

PROLOGUE

Tuesday, August 19, 1975

The man pushed himself back from his drafting table, rose slowly, and walked to the window. His right knee protested, but he shook it out to make it pop. The tall stool continued to spin for a few seconds before settling down. Normally the work came easily, but not today.

Maybe I'm just getting old.

Perched halfway up one of the steepest canyons in Jasper, California, he could see for miles up and down the coast, the spectacular view interrupted only by Devil's Claw, an ancient rock formation defining the north end of Main Beach. Layers of basalt, upended by tectonic forces and eroded over time, created the massive, aptly named landmark, reaching out into the Pacific toward Pelican Island a few miles offshore. It had been Solange's favorite place.

Memorizing the tide tables, his fifteen-year-old daughter quickly learned exactly when the sea's presents would arrive. Bundled in one of his old sweatshirts, the teenager could often be found sitting quietly on one of Devil's knobby stone knuckles, sketchbook in hand, capturing on paper whatever sea life was momentarily caught in its grip. Occasionally, she spotted her favorite subject, the sea otter, popping its sleek head up beyond the breakers or even closer in, floating on its back, cracking an abalone shell open on its stomach.

She could sit for hours, just looking out to sea. He never asked what she was thinking, but he assumed it was often about her mother. On the days she spent at the beach, she cried less, and that, too, he assumed was good.

Back in the studio, he helped her turn these first, amateurish renderings of sea stars, octopuses, anemones, and crabs into surprisingly good clay and wire sculptures. Like he, she thought in 3-D. He encouraged his daughter's training and freely supplied extra materials to the cause.

Those were good years. Unsure what to do after his wife, Marie, died, he moved them back here, back home. It had been good for them both.

Marie.

Unbidden, the smell of her perfume floated past. Tahitian Ginger. In 1942, still in art school, it wasn't exactly in his budget, but he made sure she had it. Perfume, not cologne.

The man smiled.

Furious, Marie's father refused to speak to him when he learned of their marriage, but her mother was pleased. Like most French people, she liked Americans, but Monsieur Moreau made it clear he did not. He had nothing against Americans per se, but was very protective of his daughter.

"He is a soldier, and like all soldiers, he will leave."

But Robert didn't leave. He'd surprised the old man, and himself, by not getting on the military transport that morning or any others leaving later that week. Of vague French ancestry himself and an artist, Robert Sauvage felt more at home in Paris than in the States. Restless, with a rebellious streak, he also enjoyed defying parents on both sides of the Atlantic. After art school, he quickly established a successful career as a sculptor. They lived well.

Marie made sure their daughter was raised properly, keeping her well away from his seedier artist friends. Solange attended if not the best schools, then the best schools they could afford. Uniforms were de rigueur for students during the day, but her mother indulged her daughter's desire for color, texture, and line with a wardrobe any Hollywood star would envy. Marie considered clothing an acceptable outlet for a girl's artistic tendencies versus the very male, physical profession of sculpting.

After Marie died, Paris was no longer the city of lights, at least not for Robert. A few months later, when news reached him of his mother's passing—his father had died a few years before—he returned home to settle their affairs.

Once there, he decided to stay. Solange needed a change. Of course, fifteen-year-olds are moody anyway, but he thought it would be good for her to be away from her still-grieving grandparents and the large, darkened rooms of their Paris apartment. It certainly would be good for him. Marie's father somehow blamed him for her death. As if he'd had anything to do with it. She succumbed to the flu. Quickly, and to the surprise of them all. Other than smoking, which typified all Parisians, Marie had no other vices and had always been healthy.

California suited him. Tangy sea air tinged with the sharp scent of sage; the vast, empty Pacific; and a sky so blue it hurt. After years of Parisian life, the relatively untamed West Coast felt as exotic to him as Paris had in his twenties. In Paris, nothing was natural. In California, everything was.

Here, he could become himself.

Though still undeveloped compared to the suburban sprawl inland, the tiny coastal town of Jasper had become a thriving artists' colony in his absence. He began to work before they'd even unpacked. Vigorous and fresh, his new pieces sold well. He even picked up some parcels of

raw land. On one of them, up in the canyon, with its panoramic views, he built this private aerie, flooded with natural light. Once settled in his studio, he largely ignored the other properties although some of them were much more valuable. They were also much closer to people, and he needed space and quiet to work.

Free from her mother's constraints, Solange happily assisted in the studio, soaking up all Robert could teach, but soon outgrew him and their insular world. At eighteen, she applied to and was accepted by his old art school in Paris. Suitcase in hand, she left on her nineteenth birthday.

