

Chapter 1

Glenphiddie Island, Canada, 1995

In May, at the forty-eighth latitude on the eastern rim of the Pacific, at the very edge of a continent and straddling the border of two countries, morning comes early. By four-thirty the sky begins to brighten. The light can be blocked out but not the cacophony of birds greeting the dawn. Better than any alarm, they set the small world of Glenphiddie Island stirring long before anyone plans on rising.

While the inhabitants of the town of Kilborn snuffled and moaned, burrowing down beneath the covers to steal a few more minutes of sleep, a dinghy pulled away from a thirty-foot sloop anchored at the mouth of Kilborn Harbor. The yawning sailor steered toward Ghost Island while his trembling whippet stood with her front paws on the edge of the rubber vessel and whined in anticipation. Before the boat settled on the rocky beach, the dog leapt into the rolling surf and dashed on shore to relieve herself. She was still squatting when the wind changed. Her head went up and her ears went back. Keening with fear, and before she finished emptying her bladder, she was running away from the stench of death.

“Ginger, Ginger!” the man yelled. He turned off the engine and lifted it out of the water. He stepped out of the boat. Holding on to the encircling rope, he pulled the small craft up above the lapping waters. “Ginger,” he called once more, with little hope that the excitable beast would return. He waited. Ten minutes passed and Ginger still hadn’t come back. “Stupid dog.” He sighed and began to walk carefully over the moss-covered rocks. It was his wife’s dog but of course she was tucked up tight in bed. “You go, Howie,” she always said, as if early morning dog walking was one more thing she deemed a man’s work.

“Stupid bitch.” He’d be hard put to say whether it was his wife or the dog he was referring to. They were equally annoying.

He’d only climbed six feet toward the crest of the island when a rock rolled beneath his rubber boot, twisting him sideways. His gaze was caught by a flash of color below him. He froze in shock while his rebellious eyes took in what he didn’t want to see. And then his brain tried to make sense of it. When it did, he spun away from the horror and vomited.

Chapter 2

Singer Brown woke at first light with the rest of the island and listened to the raucous birds. Beside her Louis Wilmot yawned and stretched before he rolled over to cuddle up against her back, nuzzling his face against her bare shoulder. His hand cupped her belly and his breath felt hot against her skin. A strange feeling of joy and security came over her. He was here with her, in this small cocoon of safety. No matter how long it lasted it was hers, one last chance to get it right, and she would hold on to it with her whole being. She reached out to cover his hand with her own. It had been a long time since she felt part of a couple.

A couple. The word brought back the intimate exchange she'd witnessed the day before. On the edge of sleep, she murmured, "What's Ghost Island?"

Wilmot kissed her shoulder, his whiskers harsh against her skin. "That small island at the mouth of Kilborn Harbor." He pulled her closer.

"Why do they call it Ghost Island?"

He yawned. "Because the winds out there do strange things to fog, dividing it, spinning it. Like gossamer ladies dancing across the water—ghosts dancing."

"That's beautiful." He never failed to surprise her. "Poetic even." Seeing gossamer ladies swirling across the water, she fell back into sleep.

The phone rang. Wilmot cursed softly and rolled over to pick it up before it could ring again and wake Singer. "Wilmot." He tucked the receiver under his chin, and rolled back to snuggle against her warmth.

"It's Duncan. We've got a body."

A jab of annoyance. Boating accidents were only one of the many forms of human stupidity the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, the policing unit for the Gulf islands, dealt with during tourist season. Sure that some drunken fool had fallen overboard in the harbor, he said, "I start the midnight shift tonight and you know Fridays are always hell. Can't you handle it?"

"Sure, but I hate to have all the fun. It's a dead woman."

“So?”

“So-o-o, her head was battered in. It’s unlikely to be natural causes.”

He grabbed the phone off his shoulder and swung his feet out of bed. “Where?”

He was reaching for the trousers he’d thrown on the chair the night before when Duncan answered, “Ghost Island.”

Wilmot turned back to face the bed.

After a long silence, Duncan asked, “Are you still there?”

“I’m here.” He took a deep breath and asked, “How do I get out there?”

“The search and rescue launch is at the dock waiting for you.”

He dropped the receiver back in its cradle. “Singer.”

She turned over, nestled into his pillow, and mumbled something indistinct.

