

DEATH AND A POT OF CHOWDER

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ONE

“Hospitality is a most excellent virtue; but care must be taken that the love of company, for its own sake, does not become a prevailing passion; for then the habit is no longer hospitality, but dissipation.”

—*The Book of Household Management* by Mrs. Isabella Beeton, London: Ward, Lock, and Tyler, 1861

I NEVER GOT LETTERS.

Until now.

Oh, sure, electric and fuel bills addressed to “Mr. and Mrs. Burt Winslow, Island Road, Quarry Island, Maine” arrived regularly. Too many of those. But they hardly count as personal.

And no one I know writes letters with pens anymore. They call, or text, or e-mail.

So when Jake dropped the day’s usual pile of hunting magazines and seed catalogs on our kitchen table, I didn’t even glance through them.

“The school bus was late again. They should get a new driver. Mrs. Sage is too old.” At fourteen, Jake was taller than me, borrowing his dad’s razor, and full of opinions. He poured himself a bowl of sweet cereal and drowned it with milk. “I’m starving. And I’m going to be late getting to Maine Chance.”

After school and weekends Jake had been helping Luc Burnham get Maine Chance Books, the second-hand bookstore Luc ran out of his ell and barn, ready for summer customers. The two of them spent hours sorting and shelving the hundreds of used books Luc bought at library sales and auctions during the winter. Jake earned enough to buy the video games he preferred to books. He was saving for a new, more powerful, rifle, too, hoping to be a winner in Maine's Moose Permit Lottery this year.

"Don't eat so fast. You'll upset your stomach," I automatically advised him, as I had thousands of times.

"Are you talking to me, or Blue?" Jake grinned and pointed at our old Maine Coon cat, who was scarfing up his dry food as if he were starving.

"Both of you," I answered.

At least Jake didn't choke up hair balls.

On school days, I packed two sandwiches for Jake and two for Burt. Jake ate one of his sandwiches (always bologna and cheese) and an apple on the morning school bus. The only day he stuck around for breakfast was Sunday, when I made blueberry pancakes.

I watched as he gulped his cereal. "Much homework tonight?"

"Nah. Did Algebra in school and read History on the bus. I'm good." He hugged me quickly, too old to do that anywhere but in the privacy of our kitchen.

"Be home for supper."

The door slammed after him.

Jake got decent grades without much effort. Maybe that would change next year, when he'd take the other school bus, the one that picked up Quarry Island kids

and took them over the bridge to the regional high school on the mainland.

I secretly hoped he'd get more interested in books after working with Luc. Jake talked of lobstering, as most island boys did, but I didn't see him taking up the family trade. He'd been in and around boats all his life, but he didn't have the same addiction to the sea that some island boys, like his friend Matt, did.

That was just as well. The Gulf of Maine was warming, driving lobsters into deeper waters farther north. I had nightmares about what would happen if lobstering no longer brought in a profit.

Despite the climate changes, life for most of us on Quarry Island was defined by the sea, as it had been for generations. People joked that islanders had salt water in their veins. We were different, separate, and wary of off-islanders who commented on the beauty of the island, wondered at our isolation, and then left.

Although I'd grown up here, and my husband lobstered, I also had ties to the land. For nine years, I'd kept the books for my stepfather Seth's roofing business and made sure his office ran smoothly. I'd enjoyed working with the roofers, doing the accounts, and generally keeping the office in order. Plus, my paycheck had helped our heads stay above water and provided health insurance. But since Seth's death last year I'd stayed close to home. No other office management jobs were on the island, and I didn't want to be far from home in case Jake or Burt needed me. Occasionally one of the baby quilts or placemats or pillow covers I stitched sold at a craft show or church fair, but quilting didn't seem to be my destiny.

I hadn't had any special training, like Cynthia Snowe, who was a nurse, or her sister, Rose, who was a nurse's assistant. Burt's younger brother, Carl, had dated both Cynthia and Rose (as well as probably every other eligible woman on the island), but in the past year had seemed to settle on Rose, the younger, more eager of the sisters. Both of them had steady incomes. I hoped he'd settle down with Rose. His erratic lifestyle was a constant worry to both Burt and me.

For now, I put all those thoughts aside. I assumed the rest of my day would be like every other day. At six tonight we'd eat the macaroni and cheese casserole I'd made this morning. Then I'd clean the kitchen, Burt would turn on the television to hear the weather forecast and fall asleep watching the evening news, and Jake would disappear to his room to study or, more likely, to play video games.

I bent to stroke Blue, who napped most of the time, but checked in with me occasionally to make sure his Giver of Food didn't forget him. On my dark days, I wondered if Burt and Jake also thought of me as their cook and housekeeper. Some moments I felt that way about myself.

But, don't get me wrong, I loved my husband and son and living on Quarry Island in Maine. Dark days didn't come often. My life was comfortable. Predictable.

We took for granted the smells of pine and wild blueberries and beach roses. The irregular cliffs, sharp ledges leading into the sea, and rounded sea stones. The wildness of nor'easters, and the calm of low tide. Cooking s'mores over fireplaces in the winter and at lobster bakes in summer. Collecting blue and green sea glass

and sea pebbles that were pure black or pure white. Hold one in each hand and you got a wish. Every island child knew that, just as everyone on the island knew everyone else, knew where they'd come from, and could probably predict their futures pretty accurately. We weren't all close friends, but we were neighbors. No secret remained hidden for long on Quarry Island.

My family was part of a line of hardy New Englanders who'd sailed here from England or Scotland in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, pushed roots down through the granite core of the island, and remained, held by those roots and by the sea. Sometimes its fierce waves gave. Sometimes they took. Tides ebbed and flowed. They marked the rhythm of our lives, of our ancestors' lives, and, we hoped, the lives of generations following us.

I'd never thought of doing anything but marrying Burt and staying right here.

Mom had told the teenaged me that I lacked imagination; that I should fly away for a while before settling down and lining a nest with my feathers, like a female eider duck. But I was young and stubborn, and then I was pregnant. Burt and I were married when we were both eighteen. Jake came along four months later. No regrets.

Mom had seldom left the island for long, either, so I'd taken her advice with a handful of salt.

I moved the day's mail to the table next to Burt's chair in the living room. The thin blue envelope postmarked in Connecticut and addressed to me, Mrs. Anna Winslow, by hand, slipped from between a hunting supply catalog and this week's *Granite Gazette*.

A birthday card? My thirty-third birthday wasn't for another two months.

I didn't recognize the handwriting. Did any Quarry Island summer folks live in Connecticut? None I could think of. Could someone have heard about my quilting and want to order something? If I sold a whole quilt, I could buy Burt a new chair. The upholstery on his favorite recliner was thin and patched. Even the quilt covering it was beginning to wear through.

I held the envelope. It was fun to dream.

Then I sat at our round pine kitchen table and opened the letter that changed my life.