

Chapter One

Elle Whittemore preferred being overlooked—which would be no easy task in this bright-red rental, with its fancy key fob, push-button start, and new-car smell.

Her old gray SUV, the one she'd been driving since high school, was in the shop after she'd been rear-ended by a kid who'd paid more attention to his phone than the half inch of fresh snow on the road. Unlike hers, this SUV had a clean back seat—no crushed Cheerios worked into the carpet, no board book jammed under the car seat, no sign at all that a two-year-old ran the show.

Elle felt like she was cosplaying a career woman, the kind who met friends for coffee and spent her weekends skiing or boating. The kind of woman who had her life together. All Elle needed was a business suit—sans the splotch of orange juice on the slacks she hadn't had time to change—and a leather laptop bag.

And maybe a different personality.

She was seven minutes from the restaurant and only a little late when her phone lit in the cup holder. At the next stop sign, she checked the screen.

It wasn't Tessa, wondering if she was on her way. It was Enoch.

Can you come by tonight?

Why in the world would Enoch Vance, Briar Bay's seventy-something harbormaster, be texting her? In the two years she'd been visiting him, he'd sent her no more than a dozen messages, half of them autocorrected into gibberish.

More importantly, why tonight? She'd been taking Oliver to Enoch's office—a shack on the docks—every couple of weeks since the old man had lost his wife. Her son always made him smile, and Oliver loved looking at the boats in the marina.

She tapped a reply.

Can it wait? I was planning to come see you Saturday.

While the dots danced, she checked traffic, then turned onto a narrower road headed to Briar Bay. It was early evening, and there weren't many cars coming from Augusta at this time of night. Aside from two vehicles headed the opposite direction, she was alone.

At the next stop sign, she stopped again and read Enoch's answer.

You've waited long enough. Please come tonight.

Whoa.

She read the text again, thinking surely she'd misunderstood.

For years, she'd been asking Enoch for more information about the night she and her siblings had been found floating in a life raft, alone, off the Maine coast. She'd asked Enoch to go over the story more times than she could remember. She'd tried asking different ways, coming from different directions. He never supplied her with any more information than what he'd already given to the authorities. Elle and her brother and sister were brought in by a fisherman, and nobody, Enoch included, had any idea where the life raft had come from.

After a while, she'd accepted that he didn't know more than he'd told her. She'd even started to accept that she might never know her original family or how she, Hunter, and Tessa had ended up on that raft.

Was Enoch about to give her something new, some clue she could follow?

She replied to Enoch, then texted her sister.

Can you keep Oliver a little longer? Something came up.

Tessa gave the message a thumbs-up, and then she texted back.

We're frosting cupcakes.

A moment later, a photo came through of Elle's precious little boy, face covered in bright red frosting.

Excellent. Because nothing said early to bed for a toddler like red dye and sugar. Elle smiled anyway, despite herself. She hearted the photo, then turned south on Harbor Road toward the marina.

It was just after seven o'clock, nearly dark, by the time she reached the marina. In July, not only would she have another couple hours of daylight, she'd have circled the lot three times before she found a space. Tonight, it was nearly empty, most of the fisherman having brought in their haul and gone home already. They'd be at it again long before sunrise.

She cut the engine, climbed out, and then had to figure out which button locked the doors. When the locks thunked, the sound carried too far in the quiet.

The cold stole her breath. It was late March, technically spring, though you wouldn't know it by the temperature. A sharp wind came off the water, bringing its stench with it—salt, diesel, and the low-tide rot of exposed mud. She tugged her hat down, shoved her hands in her jacket pockets, and crossed the street.

She'd been to Enoch's shack often enough—always in daylight, though, when the docks rang with engines and gulls and men cursing their gear. She'd never come after dark. Even when she was a kid, growing up a half mile north of here, she hadn't been allowed anywhere near the marina alone.

