

CHAPTER ONE

McConnell, Oregon, August, 2018

Josie Matthews pulled up to the hardware store in the used Jeep she'd bought just six months earlier. She'd traded in her sedan from her old life in Los Angeles, which hadn't seemed too practical for someone who was going to spend most of her time hauling supplies and furniture back to the old Victorian she was restoring. As she breathed in the sweet summer air without even a hint of smog, she knew she was finally in the right place.

It was a reassuring thought when you were thirty-four years old and recently divorced.

Josie sat in the Jeep and checked her list again. "Knobs for the dining room built-in, tape, extra fine sandpaper, splinter-proof gloves that really are splinter-proof." She absently picked at the spot on her ring finger where a splinter had most recently punctured her skin, then added something to the list. "And wine. All hardware stores should sell wine." She grabbed her purse to enter Hammond's, the family-owned hardware store in town. It had opened over a hundred years earlier and it was slightly more expensive than the big box stores in the next town, but no one was as helpful as the people at Hammond's. These days, that meant a lot to Josie.

McConnell was a picturesque little town eighty-five miles east of Portland, and about as far removed from her former life in Los Angeles as it was possible to get. There was little traffic and no chance she'd run into her ex-husband. And instead of their Spanish-style home in Los Feliz, Josie now lived in a Victorian mansion whose best days were far in the past.

At least they were for now. Josie had invested her savings in buying the property and was now fixing it up as an inn. With any luck, her house at the base of the Cascade Mountains would be the perfect place for tourists during both the ski season and the summer.

The house had been built in the late 1880s by a man who was a watchmaker by trade, but an eccentric by nature. Henry Wells had inherited a great deal of money from his family back east, so tinkering with watches had been more of a hobby than a profession. From what Josie could tell, he'd spent most of his time inventing gadgets. He'd lived there until his death in the early 1920s, when the property was purchased by Wall Street financier David Remington as a vacation home. But neither Remington nor any of the subsequent owners had cleared out the attics entirely, leaving trunks filled with Wells's inventions. Josie had made only the slightest dent in going through them, but she'd been enchanted by the fine timepieces she'd found, as well as the notebooks filled with formulas written in precise handwriting. She wasn't sure what the formulas were for, but she promised herself that she'd read them in her free time, once she finally had some.

But for all of Wells's eccentricities, he wasn't the most famous former owner of the estate. That honor – or infamy – went to David Remington, who'd made worldwide headlines as the Tycoon Murderer after one of his house parties resulted in two of the most notorious homicides of the

1920s. While the crimes were never officially solved, the world had been convinced of his guilt. His disappearance shortly after the murders only added to the mystery.

Now Josie Matthews was hoping the house's past would provide her with a financially secure future.

Today, she was making her latest visit to Hammond's, where she'd spent so much of her time in the last few months. While she had hired a contractor for the major work, she was still picking out doorknobs, moldings and trim. And getting splinters. Lots and lots of splinters.

"Hey, Margaret," she said to the woman at the one cash register in the store.

"Oh, honey, you are keeping me in business," said Margaret. She was in her early fifties and had worked in the store her whole life. She probably knew more about renovating an old house than most contractors. "You do realize there's a Home Depot three towns over, right? I mean, I'm grateful for the business, but you're spending a fortune on stuff you could get there."

Josie grinned. "But it's not Hammond's. What do you have that would go with this?" She held up a glass pull for the built-in hutch in the dining room.

Margaret took the beveled glass knob, which was two inches in diameter. "I don't have anything that'd match exactly, but I can check with some of my suppliers."

"Thanks." Josie examined an antique glass doorknob, whose prism projected blue light onto the nearby wall. "I sometimes think I was born in the wrong time."

Margaret laughed. "I sometimes think that, too, until I remember we're in the age of modern dentistry. But those old houses do have some lovely nooks and crannies."

"Yeah, I'm still discovering them, despite having lived there for months."

"Seen any ghosts yet?"

Josie laughed. Margaret asked the same question every time. "No. Though I hope to have a few sightings just in time for tourist season."

