

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

GREGG
OLSEN

The

BONE
BOX

A BIRDY WATERMAN THRILLER

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ALSO BY GREGG OLSEN

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*For Lori Jones,
who loves being just a little bit scared*

CHAPTER ONE

There was an irony in the return address that never failed to elicit a sheepish wince from most anyone who received something postmarked there. Maybe even a sardonic smile. *A reaction.*

The town from which the letter had been mailed was Walla Walla, a southeast Washington city with the somewhat ironic nickname “a place so nice they named it twice.” While Walla Walla might be nice—it had a burgeoning wine industry, vistas of ruggedly beautiful landforms, and a state champion youth basketball team—it was known mostly because it was home to the state’s oldest and toughest penitentiary. The most notorious killers and rapists, violent offenders of any kind, were housed in a razor-wire-and-sharpshooter-rimmed complex that was all about doing time, paying for their crimes.

In her modest Beach Drive rental in Port Orchard, Washington, Kitsap County Forensic Pathologist Birdy Waterman kicked off her sensible shoes, turned the CD player to a Stan Getz track, and rummaged through her refrigerator—a cache of zombie food that indicated a life too busy with things other than cooking. Selecting a Coors Light, she looked out at the water of Puget Sound and watched as something under its shimmery gray surface caught the attention of a flock of gulls. Birdy had seen the address on the envelope dozens of times, of course. But this was a first. It was a letter addressed to *her*, not one she’d put in the mail to the prison each November when Tommy Freeland’s birthday came around. She instinctively wiped the rim of the beer bottle and took a gulp as Getz’s sax glided through the chilly air of the drafty old beach cottage.

It was Friday. She had no plans but to eat, go to bed, maybe dream about one of the cases she’d been working—a three-year-old girl whose mother claimed she’d been abducted from the bedroom of their Chico, Washington, home. Tulip Lawson’s remains had been discovered by clam diggers ten days after she’d been reported missing. Little Tulip’s body was now stored in the chiller at the morgue, Birdy’s grim domain.

The letter sent from the ditto-named town in the southeast corner of the state beckoned. Birdy slid into her new sofa, a Pottery Barn camelback that she’d ordered to fit the smaller space of the old house’s living room. She’d never ordered furniture from a catalog before—now she was hooked. No more endless browsing. Just click and order.

She swallowed some more beer and reached for the letter. In a very real

way, she'd long hoped to hear from Tommy one day. It was one of the reasons she sent those birthday cards, year after year. Her other reason was deeper—and one she never gave voice to. It was to assuage her guilt a little. It wasn't that she had done anything wrong. She had told the truth.

The truth. She'd learned then, at a very young age, that sometimes the consequences of telling the truth are too difficult to bear. Her testimony at her cousin's trial was one of the key points that had helped send Tommy Freeland to the land of inmates, wineries, and basketball hoops.

A place so nice they named it twice.

The letter was typed, which surprised Birdy. She hadn't known Tommy knew how to type. She really didn't know much about him at all. He had been a nineteen-year-old high school dropout when he was sent to prison.

As the sax soared and the gulls circled, Birdy read.

Birdy, I bet you are surprised to hear from me. Yeah, I got all of your birthday cards and the notes. At first I thought maybe you'd been required by someone to send them. I also thought that maybe you were being cruel and ironic. After a while, I figured you were just being you. I've had twenty years to think about what happened to Anna Jo and how it was that I ended up here. I would like to say I'm sorry for all of it, but I can't because I know I didn't do it. I couldn't have done it. I don't blame you for what you did. I don't really blame anyone. I've learned a lot about life here in prison and one of the biggest things is knowing that forgiveness is the only way through salvation. You might not be religious, but sometimes forgiveness is something different than God stuff. Anyway, I am not a liar. I am not a murderer. I guess you know that I've been up for parole and all they want me to do is admit to killing Anna Jo. I can't do it. I can't admit to something I didn't do. So, I've never asked you this. I don't have any money to ask anyone else. Will you help me? Will you come down here?—I know we've never really talked since before the trial. I want to talk to you. I put your name on my visit list. All you have to do is fill out this form and you can come.

He signed it: *Yours, Tommy.*

As Birdy looked down at the visitor's registration form, two things struck her. One, her eyes were slightly moist. She was no crier. She never had been. There was something about continually seeing the worst that human beings do to each other that forced a person to wall up their emotions. *Protection mode*, she called it. It wasn't that it didn't hurt to see a strangled child, a mangled car crash teenager, or a woman beaten to death by her boyfriend. All of those things hurt like hell, but Birdy never cried about them. Not her job to cry, she told herself. Her job was about making sure that the prosecutors had all the evidence they needed to stop the perpetrators from doing it again.

Birdy dried her eyes.

The next thing she knew was she was reaching for a pen to fill out the form. It was as if Birdy's response was completely automatic. There was no dissecting the pros and cons of seeing him. No need to analyze his invitation. And, she knew, it was more than curiosity that would take her there.

She simply had to see him.

The rental house on Beach Drive had been built in 1951 and it looked every bit of its vintage—asphalt shingles, aluminum-frame windows, and a screen door that couldn't stop a sparrow. It was, in the kindest possible terms, cozy. It would take a coin toss to determine which of the two bedrooms was larger. The closets were miniscule. The kitchen had been built at the time when people gathered around a table in a little nook to discuss their days.

Birdy, at thirty-four, lived alone. She had no one to gather around the built-in nook. While others considered her too smart, too pretty, too *wonderful* to be single, being single was just fine with her.

She'd rented the bungalow with the idea that it was a temporary residence and she'd find something bigger, better, and more in keeping with her desires for privacy. She worked with a real estate agent to find a more permanent residence, but didn't find what she wanted. The gray and white house facing Sinclair Inlet and Bainbridge Island was home. She'd clipped a few ideas from home-decorating magazines in hopes the Seattle owner would eventually decide to sell the house to her. She'd be ready.

That night before she tucked in, Birdy went into the second bedroom. It was ceiling-high with boxes, books, and furniture that she still hadn't found a place for since her move from Seattle. She'd planned on setting it up as a guest room, but the need for guests seldom materialized.

Birdy flipped on the switch and scanned the overstuffed room for the box that held the odds and ends of cases that troubled her. Her father had made the box to hold the tools he used for carving toy figures he sold to tourists for extra money. The container was precious, but so were its contents. She looked inside at the file folders that filled a third of the box, the manila folders protruding like the spine of a dead animal.

Not all these cases had been failures insofar as the courts were concerned, but something about each of them troubled her. There was the young woman who drowned in a boating accident off Agate Pass—her best friend and husband reportedly had done all they could to save her. The case troubled Birdy not for the facts as presented at the inquest, but for what happened two years later. The best friend and the distraught husband got married, left town, and used insurance proceeds to buy a ranch in Arizona. There had been no evidence to suggest that the woman who drowned had been murdered—at least not at the time of the inquest. Drownings without bruising to show a struggle or wounds to show a major fight were frequently difficult cases for prosecutors. It was never about the drowning, but about what happened before and after.

Sometimes *after* was too late.

Another case that had found its way into the cardboard box involved a teenage girl who was the purported victim of a serial killer. Tara Hanson fit the victimology of the three women who had been killed by a sexual sadist rapist and murderer named Percy Bosworth. She had been the right physical type (slender, blond, short hair). And like the other two victims, Tara had been a bit of a party girl, had lived alone, and had been abducted from a mini-mart—as all of Bosworth's victims had been.

And yet Tara didn't quite fit in. She was like the jigsaw puzzle piece that is just close enough to go in a particular spot, even when the imagery—the hot air balloon, the kitten with the ball of yarn, or whatever—doesn't mesh accurately. Victims one and two were employed by Kitsap mini-marts—Shellee Casper in Silverdale, LeeAnn Tomm at one in Olalla. While Tara's car was recovered from a convenience store in Navy Yard City, she didn't work there. Further, Tara lived in Kingston, far north of the location of her purported abduction. All victims had been strangled and posed after they were dumped, but only Tara had been strangled manually. The others were killed with the application of a two kinds of ligature—the first victim was strangled with a bungee cord and the second victim had been murdered with

the tie from a hoodie. While the spread of the fingertip bruising left on Tara's throat was a close match for Bosworth's, it was troubling that Tara's case—as Birdy famously and regrettably told a *Kitsap Sun* reporter “stood out like a sore thumb.” The headline put up by a copy editor with a decidedly wicked streak took the comment further:

Pathologist Still Coming to Grips With Hanson Case

There were other cases in the box too, more than twenty. The case that she'd first put into that sad little file was the one involving her cousin Tommy and the murder of Anna Jo Bonners on the Makah Indian Reservation, where Birdy had been raised. At first, the Tommy/Anna file had been there just because Birdy's own personal history was tied up with that particular crime. Later, as she added cases to the box, she'd wondered if it had been unsettling for another reason—a deeper one.

Though she never said it out loud, Birdy Waterman had a name for her little cardboard repository of the unsettling, the unfinished. She called it the Bone Box. Not to anyone else, just herself. That night, she pulled the Bone Box out from the would-be guest room and brought it to her bedside. She lifted the lid and looked down at the neat row of file folders, some thick, some thin. She knew that after doing so she wouldn't have a decent night's sleep. There were a lot of reasons why visiting those files was unnerving. But one above the others niggled at her subconscious. Guilt is like a dripping faucet that can never be tightened or turned off. Even when the guilt is undeserved. More so, rightly, when it is.

Birdy just wasn't sure where she fit in that spectrum.

There were only three clippings in the *Port Angeles Daily News* about Anna Jo's murder. The lack of media coverage was a sad but powerful indicator about how easily crime on the reservation was accepted, ignored by the press. It was as if Native Americans were only the subject of some kind of charity profile written in a patronizing manner. Or, Birdy thought, there were the articles that made her people seem as though they'd never been able to make lives for themselves and were mired in social problems like alcohol and drugs. Those were the stories that seemed to find their way onto the pages of the Seattle papers. A murder of one Makah by another, apparently, was not so newsworthy.

The first article announced the arrest.

Indian Arrested for Murder of Girlfriend

It described the basic circumstances surrounding Anna Jo's murder and the discovery by a "family member" of Tommy soaked in blood.

A second clipping included a photograph of Anna Jo and another of Tommy. Hers was a pretty image taken in the eighth grade. His was a glowering mug shot taken at the county jail.

Makah Murder Case On Trial Next Week

It was on the front page of the paper, a preview of the evidence, including the passage:

Freeland's 14-year-old maternal cousin is one of the chief witnesses for the prosecution. Because the Makah native girl is a minor, the *Daily News* is not naming her. She's expected to testify about seeing the accused flee the scene of the stabbing.

And then, the final clipping.

Freeland Convicted Of Bonner's Murder

SENTENCED TO LIFE

The article was short, only four inches. After it ran, Tommy Freeland had been sent away to prison and expunged from most conversations around the reservation. His wasn't the worst crime committed, but as far as Birdy Waterman remembered, it was the one her family never talked about. Only a couple of times had her mother brought it up.

"I know you saw what you saw, Birdy, but you didn't need to tell anyone about it. Bad things need to stay in the family."