She stepped onto the boardwalk, which ran along the pier. Water worked at the pilings underneath, slapping in and sucking away. Out in the blackness, a halyard knocked a mast, went quiet, and knocked again. Rock salt and sand crunched under her boots, protection against the ice

that could still accumulate. A fall out here might send her into the water, and going into the water in April, wearing a coat and boots...

There was very little chance she'd climb back out.

On the far side of the parking lot and Harbor Road, the coffee/wine bar Abby and her husband had opened threw warm squares of light onto the sidewalk. Elle could see the outlines of people inside, laughing, glasses in their hands. They were probably enjoying appetizers, maybe watching a Celtics game or a Bruins game. They were carefree in a way Elle hadn't been in three years.

To be fair, though, even if she hadn't gotten pregnant at twenty, quit school, and come home to raise her son, she wouldn't be hanging out in bars after work. She would've had fewer books in her to-read pile, and no pile of books in the world could stack up against the gift she'd been given in the form of her sticky, grinning little boy.

A truck was parked by the bait shed, still ticking as she passed. One of the fishermen, no doubt, fussing over his boat, probably fixing something. Most of the fishing vessels were even older than Elle's SUV.

A freezer hummed, steady and mechanical, the loudest noise left now that the people were gone, that and her heels clicking on the wood. If she'd known she'd be out here, she'd have worn practical shoes with a good tread, not her leather boots suitable for the carpeted floor of her workplace.

Enoch's shack sat at the south end of the marina, a box of gray boards that had been shedding paint into the harbor for a century. Dim light spilled out through the windows. A dull thunk came from inside—a door closing or a book dropping to the floor.

"Enoch?" She knocked to let him know she was there, then pushed the door open. It only opened about a foot before bumping into something soft. "Help me out here. I can't get in."

She listened for the man's low chuckle or quick apology, but Enoch didn't answer.

She pushed hard enough to move the obstruction and slip inside, then closed the door behind her.

Something lay slumped on the floor.

She stared for a heartbeat, confused. A dropped coat or...

Oh, no. It was him, face down on the boards between the desk and door, one arm thrown out, the other folded beneath him.

"Enoch!" She dropped to her knees and shook his shoulder. "What happened? Are you all right?"

He shifted, letting out a low grunt.

Thank God, thank God.

"I've got you." She dug for her phone, her hands clumsy.

He said something she couldn't make out. She leaned down. "What did you say? Is it your heart? What happened?"

His hand lifted and fell on the planks on his other side. "Take it." The words were barely audible.

She didn't understand. "I'm calling an ambulance."

He lifted his hand and slapped the floor again. "You."

"Me, what?"

Focus, Elle. Focus. "I'm calling for help."

"Go." The word was barely audible.

“Enoch.” She shook his shoulder again, but this time, he didn’t move again.

No, no, no!

She touched his neck, feeling desperate for a pulse.

She couldn’t find it.

She was kneeling in a puddle, which seeped through her slacks and chilled her knees. It had spread from underneath him, black in the low light. It was still moving, traveling along the seams in the floor. And it was warm.

She shoved away, lost her balance, fell backward, catching herself on her hands.

Her palm came up red. Bright red.

She sucked in a breath.

This wasn’t a heart attack. Heart attacks didn’t bleed.

A sound came from behind the closed door that led to the storage room, wood scraping wood.

She didn't think. Couldn't think.

She grabbed the solid thing on the floor next to Enoch’s hand. It was cold and far heavier than it looked.

Another noise sounded from behind the door.

She pushed to her feet and bolted outside, shoving the thing in her purse, where it bounced against her hip. The boardwalk stretched on forever. Her boots slid on the salt, but she caught herself and ran, the cold ripping the breath from her lungs, fear stripping away every thought except the need to run.

Don’t look, don’t look.

But she twisted and saw a shadowy figure creeping out the door she’d just left.

She slammed into something solid. A body, a man. His hands clamped hard around her arms.

She screamed.

