

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a bright red jacket and blue jeans, stands with her back to the camera on a dark, jagged rock. She is looking out over a vast, dark sea under a heavy, stormy sky with dark, swirling clouds. The overall mood is somber and contemplative.

THE LAST SISTER

**KENDRA
ELLIOT**

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“Every family has skeletons. Kendra Elliot’s tale of the Mills family’s dark secrets is first-rate suspense. Dark and gripping, *The Last Sister* crescendos to knock-out, edge-of-your seat tension.”

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“*The Last Sister* is exciting and suspenseful! Engaging characters and a complex plot kept me on the edge of my seat until the very last page.”

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**THE
LAST
SISTER**

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A Merciful Truth
A Merciful Secret
A Merciful Silence
A Merciful Fate
A Merciful Promise

BONE SECRETS NOVELS

Hidden
Chilled
Buried
Alone
Known

BONE SECRETS NOVELLAS

Veiled

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PART OF THE BONE SECRETS WORLD

Vanished

Bridged
Spiraled
Targeted

ROGUE RIVER NOVELLAS

On Her Father's Grave (Rogue River)
Her Grave Secrets (Rogue River)
Dead in Her Tracks (Rogue Winter)
Death and Her Devotion (Rogue Vows)
Truth Be Told (Rogue Justice)

WIDOW'S ISLAND NOVELLAS

Close to the Bone
Bred in the Bone

**THE
LAST
SISTER**

**KENDRA
ELLIOT**



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First edition

For my girls

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Memory is inherently unreliable. With time, it degrades. With trauma, it fragments. In isolation, it festers.

—*Ellen Kirschman, PhD*

1

She wrapped her shaking fingers in the hem of her sweater to avoid damaging any fingerprints as she slid open the rear patio door, following the trail of blood. Outside it was dark, daybreak still a few hours away, and the air was cold with the coast's salty mist.

The smeared blood went across the small porch and down the wood stairs. She followed, her heartbeat pounding in her head as she ignored the heavy smell of smoke in the air. The blood trail vanished in the grass and poor light, but she instinctively knew to check the woods at the back of the yard.

Something swayed in a tree. She couldn't breathe.

Please. Not again.

2

“Who disturbed the scene?”

FBI special agent Zander Wells tamped down a rare rise of temper as he stood behind the small home in Bartonville and stared at the surrounding tall firs. The blatant disregard for standard procedure—standard procedure *everywhere*—made him want to punch someone.

An unusual urge for him.

“My deputy is a rookie. He’s young,” said the gaunt Clatsop County sheriff, brushing rain from his cheek. “I think shock took over. Haven’t had a violent death in this town in four years, and it didn’t help that he knew the victims.” Sheriff Greer shook his head, pity in his gaze. “He sincerely thought he was helping.”

Zander exchanged a glance with FBI special agent Ava McLane. She rolled her eyes.

Fewer than a thousand people called Bartonville home. The tiny coastal town sat on the banks of the massive Columbia River, not far from where it emptied into the Pacific Ocean. The city was remote, separated from Oregon’s heavily populated Willamette Valley by the hills of the Coast Range and thousands of acres of timber. Zander’s drive from Portland had taken a little less than two hours.

At their feet one of the victims was zipped up in a body bag. Zander and Ava had silently viewed the young man inside before she’d gestured for the tech to close the bag. Ava’s face had been blank, but a spark of rage had shown in her eyes. The man’s face would be permanently imprinted on Zander’s brain.

Along with the condition of the man’s dead wife inside the home.

There had been a rocky start to the investigation. The first responding deputy had cut the rope when he saw Sean Fitch hanging from the backyard tree. Three other deputies had tramped through the scene and moved both

bodies during their response. An initial declaration of a murder-suicide by the sheriff had wasted precious hours before the medical examiner showed up and disagreed.

The ME wasn't the only person who had questioned the sheriff's declaration. The witness who had reported the murders had later called the Portland FBI office to report that the hanged black man had a hate symbol sliced into his forehead. An upside-down triangle inside a larger triangle.

Sean Fitch's Caucasian wife had been stabbed over and over in their bedroom. It appeared Sean had been stabbed in the same room and then dragged out of the house and hanged.

