

The Ransom

Port Chatham, Washington

June 6, 1890

Her satin shoes left damning footprints in the pearlescent dew on the moonlit garden path. The herb beds she fled past announced their presence in cloying waves—the spice of mint here, the pungency of rosemary there. Under the spreading branches of a magnolia tree, she paused, trembling, and glanced over her shoulder. Shadows danced on the breeze, chasing a shower of blossoms across the empty garden.

He hadn't followed her.

Before long, though, she'd be missed. And once Seavey discovered her absence, he'd hunt her down. No one would stop him, she realized bitterly—he was above the law.

I mustn't think about that now. I'm Charlotte's only hope.

Taking a deep breath, she slipped through the hedge at the back of the garden and crossed to the street, walking rapidly toward the bluff.

An onshore wind flattened the waves on Admiralty Inlet, blowing the clouds from the sky and chilling her soul. On any other evening, she could've counted on Port Chatham's mercurial weather to camouflage her escape. But not tonight.

Beneath the brilliance of the stars, the town's waterfront stretched below her. A dozen schooners anchored in the harbor, rocking gently on a sea of silver, rigging draped from their masts like black filigree. Once upon a time, the stately ships had called out to her, whispering of romance and adventure. Now, she couldn't stand to look at them.

She turned right at the next corner, breaking into a run before forcing herself to drop back to a more sedate pace. *I must act natural. I must look as if I haven't a care in the world.*

Her neighbors' cottages stood dark and silent behind picket fences and tidy gardens, their owners still in attendance at the soirée. Though she was more than a block away, she could hear the laughter and music spilling from the Canby mansion, the syncopated rhythms of Scott Joplin's ragtime pulsing along her raw nerves.

For the other guests, the party had been an opportunity to share an evening with Port Chatham's social elite, its powerful politicians and businessmen. But for her, the dinner had turned into an agonizing game of nerves, each course of rich food an obstacle to overcome. And Seavey had relished in her discomfort, leaning back with savage grace in his chair, his pale gray eyes watching her swallow her terror with every bite of salmon in dill sauce, every spoonful of



Floating Island Meringue.

God *damn* his soul. Had his men beaten Charlotte, or worse? Was Charlotte lying right this moment, bound and gagged, in the filth and pitch-black terrors of the tunnels?

Reaching into the hidden pocket she'd sewn into her skirt, she clutched the roll of money. She couldn't let her imagination run wild with possibilities—she knew what she had to do.

At the top of the bluff, she stepped onto the footbridge that would take her down to the waterfront, treading carefully on dew-slick wood. The wind howled, buffeting the trestle. A gust tore at the silk skirts of her evening gown as if it were trying to drag her back from an unknown precipice. *Drunken sailors and soiled doves are the denizens of the waterfront*, it seemed to scream, *not decent people like you*.

Leaving the footbridge behind, she crossed the two blocks to the bay. She chose the muddy streets over the louder boardwalks that fronted the business establishments, using the faint illumination of the occasional gaslight lantern to light her way.

Honky-tonk and laughter spilled from a saloon, and she avoided the pool of light from its open doors. At the end of the wharf, a six-masted schooner towered over her, armed thugs patrolling its decks to keep the crew from deserting. When a guard stopped and stared down at her, shifting his rifle, she quickened her pace.

She darted past abandoned buildings charred by fire, all too aware she was most exposed in this recently leveled stretch of waterfront. The stench of scorched wood and damp ash assaulted her, forcing her to breathe through her mouth. The tragedy marked the beginning of her nightmare, she realized. *If only I'd stayed home that night*.

The odor of brackish saltwater was stronger now. Out on the bay, the oars of an unseen Whitehall slapped the water rhythmically. She could make out dark, prone forms on the beach, revelers blinded or passed out from one too many glasses of the corn liquor served by saloons and houses of ill repute. A shadowy figure moved among them, rifling through pockets. Farther down, two people lay entwined, groping silently and urgently. Heat warmed her cheeks, and she averted her gaze.

Turning away from the water, she slipped past a deserted City Hall, clinging to the buildings' shadows. When a group of sailors approached, shouting and staggering, she ducked into the alley. Catching a glimpse of their faces in the moonlight, she had to stop herself from gasping. They were so young, their faces still unlined in the innocence of youth. Just boys, perhaps thrilled to taste their first hint of danger, heedless of the perils.

A shoe scraped on gravel, and she whirled, peering into the darkness. Had Seavey followed her after all? Had he tracked her down like an animal, intending to corner her in the darkened alley? Oh, how he'd like that. She'd seen it in his eyes every time he'd looked at her. She was his prey—she'd known the moment they'd met.

