

Wishing You Harm

A Brooke Roberts Mystery

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Nancy Labs

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Wishing You Harm

Prologue

Early Spring

She'd stolen before. Plenty of times. She was an elite operative who served her clients well.

This theft had seemed no different than the others. The medallion was beautiful. Priceless. And deadly, as she'd come to realize.

She'd seen firsthand the harm done by the madman who'd possessed it, and she could attest to the power the object bestowed. The rituals she'd witnessed in that Long Island mansion had frightened her in ways she'd never been frightened before, and now, all she wanted was to be rid of the thing. Just a few more miles and it would be out of her life forever.

She approached the drop-off site—a strip mall parking lot where her client's lackey waited. She was about to put on her turn signals when her well-honed instincts shrieked a warning. She'd deliver the medallion, and then what? The muzzle of a gun to her back? Orders to keep her mouth shut as she got into a waiting SUV? And after that?

She glanced in the rearview mirror. No one appeared to be trailing her.

She continued past the strip mall. There was a Salvation Army drop box at the edge of town. A quick stop and the medallion passed through the slot. Soon it would have a new owner.

Someone who knew nothing of its storied past. Someone who regarded it as a cheap trinket to be tossed in a jewelry box and forgotten.

She got back on the road and headed south. No one had seen her, so why did she feel afraid?

One

Mid September – Six Months Later

Brooke stared at the shards of glass strewn across the basement floor. She'd spent the day at a retrospective celebrating her late husband's life and work. She'd returned home from the art gallery, overwhelmed and drained and desperately sad, only to find all this waiting for her.

The young cop nodded toward the broken window. "This is how the intruder broke in. If you've got some plywood, I'll board it up for you. It's getting dark and you'll want to keep the critters out."

She nodded her thanks and followed Detective Jason Radley up the stairs to the living room where a female officer snapped pictures and a third person dusted for prints. The room was in chaos as was the rest of the house. Closets torn apart. Drawers emptied. Upholstery slashed.

"My husband died two months ago," Brooke stammered. "A hiking accident. Today was a retrospective to honor him." She looked around in dismay. "His name was Karl Erikson. I kept my last name—Roberts—for professional reasons."

"Thanks for clarifying. Is there somewhere we can talk?"

She led Detective Radley to the kitchen. It was a mess, but at least the chairs were intact, unlike some of the furniture in the living room. She glanced at the bottles and cans littering the counters. The silverware dumped on the floor. The broken dishes

and shattered bowls. Why would a thief create all this chaos?

Radley got a notepad from his pocket. "I'll start with a routine question. Is there anyone who wishes you harm?"

The question struck her as odd. "Someone did this, so of course someone wished me harm."

"What I'm trying to determine is if the perpetrator is someone you know. More specifically, someone who knew you'd be away this afternoon."

She turned the question over in her mind. Until today, she hadn't left the house since Karl died. Not since her world fell apart. Not since pain and grief and loneliness moved in to take his place.

"I can't imagine anyone I know doing this."

"Did you notice anything missing?"

She shook her head.

"How about jewelry?"

She thought of the pieces Karl had given her. Amber, turquoise, and amethyst set in silver. Diamonds, rubies, and sapphires that belonged to his mother. "I saw better pieces mixed in with the costume junk on the bedroom floor," she said. "It's odd that the thief left them behind."

"Odd indeed. And your computers? Anything amiss?"

"I haven't checked, but I back up all my work."

"And what kind of work do you do?"

"Editing. Desktop publishing. In the afternoons I paint in the studio above the barn."

At the mention of the studio, a fresh wave of grief washed over her. "What I mean is I used to paint. I haven't since Karl died. We're both artists. That is to say, he was. I am."

"And the studio? I assume it was vandalized as well?"

She glanced toward the barn across the driveway. If any spot on earth could be considered a sanctuary—a place of peace in a world gone mad—it was the second-floor studio she and Karl had shared. She thought of the paintings he'd left unfinished: *River in Winter*. *Sailboats at Dusk*. *Farmhouse in the Mist*.