Lastly, Birdy studied the autopsy report with its voodoo-doll-like outlined drawing of a genderless dead figure, accompanying weights and measures, and the deadpan commentary about a young woman and her horrendous demise. The medical examiner, Stephanie Noritake, had been an idol of

Birdy's. She was one of the first women Birdy had heard of doing the work of speaking for the dead. Birdy had stood in line for two hours to get a signed copy of the doctor's *Among the Stones and Bones: My Life in the Autopsy Suite*. She felt like she'd gushed too much when it came her turn to get an autograph, but she couldn't help it. Dr. Noritake was a forensic science rock star, a woman who mixed care and concern with authority and science. There was no denying that the two shared a bond. Dr. Noritake was one of the first Asian women to hold the position of medical examiner in a major American city when she served in San Jose in the late 1960s. After retirement she moved to the Pacific Northwest, where her family had lived before internment in World War II. Dr. Noritake consulted on cases in Clallam, Jefferson, and Kitsap Counties.

One of those was the Anna Jo Bonner's case.

She'd testified at trial that the blood found on the victim matched what had been recovered from Tommy's T-shirt—putting him in the cabin—but her most interesting testimony had been about the stab wounds that killed the girl.

From the autopsy report:

. . . there are twenty-seven wounds, indicating overkill. Twenty of the wounds were made after the victim was supine on the floor; nine of those hit the floorboards after piercing the victim's upper torso ...

It was, as Dr. Noritake said in her report, and later at trial, “a classic rage killing.”

And while there could be no doubt that whoever had wielded that knife had overdone it—severing the carotid artery had done the job just fine—as far as Birdy could recall there was no mention as to why Tommy would have wanted to kill his girlfriend. If it had been rage killing, then what was he so angry about?

The next morning, she faced the mirror in the tiny mint-green and black-tiled bathroom. Birdy wasn't big on makeup, but a hurried glance indicated her sleepless night and the need for a little help. Her brown eyes were puffy, and her skin uneven. She applied a light swipe of powder. Tying back her shoulder-length black hair with a rubber band, she pronounced herself

presentable.

It must have been intentional because it happened every time, but Birdy Waterman found herself dressing down for her trips back home to Neah Bay. She commanded a good salary as Kitsap County's forensic pathologist. She dressed beautifully every day for work. Weekends around Port Orchard, she always put on dressy slacks and a nice top. Jeans—and not even new ones at that—were reserved for visits home.

She put on a pair of Lee's from Walmart and a sweater. In Port Orchard, she was *Dr. Waterman*, and she wore her accomplishments proudly. At home, where they would certainly be noticed, she was merely Birdy. And she did everything she could to keep herself from giving the appearance that she'd made it.

And, yet, everyone on the reservation knew she had. There were very few secrets kept among the Makah.

Maybe just one.

CHAPTER TWO

The front steps of the old mobile home were spongy. Each tread had soaked in rainwater on such a steady basis that the fact they were intact was some kind of minor miracle in a place that was decidedly short on them.

Birdy knocked on the door and waited, feeling the past come at her like it always did. *Her mother's house*. The home she and her siblings had grown up in. It was only fiberglass, aluminum, and carpet that hadn't been changed since the home was delivered to the reservation in 1969 as a part of a government-sponsored effort to help impoverished Native Americans get a step or two closer to something that had eluded them—hope.

The Makah people weren't so foolish to think that a mobile home was the equivalent of the American Dream.

Birdy's father, Mackie Waterman, had put it very succinctly the day the doublewide was rolled into position.

"If this is their idea of making things even, they're working with the wrong set of scales."

As she stood there on the wobbly stoop, the memory of her father brought a smile. He'd been gone for a couple of years, but in a very real way, he was always with her. While her mother could be cold, her father had doted on her. He'd called her every variation of her name—Baby Bird, Purty Birdy, and when she was didn't do as she was told, he jokingly called her Birdzilla. She used to wait on those very steps for him to come home from one of his extended fishing trips or from the lumber mill where he'd worked in the off-season.

Birdy let the memory pass as she knocked. She knew the door wasn't locked, but it seemed that her mom and her boyfriend of the moment required the courtesy of a warning. Neither owned a car, so a vehicle check wouldn't tell her if anyone was home. Birdy hadn't liked what she'd seen the last time she opened the door without knocking. No child ever wants to see her mother doing *that*.

Natalie Waterman twisted the knob and the chintzy aluminum door swung open a sliver. Birdy's mother stood quiet for a second. Dark eyes scanning. Silver-streaked black hair going every which way like a turn indicator on an old car.

"You keep coming," Natalie said. "Don't know just why, but you do."

The door opened the rest of the way, and Birdy, feeling like she had when she was ten years old, went inside the small living room. The TV was blaring,

smoke curling along the dingy yellow ceiling, leggy houseplants clawing their way toward the saggy curtain-framed windows that looked out over a chicken pen and a woodpile.

Just like it always had.

Birdy hugged her mother, who remained stiff. “I come because I love you, Mom. Even when you don’t make it easy. I still do.”

A cigarette dangled from Natalie’s nicotine-stained fingertips, and she braced herself as she allowed the physical contact with her oldest daughter.

“My, my, aren’t you the giver,” Natalie said, falling into the recliner pointed at the home shopping channel, where a bubbly actress was promoting Christmas candles and wreaths “guaranteed to freshen a room with holiday smells.”

It was the type of item Birdy hoped her mother would buy. She’d offered to help get the trailer home in order, but Natalie always refused. Charity, she said, was for losers and that simply wasn’t her at all.

Birdy pretended to ignore the sarcasm that seemed to pour from Natalie’s cigarette-puckered lips. “You looking for your sister? She’s not here. She’s at home with her no-good husband and her litter of no-good brats.”

Her mother—a charmer, she wasn’t.

“No, Mom,” Birdy said, softly. “I came to see you today.”

Natalie’s eyes stayed fixed on home shopping, but she answered her daughter.

“Look at me. I must have won the lotto,” she said, without even trying to offer a smile. “If you want some coffee, I’m out. Might have some instant in the cupboard somewhere.”

“I’m good,” Birdy said, as she took a seat across from her mother in the familiar green La-Z-Boy recliner that had been artfully crisscrossed with black electrical tape and silver duct tape. It had been her father’s favorite chair. She ran her fingers over the armrest.

“I’m going to Walla Walla to see Tommy,” she said.

Natalie sucked the life out of her cigarette before answering.

“What for? Haven’t you done enough to that boy?”

“He’s not a boy,” she said. “He’s almost forty.”

“Fine, but why are you going to see him?”

“Because he wrote and asked me to come. And besides, Mom, I have never felt right about him going to prison.”

“A little late for you to say that now.”

“I liked Tommy. I probably even loved him, even if he was my cousin.”

“You are making me sick now, Birdy. Let it be. Go back to the dead people you seem to love so much. Leave the living alone.”

It was cruel remark and it hurt. Natalie was a sharpshooter when it came to piercing her daughter’s insecurities. She always had been. Where most mothers sought to comfort a child, Natalie seemed to seek ways to hurt. Counselors and teachers, mentors and friends, each had tried to convince Birdy that her mother’s cruelty was a sign of her own insecurities, but that did little to alleviate a girl’s pain.

“I knew you’d be supportive, Mom,” Birdy said, in a futile attempt at jabbing.

“Leave Tommy alone,” Natalie said. “Let him be. Let sleeping dogs lie. You got that, Birdy? You’re never satisfied with the way things are. You understand?”

Birdy’s neck muscles pulsed. Her neck. It was like a barometer of her stress.

“I understand what you are saying, yes,” she said. “But I don’t agree with it. I don’t know what Tommy will tell me when I see him, but I do know I want to hear it.”

“All you need to know is that he’s in prison because of you,” Natalie said.

Birdy laid her palm against her neck. “I was fourteen, Mom.”

“I had my first baby at fifteen. Fourteen isn’t so young. Being young isn’t an excuse for anything.”

“It wasn’t an excuse, but a fact. I did what I was supposed to do.”

The room went silent as Natalie Waterman pressed the MUTE button. She wanted to make her point without the home shopping hostess’s over-the-top spiel about a “Christmas kitten ceramic coming up next.”

“You went against the family, Birdy,” she said. “Twenty years is just a drop in the ocean. Families never forget a betrayer. You’re a smart girl. You’d think with all your schooling you’d understand something as simple as that.”

The sound went back up on the TV.

“I don’t know,” Birdy said, “I thought that you’d be glad about it. Happy maybe. Something positive about seeing him.”

“You don’t know me and I don’t know you. On second thought,” Natalie said, pulling herself up from the recliner. “I’m pretty sure I’m out of that instant coffee. You better run along home. Go back to your precious job and

forget about all of us up here. You're too busy. Too important. I'm surprised you even remember where you came from."

Birdy stayed planted, thinking that if she stood her ground her mother would calm down a little and take back what she just said.

Yet that wasn't about to happen.

It was a stalemate and not the first one. "Are you waiting for something?" Natalie asked.

Birdy's heart was racing and her stomach was in knots, but she didn't want her mother to know that she'd gotten to her—like she always did. She'd seen a gentle side of her mother in the past and she craved it again. Didn't every child?

"I'm waiting for you to be a mother," Birdy said, her voice soft as though it was too much to even ask. "That's what."

Natalie laughed. "You don't need a mother. And I don't need a daughter like you. Why don't you go on now? I'm watching *Judge Judy* next, back-to-back episodes. Do me a favor, Birdy."

Birdy wasn't a crier. If she had been, she would have dissolved into tears right then. But not now. Not in front of her. Not with her mother's seeming indifference, or outright hostility.

"What's that, Mom?"

Natalie turned the sound up on the remote.

"Don't mention Tommy again and don't go see him," she said. "Leave it be. Let the past fade away. Leave it."

* * *

Birdy Waterman slumped in her car in front of her mother's house. All visits home were bad, but on the scale of their relationship, this visit had been particularly disastrous. Natalie Waterman had come up empty-handed if she'd sought a reason to be happy. Few on the reservation would argue that she had many reasons to be happy. She was an alcoholic. Her husband had died in a fishing accident off the Pacific coast. Arthritis had taken its toll on her joints. Natalie was angry at the world and maybe rightly so. Knowing all of that didn't make the pain pass any easier.

Somewhere in the time line of her mother's downfall were the murder of Anna Jo and the subsequent conviction of her nephew Tommy for the most reprehensible of crimes.

Birdy pulled out of the muddy drive way and drove west toward the trail along the coast. The sky was clear and sunlight jabbed downward through the thick covering of spruce trees that contorted away from the ocean. She parked

her car and started down the trail, each step taking her back twenty years to the day she'd seen the unimaginable.

CHAPTER THREE

Summer weather along the Pacific is governed by a kind of strange roulette wheel, one that makes anyone with concrete plans on the all-but-certain losing end of things. Not until the moment one ventures outside to experience the world of nature is it apparent if it is sunny or rainy or a mix of both. Its unpredictability is the only sure thing.

Three days after her fourteenth birthday, Birdy Waterman dragged a wagon down the coast trail to gather kindling. This was something she did nearly every day in the summer, and most weekend days during the school year. In the rain. In the snow. In the most blustery of autumn days. It didn't matter. Birdy's family heated their little aluminum box of a house with a woodstove. Wood was free if one was skilled with a chainsaw. She wore two layers of clothing, a T-shirt and a sweatshirt that she'd undoubtedly peel off once she got down to the business at hand.

Birdy was small for her age, fearless when it came to the noisy saw, and just hungry enough to help her mother and father in any way that she could. Helping each other was not only the tribal way, but the way of the Watermans. Natalie made money doing what she considered bogus crafts for the tribal gift shop, and Mackie Waterman fished for salmon up and down Neah Bay and over to West Port. Tribal fishing rights didn't always guarantee a good income—no matter what the non-Native fishermen said. So there, on that summer day, Birdy did what she always did: forage for deadfall along the coast trail that wound its way from the hillside down to the rocky beach populated by sea stacks and smelly sea lions.

