

## Sneak Preview from YOU MAY NOW KILL THE BRIDE

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Between the drizzly twilight and my benumbed state of mind, I took the wrong turn going up the hill from the harbor, and found myself bumping along a wooded side road with the water to my right instead of my left. I needed to hang a U-turn but the way was narrow, with a steep slope down to the water, and the jerk who was tailgating me didn't help any. It was a twisty road with no real shoulder, so I started watching for a pullout so I could let the jerk go by. I overshot the first one, but as the road dipped toward the water another one appeared.

I yanked at the wheel—and whiplashed back in my seat as the SUV reared up, hovered precariously, and then jolted heavily down. Judging by the nasty scraping noise, we had run aground.

With a dispirited groan, I got out to look. The unpaved shoulder of the road held a number of rocks and sure enough, I'd picked the nastiest one to slam my poor vehicle into. Shaped like a scraggly tooth, the rock was now wedged securely between tire and fender. We were hung up, but good.

*And me with no phone, dammit.* I looked around the darkening woods, hoping for house lights, and saw only the sky's reflection on the little bay down below me. But was that a boat near the shore?

"Hello? Hello down there!"

As I called out, I took a few steps down the hill to get a better line of sight. It was dark in the woods but still light on the water, and the surface of the bay was pale between the fir trees. That was definitely the outline of a boat showing dark against the silvery gleam, but it was empty, just drifting in the shallows...

No, not empty. A limp shape lay in the open boat, and though I tried to deny it, I knew in my horror-struck heart what the shape was. I plunged down the embankment, slithering out of control and then catching myself on the rough trunks of the trees, again and again until I reached the bottom. There was no beach, just a narrow ribbon of gravel, and I splashed knee-deep into the icy water. Gasping from the cold, I grabbed the boat's fiberglass side and pulled it firmly ashore.

The woman lay face-up at the bottom of the boat with her sightless eyes open to the sky. There was a dark round hole in the center of her forehead.

It wasn't the wisest thing I've ever done, but who possesses wisdom at a time like that? I clambered aboard and crouched beside her, and as I did my knee came down painfully on something hard. When I reached to push it aside my fingers closed around a gun, some kind of small handgun that was cold to the touch.

I dropped it in revulsion, and cradled the woman in my arms. I don't know how long I knelt there, weeping...

"Hands out where I can see them!" The harsh voice came from the shoreline, but the speaker was hidden behind a powerful flashlight beam. The light struck me full in the face, its glare blinding my dark-adjusted eyes.

"Get 'em out there. *Now.*"

I lifted my empty hands in innocent appeal as the light moved down the slope. I didn't recognize the voice, but I did have a suspicion about who the speaker was. And once he stepped into the open at the water's edge, where the last light of day caught his stocky build and round pallid face, my suspicion was confirmed.

Moonface—Larry Calhoun, the cop who'd been tailing me—was still on the job.

This time there was no gallant gathering me up in anyone's arms. Moonface was no giant like Jeff Austin, and anyway he didn't see me as a distressed damsel. He saw me as a killer. That was evident from the way he kept his gun on me as he played the flashlight over the body, and from the keyed-up excitement in his voice as he radioed for backup.

"I just found her," I said. "I only just found her."

I kept on saying that as Moonface herded me up the slope to his patrol car, but he didn't respond, except to make little conversational gambits like "Stand facing the car!" and "Hands behind your back!" The man had no people skills at all.

Then, as another patrol car came screaming up beside us with its red light slashing through the gloom, he snapped a pair of handcuffs on my wrists. Handcuffs! Finding the body had felt like a dark fantastical dream, but the cold metal biting at my skin was all too real.

"What are you doing?" I sputtered, as he guided me into the back seat. "Am I arrested?"

Moonface conferred with the occupants of the other vehicle, then got in the driver's seat and slammed the door. "I'm just asking you to come in and make a statement."

"You call this *asking*?"

