

CHAPTER ONE

Not for the first time, Lorna Dutton wondered whose fucking idea it was to move to this place. Oh yeah, it was hers. With the sleeve of her shirt, she wiped away the icy rain that sliced across her face. She gave serious consideration to staying outside to let the rain beat her up. Somehow it was soothing to feel something, anything. Instead, she turned around and went back into the living room. The storm continued its unabated rage outside. From all appearances, she'd have plenty of time to let a storm kick her ass. Seemed like all it had done outside since she'd gotten here was rain and blow.

Inside the hundred-and-twenty-year-old Victorian, a fire blazed in the massive fireplace. The warmth almost thawed the ice around her heart. Almost didn't really count. It would help if it was a little less isolated and strange. Except it wasn't the house—lovely, old, and full of history. No, it was...well, everything. Where she was, why she was here, and worst of all, why she was here all alone. A pretty house and killer views couldn't take the edge off of any of those things, especially the latter.

In the massive bedroom that was now hers, she shrugged out of wet clothes and dropped them in a heap on the floor. With the towel she grabbed off the bar in her private bathroom, she dried her hair as best she could, then slipped into nice dry sweats. Might as well get comfortable for another night watching movies. Wasn't like she needed to dress up for anything or anyone. Old, ratty sweats were just the thing for hanging out all by her lonesome.

The only sound as she made her way back to the living room was the slap of her bare feet on the hardwood floor. She stopped and stared out the big window amazed that the rain still came down as hard as when she'd come in earlier. Did it ever let up around here? Her gaze drifted from the storm to the low table in front of the sofa. On it rested a small bottle of wine, one stemmed glass, crystal she was pretty sure, and a plate of cheese and fruit. The small kindness of the housekeeper, Jolene Austin, pushed back a bit of the loneliness. The only thing about it that rubbed Lorna wrong was the sight of the single glass. Not Jolene's fault. Just another unfortunate reminder of how messed up her life had gotten.

She poured a little of the wine into the solitary glass and sipped it. A touch of depression was no reason to let good wine go to waste. The flavors tickled her senses as she swirled it in her mouth. Not too shabby. It would appear Jolene knew her wines.

She trailed her fingers along the back of the sofa as she walked around it while studying the room. The house was so much a reflection of Great-aunt Bea. From the burgundy accent wall to the cream leather furniture to the paintings with a touch of surrealism, it all screamed Bea. Eccentric and more than a little out-spoken, she was one of the most interesting people Lorna had ever known. How she wished she'd told her that, and regretted it was now too late.

Bea left her this place, and no one had been more shocked than Lorna. She could count on one hand the number of times she'd stayed here. That made the bequest of the handsome home overlooking a gorgeous stretch of the Pacific Ocean all the more odd.

When she gave it a little thought, perhaps it wasn't such a peculiar bequest. Even if they'd spent time together only sporadically over the years, Lorna and Bea got each other in ways none of the others in the family did. They were kindred spirits. Or rather they had been.

When the news arrived about the house she could have easily refused Bea's generous gift. Lord knows there were plenty of cousins ready and willing to step up and take her place. Her initial reaction was to do just that. Beautiful as the house was, it was four hundred miles away from Spokane where she'd been born and raised. Top it

off with its rather isolated location, and it wasn't the kind of gift she jumped and ran with.

In the end, she didn't turn her back on Bea's final wish. Instead, she quit her job, sold her condo, and headed to the coast. In the big picture the bequest was not only generous, it was incredibly well timed. A dramatic change was just what she needed, and it was handed to her in the form of a deed.

Spokane had been her home for all of her thirty-five years, and honestly, three and a half decades was enough. Beautiful and unspoiled, the city in northeastern Washington State had many positives. The cost of living was fantastic, and the area boasted every kind of outdoor activity possible. As an outdoor enthusiast, it was a great place for someone like her. The negative, in her opinion, was the staunch conservative base that called Spokane home. All in all, way too conservative for her taste. She felt like she'd done her part to help open eyes to the beauty of diversity, but frankly, it got tiring always having to be a crusader. After everything that happened, it was time for adventure, and Bea handed her the perfect excuse to escape.

Except it really wasn't the city she was trying to escape. Deep down the truth was she could deal with its conservative roots. She could live with small town mentality in a metro environment. She could be proud and loud. What she couldn't handle was seeing Anna day after day, and knowing that what they'd shared was over. She couldn't handle running into her having dinner with someone else. The lilt of her voice carrying across a restaurant as she laughed and smiled with another woman, or bumping into them at Huckleberry's, the grocery store they used to shop at together. No, she couldn't deal with any of that, and she took the chance to run without as much as a glance back over her shoulder.

Now, in the quiet of this place, she was beginning to think it wasn't just the coward's way out; it was the stupid coward's way out. What the hell was she going to do here? She was more than twenty miles from the nearest town and much farther than that if she wanted a real city like Seattle. She'd been born and raised in a city. This was definitely not urban living.

And then there was the rain. It was raining when she drove up, and it didn't seem to be in a particular hurry to quit. If it wasn't so damned wet, it might actually be comfortable outside.

She tapped gently on the glass. "Rain, rain, go away," she whispered, her breath fogging up the window. Her reflection was wet and wavy like a spirit dancing in the storm.

Despite the constant precipitation, the place did have an upside. Like the fact the view from just about every room was spectacular. It was like staring out at a fabulous painting every day, only this was real. Even when it was raining outside, from inside the house, the majesty of the ocean view took her breath away. This night when the weather was hideous, there was something magical beneath the icy rain and howling wind. As much as she was tempted to say fuck it and move back to Spokane, she didn't. Beneath her heartache, loneliness, and confusion was something else. The way she figured it, she owed it to herself to stay long enough to find out what it was.

"Lorna?"

At the sound of Jolene's voice, she jumped like a scared cat. Even after nearly a month living here she still wasn't accustomed to co-habiting with her. At least once a day, Jolene startled her. It had to do with her way of moving around like a ghost. Quiet didn't even begin to describe the way she floated through the house. Lorna rarely heard her coming. Housekeeper slash ninja. Good thing she was relatively young or she'd have succumbed to the big one a couple of days after moving in.

Lorna turned and tried for a smile. "Yeah?"

It must have worked because Jolene smiled back. She was one of those people who gave off warm and comforting vibes. It was hard not to like that about her. Lord knows her mother had never exactly been the warm and fuzzy type. Of course, in her defense, she was a single mother trying to raise two kids all by herself. With no one around to help, Mom was exhausted more than her share. Still, it would have been nice to have come home to a smile like Jolene's once in a while. Mom wasn't the smiling type.

"Are you hungry? I can put on something hearty if you are."

The light snack arranged so prettily on the table was still untouched, and she shook her head. “I appreciate it, but I think this will do.”

Jolene’s smile morphed into a frown. “That’s not a proper meal. If you get any skinnier, you’ll fade away right before my eyes. How are you going to do that run thing you’re training for if you don’t eat? Let me fix you something more substantial.”