She was on the east fork of the trail when she first heard the noise. It came at her like a locomotive, pushing, huffing, and puffing. Each breath was a gasp for air. At first, it didn't seem human. Birdy idled her chainsaw, then shut it off. She turned in the direction of the noise.

“Hey!” a familiar voice came at her. “Birdy!”

She looked through the tunnel-like pathway and strained to see who it was.

“Birdy!” It came again.

Coming toward her was her cousin, Tommy Freeland. He was in the darkness coming toward her. The ground thumped under his frantic feet. She set down the saw. Then, like a strobe light, his face was suddenly illuminated. It wasn't the handsome face of a much loved relative, despite the familiar flinty black eyes and handsome broad nose.

The twenty-year-old's face was dripping in red.

"Tommy!" Birdy cried out, and moved closer. "Are you okay?"

"Birdy!" he called again, stopping and dropping his elbows to his knees. "Help me."

By then she was close enough to see that the coloring on his coffee skin wasn't just any red. It was the dark iron red of blood. Tommy's T-shirt had been splattered with what instinctively Birdy Waterman, only fourteen, knew was human blood.

"Are you hurt?" she said, almost upon him.

His eyes were wild with fear. "No, no," he said as he tried to catch his breath. "I don't think so.... I think I'm okay." He looked down at his bloody hands and wiped them on his blue jeans, also dark and wet with blood.

Birdy shook a little as fear undermined her normally calm demeanor. "What happened? Who's hurt?" she asked.

Tommy, breathing as hard as a marathon runner at the finish line, swallowed. He started to cry and his words tumbled over his trembling lips. "Anna Jo. Birdy, I'm pretty sure Anna Jo's dead."

Anna Jo was a beautiful young girl, the kind other girls of the reservation aspired to be. She had a job, her own car, and she was kind. No one thought anything but the best of Anna Jo Bonners.

Did he say dead? The question rolled around in her head, but she didn't say it out loud. Something held her back. Maybe it was because she didn't want confirmation of something so terrible. Birdy took a step backward and fell onto the black, damp earth. Tommy lunged at her and she screamed.

"Hey," he said. "I won't hurt you. I was trying to stop you from falling. Don't be afraid of me."

"What happened to Anna Jo? What did you do to her?"

Tommy blinked back the recognition of what his cousin was undoubtedly thinking just then.

"No. I never. I just found her. Honest. She was at Ponder's cabin. She was already dead. I promise. I never hurt anyone."

Birdy found her footing and got up from the damp, dark earth. Her heart was pounding so hard inside the bony frame of her heaving chest just then, she was certain that she'd have a heart attack. She didn't want to die and she didn't want to find out what had happened to Anna Jo. She was too scared. Instead, she turned and ran, leaving the wagon, the chain saw, and her bloody cousin on the trail.

Twenty years later, as she walked down that same trail, the scene played in her head. Birdy hadn't thought about what she'd felt that summer day and the role fear had played in what she testified to at trial. She was the witness who had put Tommy on that trail covered in blood. She was the one who had provided the time line that connected the victim to the killer. While it was true that Tommy Freeland had had blood all over his hands and chest, and it was true that he and Anna Jo had had a bitter fight a few days before she died, he'd denied any part of the brutal stabbing that had killed her.

One of the last things Birdy remembered Tommy saying before they hauled him away after sentencing was, "I loved her. Doesn't anyone remember that? I loved Anna Jo. I would never have killed her. I didn't do this."

Over the years, in case after case, Dr. Birdy Waterman would hear similar statements from the convicted, but never would they be so personal, so directed at her ears. Tommy had been family. When he went away to Walla Walla, his disappearance caused a rift between sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins. No one who lived on that part of the Makah reservation was ever the same. People didn't talk about it. Ever.

Birdy watched a squirrel as it zipped up the craggy bark of a towering Douglas fir. A hawk flew overhead. The wind found its way through the evergreen canopy. The land all around her was as it had been when she was a girl. The place, she knew, should feel like home. But it didn't. It never could. A place where one feels unwelcome can never feel like home. Thinking of Tommy, Anna Jo, the trial, her mother, she wondered if there would ever be a way to fix any of it.

She walked back to her car and drove over to her sister Summer's brand-new mobile home, but no one was there. Same at her brother Ricky's place—a small wood frame house that he'd built himself. She decided not to let it pass through her mind that they'd avoided her on purpose. She was their sister—their blood. They had to love her too, didn't they?

* * *

It was dark when she returned to the bungalow on Beach Drive. Birdy had driven all the way through with only a single stop for gas in Port Angeles. It was after nine when she finally pulled up. Too dark, she thought, to feed the neighbor's cat as she'd promised to do while they were away in Hawaii downing rum-infused tropical drinks—a prospect that seemed more than appealing right then. Birdy made a mental note to get up extra early to feed Jinx before the Coopers got home and found out that their next-door

neighbor was an untrustworthy cat sitter.

Knowing Pat and Donna Frickey, there could be no crime worse.

Birdy took a beer from the refrigerator and a package of chicken-flavored Top Ramen from the cupboard. She took a drink from the bottle and unwrapped the ramen with no intention of cooking the noodles. She ate it dry, like a big fat brick of crispiness—a habit she'd acquired growing up on the reservation and having to make do with a package of the Asian dried noodles for two out of three meals of the day.

The message light on her answering machine caught her eye. There were three messages. She pushed PLAY.

"... Election Day is fast approaching and we want to make sure that the Citizens for a Lovely Port Orchard can count on your support for our transportation levy ..."

Birdy sighed and pushed DELETE. *The Lovely Port Orchard group would be better served by focusing on cleaning up the streets they already had than on building new ones,* she thought.

Then next message came from her mother, probably just after her visit.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. You really caught me off guard about Tommy. I think you should just leave him be, but you never listen to me anyway. Love you."

The word "love" came out of her mother's mouth in a cough. The voice message was so like her mother that it brought a smile to Birdy's face. While Natalie Waterman hadn't invented passive-aggressive behavior, few would dispute that she had perfected it.

The last message sent a chill through Birdy's bones.

"Dr. Waterman, if this is you, I want you to know that you've caused enough trouble for Tommy and his family. If you know what's good for you—and I bet you do—you'll stay away from him."

The voice was unfamiliar. Birdy played it again. It was hard to determine if the caller was male or female. It was breathy and soft, the kind of voice that required concentration in order to fully comprehend.

She scrolled back on the caller ID function of her machine. The call had come from a pay phone at the tribal center—which wasn't much of a surprise. After telegraph, tele-native was the fastest mode of communication known to man. Someone from the Makahs had heard from her mother that she was going to see Tommy, and not only that, they didn't want her to.

Not at all.

"If you know what's good for you ..."

CHAPTER FOUR

Tommy was barely forty, but he looked closer to sixty. Maybe even older. If DOC Inmate 44435-099 had once been the most handsome boy on the reservation, years behind bars—more years than he'd lived free—had stolen that from him. It wasn't merely that his jet-black hair had receded or that his once-clear skin was now loose and somewhat sallow. His eyes nestled in dark hollows. It was also obvious from across the poorly lit visitation room that whatever charisma he'd had, whatever inner light had radiated through him, was gone. *Pfft. Out like a soggy match.*

Birdy Waterman almost had to steady herself when she saw Tommy. While she realized that two decades had come and gone, she hadn't expected Tommy to look so old. Certainly in her job, she'd been around prisons and jails all her adult life. Most inmates seemed to make the best of their time on the inside by pumping iron in the yard. There wasn't much else to do. They looked like health-club regulars. Tommy, by contrast, seemed alarmingly frail.

She walked toward him, quickly so as not to show any hesitation. He was, after all, family.

Tommy, in a dingy gray T-shirt and off-brand dungarees that seemed a size too big for him, stood to greet her. "You look almost the same," he said, a broad smile of recognition coming over his face. It was disarming, the way she remembered Tommy Freeland could be. *Maybe a part of him is still there, somewhere hidden under the hard veneer of prison life?*

Tommy nodded for her to sit, and Birdy slid into a bolted-to-the-floor steel frame chair. "You too. But you're a liar," she added, trying to hide her obvious surprise.

Tommy eyed her, taking in everything. It was a fast and unequivocal search, the kind of once-over that an inmate might employ to figure out that instant of life or death in the laundry room, in deciding who to trust.

"Well, you have filled out," he said. "Not in a bad way. But you know, you're no longer Birdy Legs."

Birdy's face reddened. No one had called her that in eons, and it made her feel good. It was funny how the mention of a once-hated nickname elicited fond memories. Back on the reservation it had been a nickname meant to torment her. Time changes everything.

"Thanks," she said, changing the subject. "I'm glad you asked me to come."

He frowned slightly. “You were never *not* invited, Birdy. It hasn’t been like you didn’t know where I was.”

“That isn’t fair,” she said.

“Well, from my knothole, there isn’t anything about the last twenty years that has been particularly fair.”

Birdy nodded. There was no arguing that.

“Do you want a pop or something? I brought quarters,” she said offering up her Ziploc bag of quarters.

Tommy smiled. Actually, it was not really a smile, but a kind of grimace. “No. I’m good. I’ve learned to do without. You know, without friends, family. Pretty much without a life. A lot of people played a part in making that happen.”

He left those words to dangle in the air of the visiting room.

“I didn’t lie,” Birdy said, her tone more defensive than she’d intended.

Tommy leaned back and crossed his arms. As he did, Birdy noticed a series of jagged scars, some faint, others far more recent. Her eyes hovered over the scars, but she didn’t remark on them.

“No,” he said, biting off his words. “You saw what you saw, but God, Birdy, you know *me*. You know I couldn’t have hurt Anna Jo. It isn’t in me to hurt anyone, least of all her.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” she asked, though she knew he had. At least to her. He had told her on that sodden trail just after it happened.

“You mean take the stand to testify? Like anyone would believe an unemployed drug user like me? That would have been pretty useless, don’t you think?”

Birdy wanted to disagree with her long-lost cousin just then, but she knew he was probably right.

“Do you hear from your family?” she asked, regretting the question almost the instant it came from her lips. Birdy hadn’t meant it to hurt him, she just wanted to know. Tommy’s mother, her aunt, had pretty much iced her out of that side of the family—payback for her testimony.

He looked away at a little girl playing a card game with her father and Birdy answered for him.

“I’m sorry. I thought ...” she said.

“Mom’s been married twice now. Somewhere along the way she’s been too busy for me,” he said. “Not like I’m a kid anyway.”

Birdy didn’t say so, but she understood. “I think I’ll get a Coke. Sure you

don't want one?" She looked at Tommy and a guard one table away. The man with a faint moustache and eager-beaver eyes nodded that it was okay for her to get up and go to the vending machines. Tommy followed her across the room filled with wives and girlfriends mostly, a few kids. Some passed the time playing checkers. Others read books in tandem like they were in some library for criminals.

Birdy inserted three quarters and the change tumbled to the coin return.

"Damn," she said. "Must be out of soda."

"Just tricky," Tommy said. "I'm not allowed to touch the machine, but I'm told you have to drop the change in very slowly. One, then the next, then the last."

Birdy did as he suggested and was rewarded with a cold can of diet soda.

"I'll take one, too," he said.

She looked over at the guard watching them. He nodded that it was all right for her to hand him the pop. She dropped three more coins and retrieved another can.

As Birdy turned, Tommy leaned a little closer and whispered, "I don't want anyone to hear me. Please, Birdy. I need you to believe in me."

"Are you being mistreated?" she asked, her voice as quiet as possible.

