

# PROLOGUE

*Friday, September 2, 2016*

"She's here."

"Where?"

"She and Shannon are across the street, sharing an ice cream cone. There are benches along the boardwalk."

Neal Everly adjusted his sunglasses. He continued to speak softly, even though there was plenty of cover noise in the coffee shop. It was a good spot. Traffic wasn't heavy and he could keep an eye on them without being seen.

"They're sharing," he added, smiling.

Shannon loved chocolate. So did her mom.

"I mean what town, Neal."

He knew what his boss meant, but right now they looked so happy. Lauren looked good. Hair, sun-streaked, pulled back from her face, tan, relaxed. She was laughing at something Shannon said. He never knew what that cute, dimpled little kid jabbered about, but she kept up a steady stream of excited chatter from her car seat in the back seat all the way home from pre-school every day.

Neal relented.

"Jasper. They're in Jasper, CA", he said.

The moment's hesitation was not lost on his boss.

Garrett knew he'd have to remind Neal who held his leash. One phone call is all it would take.

But at least he found her. For now, he was still useful.

Once he had Lauren and Shannon back home he'd decide what to do about Neal.

When she took off this time, in July, Garrett assumed she'd come home on her own in a few weeks, when she ran out of money or realized he was the best thing in her life, like every other time. Or he'd find her.

But this time, she disappeared into thin air. No credit card receipts, no phone calls, no calls to friends. Not that she had many. But, he knew she couldn't resist calling dear old Mom. Shannon's grandmother. It's the one tie he hadn't been able to break, and she hadn't been able to resist keeping.

Even though Lauren had been intentionally vague with her mom on the phone, saying only that she and Shannon were in a "little artsy town" along the Southern California coast, she'd slipped up. Trying to reassure her mother that she and Shannon were OK, Lauren said she'd taken her daughter to a marine animal center and Shannon had fallen in love with the sea otters. The little girl loved watching a young otter, the star of the show, named Sadie, crack her seafood dinner open with a rock as she floated on her back in the pool.

Yes, she was happy. Everything was OK. This wasn't forever. No, she couldn't tell her exactly where they were, but she'd find a way to call her again soon. Maybe even FaceTime.

Thrilled down to his marrow, Garrett listened to every damning word. He'd been bugging grandma's phone. Stupid bitch. Lauren - still tied to her mama instead of her husband. What had her mother done for her? He'd given her everything, and she didn't appreciate it.

He had her now.

It didn't take him long to figure out that there were only three Southern California towns with sea otter exhibits. Long Beach and San Diego had sea otter exhibits within larger aquariums, but didn't qualify as small towns. Jasper, CA, however, fit the bill. It was small. It was artsy. And it had a Sea Otter Center of its very own.

"She see you?"

"No."

"Good. Keep it that way. She driving the same car?"

"Yeah, I can see it from here. The Corolla. It's parked out front, about a block away."

"Piece of crap. I gave her a brand new GLC and she's driving that. Did you get the tracker on?"

"Not yet. Too many people around. Labor Day weekend coming up."

"Well, when do you think that might *happen*, Neal?"

"Tonight, once it gets dark and things quiet down. There's enough holiday traffic and tourists around. I should be able to follow them then. If she lives in town, it'll be easy. If

she's staying someplace more remote, it will be tougher – fewer cars on the road. She'll recognize the Volvo if she sees it."

He didn't mention the hair. Garrett hated short hair on women. He'd blow a gasket when he saw her. She was in enough trouble already.

Neal waited as instructed. He almost wished Lauren would see him, and get away, but he did his job. Garrett owned him. Garrett hired him when no one else would. And he could send him back at any time. All he had to do was call up his PO and tell him Neal was out of state.

But this was the last job he'd do for him. He'd find a way. He only had ten days left on his parole.

Keeping one eye on his quarry, Neal got up and paid his bill. Lauren was a big girl. She should have left Garrett years ago.

"Do you want me to call you?" he asked.

Silence filled the line for a few more seconds, then, as if storm clouds had blown over, Garrett wrapped up the call.

"I'll call you. Have your phone on around 11:00 o'clock. That give you enough time?"

"Yeah. She has to get Shannon to bed early, right?" Neal said.

"She should. But who knows what she's doing now. And when I call, I want to hear you got that tracker on that junk heap she's driving my daughter in, OK, Neal?"

"This is important," Garrett added.

Neal sighed internally. As if he didn't know.

Waiting until Lauren and Shannon started walking back to their car, Neal left the coffee shop and got into the Volvo. It was a tank. Garrett got it specifically for him to ferry Lauren and Shannon around in, supposedly to keep them safe, but after a week or so of being their driver, he realized his main job was to keep tabs on the boss's wife.

The engine started right up. Might as well get this over with.

Tossing his phone back on his desk, Garrett Delaney leaned back in his chair, squeezing his eyes shut. Opening them, he scanned the opposite wall, not really seeing the muted, grey wallpaper or the brushed steel sculpture in the corner, blazing orange in the slanting rays of a late, Seattle summer sun.

