

## Chapter 1: A Widow Arrives In Maine

The red was wrong.

Beth Monroe stood at the edge of the cliff path in the early morning fog and looked down at the rocks and knew, before she knew anything else, that the red was wrong. Victor Hale's jacket — she recognized it from dinner the night before, that aggressive scarlet, the kind of color a man wore when he wanted to be seen, was down on the granite shelf below, one arm outstretched. The way it lay was the way things lay when they were finished.

She had spent thirty-five years in the field. She knew the difference between a bird that had landed and a bird that had fallen.

She stood perfectly still for ten seconds, the fog moving around her in slow gray sheets, the foghorn out in the harbor going about its business, Daisy pressed against her ankle and very quiet. Then she turned and walked back to the inn, calmly, and asked Margaret Alcott to call the police.

She did not run. Running would not help Victor Hale.

What she noticed, and she would think about this later, would turn it over in her mind the way she turned puzzle pieces, was that the path behind her showed no sign of a stumble, no scrape of shoe leather on granite, none of the small panicked evidence a man leaves when he goes over a ledge by accident. The rocks were wet with fog. The path was narrow. An accidental fall was entirely plausible.

Almost entirely.

### **Two days earlier.**

She had been talking to the dog on the drive up from Connecticut. She was aware this was not ideal.

"Dr. Abramowitz says it will be good for me," she told Daisy, who was standing on the backseat with her chin on the center console, nose working the air from the cracked window.

"Two weeks. Fresh air. Change of scenery. She said, and I'm quoting here, 'Go somewhere, Beth. Just be somewhere else for a while.'"

Daisy offered no opinion on Dr. Abramowitz.

"She didn't specify Maine. I specified Maine."

Beth signaled a lane change she didn't technically need to make. "Thomas always wanted to do Bar Harbor. So. There it is."

There it was. Eight months since the cardiac event, that was the phrase, as though Thomas's heart had hosted a conference and failed to circulate the agenda, and she had not gone anywhere. She had eaten crackers and worked the edges of a coastal harbor puzzle and watched Daisy sit in front of Thomas's study door every morning, waiting with the patient certainty of a creature who had not yet accepted the situation. Beth was fifty-six years old and could not explain death to a Dachshund.

Daisy had spent eight years as a detection dog before the ligament slowed her down, and before Beth, and she still carried herself with the focused dignity of a professional between assignments. What she detected now was mostly socks. She was thorough about it.

The drive had taken six hours because she stopped twice, once for gas, and once because Daisy made a sound that Beth had learned, over eight reluctant months of cohabitation, meant now, not in five miles, now. Route 3 in late September had a way of pulling at the wheel, all that pewter-gray Atlantic glimpsed between the pines, and Beth found herself slowing without meaning to.

The Harborview Inn sat above the town like something from a painting that hadn't decided yet whether it was a postcard or a warning. Victorian bones, gray-shingled, with a porch that wrapped the whole front face and a widow's walk at the peak that looked out over the Atlantic. Flower boxes, real ones, not the plastic kind. A hand-lettered sign at the gate that said Welcome, Guests and Well-Behaved Dogs.

Beth looked at Daisy. Daisy looked at the sign with an expression of absolute innocence that suggested she had read and understood it.

The woman who opened the front door before Beth had even reached the steps was Margaret Alcott, proprietor, according to the website, for twenty-eight years. She was fifty-eight, perhaps, with silver-streaked dark hair and the easy, deliberate movement of someone who had never been surprised by a guest, a crisis, or an unfavorable weather forecast. She looked at Beth's binocular case, then at Daisy, then back at Beth, and smiled, warm enough that Beth noted it.

"Dr. Monroe. We're so glad you're here." She held the door wide. "And this must be Daisy. I've been reliably informed she requires a ground-floor option for evening walks, yes?"

"I mentioned that in the reservation notes. I wasn't sure"

"Your room's in the back. Garden view, private gate to the path. And I keep a tin of dog biscuits at the front desk." She said it the way she said everything, Beth would come to

understand, as though the arrangement had already been sorted and there was no need to make a production of it.