Lorna held up her hands as she laughed. That run thing was actually the endurance event Ironman. A bit more than just a run, but Jolene was trying. “Really, this is great. I’m tired tonight anyway, and I think I’ll turn in early. This lovely wine and cheese will be perfect, and I promise you can fatten me up tomorrow.”

“I don’t know...”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll see you in the morning.”

Jolene was muttering softly as she turned and walked away. Her words grew softer until silence once more fell. More than likely Jolene had reached the back of the house where she occupied a suite of rooms that comprised her private quarters.

“Well,” Lorna said to the empty room. “Might as well drink up.” She poured more wine into her glass and sipped. Dear old Aunt Bea had a damn good way with wine, and Jolene had a way of picking out exactly the right one. Speaking for herself, she didn’t have the knowledge to be anywhere even close to a buff. All she really knew was what tasted good, and this was yummy. Paired with the selection of cheeses arranged in a pretty fan on the plate, it was a snack made in heaven. The nicely stocked wine cellar was going to be fun to play with.

Lorna set her nearly empty glass on the table and put her feet up on the soft cushions of the sofa. The wine, combined with the warmth of the fire, made her eyes heavy. Maybe she could lie here for a little bit and enjoy the warmth and comfort of her favorite room in the house. She might actually sleep for a little while without dreaming of Anna. The possibility of that was worth downing the whole bottle of wine. The last time she’d been able to go to sleep without heartbreak weighing her down and invading her dreams was hard to remember. Maybe tonight would be such a night. Her head

felt suddenly very heavy so she slid down the sofa until she was stretched all the way out, her head resting on her arm. Yeah, nice and comfy.

Her eyes fluttered open, and for a second, she wasn't sure where she was. Her house in Spokane? No, that wasn't right. She didn't live there anymore. Then the room came into focus and she remembered. Aunt Bea's house by the ocean. Except, something was off. The living room where she'd fallen asleep looked and felt different. It wasn't like she'd been asleep that long, and yet it wasn't as it had been before she slipped into slumber. Then it hit her. The furniture, the paint, the rugs, they were all changed as if the room had been completely redone while she slept. Oddly, it seemed newer although everything about it had the flavor of expensive antiques.

She was about to push up when she lowered her head back to her arm, her body going very still. On the rug in front of the fire, two women sat close together. Neither one of them wore a stitch of clothing. Afraid to say anything, she held her breath, afraid one of them would turn around and see her. Too much like being a voyeur, and yet she couldn't look away.

Firelight glowed on their naked flesh. One woman was pale with flowing brown hair that fell to her waist. Her breasts were full and firm, her face a beautiful oval with generous, red lips. Her slim fingers stroked the flawless brown skin of the other woman whose black hair was long and braided. Slim and small-breasted, she murmured in a voice too low to hear. Whatever she said made the other woman smile. They embraced their kiss passionate. Together they reclined on the thick rug, hands stroking, lips kissing, bodies moving together. Their moans grew louder as their lovemaking intensified. Suddenly, they stopped, fear etched on their beautiful faces as they reached for clothing strewn across the rug. The brown-haired woman jumped up, her dress pressed against her nakedness. A scream rose from her lips. "No—"

Lorna came awake with a start, her heart pounding. She jumped up from the sofa and did a three sixty. Nothing. The fire was still going, although it was beginning to die down. The walls were once again pale green, the furniture comfortable modern leather. The rug

beneath her feet was a thick oatmeal weave. No expensive antique furniture, no Victorian patterned wallpaper, no naked women in front of the fire. She was alone. All alone.

She sank back down on the sofa and took a big swig from her glass. The zing of the wine helped. Wow, she'd wanted a little sleep that didn't include dreams of Anna, but where the hell did that come from? It wasn't just odd; it was odd, erotic, and more than a little crazy. Maybe she was losing it after all. Difficult breakups had a way of sending a person over the edge though she always thought she was made of sterner stuff than that. Apparently, she was mistaken.



Renee Austin stood next to the fire truck and willed herself not to cry. The fire raged despite the best efforts of the men and women who fought it. Flames lit up the night sky in a show of red and gold that would be intriguing were it not for the fact her home and business provided the tinder.

Her heart hurt as she stood powerless to do anything but watch her life disappear. She tried to be a good person, to do the right thing, to keep her life in balance, and to give back to her community. Obviously, somewhere along the line she'd messed up, and karma was now giving her a big fat bitch slap. Why else would her home and her business be crumbling to ash before her eyes and the eyes of all her neighbors? Ten years of hard work and persistence gone, and all that was left was a smoking pile of debris, the stench of which made her want to gag. The one and only good thing to come out of it: Clancy hadn't been inside when the building went up in flames.

"Ma'am." A firefighter reeking of smoke touched her on the arm.

She didn't flinch from his touch. Didn't respond by word. What was there to say anyway? And why in the hell was he calling her "ma'am?" Made her sound like a little old lady. She was only thirty-seven for heaven's sake. Ma'am was for older women.

"Do you have anywhere to go, or would you like us to call the Red Cross?" The tone of his voice never changed as if he was accustomed to people who stood like statues, stony and silent.

Finally, she looked up and met his gaze. He was a nice-looking man, maybe five or so years younger than she was. What bugged her right now was the idea he should be hitting on her instead talking to her like she was a delicate little flower. She opened her mouth to tell him that and then snapped it shut. Hitting on her? What kind of fire professional worth his salt would do something like that?

Maybe she was being a little bitchy about the ma'am thing. Possibly the reality she'd just lost everything she owned could be making her a shrew? All she could see in his face was concern. His kindness was appreciated even if she realized it was all part of his job. He wasn't the one out of line; she was.

She patted the hand he still had on her arm and shook her head. Her car was okay, she had her backpack with her wallet and credit cards, and most importantly, she had her dog. As for clothes and all the rest of her belongings, including her livelihood, well, those were gone.

Her eyes strayed to Clancy who was leaning heavily against her legs. She patted his head and looked back up at the fireman. "Thanks, we're going to be fine. I have family." It sucked that she was forced to run home to Mommy, but some days were like that. At least she had a mom who was there for her. How many others did not?

The concern in his eyes didn't diminish. She wasn't sure if he didn't believe her or she looked so lost he didn't think she'd be able to find her way out of a cardboard box. "Do you want us to take you there?"

Apparently, it was the latter, and she must look pretty rattled despite what she considered a noble effort at looking and sounding calm. Must not be working because he seemed more than a little hesitant to leave her alone.

She thought of her mom at the house on the cliff and the calming sound of the ocean waves outside the window. Simply visualizing it filled her with calming vibes. The drive was long, but since she'd lost her home and her business in one fell swoop, what did it matter? She might as well get out of town. There was time enough for all the paperwork and drudgery that would come with a total-loss fire

on another day. That it was now nearing midnight didn't deter her either. It would be a long time before she'd be able to sleep.

"No, thank you. I appreciate your kind offer, but we can stay with my mother on the coast. If you need me—" She dug in her backpack and came up with a piece of paper and a pen. After she wrote the pertinent information, she handed it to the firefighter. "You can contact me here."