Each in Karl's unique style. Enough reality to let you recognize the subject. Enough abstraction to make you see it in a whole new way.

"I haven't been up there since his death. I unlocked the door when students stopped by to pick up their work, but I didn't join them."

"I know this is difficult," the detective said, "but when we're finished here, we'll need to check it out."

"I understand. Just don't ask me to go up there with you."

He shifted in his seat and nodded in the direction of the living room. "The slashed upholstery suggests that the thief was searching for something he or she knew was hidden in the house. Gold. Cash. Thumb drives. That sort of thing."

"I've got nothing to hide."

"And your late husband? Might he have had something to hide?"

The question stopped her. Karl hadn't been himself in the months leading up to the hiking accident that took his life. He'd been silent. Moody. And oddly religious. What had come over him? Was he hiding something? A secret life separate from the one they shared? It was a question that had kept her awake at night.

"If my husband had something to hide, I was unaware of it."

"Fair enough. Have you contacted your insurance company?"

She shook her head.

"You'll want to do that right away. But keep in mind that this is a crime scene and we can't have people tromping around the place touching the evidence."

"For how long?"

"We should have things wrapped up by tomorrow afternoon."

He got to his feet and tucked the notepad into a pocket. "You'll need to stay somewhere overnight. Same reason—we don't want the evidence disturbed. Your insurance company will most likely reimburse you for a hotel room."

“My uncle offered to let me stay with him.”

“Terrific. Nice to have family nearby.” Detective Radley walked over to the counter and glanced out the window. “It sure is lonely back here in these woods. I’ll bet it gets spooky at night.”

“I’m used to it. Or at least I was until...”

Her voice trailed off. It was mid-September. The days were getting shorter. The nights longer. Karl was gone and now this. Would she ever feel safe again?

“I’ll need a phone number where we can reach you,” the detective said. “And the keys to the studio.”

She gave him the keys and waited while he entered her cell number into his phone. That completed, Jason Radley left her at the table and went off to inspect the studio above the barn.



Elena Voss glanced out the window. At 30,000 feet the flight was smooth with little in the way of turbulence. So what could explain this odd feeling? It wasn’t a premonition exactly. More of a nagging sensation that something important had been left undone.

But what?

She’d sent the contracts to the network honchos. Tomorrow they’d firm up the details and in the evening she’d join her colleagues for a cocktail party to celebrate the upcoming season of *The Unveiling*, her highly successful cable documentary series.

Her audience was eagerly awaiting the next revelations. Esoteric doctrines. Hidden knowledge. Ancient wisdom simplified and packaged for mass consumption. Everything was going as planned. The timing. The pacing. The drip, drip, drip of challenges to accepted orthodoxy. The public mind bending to her will.

So why was every nerve in her body set on edge? Every muscle tense? Why was she—Elena Voss—so afraid?

Upon landing, she checked her messages. Yes! Her lackeys had reported in. She returned the call, anxious to hear news of their success.

She pressed through the crowds in LAX, her carry-on bag bumping against her hip as she hurried toward baggage claim. And then the world seemed to go dark, and she stopped, barely able to breathe let alone speak. “What do you mean, you didn’t get there in time?” She listened to their answer. “Someone else was at the house ahead of you? Who?”

The explanations began, but she cut them off. “How could you let this happen? You’re professionals.”

A wave of nausea swept over her. “Fools!” she shrieked into the phone. “I’ll make you pay for this!”

She hung up, her head reeling.

Six months earlier the object had slipped through Elena’s fingers, and the operative who’d dared to betray her trust had paid for her duplicity with her life. And now, just when Elena was sure the medallion was hers for the taking, it had slipped through her fingers yet again.

Two

Brooke's Uncle Nelson pointed at the scrambled eggs and toast on her plate. "You've barely eaten, my dear. You need to keep up your strength."

She obliged him by taking a small bite and washing it down with lukewarm coffee.