He zipped his trousers and reached for a clean shirt. “I’ve been called out.”

Her eyelids fluttered but she didn’t answer.

“Singer?”

He shrugged the shirt up onto his shoulders and then crossed to her side of the bed and leaned over her. Her wild hair spilled darkly across the pillow. Even in sleep her face was compelling. High cheekbones, a long thin scar on the right one that she would never explain, full lips that mocked the world and eyes that went from hazel to rich caramel. It was a face he never got tired of examining, and she often caught him staring. With her hand going up to her face, she’d ask, “What is it?”

“Nothing,” he’d answer, when in truth it was everything. This woman took him out of his comfort zone, throwing him off balance while making him feel alive in a way he’d never experienced before. Louis Wilmot was no fool. He knew it couldn’t last. Singer was a woman who was planning on leaving the moment she said hello. She’d warned him at the very beginning of their affair that she was only on the island until she could prove her residency and sell her house.

He shook her shoulder gently. “Why did you ask about Ghost Island?”

Her eyes stayed closed and her breath whispered softly between half opened lips. He reached out his finger and removed a strand of curls from the corner of her

mouth, then he leaned over and kissed her forehead. There was time enough later to find out why she was asking about Ghost Island.

Chapter 3

As the boat approached the ragged little piece of land jutting up out of the Salish Sea, Wilmot studied it. It wasn't much of an island, maybe three acres, rising to a crown in the center, with gnarled and stunted fir trees growing out of the rocks. The shore was littered with logs that had broken loose from a boom and now waited to be shifted by the next king tide.

When the launch butted against the beach he stepped onto the shore and paused. He took his time, standing just above the tideline, and studied the whole scene. Sometimes impressions were worth as much as hard evidence. Satisfied, he took the dozen steps toward where Duncan waited beside the naked body.

Parts of her face had been eaten away and her right eye was missing. But it wasn't this horrific sight that sent a tremor through him. It was something much gentler, a memory he didn't want to associate with this scene. The dead woman's dark hair was fanned out in a halo around her head, just like Singer's had been when he left her. He wiped his hand across his mouth, trying to abolish that first impression, and said, "She's young, isn't she?"

Duncan took off her cap and rubbed vigorously at her short blond curls. "Still in her teens, I'd say. Early twenties at the most." Nearly as tall as Wilmot, and with a curvaceous body not even the severe uniform could hide, Duncan was the only woman on the island detachment of six Mounties that served a permanent population of ten thousand plus a further ten thousand in high season.

"Do we know who she is?"

"Nothing to identify her, only this." She bent over and pointed her forefinger at a butterfly tattoo on one ankle. "I've taken lots of photos."

"Is there anyone on Glenphiddie doing tattoos?" he asked.

"Nope."

He didn't question her pronouncement. Duncan had spent her early years on the island, still had relatives here, and there wasn't anyone or anything about Glenphiddie she didn't know.

“So she got it in Vancouver or Victoria.” Wilmot squatted beside the body to look closer at the blue design. “How many ink parlors do you think there are in those two cities?”

“Hundreds, maybe even a thousand if you take in the amateurs.”

“At least it tells us something about her. She’s over eighteen. You have to be to get a tat.”

Duncan snorted. “Like our legal drinking age, that law is easily bypassed. And even if you find someone willing to admit they recognize the design, they probably won’t have a name. I’m sure they don’t look too closely at ID and date of birth. Some artists follow the rules, but at over a hundred bucks an hour...” She shrugged. “Lots of guys are willing to break the law.”

He grinned up at her. “Hey, Duncan, you have a tat, don’t you?” His grin grew with her frown. “Let me see it.”

“Screw you.”

“In your dreams.” It came out without thought, and he cursed himself, but Duncan wasn’t paying attention to him.

“There’s a scar on her arm.” She pointed to the fine white line. “Maybe a break.”

“That will help.” Wilmot took in the area the fluttering yellow tape cordoned off. “This whole crime scene will be under water within the hour. We can’t wait for the coroner.” The incoming tide already lapped the dead girl’s ankle and kelp washed back and forth between her feet. “We have to move her.”