"Please return to the table," the faintly mustachioed guard said.

Birdy felt a chill and it wasn't from the icy cold soda.

"You've been up for parole twice," she said. "Just tell them you're sorry."

"I didn't do it. And if you don't get me out of here, I'll probably die here. I don't want to die in this place."

"You've served your time," she repeated.

"Here's something that might not have occurred to you. Prison is more than bars and the guards. Prison is how people see you. I have some honor, Birdy. Help me get home as a free man, a man who didn't kill the girl. I never would have done that. Tell me you understand that."

"I do. That's why I'm here. I came because of your letter."

Tommy looked confused. "What letter?"

"The letter you sent me. The reason I'm here."

Tommy shook his head. "I'm glad you're here, but I didn't send a letter to you. I mean, I did write to you years ago, like I wrote to everyone. You know, asking forgiveness for what I've done. Part of the program."

"I never got that letter," she said. "The letter I'm talking about came last week."

Tommy touched his chest with his forefinger. “Not from me it didn’t.”

They sat back down and faced each other. She hadn’t dreamt it. She’d read the letter. She’d come all that way. *But if Tommy didn’t send it, then who did?*

Birdy knew that she’d carried Tommy’s case in the Bone Box all those years for a reason. Deep down, she didn’t believe he really could have killed Anna Jo Bonners.

At the same time she wondered just why it was that he—or someone—called on her to help now. It would take only moments for that answer to come to her.

An alarm sounded and the visit was over. Just like that. There was an awkward quiet, like the conclusion of a first date when both parties know there will never be a second. Birdy wasn’t certain what she could really do, or why she should do it. Tommy and the other inmates stayed at their tables as the visitors filed out. Outside the visitation room, the forensic pathologist from the other side of the mountains lined up with the friends and families of Washington state’s most notorious.

It was obvious from their chatter that many knew each other. Regulars. The word fit. For the most part the people leaving their men and boys behind were so very average. There was nothing scary about any of them. Not a single one of them, save for a woman who never managed a smile, looked like they even knew a hardened criminal. They were the other side of a violent crime. They were on the side of the perpetrator, the convicted. Every one of them had come to show an inmate something they could get nowhere else—compassion and love.

Birdy, at the rear of the line, started for the corridor that would lead her out of the prison, out the door to lives where no one knew they’d spent four hours and a bag of quarters playing table games and talking about the dullest of things. *Like anyone. Like people at home.* That is, if home included a baby-faced rapist, an axe murderer who ironically worked in the prison kitchen as a meat cutter, and a seventy-year-old man who had strangled his wife of almost fifty years one Christmas morning with the very necktie she’d given him (“Bea knew I hated plaid,” he joked whenever the subject came up).

For every inmate with a visitor that afternoon, Birdy knew, there were

probably scores of others who never had that human contact with anyone from outside. Never had visits with anyone, except maybe the occasional convict groupie or an eager-beaver churchgoer who wanted to save someone's hardened soul from the system that only existed to make them pay for their sins in an earthly way.

And then there was Tommy.

As far as Birdy Waterman knew, until that afternoon when she came calling, he hadn't had a single visitor. Birdy wondered if someone could be the same person they always were if they had no contact with those who knew him. Wasn't part of who you were how others related to you, feeding your personality traits, shaping your character with their own? And yet Tommy still seemed like Tommy. A little subdued, certainly thin and haggard, but still Tommy nevertheless. During the visit he occasionally punctuated what he said with a short laugh—even if nothing was funny. When she heard the laugh, she was transported back to the Tommy he was before he became the Tommy who killed Anna Jo.

Birdy remembered how the two of them had spent one insufferably hot day picking huckleberries. They'd cursed how small the berries were and worried that they'd never get enough to fill that half-gallon container that her mother had insisted was required for a pie. It was a couple weeks before Anna Jo's murder. Now it seemed like days ago, not decades. She and Tommy had picked and picked and picked for hours. When it looked like they'd never get enough berries, Tommy had the bright idea of buying some from a vendor.

"Your mom is too much of a stickler," he'd said. "So let's give her what she wants to make her happy."

The berries cost him his last dollar, but he didn't care.

Natalie Waterman *did* care. The berries they bought were not huckleberries, but blueberries.

"Sorry, Aunt Natalie," Tommy said. "I thought they looked a little large for hucks." He flashed his bright white smile, gave that little laugh, and shrugged in the way that just made it easy. Everything was easier with Tommy, back then.

As Birdy followed the queue and turned the corner toward the metal detectors and the glass-walled station where the guards monitored every blink of someone's eyelash, a finger jabbed at her shoulder. It startled her.

"I know why you're here," a man's voice said, as she spun around.

“Maybe even more than you do.”

It was the same guard—the one who’d watched her and her cousin as they visited.

“Excuse me?” she answered, looking him over. She read his ID badge: Ken Holloway. He was smaller there in the corridor than he was when he commanded a chair upfront overlooking the prisoners in his quadrant of the room. He had soft green eyes and a pockmarked face. Not handsome, not ugly. Despite the fact that he carried a gun, worked with the worst of humanity day in and day out, Sgt. Holloway seemed concerned.

“Your cousin isn’t well,” he said.

“What do you mean *well*?” she asked.

The guard stopped walking. Birdy stayed with him as the other visitors shuffled toward the doorway. “It was all he could do to get out of his cell and get down to see you.”

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“It’s none of my business,” Sgt. Holloway said. “But I like the guy. He’s probably the most decent guy in the prison—that includes the guards and the superintendent’s so-called staff. Them for sure.”

He wasn’t answering her question. She asked again, this time directly. “Is he sick?”

Holloway shook his head. “Worse than sick. He’s dying. Leukemia. He’ll be dead before Christmas. At least that’s what the docs tell him. Anyway, you need to know that.”

“Why are *you* telling me this? Why didn’t he?”

He stared into her eyes, searching. “He’s proud, Dr. Waterman.”

The use of her name surprised her. “You know who I am?”

He nodded. “Hell yeah, he’s bragged about you for years. I know all about you, your backstory, the crime that sent him here. I know stuff you don’t even know.”

“Like what, for instance?”

“Like Tom Freeland didn’t kill that girl up in Neah Bay.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard claims of innocence before around here,” she said, looking at an inmate pushing a laundry cart down the hall.

“Yeah. More times than you probably think. But Tommy’s different. He has honor. He’s never ratted on anyone and no one has ratted on him. He’s taught at least a hundred inmates how to read; sent money—and he don’t have much—to a cellmate’s family. He’s not perfect, but he’s as close to

decent as I've seen in this hellhole," he said, his eyes lingering over another guard and an inmate in belly chains down the corridor. A mother who'd moments before had been calmly playing cards with her son was now convulsing in tears as she moved toward the exit.

"My boy is being raped by his cellie! Why don't you people stop it?"

It was hard not to look at the woman, but Birdy faced the sergeant. "He didn't tell me he was dying," she said.

"Of course not. He's not the type."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Tommy's not one to make someone do something they don't want to do. He could tell you he's got months, weeks to live and you'd get all in a tizzy and try to help him because of that—not because you thought he was innocent."

"What kind of medical care is he getting?" she asked. "Maybe I can help."

Sgt. Holloway shook off her offer. "No offense, but don't you deal with dead patients? No disrespect intended."

"None taken," she said. "And yes, I do, but I also know doctors who actually deal with patients who are living. I know several very good oncologists in Seattle."

"Look, I'm sure you do," he said. "If you think that because he's a con, he's not getting the benefit of a cancer doc, then you'd be wrong. The state legislature has made it sure these guys get the best care possible when it's serious. Mantra around here is that medical care for cons is gold-plated. No more lawsuits coming at us because someone croaked before their time."

"I see," she said. It made sense to her. The whole world seemed to spin on making sure no one got sued, or if they did, they couldn't lose.

"Do you?" he asked, a little pointedly.

"Can I talk to him again?"

"Too late for today. Next week though. You staying in town?"

Birdy shook her head.

"I can give him your number and he can call you collect. Visiting hours are over until Tuesday."

"I don't have my purse," she said. "You don't happen to have a paper and pen?"

Holloway put his fingertips to his lips and smiled. "Don't tell the other guards, but yes I do." He pulled a scrap from his pocket and a stub of a

pencil.

Birdy took it and wrote as he called out his number.

“Do me a favor,” he said.

She stopped writing and looked up, her eyes locking on his. “What?”

“Don’t let him down,” he said. “The guy deserves better than that.”

“He’s in prison for killing a girl,” she said.

“So the jury concluded. But do you think—even for a minute—that the man you sat with today killed someone? He’s a decent human being,” he said. “Better than most by far.”

“He’s helped a lot of people,” she said, searching the guard’s eyes.

“I know what you’re getting at and you’re right. I’m one of those. Your cousin has taught me more about being a compassionate person than anyone. I’m here as a guard because of him. Some are here to punish, but I’m here to help. So I’m asking you—for him, please, help him.”

“You sent the letter to me,” she said. “Didn’t you?”

He looked down at the gleaming floor. “It was the only thing I could think of doing. He wasn’t going to ask you. But if you could have seen his face when he got word that you’d asked for a visit, you would know that I did the right thing. Man, he was so happy. And you know what else?”

Birdy shook her head. “No, what?”

“You’re doing the right thing,” he said.

“I still don’t know what, exactly, I’m doing. I’ve looked over the evidence file. I didn’t see anything that can help him.”

Ken Holloway looked around. “It isn’t for me to say,” he said finally. “But I will anyway. Your cousin once let it slip at a meeting that relationships sometimes aren’t all they seem. He said, sometimes you trust the wrong people.”

“What does that mean? What wrong people?”

“He said that the girl wasn’t all that he thought she was.”

Birdy stood in the silent corridor. Was he referring to her? How she didn’t stand up for him? How could she? She had told the police what she’d seen even though her mother and father told her to keep quiet.

Or was he talking about Anna Jo? And if it had been Anna Jo, then there was only one place to go. Back home.

CHAPTER FIVE

“I know who you are why you are here.”

Anna Jo Bonners’s mother stood on the front steps of her house and faced Birdy Waterman with ice-pellet eyes. Carmona Bonner was a woman who, as Birdy recalled, seldom smiled. She had the kind of humorless face that owed more to the fact that she’d lost one of her front teeth in a car accident than to what kind of person she really was. She simply never smiled. After Anna Jo’s murder, few thought she had many reasons to anyway.

Birdy braced herself against the chill by wrapping her arms around her chest. “My cousin is dying and I’m just trying to tie up some loose ends,” she said.

“My daughter is dead and there are no more loose ends,” Carmona said.

Birdy persisted. “May I come inside? Chilly out here.”

Mrs. Bonners stood her ground. “No,” she said. “You should have put on an extra sweater. Always cold up here this time of year. Maybe you’ve forgotten, living in the big city.”

The remark was almost laughable. No one who visited Port Orchard would have considered it a big town, much less a major city.

“Really is cold out here,” Birdy said, letting her teeth chatter for effect and because the chilly ocean air was pummeling her. A curl of wood smoke coming from the chimney indicated that there was no need to suffer on that stoop.

Carmona Bonners sighed and reluctantly opened the door. “Come in,” she said. “But you can only stay a minute and you have to stay on the linoleum. I just cleaned the carpets.”

She shut the door and the two stood in the miniscule foyer. A photograph of a group of Makahs huddled next to a whale carcass dominated the space. It wasn’t a particularly old image. Despite outcries from environmentalists and organizations like PETA, the Makahs had established their continuing right to hunt for whales off the coast of Washington. They had done so only once in modern times.