The room smelled of salt and old wood and dried lavender hung from a beam near the window. The bay was visible from the table, gray and silver in the late afternoon, a lobster boat making its way toward the harbor mouth. Beth set her puzzle on the table by the window and sorted the edge pieces. It was automatic, the way breathing was automatic, something her hands did while the rest of her figured out where she was.

She noticed the cliff path below. A narrow trail along the garden's back edge, threading through granite and low-growing juniper toward the rocky shore. It was beautiful. It was also, she noted with the dispassionate attention of someone who had spent thirty-five years assessing terrain, genuinely treacherous in low light.

She filed this under observation. Not concern. Just observation.

Dinner in the parlor was family-style, which Beth had not fully registered in the booking details and which she would have avoided had she registered it. There were five other guests.

Victor Hale was impossible to miss. Sixty-eight, broad-shouldered, with the kind of tan that came from standing on other people's land and calling it due diligence. He was holding court at the head of the table before the soup arrived, speaking at a volume calibrated for a larger room.

His name-drops were arranged chronologically, Boston, then the Cape, then Kennebunkport, working his way up the coast like a man planting flags.

Across from Beth, Patrice Bellamy was watching Victor with an expression so carefully neutral it had taken real effort to construct. Fifty-six, perhaps. Warm eyes. Patrice caught Beth looking at her and tilted her head, eyes dropping briefly to the binocular case at Beth's feet.

"Are you a birder?" "Ornithologist. Retired."

Beth moved the case to the floor. "Force of habit."

"What do you watch for, this time of year?"

"Warblers. Migration's winding down. But the black-throated blue sometimes lingers if the weather holds."

Patrice smiled, a real one.

"I've always thought birdwatching required a quality of patience I simply don't have."

"Attention, mostly," Beth said. "Patience is just attention without a deadline."

At the far end of the table, a man introduced as Owen Marsh was reading a book propped against his water glass. He had been at the inn ten days already and had the self-contained air of someone who ate in company because it was convenient, not because he wanted company. His camera bag hung off the dining room chair beside him, too large for the room, too heavy for the equipment of someone who just wanted photographs.

Harriet Webb, eighty-one and visibly proprietorial about the table seating, looked at Daisy's soft-sided carrier with the focused suspicion of a customs agent.

"Is that a dog?"

"A Dachshund."

"Dachshunds chew things."

"She mainly steals socks," Beth said. "I've hidden yours preemptively."

Harriet regarded her for a long moment, then turned back to her soup. Not warmth, precisely. A provisional ceasefire.

Victor Hale turned his attention to Beth between courses.

"Monroe. Hartford area, yes? I've been looking at some very interesting opportunities in coastal Maine, undervalued properties, water access, genuine upside for anyone who understands what this region is about to do. Are you in real estate at all?"

"Ornithology," she said.

"Ha. Well."

He smiled the smile of a man who had never once been interested in birds and pointed it down the table at someone more useful.

Patrice caught Beth's eye. She didn't say anything. She didn't need to. The tiny, eloquent lift of her eyebrow communicated a complete editorial opinion on Victor Hale, the Maine real estate market, and the experience of sitting at this particular table, and Beth found herself, for one unexpected moment, almost smiling back.

She was at the window at eleven-fifteen. Daisy had her nose pressed to the glass, fogging it in a small circle, and Beth had her binoculars up, not for any reason, just the bay in the dark and the foghorn going every two minutes and the lights of a tanker far out on the water.

The figure crossed the back garden at eleven twenty-two.

She noted it the way she noted everything in the field. Time: 2322h. Direction: north-northeast, toward the cliff path gate. Behavior: purposeful, no visible light source. The fog had come in off the water and the garden lamps gave just enough scatter to read movement without detail. She could not confirm gender, height, or identity. The cliff path gate swung open. Then closed. She held the binoculars on the space for another thirty seconds, then wrote in her field journal.

Figure, garden, 2322h, direction N/NE, cliff path, unidentified.

Daisy made a low sound, almost conversational. "I know," Beth said.

She set the binoculars on the windowsill and went to bed.

In eight hours, she would be standing on a cliff path looking at a red jacket on the rocks below.

The field journal was on the nightstand. The entry read: Figure, garden, 2322h, direction N/NE, cliff path, unidentified.