

A two-story house with a porch is illuminated at night. The sky is a vibrant mix of green, blue, and purple, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The house has a dark roof and a porch with a railing. The windows are lit from within, and the porch lights are on. A large tree is in the foreground on the left.

KENDRA
ELLIOT

A

MERCIFUL
DEATH

PRAISE FOR KENDRA ELLIOT

“In Elliot’s latest gripping novel the mystery and suspense are top-notch, and the romance embedded within will quench love story junkies’ thirst, too. The author’s eye for detail makes this one play out more like a movie rather than a book. It can easily be read as a standalone but is obviously much better if the prior three are digested first.”

—*Romantic Times Book Reviews* on *Targeted*, 4 stars

“Elliot’s latest addition to her thrilling, edge-of-your-seat series, *Bone Secrets*, will scare the crap out of you, yet allow you to swoon over the building romantic setting, which provides quite the picturesque backdrop. Her novel contains thrills, chills, snow and . . . hey, you never know! The surprises and cliffhangers are satisfying, yet edgy enough to keep you feverishly flipping the pages.”

—*Romantic Times Book Reviews* on *Known*, 4 stars

“Elliot’s best work to date. The author’s talent is evident in the characters’ wit and smart dialogue . . . One wouldn’t necessarily think a psychological thriller and romance would mesh together well, but Elliot knows what she’s doing when she turns readers’ minds inside out and then softens the blow with an unforgettable love story.”

—*Romantic Times Book Reviews* on *Vanished*, 4½ stars, Top Pick

“Kendra Elliot does it again! Filled with twists, turns, and spine-tingling details, *Alone* is an impressive addition to the *Bone Secrets* series.”

—Laura Griffin, *New York Times* bestselling author

“Elliot once again proves to be a genius in the genre with her third heart-pounding novel in the Bone Secrets collection. The author knows romance and suspense, reeling readers in instantaneously and wowing them with an extremely surprising finish . . . Elliot’s best by a mile!”

—*Romantic Times Book Reviews* on *Buried*, 4½ stars, Top Pick (HOT)

“Make room on your keeper shelf! *Hidden* has it all: intricate plotting, engaging characters, a truly twisted villain. I can’t wait to see what Kendra Elliot dishes up next!”

—Karen Rose, *New York Times* bestselling author

A
MERCIFUL
DEATH

ALSO BY KENDRA ELLIOT

BONE SECRETS NOVELS

Hidden

Chilled

Buried

Alone

Known

CALLAHAN & MCLANE PART OF THE BONE SECRETS WORLD

Vanished

Bridged

Spiraled

Targeted

ROGUE RIVER NOVELLAS

On Her Father's Grave

Her Grave Secrets

Dead in Her Tracks

Death and Her Devotion

A
MERCIFUL
DEATH

KENDRA
ELLIOT



Montlake
Romance

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First edition

*For my mother, who taught me how to can applesauce and
pickles.*

*For my father, who taught me how to chop wood. And stack
it perfectly.*

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ONE

Mercy Kilpatrick wondered whom she'd ticked off at the Portland FBI office.

She stepped out of the car and walked past the two Deschutes County Sheriff SUVs to study the property around the lonely home in the wooded east-side foothills of the Cascade Mountains. Rain plunked on Mercy's hood, and her breath hung in the air. She tucked the ends of her long, dark curls inside her coat, noting the large amount of debris in the home's yard. What would appear to be a series of overgrown hedges and casual piles of junk to anyone else, she immediately identified as a carefully planned funneling system.

"What a mess," said Special Agent Eddie Peterson, who'd been temporarily assigned with her. "Looks like a hoarder lives here."

"Not a mess." She gestured at the thorny hedge and a huge rusted pile of scrap metal. "What direction do those items make you want to go?"

"Not that way," stated Eddie.

"Exactly. The owner deliberately piled all his crap to guide visitors to that open area in front of the house, stopping them from wandering around to the sides and back. Now look up." She pointed at a boarded-up window on the second story with a narrow opening cut into its center. "His junk positions strangers right where he can see them." Eddie nodded, surprise crossing his face.

