

WHISPER CREEK

A LOGAN MCKENNA NOVEL

VALERIE DAVISSON

*To John,
True blue, smart, and loving, my rock in swirling waters.
You're my Ben, honey!*

Prologue

A light rain misted the highway. The tires hummed.
Alignment, need to get that checked.

But not tonight. Tonight, tire alignment was way down the list of priorities or concerns. And after tonight, such worries would be swept away. Almost there.

Twenty minutes later, a great horned owl, perched high above Whisper Creek, hunched against the slanting rain, taking it all in. The parking lot, the school, the gardens beyond. Large, yellow eyes tracked the solitary figure skirting around the edge of the dining hall, hidden by the shadows of western red cedars and pines.

Family was supposed to show up for the talent show by five. Leaving work early to get here on time could have been tricky, but it wasn't a problem. Most everyone left by two on Fridays anyway.

A frisson of energy and hope shot through the driver's body, ending with a tingling at the fingertips. Soon. Very soon. Freedom was within reach now. Tonight, the bitch would die—and not a nanosecond too soon.

No rush, though. No reason not to enjoy the evening. Parents

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and faculty were arriving. Gravel crunched, warm, golden light exuded from the dining hall's open doors, welcoming everyone. Cheerful chatter floated out into the forest. A staff talent show. What a great way to kick off the year—and a great cover for whatever sounds might otherwise break through.

Ahh . . . there she was. Stepping out of her Lexus. All red stiletto heels, form-fitting suit, and that waterfall of perfectly smooth, blonde hair.

Bitch.

She had no idea these steps, these last few hours of flirting and manipulating and controlling were her last. All her conniving would end. Tonight. In just a few hours, they'd all be free. She just had to be coaxed to leave the company of other humans and venture into the night. Into the dark. Where she belonged.

That wouldn't be difficult. Not when you knew her. Not when you knew all she wanted was whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted it—*her* needs met, no matter how many people she hurt. The woman was nothing if not predictable.

Almost an hour later, night fell and the rain softened to a drizzle. Landing silently on a thin branch high in the trees, the owl neatly dispatched a small vole by swallowing it head-first. This was his third foray over the field. The gibbous moon made for a productive night.

On the ground, far below, another nocturnal predator pulled out a phone. Twenty-two keystrokes later, it was done. A slow smile stretched across a satisfied face.

Sure enough, the woman almost immediately emerged from the dining hall, slipping out quietly, golden light and strains of classical guitar music and applause trailing behind her until the door clicked shut.

Head down, intent on her phone, she trotted down the stairs, tapping on her screen as she went. When she reached

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the garden, she strode into the night, until all that could be seen were the backs of her blood red heels, her pale, yellow hair lit ghostly white.

The owl ignored her. Not for him to interrupt another predator's hunt.

And in the dark, the woman neither saw nor heard the figure that followed, nor the soft, murmured warnings of Whisper Creek.

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For most of the afternoon, a muted rain fell, leaving behind a freshly washed, pearl-gray sky from which emerged the ghostly trunks and branches of evergreens and alders. Now and then, a few lingering raindrops answered the call of gravity, rolling to the end of a graceful cedar's fingertips, creating a symphony of singular notes as they plopped heavily onto different surfaces—the solid, wooden deck, the soft, dark soil in the planter boxes, or the conical, metal hat of the space heater that made sitting outside in January possible.

Listening to the varying notes, Logan stepped out onto the deck. C-E-G-A-flat? She made a mental note. She'd pick her violin, Bella, up later and see if it fit with the new piece she'd been working on. She always did her best composing at night.

For now, she just wanted to be.

The kids came up for the holidays and loved all the work she and Ben had done on the house since they had bought it as a vacation home last year. Everyone had just left. She missed them all already, but it was nice to have some time alone before flying back home to SoCal. Actually, she was beginning to think of this place as much like home as her beach house

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in Jasper.

Before sitting down on one of the deck chairs, Logan tapped the thermometer Ben had mounted just outside the sliding glass doors before he left. Forty and rapidly falling. The weather channel said it might dip below freezing tonight. Perfect as far as Logan was concerned.

