

## Chapter 1

There's a man in the backyard." Sadie Guthrie peered out the round window in the back stairwell, clutching her cell phone to her ear. "Why would someone come into my yard uninvited?"

"What's he doing?" Denae asked. "I mean, if he's walking toward the door..."

"He's not." Sadie shifted a little. Maybe her vision was obscured, since the small window was fitted with circling stained-glass bluebirds in a sea of slightly wavy clear glass. "He's... digging?"

"You're kidding, right?"

Could the distortions mess up her eyes that much? Not possible, but having another peek from the kitchen window before she hung up on her best friend and called the police seemed like a good idea. "I'm going downstairs to get a better look."

"I'll stay on the line. Because what if he's hiding a body there? You might be his next victim."

“Or you might read too many mysteries.” Sadie entered the kitchen and angled a look out the window above the sink, taking care to stay in the shadows in case the man looked up.

“You okay? Is he still there?” Denae’s voice prompted.

“I’m okay. And he’s definitely not digging a hole deep enough for a body. It looks more like he’s... gardening.”

“Did you say *gardening*?”

“Yeah. But who does that in someone else’s yard?” There’d been signs, though, when she bought the place. Denae and her cousin had hurried Sadie through the house when they came to clean out their grandmother’s lifetime of collections.

Sadie had signed papers on the spot. This was exactly the sort of heritage home she’d been looking for all over Spokane, Washington. That she’d be only ten minutes from her office downtown while living in a quiet neighborhood backing a steep hillside had sealed the deal. She didn’t even mind the throwback kitchen, which didn’t match the era of the house one iota. It wasn’t like she cooked, so how bad could it be?

Her brain clicked that Denae rapid-fired questions at her. “How old is he? How is he dressed? Is he looking around to see if he’s being watched?”

“Um, he looks maybe thirtyish? Dark curly hair brushing the collar of an old denim shirt. Scruffy jeans.”

“I guess mass murderers can start at any age.”

“Denae. Stop it. You’re scaring me.”

“No, I’m protecting you. Has Grandma’s landline been disconnected yet? Because I’ll stay right here while you call 9-1-1.”

“They removed the wires this morning.”

“Maybe you can go out the front door and make the call from a safe place, like next door. Only what if they’re in on it, too?”

“In on what?”

The man stood and stretched from side to side then leaned on the handle of a long spade and glanced around. He did look rather suspicious. Could Denae’s over-active imagination be right, just this once?

“It could be a crime ring. If not murder, maybe drugs. Or maybe he’s going to bury the cash or jewels from a heist and frame you for it!”

“Denae. Don’t even—”

“You can’t be too careful.”

Decades ago this neighborhood under the bridge had been a magnet for addicts and the destitute. Sadie might not have spent more than an hour in the house before signing papers, but she’d researched Bridgeview along with every other area of Spokane in her year-long search. She’d missed an opportunity for a riverside home near here just last summer by pondering too long,

and she hadn't been about to make that mistake again. Not when the price was so reasonable, and the old woman's family hadn't even listed it with a realty yet.

Win, win.

Maybe.

The man turned as he looked around, a crease furrowing his brow. Even with the frown, he was awfully cute. His denim-clad shoulders were broad, his sleeves rolled up to reveal tanned muscles in his forearms. Who in the Pacific Northwest had a tan by the end of March? The snow had only finished melting away a few weeks ago.

She knew the moment he realized something was off. His gaze sharpened on the collapsed cardboard boxes beside the back door. He scanned the back of the house again, and Sadie stepped even further into the shadows lest he could see six feet back into the unlit kitchen.

Denae's jabbering faded into meaningless, rolling sounds.

He strode toward the porch.

Sadie gripped the phone with a sweaty hand. What a stupid design for a house! There was no escape from the kitchen without being in full view of that back door. She heard his footsteps cross the deck. Heard the sharp knock.

There was no place to hide. She let out a shaky breath. "Denae?"

"Are you okay?"

“I-I’m not sure. He’s coming to the door. I’m going to set the phone down a few feet away and go answer it, okay? Don’t leave me.”

“I’ve got your back. If he messes with you, he’ll pay. I promise I won’t let your death go unavenged. Just a sec. I’ll start recording.”

Another knock sounded, louder this time.

“Stay quiet so he won’t know you’re listening.”

“Mum’s the word.”

The door creaked open. “Mrs. Essery? Are you home?”

That had been the former owner’s name. Was this guy on walk-in-without-an-invitation terms with the old woman?

Sadie tapped the icon for speaker and set the phone down on the counter, but her shaking hands missed. The device clattered to the scuffed wooden floor.

The intruder’s gaze swung to meet hers.



The woman staring back at Peter Santoro was definitely not Beulah Essery. She was fifty years younger, had more curves, and was a whole lot prettier, for starters.

“Sadie? What happened? Are you there? Or I’m calling the police.” A panicked voice squawked from the phone on the floor.

The woman — Sadie? — grabbed the phone. “Sorry. It fell on the floor. Hang on a minute.” She straightened, her gaze never leaving his as she set the device on the counter. “Who are you and what are you doing in my backyard?”

Peter blinked. “*Your* backyard?”

Her blue eyes shot fire at him. “Yes. I bought this house. You’re trespassing.”

“Uh... no. Beulah and I have an agreement. She’d let me know when she was ready to sell, and I’d buy it.”