And didn't look back.

He was surprised how much this bothered him at first, but he couldn't hold it against her. Like father, like daughter. He had lived his life. Why shouldn't she live hers? It wasn't her job to keep him company and care for him in his old age.

And he wasn't alone for long. There was Janet. One minute, she was in his studio; the next, she was in his bed. He still wasn't sure exactly how that had happened. Nothing like Marie, of course, but Janet fit nicely into his life. Cheerful, uncomplicated, and so very young. Not her fault. She easily morphed into running his household and his business, allowing him the freedom he craved. They were together almost six, no, seven years.

Robert didn't agonize over decisions. He just knew he needed to make one. Now.

The soothing sound of breaking waves and seagull cries reached his ears. A solitary surfer caught a wave, riding it briefly to shore.

He turned back to his desk, where dust motes, suspended in the afternoon light, hovered over the unfinished letter.

It was the right thing to do. The least he could do.

He picked up his pen.

Dear Janet . . .

He had no idea this one simple act, hidden for years, would erupt into a vicious battle, threatening those he loved, eventually crushing the life of an innocent.

1

Saturday, June 20, 2015

Crunching gravel as quietly as she could, Logan backed Lola out of the driveway and rolled past still-sleeping neighbors toward the light at the bottom of Killer Hill. They were both looking forward to an early morning cruise down Pacific Coast Highway, before it became clogged with tourist traffic. Other than a recording session this afternoon with a couple of her student leaders, Logan had two glorious days off until Monday and planned to enjoy them.

A graduation gift from Logan's father, Lola was Logan's '58 Corvette. The sapphire beauty with white leather interior gleamed inside and out, thanks to the loving attentions of Mr. Delgado, mechanic extraordinaire. He left the chrome scoops Logan loved on the sides but discretely took out extra weight and put in extra power, making Lola a very fit female of a certain age. And in Southern California, that was saying something. Nothing made Lola happier than flying effortlessly over miles of empty highway, flirting with her pal, the Pacific.

June gloom was still in effect, but as far as Logan was concerned, every day was a top-down day, sun or no sun. By the time she reached San Juan Capistrano, half of her hair had escaped the baseball cap she'd jammed on her head this morning. She didn't mind a bit. She wasn't as particular about her looks as Lola was.

Two hours later, energized by the drive, she couldn't wait to tackle the kitchen. Not that it needed much in the way of spring cleaning; she barely used it. Logan only used her oven for

one thing—her signature dish—roast chicken. Her foreign-exchange mom made sure she learned to cook at least one French basic well. Stuffed with lemons and rosemary sprigs, basted in butter, it came out perfect every time and made her compact beach bungalow smell heavenly.

After a brief stop at the local market for supplies, she parked in the driveway, between the house and what used to be the garage. It was now the studio where she was to meet the boys at 1:00 p.m.

Keys in hand, she headed for the front door. Morning glories tangled along the fence, shielding house from street. French thyme nicely filled in the spaces between the slate paving stones, creating the meandering walkway. On damp mornings, she purposely stepped between the pavers so the herbs would release their pungent, savory aroma.

She recently painted the front door a bright, blue-green color. Bonnie called it seafoam green. Logan had no idea. She just liked it. It reminded her of mermaids.

Once inside, she hung her keys and purse on one of the heavy-duty hooks just inside the door and carried the groceries and cleaning supplies into the kitchen.

Normally, her tiny, domed fridge was stocked only with Logan's idea of essentials—real butter and a good chardonnay—but for tonight's barbecue with Ben, she'd added fresh salad makings and a bowl of just-picked strawberries. Next, she refilled the miniature ice trays—no automatic ice maker in this vintage model. She knew she should upgrade the appliances, but she loved the vintage look of them, and it made her feel connected to the original owner of the house, Meg, an eccentric writer who died in her eighties. Logan never met her, but from everything she'd heard about her, they would have hit it off.

One of Jean's freshly baked baguettes from Tava'e's down the hill rested aromatically on the counter, in a basket Bonnie had given her. Food-wise, she was good to go. Ben usually

provided anything that actually had to be cooked. He was the chef; Logan was more of an assembler.

Being in a relationship, particularly with a next-door neighbor, was not something Logan had planned when she bought her fixer-upper two years ago, but the last few years had been anything but predictable.