"And you really don't get scared living there alone?"

"They're just ghost stories ginned up over the years to try to interest people in buying the old place." The house had remained shuttered for years after the murders and had gone into decline during the Great Depression. It had changed hands over the years with various owners wanting to capitalize on the house's notoriety, but nothing had worked. It had been the rundown headquarters of a local conservation organization when Josie bought it. "Don't tell me you believe it's still haunted by the victims of the Tycoon Murderer."

Margaret shrugged. "I've never spent much time there, despite growing up in McConnell. I took a tour of the place right before you bought it and got chills."

Josie grinned. "Harvey likes talking up the ghosts. It's one of the things which sold me on the place."

“Harvey wasn’t the Realtor back then. It was Sue Bergstrom over in Ashton. She used to sell a lot of houses around here, though I haven’t seen much of her recently. She thought the place was just as eerie as I did, especially the attics.”

“I’m sure it was all the spiderwebs. They certainly freak me out. In fact....” Suddenly, there was an abrupt shift in the ground, the latest in a series of minor earthquakes to hit the area. The room shook with enough force to rattle the various items on the shelves. Margaret ducked under a nearby table, while Josie rode it out where she was.

Once the shaking had stopped, Margaret made her way out from under the table. “You should take cover when that happens.”

“I’m pretty used to earthquakes from my time in L.A., though I guess a hardware store would be a pretty bad place to be if there ever is a big one. You have a lot of sharp objects in here.”

Margaret shook her head as she made a few notes about the glass pulls. “I don’t know how you could ever get used to earthquakes. We’ve been getting them for three months and they still scare me each time they hit.”

“I read about that – it’s because of the mountain range. The Cascades are dormant volcanoes and every hundred years or so they cause a seismic shift.”

“I don’t know about the science, I just wish they’d stop. Now you’ve got ghosts and earthquakes to deal with.”

“I still think the greatest danger I face at my place is going broke with the renovations.”

“Like I said, there’s that Home Depot.”

“I’m sticking with Hammond’s, but thank you. Let me know if you find my knobs.”

As Josie drove home down a two-lane road surrounded by forest, she realized she hadn’t been this happy in years. She was in charge of her destiny and even if she did worry about the mounting costs, these were her decisions. Living in the middle of nowhere could be lonely at times, but she was ready for this next chapter in life, no matter what it brought.

She took the turn-off to her land, then drove slowly up the gravel driveway, smiling as her home came into view. It still needed a lot of work. The red paint with dark green trim had faded over the years. Half a dozen shutters on the three-story house had had to be removed because they were on the verge of falling off and some of the hand-carved wood trim had been stolen over the years. Inside it was in only slightly better shape. The previous owners had at least updated the electrical and plumbing systems in the house, but the wood paneling had been damaged by dry rot and termites over the years. Most of the panels had been replaced, but they still needed staining. The herringbone hardwood floors had been patched and one day they’d be as beautiful as when they were installed.

Josie didn’t mind putting in the work to restore the house to its former glory. She found it therapeutic while she was rebuilding her own life. At least with the house, she could see the results of her labor. With herself, progress wasn’t quite as visible.

The workers were just ending their day as Josie got out of her car and waved at the foreman, Manuel. He and his crew had been working tirelessly and had made a great deal of progress. There was still a lot to be done, but the house was nearly unrecognizable from the rundown manor she had first found online in Los Angeles.

Josie entered the house, where the sun shone through the stained glass in the transom above the front door, casting blues and reds on the grand central staircase. The rich wood of the floors and walls made the interior a bit dark even on a bright August day, though the late afternoon sun cast a soft glow to everything it touched. Josie walked through the dining room, whose built-in buffet would soon have glass pulls if Margaret had any luck in her search.

Josie made her way into the kitchen which had all the modern conveniences, though in retro form. She liked the look of the past but not enough to cook like electricity was a new thing.

She studied the contents of her refrigerator, then ended up putting a frozen dinner in the microwave before sitting at the table and firing up her tablet.