A shadow shifted.

She leapt across the alley, into the pool of green light at the rear entrance of Port Chatham's most infamous house of ill repute. Her pursuer's footsteps quickened until he was directly behind her.

Raising her fists, Hattie Longren pounded on the door, her screams rending the hushed violence of the night.

Chapter 1

Port Chatham, Washington

June, Present Day

Jordan Marsh stood in the middle of the street, staring aghast at her new home. Across twelve feet of uneven pavement and a weed-choked patch of lawn sat Longren House, the nineteenth century Queen Anne she'd bought on what could only be described as—though she normally tried to avoid the term—an *insane* whim.

Crisp air, washed clean from last night's rain, brought into sharp relief decorative tracery hanging askew from the domed turret. Bright sun highlighted chunks of paint peeling from the columns of the wraparound porch that—she tilted her head—sagged. Behind a railing missing every third baluster, a broken swing had been shoved against the front bay window, which sported an ugly crack running diagonally its entire length.

Holy God. I don't even own a hammer.

While she'd been going through the inevitable hassles of closing down her therapy practice in Los Angeles and packing to move, Longren House had been a daily reminder of the new life she'd planned for herself. A simpler, quieter life—an antidote to the hell she'd lived through for the last year. A fantasy of peaceful, solitary days spent wallpapering a few rooms, perhaps rehanging the porch swing she'd always dreamed of owning.

What on earth had she been thinking? That watching a few reruns of *This Old House* qualified her to handle a historic home remodel?

She counted the faded colors gracing the exterior, punctuating each numeral with a fingertip pointed midair at a section of siding, or what was left of it. "Thirteen goddamn colors of paint!" Just the thought of matching such a color scheme in modern paints had her light-headed.

A huge, shaggy dog lying in front of the door raised its head and grinned at her, tail thumping, looking for all the world as if it belonged there. And for a brief moment, she could envision the house as she'd dreamed it would look after it was refurbished. "Like a real home," she murmured. "With a front porch swing for visiting neighbors and a friendly dog."

A door slammed down the block, and a dark-haired man wearing a cable-knit sweater and jeans jogged down the front steps of the house on the corner. Zeroing in on the tray of coffee cups he balanced in one hand, she remembered that in her haste to hit the road that morning, she hadn't stopped for her requisite morning cup.

LOCAL MAN ASSAULTED BY CAFFEINE-DEPRIVED LUNATIC

If she gave into impulse, that's what tomorrow morning's newspaper headlines would read. Not, she reminded herself firmly, that she was a person who typically gave in to impulses.

Caffeinated beverages notwithstanding, though, he looked...interesting. Broad shoulders, and a confident, ground-eating stride. Definitely...

She gave herself a shake. Nope. Gazing was *not* in the cards. According to her Four Point Plan for Personal Renewal, gazing was on hold for at least six months. Then she could *look but not touch* for another six. She'd laid it all out, written

it all down. She had a plan, and she was sticking to it. Remodel first.

As soon as she bought a hammer. And a paintbrush or three.

She forced her attention back to her house. Leaning forward on her toes, she squinted to see whether lack of focus improved it. The driver of an approaching car tapped its horn, evidently afraid she would fling herself into its oncoming path.

The idea had merit.

Okay, so the house needed a little work. But she'd fallen in love with that crazy witch's cap perched atop the turret, the arched entryway and the gingerbread trim, the utter *wackiness* of its architecture. She didn't care whether it tumbled down around her—for the first time in her life, she had a real home.

Complete with a dog, it seemed.

"Nice bones."

Her head whipped around. Her new neighbor stood just a few feet away.

He gestured with the tray. "The house," he clarified in a deep baritone, smiling slightly, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "One of the few examples of stick-built Queen Anne architecture left standing in Port Chatham. She's a real beauty, isn't she?"

Jordan frowned. Even with the aid of fuzzy focus, the house wasn't yet close to a "beauty." But hey, maybe he was an architect who recognized potential.

The aroma of fresh-roasted coffee and steamed milk wafted over her, and her eyes crossed.

"Can I ask what your interest is in her?" he asked.

"What? Oh." Jordan cleared her throat. "I bought her."

"Ah." He looked squarely at Jordan, not concealing his curiosity. Up close, his face was rugged and lived-in...and appealing. "You must be the psychologist from Los Angeles."

Her surprise must have shown on her face.

"Sorry." He shrugged, smiling sheepishly. "Small towns and all that." He extended a hand. "Jase Cunningham."

"Jordan Marsh." His grip was warm and firm.

"So you'll be setting up shop here in town?"