Clancy in tow, she left behind the smoldering remains of her life and headed toward her car. He jumped in the second she opened the back hatch and proceeded to whine as he pressed his nose to the window. She ran a hand down his sleek coat and leaned in to hug him. He was young, a mere five months, but he was as sharp a dog as Renee had ever shared her home with. Like her, Clancy seemed to know their life in this place was over, at least for now. It was too hard to think about rebuilding and so she didn't. Later, she'd think about it later. As long as they were together and unharmed, it was enough. He licked her cheek, did two full circles, and lay down.

The drive out of the city and toward the coast was odd. She'd made the same trip a hundred times before. A light heart and anticipation were her usual traveling companions. She looked forward to seeing her mother and had loved Aunt Bea, who wasn't her aunt at all. It didn't matter; she called her Auntie and loved her as much as if they shared the same blood. Family wasn't always defined by birth, and her relationship with Bea proved that.

Today, the journey was awash with great sadness. Who knew that a fire could make her feel so lost and alone? After all, she'd only lost *things* and things could be replaced. Thanks to a buddy who also happened to be an insurance agent, she'd been responsible and had plenty of insurance on both the business and the property. All her possessions could be replaced. The building could be repaired or replaced. Best of all, she had family who could take her and Clancy in. Unlike so many who suffered catastrophic events, they had support. None of that mattered at the moment. The blackened windows, smoking roof, and charred brick left her feeling adrift and that made her sad.

Halfway to her mother's, she pulled into a convenience store and ordered a tall latte. In her world, there was little that couldn't be fixed by a good latte. Even tonight with problems of epic proportions, it helped. The sadness retreated...a little...and as she neared the coast, the band around her heart began to loosen. In times of crisis who better to see than Mom?

At the house all but one of the windows was dark, and a strange car was pulled up in the driveway. Company? Mom did have a few friends, and since Bea's death there had been a number of folks helping out with the estate, of which the house was part. She'd never really heard much about the will, only that Mom had a home for as long as she wished. That was great because Mom loved it here. She'd been with Bea since Renee was just a toddler. In many ways, it was as much her mother's home as Bea's.

She parked behind the unfamiliar car and got out, wrinkling her nose when she realized she reeked of smoke. No wonder Clancy had retreated to the back of the SUV and stayed there the whole trip. Usually, he was panting over Renee's shoulder as if he really wanted to take the wheel and drive it himself. After the one good lick alongside her cheek, he'd settled down in the back. The only time he moved was when she stopped for a latte. She'd let him out and he'd done his business. That was it; he'd slept the rest of the way.

How long had she stood outside the burning building while billows of gray smoke wrapped around everything in sight? It had been almost like standing in the middle of a flue. Her eyes had stung, and her lungs hurt with each inhalation. The firefighters tried without success to get her to step back. She hadn't been able to do that despite understanding the wisdom of their repeated requests. It would have felt too much like she was abandoning what she'd carefully built and nurtured. Only when there was no longer a single spark of a flame had she been able to walk away. By then, she smelled just about as bad as the firefighters on the front line.

Until now, she hadn't noticed the stench. If Mom even let her in the back door smelling like this, she'd be lucky. Clancy didn't smell much better. A shower was the first thing up...for both of them.

Hopefully, Mom had something she could change into until she had a chance to buy some new clothes.

A security light kicked on as it caught her motion walking from the driver's door to the back of the SUV. She opened the hatch. Clancy jumped out and went running over to a patch of grass to relieve himself. Energy radiated from every step. Renee smiled. She loved that dog and the boundless energy that made him such a perfect companion. How people lived without dogs in their lives she couldn't understand. Without him in her life this day would have been unbearable.

A light breeze blew, carrying the scent of smoke and fire across the massive bluff. In the distance, the sound of the ocean waves crashing against the rocks was a welcome reminder of home. Not the home she'd made for herself in the city, but the home where she'd been taught to love. The home where the door was always open.

Her mother must have been watching for their arrival because suddenly there she was, her arms pulling Renee close. Unlike Renee, she smelled of soap and vanilla shampoo. "Oh, sweetheart, are you all right?"

Renee hugged her back. The feel of her mother's arms around her was exactly what she needed. It didn't matter one little bit she was pushing the big four oh. She was never too old for a mother's comfort. "Yeah, we'll be fine. Just sucks to be me right now."

Her arms dropping away, Mom stepped back and studied her. In the buttery glow of the outside light, her dark eyes were serious. "Renee Kathleen Austin, I hate when you use terms like that. Makes you sound like an unruly teenager."

Oh no, her full name. Mom only did that when she was upset with her. She almost smiled. "Sorry," she said even though she wasn't really. Mom could be so old-fashioned. It was reassuring in a way. Some things just never changed, and that was okay.

"You smell too." Her nose crinkled and her lips turned down into a frown.

She laughed a little this time. "I think Clancy was a little offended. He stayed in the back the whole way. What he probably didn't realize is that he smells as bad as I do!"

Her mother's face lit up at Clancy's name, all traces of displeasure wiped away in a second. "Clancy! Where's my boy?" At the sound of his name, he came racing around the SUV, almost losing his footing as he did, and jumped joyfully, his paws coming to rest on her chest. Laughing, Mom began to rub his ears.

It amazed Renee how much the two of them seemed to love each other. Though she'd never had a dog growing up, Renee had lived with one ever since she'd left home. Mom had always seemed to like her dogs, but for some reason she didn't understand, Clancy was special to her. Something about the black-faced German shepherd touched her mother's heart. She didn't know what it was and didn't care. It warmed her through and through that the two of them shared a tight bond, so she stood aside to let the two of them have their moment of joyous reunion.

Her mother finally straightened up, her face thoroughly licked, and held out a hand to Renee. "Come on. Let's get you cleaned up and then you can tell me all about the details of the fire. Come on, Clancy, that means you too."

After standing there smelling herself for a few minutes, the cleaning up part sounded fantastic.

The fire part not so much.

CHAPTER TWO

From the shadows, he watched the two women and the dog. Wrapped in the darkness, he was but a whisper. Something seen from the corner of the eye yet never fully formed. It had been that way for him since the time of his fall.

His wait had been long, but deep in his heart he had known she would come. Had understood they both would come. They had to. For it had been written in the stars so many years ago. The familiar crash of waves against the rocks filled the night with a lullaby of sorts. The sound had been his constant companion year after year, its steady beat a comfort in the endless procession of nights as he watched and waited.

His eyes drifted back to the massive house that had stood on this spot for more than a century. Old in the human realm. But a blink of time in his existence. Inside, one slept, her slumber no longer troubled. No more on this night would he send her dreams. His work for now was complete. He had given her what he could, and it would have to be enough. She would wake and begin to wonder. It was the wonder that would bring her understanding and knowledge.

Not open to him yet, the other one he would not trouble for he could not. Her time would come, and her soul would open to him. Until then, he would wait and watch just as he'd been doing for so long. His patience was endless. His time to make this right was not.