Dinner wasn't all that tasty, but a glass of Willamette Valley wine helped wash it down as Josie read the local news. Geologists warned that the cluster of earthquakes was increasing in both frequency and strength, though there was no reason to believe a volcanic eruption would occur.

"I didn't leave L.A. to get killed by an earthquake or a volcano," muttered Josie as she poured a second glass of wine and did a search of the story which had fascinated her for months now.

She found a story from 1929, complete with black and white photos of her house, with the headline "Remington Murder Mansion. FBI called in to solve the case." The outside of her home was slowly beginning to resemble the house in the photos. But it would be a while until the interior did.

There had been several pieces of wood furniture in the attics in need of restoration. Much of it was now scattered throughout the house under Holland covers. Josie was trying to supplement it as much as she could from local antique stores and estate sales, though it would take time until the house was completely furnished. A lovingly restored salute to the past was expensive. She had secured a mortgage fairly easily, but hoped to use money from the sale of her house in Los Angeles to finish the renovation.

Her house in Los Angeles. She tried not to think about the divorce, but it still crept into her thoughts from time to time. It was odd that a couple spent months planning a wedding, but the end of a marriage could be so abrupt. Josie had known things were rocky between her and her husband for a while, but when he said he needed to talk, she'd thought he was going to tell her he wanted a motorcycle, not a divorce. Then she'd been blindsided again when she'd found out he and her best friend had been having an affair. Six weeks after he said he wanted out, the two of them had moved in together and Josie was on her way to Oregon.

She looked around for that wine bottle.

After scouring Craigslist for furniture, Josie realized it was fairly late. She cleaned up the kitchen, then went through the downstairs, turning out lights. Moonlight streaming through the floor-to-ceiling windows gave the white Holland covers a ghostly appearance.

After turning out the last light on the ground floor, Josie made her way upstairs, watching how the moonlight cast long shadows on the wall. She couldn't help thinking this would be a good set for a horror film. Perhaps she'd rent it out to a movie studio. It might be a good way to pay the bills between tourist seasons.

Her bedroom was the closest one to the stairs on the second floor simply because it had been the smallest and, therefore, the easiest to renovate. Josie quickly got ready for bed, then fell asleep almost as soon as her head hit the pillow.

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Josie awoke with a start as yet another earthquake shook the room. She groggily turned on the lamp on her bedside table. She'd been awakened by her share of minor earthquakes in Los Angeles, but her husband would usually put his arm around her and pull her closer before they both fell back to sleep. There was no husband this time and there was no use thinking about it. That was the past. This run-down house with all its beautiful potential was her future.

She was about to turn off the light when she heard a rhythmic thumping from downstairs. Something was hitting a wall at about one beat per second. She was reminded that she lived alone in the middle of nowhere and every slasher film she'd ever watched – and she'd seen quite a few – ran through her mind.

She got up, slipped on tennis shoes in case she needed to run, then picked up a fireplace poker – which was an advantage to having a fireplace in your bedroom. She punched in 911 on her cell phone, keeping her finger just above the call button.

With her cell in one hand and the poker in the other, Josie silently left the room, her heart beating so hard she wondered if it was audible. She hugged the wall when she reached the top of the staircase, peering into the foyer one floor before. She couldn't see anything and she tried to reassure herself that only the most inept burglars would be making that much noise. There was no sign of an intruder, but the thumping continued.

Josie crept down the stairs, feeling slightly better as she went. The light streaming through the windows showed nothing out of place. She edged up to the window near the door and looked out. There was no car besides her own.

She looked toward the woods to see if someone might be watching the house, but there was no one there. However, there was a strong wind. She suddenly realized the thumping was coming from the porch. She looked out the window on the other side of the door to see a rocking chair hitting the house because of the breeze.

Josie let out a sigh of relief, closed her phone's keypad, then made her way upstairs. She slid the poker under the bed just in case – she really needed to stop watching slasher films – then got under the covers, shut out the light and went back to sleep.

She woke up later to hear the chair thumping against the house again, but this time she just rolled over and went back to sleep.

She might not have done so if she'd realized this time there was no wind whatsoever.