“Mrs. Bonners, I really only want to know one thing and I think you might be able to help me. Something has troubled me over the years.”

The woman regarded her visitor warily. “I guess you were probably traumatized too. Not as much as we were. But seeing Tommy Freeland right after he did what he did to our Anna Jo must have been bad. Like I said, not like us at all, but hard I guess.”

“Yes, it was,” Birdy said. “I don’t even like bringing it up. Just thinking about it all these years makes my heart break for you and your family.”

“Thank you, but that’s not why you’re here. I heard it through the grapevine that you’re trying to clear his name.”

The grapevine on the reservation was more powerful than a satellite receiver. “It isn’t so much that,” Birdy said. “I don’t know what happened, but one thing that troubles me is all the violence against Anna Jo. They called it a rage killing. I don’t know what Tommy would have been so mad about.”

“Trust me,” Carmona said, “he was mad. Do you need me to spell out what he did to her?”

There was no use suggesting that Tommy wasn’t the killer. The focus had to be on gathering information and understanding. Not promoting something she wasn’t even sure about.

“I guess so,” Birdy said. “What was it?”

Carmona glanced through the window as a pair of headlights slowly meandered by. “You better go now. Let’s just let sleeping dogs lie,” she said.

Birdy wasn’t ready. She wanted, *needed* some answers. “Didn’t he love Anna Jo?”

“He said he did,” she said, her words emphasizing the word “he” in a strange way. Birdy asked the victim’s mother what she meant.

“Look, I know you have respect for our people,” Carmona said, her voice whistling a little through the gap in her front teeth. “I know you haven’t completely forgotten where you came from, so let’s just leave it at that. Let’s let Anna Jo be. Let her live in our memories as she was—not as you’d have her.”

Carmona opened the door and held it for Birdy to pass. Birdy put her hand on the doorjamb to buy a moment more of conversation.

“Anna Jo didn’t love Tommy, did she?”

“Good-bye, Dr. Waterman. Let my daughter rest in peace.”

CHAPTER SIX

It had been a quiet day in the Kitsap County Morgue, which meant it had been a good day. No one who worked there ever cursed their jobs because there was “nothing to do.” An empty chiller meant a day without carrying the hurt of someone else’s loss. A child. A wife. Even a friend. Birdy was in the midst of finishing up a supply order that needed to be filled when she looked up from her desk to see a woman in an orange North Face jacket and black jeans. The color combination was definitely on the Halloween side of the fashion wheel, which might have been intentional. The holiday was only a week away.

“You don’t remember me, Dr. Waterman,” the woman said, her voice soft and nearly reverential. She was slightly built, with the facial features of a Makah—intense eyes slashed above with eyebrows that never needed any help from Maybelline, and, most strikingly, a pronounced nose.

Birdy looked her over, racking her brain. *Who is this?* There was something familiar about her, but Birdy couldn’t come up with a name.

“I’m Iris,” the woman said. “I used to be Iris Bonners. Married to Randall Rostov now.”

Birdy nodded. “Of course, I remember you,” she said, a little unconvincingly, as she worked hard to reel in some kind of memory. She did recall Randall Rostov; he was the son of the first Makah to run a whale-watching business catering to the tourists from Seattle. If Iris hadn’t said her maiden name, she would never have guessed who she was.

Iris was Anna Jo Bonners’s little sister. She had been three or four grades behind Birdy in school, a gap of enough measure to ensure that their paths seldom crossed. It didn’t matter how small a school was. And the reservation school was small by any standards. Only eighty students graduated with Birdy—and only three of those went on to college.

“It’s okay if you don’t,” Iris said, taking off her jacket to reveal a cascade of black hair that had been tucked inside. “I was a lot younger than you.”

Birdy smiled, a recollection finally coming to her. “I do,” she said. “I actually do. Weren’t you a dancer? I remember hearing that you went off to study dance back east. New York?”

Iris nodded. “Yes, I was. Back then. Made it as far as Milwaukee. A far cry from New York, that’s for sure. Now I work in the bar at the casino. In the bar. So much for my brilliant career. But look at you.”

Birdy deflected the compliment, if that’s what it had been. With some of

the people on the reservation mad at her for getting a medical degree and not returning to work in the free clinic, it was hard to know if Iris really thought her career had been brilliant or a betrayal.

“Coffee?” Birdy asked. “I was about to pour myself a cup.”

Iris shook her head and declined. “Too late in the day for me. And really, I don’t have much time. The longer I wait to get to the point of it all, the greater the likelihood that I won’t be able to get up the nerve to tell you what I think you need to know.”

Birdy scooted back into her chair, her eyes riveted on Iris. “Okay. No coffee. Sit down. Talk to me, Iris.” She motioned to Iris to take one of the chairs across her desk.

“I’ll stand,” Iris said. “And first of all, before I say anything, I want you to know that as sorry as I am about everything, I’m also scared. Really scared. I have two kids. This can’t come back to me. Promise.”

“Promise.”

“I hope I can trust you, Birdy. I’m hoping that given your job and your education, you’ll be able to keep a confidence.”

“I will,” she said.

For the next twenty minutes, refusing to sit, Iris Bonners Rostov talked about her sister, how much she loved her, how she was sure they’d have been close.

“Not like you and your sister,” the younger woman said.

“That’s right, my sister and I aren’t close,” Birdy said, swallowing the sentence in one bitter gulp.

Birdy wondered why Iris had needed to make the jab. People often needed to hurt someone as a way to take away their own pain. Putting the hurt on another person sometimes made them feel better, if only by comparison.

“Iris, you came a long way to tell me something you think might be important,” Birdy said.

“I did,” she said, “but really I’m scared.”

“It’s about Tommy, isn’t it?”

She nodded, but stayed quiet.

Birdy pushed for an answer. “Iris, what?”

Iris took a breath. “I don’t know that my sister really loved Tommy. I know it is wrong to talk bad about the dead, but it seems to me that Anna Jo has had a long enough time to adjust to what she did—wherever she is.”

“I’m sure she’s at peace,” Birdy said.

Iris looked away. “Not after what she did, maybe not.”

“What did she do?”

“She cheated on Tommy. She was seeing someone else. I think that’s why Tommy killed her. He must have found out.”

The disclosure came out of nowhere. Birdy had thought that Iris was going to say something against Tommy, another reason why no one should forgive him, or that he’d gotten what he deserved.

“I didn’t know she had another boyfriend,” Birdy said. “I’ve never heard that before.”

Iris’s eyes were back on Birdy’s. “Well, she did,” Iris said. “She had two guys on a string. Tommy and the other guy.”

Birdy got up. The intensity of what Iris was saying made her feel silly sitting in her chair while Iris stood, coat on, ready to drop the bomb and run away.

“Do you know his name? Was it someone from home?”

Iris shrugged a little. “I never saw him. She never said his name. Not to me. I don’t think he lived on the reservation, because I’d never seen him or his car. Whenever he came to get her, she had to walk all the way down the lane to be picked up. I don’t think she wanted our parents to meet him. Maybe he was black or something. I don’t know. My dad was kind of a racist and that wouldn’t go over real big with him.”

Black?

“What makes you think he was black?”

Iris looked around the room. “Nothing really,” she said. “I was a kid and I just tried to figure out why it was that my sister hid him from everyone in the family.” Iris shifted in her chair. She was on a roll now and Birdy wasn’t about to stop her. “I thought we’d meet him after she died, you know, he’d come over and pay his respects at the house. That never happened. We never saw him. Not even one time.”

“So you think Tommy killed her because he was jealous of this other man?”

“That’s the only thing that makes sense to me. I remember my mom telling me that the police caught Tommy red-handed. He must have killed her for something. Anna Jo was hurt pretty bad. He must have been mad.”

Twenty-seven-stab-wounds mad to be exact.

“Did you ever see Tommy threaten her? Act jealous? Angry?”

“That’s the hard part. I always got the impression that he loved her, was gentle with her. The other guy always made her cry. One time I remember going into her bedroom when she was on her bed crying. I asked her what was the matter and she said she was in big trouble. I asked her what kind, and she said, ‘boyfriend trouble.’ ”

“What do you think she meant by that?”

“I don’t know. That was the last time I saw her. The next day she was dead.”

After Iris left, Birdy went home to the Bone Box.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next day Birdy Waterman got in her car to drive to the morgue. She hadn't slept well. She'd been unable to shut down her thoughts about Tommy. Yet duty called.

A car accident the night before had taken the lives of a middle-aged couple from Bremerton. They had left a party in Port Orchard and the women crashed their late-model Jeep just outside of Gorst, a tiny town clinging to a hairpin turn of highway populated by a strip club and coffee stands with half-naked baristas. Investigators theorized that the driver had been drunk. Birdy Waterman would examine the bodies, take the blood, look at stomach contents, and send tissue to the lab to determine if alcohol had been a factor.

As she dressed for work, she kept thinking about Tommy. She'd called the prison to confirm his illness with the medical staff there—from one doctor to another. Just as Sgt. Holloway had, the doctor on call said how much everyone liked Tommy and how “it is a shame he never got out of here.”

Instead of turning up Division Street and heading toward the morgue, Birdy did something she'd never done in her entire life.

She called off work.

“Joe, you can handle the crash all right? I'm taking a personal day.”

Birdy despised the “personal” day excuse, but it seemed more legitimate than lying and saying she was ill.

“You under the weather or something?” the assistant asked.

Birdy pressed the gas pedal and headed toward Highway 16 along Sinclair Inlet.

“Or something,” she said, still refusing to out and out lie. “I should be in the office tomorrow.” She hung up her phone and started toward the highway for the long drive to the Makah Reservation near Neah Bay. *Home*. The scene of the crime. In her mind it was now both places, linked like that forever.

Birdy had two things on her mind, one trivial and one overriding. She was grateful she drove a Prius—gutless as it was, she'd been racking up the miles and was grateful that she needed to fill up only twice in the past week. Forensic pathologists are on a budget too. She was also thinking about the right starting point to find out what she could about Anna Jo Bonner's murder and what role her cousin had truly had in it. Blood doesn't lie.

Not usually.

It came to her that the person to see was none other than Clallam County

Sheriff Jim Derby. Twenty years ago, Jim had been the lead detective, albeit a young and inexperienced one, on the Bonners murder case. Since that time, he'd made a name for himself. A very big name. For the past ten years he'd served as the sheriff, an elected position he won by a landslide. At the moment he was preparing to run for Congress. His campaign motto had already been trademarked on his website: CONGRESSMAN DERBY: WINNER TAKES ALL.



Jim Derby was a flinty-eyed man with angular features and Sharpie eyebrows that only added to the hard-liner-against-crime persona that he'd earned rather than manufactured over a decade of law enforcement. Property crimes and drug manufacturing had been his primary challenges in the county in the very northwest corner of Washington state. His thick wavy hair had receded a little, allowing his scalp to catch the light of the fluorescents, and his belly hung over his oversized belt buckle like a floating shelf. If he had any enemies in the community or in the sheriff's department, none were bold enough to speak out against him. Jim Derby didn't suffer any fools, which was one of the reasons state Republican Party leaders thought he'd be the nonsense candidate to defeat Democrat Casey Laughton, who'd held the office for four terms.

Derby's office was completely impersonal save for a portrait of Mrs. Derby and their son, and a row of bobblehead sports figurines that commanded the majority of a shelf next to the window. The joke in the sheriff's office was that when "the sheriff talks, you just nod."

Birdy had called ahead and Sheriff Derby had agreed to clear some time for her.