Born a Southern Californian, she was surprised at how quickly her body had acclimated to the cooler climate here on the Oregon coast. She zipped up her jacket, adjusted the flame on the heater, and snuggled into her favorite chair, a sturdy teak number that sloughed off the rain with ease. Tonight, it was dry due to the overhang Ben had installed over the deck. It allowed them to stay out of the rain while still leaving the sides open to let in the fresh air.

Although she loved the view of the ocean down and across the highway from the front of the house, Logan found herself more often drawn to the back deck, immersing herself in the calming company of the trees. Her whole life she'd been rushing—raising Amy, running the business with Jack, then, after the car accident, picking up the remnants of her life, rebuilding, and creating and running her seminal Music/Math program, Fractals.

She'd pulled Bella out from the back of her closet and had been rediscovering her music, learning to love and trust again. In just the last three years, her fairly simple life had expanded to include not only a significant other, a son-in-law, a grandson, the mother she'd been estranged from for most of her life, but also a half-sister she didn't know she had. It was all good, but a little overwhelming at times.

Almost completely dark now, Logan could only see a few feet into the forest. The house, built on the eastern edge of the small coastal town of Depoe Bay, Oregon, backed onto a large tract of forestry land extending she didn't know how many

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miles east. She just knew it was a selling point for her. She liked quiet and didn't want to live in cheek-and-jowl suburbia or watch anyone brushing their teeth in the morning across ten inches of manicured lawn.

As the space heater softly hissed and occasionally crackled beside her, the trees became silhouettes in varying shades of charcoal and ash. Cedar boughs nodded sleepily—the whole scene fading slowly into a watercolor wash in gradients from slate gray to obsidian.

Just as her eyelids began to lower to half mast, a distinctive shape in the gloaming caught Logan's attention. Leaning forward, she peered into the forest. High in an alder, perched absolutely still on a slender branch, sat what must be an owl. But it wasn't like any owl Logan had ever seen. For one thing, it was huge! And no ear tufts. Just a very rounded head—like a Russian nesting doll. But in every other way, it sure looked like an owl. She watched it sitting there, in perfect possession of itself and its realm, wondering how the weight of so large a bird could be supported by the spindly branches in the uppermost reaches of the tree.

Moving her arm as quietly as she could, she reached for her phone and looked up 'Oregon owls,' then 'large owls on the central Oregon coast.' Too many results. When she added 'mixed conifer forest' to her search request, Google presented her with a couple of possibilities, including the snowy owl and the great horned owl, but that one had prominent ear tufts sticking up. She looked up again to see if she'd missed them somehow, but it was gone. The dark cutout where the shape had been was again a smooth and empty space—as if she'd only imagined its visit.

The phone she'd forgotten on her lap rang in her hand. She almost dropped it but managed to keep it from clattering onto the deck just in time. She glanced at the screen to see who was

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calling. It was Bonnie, her best friend from home.

“Hi, Bonnie.”

Logan always enjoyed catching up on all things Jasper. Bonnie knew everything and everybody and wasn't afraid to share.

“Logan! Are you sitting down?? Do you have your phone? Of course, you do . . . arrrgghhhh! Go to YouTube! Right now!”

She'd never heard her bubbly friend this excited, and that was saying something. Bonnie was always gushing about something.

“Okay, okay,” Logan said, pulling up the internet on her phone. “What am I looking for?”

“*You!* Your video's gone viral!”

“What video?”

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“**Y***our* video,” Bonnie shouted into the phone. “You have your own channel!”

“My own channel?” Logan said.

She felt stupid just repeating everything Bonnie said, but she had no idea what she was talking about.

“Just go to YouTube and type in ‘Logan’s Laments,’” she said, “You’re huge!”

With some measure of disbelief, Logan did as instructed. What she saw left her speechless.

As an extension of her Fractals program, she’d done some recording with a couple of her high school students off and on last summer, and often sat in with some friends of hers in her old bluegrass band, but . . . she couldn’t imagine any of that being on YouTube, and she certainly would know if she had a YouTube channel, but there it was. Larger than life.

“Oh, my God!” Logan said.

“Well, I don’t think God did this, but whoever did, did a damn good job!” Bonnie laughed.

