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## *Prologue*

# MARCH

**ELEANOR SETTLED ONTO THE BENCH** overlooking Puget Sound, resting her cane beside her. It had turned into a beautiful afternoon. Chilly, but God be thanked, the rain had stopped.

“Here.” Meredith handed her a blanket, which Eleanor tucked over her lap. “You warm enough?”

“Yes, dear. Thank you.” Eleanor rested her gloved hands on the blanket.

Meredith sat beside her and pulled out her *National Enquirer*. “Hot off the press,” she said with a smile, tapping today’s date on the cover.

Eleanor turned away from the garish photos and lurid headlines. After three years, she was used to Meredith’s questionable taste in reading material, but to prefer sensation and scandal to the beauty that lay before them? It astounded her.

The Sound was a sheet of steely blue glass all the way to the peninsula, where snow-capped mountains thrust sharp peaks into a true blue dome of sky—a sky strewn with drifts of cotton clouds. Such a gift after so many days—or was it weeks?—of gray skies and bone-chilling rain.

Eleanor inhaled deeply. The air held the tang of wet leaves and salty brine.

On the playground a little way down the hill, children in bright coats and caps clambered up the jungle gym and down the slides, flew high into the air on the swings, and raced down the zipline, the general hum of their chatter punctuated by cries of delight and shouts of laughter.



Away to her left, beneath a wizened old grandfather of a mountain ash tree, juncos and robins hopped about in the leaf mast, plucking fallen berries from the ground with their beaks. The soft rustling of the leaves mingled with the occasional cheery-cheery-cheerio of a robin. A child shouted, and two juncos took to flight in a blur of black-and-white tail feathers before alighting on the branches of the mountain ash. From somewhere behind the bench, a crow cawed.

Eleanor's soul felt full—such a glorious day. She closed her eyes and turned her face to the sky. The late winter sun warmed her skin, and sunlight danced across her eyelids in swirls of yellow and orange, like fire. *Thank you, Lord.* In the prayer book, she knew, there was a prayer of thanksgiving for fair weather. How did it start? Something about immoderate rain and water, and then—*In thy mercy thou hast relieved and comforted our souls by this seasonable and blessed change of weather. We praise and glorify thy holy Name for this mercy.*

Meredith elbowed Eleanor's arm. "Wonder what *he's* up to."

Eleanor stifled a sigh. "Who, dear?" She did not open her eyes.

"That man. He was sitting in his car when we got here. And then he got out and just stood there in the street for a bit. And now he's gone and cut daffodils out of that rockery. The hooligan."

Eleanor opened her eyes and followed Meredith's gaze. The man wore dark sunglasses, a faded gray sweatshirt, paint-stained pants, and work boots. He stood, shoulders hunched, next to a beat-up blue coupe, the daffodils clutched in his fist. Eleanor offered a silent prayer for him—he looked so lost.

"Up to no good," Meredith said under her breath. "There's a pay phone down there, just past the playground. I'm going to call the police."

"No, dear." Eleanor placed a restraining hand on Meredith's arm. "It's just daffodils."

The man squared his shoulders and walked to the corner. Eleanor turned on the bench to watch him. He stood on the edge of the

sidewalk, staring across the street like it was an ocean too big to cross, his body tense and poised.

And she knew she was being asked to speak to him. It wasn't too far—just across the street. The hardest part would be the step off the curb. She unburdened herself of the blanket, grabbed her cane, and pushed herself to her feet.

“What are you doing?” Meredith demanded, her eyes popping behind her glasses.

“I'm going for a little walk.”

“A what?”

Eleanor stepped carefully over the grass toward the sidewalk, using her cane for balance. She never went for walks. The chronic pain in her legs was the reason her granddaughter had hired Meredith in the first place.

“You're not going to talk to him!” Meredith said incredulously.

“Hush, dear, he'll hear you.”

Meredith raised her voice. “I don't care if he does—the thief!”

“Well, I do,” Eleanor said quietly. “Now go back to your magazine. I'll be fine.”