He reached inside his desk drawer, deftly removing a small, round, white tablet from the blister pack stored there, downing it with the leftover coffee in his mug.

Double shot.

He flicked the drawer shut.

Taking a deep breath, he swiveled his chair around to look out the window at Elliot Bay. Steepling his long fingers, he thought about next steps. The Adderall helped him focus.

He found her. He always did. It was only a matter of time, of course. She always gave in or ran out of money, but this time, she almost made it. This time it had been very inconvenient, and expensive to locate his own wife. That would not happen again.

Once Neal secured the tracker, he'd have him lay low and monitor their movements until he could get there. He couldn't risk Lauren spotting her former driver and getting spooked. Although, with the electronics in place, at least he could find her easily if she sensed something was up. *If* Neal got the damn thing on tonight.

His Ferragamo clad foot shot out and kicked the wall. This was not a good time. He needed to be here, not a thousand miles away in some little tourist town in Southern California, fetching an ungrateful wife. He had business to take care of. Things were happening fast, and not in his favor.

Even if he could borrow Steve's Cessna the trip would probably eat up at least four days. Four days lost. A friend from college, Steve was the one who talked him into getting his pilot's license five years ago. And if he took the Cessna down, he wouldn't even have to rent a car when he got there. Steve's wife was from Oceanside; he always had an extra vehicle or two stored with one of the small FBOs, Fixed Based Operators, at Carlsbad Airport nearby. He checked on Google maps. Carlsbad was about an hour south of Jasper, CA.

Doable.

Garrett combed his fingers through the tight, black waves he gelled into submission every morning, tugging hard at the roots until it started to hurt. For some reason, this helped.

Why did Lauren have to do this to him now? She was so selfish!

He had to hand it to her, she'd made it pretty far this time. He'd take her back, but she wasn't going to like the new rules. He might have to hire two Neals.

A young woman with smooth, honey blonde hair, secured at the nape of her neck with a large barrette, knocked lightly, opening the door a few inches. Sheaf of papers in hand, she peered around the door and raised her eyebrows for permission to enter.

Garrett swung his chair back around and leaned forward, arranging his face around a laser-whitened smile.

Pale blue-grey eyes pierced her soft, brown ones.

"Hello, Gorgeous!" he said, hands folded in front of him on the desk. He had all the time in the world.

"Hi, Mr. Delaney, sorry to bother you again," she said.

It had been a busy day. The phone hadn't stopped ringing. One of Mr. Delaney's clients had been particularly insistent. Didn't they realize he had more than one client? How was he supposed to get any work done if they kept badgering him to see how their money was doing?

She entered and placed the papers on his desk, indicating the precisely placed, yellow tabs on the edge of each page requiring his signature.

"The mail guy comes at 4:00 o'clock now, Mr. Delany, instead of 4:30 p.m. If you want these to go out today I can come back to pick them up in a few minutes, or I could drop them off on my way home," she told him.

"Not necessary, Patricia, you work too hard already. Here," he said, pulling the papers towards him, "I'll take care of these now."

Patricia watched as he skimmed the documents and signed in the designated places quickly and efficiently. She loved the way his gold pen flashed in the light, and his shirt sleeves rolled back several times at the wrists. He had very sexy forearms. Everything about him was sexy. Clean and sharp. Dark hair against white skin.

'The Black Irish, I am!' He told her one day, with a wink.

An indigo sweater contrasted nicely with his white shirt sporting faint, indigo stripes. The raw silk, blue tie brought out his eyes.

Re-stacking the papers briskly on all sides before handing them back to her and recapping his Mont Blanc pen, he looked up, flashing her another brilliant smile.

"Signed, sealed, delivered!"

*...I'm yours!*

Mr. Delaney was so nice, taking time to take care of these so she wouldn't have to make an extra stop on the way home. They just didn't make men like him anymore. He remembered everyone's birthdays and even sent her mother a card when she was sick last year. His wife was a lucky woman.

"Thanks, Mr. Delaney!" she said, hurrying back to her desk to get them in the envelope she already addressed and stamped.

Garrett watched his assistant's attractive backside move from side to side as she walked away, keeping the smile plastered on his face until the door closed behind her.

Why do they insist on being called administrative assistants? They're secretaries.

Dismissing both secretaries and administrative assistants from his mind, he swiveled around to look out his window, pupils dilated, heart slightly racing, capping and recapping his pen.



# 1

*Saturday, September 3, 2016*

*7:30 a.m.*

A small shiver of joy ran up Logan's spine. Bare feet splashing in and out of the incoming tide, she turned up the power, lengthened her stride, and sprinted the last forty yards.

