

CHAPTER ONE (edited extract)

Puget Sound, 2013

It was less than a fifteen-minute trip back to Fairmile by road, the last few miles along a dirt track edged with towering, old-growth Douglas fir and big-leaf maples. Frankie's wipers worked double time to clear the driving rain. Flicking on the radio, tuned to the local station, she caught the end of a news report: the body of an elderly woman found in suspicious circumstances.

The words 'suspicious circumstances' were something of a cover-all: they could mean suspicious as in foul play was involved or, less ominously, medically inexplicable. When she heard the name Pacifica Gardens, however, her knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. Ingrid's nursing home. On the other side of the island.

Frankie briefly considered pulling over, making a call, but common sense told her the likelihood of the phone being answered was slim; it would be quicker to drive there. She scanned the road ahead for a place to turn, then checked the rearview mirror, ignoring the automatic impulse to reach for lights and sirens. Some habits died hard.

Instead, she spun the wheel in a tight arc. The tyres squealed in protest and the truck threatened to fishtail in the wet, but the treads held, and she was travelling in the opposite direction, managing to stay within a hair of the speed limit.

As she drew up at the nursing home, she wasn't surprised to see a cruiser with a six-pointed gold star and the words 'Island County Sheriff' in white letters across its doors. She eased into an empty space between two other vehicles, cracked the back window open for the dog, and cut the engine.

Walking towards the building's entrance, she made herself take the long, calming breaths she was supposed to practise more often, doing her best to ignore the tightness in her chest, the thumping of her heart, an accelerated pace that had begun as soon as she heard the news report.

The island didn't have a local TV crew, which was something to be grateful for, though doubtless several from the city would be on their way before too long. A suspicious death would be a lead item on the nightly news unless something considerably more dramatic took its place.

A young woman—a girl really—with stringy blonde hair and pale skin was hunched on a low wall, sheltered from the rain by the building's eaves, pulling hard on a cigarette. She didn't look up as Frankie strode past.

Frankie made it through the front door before she was stopped.

'No visitors today I'm afraid.' June, the receptionist, was an abrasively cheerful woman who enjoyed wielding her tiny measure of power with more relish than was strictly necessary. 'I'm not supposed to let anyone in.' She turned towards the sounds of muffled voices that were coming from the end of the corridor and Frankie strained her ears, hearing the click and electronic whirr of a camera shutter. 'Perhaps try again tomorrow . . .'

'But ... ?'

June smiled patronisingly. 'Ingrid had a good night, and she's perfectly fine.'

The tightness in Frankie's chest released, like a rubber band that had been held taut for too long, and for the first time since the radio report she felt able to take a normal breath. It wasn't likely that her grandmother would have been the victim, but her imagination had gone into overdrive nonetheless.

June seemed as if she wanted to say more but was silenced by the arrival of a harried-looking man in an expensively cut dark suit clutching a folder to his chest. His hair was combed back in two slick wings, and Frankie noticed a tiny bead of blood on his chin where a razor had cut too close.

Frankie had made at least a dozen visits to the home in the short time since she'd arrived on the island and was on nodding terms with nearly all the staff, but she had never seen this man before, she was sure of it.

June knew him though, for she straightened, fussing nervously with the papers in front of her. 'Good morning, sir.'

The man muttered an indistinct greeting, went around the front desk, and leaned towards June, whispering something in her ear.

He paid little attention to Frankie, and she took advantage of their distraction to check the corridor, craning her neck. She saw a tall shape in a doorway, someone wearing hooded Tyvek coveralls.

Anywhere else and the place would have been in lockdown, guards posted to keep visitors out, but this was an island so sleepy that in the off season it was practically comatose, so she doubted whether they'd even heard of such a thing. She'd guess that cops here dealt with loud parties, acts of vandalism, traffic violations, domestic disputes. Very occasionally homicide. Rarely, if ever, murder.

The single-storey building huddled in the lee of a steep hill, with the better rooms looking across lush lawns that led to the ocean. It was laid out in an elongated H-shape and housed thirty-five residents, all in varying degrees of mental and physical disability, bodies and minds worn out by long or hard lives, often both.

Everyone who lived at Pacifica Gardens had their own room and small private bathroom, equipped with handrails and shower chairs, though some needed help using them. Each had a mechanised single bed and a high-backed easy chair in their room, a dresser on which to display a lifetime's worth of memories and store their now diminished possessions. The paintwork was fresh, the carpet (although a bilious, institutional colour that made Frankie think of split pea soup) new, and the staff were kind, from what Frankie had seen on her previous visits at least. Still, there was no disguising the smell of antiseptic and boiled cabbage that pervaded the hallways.

The man opened the door to the back office, and after a second June turned to follow him, as if she'd forgotten to tell him something. Frankie seized her chance, arguing with a conscience that urged her to go to her grandmother's room. Losing that battle, she turned in the other direction, to where she'd seen the shadowy shape. She reached a kitchenette, a little way along the corridor, unchallenged, and began to make a coffee. It would be her excuse if someone saw her.

No one took any notice of Frankie as she paused before the police tape, cup in hand, steam rising from its surface. The familiar, sickly-sweet smell of death crept towards her, and she held her breath as she scanned the scene. Four people crowded the small room, all in protective suits, one with a camera. A figure knelt at an open briefcase on the floor, neatly ordered sample vials in front of her.

Swabs. Paperwork. Another figure, squarely built, possibly female, was turned towards the window, murmuring into a phone.

Unlike Ingrid's room, which was dotted with family photos in mismatched frames, this one was sparsely accessorised, the only personal items a crucifix that hung over the dresser and a framed illustration of the Virgin Mary on the wall opposite.

Something—call it a sixth sense developed from years of this kind of work—made the hairs on the back of Frankie's neck prickle when she saw the bed. A rumpled nightgown, the mottled skin and spider-veined legs of a very old person.

What looked to be garden twine fastening the woman's wrists to the iron bedstead. Solid proof that it wasn't accidental.

Pretty young girls found in dark alleys or lonely parks and middle-aged women bashed by abusive partners died violently . . . but an elderly woman, in a nursing home? Death was hardly an unusual occurrence in such a place, but not like this.

She stood, one hand on her hip, her favourite posture when she wanted to concentrate. Her other hand gripped the coffee cup, which now had a slight tremor on its surface, ripples on a murky pond. The words 'What the ... ?' began to form on her lips and she had to fight the urge to march in and start asking questions.

'We won't be too much longer, Molly,' one of the men said.

'Good.' The woman's voice was quiet and Frankie had to strain to hear it. She turned, caught Frankie's gaze, and her aquamarine eyes—so bright she might have been wearing coloured contacts—signalled irritation that she should be there.

Frankie retreated, feeling like a ghoulish rubbernecker at the scene of an MVA, and hurried in the other direction. September first. That was the date she'd be official. Until then, she had no business getting involved.