Meredith did not go back to her magazine, but neither did she leave the bench.

Eleanor made her slow way along the sidewalk, paused when she reached the curb, then lowered her cane and stepped carefully into the street. Pain throbbed in her legs, but she ignored it and slowly crossed the road. When she reached the other side, she stopped and stood a few feet from the man. He did not move or acknowledge her in any way.

She said gently, “May I help you?”

He turned his face toward her, but his sunglasses made it hard to tell if he was looking at her or past her. He was young, perhaps thirty, and handsome in a roguish sort of way. He ran a hand through his hair—so dark brown it was almost black, and in need of a trim. It

curled behind his ears and over the pushed-back hood of his sweat-shirt. “No,” he said, his voice bitter. He thrust the daffodils at her.

Without thinking, Eleanor took them.

“No one can help me.”

“Oh, but—” Eleanor began.

He turned and strode back to his car, climbed in, and drove off down the hill.

# 1

**TRISTAN WOKE IN THE DARK.** The attic window was a black eye in the wall. No hint of light. It must be about 3:30—dawn came early to the Pacific Northwest in summer. He turned his head to look at the clock on the nightstand. 3:28.

He expelled a long breath and closed his eyes, the weight of his exhaustion pressing him into the mattress. He'd fallen into bed at nearly midnight. The dress rehearsal had gone badly, and Carrie made them re-run several scenes. His castmates had been game and gracious, laughing at their mistakes—well, except for Grace Crawford, whose thin smiles fooled no one.

But it wasn't the prospect of a disastrous opening night that kept him awake despite the tiredness that wound through his chest and sucked at his limbs. His mind would not shut off. He lay there for hours or days or maybe a lifetime, his thoughts running in the same muddy ruts they'd been slipping in for weeks.

And then he smelled coffee. Someone was up. He opened his eyes. Gray light glimmered in the window. No point lying here cycling through the same old thoughts. He rolled out of bed, pulled on his running shorts and shirt, and headed downstairs.

His mother was at the kitchen table, her Bible open in front of her. "Did I wake you?" she asked. "I was trying to be quiet."

"I smelled the coffee."

She gestured toward the percolator. "Help yourself."

"You're up early," he said as he poured himself a cup.

"Your dad was snoring so loud it woke me up. And then it kept me up." Her lips curved into a small smile. "I haven't heard him saw logs like that in months."



Tristan sat at the table. At least someone could sleep. Not that he had any right to be annoyed. Hal had known more than his fair share of sleepless nights these past eight months. “I’m glad he’s sleeping.”

“Me too,” Diana said fervently. “But you’re not. How come? You nervous?”

Nervous was not the right word. Spun up, maybe, or spun out. But not about tonight. “Rehearsal last night was a disaster,” he said lightly, “so I’m feeling pretty good.”

“You and your theater superstitions!” She laughed, and the skin of her face wrinkled over her cheeks, softening the harsh jut of her cheekbones and filling in the hollows beneath them. Her hands holding the coffee mug were thin too, skin over bone. She’d never regained the weight she’d lost during chemo, and she’d lost more during radiation.

Diana’s smile faded, replaced by concern, accentuating the thinness of her face. “What are you going to do when the play’s over?”

“Well, there’s a party afterward, so I guess I’m going to mingle and make small talk and be my usual charming self.”

“I meant next month, when it’s *over*.”

He’d known exactly what she meant, and he did not want to talk about his plans, or his lack of them. He hadn’t told his parents about turning Lingman down—and he wasn’t going to. “Mom,” he said with a smile, “it hasn’t even started yet.”

“Are you going back to L.A.?”

Evidently she was not to be deterred. He chuckled, feigning nonchalance. “I don’t know what I’m going to do next month, but right now I’m going for a run.” He slugged the rest of his coffee and pushed back from the table.

Diana gave him an overbright smile. “Take Jess with you.”

He squeezed her shoulder gently. “I always take Jess with me.”