Ned Fahey's home had been hard to find. The dirt-and-gravel roads weren't labeled, and they'd had to follow precise, mileage-based directions given to them by the county sheriff to find the house hidden deep in the forest. Mercy noted the fireproof metal roof and the sandbags stacked six

feet high against the front of the house. The tired-looking cabin was far from any neighbors but close to a natural spring.

Mercy approved.

“What’s with the sandbags?” Eddie muttered. “We’re at an elevation of four thousand feet.”

“Mass. Mass stops bullets and slows the bad guys. And sandbags are cheap.”

“So he was nuts.”

“He was prepared.”

She’d smelled a light odor of decay in the yard, and as she climbed the porch steps to the house, it slapped her full in the face. *He’s been dead several days.* A stone-faced Deschutes County deputy held out a log for her and Eddie to sign. Mercy eyed the deputy’s simple wedding ring. His spouse would not be happy when he arrived home with corpse scent clinging to his clothes.

Next to her, Eddie breathed heavily through his mouth. “Don’t puke,” she ordered under her breath as she slipped disposable booties over her rubber rain boots.

He shook his head, but his expression was doubtful. She liked Eddie. He was a sharp agent with a positive attitude, but he was a young city boy and stood out here in the boonies with his hipster haircut and nerdy glasses. His expensive leather shoes with the heavy treads would never be the same after the mud in Ned Fahey’s yard.

But they looked good.

Used to look good.

Inside the house, she stopped to examine the front door. It was steel. The door had four hinges and three dead bolts; the additional bolts were positioned near the top and bottom of the door.

Fahey had built an excellent defense. He’d done everything right, but someone had managed to break through his barriers.

That shouldn’t have happened.

Mercy heard voices upstairs and followed. Two crime scene techs directed her and Eddie down the hall to a bedroom at the back of the house. An increasing buzzing sound made Mercy’s stomach turn over; it was a sound she’d heard about but never experienced for herself. Eddie swore under his breath as they turned into Fahey’s bedroom, and the medical examiner glanced up from her inspection of a bloated body on the bed.

Mercy had been right about the source of the noise. The room vibrated with the low roar of flies that had discovered the corpse's orifices. She avoided looking closely at the distended belly that strained the buttons of its clothing. The face was the worst. Unrecognizable behind the black screen of flies.

The medical examiner nodded at the agents as Mercy introduced herself and Eddie. Mercy guessed the medical examiner wasn't much older than she. She was tiny and trim, making Mercy feel abnormally tall.

Dr. Natasha Lockhart introduced herself, peeled off her gloves, and laid them on the body. "I understand he was known to the FBI," she said, lifting a brow.

"He's on the no-fly list," Mercy said. The list was one of a few the FBI used for its terrorism persons to watch. Ned Fahey had been on it for several years. The corpse on the bed had a history of brushes with the federal government. Sovereign citizens and right-wing militia types were his preferred company. From the reports Mercy had read on the long drive from Portland, she gathered that Fahey had talked the talk but had been unable to walk the walk. He'd been arrested several times for minor destruction of federal property, but someone else had always been the ringleader. Fahey's criminal charges had seemed to slide off him as if he were coated in Teflon.

"Well, someone decided they no longer needed Mr. Fahey around," said Dr. Lockhart. "He must have been a sound sleeper to not hear our killer enter his house and place a weapon against his forehead."

"Against?" Mercy asked.

"Yep. Even under all the flies, I can see the tattooing of the gunpowder in the skin around the entry hole. One nice hole in and one out. Through and through. Lots of power behind the round for it to go through that cleanly." Dr. Lockhart grinned at Eddie, who swayed slightly as he stood by Mercy. "The flies brush away easily enough. For a moment."

"Caliber?" Eddie asked in a strangled voice.

Dr. Lockhart shrugged. "Big. Not a puny twenty-two. I'm sure you'll find the bullet burrowed in something below."

Mercy stepped forward and squatted next to the bed, shining a flashlight underneath, intending to see if the round had gone into the floor, but the space under the bed was crammed with plastic storage containers. *Of course it is.*

She glanced around the room, noticing the heavy-duty trunks stacked neatly in each corner. She knew exactly what the closets would look like. Floor-to-ceiling storage neatly labeled and organized. Fahey lived alone, but Mercy knew they'd uncover enough supplies to last a small family through the next decade.