Once before, he had failed, and two had been lost. His fault. Their damnation. Ever since, he had been waiting to bring them

home. Only then could he hope to find his own salvation. Alone, he could do so little. Together with the two women now beneath the roof of the old house, they could do so much. In his heart, he dared to hope.

But still he was afraid.

The wind picked up and blew around him in a swirl of dead grass, golden leaves, and fine beach sand. It did not touch him. Neither did the rain, the cold, or the heat. Nothing touched him except the ache of the lost. As their souls suffered in a limbo they did not deserve, so too did his. Guilt was a heavy burden, his rightfully to bear.

He wished a thousand times it could have been different. That he could have stopped the evil that saturated this place and hurt two who committed no greater sin than to love each other. He wanted to bring them home, and more than anything, *he* wanted to go home. His failure kept his feet on the earth, his soul waiting. Until he could bring them with him, the gates would never be open to him.

Tonight, two came, and for the first time, a flicker of hope pushed away a little bit of the darkness in his heart. Outwardly, little changed for though he neared seven feet tall with a body rail thin, no one saw him. Ever. A blessing. A curse. His fate.

No more could be done this night. With his eyes still on the windows of the old house, the Watcher took several steps back into the deepest shadows and faded as if he had never been there at all.



Lorna rolled over and groggily thought she heard a dog barking. Must have been a dream. Somebody's pet would have to have gotten really, really lost to end up clear out here. It wasn't like they had close neighbors. The isolation was one of the things that appealed to her when she decided to make the move. One of the things that scared her too.

The sleepy fog cleared and the barking continued. The sound should have annoyed her because it meant someone's dog was far from home and she'd probably have to find its owner. Strangely

though, the presence of the dog didn't bother her at all. Instead, she couldn't help smiling. For a long time, she'd wanted a dog. Anna hadn't been a fan of the idea. She always said a dog was a burden. They messed up the house, and if they wanted to go out of town, they'd either have to find a sitter or put the dog in the kennel. Either way, Anna insisted it was too much trouble and too much money.

In her heart, Lorna hadn't cared about any of those things. She thought dogs were incredible and would have shared her life with one in a second. Still, she'd never pushed the issue. She loved Anna, and it was just one of those things that a couple compromised on. At the time, she'd been okay with it. Now as she listened to the dog's bark outside her window, she wondered how okay with it she'd really been. It made her think that once she settled in a little more, she just might make a visit to the local Humane Society.

Daylight pushed through the slats of the blinds spilling pale light across her room. The day appeared to be starting off much better than yesterday. Awesome. Truth was she needed to get on her bike and spend some quality time putting serious miles on it. Then she remembered...it was still in Spokane at the bike shop getting tuned up. There'd be no bike ride today. It was going to have to be another run.

Before the breakup, she'd plopped down a crapload of money to compete in the Coeur d'Alene Ironman competition. Now only four months away, she admitted, at least to herself, that she was getting nervous. With a swim of just over two miles, a one-hundred-twelve-mile bike ride, and a marathon-length run, training wasn't an option. It was an absolute necessity. Even if the weather stayed horrible here for the next four months, she'd have to adapt. She might have failed miserably at love, but she wasn't about to fail at Ironman. The thought of not finishing the race was too embarrassing to contemplate.

She swung her legs out of the bed and stood with her arms reaching to the ceiling. Her muscles warmed as she did a quick sun salutation. It felt good. Stretched out all the right muscles and helped her feel ready for the day. For no apparent reason, she had a feeling today was going to be a good one. It took a second to realize

this was the first morning she hadn't awakened thinking of Anna. Well, how about that? Things must be looking up.

An old T-shirt and a faded pair of sweats might be ugly, but they were perfect for a sweaty workout in a little bit. First things first though, coffee and a bagel. She skipped down the stairs following the smell of freshly brewed coffee. God, it smelled like heaven. No big mystery why Aunt Bea was so fond of Jolene. She hadn't been here that long and she was already in love with waking up every morning to Jolene's kitchen magic.

A housekeeper was a strange reality for her. Her family never had the kind of money that would allow for such a luxury. Her mother provided well for Lorna and her brother. Solidly middle class, they always had what they needed, and much of the time what they wanted as well. Had she been the kind of girl who blended into the mainstream, her memories of growing up would have been all good.

What they needed didn't include a housekeeper. With no one to clean up after them, she was taught very early to be self-sufficient. Before moving here, she cleaned her own house, cooked her own meals, and washed her own clothes. She never thought too much about it until now and never minded doing for herself. Still, she had to admit waking up to coffee and a clean house was pretty sweet.

Having Jolene around for company wasn't too bad either. At first, she thought it would be uncomfortable having another woman living and working in her home. That lasted about ten minutes. Jolene had a way about her that made everything comfortable, and more importantly, natural. Now Lorna couldn't imagine not having Jolene here.

She stepped through the kitchen doorway with a cheery greeting on her lips. Before she uttered a single word, she stopped and stared trying to put together all the pieces of the picture she was seeing. Jolene was seated at the kitchen table. No big surprise there. It didn't seem to matter what time Lorna got up, Jolene was already in the kitchen with the coffee made. That isn't what made her stop in confusion.

What surprised her enough to derail her mission for coffee was the younger woman sitting across from Jolene whose features made

it obvious the two were related. The kind of whoa baby moment that usually happened in clubs, not her kitchen. Funny, until this moment, she'd not considered how beautiful Jolene was. Seeing the younger version made her breath catch.

Jolene jumped up beaming, and seemingly unaware that she'd been struck speechless. "Lorna, good morning. I hope you slept well. This is my daughter, Renee. I don't know if you remember her. You two played together a couple of times when you were children."

Daughter? A vague recollection of a skinny girl a year or two older with crazy red hair who talked a lot flitted through her mind. Yeah, maybe there had been a daughter but certainly not this vision of hotness sitting at her kitchen table. "Good morning," Lorna said. She sure didn't remind her of that wild little girl who annoyed the hell out of her back in the good old days. If she was, then that little girl was long gone, replaced by a graceful beauty.

Renee stood also and extended her hand. "It's been a long time. I think I was about eight last time we saw each other. I remember you being tall with braids I liked to pull. I bet that annoyed the hell out of you." Her laugh was soft and musical.

Lorna shook the outstretched hand, liking the way her fingers touched her palm. She didn't look even remotely like that Raggedy Ann little girl of her memories. Not even close. This woman was, to put it bluntly, gorgeous. The crazy red hair was gone, replaced by long, wavy tresses a shiny shade of auburn somewhere between red and brown. Her green eyes were large and bright, her pale skin sprinkled with just a few freckles.

"Hi," was all she could think of to say, and she hoped her mouth wasn't hanging open or that she'd have to wipe drool from her chin. Lorna wasn't a big talker on the best of days, but today she appeared to be particularly verbally challenged. Really, she should be able to come up with something besides a one-syllable greeting.

Renee didn't seem to notice that she wasn't just staring but staring stupidly and displaying the vocabulary of a one-year-old. Instead, she sat back down in the chair she vacated to offer her hand in greeting, took a sip from the hefty coffee mug sitting on the table

in front of her, and then sighed. “I hope you don’t mind me crashing here. My place burned down last night.”

