

Chapter One

Her nightmare woke him.

He could tell which one it was from the way she was pressed up against the headboard, her knees pulled up, feet twitching and kicking. Cursing softly, John slipped out of bed and went around to Beth's side. Reaching past the huge Rottweiler already standing watch, John took the glass of water off Beth's night table and went to refill it in the bathroom sink.

Rejoining the dog, he reached down with his free hand to pat its muscled shoulder. Taiho edged slightly away and maintained his focus on Beth. When she sat straight up and screamed—equal parts terror and fury, arms shooting out in front of her, eyes wild and unseeing—Tai shot forward and pressed his head and chest as far up onto the bed as he could without his feet leaving the floor.

John took a deep breath and waited for Beth's eyes to focus, for her to realize it was him in the room with her. He tried not to notice how quickly her look of relief was replaced by resignation and guilt. "Damn it," she said. Dropping her eyes, she leaned against Tai's muzzle and stroked his ears.

Watching as the pulse racing in Beth's neck gradually slowed, John took a step forward and held out the glass of water. She hesitated, then took it, her eyes closing tightly,

muscles still bunched but slowly relaxing, hands still shaking. She drank, breathed a little, and drank some more.

Only after she lowered the nearly empty glass did he sit down on the corner of the bed. Finally, she met his eyes and repeated, “Damn it.” Then it was safe to move into each other’s arms.

Chapter Two

Beth believed that talking about the nightmares gave them power over the rest of the day. So, with Taiho acting as advance guard, John silently followed her down the stairs and into the kitchen.

The richly finished cabinets and stone countertops softly reflected the natural light entering the room from a bank of windows that looked out over the Puget Sound south of Seattle and the Olympic Mountains beyond. Against that backdrop, Beth moved with choreographed efficiency. She hadn't danced professionally in years, but as John watched her reach up to tie her long hair in a knot at the base of her neck, he found it easy, as he always had, to imagine her on Broadway.

When he'd moved in about a year after construction on the house was completed, she'd given in to his one request—a small drop-down TV was mounted under a corner cabinet. As a lawyer with several high-profile corporate clients and a sideline representing victims of violence in civil lawsuits, his cases sometimes got a lot of attention. But this morning the TV stayed off.

Beth showed anxiety by controlling her diet, so when she buttered the pan and added feta to the eggs, John relaxed, patted Tai on the shoulder and gave him a scratch behind the ears. This time the dog gave him an appreciative grunt before trotting over to his food dish.

Taiho had been raised for personal protection, so rolling over to allow someone to rub his belly was as far out of the question as Beth opening her home to host a dinner party.

The rest of their morning routine included taking Tai for a walk outside the fenced yard, across the public pathway, and up the steep trail cut through blackberry bushes that served as a shortcut to their small community's shared parking area. They could always tell if one of the neighbors had had visitors the night before from the intensity with which Taiho followed the unfamiliar scent trails.

Their house—like the six others on the narrow, flat slip of land sandwiched between the bramble-covered hillside and the frigid waters of the Puget Sound—was oriented toward the water. It was smaller than the neighboring houses but was centered on a double lot ringed on three sides with a tasteful security fence. The house itself sat well above the high breakwater with access to the floating dock and the water by way of a narrow, gated gangway.

John and Beth finished getting ready and said goodbye to Tai at the gate. Walking along the common pathway to their cars, John exchanged pleasantries with a neighbor while Beth stood by. There was always some house or dock project to discuss; some spat over reserved parking, shared maintenance, or trash and recycling procedures to mediate.

John had done all the right things to ensure that he was well-liked and respected in their high-end neighborhood, but Beth never tried to break through the barriers that separated her from the others. It helped that John's difference was familiar to them—Successful Black Lawyer was a type they regularly saw on TV or interacted with at fancy fundraisers. It didn't hurt that he was handsome and fit and placed his feet deliberately when he moved, like someone with martial arts training.

But she was different in a way that none of them had ever gotten used to. She was gorgeous. Five-foot-eleven to John's six-foot-two with light olive skin and long, straight chestnut hair. After the neighborhood wives had satisfied themselves that she wasn't planning to steal anyone's husband, and at least one husband was disappointed after coming to the same conclusion, a genuine effort was made to welcome her to the neighborhood.