Fahey wasn't a hoarder; he was a prepper. His life centered on being prepared for TEOTWAWKI.

The end of the world as we know it.

And he was the third Deschutes County prepper to be murdered in his own home over the last few weeks.

"Did you handle the first two deaths, Dr. Lockhart?" she asked.

"Call me Natasha," she said. "You mean the other two prepper murders? I responded to the first, and an associate went to the second. I can tell you the first death wasn't nice and neat like this. He fought for his life. Think they're connected?"

Mercy gave a smile that said nothing. "That's what we're here to find out."

"Dr. Lockhart's damned right about that first death," said a new voice in the room.

Mercy and Eddie turned to find a tall, angular man with a sheriff's star studying both of them. His gaze grew puzzled as it lingered on the thick frames of Eddie's black glasses. No doubt the residents of Deschutes County didn't see a lot of hip 1950s throwbacks. Mercy made introductions. Sheriff Ward Rhodes appeared to be in his sixties. Decades of sun exposure had created deep lines and rough patches on his face, but his eyes were clear and keen and probing.

"This room looks like a tea party compared to the scene at the Biggs murder. That place had a dozen bullet holes in the walls, and old man Biggs fought back with a knife."

Mercy knew Jefferson Biggs had been sixty-five and wondered how he'd earned the title of *old man* from this sheriff who was in the same age group.

Probably an indication of Biggs's get-off-my-lawn attitude more than his age.

"But none of the homes—including this one—showed forced entry, correct?" asked Eddie politely.

Sheriff Rhodes nodded. "That's right." He scowled at Eddie. "Anyone ever tell you that you look like James Dean? With glasses?"

"I get that a lot."

Mercy bit her lip. Eddie claimed to be surprised by the comparison, but she knew he liked it. "But if there's no forced entry here, and Ned Fahey was asleep," she said, "then someone knew how to get inside the house or was also sleeping in the house."

"He's wearing pajamas," agreed Dr. Lockhart. "I don't know the time of death yet. The putrefaction is very progressed. I'll know more after lab tests."

"We examined the house," said Sheriff Rhodes. "There's no sign that anyone was sleeping here or of any forced entry. There's another bedroom, but it doesn't look like it's been slept in for a few decades. The sofa downstairs doesn't have any pillows or blankets to indicate that someone else was here." He paused. "Front door was wide open when we got here."

"I take it Ned Fahey was the type to keep his doors locked tight?" Mercy asked half in jest. The short walk through the house had shown her a man who took home defense very seriously. "Who reported his death?"

"Toby Cox. He gives Ned a hand around here. Was supposed to help Ned move some wood this morning. He said the door was open and when he saw the situation he called us. I sent him home a few hours ago. He's not quite right in the head, and this shook him up something fierce."

"You know most of the local residents?" Mercy asked.

The sheriff shrugged. "I know most. But who can know everyone? I know the people I know," he said simply. "This home is far from any city limits, so whenever Ned had an issue, he called us at the county."

"Issue? Who'd Ned have problems with?" Mercy asked. She understood the politics and social behaviors of small towns and rural communities. She'd spent the first eighteen years of her life in a small town. The residents tried to make everyone's business their own. Now she lived in a large, urban condo complex where she knew two of her neighbors' names. First names.

She liked it that way.

"Someone broke into a couple of Ned's outbuildings one time. Stole his quad and a bunch of fuel. He was pretty steamed about that. We never did find it. Other calls have been complaints of people hunting or trespassing on his property. He's got a good ten acres here, and the borders

aren't marked very well. Ned posted some **Keep Out** signs, but you can only cover so much ground with those. He used to fire a shotgun to scare people off. After that happened a few times, we asked him to call us first. Scared the crap out of a backpacking family one time."

"No dogs?"

"I told him to get a few. He said they eat too much."

Mercy nodded. *Fewer mouths to feed.*

"Income?" she asked.

"Social Security." Sheriff Rhodes twisted his lips.

Mercy understood. It was common for the antigovernment types to raise hell about paying their taxes or buying licenses, but don't *dare* touch their Social Security.

"Anything missing?" asked Eddie. "Is there anyone who would even know what's missing?"