Last summer, with the help of his crew on their off hours, Ben had helped Logan convert her garage into a recording studio and added an upstairs office. Killer Hill was steep, so even with the addition, she didn't lose the view from her rooftop deck. Lola, however, still hadn't forgiven Logan for commandeering her garage. She'd have to make it up to her this summer with a nice detail and tune-up at Mr. Delgado's.

Ben, nicknamed the Viking by her best friend, Bonnie, had been there with her as she rebuilt every aspect of her life. In fact, he and Purgatory probably saved her life two summers ago when a deranged woman with a very large knife attacked her in her bed. Declared incapable of standing trial, the young woman was currently locked away in a hospital for the criminally insane, many miles away.

Everyone liked Ben. He'd even passed inspection with her little brother, Rick, a police officer. It didn't hurt that Ben's dog, Purgatory, and Rick's K-9 partner, a German shepherd named Charlie, had a thing going, too. BBQs were a regular lovefest.

Last summer, Ben and Logan exorcised enough of their own personal demons to realize their friendship was turning into love. The last ten months had been better than she could have imagined, but for now, she wasn't ready for more.

Her current life seemed light-years away from her life with Jack.

Four years ago, she and her husband ran a successful computer business they built from scratch, and their daughter, Amy, had recently graduated from UC San Diego and was off in Africa doing research.

Then came the car accident that changed everything. It took her husband's life and left Logan with humbling back and neck injuries. During her painful physical recovery, she also dealt with the discovery that Jack had been unfaithful during much of their marriage. Her old life shattered, she'd been forced to contemplate a new one. It hadn't been easy.

That first year could only be described as a deep, black hole of depression sprinkled with anxiety attacks. The daily struggle almost undid her. At some point, though, she realized she wanted to live, not just exist.

She still wasn't sure what her new life would look like in the end, but she knew she wanted to find out.

Cleaning the entire downstairs took all of thirty minutes. Barefoot, she couldn't do her signature sock slide on the refinished hardwood floors, but she smiled at the thought of it. Bella, her violin, handed down from her paternal grandmother, took pride of place on the living room wall.

Checking the time again, she put away her meager cleaning supplies and hoped the boys were on schedule for their session. She wanted time to shower and get ready for her evening with Ben. A landscape architect, he was doing some work in town today but said he'd be there by five thirty.

When she was growing up, music had been a central part of Logan's world. In high school, she played fiddle in a bluegrass band and at the local arts festival with her friends Ned and Sally. When Amy was born, it was obvious she had inherited the family love of music. A

true McKenna, Amy danced before she could walk, whirling with joyful abandon to the Appalachian clogging tunes.

Jack always felt left out. He didn't play an instrument and wasn't particularly interested in being the audience. He wanted his wife and daughter at his rugby games. Gradually, as Jack and the business took more and more of her time, her violin and her music got pushed literally and figuratively to the back of her closet.

Playing again was like opening a window in a stuffy room.

Leaving the French doors open, she checked the clock. 12:55 p.m. Grabbing her violin, she slipped on some flip-flops she kept near the door and made her way around the back, past the stairs leading up to the deck. She arrived just as the boys were getting out of Brandon's car.

"Hi, Ms. McKenna!" Brandon yelled.

"Hello, Mrs. McKenna," Jeff said.

Brandon reached into the back seat of his Kia to lift out a beat-up guitar case. Plastered in travel and surf stickers, it was a hand-me-down from his dad, a local musician and former member of a semi-famous rock group, Bone Temple. They broke up in the '80s over girls and drugs. *Qu'est* surprise.

"Hi, guys," Logan said, pulling a key out of her pocket.

Unlocking a small door, she entered the cool interior of her former garage and switched on a light. The door to the sound studio was straight ahead. Directly to her left, narrow, steep stairs led up to the large, open office area from which she ran her music/math program, Fractals. They still hadn't installed a safety railing. It was on the list. As she learned when fixing up her house, remodels were never finished.

The boys followed her inside, everyone's eyes taking a minute to adjust to the darker interior.

"You get any surf time in?" Logan asked, opening the studio door with her free hand.

"Yeah, waves were a little flat, but we got in some good rides," Brandon said, coming in behind her, taking his guitar out of its case on a small table just inside the door. Jeff nodded. A part-time lifeguard, Brandon could always be found in or near the ocean. Friends since the third grade, Jeff went where Brandon went, and Ben's nephews thought both boys were cool.