"It doesn't reflect well on your department that a civilian had to report this as a possible hate crime." Zander stared at Greer as water dripped from the brim of the sheriff's hat. It wasn't raining; it was drizzling mist. The type of northern Oregon coastal weather that fooled you into believing it was safe to step outside, while in reality the dense mist clung to every inch of clothing and skin, drenching a person rapidly.

Greer grimaced and looked down at his boots. "We don't get racist shit like this in our county—and blood had obscured the cuts. I'm still not convinced that's what those marks represent."

Zander understood. The triangles weren't a commonly known Klan symbol. But the sheriff had been in law enforcement a long time.

He should have known something wasn't right.

"Even so, the noose and the victim's skin color were clear," said Ava. "If that's not a red flag, I don't know what is."

Greer shook his head. "That kind of crime doesn't happen here. Suicide is much more prevalent."

The small sheriff's office employed three detectives. Two were out of state, testifying in a trial, and the third was home with the flu. Sheriff Greer had started the initial investigation himself, without asking for help except from the state police crime lab, to process the scene.

Was the man rusty, Zander wondered, or just overconfident?

Either way, Zander and Ava now had a mess to unravel.

Zander stared at the mud under the tree. A dozen yellow numbered crime scene markers dotted the ground along with dozens of prints. A long depression where the body must have lain at one point. A length of rope. He looked up. Another piece of rope dangled from the branch. The bare

deciduous tree stood out among the towering green firs; its pale, thick trunk and knotted branches alluded to a long, rough life.

The branch wasn't that high, but it'd been high enough.

"Two killers. At least," Ava muttered under her breath, and Zander silently agreed. Sean Fitch wasn't small. Hanging the man had taken effort.

Persons motivated to make a point.

Zander turned and walked back to the home, taking care not to walk through the obvious body drag trail where the killers had pulled the man out of the house—although several boot prints had already stomped through it. He paused and took a look at the burned brush against the back of the house, where the smell of gasoline permeated the air.

Someone had tried to burn the house and failed miserably. The siding was scorched, and a few bushes wouldn't survive.

"Not a lot of intelligence in that maneuver," Ava commented. "Maybe the fire was an afterthought?"

"They brought gasoline," said Zander.

"We're in a rural area. I bet plenty of people carry a gasoline can in the back of their truck."

"True. Possibly one of them panicked and thought they could cover up some evidence by burning down the house."

"They underestimated Oregon rain."

Zander stared at the darkened siding for a long moment, disturbed that it felt unconnected with the rest of the scene.

He moved up the concrete steps to the back door and slipped booties over his wet shoes. Ava joined him and covered her shoes too. They still wore gloves from their first quick pass through the house.

They stepped into the immaculate but aged yellow kitchen. He'd already looked for an indication that a knife was missing but hadn't been able to tell. The Fitches had a drawer full of mismatched utensils. No knife set. Black fingerprint powder coated the cupboard and drawer handles.

A dried trail of smeared blood passed through the kitchen and out the back door.

More black powder. More evidence markers.

Moving down the narrow hallway, he balanced carefully, keeping his feet on the few bare inches of carpet close to the wall, avoiding the wide bloody track.

Zander and Ava paused in the doorway of the largest bedroom. Signs of brutal violence covered the room. A large dark stain indicated where Lindsay Fitch had bled out on the carpet next to the bed. Lindsay's body had been loaded into a vehicle to be delivered to the morgue, but he and Ava had viewed the woman before entering the scene. He was accustomed to coming late to crime scenes where the bodies were usually long gone.

Squares of the carpet had been cut out and removed by the state crime lab's evidence team. Torn, tiny chunks of discolored carpet pad dotted the exposed plywood. Arcs of blood swept up the walls, splattered on the ceiling, coated the headboard, and left streaks on the lampshades. More blood covered the sheets. The metallic odor filled Zander's nose as he snapped a few photos with his phone.

Why does our body's liquid essence smell like metal? A nonliving substance.

Sean's blood had been tracked from the far side of the bed and into the hall, the swath dotted with occasional yellow markers.

Again Zander agreed that at least two people must have been involved. It appeared both victims had been surprised and quickly subdued. Each had only a few defensive wounds on their hands or arms. A mishmash of bloody tread marks crossed the bedroom's carpet. Zander believed he saw two distinct treads, but he knew the boot prints of the responding deputies had to be eliminated.