Tristan jogged past the park and the playground and then down the hill toward Park Street. Jess ran beside him, her presence a comfort. She might be Hal's dog, but Tristan had been the one to care for her during Diana's long illness, and he loved her as much as Hal did. Maybe more. With Hal, it was hard to tell.

Light filled the sky though the sun had not yet risen over East Hill. A cool breeze blew up from the Sound, and seagulls cried as they swooped over the water. The mountains loomed blue in the distance. Tristan pushed himself beyond his usual pace, trying to drown the thoughts in his mind with the exertion of his body.

When he reached the stairs on Park Street, he snapped the leash off Jess's collar. She bounded down the long flight of wooden steps and onto the beach, her plummy golden tail waving like a flag. As he jogged down the stairs after her and clambered over the driftwood to the sand, the sun rose over East Hill, turning the Sound to silver and the snow-capped peaks of the mountains to gold.

Jess plunged into the surf, barking joyously, raced back, and ran a circle around him.

He found a small, thin piece of driftwood, threw it to her, and watched her chase it. Sand churned under her feet as she ran, spraying up behind her. The beach, thank goodness, was still largely deserted—a couple walking away from him in one direction and a jogger far up the beach in the other.

A sudden stiff breeze blew in from the water, and he turned to face it, hoping it would clear his head. As of last week his mother was officially in remission. Finally. Thank God. But now he needed to decide what he was going to do. Go back to L.A. and try again? Stay in Port Lawrence and get a job? Go somewhere else and get a job? What kind of job? He was only good at one thing—and apparently he wasn't good enough at it.

He shoved the bitter thought aside. After all, he was the one who'd turned something he loved into something he used, a tool he could

wield to catapult him where he wanted to land. And it had begun to work.

Until his mother's cancer diagnosis last fall.

Jess brought the stick back and dropped it at his feet.

They told him when he visited for Thanksgiving. Diana had downplayed it. "It's not that bad. They caught it in time."

"Barely," Hal had muttered. His face was a mask, but his fear hit Tristan like a fist to the chest. Hal still worked full time. And even if he didn't, Tristan couldn't see his father playing nurse.

It had taken him less than an hour to decide what he needed to do.

Jess nudged his knee with her nose.

"Good girl." He picked up the stick and lobbed it up the beach.

So why was it taking him so long now?

But he knew why. He hadn't expected to be gone four months, let alone eight. He was just going to stay long enough to get his mom through chemo. But she'd been so sick that they'd delayed treatment multiple times. Three months turned into four, then five.

And he hadn't expected the simple fact of his absence to end so many relationships. In all these months, he hadn't heard from any of his friends in L.A., except for that letter from Genevieve, which didn't count.

He ran a hand through his hair as he stared out at the water and the mountains. In the past eight months his lifelong dream had slowly turned to dust and ashes.

He *really* hadn't expected that.

Jess ran back with the stick, dropping it at his feet yet again.

Tristan picked it up and hurled it into the surf. He peeled off his shirt, running shoes, and socks. Then he ran after Jess. The water was cold enough to take his breath away when he plunged into it. He came up sputtering, Jess circling him with the stick in her mouth. He took it from her and tossed it along the shallows. She paddled after it, and he swam after her. The cold water forced him to focus

on moving his body, on trying to keep himself warm. He and Jess swam down the beach for several minutes before he waded ashore, shivering, and ran back to where he'd left his shirt and shoes. The cool wind off the Sound felt frigid against his wet skin, and the early morning sun did little to warm him. His teeth were chattering by the time he got his shirt back on.

“Come on, Jess,” he called as he ran barefoot through the sand and seaweed toward the stairs that would take him up to Park Street. At the top of the beach, he sat on a large piece of driftwood, snapped Jess's leash to her collar, and wiped the sand off his feet as best he could. Then, still shivering, he quickly pulled on his socks and shoes and set off up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He and Jess raced home.

When he turned onto his parents' street, he slowed to a walk, breathing hard, but despite the cold water and the exertion of his body, his head was no clearer. He'd wasted ten years chasing an empty dream, and now here he was, finally awake from the dream, and pitifully lost without it.

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