Beth had politely refused to engage. She used the Rottweiler as a barrier. The fact that the dog didn't bark, except occasionally at harbor seals, would normally have been a plus, but the way he silently watched anyone passing by the security fence was creepy. And if Beth had him on a leash outside of the fence, he didn't walk on the left like most trained dogs, or follow his nose, pulling ahead or lagging behind to sniff or pee. He kept his head up, switched sides, moved slightly ahead of Beth or dropped back a pace—always putting himself between her and anyone they passed. And even if she were walking alone along the path, when someone tried to talk to her, Beth would smile and gesture vaguely toward the parking area as she kept moving in that direction.

Between the news coverage of the cases John's firm handled and gossip about Beth's past in New York, the couple provided the neighbors with a rich source of speculation and gossip. And it wasn't just the neighbors; Beth and John drew attention wherever they went. It was race, maybe, and their respective good looks. But more than that, it was the way they moved—like a pair of dancers, gracefully and in sync.

Chapter Three

After John finished chatting with the neighbor and they reached the parking lot, Beth dumped her school bag onto the passenger seat, locked the doors, and headed for the Seattle University of the Arts where she taught in the theater program. Depending on the demands of his law practice, John drove to the office, to meet a client, or to court. Fridays and weekends, the couple spent time outdoors, exercised, shopped for fresh fish and produce in the local markets, worked to get ready for the following week, and enjoyed the relative privacy and security of the home Beth had painstakingly created from the remnants of her former life.

At 7:30 in the morning, the theater building was quiet. Beth took a deep breath and let herself in the backstage door, making sure it closed and locked behind her. She turned on the backstage lights, took a few more deep breaths, then went into the lighting booth to turn on the house lights and a scoop light to illuminate the stage. Crossing the lit stage, she unlocked the door on the opposite side for her students.

It was difficult for Beth to be alone in an empty theater, which was why she went in early before every morning class, forcing herself to walk slowly when she wanted to run, to breathe normally when she felt herself getting dizzy. She deliberately slowed the shallow panicked breaths she knew would cause the carbon dioxide levels in her system to drop

too low. Beth understood the physiology of panic attacks, and she had developed an exercise routine that was part warm-up and part rehab. It loosened her muscles, focused her mind, and kept her from cowering in the nearest corner.

No matter the hour, Beth's advanced classes were always full, and her students knew better than to be late. But she did make exceptions. Most of the students in her Acting 450 class this morning were on the cast or crew of an upcoming production of *Madame Butterfly*, which another faculty member, Margaret Palmer, was directing. Palmer was staging a non-operatic version of the play, but it was common knowledge that rehearsals were going poorly. Margaret had been keeping the cast later and later, and Beth expected most of her students to be slow getting to class. She didn't mind. She needed a little extra time this morning to work the nightmare out of her system.

She grabbed a yoga mat she kept in a corner and laid it out under the scoop light. The warm-up routine Beth had developed included elements of traditional dance stretches, Tai Chi, and Aikido. She started with the floor work. From a standing position she crossed her feet at the ankles and sank slowly down onto the mat, ending in a sitting position with her legs crossed. She had done this once at a campus picnic holding a plate of food in one hand and a drink in the other. Everyone around her had gasped and lunged forward, trying to catch everything before it hit the ground.

Beth took a breath and smelled stale urine. Disgusted, she got up and looked around, found the sticky dried up puddle on the stage. She rolled her eyes and then froze. In the rafters, just beyond the glare of the scoop light, the soles of a woman's feet and hands were just visible above the light bridge. Most of the rest of the body was obscured in darkness, but it was

obvious that the dead woman hanging in the rafters was wearing a kimono.

The next thing Beth remembered was tripping backward, her right hand hitting the stage, and the back of her head slamming against the wall. She cowered, butt and feet on the floor, body curled around itself in the grip of a full-on panic attack. Her mind flashed on scenes from her nightmares. She was trapped in her dressing room in New York, and he was walking slowly toward her.

No. She shook herself. One of her students was dead and hanging in the upper rigging.

Beth couldn't have said if it took five minutes or fifteen, but as her adrenaline level slowly dropped, she realized she couldn't wait there cringing until her students started showing up. Her mind wouldn't let her give the body a name, but she felt certain she knew who it was. Slowly inching along the wall toward the stage door, Beth was suddenly down the hall, bursting into the foyer, and headed for the exit before she could gain control again. It was all she could do to walk back down the hallway to test the stage door to make sure it was locked. Her bag with her cell phone and keys were backstage, but there was no way she was going in to get them. She knew her students couldn't get in. That was the best she could do.