"No, at least, not right away." Perhaps not ever, though she wasn't admitting that yet, even to herself. "I'm taking a year off to work on the house."

"You're planning to fix her up?"

She nodded.

"Good."

"I need to buy a hammer," she blurted out.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "The purchase of a hammer is a symbolic act. It's not to be taken lightly."

She narrowed her gaze. Okay, scratch *architect*. Maybe he was one of those artisans who worked on historic homes. Maybe he had a lot of hammers. Maybe he named them.

He came to some kind of conclusion with a nod. "Talk to Ed at Renovation Hardware out on the highway, and tell him I sent you. He'll get you set up properly."

"Um, thanks."

He pried one of the cups from its holder and handed it to her. She clutched it with both hands, giving him a look of such profound gratitude that he grinned. "You seem a little shell-shocked—it's the least I can do. Welcome to the

neighborhood.”

“Thanks again.”

He waved a hand as he started down the street.

“Hey,” she yelled, and he turned back, raising an eyebrow. “Do you know who owns the dog?”

“Nope. Never seen him before.”

Jordan watched for a moment longer, then shook her head. *Four Point Plan for Personal Renewal*. Time to unpack her BlackBerry and review the salient points.

As she walked over to her Toyota Prius, she took a sip of the coffee, which she discovered was an excellent latte. The man obviously knew his java. Shifting the cup to her left hand, she opened the trunk and hauled out her bag.

The hairs on the back of her neck suddenly rose, and she glanced around. The neighborhood of turn-of-the-twentieth-century Victorians seemed unusually deserted for such a fine summer day, the street empty and desolate with its cracked pavement and faded markings. Why weren't more people outside, taking advantage of the fine summer day?

She studied the vacant windows of the surrounding houses, keeping her expression nonchalant. No doubt a neighbor was watching her from inside one of them. After all, this was a small town—people were bound to be curious about the recently widowed psychologist moving to their neighborhood.

From the foliage of the maple tree, a songbird trilled enthusiastically, mocking her uneasiness. Shrugging, she gripped the handle of her bag and rolled it across the uneven lawn, banging it up the front steps.

The dog scrambled to its feet, ears perked. It had the black and tan coloring of a German Shepherd, but its blocky build and thick, shaggy hair reminded her of a much larger breed. Definitely a classic mutt. A very *large* male mutt. She held out her hand for him to sniff.

Setting her bag down, she hunted through her pockets for the key the real estate agent had given her. After several tries, the lock gave with a screech and the beveled glass door swung inward.

She looked down at the dog. “Excuse me.”

He cocked his head.

“Shoo?” She wiggled her fingers, and when that had no effect, she managed to look stern. “Go home!”

He didn't budge.

She sighed. “I absolutely *cannot* get attached to you—someone owns you, I'm sure of it. I'm not letting you inside.”

He barked, and she jumped a foot. Then he trotted into the foyer.

“Right,” she muttered.

She set her bag inside the door, then slowly turned in a semicircle. The carved mahogany staircase that had made her hyperventilate when she'd first laid eyes on it rose in a graceful curve to the second floor, its risers covered by a faded, robin's-egg-blue runner worn through at the front edges. To her right stood the parlor with its bay window looking onto the front porch, to her left, the library that had been the second reason she'd lost her mind and written an obscenely large check.

“God.” She sagged against the arched doorway to the library, staring at the cream-colored area rug. “That may be an Aubusson. Did I even notice that when I was here before?”

Nails clicking on the oak parquet flooring, the dog came to stand next to her, sniffing the stale air. She rubbed his head. “If you pee on that rug,” she warned, “we'll have words. No marking your territory, even if it is the male imperative.”

He looked insulted and returned to lie down by the front door.

The house had the empty silence of disuse, as if it had been waiting far too long for her arrival. She climbed the stairs, brushing cobwebs off the dusty railing. High up in the stairwell, sun shone through a small dormer window, turning the tracks her fingers made a burnished gold. Dust motes spiraled upward, floating on air currents warmed by shafts of sunlight.

She walked into the front bedroom, a giant, dimly lit cavern, the formality of its frescoed ceiling relieved by the cozy window seat in the turret. The room stood empty, its wide-planked floor scratched and bare, and the air was even staler than it had been downstairs.

After three tries, she found a window that wasn't painted shut. Fresh air blew in on a cool breeze, banishing the odors of must and mildew. She'd start cleaning in here first, so that she wouldn't have to put her sleeping bag down in the dust. She'd packed only the essentials for the trip—casual clothes, an espresso maker, books to read. The movers wouldn't be here for another day or two, so she'd be roughing it until then.