Her phone rang and when she saw that the caller was Detective Radley, she excused herself and went out to the living room. Radley informed her that there'd been no sign of a break-in at the studio above the barn, and then he asked her to meet him and another detective at the house at 9:30 to wrap things up.

The call concluded, she returned to the table and resumed picking at her food.

Her 82-year-old uncle put down his crossword puzzle and removed his reading glasses, an indication that whatever he was about to say was important. "You need a home security system," he announced. "Get estimates, and when you've made a selection, we'll have it installed. Don't hold back. I want you to have the best protection money can buy."

"Why bother?" she asked. "The house will be on the market soon. And besides, the best protection money can buy sounds expensive."

"No problem. I intend to take care of it."

Brooke frowned at the thought. "I can't ask you to spend that kind of money."

"You're not asking. I'm offering, Or should I say *insisting*?" His expression softened and his rheumy blue eyes gazed at her pleadingly. "Please allow me to do this. I feel so helpless otherwise."

She saw the love written on his face and knew that this was no time to be stubborn. "You are the dearest, kindest thing that ever lived. You know that, don't you?"

"I know nothing of the sort. I just know I'll sleep better knowing you're safe. And until the system's installed, you'll be staying here in the guest room. I won't take no for an answer."

She smiled at him. "I guess that settles it then."

At 9:30 Brooke guided her SUV down the tree-lined driveway toward the rustic home she and Karl had shared. It wasn't as rustic as it appeared. It had been designed to suggest a life of primitive self-reliance while offering the latest in modern conveniences.

A white sedan waited in the drive, but before addressing its occupants, she checked her appearance in the rearview mirror. Her chin-length chestnut hair was neatly combed, but her blue-green eyes showed the aftereffects of last night's crying jag, and a touch of lipstick and blush had done little to disguise her misery and fatigue. But it hardly mattered. She was sure the police had seen much worse.

Jason Radley emerged from the passenger side of the sedan, and a stocky man in a gray suit got out on the driver's side. He appeared to be in his mid-fifties with a wide nose and jowly cheeks, and his dark eyes studied her from beneath a pair of bushy gray eyebrows. Without waiting for an introduction, he offered his card: *Homicide Investigator, Detective James Burleigh*.

Brooke felt her hands trembling. Why was a homicide detective being assigned to a burglary investigation? She looked at him, confused. "Homicide?"

"Don't be alarmed," he said. "The timing of the break-

in so soon after your husband's death has raised a few questions. Our goal is to answer those questions so we can determine whether or not there's a connection between the two incidents."

She turned her face away, torn between grief and anger. Two months earlier she'd told the police that Karl's death was suspicious, but they'd brushed her remarks aside. Hysterical wife. Distraught widow. Her concerns hadn't been given any credence, and they'd been dismissed out of hand.

But nothing about Karl's death had made sense. Although he was 24 years Brooke's senior, he'd been in superb physical shape. He was hale and hearty at 60 and a robust outdoorsman who wasn't likely to tumble down an embankment. Especially not there. Not at the familiar spot he'd loved since childhood.

She thought back to that bright Sunday in mid-July. Other summers she and Karl would have set off like gypsies to sell their paintings at outdoor art festivals. But since finding God, Karl had taken to going to church on Sunday mornings, leaving her to work the festivals alone.

She'd returned that evening, expecting to find him at the stove whipping up something wonderful as penance for sending her off by herself. He hadn't been there, so she went to the studio, and when he wasn't there either, she'd noticed, belatedly, that his truck wasn't in the drive.

She'd called his cell. Not once but a dozen times. Finally she called the police and fifteen minutes later an officer stopped by the house. Karl hadn't been gone long enough to be considered *missing*, but the officer promised they'd stay on top of the situation and she should let them know if he turned up.

And then he'd asked a question: "You two having marital problems?"

Marital problems? Did disagreeing about God count as a marital problem?

"We love each other deeply," was all she'd said.