Logan watched in shock as the professionally-produced video rolled, rotating through several different backgrounds

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and songs, some she recognized, others she'd never seen before. In the first song, a sweeping, overhead shot looked like she was playing on top of a wild, windswept hill in the Scottish Highlands, fields of heather unrolling at her feet. In another, a plaintive lullaby she'd played for Amy when she was a baby—the only one she'd go to sleep to—was more intimate. Somehow, a camera was positioned looking over her left shoulder from the back. Soft light glinted off Logan's lush, copper waves and Bella's golden finish as she played, pulling the rich, rounded notes from the violin, letting the music flow across the room.

On hearing the first notes and seeing the sleeping infant under the soft, pink blanket—where they found footage of a sleeping baby girl she had no idea—a surge of emotion welled up in Logan's chest, bringing tears to her eyes and a flood of memories of Amy as a baby. Amy was twenty-six now, with a child of her own—Ian, Logan's grandson.

Logan tried to place where and how these songs could have been recorded. She remembered several sessions where they used her new arrangements of these traditional ballads and lullabies. They'd even recorded a few of her original pieces she'd written when she began composing again and some of her student, Brandon's, too.

Often, when they'd finished in the studio for the day, even though the sound couldn't be controlled as well, they hauled the equipment up onto the roof of her house, which was located just a few yards away. Ben had converted her single-car, free standing garage into a studio and built a second story for her office so she could work from home when she wasn't visiting the schools.

"Wow," Logan said, her brain quickly compiling this new information. "Looks like someone pieced together different recordings, cleaned them up, put in some new backgrounds,

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and voila! But why? And who would want to take the time to do all this?”

“Your students,” Bonnie said. “It has to be! Brandon’s dad does all that video stuff. He could get his hands on the mixing equipment or video editing or whatever you call it.”

Logan couldn’t think of anyone else, either. She’d have to give Brandon a call. If he was capable of doing this level of work, he sure as hell didn’t need her tutoring anymore. And while it was flattering, the why of it still nagged. She looked at the time. It was a school night and Brandon’s folks were pretty strict. They always let him hit the beach in the morning before school—Brandon and his brothers were die-hard surfers—but all the kids were home hitting the books at night.

“I’ll call you back,” Logan said.

“Okay.”

Out of respect for his parents, Logan always called their land-line. Brandon’s mom caught Logan up on small talk, then before calling her son to the phone, she added, “We’re just proud as punch about the video. Brandon made us all keep it a secret! Let me go get him.”

“Brandon! Ms. McKenna’s on the phone!” she said.

“We only put it up a couple of weeks ago,” Brandon bubbled when he came on the line. “We were going to wait until it did something to let you know. Isn’t it awesome?! You’ve got over 2 million views already! Someone in South Korea found it and when it hit Germany . . . it just exploded!”

After reassuring Brandon that she was suitably impressed and genuinely in awe of his technical and creative abilities, she asked her question, “But why? Don’t get me wrong, I think it’s great, but whatever possessed you to do this?”

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“Well, it just kind of snowballed. Remember the song you wrote for Jeff?”

Several years ago, a talented young teenager in the Fractals program—and Brandon’s best friend—lost his life trying to defend Amy from a desperate killer.

“Jeff. I started out wanting to do a great version of Jeff’s song—you know, the one you wrote and played at his memorial,” he said. “And then, my dad saw all the other clips we had and said we needed to put something together to get those out there.”

“I don’t know what to say, Brandon,” she said, still trying to process everything.

“And it wasn’t all unselfish,” he added, “I used this whole album as part of my portfolio. They wanted to see recent work. I applied to Berkeley and I just got my letter! I’m in!”

“That’s wonderful, Brandon!” Logan said, “I’m so happy for you! Your mom must be over the moon!”

Brandon’s mom was a Berkeley graduate and a musician in her own right. She still taught harp lessons in her living room and had the back and arm muscles to prove it. She had to do special chest exercises to keep the front and back of her body balanced.

“Oh, and it’s not just about getting a lot of fans,” Brandon said, “it’s about making money. The first day it caught on, you got over a 150 million views!”

“What does that mean?” Logan asked.

Launching into a rambling explanation of how many thousands of fans you need to monetize your creative work, kinds of viewership, clicks, subscriptions, ads, and more . . . Sensing he was losing his audience, Brandon summed it up, “A LOT! Ms. McKenna . . . a LOT!”