She shook her head. “Beulah Essery passed away two weeks ago.”

No way. This woman had to be lying. Or Peter was having a nightmare. That was it. He’d wake up in a few minutes and share the story with Alex over morning coffee. They’d both have a good laugh before Peter came next door to sow the second planting of sugar snap peas. Right?

The woman didn’t seem like a dream. She looked very real with her shoulder-length blond curls, white pleated top, and navy jacket and slacks. Heels. If Peter were imagining a woman, she’d be in jeans and a cute T-shirt. He’d never come up with this business look in the middle of the night.

She must be real, then. Which meant her story might be, too.

He needed to think, because the conversation had gotten way off script. He stuck out his hand. “I’m Peter Santoro, and I live next door, renting a room from my cousin Alex. I’ve known Beulah most of my life. Last I heard from her, she was enjoying an extended visit with her family in Cannon Beach.”

“I’m Sadie Guthrie. Mrs. Essery’s granddaughter Denae is one of my closest friends.”

“Hi there.” The female voice crackled from the phone at Sadie’s elbow.

He gave the device a sidelong look. “Uh... hi.” Weird.

“Denae and I were chatting when I saw you in the yard. She’s still on the line.” Sadie raised her eyebrows at him.

Like he was supposed to read some significance in that?

“Yeah, I’m a witness, so don’t try any funny stuff.”

Peter blinked. “Funny stuff?” What on earth? They thought he was... what? He couldn’t help the chuckle that erupted.

“Not so fast, buster,” the disembodied voice warned.

He held up both hands as he corralled his mirth. “No nefarious purposes. I was simply tending my garden when I noticed the packing boxes on the porch and came to check on Beulah.”

A perplexed frown graced Sadie's face. "Tending your garden? This is my house. My yard."

Worry gnawed at Peter's gut. "I have an agreement with Beulah. I care for her yard, growing fruit and vegetables, and she gets all the fresh produce she wants." One thing at a time. He'd address the purchase pact after his livelihood was secured.

Sadie took a step closer, a faint scent of vanilla tickling his nostrils. "You may have had an agreement with her, but she's dead and her legal heirs sold the property to me. You and I—" she motioned between them "—don't have an agreement. While I'm sure the family appreciates you looking out for their grandmother, the situation has changed. Your... services... are no longer needed or wanted."

"*You're* the one who doesn't understand. Beulah signed a paper."

She rolled her eyes. "I'm not sure if you're always this dense or if today is a special occasion." She pointed at official-looking paperwork on the counter behind her. "I. Own. This. Property. The prior owner's agreements are no longer valid. So I'll thank you to remove your, your shovel and your presence from my yard, or I'll call the police."

"Go, Sadie!" called the voice from the phone.

Who was that person again? Peter snatched the cell. "You're Mrs. Essery's granddaughter?"

Didn't she explain her wishes to her family? She promised to sell me the property." He'd let the details of the elderly woman's demise sink in later. For now, he had a garden to protect and real estate to gain possession of. Could someone be forced to unbuy a house?

"Yes, I'm Denae Archibald. Beulah's daughter Lisa is my mom."

"And didn't she tell all of you what she wanted?" She had to have. Peter was grasping at straws. He knew it, but what choice did he have? He couldn't just walk away from two seasons of hard work. From all his dreams for Bridgeview Backyards, the business he co-owned with his cousin Jasmine. They needed everything to go right this summer after dipping into their savings to buy out Jasmine's brother. Cash flow was a mere trickle until sales rose. And sales couldn't rise without produce for sale.

"She did mention that the nice boy next door had approached her about buying her out."

Peter's teeth ground in frustration. "Then why...?"

"My uncle Ted is the executor, and he was determined to liquefy all assets as quickly as possible. Sadie made an offer for the house and its contents, and Uncle Ted accepted it on behalf of the estate. Done deal."

"But you can't." There was simply no way on God's green earth that this could be happening.

"Sorry." Denae's voice held no remorse.

He'd counted on this house next door so much they'd planted perennials here. Berries. Asparagus. Varieties that required several years to establish and could not easily be moved. They'd lose the income while transplanting and waiting for new growth.

Peter didn't bother pressing the button to end the call as he plunked the phone back on the counter. Let Denae keep listening. She wanted to be a witness? All right then. Let her witness this.

"This isn't over." He stared Sadie straight in the face, steeling himself against her vanilla fragrance and focusing instead on her blue eyes, as unyielding as his own. "I have a signed agreement, and I'll be taking it to my attorney."

At least, if he had one. Alex's kid brother was in his third year of law school. That counted, right? It had to be enough for some advice.

"I won't be hiring an attorney," Sadie informed him. "I won't need one."

From the cell phone, Denae snickered.

The nerve. Peter raised his eyebrows. "I think you will." No way was he letting on his bravado was mostly bluff. Surely the agreement would hold up. Their marketing consultant — the guy who'd wound up marrying Peter's business partner — had harped on formal, signed contracts with the various landowners Bridgeview Backyards dealt with, so they'd typed something up and taken copies around. None had been

notarized. Still, the contracts proved intent. That might be enough. It had to be.

A faint smile crossed Sadie's features.

Too bad the sight of it wasn't more reassuring.

"You misunderstand. I won't need representation because I am a lawyer myself."

Peter felt the nails secure his coffin with every word.

*Raindrops on Radishes*

will release early in 2019

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