I lurched against the car door as he took a tight turn, and for the rest of the drive I kept quiet and worked on choking down a rising sense of panic. It's a horribly vulnerable feeling, not having your hands free. There were so many questions to consider, about the murder and about my own fate, but I concentrated on staying upright and remembering to exhale every time I inhaled.

After an eternity or two, I found myself in an office with Detective Lieutenant Orozco standing behind the desk, looking snappy in a dark shirt and light blazer. I took in his shoe shine and cologne.

"Sorry to interrupt your night on the town."

"Ms. Kincaid," he said solicitously, coming around the desk. "Please sit down. Your hair is wet, are you cold? Would you like some coffee?"

I'm not stupid, I could see that now the bad cop was playing the good one. But at this point I wasn't immune to a warm smile, and I'd have sold my soul for hot caffeine.

Soon I was cradling a fragrantly steaming mug, and Lt. Orozco was answering my questions. Sort of. He was meticulously courteous, as before, but somehow evasive.

"Of course you're not under arrest," he said, as if such a thing had never crossed his mind. "We simply need to analyze all the available evidence, such as your clothing, if we're to eliminate innocent persons from involvement in this death."

"I see." He made it sound so reasonable. "But I can leave if I want to?"

"Naturally you're free to go. But don't you want to assist us in finding her killer?"

"Sure I do, but can't I assist you tomorrow?"

"It's best to record the details while they're fresh in your mind, and time is of the essence in this kind of investigation. As a witness to a violent crime—"

"The aftermath of a crime," I pointed out. "I didn't actually see the murder."

"What did you see, exactly? You were in the boat with her, and then what happened?"

"I wasn't in the boat with her! I mean, I was when Calhoun got there, but...Let me start from the beginning, OK?"

"By all means. Officer Henniman here will record your initial statement."

I didn't like the sound of "initial." Would I need to make more than one? But I took a deep breath and described my afternoon, including my run-in with a rock on the road above the bay.

"We've had your car brought back here," he said. "It wasn't damaged. Please go on."

Orozco was making notes from time to time on the pad in front of him. When he wrote an especially long one I tried to read it upside-down, but his handwriting was terrible.

"Then when I saw her in the boat," I said, giving up, "I climbed in and found this gun—" "You handled the gun? You admit that?"

"There's nothing to admit! I just bumped into it and moved it out of the way. Then Calhoun yelled at me and that was that." I got to my feet. "Now, I'll be at the Owl's Roost if you need me. You've been there, you know the address."

The phone under his hand rang, and he motioned me to a halt as he picked it up.

"Orozco. All right, go ahead...When?...You confirmed that?" He looked at me and raised his eyebrows appraisingly. Then he said to the caller, "Yes, just in time. Thank you."

The lieutenant replaced the phone and drummed his fingers on it. "Ms. Kincaid, I must ask you to remain with us."

"You said I was free to go."

"It seems that I have more questions for you. For example, about the violent argument you had with the deceased just this morning."

"What violent argument?" I said, violently.

"Apparently there was an altercation at the Winter home, during the course of which you seemed to be threatening her."

"Threatening? I didn't threaten her, I just snapped at her a little. It was very trivial."

"And the reason for this trivial snapping?"  
"It was...she was...I don't remember." I closed my eyes and thought about that little black hole in the woman's forehead.  
"Are you all right, Ms. Kincaid? You're shivering. I can call a doctor if you like."  
"No, thank you. "  
"Very well," said Orozco. "I'm sure we'll have more questions for you as we investigate further, and I know that you'll want to cooperate with us."  
"I'm already cooperating! I just want to go home."  
"I'm afraid not."  
The light dawned.  
"Wait a minute," I said. "Is this that 24-hours thing, where you can hold someone without actually charging them?"  
"You're very well informed." Orozco smiled, as if he was pleased to pay me the compliment.  
"Under certain circumstances, yes."  
"Circumstances like these right here?"  
"Yes."  
"So I can't leave?"  
He shrugged sympathetically. "Alas, no."  
Which is how I came to have a hot Friday night date with a holding cell.