Strong and toned after a summer of beach runs and kayaking, she hadn't felt this good since the car accident that took her husband's life four years ago. It almost took hers, too, but with time and consistent effort, her body, and for the most part, her soul, had healed. She sometimes still reeled from discovering Jack was unfaithful to her for much of their marriage, but kept those feelings pushed to the back of her mind.

When she got to Main Beach, she started her cool down, dragging her feet deliciously through the cool water. Pulling her hair up into a loose knot at the top of her head, she looked out to sea. The Pacific was gentle this morning. Glassy, almost. Glad she got her run in early. The sun was already hot on the back of her neck.

The new life she'd forged for herself was taking root. And it was good. She was luckier than most. After the accident, she sold her and Jack's computer business, bought a fixer-upper, and with a few nudges from her friend, Bonnie, embarked on a career in education. At least, indirectly.

Logan hadn't lasted long as a classroom teacher. But, merging her two passions, math and music, she created an integrated program based on exciting developments in brain research. Put simply, the program not only helped build students' neural pathways and learning capacity, but measurably increased retention across all subject areas.

The best part, as far as Logan was concerned, was that it verified what she knew in her gut. Kids learn more when they're having fun and allowed to flex their creative muscles. The kids dubbed the new program Fractals.

Originally funded mainly by a generous octogenarian donor, Mrs. Houser, who passed away last year, Fractals was saved from an untimely demise by the efforts and connections of Rita Wolfe, principal of the New School up near Portland, Oregon.

In return for Logan bringing her program up to Oregon, which required being on campus two or three times a school year, Rita arranged for the continued collaboration and support of Huey Le, her technology guru. He flew down to attend the CUE (Computer Users in Education) conference in March with Logan, and their latest project was integrating music mapping software into the program.

Logan felt lucky to be working with Huey. She trusted his intelligence, skill and character. They met a couple of years ago, on her first trip to see the New School. When his sister's Vietnamese food truck was blown up right outside Logan's downtown Portland hotel window, killing her mother-in-law, Huey asked for Logan's help. Through the course of the investigation, the three of them had become good friends.

His sister had just reopened her food truck restaurant, Thanh's Pho. Just the thought of the fragrant and filling, Vietnamese rice noodle soup, pho, made Logan's mouth water. She hadn't had breakfast yet.

Luckily, Tava'e's was on the way home.

Motivated by the thought of one of Jean, Tava'e's husband's, gigantic cinnamon rolls and strong, hot coffee, Logan hiked up the beach and across the sandy scrap of lawn separating the boardwalk from PCH, the Pacific Coast Highway. There was hardly any traffic this early, so she jaywalked at the corner without waiting for the light. What Rick didn't know wouldn't hurt him. Her little brother was a cop in town.

Nodding to one of the regulars anchoring the bench, soaking up the morning sun, Logan opened the door and went inside. Immediately enveloped by the rich aromas of cinnamon and freshly roasted beans, she couldn't help but smile. Life was good.

Tava'e, the owner, was holding court in her booth in the back. Usually, the large, Samoan woman greeted Logan with a booming "Talofa!" and a huge hug, but today her attention was on the chess board in front of her and the move her opponent just made. Logan didn't recognize the newcomer. Maybe Jasper's reigning chess queen finally found someone who could give her a good game. All the better, because no one else could. Tava'e had given her lessons, but Logan was a novice, and knew in all likelihood she would remain so.

After a satisfying infusion of sugar and caffeine, providing absolutely no essential vitamins or minerals, Logan waved in Tava'e's direction, exited the coffee shop, and started home. Her 1940s beach bungalow was just a few houses up the hill. Nicknamed by the locals due to its murderous effect on manual transmissions, Killer Hill rose at a sharp 45 degree angle. On a full stomach, it felt more like 180 degrees.

Almost there.

Up ahead, Lola, her 68 Corvette, lolled in the shade like a southern belle, on the short, gravel drive between her house and the converted studio/garage. Logan reminded herself she needed to take her into Mr. Delgado for a tuneup and wax. The salt air was murder on Lola's complexion.

Just before she turned in, movement at the window of the last house on her right, caught Logan's eye. A little girl, about 3 years old, waved furiously at her, jumping up and down on what must have been a chair underneath the open living room window. Her head was haloed by bouncing, dark curls.

"Hi!" she trilled.

Logan returned the little girl's wave.

"Hi, yourself!" she said, smiling back.

A young woman, presumably the mother, materialized at the little girl's side. Without looking at Logan, scooped her daughter up and said something about "Not bothering the nice lady" then closed the window.

Logan wasn't bothered, but neither did she want to intrude. Maybe the woman didn't think she liked children. Her new neighbors moved in a couple of weeks ago, but Logan still hadn't made it over to say hello. She'd have to remedy that.

Tomorrow, she'd put on her welcome wagon hat. She couldn't bake, but she could bring over a goodie bag from Tava'e's. No one could turn down one of Jean's cinnamon rolls. It's how she and Ben met when she was the new kid on the block.

Time to pay it forward.