Although best friends, in every other way, they were a study in contrasts. Brandon's wavy hair, bleached white and stiff with saltwater, stuck out from a friendly, sunburned face. The sun had no effect on Jeff's hair. It remained completely black, shiny and stick straight, no matter how much time he spent in the water. As always, his bangs needed to be cut. Jeff was the quiet one.

The first two student leaders Logan selected, both boys worked hard and really helped get *Fractals* off the ground its first year. Now in high school, they'd been in Logan's seventh grade class the one year she worked in the classroom. The boys' pick for the program's new name, *Fractals*, was inspired by one of Logan's math lessons. Even though fractals weren't part of the regular geometry curriculum, Logan hadn't exactly been a regular teacher. The students had been awed by how fractals not only created beautiful, kaleidoscope graphics, but were patterns underlying everything in the universe, including math and music, on any scale, and were created with a very simple equation.

"I love it!" Mrs. Houser said when told of the new name, just before writing a check, so *Fractals* it was.

Logan didn't know where the woman got her money, but she was just happy Mrs. Houser was willing to part with some of it.

Even with her benefactor's generous checkbook, Logan was always searching for ways to pay for instruments, equipment, software licenses, and just office supplies. Today's pizza was coming out of her pocket. These guys could easily put away a large meat lover's each.

Since Logan had loaned her fiddling efforts to the first recordings, they begged her to play on their current project. She agreed only if they kept the profits for themselves. College was only two short years away for these boys, and she knew they'd need every penny, no matter who got into the White House. Campaign promises of free tuition for every child were just that . . . promises.

Although finding time in her schedule was tough, Logan loved these sessions. Getting away from the mound of paperwork on her desk and putting off dealing with district pencil pushers whose only vocabulary word seemed to be *no*, even for a few hours, was glorious.

As musicians, Brandon and Jeff were developing in skill and range, but it was Jeff's voice and songwriting that really set him apart. His strong vocals and tongue-in-cheek lyrics captured your attention. The resulting sound reminded Logan of a cross between Keb' Mo' and Ben Harper. The boy was truly talented.

Though 4:00 p.m. came all too soon, they got a few good tracks down before they wrapped it up. Jeff's shift at Athena's, one of the food court restaurants in the Otter Festival, started at four thirty. He only worked three days a week. To avoid paying benefits, most places didn't give kids more than twenty hours. Brandon was going home to watch a Star Wars marathon. His lifeguard hours were usually early in the morning.

Locking the studio behind them, Logan walked the boys out to their truck. The sun was still out, but lower in the sky and not as strong. Logan's large tortoiseshell cat, Dimebox, emerged from the long shadow of the hedge separating her property from the next house down the hill. It was a fixer-upper like hers, and the young couple who bought it were racing to finish the remodel before their baby arrived, which, by the look of the wife, could be any day now. Winding around the boys' feet, rubbing against their legs, Dimebox pressed for a scratch behind the ears. Jeff was happy to oblige. His mom was allergic, so they didn't have pets.

Named after a small town in Texas "no bigger'n a dime box worth of snuff," Dimebox weighed in at fourteen pounds and was the king of all he surveyed. He didn't start out that way. When Logan first scooped up the flea-infested, scrawny kitten, he fit into the crook of her arm.

"What time do you want us back on Monday?" Brandon asked.

"Same time works for me," Logan said. "If I don't hear you when you get here, yell up at the window. I'll be in the office."

Jeff said that worked for him, too.

Violin tucked under her arm, she waved at their taillights and Brandon's outstretched arm and checked her watch.

Almost Ben time!

Deciding to catch the sunset while she waited for Ben on the rooftop deck, Logan went inside and quickly assembled her supplies into a canvas bag. Bottle of pinot noir. Two glasses. Some crackers and cheese. Adjusting it onto her shoulder, she left the doors open and went up the outside stairs.

The rooftop deck had been one of the major selling points of this house.

After paying off the debts she didn't know Jack had accumulated, the cash purchase and remodel of the house took every cent she had. But she'd been determined to own her own home. A lifelong renter, she still got a thrill from coming home to *her* house. *And* she loved not having a house payment.

The deck was Logan's escape hatch, a place where she could close her eyes and just listen to the waves or marvel at the many changing colors of the Pacific. She tried to name them once, but Mother Nature's palette quickly outran her vocabulary.

Dimebox trotted up behind her. Ever loyal to her for rescuing him from the pound, he guarded his mistress and faithfully brought her presents of mice, small birds, and moles.

She found another one of his grisly gifts this morning on the back porch.

Well, like her father always said, it was the thought that counted.