But it wasn't the police who'd found him. Early the next

morning a walker along a wooded path reported seeing a body in a ravine. An *accident*, the investigating officer told her later. Karl must have fallen, struck his head on a rock, and drowned in the shallow stream at the foot of the embankment.

"I'm sorry for your loss," the officer had said, shaking his head sadly as her world fell apart.

Four days later she'd stood at the graveside and placed a rose on Karl's casket, her grief on display for all to see. And yesterday at the retrospective, it was like she'd buried him all over again.

She invited the detectives inside, and like yesterday, she offered seats at the kitchen table. The homicide investigator took the lead and began by asking for the names of those who knew Brooke would be away from the house the previous day, starting with immediate family.

She told him that Karl's kids—28-year-old Stephanie and 30-year-old Brett—were aware that she'd be at the retrospective all afternoon. They'd been at the event as well; Brooke had seen Stephi several times throughout the afternoon but Brett just at the beginning.

The detective asked about her relationship with her stepchildren. *Strained*, she told him. They hadn't approved of their father marrying someone so much younger—Brooke was only eight years older than Stephi and six years older than Brett and could have been their sister rather than their stepmother. Beyond that, they'd resented her presence in the house that Karl had built with their mother.

"Your husband's ex-wife. Did she attend the exhibition?"

"Janine? No. She felt it might make things awkward."

"Did she know the house would be unattended while you were at the art show?"

"Of course."

"Anyone associated with her who might also have known?"

An image of Janine's second husband popped into Brooke's mind. She'd never liked the guy. Never trusted his glib manner

and his flattering tongue.

“Janine’s second husband knew I’d be away.”

“And he is...?”

“A psychologist named Greg Greenwood.”

“Would the two of them have known if something was hidden here?”

“Possibly. Janine lived here a lot of years before I came along.”

That was it for family and so they moved on to friends. Gallery owner Madeleine Hewitt had taught in the art department at the same university where Brooke’s late husband had taught. She’d retired early to open Hewitt Fine Arts Gallery about the same time Karl retired to paint and take private students. Madeleine’s husband, Sidney, had been Karl’s childhood friend, and he’d taken Karl’s death quite hard.

“Sidney Hewitt was at the retrospective?” the detective asked.

Brooke shook her head. “He had a touch of something and stayed home. He sent his regrets.”

Burleigh asked about Karl’s students, of which there’d been too many to recall. Brooke suggested that there might be a list of names and contact information in the study. She’d avoided the room since Karl’s death because it reminded her of him and that’s why she’d closed the door and hadn’t stepped inside. She had no problem with Jason Radley looking there for a list of students, and Detective Burleigh excused him to do so.

“Who stood to gain by your husband’s death?” he asked as his partner left the kitchen.

Brooke frowned at the question. Things always came around to money. Not love and loss and a future left in ruin, but cold, hard cash in people’s grasping hands.

“His kids each get a third of the estate. Not a fortune, but a nice sum for young people saddled with debt.”

“And you? What did you stand to gain?”

“Heartache. Loneliness. Soul-crushing grief. Shall I go on?”

The detective frowned. This was clearly not the response he was seeking. “I meant materially.”

She explained that she’d receive a third of the major assets which included the house. Stephi and Brett had grown up there, and it seemed only right to let them have a third of its value. They were anxious to sell and it would be only a matter of days before it was on the market. Beyond that, Brooke was the beneficiary of two life insurance policies and she’d be keeping the items she and Karl had purchased and the investments they’d made together. She offered to supply the detective with the paperwork that was currently in the hands of their attorney.

He thanked her and took a moment to refer to items on his tablet. “According to the notes from your interview last July, you said you and your late husband were having differences of opinion. What was that about?”

“Karl started going to church. I didn’t. We’d both been skeptics and suddenly he wasn’t. The change was difficult to get used to.”

He asked about the church Karl had attended and he wrote down the name when Brooke supplied it. After that he placed the notepad in his pocket and rose to his feet.