Chapter Two

The woman slammed into him hard enough to send a spike of pain across his ribs. And then she was screaming, a raw, wordless sound, panicked and fighting.

Quinn Prescott gripped her tightly, afraid she'd accidentally throw herself into the frigid water. He held her against his chest and pinned her flailing hands between them. "Easy. I've got you. You're okay."

She fought him anyway—an elbow, a knee that missed. He twisted to protect himself, again wrenching those stupid ribs, and the light from the bait shed slid across her face.

He knew that face.

"Ellie. Hey. It's me. It's Quinn." He loosened his grip enough to let her see him but kept it firm enough to keep her from running or falling. "It's Quinn. You're all right."

He'd spent three years thinking about what he'd say when he finally saw Elle again. He'd chosen his words of apology and remorse. Not that he'd admit it to a soul, but he'd even worked on his delivery.

He'd pictured a lot of scenarios, but he hadn't pictured this.

Elle stared up at him as if she couldn't place him, her eyes wide and glassed over.

She angled back, and he caught sight of something dark smeared across her cheek. Dark and red.

He backed a little farther away.

Her legs, her hands... She was covered in blood.

Everything in him went cold.

“What happened?” He ran his hands down her arms, trying to see beyond her clothes to the wound. “Ellie, look at me. Where are you hurt?”

“I’m not—” Her voice broke. “It’s not mine.”

Not Ellie’s. *Thank God.* He looked beyond her to where he’d seen her silhouette running from Enoch’s shack.

“Is Enoch hurt?”

“I think he’s gone.” Her pitch was high, the words coming fast. “He was alive when I got there, but I think...” She sucked in a breath, then another, panic taking over.

“You’re okay, honey. You’re safe.”

Farther down the pier, a shape bolted in the darkness, low and fast, cutting for the far end of the marina. He ran behind a docked boat and out of sight.

Quinn wanted to run the man down and put him on the ground.

But Elle’s fingers were knotted in his jacket. He wouldn’t leave her alone and vulnerable. Never again.

An engine caught. By the time the boat was in Quinn’s view, it was moving fast, running without lights and aiming hard for the open water. He memorized the shape of it, and the sound. Those were the only clues he’d be able to supply.

“Come on.” He slid his arm around Elle’s back and turned her toward the light across the street, toward the people and the noise and the warmth. “We need to get out of this cold.”

She walked beside him, her boots dragging and her bag hanging between them, bouncing against his hip and heavy enough to leave a bruise.

He reached for it. “Let me take that.”

“No.” She lifted it, hugging it to her chest. “It’s for me. He said it’s for me.”

“Okay.” Quinn clamped his lips shut on all his question. Step one—get Elle to safety. Step two, figure out what in the world had just happened.

Eventually, he’d focus on his original reason for being back in Briar Bay—to win the heart of the woman at his side, the one covered in blood who had just...what?

What had just happened?

Quinn called it in while they walked, phone in one hand, his other arm around Elle, steering her across the street.

"Nine-one-one, what's your emergency?"

"There's a man down at the Briar Bay marina, the harbormaster's shack. A lot of blood, and somebody just left the scene by boat." He kept his voice flat and kept Elle moving. “Send police and an ambulance.”

The dispatcher asked questions, and Quinn answered the ones he could—no, he hadn't seen the body. No, he couldn't describe the man he’d seen running. Yes, he'd be nearby. “We’re headed to a restaurant across the street from the marina. We’ll be inside.” He ended the call. The only thing that mattered to him right now was Elle.

The restaurant was loud and warm and full. Before Quinn moved away, this space had been a dive bar—dark paneling, low ceiling, scratched furniture, and the unmistakable stench of stale beer.

Quinn froze in the doorway. The walls were brick, the ceiling twenty feet overhead, crisscrossed with dark beams and shiny ducts. A honey-colored bar stretched along one side, and chairs and tables in the same warm wood filled the rest of the space. Black and white artwork covered the walls. TVs were mounted in every corner.