That statement, said so calmly, shocked her. If her house burned down, she’d be a damn wreck, and yet here Renee sat at her table looking cool and collected like it was just another morning with family and friends. A twinge of guilt hit her as she thought about how depressed she’d been over her breakup. Seemed kind of dramatic when compared to a house fire.

Jolene handed Lorna a cup of coffee in a mug just as big as Renee’s. “I was going to ask you today if you’d be all right with Renee staying just a bit until this fire mess gets straightened around. Since we’re all here, might as well ask you now. I realize I’m putting you on the spot and in front of my daughter, but would you mind terribly if Renee stays with us?”

“Well, me and Clancy.” Renee added with a wry smile. “And it won’t be for very long. I’m sure my insurance covers temporary lodging. We’ll be out before you know it.”

Lorna held the big mug between both hands, not yet taking a drink, and asked, “Clancy?” Her boyfriend maybe? A shame. Despite her recent breakup, Lorna found Renee’s face entrancing. Wouldn’t it be sweet if she was, well, like her? Fantasy.

Renee smiled, and the way her face lit up made Lorna’s heart skip a beat. Having her stay was a no-brainer, but if she smiled at her very often, she wasn’t sure she could take it. Right now, she better sit down before her knees buckled.

“My dog. A pup really, not quite six months old. He’s a dream, and I promise he’s very well behaved. You won’t even know he’s around.” As if on cue, a sound came from the kitchen door, and Renee got up to open it. A young black and tan German shepherd raced in, came right up to Lorna, and jumped up, his two front legs draped over her knees. His tail wagged, smacking the table leg with a thump, thump, thump. Thank goodness she’d set the big mug on the table or she and the dog would be wearing the coffee.

If he was only six months old, he was one big boy. Handsome too with his shiny black and tan coat. She laughed and petted him between the ears, her fingers touching damp fur in his undercoat.

Seeing him certainly explained the barking earlier. “He’s beautiful.” Her smile was only half for Clancy. So far, no boyfriend. She liked that.

Renee pushed the thick hair off her shoulders. “Thank you. I’m pretty fond of him. He might be a little wet. We both had to shower or we’d still smell like a campfire.”

Her hand still stroked Clancy as she asked, “Your house burned down?”

“Yeah, my house, my business, my everything pretty much. I own a building in Seattle. Downstairs is my natural foods store and upstairs is where Clancy and I live. Well, I guess it’s more like where Clancy and I lived. Everything was lost last night.”

“What caused the fire?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know and the fire department folks weren’t saying much last night. They probably think I started it.”

“You? Why?”

Renee shrugged. “No reason I just figure that’s what they always assume in a situation like this. The owner did it.”

“That’s fucked up. Oops, I’m sorry. I mean, ah, um, tell me about the fire.” God, what an asshole she could be. Who talked that way in front of strangers? Beautiful, sexy strangers?

Renee didn’t seem to miss a beat. “I’d closed up for the night like I always did, then Clancy I went to the dog park...”

As she talked, Lorna couldn’t help but think how different they were. Renee was taking the loss in stride, something she didn’t think she’d be able to do. She told the story calmly as though she were an observer rather than a victim. Everything the woman owned was gone, and yet she sat here drinking coffee and smiling as if she were on a happy holiday break. She even seemed to take in stride the idea that she might be considered an arson suspect. Her first impression was this was one amazing woman.

Made her embarrassed at how mopey she’d been since getting here. She’d been dumped, and that hurt more than she’d believed possible. Even so, she still had a home, her belongings, and a job. Everything that Renee had lost in a matter of hours last night. If she could still smile and see hope in the world, then Lorna didn’t have

much of an excuse for not pulling her head out. She'd been dumped by her girlfriend, BFD.

By the time they polished off a second pot of coffee, Lorna was trying to remember the last time she'd enjoyed a morning so much or felt so relaxed. Both of these women made her feel comfortable and alive. She didn't want it to end even at the expense of her training.

Across the table, the fatigue clearly showing in Renee's face made her feel guilty. Even taking her tragedy with incredible grace, Renee needed rest, and here she'd been blabbing for at least an hour. She was a horrible hostess and not a very good caretaker.

"Why don't you bring in whatever you were able to save and get settled?"

Jolene squeezed Renee's shoulder as she walked behind her. "I'll get clean linens on your bed, sweetheart. You need to lie down and sleep for a bit. It's not that I'm not thoroughly enjoying being here with both of you, but, honey, you look dead on your feet."

Renee smiled at her mother and then looked back at Lorna. Her eyes were sparkling despite the weariness etched into her features. "You're sure it's okay if Clancy and I stay for a little bit? It's a terrible imposition. I promise though, we'll stay out of your way as much as we can."

After Anna's devastating rejection, Lorna was leery of being around someone she found attractive. What would be the point? Even if something did miraculously come of it, odds were it would end on a bad note. She was good at a lot of things, but gracefully ending a relationship wasn't one of them.

Still, as she gazed into Renee's mysterious eyes, she couldn't bring herself to refuse her shelter. She was lovely and energetic, the kind of distraction that was good for the soul. Especially a soul battered by the crushing loss of a loved one. In short, a breath of fresh air. God, how she needed fresh air and a bright light.

It didn't make sense. Here was a woman that tragedy chose to dump on, and yet she almost glowed with light. Lorna was drawn to it like a moth to a fire. To hell with first reactions, she hoped it was a long time before Renee was able to go home. Besides, thinking there was a chance in hell they'd have a relationship was just plain

stupid. The probability that she liked men was far greater. It was the way the world worked. Well, it was the way her world worked anyway.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “I’m sure.”



The last thing Jeremy felt like doing was driving I-90 across the state. Tired and grumpy, what he really wanted to do was to drop into bed to sleep for a week or two. The marathon meetings had been a real bitch, and exhaustion weighed him down like a bag of bricks slung over his back. When he had this brilliant idea to go into business with his best friend, Lorna should have slapped some sense into him. Never in his wildest imagination did he see how it would all turn out. It wasn’t that they failed. On the contrary, their contracting business had taken off like a rocket.

So had the time he’d put into the business. Anywhere from sixty to seventy hours a week had helped to make the business flourish and make him an old man at thirty-five. He had money, he had status, and he had lots of friends. No time to do much with any of it though. His world was more work than much of anything else.

Even that wasn’t so bad. In the beginning, it was also exciting enough that he found a way to make it all work. The turning point came the night he caught Nate and their office manager, Melinda, in the storeroom. Both were married to other people, and they’d been going at it like a couple of kids. It wasn’t that Jeremy was the morality police. Not in a million years because he wasn’t the kind of guy who threw stones at glass houses.

No, it was everything. The crazy hours. The stress. The way his best friend changed from a nice guy into a money-obsessed player. Their success had changed his friend into a guy he didn’t know and one he didn’t like. These days Nate wasn’t the kid who’d sat at the kitchen table with him drinking cheap beer and dreaming of what they could accomplish together. He missed that guy a bunch.