Bracing her knee on the worn velvet seat cushion, she gazed down at the street through the leafy boughs of the maple tree. The neighborhood was quiet, filled with quaint, carefully tended houses and mature trees, reminiscent of small-town America from a bygone era. Ryland would have hated this place, she mused, as much as she was drawn to it.

The dog trotted up the stairs but stopped short of coming into the room, watching her hopefully with soft, liquid brown eyes. She straightened, sighing. "You really *do* need to go home."

Walking over to him, she rubbed his head some more, then ran a hand down his back. She could feel every joint of his spine, she realized in horror. Whoever owned him certainly didn't deserve him. "Come on, fella. Let's find you something to eat."

She took the stairs two at a time. Glancing into the library as she walked past, she noted what she estimated to be a few thousand books stacked in random piles and jammed into glass-fronted bookcases. A wingback chair sat in the center of the room, flanked by a rickety pedestal table and a floor lamp with a leaded-glass shade. Across the room, a huge oak desk sat stacked with more books and yellowed newspapers. But it was the French doors on the opposite wall that beckoned.

She held up a hand to the dog. "I'll only be a moment..."

The doors swung open onto a stone patio tangled with weeds. An intoxicatingly sweet scent blew in, and she ventured out a few steps and looked up, trying to locate its source. She gasped. Wisteria covered the entire side of the house; its cascading lilac flowers drowned her in fragrance.

"Oh...*oh!*" She knelt and wrapped her arms around the dog's neck.

In her mind's eye, she could see the garden as it would be when she cleaned it up—overflowing with flowers, bounded by bentwood fencing lush with climbing roses blooming in a riot of pink and white. What she'd felt the first time she'd seen the house had been a serious crush, but this...this was *love*.

"I'll be okay," she sniffed, burying her face in the dog's fur and pushing back the ever-present grief. "We'll be just fine."

"Hello?" The call came from the front hall.

"Coming!" She stood, swiping at tears, and crossed the library. Through the window, she spied a police cruiser parked at the front curb. *Damn*.

A woman stood inside the door, her gaze as sharp as the razor cut of her chin-length ash blond hair. She spied Jordan. "Oh, good. I was afraid Sandy—the real estate agent—had left the door open. You must be the psychologist."

Though dressed casually in pressed jeans and a tailored jacket, she reminded Jordan of a Scandinavian Valkyrie—around six feet tall, she estimated, athletic and imposing as hell. Jordan had had her fill of cops in the last few months, asking questions for which she had no answers, treating her as if she were a criminal.

The Valkyrie thrust out a hand nearly twice the size of her own. “Darcy Moran. Port Chatham chief of police.”

Chief of police. Even worse. Jordan reluctantly introduced herself. “What can I do for you, Chief Moran?”

“Make it Darcy. Stopped by to welcome you to the neighborhood.”

Jordan relaxed marginally. “Thanks.”

Darcy jerked her head toward the front door. “Looks like you could use some help carrying boxes.”

“That’s okay. You don’t—”

She was talking to empty space. The woman was already at the curb, pulling boxes from the trunk of Jordan’s Prius.

Jordan followed at a more leisurely pace. “Slow day?” she asked wryly.

“Waiting for the tourists to wake up and hit the streets.” Darcy shoved a box into her arms, then picked up two more.

“Where do you want these?”

“Um, the kitchen?”

They carried the boxes down the hall to the roomy country kitchen at the back of the house.

“When did you hit town?” Darcy asked over her shoulder as she deposited her boxes on the warped linoleum counter and headed back outside.

Jordan had to trot to keep up. “This morning. I’m a bit overwhelmed.”

“Buyer’s remorse.” Darcy handed her another box. “You’ll get over it.”

“The wisteria’s helping.”

“Yeah, it’s cool. Bit of a pain to keep in check, though.”

It took only two more trips to empty the car. “See?” Darcy dusted off her hands. “Much easier when someone helps.”

Jordan eyed her, trying to catch her breath. “Anyone ever compare you to a human cyclone?”

“I may have heard similar comments a time or two. Got anything to drink?”

Jordan rummaged in the ice chest they’d brought in, coming up with a soda. Then she found a bowl and headed for the sink. Nothing but a hiss of air came out when she turned the faucet handle, so she uncapped a bottle of Evian and poured it into the bowl for the dog. Unwrapping the all-natural chicken breast she’d been saving for a sandwich, she held it out to him. He scarfed it down in one gulp, then looked at her expectantly.

“I’ve been trying to catch up with that dog all week.” Darcy flipped open her cellphone. “Let me put in a call to Animal Control—”

He lowered his head and whined.

“No!”