"I've followed your career," he'd said. "Glad to see you made something of yourself." The words tumbled out a little patronizingly, but Birdy took them at face value.

"Thanks," she'd said, almost adding *Glad you did too*.

"Not sure what I can tell you. Things change, time marches on, memories fade."

"That's fine. To be honest," she'd said—a phrase she hated because it signaled that everything else must have been a lie—"I'm not sure what I'm looking for."

It was true. She wasn't. All she knew was that her cousin had compelled her to help him. She wondered if her own sense of guilt had driven her to.

She'd never lied about what she'd seen, but her statement to the sheriff and at trial was crucial.

She'd read the statement before heading up to Clallam County.

I had been cutting wood for my family. It was around three p.m., but it could have been later. I don't know the exact time because I don't have a watch. I heard a noise of someone coming down the trail toward me. He was screaming. I didn't know who it was at first. I was scared. I turned off my chain saw. I started to run and then I heard my name. It was my cousin Tommy calling to me. I went to him. He was bloody. He was crying. He was saying that "she's dead. It's my fault. She's dead." I asked him who and he didn't answer for a long time. Then he said it was Anna Jo Bonners. I started to cry and then I ran away. I was so afraid about what happened, I ran as fast as I could. I got home and my mom told me not to say anything. The next day the sheriff found my chain saw and questioned me. I agree that this is what happened and is true.

It was signed with a signature that was half printed and half cursive, and dated. It was *her* signature, at least as she'd used to write it. Yet something didn't seem quite right. Birdy remembered how a kind lady with short blond hair had sat in the small room while then-detective Derby urged her to "get it all down" and "don't worry about the mistakes because Patricia can fix them later."

Patricia. The name played in her head, but she couldn't come up with any more. Who was Patricia?

When she walked into Derby's office, she was instantly reminded of the days leading up to Tommy's trial. It was strange. The sense of familiarity didn't come from seeing him in person, or even hearing his voice on the phone. It was the odor that lingered in the air of the office. Birdy caught the distinct whiff of witch hazel, a scent that always led her back to the days she'd spent waiting to testify, being questioned, all of what came with being an eyewitness. At fourteen it had been almost too much to take in. All the adults telling her what to do, pretending they weren't telling her what to say. The smell reminded her of all of that. Jim Derby used witch hazel as a skin bracer or aftershave. Apparently some things hadn't changed so much after

all.

A secretary led her inside the bobbleheaded office and the pair exchanged a few remarks about the congressional race, the reservation, and the time that had passed. She told him that she'd seen Tommy and she'd promised to look into his case.

“Not officially, of course, but as a family member.”

“A little late to dig into that one,” he said. “It has been a long time.”

“Not really,” Birdy said. “Not if he's innocent.”

Sheriff Derby motioned to his coffee cup and Birdy shook her head at the offer.

“We got him dead to rights as I quite vividly recall,” he said, folding his big hands atop his pristine desk. “One of my first big investigations. Who says he's innocent?”

Birdy didn't like his tone. Not at all. She'd come there to learn more about the case from the lead investigator. She hadn't come with the intention of defending Tommy. It wasn't about that. It was about finding out the truth for someone who really needed it. At that moment, she wasn't sure if it was she or Tommy who needed the truth more.

“He does,” she said. “Always has. That's kind of the point. He has always said he was innocent, but once he was convicted, he just kind of stopped. He disappeared. There was no appeal.”

Jim gave a knowing sigh; it was exaggerated like everything he did. “Maybe once he was convicted, he knew we had him and there was no point to fighting it anymore. Didn't testify at trial either, as I recall.”

“No, he didn't,” Birdy said. “But you interviewed him.”

“It wasn't much of an interview.”

“So I gathered,” she said, pulling out a slim manila folder. “I have a reference for it. Somewhere ...” She shuffled through the documents she'd brought from the Bone Box. She'd flagged one page with an incongruent rainbow Post-it note.

“What's all that?” he asked, as she rotated the file and set the page on his desk.

“Material I collected,” she said, watching his every nuance and facial tic. Was there anything to be learned from his folded hands? His sigh? In the morgue the dead say nothing, but their stories were part of their bodies.

“You probably have cases that haunt you too, don't you, Sheriff?”

He signed again. *Impatient? Annoyed?*

“I can assure you, Freeland’s isn’t one of them,” he said, “but yes.”

Birdy finished sifting through the folder. “Here it is,” she said, pointing her forefinger at a line in an old police interview report. She started to read:

“... *subject was polite, but evasive. Didn’t admit guilt, but attempted to deflect responsibility during the recorded session.*”

She pushed the paper at him, but he didn’t reach for it. His fingers still threaded his hands together. “Yes, for a killer, I guess he was polite. Is there a point here?”

“The report makes mention of a recording, and yet as far as I can tell the recording was never played at trial. I’ve looked everywhere for a reference of it, but none.”

The sheriff shrugged. “Maybe there wasn’t much on it worth playing. Not like he confessed or anything. Sure I can’t get you anything? Pop?”

“I’m good. No thanks. Back to the report here—it is your report, right?”

He nodded, his smile still in place, but his eyes no longer generating any kind of genuine warmth. He wasn’t irritated, maybe a little impatient. Birdy tried to avoid reading anything into his demeanor just then. She was after something very specific.

“Says right here.” She tapped her fingertip on the page and glanced at him. “Says ‘suspect deflected blame.’ What does that mean? If you remember, that is. I know it has been a very long time.”

“It has been, I’m sorry. I wish I could help you. I can see you have a lot of passion in your eyes for this matter. I understand the family connection, and the importance of family on the reservation.”

Again, he said all the right words. *At least mostly.* He had the badge of a law enforcement officer, but no doubt politics had been Derby’s true calling. The last word was meant as kind of zinger, Birdy was sure, though she didn’t let on. Law enforcement who worked the reservation never did so because it was a plum assignment. It was a stepping-stone. The people who lived there were never seen as they should have been—as mothers, fathers, and children. Just as big, messy family units, a mass of souls coiled together tightly in troubles that never ceased.

“Do you know what became of the tape?” she asked.

“Evidence locker at the county. Always thought the kid would appeal, but knowing that he’s guilty as sin, probably did us all a favor by accepting his sentence. In my mind, that’s the same as owning up to the crime.”

“He didn’t own up to anything,” she said.

“No answer is sometimes the same thing as saying that you’re guilty.”

“That isn’t how our legal system works, Sheriff Derby.”

His eyes stayed on her. The bobbleheads moved slightly behind them, a Greek chorus of plastic and spring necks. “Look, I understand where you’re coming from. I wish I could help you and your people. I wish there was something that I could tell you that would make the world a better place, a place where the sun always shines, where no kids are hungry, and your cousin wasn’t a killer.”

Annoyance had clearly given way to genuine irritation.

“It is nice to dream, isn’t it, Sheriff?” she said, getting up and reaching for her coat. “Thanks for your time. Thanks for all you’ve done for my ... my *people*.” She paused and turned, a smile on her face.

“I have often thought of the nice woman, Patricia, who was so kind to me during the trial,” she said as they passed by a record’s clerk outside his office.

A look of recognition came over the sheriff’s face, but it was fleeting. “Yes, Patricia Stanford,” he said. “Nice and smart. Retired from the department years ago.”

“Do you happen to know where she is?” Birdy asked.

Jim Derby, witch hazel balm oozing from every oversized pore, looked upward and then shook his head. “Sorry, but I lost track of her. I think, yeah, I think she passed away.”

As Birdy climbed into her bright red Prius, a finger tapped at the window.

It was the records clerk, who’d overheard Birdy’s conversation with the sheriff.

“Hey, don’t know why he said that. I can only guess. He never liked Pat much. Not that I could tell anyway. As far as her being dead, that’s a complete crock. I chatted with Pat-Stan last month at the Antiques Mall in Port Angeles. She runs the place.”

“He must have made a mistake,” Birdy said, purposely a little unconvincingly. She didn’t like Jim Derby at all. She was glad she didn’t live in his congressional district. She would probably doorbell for any other candidate no matter what their qualifications.

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” said the clerk, a middle-aged woman whose county-issue name badge identified her as Consuelo Maria Diego. “But I don’t think so. He just hated Pat. She quit here because of him. I don’t

know what the beef was, but Sheriff said, 'Pat didn't have a leg to stand on.'
He could be mean like that, you know."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Wicker Avenue Antiques Mall was a gritty warren of old, musty collectibles of debatable value. Customers entered the tight rows of vendor cubicles with their questionable arrays of Strawberry Shortcake lunchboxes, milk jugs from defunct Northwest dairies, or the occasional 1970s-era kitchen set and were immediately skeptical that they'd find anything there that they couldn't get from the closeout section of the local Goodwill. In fact, the Port Angeles Goodwill had a better record for delivering the occasional treasure.

Patricia Stanford had snowy white hair that she wore down to her waist. She also had one more distinguishing feature. Pat-Stan was missing her right leg, having lost it in a meth lab shootout the year after she'd made it to the detective's rank.

Didn't have a leg to stand on.... What a jerk!

"Patricia Stanford?" Birdy asked, approaching Pat as she fanned out the items in a jewelry case around a handwritten sign that said BAKELITE SOMEONE HAPPY.

Pat turned on her good leg. "That's me. Can I help you find something?"

"I've found what I'm looking for," Birdy said. "That would be you."

Pat appeared surprised. "Me?"

Birdy nodded and introduced herself, and the flicker of recognition—at least of her name—came over Pat-Stan in the most pleasant of ways. The woman, who leaned a little because she didn't like the way the prosthetic leg felt on the stub of her thigh, managed a warm smile.

"You're grown up," she said. "You look the same in the eyes, but, well, well, you have grown up."

Birdy returned the smile. "I remember how kind you were to me back then."

"And you've come here to tell me that?" she asked.

"Not exactly," Birdy said. "I came for help."

Pat-Stan narrowed her focus, ignoring a couple of women haggling over a stack of vintage hankies. "What kind of help?"

"I came here for my cousin Tommy."

Pat-Stan shifted her weight and winced. "I don't know what you mean."

"Of course not," Birdy said, explaining that Tommy was ill and she wanted to help clear his name before it was too late.

"Where's he living?" she asked.

Birdy paused a beat. She wondered why Pat-Stan asked that. "Walla

Walla. He never got out of prison.”

The shop manager looked genuinely surprised. “But that was more than twenty years ago. I thought he’d be out long ago,” she said.

“He won’t admit to something he didn’t do. And that’s the only way he could have been paroled.”

“I wish I could help you,” she said, stepping away to twist the small padlock on the jewelry case door.

Birdy touched her shoulder. “You can. You don’t have to wish.”

Patricia took a small step backward, both hips now resting against the cabinet. “I don’t remember anything,” she said. “I was a secretary studying to try to get the god-awful job that cost me my leg. The pension is good. But I’d rather have my leg.”

It was a joke, an attempt to defuse the tension between them.

“Actually, I’m a little surprised that you’re alive. I spent a half hour with Sheriff Derby and he told me that you were dead.”

“Interesting. He probably wishes I were dead. The man’s a complete ass. He was a terrible boss, he’s estranged from his only kid, his wife only comes out to pose for campaign photos. Messed up. I hate him.”

Some common ground, good.

“You’re not one to hold back,” Birdy said, trying to keep the disclosures coming. “But why would he wish you were dead? I don’t get that.”

Again, nervousness took over and Pat-Stan called to the women fighting over the hankies that she’d be right over. She looked back at her visitor.

“I really don’t want to get into it,” she said.

Birdy pushed harder. “Does it have anything to do with Tommy’s case?”