Duncan scowled at him. “I told the coroner that. Even if we ordered in a copter for her, Dr. Pearce couldn’t get here from Victoria before high tide covers the body. She’d have to fly from Victoria to the helipad behind the hospital where a cruiser would pick her up and deliver her to the dock. And then the police launch would bring her out here. Not going to happen. Dr. Pearce is not happy, but there’s no other choice. Dr. Glasson has done a preliminary examination and after we bag the body, a hearse will meet her at the dock and take her over to Victoria for the autopsy, which will be done tomorrow or the next day. It’s the best we can do.”

“Tell me what you’ve done so far.”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I’ve photographed the scene, collected the dozen or so rocks that covered her to analyze them for finger prints, but

there isn't a prayer, and I bagged what little evidence I could find. I've sent for divers to search the water within a ten-foot area offshore. Probably useless, but it was all I could think of."

"Seems like you've thought of everything," he said to reassure her.

She nodded. "I was just waiting for you before I sent her on her way."

"Did Glasson give an approximate time of death?"

"Liver temperature suggests it was around midnight but he says that could be out by an hour either way. He told me the liver temperature of a living person is about a hundred and two degrees and cools at the rate of one degree for each hour after death."

"We'll need to get the exact time of the last high tide. If she'd been here then, she would have been washed out to sea."

"Her killer started to hide her." She pointed to the rocks covering the mid-section of the body. "Something stopped him. The rocks might have held her in place when the tide came in."

He glared at the rising water. "We'll have to do a search fast."

"Well, it's a good thing I haven't been just standing here with my finger up my nose." When Wilmot jerked his head up to stare at her, she added, "Sergeant."

Duncan was the smartest member of the team, but she'd be done for noncompliance in any other detachment. He'd once asked her why she was so sure he wouldn't report her for insubordination and she'd pointed out that he'd been demoted for harassing a female officer. He explained that the corporal who had put in the complaint against him was lazy and incompetent. Her next superior officer made sure she left the force. He told Duncan not to fight a war that wasn't hers, but nothing he said or did had changed Corporal Duncan's attitude. Always irascible, her rudeness towards him seemed to grow with each passing day and Wilmot had given up trying to find a pleasant side to her. Strangely, she only acted this way towards him. It was beyond his understanding. He went back to studying the body. "No chance you found a bloody rock, is there?"

"Nope. My bet is he had enough sense to throw it into the ocean with the other fifty million just like it." A gull, hovering in the air above them, screamed. Duncan looked up. Watching the bird, she said, "He's waiting to see if we leave him a meal."

He stood. "Where are her clothes?"

Her brows contracted in a scowl. "That's what the divers will be looking for."

He could tell by her restless shifting from side to side that she had outlasted her patience and was eager to be doing something, anything but stand there waiting for him to catch up.

He fought down annoyance. Emotions only confused things. This was the crime that would get him away from Glenphiddie. He needed to be totally rational and clear-headed. "Collect everything else you can find on the island. It probably won't help either, but it still has to be done."

Wilmot pulled on disposable gloves and moved from the girl's ankles to her head. He examined her wounds. First man and then nature had brutalized the young woman. The left side of her face had been crushed by her attacker and then the open flesh had been eaten away. Her right eye, in an area undamaged by her killer's attack, had been pecked out. And her lips... Wilmot looked away, studying the horizon and regretting the coffee he drank on the ride over to Ghost Island.

"Crabs," Duncan said, answering his unasked question. "That's what was eating her when we got here."

He nodded and looked back at the body. Duncan had bagged the victim's hands in clear evidence pouches to protect any trace of evidence under her fingernails. Hopefully the victim had scratched her killer and they could get a DNA sample. Duncan had left the head uncovered until he had seen it, but they needed to bag it immediately or risk losing vital evidence.

When he had finished examining the face, he took the plastic evidence bag Duncan held out and gently pulled it over the victim's head. He sat back on his heels and breathed a sigh of relief. The bag put a barrier between him and the victim, turning her into an exhibit and less of a human being.

He slid one hand under the head and another under the lower shoulders. He looked up at Duncan and said, "Ready?"

Duncan nodded.

"Okay," Wilmot said, "To you on three." Duncan crouched down, slipping her hands under the hips and thighs.

When they turned the corpse over, crabs scurried out from beneath the body and water rushed into the depression where the victim had rested. "Shit," Wilmot said. "I hope we don't get any of the little buggers inside the body bag." The thought of crabs feasting away while trapped in with the body was something out of a horror film. He could imagine the coroner's rage. Dr. Pearce was always lecturing them on preserving evidence, and letting crustaceans feed on a corpse would have her screeching about their incompetence.