Combine that with the mess he’d managed to make of his personal life, and everything seemed to be blowing up in his face.

Living like this wasn't something he wanted to do anymore. He'd been coasting along too long now, and if he was honest with himself, pretending he was making everything work. Changes had to happen, and he couldn't wait around to see what they were going to be. The only choice he felt he could reconcile with was to make his own changes. So he did.

He owed it to the memory of his mother to do the right thing for himself and those around him. It was, after all, the proceeds of her life insurance policy that gave him the freedom to quit his first real job and go back to school. Armed with his graduate degree, he and Nate had launched their business. That Mom was gone too soon hurt his soul because she didn't live to see what he'd built. Even so, he knew that what he'd done with the legacy she provided him would make her very proud.

Things were different now. Living a life that was a lie would not make her proud regardless of the monetary success. That had to come from the heart, and his had called for a change. Mom would take one look at him and would know in a flash he was not a happy guy. He was beyond pleased at what two regular guys had been able to create and nurture, and if he'd been able to find a balance that worked would have been able to look his mother in the eye. Instead, he failed in that department and now had to make it right.

Now, however, before he could work on his own life, he had to get Lorna her gear or she was bound to have a heart attack. Ironman wasn't that far away, and she needed her stuff to keep her training on track. Granted, it would be easy enough for her to find a wetsuit to practice in, but the bike was a whole different story. The one loaded in the back of his SUV cost more than his first car. It still made him shake his head every time he thought about it. Lorna swore it made a world of difference in her biking speed. He wasn't so sure. After all, a bike was a bike was a bike...right?

Whether or not he was a believer didn't matter. This was her gig, and he respected her for taking on the huge challenge of the endurance race. If she said the bike made a difference and was worth the cost, then who was he to argue? Besides, bringing this bike to her was a small price to pay to give her a little pleasure. Though

she tried to hide it from him, he could tell she was suffering. That bitch Anna had dropped her like she was nobody special, and he hated her for that. Lorna was awesome, and Anna should have been thanking her lucky stars a woman that wonderful loved her. Not Anna. Instead, she runs off with some pretty little artist, breaking his sister's heart in the process. His patience with people who cheated was slim at best. When the person cheated on happened to be his sister, well, his patience was non-existent.

All he could do to help was be there for her. If she asked him to pick up her uber fast bike from what she characterized as the only guy in the Pacific Northwest who could tune it up right, and bring it to her, then he would. It might seem like a big favor to ask, but he didn't feel that way. It's the kind of thing a person did for someone they loved. He loved Lorna even if he didn't say it often. He'd try to work on that.

In the middle of the Vantage Bridge, a gust of wind hit him like a hammer to the side. Every time that happened, he wondered why he didn't end up in the Columbia River. Hadn't happened yet and probably never would, but that didn't mean the wind was going to give up either. He hated that bridge.

The long and winding hill up past Vantage with its sagebrush and basalt rock always made his imagination soar. He could envision the wild horses that used to roam the hills and the Native Americans who camped on the shores of the Columbia River. These days, all that rose from the earth were hundreds of giant white windmills that looked like aliens standing sentry.

Finally, he made it past the hills and windmills and to the wide-open flatlands that announced Ellensburg. Farmland and cattle ranches replaced the desolation he'd just left behind. At the second exit, he put on his blinker and pulled off. He had to get out of the car and stretch.

He pulled up to the gas pump at the Exxon right off the exit and got out. Waiting for the tank to fill, he raised his arms over his head and stretched. Man, that felt good. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a little boy maybe three, four tops, racing across the parking lot. He also caught sight of a car turning in and it wasn't

slowing down. The little boy was smiling and running as though he didn't have a care in the world and as if he was in a park instead of a terribly busy service station. Without giving it a second thought, Jeremy took off in a full-out sprint and managed to grab the boy around the waist. He spun away from the incoming car just in time. It missed them by inches.

"Oh my God, Michael," a young woman screamed, dropped her purse, and ran from the other side of the lot.

"He's all right," Jeremy said as he handed the squirming boy—Michael—to his frantic mother. Her lips were quivering and her hands shaking as she took the still cheerful toddler out of his arms. Happy to return the little one to his mother, only then did Jeremy realize his heart was beating like a drum. It hit him how close they'd come to being struck down by the car.

"Thank you, oh thank you," she said on a sob. Her blond hair flew around her face as wind gusted through. If not for the fear still etched in her face, she'd have been a beautiful young woman.

"Thank you," the smiling boy echoed. His blue eyes crinkled with the joy of innocence, and he reached out with a pudgy hand to pat Jeremy on the cheek.

He laid his hand over Michael's. "You're welcome."

The woman started to turn away and then turned back. With one arm still around Michael, she used the other to give him a hug. "Thank you," she said again softly before hurrying back to her car holding her son close.

He watched them go, an ache in his heart that he didn't understand. These people were strangers, and their paths crossed only because they'd happened to stop at the same service station. Saving the little boy didn't make their connection any deeper. All he'd done was what any decent person would. So why did seeing a mother hold her child give him such an empty feeling?

He ignored the emptiness that settled in his stomach and instead focused on the drive ahead. Snoqualmie Pass was just ahead, and he always looked forward to driving the ascent that would take him to the top of the mountains. Each time he hit the summit, he smiled because it brought him that much closer to the beautiful and vibrant

city of Seattle. Didn't matter that he was born and raised in Eastern Washington, the west side of the state had its own special charms, and he wasn't immune. He loved crossing the mountains.

Even given how much he liked coming across state, Lorna's move to the coast was weird because she was an Eastsider too. Not that he was saying her move was a bad idea. On the contrary, getting her away from the possibility of running into Anna and her new little *gal pal* would help her heal. Time and distance were great for that. Not a bad idea for him either.

So, if taking his first weekend off after the epic showdown with Nate to drive over to the coast with Lorna's stuff was an inconvenience, he'd live with it. Besides being a great excuse to get out of town, he really wanted to help make certain she had everything she needed to kick ass in Ironman.

CHAPTER THREE

Mom,” Renee said while watching Lorna through the kitchen window as she stretched and readied for a run. “She’s special.”

“She’s a lovely young woman,” she agreed. “Sad though. She hasn’t said too much to me, but I see it in her eyes. She’s hurting over something or someone. She’s bright enough when she knows I’m looking. It’s when she thinks no one will notice that sadness drops over her like a blanket. Breaks my heart.”

Renee was shaking her head as she turned around and watched her mom clean up the coffee cups from their morning around the table. “That’s not what I mean. I’m with you. I see the sadness in her, but it’s something else. She has an aura I haven’t seen in anybody for a long time. Maybe never when I really think about it.”

“You think she has some kind of power?” It was said absently, her attention more on cleaning up the kitchen so it sparkled.

Mom never really did buy into what Renee could read in people. She passed it off as her daughter’s eccentric nature. In some respects, it was true. Renee couldn’t deny that she wasn’t exactly the *normal* daughter. That was true even before she stopped pretending. For as long as she could remember, she stepped to the beat of her own special drummer. Life worked for her that way. It still did.