Pat-Stan waited a long time. Uncomfortably long. It was one of those awkward pauses that usually invites an exit from an uncomfortable conversation.

“Probably,” she said. “No. Yes. I mean, I don’t know. Jim was not just a jerk yesterday. His jerkdom has been a long time coming.”

“What about Tommy?” Birdy asked.

Pat-Stan pretended to search her memory. “I can’t say. Really. I don’t exactly remember.”

“Please,” she said.

“I’ve said all I should. I really do wish you luck. Don’t know how it can help Tommy. He’s served more than his time, that’s for sure. Can’t give back all those years.”

“Do you think they should be given back?” Birdy asked.

Again, a long pause. Pat-Stan clearly wanted to spill her guts right over that tacky display case, but she held back the best she could.

“I will say this and it’s against my better judgment. I transcribed his tape and I can tell you this.... When I saw his statement at trial I noticed that it was slightly different. Some parts were omitted.”

“I have his statement here,” Birdy said, pulling out the file.

“I don’t have my glasses and I wouldn’t remember exactly. Just something kind of bugged me. I told Detective Derby about it, but he dismissed it as a clerical error. That really angered me because, well, *I* was the clerk.”

“What was different?” Birdy asked.

Pat-Stan shrugged. “Don’t remember. Check the tape.”

“Video?”

“No, audio. We taped all the interviews. Policy.”

This interested Birdy. The transcripts—no matter who did them—didn’t sound completely like Tommy. “Where are the tapes?” she asked.

“I’ve got some. When I left, I was so mad that I took a bunch of old case files. Don’t lecture me. You’ve never lost a leg and then had your boss tell you that it would be best if you sat at a desk for the rest of your life. I get off at five. House is a mess, but I do the best that I can. Come over.”

She wrote down an address on Hawthorne Avenue and went down the narrow aisle. No one would have known that she’d lost a leg. Pat-Stan had practiced her gait. She might have lost a limb, but she had never lost her sense of pride. As Birdy Waterman saw it, despite its place in the “sin” category of the Bible, pride could be a very good thing. Pat-Stan was angry about the contents of the report.

Anger, Birdy knew, could be a good ally.

CHAPTER NINE

With a little more than an hour to kill, Birdy found a coffee shop that made ginormous cinnamon rolls. Even though the time of day was so wrong for that kind of indulgence, the forensic pathologist with a sweet tooth ordered one.

“Heated with butter?” a pleasant young man behind the counter asked.

“If I’m going to die from sugar overload, might as well go all the way,” Birdy said.

As she drank her coffee and ate the gooey roll at the table in the back of the café, she reread her own statement and compared it against what Tommy told the detectives.

I was smoking pot and drinking beer that afternoon in the woods alone. I had talked to Anna Jo Bonners about meeting me at the cabin so we could mess around. Anna Jo didn’t show up so I hung out by myself. I heard a scream coming from the cabin later and I went inside. I found Anna Jo Bonners in a pool of blood. I was scared that whoever had hurt her was still there so I grabbed the knife. I ran out of the cabin and hurried down the trail where my cousin Birdy found me. I don’t know why I picked up the knife, but I threw it away before my cousin came up to me. I did not kill her. I really liked Anna Jo. I think I might have loved her even.

All of the evidence supported the contention that Tommy was the killer. He’d had Anna Jo’s blood on his shirt and hands, his fingerprints had been recovered from the knife, and Birdy’s eyewitness testimony had put him fleeing the scene of the grisly homicide in Ponder’s cabin.

Yet he said he didn’t do it.

Surprised that she’d devoured half of the roll, Birdy pushed the plate away just as a call came in with a 509 area code, eastern Washington.

“Waterman,” she said.

“Dr. Waterman, I hope you don’t mind the intrusion,” a man’s voice said. “This is Ken Holloway. I’m the guard you talked to at the prison. You know, about your cousin?”

“Of course. Is everything all right? I didn’t leave my ID behind, did I?”

“No. Not that. It’s about Tommy. He’s been admitted to the infirmary.

They might take him out of here to Spokane. He's not doing so hot. After you left, he changed his family contact info to your name. Not changed. Actually gave a family contact. The spot on his file had been empty since he got here."

Birdy felt sick and it wasn't the cinnamon roll, which was now expanding in her upset stomach. "What can I do?"

"Nothing," he said. "He wanted me to give you a message. He wanted me to tell you that ..." The man's voice grew soft. For a second, Birdy thought he might be crying.

"Are you all right, Sergeant?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, his voice clipped in an obvious attempt to snap out of his grief. "He just wanted me to tell you that even if you don't believe in him all the way yet, he's grateful knowing that someone out there thinks he matters."

Birdy asked, "Will you let him know I got the message? Tell him that I'm doing my best. I don't want to give him false hope."

"Hope is never false," he said. "Hope is what keeps the innocent from killing themselves. Hope is what makes me think that justice will be done."

She hung up and looked at the time on her phone. Pat-Stan was waiting for her.

Patricia Stanford produced an old audiocassette from the box of things she'd taken when she'd hobbled out of the Clallam County Sheriff's department. It had been kept in an envelope with the date and Tommy's first name scrawled on it in pencil. On the top right-hand side, a red ink stamp read: EVIDENCE.

Pat-Stan offered her some coffee, but Birdy declined. She was sick to her stomach.

"If you have any Roloids," she asked. "I'll take a couple."

"Alka-Seltzer all right?"

Birdy nodded. Pat-Stan went into her kitchen and returned shortly with a fizzing glass of water.

"Lemon lime," she said.

As Birdy drank it, she couldn't help but think of Pat-Stan's need to collect some things from her office, her own kind of a Bone Box, maybe. She wondered if there were hundreds, if not thousands, of law enforcement people who carried away the flotsam and jetsam of cases that niggled at them too.

“Why Tommy’s tape?” she finally asked.

Pat-Stan inserted it into the player. “I guess I took things that bugged me. Things that I wasn’t really sure about.”

Birdy didn’t tell her about her own stash. Pat-Stan, in some ways, was a kindred spirit. Maybe law enforcement was full of people like them; those who were on the right side of the law, but weren’t as convinced as the men and women who lined up in the jury box. More times than she could care to admit, Birdy and her colleagues turned over the best information they could find, in hope that the jury would sort out the puzzle pieces that didn’t really fit. Their job had been to gather the evidence, the prosecutor’s job was to put it all into a story, and the jury was called upon to make the final call.

“Were you there?” Birdy asked. “In the room when this was recorded?”

She shook her head. “No. Not at all. Didn’t have the right badge back then. Derby treated me like an office girl and flunky. My scores on the detective’s test were twenty points higher than his. He’s now sheriff and I’m a human tripod selling *Partridge Family* lunchboxes.”

Even though the woman had clearly been wronged by her boss, in a very real, and very uncomfortable way, Birdy was grateful for it. Pat-Stan’s anger was proving to be more helpful than she’d hoped. Bitterness, sadly, was something that she could put to use.

Pat-Stan pushed the PLAY button. The tape crackled and popped, but Tommy’s voice was unmistakable. It was young Tommy. Broken Tommy. Not the man old before his time rotting away in prison. Tommy Freeland spoke in a deliberate, halting manner.

“I was smoking pot and drinking beer that afternoon in the woods alone. I had talked to Anna Jo Bonners about meeting me at the cabin so we could mess around. Anna Jo didn’t show up so I hung out by myself. I heard a scream coming from the cabin later and I went inside.”

His words were so precise that Birdy wondered if he’d been reading his statement. But he couldn’t have been because the statement was a transcription of the tape, not the other way around.

“I found Anna Jo Bonners in a pool of blood. I was scared that whoever had hurt her was still there so I grabbed the knife. He told me to put it down. So I—”

“Stop the tape, please,” Birdy said, looking up from the transcript of her cousin’s statement, her heart beat a little faster. The Alka-Seltzer roiled in her stomach.

Pat-Stan complied. She kept her facial expression flat, but her eyes were alert and sharply focused. There was awareness behind them, and, Birdy thought, a kind of appreciation for what she was hearing.

Maybe even a little relief.

“Did you hear what I heard?”

“Yes. I guess that’s why you’re here, isn’t it?”

“He says that someone told him to put the knife down,” she said.

“That’s right. That’s what he says.”

“But at trial he said he was alone.”

“He didn’t. Maybe you don’t remember, but Tommy Freeland never actually testified. His lawyer told him not to. The transcripts were used.”

“But the transcriptions are wrong.”

The former detective nodded. “I know. I was there. The only comfort I’ve had is that all the other evidence so clearly indicated that Tommy was the killer. It was only after his conviction that I played back the tapes.”

“Not only that, but doesn’t he sound peculiar?” Birdy said.

Pat-Stan watched her visitor closely. “How so?” she asked.

“Stilted, calm. Not like someone who’d just killed his girlfriend and was looking for a way out of it,” Birdy said.

“Funny that you should say that,” Pat-Stan said, her finger hovering over the recorder to advance the audiotape one more time. “I saw him the afternoon they brought him in. He was a complete wreck. He was barely able to breathe because he was crying so hard. Also, this isn’t an interview tape at all. It seems like a compilation, bits and pieces strung together. Did you hear how the hissing in the background stopped at the end of the sentence?”

Birdy was still stunned by the disclosure that someone else had been at the crime scene. “Not really,” she said. “I’ll listen more carefully.”

Pat-Stan nodded. “I want you to follow along with your transcription, okay? You are missing something.”

“Missing something?”

“Listen carefully. There’s a hiss on the tape just as he says it.”

“All right.”

The tape resumed.

“I ran out of the cabin and hurried down the trail where my cousin Birdy found me. I don’t know why I picked up the knife, but I threw it away before Birdy came up to me.”

“Stop, please.”

The former detective pushed the button, her finger hovering to advance the tape once more.

“He said that he threw it away, before he saw me.”

“That’s what he said.”

“But when I read the report, it indicated that the knife had been recovered from the cabin.”

“I don’t recall that, but all right. What does it matter where it was found?”

“It matters to me. Not so much where, but by who?”

“That’s easy. Detective Derby found it.”

CHAPTER TEN

Jim Derby's house commanded the edge of a hill overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca, an always choppy passage that divides Washington from British Columbia. It was a big house with shingled siding and a river rock chimney. Atop its second story was a widow's walk framed by ornate ironwork. It was the kind of place that drive-bys admire and covet.

Pitched in the front yard was a campaign sign as big as a car: THE DERBY WINNER YOU WANT.

Birdy parked and walked up the long cobblestone path. She wondered how a sheriff could afford such a place. A congressman, yes. They had a zillion ways to earn a fortune through sweetheart deals made when their constituents were home dealing with the real-life problems of their respective districts.

She knocked and Jim Derby opened the door.

"What do you want?" he asked, clearly not happy to see her. "It's late."

"I think you know why I'm here, Sheriff." Her tone was flat, without emotion. Her eyes stared hard at him. He had to know why she was there. It wasn't a social call.

"It sounds like you're threatening me," he said.

Witch hazel scented the air.

"Are you going to invite me in or are we going to have this conversation out here where the neighbors might hear?" she asked, refusing to yield to fear.

Jim Derby looked warily over the hedge next door. A light beamed from the porch.

"Come in," he said.

"Who's there?" a woman's voice called as Birdy followed the sheriff into a living room that had been turned into campaign central. Mailers, bumper stickers, and yard signs blanketed the coffee table, the sofa, and a credenza that ran the length of a bay window that overlooked the Strait.

"No one, Lydia," he said calling into the hallway. "Just a staffer."