"As far as I know, Toby Cox was the only person to step foot in this house in the last ten years. We can ask him, but I'll warn you he's not the most observant type." Rhodes cleared his throat, a sheepish look on his face. "I can't take it too seriously, but I'll tell you Toby was terrified and rambling that the cave man had killed Ned."

"What?" asked Eddie. "A caveman? Like prehistoric?"

Mercy simply stared at the sheriff. Communities had their rumors and legends, but this was one she'd never heard of.

"No, I gathered from my talk with Toby that it was more like a mountain man. But like I said, he gets confused easily. The boy's not all there. I can't give it any weight."

"Did he see this cave man?" Mercy asked.

"No. My impression was that Ned had told Toby the story to scare the crap out of him. Seemed to work."

"Got it."

"But we do have one interesting thing," said the sheriff. "Someone broke into a storage unit outside. Follow me."

Mercy sucked in deep breaths of fresh air as she followed the sheriff down the porch stairs. He led them through the junk-lined funnel and fifty feet down the dirt road before veering off on a path. She smugly noted her toes were dry in her cheery rain boots. She'd warned Eddie to dress appropriately, but he'd brushed it off. This wasn't rain on concrete sidewalks in downtown Portland; this was a rainstorm in the Cascades.

Mud, heavy brush, wandering streams, and more mud. She glanced back and saw Eddie wipe the rain off his forehead, and he gave a wry smile with a pointed look at his mud-caked shoes.

Yep.

They ducked under a yellow ribbon of police tape that surrounded a small shed. “The crime scene techs have already processed the scene,” Sheriff Rhodes advised. “But try to watch where you step.”

Mercy studied the mess of crisscrossing boot prints and didn’t see a clear place to step. The sheriff simply walked through, so she followed. The shed was about fifteen by twenty feet and hidden by tall rhododendrons. From the outside it looked as if a strong wind would flatten the tiny outbuilding, but inside Mercy noticed the walls had been heavily reinforced and the room was lined with sandbags along the dirt floor.

“Chain on the door was cut. I should say all *three* chains on the door were cut,” the sheriff corrected himself. He gestured toward a big hole in the ground near the back wall of the shed. The lid to an ancient deep freezer opened out of the hole.

Bodies?

Mercy peered into the buried freezer. Empty. She sniffed the air, catching the minty odor of a weapon lubricant she knew some gun enthusiasts swore by, and a hint of gunpowder smell. Ned had hidden an arsenal in the ground.

“Weapons,” she stated flatly. Fahey had had three guns registered in his name. He wouldn’t have worked this hard to hide three guns. He could have easily stored a few dozen in the huge freezer. Mercy wondered how Ned had controlled the humidity for the guns. As far as weapons storage went, this wasn’t ideal.

“There was one of those little cordless humidifiers in there,” Rhodes stated as if he’d read her mind. “But someone had to know where to dig to find the freezer.” He gestured at the piles of fresh dirt. “I wonder how well camouflaged the freezer was. This isn’t a place I’d come looking for weapons.”

“Anyone know how many weapons he actually had?” Mercy asked.

The sheriff shrugged and looked into the freezer. “Lots is my guess.”

“You said there were three chains locking the door?” Eddie asked. “To me that screams, ‘I’ve got something valuable in here.’” He pointed at a narrow steel rod on the dirt floor. “If I broke through three sets of locks and

chains and found an empty shed, I'd start plunging that into the ground until I hit something."

Sure enough, there were narrow holes in scattered places across the floor of the shed.

"He's a prepper," Mercy stated. "It's expected he'd have a stash of guns somewhere."

"They didn't have to murder him in his bed to steal his guns," Rhodes pointed out.

"They?" asked Mercy, her ears perking up.

The sheriff raised his hands defensively. "No proof. Just going by the amount of work I see here and the number of footprints found in front of this shed. The techs are running a comparison on Fahey's and Toby Cox's boots to see what's left. They'll let us know how many people were here."

"Can't rule out Cox," Eddie pointed out.

Sheriff Rhodes nodded, but Mercy saw the regret in his eyes. She suspected he liked this Toby Cox who wasn't "right in the head."

Mercy mentally placed Toby Cox at the top of her list to interview.