Darcy paused, her finger poised over the keypad, brows raised.

“He’s mine,” Jordan improvised.

“Uh-huh. Didn’t you say you just drove in this morning?”

“Minor technicality,” she replied brightly. “Why don’t we take our drinks and go sit out front? I’ve always wanted a front stoop to sit on.” Without waiting for an answer, she grabbed Darcy’s soda can, leaving her to follow.

“So what made you decide on Port Chatham?” Darcy asked once they were settled on the porch steps.

“An acquaintance of mine gave me tickets to last year’s jazz concert. A few days in town was all it took to hook me on the idea of moving up here. Are you familiar with the Ted Rawlins Trio?”

Darcy nodded. “Rawlins is the friend? I’ve heard him play—he’s very good. I think he purchased a summer home south of town on the golf course, didn’t he?”

“He comes up every summer, as far as I know.”

“How long are you planning to stay in town? Will Longren House be your vacation home, or your primary residence?”

The police chief was grilling her—and not all that subtly, either. Jordan kept her answers friendly. “I’ll be here at least a year, maybe more, depending on how the remodel goes. And no, I don’t plan to split my time—I’m gone from L.A. for good, I think.” She shrugged. “We’ll see. I want to research the house’s history, plan the remodel right. Got any suggestions on where to start?”

“County. They might even have a copy of the original plans.” Darcy propped an elbow on the top step. “If memory serves, a Captain Charles Longren built the place for his bride, Hattie, in the late 1800s. Hattie didn’t live here all that long, though. There’ve been a number of owners over the years—”

Her cellphone wailed, startling Jordan.

After a brief conversation, Darcy hung up, sighing. “I’ve got to head back to the station.”

“Your phone is programmed for Miles Davis?”

“Of course. We take our jazz seriously around here.” Darcy drained her soda and stood, then studied Jordan for a moment. “So I’m betting you weren’t the one who cut the brake lines on your husband’s Beemer.”

“No, I wasn’t.” Jordan managed to keep her tone matter-of-fact.

Darcy nodded. “Needed to ask.”

“I can give you the name of the detective in L.A. who is handling the case. I’m sure he’ll be glad to fill you in.”

“Not necessary. The LAPD has already been in contact to say you’re part of an ongoing investigation. It got me curious, so I asked a few questions.”

Jordan didn’t respond—over the past few months, she’d learned not to volunteer information.

They walked to the curb, Darcy in the lead. “Listen, why don’t you drop by the pub tonight? I’ll introduce you around.”

“Pub?”

“The neighborhood hangout, over on the main drag. Come to think of it, your buddy Rawlins is slated to perform there tomorrow night. It’s a laid-back place—the food is great and Jase doesn’t water the drinks.”

So he owned a pub. “I met him a bit ago, I think. Dark, wavy hair, killer blue eyes—”

“—and sexy as all hell? Yep, that’s Jase.” She flashed a grin, and Jordan relented, smiling back. “Seeing as how you don’t strike me as a black widow in training,” Darcy added, “I’ll also mention that Jase is unattached.”

Jordan held up a hand like a traffic cop. “Not on the agenda anytime soon.”

“Good thing you’ve adopted a dog to keep you company then.” Darcy opened the door of the police cruiser. “Hey, do you like to hike? I’m always looking for new blood, and there’s a great trek out on Dungeness Spit if we time the tides right.”

Jordan had a sudden vision of being dragged, breathless, along a boulder-strewn promontory. “We’ll see.”

“Wise to be cautious.” Darcy’s grin broadened. “Talk to Jase—he’ll tell you I don’t lose too many of my hiking buddies. Well, just the uncoordinated ones.”

Jordan shook her head, amused in spite of herself. “Thanks for the help unpacking the car.”

“No problem. We tend to do for each other around here. Give it a couple of days and you’ll be buried in food from the various welcoming committees.”

“You live here in the neighborhood?”

“Two streets over—the Gothic Revival in the middle of the block.”

Jordan must have looked perplexed.

“Blue with white trim, clean, symmetrical lines, a couple of Adirondacks on the porch,” Darcy elaborated. “None of those frilly cottage garden flowers. You can’t miss it.”

She started to climb into the driver’s seat, then paused, angling her head to look up at the second floor of Longren House. “So which bedroom are you planning to commandeer?”

“The front one. It’s the largest, and the window seat in the turret is pretty hard to resist.”

“You might want to rethink that if you plan on getting a good night’s sleep.”

“Why?”

“You mean Sandy didn’t tell you?” Darcy shook her head in apparent disgust. “Back around the turn of the last century, Hattie Longren was bludgeoned to death in that very room.”