“That’s it for now, Ms. Roberts. As soon as Detective Radley finishes up in the study, you can start putting things back in order.”

He was about to leave but turned back. “One other thing,” he said. “Did your husband have acquaintances at church?”

“We didn’t talk about church. At least I didn’t, and I didn’t pay much attention when he brought it up.”

“Then you wouldn’t know if he might have been meeting a lady friend there?”

Brooke drew in her breath. “A lady friend? I have no idea.” She watched from the kitchen window as the men left the

house and got into the white sedan.

A lady friend?

Why had she never thought of that?



Janine Greenwood carried the groceries into the kitchen. Carrots, asparagus, spinach, tomatoes, grapes and strawberries. Fresh, organic, and brimming with nutrients. Later she'd make a salad, and as the darkness settled over the river, she and Greg would put on sweaters and share a candlelit dinner on the deck. She'd open a bottle of wine, and after two or three glasses, maybe he'd open up and tell her about the meeting he attended over the weekend.

Or maybe not.

She fumed at the thought. After fifteen years of marriage, it was unacceptable that Greg still kept secrets from her. They were soul mates as well as business partners. Secrets had no place in a relationship like theirs. And yet, there it was. At least once a year he disappeared for two days. She suspected that these meetings were elite gatherings of advanced lodge members with important business to attend to. But Greg remained secretive, and all she knew for certain was that this year's meeting started Friday night and ended sometime Sunday afternoon.

On the way home, Greg claimed to have visited a nature center to indulge his passion for bird-watching. *There's something magical about birds*, he always said. *The way they take to the sky without a care in the world.*

Janine envied the birds for not having a care in the world. At the moment she had a number of cares. Among them was her deep regret at having missed her ex's retrospective.

"It'll be awkward," her daughter Stephi had said. "Everyone will be looking at you and then at Brooke to see who cries first."

And so she didn't go, even though she of all people deserved to see Karl's paintings one last time. She'd watched hundreds make the journey from first brush stroke to final creation. Some came together in a day—a *la prima*—quick, confident strokes that erupted in color. Other paintings took months to unfold, sometimes in oil; sometimes acrylic. But never water color. Transparency, in art as in life, was not Karl's forte.

She'd consoled herself by going to Philadelphia to visit the places she and Karl used to frequent in their student days. She'd eaten coffee and a Danish at their favorite diner and wandered through Old City, soaking up the history around Independence Hall. After that, she'd turned her steps toward Mordecai's Antiques and Oddities, the quirky little shop where she and Karl had worked in their undergrad days.

The store was still quirky. Still filled to the rafters with the bizarre, the grotesque, and the arcane. Mardi Gras memorabilia. Carvings of angels, saints, and devils. Antique crystal balls and vintage Ouija boards. Not much had changed over the years except for the owner.

The Mordecai Simmons she remembered had been a shrewd businessman with an animated personality and a keen sense of humor. But the Mordecai Simmons she found in the office at the back of the store was a feeble and confused senior citizen—old or older than much of his merchandise. It took a while for him to place her, but when he did, he mumbled something about her ex-husband having stopped by months earlier with a medallion he wanted appraised—a piece he'd acquired at a Salvation Army Thrift Shop.

At that point, Mordecai had leaned across the desk as though about to reveal a secret. "If I didn't know better, my dear," he'd said in confidential tones, "I'd have told your ex that he possessed a rare and highly desirable occult ritual object. But after a lifetime in this business, I'm not so easily fooled. I can spot a reproduction when I see one."

When she informed him of Karl's recent death, the tenor

of the conversation changed. The old man became agitated and began wondering aloud if the medallion had been authentic after all. It brought with it a curse—surely she could see that. When she expressed confusion, he became angry, not just at her but at himself for having dismissed the item so lightly.

Alarmed, Janine got to her feet and excused herself, but the owner's son stopped her before she could leave the building.