It didn’t, however, explain away what it was she could see. From the time she was very little, she was able to see light around people. As a young child, she thought everyone could see the lights.

It was quite an eye-opener to learn very few could actually see them, and it made her feel like more of an outsider than she already did. It didn't take very long before she discovered that it was best not to talk about what she saw. Easier to keep friends if they didn't think she was the local crazy kid. Eccentric, people could tolerate. Crazy, not so much.

When she learned it was auras she could see, it actually made her feel a little less nutty. After a while, she even learned to love her unique ability. Strangely, it made her feel special. She was teased plenty about being the odd kid, but that little bit of special was all she needed to help reconcile with herself. By the time she was an adult, she found the talent pretty handy. Good, bad, and everything in between had a tendency to show up for her. Made it easier to know who to trust and who not to trust.

What she was seeing in Lorna this morning made her very curious. The tall, muscular woman with the short blond hair was interesting for a whole lot of reasons, but it was the fusion of color surrounding her like a rainbow fog that was filling Renee with a desire to know so much more. Even if she weren't homeless, she'd want to stay here and find out Lorna's secrets.

"I don't know, Mom. Could be power, could be something else. It's unique, I'll give her that. Haven't seen that kind of color on anyone else." She'd seen auras of power before, and Lorna's wasn't like that. In fact, it wasn't like any she'd seen before. It made her all the more curious to find out what made Lorna tick. Professional curiosity only, of course.

"Maybe you're just seeing something because of what happened to you. Stress of losing your home and business. That kind of stress would be difficult for even the strongest of people. You're also tired and that's affecting you more than you know." She continued to put dishes away without looking at Renee.

She closed her eyes for a second and counted to ten. As much as she loved her mother, her subtle innuendos got on her nerves at times. The truth was she'd never reconciled with Renee's decision to live in Seattle after the incident on the rocks. Only once did she try to explain it all to her mother. She'd been full of empathy and

concern, but she hadn't understood. Nor had she been able to grasp what had driven her to that awful night. She stopped trying to make her understand. Instead, she'd packed her things and moved to Seattle, leaving everything in her rearview mirror.

At first, it had been difficult. A hundred times, she'd thought about throwing in the towel and going back home. A hundred times, she stopped and found the strength to keep trudging forward. In the end, she'd embraced the freedom to be the person who'd lived hidden inside her soul.

It started that night on the rocks with the ocean pounding the stones with a fury that matched the way she'd been feeling. She'd come within a breath of embracing the violence and giving her body to sea. To this day, she couldn't say what it was that pulled her away from that irreversible decision. Whatever it was, she was grateful. She'd climbed down from the stones and changed her life. She no longer hid her sexuality or her desire to give her heart to a woman, and that drummer's beat became a lot funkier. The quiet discontent always rippling through her disappeared. Scary as it was, she embraced the courage she needed to be free. She was happy.

That long ago night was not something they talked about. Mom was great in so many ways, but when it came to Renee's idiosyncrasies, she chose to pretend they didn't exist. Like her ability to see auras. She might mention them, might give superficial attention to Renee's visions of them, that's it. Belief was another thing altogether and something she really didn't possess.

Renee wasn't going to go into it with her now. It was easier just to roll with the superficial acknowledgement. "Yeah, you've got a point, Mom. Losing everything sucks, and it's more than a little stressful though it doesn't affect someone else's aura. Lorna has something very cool going on, and I'm really curious to find out what it is."

"Well," she remarked as she picked up a bucket filled with cleaning supplies. "Remember, this is her house now, and despite her warm welcome, remember you're a guest. She may not appreciate your voodoo ideas, so probably better to keep those to yourself."

Renee smiled and kissed the top of her head. "I promise I will not bother our hostess with any voodoo."



The second she stepped outside and the fresh air filled her lungs, Lorna smiled. For some reason, running always made her feel alive and real. It wasn't that she liked to run all that much. On the contrary, getting herself out the door and on the road was more often than not an exercise in sheer determination.

The funny part was once she got going, all the resistance melted away, and she took off with a feeling of energy and light. When she first began running, she'd felt like a heifer trying to run with a cougar. Her friend Sophia had pestered her until she gave in. The first few months were pure torture, and if not for Sophia, she'd have quit the first week. As good friends often do, Sophia gave her the encouragement she needed to keep going. Who could have guessed all the wonderful side effects?

Still, even after months of logging mile after mile, she could recall thinking she was nuts to even consider finishing a 5K. The idea of a triathlon was nowhere on her horizon until Sophia got a wild hair that they should do Valley Girl, an all-women spring triathlon. A third of a mile swim, a twelve-mile bike ride, and a 5K run.

Turned out to be so much fun, she was hooked before she realized what had happened. Three years later, after watching Ironman in Coeur d'Alene, she caught the fever. Next thing she knew, she was a regular volunteer working with the awesome athletes as they made their life-changing journeys. The logical step following her years as a volunteer was to sign up to be one of those athletes. Caught up in the high of last year's event, that's exactly what she did. Expensive commitment made, the only choice she had, in her opinion, was to give it the best shot she could.

A couple months after making the decision to go all in, she'd gotten bold and decided to go big guns. With only a twinge of guilt about spending so much on a bicycle, she plunked down a bundle for the red and white Cervélo. One hundred and twelve miles was a long way to ride, and if she could give herself an edge, she was all over it. Any remaining guilt slid away the first time she went out.

The miles glided by, and it was the first time she began to believe her Ironman dream might become a reality.

Of course, at the time she had a great job, a beautiful home, and was deeply in love. In her mind, the stars had, to her utter amazement, aligned for her. Boy, had she been wrong. Everything blew apart as if she'd been hit by a freak tornado. By the time the dust settled, she'd quit her job, sold her home, and tried to figure out how to keep going forward with a heart broken into a thousand pieces.

Could be she had a little guardian angel lurking above her because after all the turmoil, things started to fall into place. She inherited this house and even a fair chunk of change to keep it going. Her skills and experience as a technical writer came together to create a new career that allowed her to work anywhere. She worked from home these days making nearly as much as she had working for corporate America. Both the home and the work-at-home career gave her the time and place to train. If not for the heart that still hurt like hell, her life might be pretty sweet.

With her pre-run stretches complete, Lorna stopped thinking about the state of her life and began to run, her pace easy and relaxed. The sun had decided to peek through the clouds, and the scent of the ocean wafted in the air. This was so different from the hot, dry air in Spokane. Not that it was unpleasant. On the contrary, it was exactly what she needed. No reminders of what she'd lost and what she'd left behind. This was a one hundred and eighty degree new beginning.

Once she made her way down the long driveway to the road, she stopped and inhaled deeply. It was breathtaking here in a completely different way from Spokane. How the family ended up on this gorgeous spot of land between Neah Bay and Clallam Bay was a mystery. It was so out of the way on one hand and so incredibly stunning on the other. What she didn't get was the isolation. They were a rich, interesting family, and it seemed to her they would have wanted to be part of the vibrant Seattle society. Instead, they settled here far away from the city and pretty much anyone else for that matter. Given her current state of mind, that part was welcome to her

and maybe that's what they were looking for too when they stopped here and decided to build.