He examined the woman's back. Small creatures had eaten away the flesh in spots along the buttocks and legs. Lividity had turned the skin black where the blood had pooled, telling him the body hadn't been moved after death.

Together they lifted the remains into the heavy plastic body bag Duncan had laid out. They didn't close the zipper. The exhibit officer would do that, and then he would cover the zipper with a sticky exhibit tag and sign and date it so evidence inside couldn't be tampered with.

Wilmot pointed to the police launch. "We'll make Thoms the exhibit officer. He can ride with the body to Victoria for the forensic autopsy."

"So Thoms will be responsible for the collection and documentation of all exhibits?" Duncan's mouth narrowed in a grimace. "The detachment is already shorthanded. Losing an officer to forensic duty will leave even less staff for regular duties."

"Let's bring them in." He waved to Thoms and the two other constables on the police boat. "They can start the search."

The crime scene area Duncan had roped off included a bench made of driftwood and a charred circle of stones that contained the remains of years of fires. Anyone sitting on the bench could see Glenphiddie Island across the fire pit. Wilmot went to the pit and squatted down to study the ashes. "No telling when the last fire was, but we can ask any witnesses if they noticed one burning last night. It will help with the time of death."

Duncan said, "No one would even notice. Lovers come out to Ghost Island to watch the sun go down and everyone has a little fire to keep the chill off. It's supposed to be romantic."

"What happened to this girl wasn't about romance."

The motor on the police launch died. He turned to watch Thoms pull it up onto the rocky beach. "The first thing we need to do is identify the body. Go through the missing persons database to see if someone has reported her missing already. She could be a runaway. And get copies made of your pictures of that tattoo."

"We'll need help," she said.

"We'll get some auxiliary RCMP constables to help out."

"That's not what I meant. It's race weekend. A hundred boats are here from as far south as Seattle. With crews, there could be up to five hundred extra people in Kilborn, maybe a thousand, all in the mood to party. We can't manage all that and handle a murder."

The force was always stretched to capacity just with normal policing on weekends and this weekend would be worse, but he wasn't ready to call in Major Crimes and lose control of the case. In fact, Wilmot intended to do everything he could to hold them off. "Major Crimes will be just as pushed on a long weekend as we are and they're seriously understaffed at the moment." He knew because he'd tried to use that argument to get transferred back to the unit. "The boats here for the regatta won't leave until Monday. We'll all be working overtime but we can handle it."

Wilmot watched the last man climb out of the launch and stand by the others, waiting for instructions. "I'll get in touch with Major Crimes and fill them in as soon as I get back to the office, but I'll tell them we've got it under control. If we haven't got a solid line of inquiry by Monday, I'll be happy to have the Major Crimes unit take over. Three days, that's all I ask."

Duncan sighed. "I still think we should turn it over to them and go back to our own policing." She screwed up her face as if she'd tasted something bitter. "They might not even come on Monday. In the end it will be the unit commander who decides if the serious crime unit takes over. It will come out of his budget, and you know how he likes to keep that balanced. Money will be more important than some poor kid."

"Either way, they can't get here before the tide comes in. You and Thoms and I will work this, while the other three handle the day to day duties with the help of the auxiliaries." He could see she was about to argue. He raised both hands, palms out, as if to dampen down her impatience. "I said I'd call and explain the situation. If we mess up, it will be my responsibility, not yours."

"My name is on the case file. I was on duty when the call came in."

“Fine. Just blame it on me if it all goes wrong.”

“Oh, I intend to.”

While Duncan supervised the search, Wilmot boarded the police launch and headed back to Kilborn. The town was beautiful from the water. A flat green band of park hugged the shoreline above a small beach and multiple docks. A boardwalk stretched from one end of the park to the other. Fanned out above this green space, the streets rose in tiers like bleachers in a stadium. Overlooking the seafront, colorful patios, dotted with umbrellas and hanging baskets, made the community look like it was in permanent celebration. And it was just as interesting at night. From the water Kilborn looked like a giant ocean liner anchored in a sea of blackness. When the lights went out, one by one, the town disappeared.

He turned away from the view. Taking out a notebook, he began planning the operation to first identify the victim and then find her killer.