"I couldn't help but overhear my dad's outburst," Ezra Simons said apologetically. "His memory's failing. He may have seen your ex-husband a few months ago or it could have been years ago. Or it could have been someone else entirely who brought an item in to be appraised."

So that explained it. Mordecai was senile. Then why was Janine troubled by the things he'd said?

She finished putting the produce in the fridge and glanced at the clock. She had to hurry. A client was due in fifteen minutes and she needed to get ready.

She left the non-perishables on the counter and headed for the Reiki studio at the back of the house. She lit some candles and a stick of incense and sank to the floor in the lotus position, her spine erect as she focused on her breathing. This was how she prepared herself for her sessions. Her clients deserved a practitioner who was centered and focused.

But she was having trouble centering and focusing because her thoughts kept drifting back to Karl. They'd been high school sweethearts, and while there'd been moments of teenage angst and some particularly challenging experiences she'd prefer not to recall, they'd managed to put the past behind them and move into what Janine had hoped would be a blissful future. They'd married at Christmas in their junior year of college and lived in a tiny apartment in Philadelphia while they finished their degrees. There was Janine's first teaching job at a Quaker school and Karl's MFA that led to a position in a university Fine Arts department. Eventually they'd built the house in the woods and passed pleasant years raising their children to

be wild and free.

And then as often happens, they began to grow apart. Janine felt drawn to the exotic and the mystical while Karl remained earth-bound. As the differences between them became more marked, Janine fell under the spell of a handsome psychologist named Greg Greenwood. He wasn't just a psychologist; he was a motivational speaker, a life coach and a hypnotherapist. He was sensitive. Funny. Gentle. In short, he was everything and more that she could have wished for in a life partner.

The divorce was swift. The re-marriage even swifter. Within a year, she and Greg had expanded their home to include space for their business: *The Center for the Mystic Healing Arts*. Soon they were sharing their wisdom with others.

Meanwhile, Karl had remained in a rut. Skeptical. Disparaging. Arrogant. Tormented, at times, by regrets from years gone by. And then one day he found Jesus. How was that possible? Jesus, of all things?

And now Karl was dead, released to wherever his karma—or his faith—had taken him.

Janine reined in her wandering thoughts. It was time to set her intentions for the upcoming Reiki session. "Peace," she murmured, as the air slowly escaped her lungs. "My next client is seeking peace."

She inhaled again and let it out. Slowly in. Slowly out. A minute went by. Two. Three. The silence deepened. And then a ringtone jangled from her pocket.

Not another cancellation! She'd had three this week with no indication that her clients intended to reschedule.

But it wasn't her Reiki client calling to cancel. It was her daughter, Stephanie.

"I can only talk a minute, Steph. What's up?"

"You won't believe this! The police were just here! In my apartment! On my day off!"

Janine felt her blood run cold. "Is everything all right? It's

not your brother, is it?"

"Of course it's not my brother. They don't arrest people for being hopeless idiots. Daddy's house was broken into yesterday. The police stopped by to ask questions."

"Your father's house was broken into? Was anything taken?"

"Beats me. But the thief ripped up a bunch of furniture and the cops figured he was trying to find something hidden in the upholstery. And get this," Stephi continued. "The cops are reopening their investigation into Daddy's death. They're calling it suspicious instead of accidental."

Goose bumps prickled up and down Janine's arms. "Your father tripped and fell. It was a tragic accident. There was nothing suspicious about it."

"Try telling that to the homicide guy and his sad-eyed side kick. And FYI, they want to talk to you and Greg. And Brett as well."

"To us? What do we have to do with this?"

"You knew Brooke would be out of the house yesterday. You and Greg weren't at the retrospective. And Brett left after only a few minutes."

"Are you saying we're suspects?" Janine's voice was shrill. "For the break-in or for...?" She felt suddenly faint and found herself gripping the edge of her Reiki table.

The doorbell chimed at the rear entrance.

She glanced at her watch. Her client was early!

There was no time to calm herself. With her thoughts spinning in her head, she said a hasty goodbye and went to open the door.