"All right then," she said.

He turned back to Birdy. "My wife doesn't need to hear this. I made a few phone calls after you left. I know what you're up to. I just don't know why. I'm guessing that someone from the other side is trying to smear me. I get it. That happens. Don't be used. Despite Tommy being a family member, you and I are on the same team."

“Are we? My team doesn’t frame people for murders they didn’t commit.”

“You better back off, Ms. Waterman,” he said.

“Doctor,” she shot back.

He looked flustered, maybe for the first time ever. “Fine, Doctor, back off. No one framed anyone. Are you working for the Democrats or not? Is this about hurting my chances for reelection?”

“No,” she said. “But it does give me a little bit of comfort knowing that what you did to my cousin and Anna Jo will stop you from winning the derby, as you like to call it.”

“Just wait a second. You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I found out that Anna Jo was seeing someone. Someone she didn’t want her parents to know about. It was you, wasn’t it?”

Derby took a step backward, but said nothing.

Birdy pressed on. “It wasn’t that Anna Jo was embarrassed about who she was seeing. It was the other person—you—who was embarrassed about seeing her, a Makah girl. She meant nothing to you. She was trash to you, wasn’t she?”

“I want you to leave,” he said. “I will call my deputies and have them pick you up for threatening an officer.”

Birdy gripped her keys. She’d planned on jabbing them in his eyes if he got violent with her. Instead, he was cowering behind the shields of the men and women who worked for him. Probably like he’d always done. Like he did to Patricia Stanton. “Fine,” she said. “People like you ruin the law for everyone who actually gives a damn. You killed her and you set up Tommy.”

“Get out!” he said, his voice rising to flat-out anger.

Again, Birdy felt her keys.

“Wait,” came the woman’s voice from the other room.

Birdy spun around and faced Lydia H. Derby, the woman who graced every campaign poster; the woman her husband wore like an accessory. She was a slender woman with dark-dyed hair and a flawless, powdery white complexion. She wore brown velvet sweatpants that she somehow managed to make stylish. She was the ultimate dream wife for a man with higher aspirations.

“Lydia, this is handled. Dr. Waterman is leaving now.”

Lydia’s face stayed calm. *Botox? A controlled wariness that had been practiced over the years? Resignation that what she was going to do was*

something that had to be done? Birdy didn't know.

"This is going to come out," Lydia said. "I suppose it should. Owning up to something will set you free. Isn't that the truth, Jim?"

His eyes pleaded with her. "Lydia, don't."

Birdy held up her hand without the keys to stop him from saying anything more. "Mrs. Derby, you overheard what we were saying, didn't you?"

"Every word," she said.

"I'm right, aren't I?"

She shook her head. "No, you're half right."

It didn't track. "Half?" Birdy asked.

"Jim did frame Tommy Freeland, but he didn't kill Anna Jo."

"Then who did?"

Lydia looked at her husband. By then Jim Derby had dissolved into a chair by the credenza.

"I did," she said.

Birdy thought she didn't hear quite right. "What? You?"

Lydia Derby glanced at her husband, his face buried in his hands. "A couple of days earlier I followed Anna Jo to that love nest Jim kept with her." Lydia said, stopping a beat as her husband jabbed a finger at her.

"Shut up, Lydia!" he said, snapping back into the moment.

"You'd like to shut me up," Lydia said before returning her attention to Birdy. "I don't know how special Anna Jo Bonners was. All I know is that she was ruining my marriage. I had a little boy to think about. You were about to ruin my life, Kenny's life. I only wanted to threaten her with the knife. But something just took over. She was sitting there, waiting for Tommy or something. I just grabbed a knife from the kitchen and started ..."

Anna Jo Bonners was dressing. She was young, beautiful. She was unencumbered by children, with a slender body that had never carried a baby.

"I know who you are," Anna Jo said, barely glancing at Lydia.

"Leave him alone," she said.

"You mean like you do? I'm giving him what he wants and needs. I know about your type. Needy. Always thinking of yourself. No wonder he laughs about you when we're in bed." Anna Jo started for the door. "You know what's so funny? I don't give a crap about Jim. I'm looking for a good time. You might try it sometime, Mrs. Derby. Jim says you have no passion."

“Please,” Lydia said. Her body was so tense, she thought if she breathed any harder her breastbone would shatter into a million little pieces.

“I do what I want to do,” Anna Jo said. She was not really a malicious girl, but somehow the fact that Lydia was so upset made her feel good. Jim Derby’s wife’s tears only served to egg her on. Lydia’s anguish gave her power.

“We made love in his car the other day,” she said. “You ever try that?”

Lydia was shaking. “Stop it or I’ll stop you.”

Anna Jo just didn’t seem to care. “That’s a laugh. You couldn’t satisfy your man—how do think you’ll find the courage to stop me? Go home, Mrs. Derby.”

That was when Lydia saw the knife. It was like an antenna transmitting its presence from the open kitchen doorway. Without another second to think it through, she grabbed it from the cutting board, spun around and plunged it into Anna Jo’s midsection. The first cut brought a muffled scream, a kind of guttural spasm of noise that undulated over the cabin’s cedar floorboards. The second brought eye contact, a look of horror and disbelief.

“What are you doing?” Anna Jo said, grabbing at Lydia and the knife as she sank to the floor. Blood splattered over her bra as she moved her hand over her breast to stop the bleeding.

“You’re getting what you deserve!” Lydia said as she stared down at the girl fighting for her life.

“Stop! You’re killing me!” Anna Jo said, as she tried to regain her footing. Halfway up, she slipped on her own pooling blood.

The scene was beyond frenetic. Lydia stood over Anna Jo, working the knife like a piston. Over and over. Twenty-seven times. Later, when she spoke of what she’d done, she was unsure if Anna Jo’s last words were really as she remembered them or if they had melded into some twisted fantasy of what had happened in Ponder’s cabin all those years ago.

“Finally, got some passion,” Anna Jo said.

Or maybe she didn’t say anything at all. She died after the second or third stab into her carotid artery.

Lydia looked up as her husband entered the cabin.

“Good God, what did you do, Lydia?” Jim Derby asked, his eyes terror-filled as he dropped down next to his lover.

“I fixed your mess. Now you clean it up,” she said.

Jim reached for Anna Jo’s blood-soaked neck for a pulse.

“Anna Jo?” came a voice outside the cabin.

It was Tommy.

Jim led his now silent, almost catatonic, wife toward the back door.

“I’ll clean up your mess, Lydia. I guess I owe you.”

In a beat, he’d returned, pretending to see Anna Jo’s body for the first time. Tommy was crying and trying to give his girlfriend mouth to mouth. His whole body was shaking. He picked up the knife and looked at it like it was some kind of mysterious object.

“Get out of here, and get rid of the knife. I’ll clean this up.”

“Who did this?” Tommy said.

The detective hooked his hand under Tommy’s armpit and lifted him to his feet.

“Just keep your mouth shut. I’ll help you,” Jim said. “Get rid of the knife and get out of here.”

“My husband later told me how he rearranged the crime scene. How he’d wiped away my footprints. Blamed his own on an uncharacteristic lapse in detective protocol. He called Tommy’s appearance at the cabin a gift,” Lydia said, looking at Jim. “I believe you said he was the ‘perfect patsy,’ ” she said.

With Birdy looking on in the expansive comfort of the Derbys’ magnificent living room, Lydia was crying her heart out as she confessed to what she’d done. She was literally crumbling into pieces, but Jim “Mr. Family Man for All People” just sat there. He didn’t even try to calm his wife. Birdy wondered what he was thinking about—his political career diving into oblivion? He certainly wasn’t thinking about Lydia.

Or Tommy.

Or Anna Jo.

He got up went for a desk drawer and got his gun.

“I’ll say I thought you were an intruder,” he said, coming toward Birdy.

“No, you won’t,” she said. She held up her cell phone. “I’ve had this on speaker. Your old friend Pat-Stan—the one you said was dead—is listening and recording this entire conversation.”

“You asshole, Jim Derby,” came Pat-Stan’s voice over the cell phone. “I’ve already called the police—and not your bunch of deputies. The state patrol is outside now. Let’s see who has a leg to stand on in court.”

Tommy Benjamin Freeland took his last breath a week after getting word in his Spokane hospital bed that his cousin Birdy had cleared his name. The medical staff said their patient was unable to respond verbally, but he nodded slightly and managed the briefest of smiles. They were sure he understood.

Birdy had wanted to go see him, but a homicide case involving a high school boy in Port Orchard kept her planted in the autopsy suite. She left work when she got word of Tommy's passing.

Birdy wasn't a crier, but she couldn't stop just then. She hurried to her car and drove down the steep hill toward the water. Her mind rolled back to the boy she'd known—the one who had taught her how to fish a creek at night with a flashlight and, in one of her more disgusting lessons, how to dress a deer with only a pocket knife and a whetstone.

She parked the Prius behind the old abandoned Beachcomber restaurant and looked out at the icy, rippling water of Sinclair Inlet. She knew that she'd done all she could. She had been so late to come to the realization that Tommy had needed her all those years. It made her sick and sad.

Tommy, we let you down. I let you down....

A young bald eagle, its feathers still a root beer float of brown and white, swooped down to the water and grabbed the silvery sliver of a fish. Its wings pounded the air like the loudest heartbeat imaginable as the bird lifted a small salmon and carried it upward to the cloud-shrouded sun.

Birdy Waterman was a scientist, a doctor. But she was a Makah and that meant a millennium of tradition and lore had been woven into her soul. Her connection to the water, the air, and the creatures that inhabited the natural world was different from that of people who didn't depend directly on it for their very existence. She watched the eagle as it screeched skyward, its talons skewering the now motionless fish.

Birdy felt a whisper come to her ears. It was gentle, like a breath of a lover.

"I'm free," the wind said.

She cradled her eyes in the crook of her elbow and then looked out the windshield as she watched the young eagle fly away.

Tommy was at rest. He, finally, was free. And so was Kenny Holloway. The prison guard from Walla Walla who'd set all the events in motion called her after his mother and stepfather's arrest for murder and conspiracy. He wasn't celebratory, just grateful for the outcome.

“You meet all kinds of people in prison,” he said. “Some bad with no possibility of redemption. And then sometimes you meet someone like your cousin. If he’d given the slightest reason to continue the cover-up, I would have done so. My mother did what she thought she had to do and that monster she’s married to made it all happen. I wrote the letter to you, because I knew you’d be the one to help fix the big ugly mess.”

“Why didn’t you just come out and tell me?” she asked.

“Telling something to someone gets you nowhere. Your cousin had been saying all these years that he was innocent, yet no one listened. Someone like you had to find out what happened.”

Kenny Holloway ended the call with a thank-you.

“You did more for me than just about anyone,” he said. “Anyone but Tommy, that is.”

Inside her house, the Bone Box was lighter than it had been. Tommy’s case file would not be thrown away, but no longer did it feel right to keep it there. There were the cases of a little girl found drowned off the fishing pier in Manchester; the two teenage boys from Bainbridge Island who had supposedly killed themselves in a secret pact; and so many others. It surprised her how many there were. How many times she second-guessed the results of the cases in which things just didn’t add up. All the cases were different. All deserved another look.

Birdy turned off the light and slid under the covers. Her mother was right about one thing. She was never satisfied. That night as she went to sleep she remembered how she and Tommy had picked huckleberries and foraged for firewood. She imagined his laugh.

She’d fish through that box again. If all else had failed, if someone had gotten away with murder, maybe she could put her intuition and forensic science to good use. For Tommy and the others whose voices were never heard—some living, some dead.