She took a sip from the water bottle on her fuel belt and then took off again. No more easy. In the race, she'd have to complete 26.2 miles, so wimping out at a couple miles wasn't going to cut it. She pushed even as her legs ached with each strike of her foot on the unforgiving asphalt. It was her fault for ignoring most of her training during the last month. The body had a way of expressing its displeasure at her abandonment of the plan she'd been faithfully following until recently.

With her race coming up in a few months, she didn't dare allow her training to slide any longer. If she didn't focus, she'd be lucky to finish the endurance test within the allowed time limits. And with strict cutoff times on each leg, it wasn't like she could make up time for a weaker segment in one where she was stronger. No, it was out for the count if she missed her time by a single second in any of the three. Not an option.

So shut up and run was what she was thinking right now. And it's what she did. After a few minutes, she found her rhythm, and the pain in her legs began to ease away. Despite her whining about the stiffness in her body when she started, it usually ended up this way. Ten minutes or so into the run and her attitude shifted from reluctant runner to willing participant.

After about five miles, the road veered closer to the ocean though still decidedly inland. A side road lead away from the main highway and to the cliffs overlooking the waters. This was a much nicer road to run on without the worry of high-speed traffic. Along the side road, she ran on until she veered off the road and onto the wild grass of the bluff. Her breath coming in labored puffs, sweat beading on her forehead and trickling down her chest between her breasts, she stopped. Hands on her quads, she leaned forward and caught her breath as she looked out on the breathtaking view.

A glorious cool breeze blew off the water cooling the sweat on her skin. Despite the unaccustomed dampness to the air, it was delightful. All the way over here from Spokane she'd wondered if this was the right move and whether she'd be able to acclimate to a

coastal climate. With each passing day, she became more and more convinced that she could. It was different but in a good way.

Besides, wasn't that exactly what she'd been looking for? Her life on the east side had become painful, and everything she thought she believed, altered. Coming here gave her a chance to start over without distractions, and more importantly, without having to worry about running into Anna. She didn't think her heart could take that despite her conviction that she was a tough bitch. Just didn't think she was quite that tough.

As she watched the ocean ebb and flow, the spray of the waves touching her face like fine mist, she considered why it had been so important to run away. That wasn't like her really. And it wasn't like this was the first time her heart had been broken. Anna had dumped her for another woman and that had its own kind of sting. But it was something more than simply being dumped.

She'd believed what they'd shared was forever, and discovering how terribly wrong she'd been hurt more deeply than she imagined. The courage to love that completely might never come to her again, and that was one of the reasons she ran. Not so much from Anna but from herself. Hidden away on the ocean shores, who could touch her here? No one, and that made her feel safe. Eliminate the temptation and the problem was solved.

With a sigh, she decided that rather than stand here psychoanalyzing herself, she should probably keep running. She was, after all, due for a twelve-mile loop today, and according to her Garmin, there were almost seven more miles to go.

It was hard to work up the energy to leave this place. The grass was green, a big overhanging tree provided lovely shade, and the ocean waters were clear and beautiful. Perhaps for just a little while, she'd sit and rest. Enjoy the moment, the journey, and then finish her run.

She lowered herself to the ground, slipped out of her running shoes, and took off her fuel belt. She leaned her head against the tree trunk and closed her eyes. So peaceful. A girl could get used to this.

The wind howled, the sea raged, waves crashing against the rocks with the roar of a wild beast. She stood on the rocks, the spray

soaking her dress and chilling her skin. Tendrils of her long hair whipped around her face, but she didn't move. The crash of the water against the rocks was deafening. She gave little notice to any of it as she stared across the ocean waters, waiting and watching.

Even the rage of the lightning and the crack of thunder in the far off sky, could not dull her senses enough to block out the sound of her beloved. When she sensed her spirit, her heart soared. The night had called her, and she'd come. She always did. Love had a way of speaking to the heart, no matter what else happened. Soon they would be together again.

The wind tore the pins holding the thick mass of her hair, and it fell free, whipping around her face as the wind carried it. The ocean spray soaked her gown, and it clung to her every swell and curve. She shivered as she stared into the dark sky, the beginnings of a storm rolling across the sky until all the blue was pushed away. None of it mattered, for she could feel her spirit on the wind. Out here where nature roared and raged, she felt closest to the one she'd lost. That if she reached out, once more their fingers would entwine.

Another sound cut through the night, and she whirled, her gaze turning toward the bluff where earlier she had walked. A figure, large and menacing in the growing darkness, moved with speed and determination. Her scream cut through the growing wind, the raw pain of it clear even to her own ears. Knees buckling, she crumpled to the ground as she pressed the necklace she held in her fingers against her face. Great, wracking sobs shook her body.

He came across the bluff, his strides never slowing. She did not need to raise her gaze to his to know that his dark eyes never wavered from her. The grim set to his face would not be one of compassion or caring. Anger would darken his features just as the storm darkened the day. She had seen it a hundred times before. When he reached her side, he did not put a comforting hand on her shoulder. Instead, he gripped her arm and dragged her to her feet heedless of her cries of pain.

"Enough," he bellowed through the howling winds. "Someone will hear you, or even worse, see you with this thing!" He ripped from her hand the necklace she'd been holding to her face.

“It’s mine,” she screamed. “You have no right to take it from me.” She lunged, trying to take it back. He held it outside her reach.

“No more!” He flung it far away, and when she tried to run after it, he wrenched her hard in the opposite direction. “Do not cross me, child. I will have no more of it.”

She twisted back and forth in her attempt to break free of his cruel grip. “It’s mine. It’s all I have left of her.” In the darkness she could barely make out the flicker of white beads as they bobbed and floated in the ocean surf. If she didn’t get to it quickly, it would be gone.

He dragged her in the opposite direction, the fabric on the sleeve of her gown tearing away to leave bare skin to take the brunt of the rain that now came down in a torrent. “No more,” he yelled through the wind. “No more.”

She stumbled, a sharp pain knifing through her ankle. He dragged her without regard to her footing or her tears. One shoe slipped from her foot, and still he did not pause. Hot blood mingled with cold rain when a stone tore the tender skin on the bottom of her foot. “I hate you,” she screamed back at him, heedless of the pain and the blood. “I will always hate you.”

Her eyes stayed on the ocean as he hauled her away. His hatred could not destroy what was in her heart. She could not fight him and win, for he was bigger and stronger, but neither would she bend to his will. Her heart belonged to one and one only. It mattered not what he did; that would never change. He could never destroy their love. She would make certain.

The waters stirred up by the storm roiled with a fury that matched that of the man whose fingers dug into the skin of her arm and drew blood. The last thing she saw as he hauled her away was the beautiful whalebone necklace discarded amongst the craggy, surf-battered stones at the edge of the beach.