A group laughed near the taps. These weren't fishermen drinking their catch away. These were young people, professionals.

A couple at a high-top glanced up when they walked in. The woman's eyes popped wide, and she looked quickly away.

Quinn steered Elle to a table in the back corner where he'd see the policing coming. He eased Elle into a chair. She sat, both arms wrapped around her bag, her stare fixed on nothing.

He sat beside her, facing her. "You're okay. You're safe here. Can you look at me?"

She did, but her eye contact didn't hold.

"That's good. You're doing great. You're safe, honey. You're safe now."

A server came over with menus, took one look, and stopped short. "Oh, no." She wasn't much older than Quinn, maybe early thirties. She crouched in front of Elle's chair, order pad forgotten. "What happened? Are you all right?"

This wasn't the kindness of a stranger. They must know each other.

When Elle said nothing, Quinn said, "Can you bring her something hot? Tea, if you've got it. And a wet rag to wipe her hands."

"Of course." The woman seemed to be waiting for Elle to respond, but she didn't.

Quinn squeezed the woman's arm gently. "If you have a blanket or a coat—"

"Right. Yes. Be right back." She stood and hurried away.

Elle was shaking, her lips pale.

Quinn shrugged out of his jacket and settled it over her lap, not that it would help much. He'd been cold since he'd crossed the border into Maine.

The server came back with a thick, puffy coat and a wet rag.

"That's perfect." He hesitated. "She might get blood on—"

“Doesn’t matter.” The woman dropped the rag on the table and tucked the coat around Elle.

“This should warm you up, honey. I’m going to get your tea. Have you eaten?”

Elle looked at Quinn as if he should know.

“Just the tea for now.”

“Coming up.” She hurried away again.

“Ellie.” He crouched into her line of sight and took her hands, wiping them gently with the rag. Blood covered the palms of both hands and left prints on the bag she wouldn’t let go of.

“Are you with me?” When she said nothing, he tried again. “Sweetheart, can you say something so I know you hear me?”

“He was alive.” Her breath hitched, and tears filled her eyes. “I should’ve...I don’t know. I didn’t know.”

“Of course you didn’t. You didn’t do anything wrong, sweetheart.”

“There was someone there, I think.”

“I know.”

For the first time, her eyes met his. “You saw someone? I didn’t...I thought...”

“I saw a man running away from the shack.”

“Oh.” More of those hitching breaths. He couldn’t tell if, in confirming what she believed, he’d comforted her or worried her more.

The server set two mugs of tea on the table, along with a little dish of sweetener packets. He thanked her, grabbed a yellow one, and stirred it in one of the mugs. He’d eaten enough meals with Elle and her family to know she liked sweet drinks.

The woman picked up the now-pink rag, her eyes wide. “What can I do?”

“The police are on their way,” Quinn focused on Elle. “Wrap your hands around this to warm them up.” She did as he instruction, which was a good sign. “Try to drink a little. Just a sip.”

For half a second her eyes met his, then slid down to the cup. She sipped.

"That's it. That'll warm you up."

The server stayed, crouching on the opposite side of Elle, her lips moving silently. If he didn't know better, he'd guess she was praying.

He hoped he was right.

Quinn had seen shock before, in worse places and on harder faces. He'd never had to sit watch it work on someone he cared about.

Light swept the front windows.

Quinn straightened. A cruiser had pulled in across the street, another easing up behind it, light bars washing the darkness in red and blue.

He looked at the server. "Will you stay with her? Don't leave her by herself. I'll be right outside."

The server came around and took his chair. "Go on. I've got her."

Quinn hurried outside, shocked by the frigid air that belied the season. Apparently, his jacket hadn't been as useless as he'd thought. He crossed toward the officers climbing out of their cars, sorting what he'd tell them and what he wouldn't. Whatever had happened in that shack, Ellie had run out holding something against her chest like it was the last thing left in the world.

He had no idea what she'd taken, but for now, that was nobody's business but hers.