No one was around that time of the morning in the building's main entrance, so Beth left out the front doors and ran across the grass to the athletic complex. The minute she stepped inside she was assaulted by the sound of basketballs pounding, gym shoes squeaking against the wooden floor, the shrill of the coach's whistle. She made it across the foyer to the gym's open double doors before collapsing. As the sounds around her slowly died away, she forced herself to breathe, and when someone put a hand on her shoulder and asked if she was OK, she was able to tell them to call the police.

Chapter Four

Nick O'Donnell called 911 then let Beth use his cell phone to call John's office. It was O'Donnell's class that had been about to start when Beth burst into the gym.

She was always a little sketchy and detached after a panic attack, but she watched the first police car arrive with two patrol officers in it. One went into the theater building with university security and the other stayed outside to ask some basic questions. Who called 911? Who found the body? What time was that? When a second patrol car arrived, followed by the medical examiner's van, one of the campus security guards came out to escort them into the building.

Beth imagined the body being lowered past the light rigging, twisting in midair, finally caught, feet first, then her shoulders. She saw her laid out on the stage, but her face was like the faces in Beth's nightmares—familiar but unidentifiable.

John arrived after the second police vehicle and the medical examiner and walked Beth over to a spot on the grass away from the others and sat with his arms around her. She spent the next several minutes furious with herself, first for panicking, and then for being glad John hadn't worn a suit to work that day. It was that kind of stupid stuff—grass stains and self-recrimination—that would stick in her head when her mind was refusing to process something.

She was trying to work herself up enough to go talk to her students when the single policeman who had arrived in the second car came back out of the building and introduced himself as Sergeant Santos. Santos repeated the first officer's questions then added a few of his own. What time had Beth arrived at the theater? What did she do between the time she arrived and when she found the body? Then what had she done?

They were simple questions unless the answers involved time spent crouched against a wall unable to distinguish between the 42nd Street Theater in New York, a recurring nightmare, and the Sarah Putnam Instructional Theater in Seattle, Washington. She told the officer she'd gotten to the theater around 7:30 to do warm-ups before her class started and that it had taken her a while to realize there was a body because it was hanging in the shadows above the stage lights.

Santos listened, watched, and wrote everything down. Which of the two theater doors had she used to get in that morning? Which door had she left from after discovering the body? Was the backstage door locked when she arrived? What about the other door? Was this her bag? Did she mind if he looked in it? Were these keys hers? Which one unlocked the theater? Had she used the car fob attached to the key ring to drive herself to work this morning?

Beth identified the key to the theater and told him she had driven herself to work that morning using the fob attached to the key ring. "I sort of panicked after I saw her. I wanted to get out of the theater, and the stage door was closer than the backstage door. I locked it as I left because I didn't want any of my students to get in and find her. I knew they couldn't get in the backstage door because that's how I come in, and I always relock it behind me." Responding to his questioning look, she added, "I was *sure* I had relocked the backstage door

because it's more than a habit. It's deliberate. I *always* relock the backstage door after I come in."

Santos held up a hand. "OK. Thank you." Then he handed her back her purse, but he wasn't finished with his questions.

Before this morning, when was the last time she had been in the theater? What did she touch before she discovered the body? Was that everything? Was she sure? Who else had keys to the theater? What about students? Did she know of any reason a student would have been in the theater last night?

Beth told Santos that around twenty-five people, most of them students, would have been in the building the night before for rehearsal, but they would have been in another, larger theater down the hall. Nobody but faculty and staff were issued keys, but students were sometimes lent keys if they were working on a project or were part of a production. He asked what time rehearsal had gotten over the prior evening, and she said she didn't know, that she hadn't been on campus the night before.

Santos shifted his shoulders and waist, adjusted his bullet-proof vest, and seemed to consider his next question. "Can you tell me who's in there? Whose body that is?"

She shook her head in a way that was part shudder and part answer to his question. Smiling sympathetically, Santos thanked her and then seemed to lose interest.

Ross Golden, vice president for student affairs, who had strolled over to listen to Santos's questions, gave Beth a sympathetic pat on the arm. Then everyone's attention shifted as Shari DeWitt came running across the grass. The next thing Beth remembered was John standing next to her with an arm around her waist and Vice President Golden asking in a tone that suggested he was repeating himself if Alyson Samuel had been upset about anything lately.