He exhaled. How was Sheriff Greer not raging about his department's response?

"The bodies need to go to the main Portland medical examiner's office," Ava stated as she scanned the room. "Not a satellite examiner's office. Dr. Rutledge should oversee this."

Zander nodded. The rest of the case needed to be handled without flaws. The state's top medical examiner needed to step in. There was no room for more errors.

Racial overtones. Scene contamination.

From here on out, the deaths would get the proper investigation they deserved.

Zander heard the sheriff stop in the hall behind them.

"Has Bartonville ever had its own police department?" Zander asked. He and Ava had reviewed the logistics of response coverage in the rural area before they had left the FBI office in Portland. A few fluid layers of

outside law enforcement extended over the tiny town where the murders had occurred.

“No. The city of Astoria responds occasionally, but our county department in Warrenton is closer to Bartonville, so usually we do.” Sheriff Greer cleared his throat. “State police step in when we need technical support or more manpower. Usually pretty quiet around here. Picks up during tourist season. State would help us out if I gave them a call.”

Zander caught the subtext. *The FBI isn't needed.*

“What kind of suspect first came to mind when you saw this scene, Sheriff?” Ava asked politely. Zander recognized the tone. She was angry. He'd worked with Ava for more than five years and knew her every mood. He admired her; she was relentless and sharp.

The sheriff pulled at the skin under his chin as he thought. “Dunno. We have our share of idiots and drunks and meth heads, but I can't imagine this kind of violence from any of them. Probably wasn't a local.”

“You said the Fitches had only lived here a year?” Zander asked, hoping the protectiveness the sheriff showed for his residents and deputies wasn't affecting his ability to conduct the investigation. His reluctance to consider that the murders were homegrown was the equivalent of viewing the case through a peephole.

“About that long. I believe they moved here because Sean got a position teaching history at the high school. Lindsay's a waitress.”

“I'd like to talk to your responding deputy,” Ava stated.

Zander instantly pitied the deputy. Ava's good looks and dark-blue eyes didn't reveal that she was a ferocious interrogator. The man wouldn't see it coming.

“After I questioned him,” said the sheriff, “I sent him back to the department to get started on his paperwork while the events were fresh in his head. He knows he screwed up. Feels bad about it. I suspect he's gone home by now.”

“Where can I find Emily Mills for an interview?” Zander asked. He and Ava had already decided to split up the interviews to cover ground quickly. Ms. Mills had discovered the murder scene when she arrived at the house early that morning because Lindsay Fitch was late for her waitressing shift and hadn't answered her phone.

Ms. Mills was the resident who had personally called the Portland FBI after Sheriff Greer had brushed aside her concerns that the crime could be

racially motivated. She had refused to hang up until Zander's supervisor gave her his word that he'd send an investigator to the coast that day.

Zander doubted Ms. Mills was the sheriff's favorite person at the moment. A flicker of annoyance in the sheriff's eyes confirmed his thought.

"Emily works at Barton's Diner in Bartonville," he said with a dull tone. "Big place that looks like a log cabin. It's on the main road. Can't miss it." The sheriff frowned and looked past Zander and Ava into the bedroom. "I was a deputy when Emily's father was murdered a couple of decades ago." Sheriff Greer glanced back to the agents, his eyes wary. "We haven't had a hanging in this county since his."

Tiny hairs stood up on the back of Zander's neck.

"Wait!" Ava exclaimed. "You've had hangings here before? And you just mention this now?"

The sheriff's mouth flattened into a thin, pale line. "Did you hear me say 'decades ago'? His killer has probably died in prison. Can't be relevant."

"But the person who found Sean Fitch hanged in a tree is the daughter of a man who was hanged?" said Zander. "You don't find that the slightest bit unlikely?"

Exasperation crossed the gaunt face. "This is a tiny community. Everyone knows everybody. You can't kick someone without finding out their sister or uncle went to school with you or married your cousin. When I heard Emily found the bodies, I felt bad for her but wasn't surprised by the coincidence."

Ava and Zander looked at each other, each easily reading the other's thoughts.

Neither of them believed in coincidences.