Trying to catch herself up, Beth studied the group of her

students gathered on the grass nearby. William Daniels and Brianne McKinney were sitting on either side of Shari with their arms around her shoulders. Shari, who was Alyson Samuel's girlfriend, was rocking back and forth. Sergeant Santos waited patiently nearby. Beth searched the group for Alyson, but she wasn't there. John leaned his head down. "Shari says Alyson didn't come home from rehearsal last night, and she's not answering her cell." The others stood or sat on the grass looking stunned. Brandon Kincaid had his head down and was wiping his nose on his sleeve.

Beth had students she worried about—Brandon Kincaid for one—but not Alyson. She walked over to Sergeant Santos and told him it was not Alyson in the theater.

He nodded his head in acknowledgment. "The Medical Examiner will handle identification of the body. But can you tell me why you don't think it's Alyson Samuel?"

"Alyson is... Alyson would just never do that."

He made another note in his book, verified her name and number again, and told her some detectives would be there soon. "I apologize in advance, ma'am, but I need you to wait here until they arrive. And I have to warn you that they'll probably ask a lot of the same questions. We appreciate your time and patience."

Beth stood beside John, waiting with the others on the grass for the gurney to be wheeled out of the building and taken away. She had tuned out on the conversation John was having with the vice president until she heard John say, "They don't seem to be convinced it was a suicide." When her head shot up, John squeezed her waist and pointed to the officer who had questioned her initially. He was walking toward the theater building with a large roll of yellow-and-black crime-scene tape.

can't think of anyone who'd be capable. So, I'm trying to think of everyone who *might* be capable." She looked at John warily. "I've heard Alyson say some pretty rough things about Walter Kramer."

He smiled, sat down in the chair next to her, and took another sip of her wine. "I would have laid odds Kramer's name would come up."

Walter Kramer was a theater historian and the dean of arts and humanities. Beth disliked him because he was an arrogant prick, but she hated him because of an incident that had happened when Kramer was still a faculty member, long before she'd come to work at the university. The story was that a student had posted copies of a note Kramer had written to her agreeing to pay for her abortion. John didn't remember exactly what the note said, but it was cold enough that the student decided to post it all over campus and then withdraw from the university. If the incident had happened a few years later, Kramer would have lost his job. Instead, the university thought distancing him from students by making him dean was a wise move.

John offered Beth her glass of wine, but she didn't seem to notice. "I don't think it could have been a random murder," she said, "not in the theater like that and making it look like a suicide."

He tilted his head to the side and offered her the wine again, waving the glass enticingly. She smiled at him and took it. Then she got up and released Tai with a snap, and with a flick of her finger sent him marching before her into the house. John followed them both inside.

"Are you working?" she asked, looking back over her shoulder as she refilled her glass. "Because I'm going to take a soak in the tub."

He nodded. "I'll be up in a minute. I have to call Gayle Turner about the Marie Hodge case."

Beth grimaced and gave him a sympathetic look then headed up the stairs, Tai trotting ahead of her like any good security detail would have done.

John's involvement in the murder trial of Marie Hodge was the result of his sister Janice's disastrous marriage. After Janice had finally kicked her abusive ex-husband out for good, John and Janice's mother, Ester, had dragged Janice along to volunteer with DAWN, a local women's domestic violence support network. Ester Marshall's message to her daughter was clear. "You and I belong on the helping end of this equation. You want to try to save people, fine. We'll try to help save people. But don't you dare bring another rabid stray into my home."

A few months later, Ester also started bullying John into giving legal assistance to DAWN and the women it tried to help. She and Janice provided bookkeeping services to the organization free of charge, and Ester wanted her son to do pro bono legal work as well. When John argued that he didn't practice the kind of law DAWN or its clients were likely to need, Ester Marshall gave him a look and her final word on the subject. "You make a lot of money helping rich people sue each other. It'll do you good to give some back."

Marie Hodge was one of many DAWN clients John had helped over the years, but she was the first one to be charged with murder. After talking to Gayle about her opinion and sending a follow-up email to the defense attorney he was working with on Marie's case, John went upstairs.

Beth was still in the tub, staring out at the Puget Sound and refining her list of suspects in Alyson Samuel's death. There were only so many things that could have gotten the events of the morning and the evidence in the Hodge case off John's mind. Watching his wife get out of the tub was definitely one of them.