

Chapter 1

Julianna climbed into the back seat of the waiting Volvo, square and black and unremarkable until she sank into its plush leather. The wind lashed through the crowds on the sidewalks as they stumbled against their luggage, called for taxis, grabbed children. Edinburgh Airport, though smaller than most she passed through, sported the same cacophony of noise and movement, and Julianna wasn't up for either. She sighed with gratitude upon entering the warm car.

Margot slid into the front seat beside a stranger, then turned and smiled wearily. "You remember Evan, don't you, Julianna?"

She looked into the rearview mirror where half of the driver's face was reflected. The stranger spoke. "How are you, Mrs. Burke? It's been awhile."

Perhaps he was familiar. She met so many people. She'd learned long ago to listen for clues. Often someone would drop his own name in the first few minutes of conversation if you waited. A name or, if not, at least a city or an event or a book title or a spouse's name. You smiled and nodded until you figured it out. She never wanted someone who knew her to suspect she didn't know him. Though increasingly she didn't.

"Of course, Evan," she said, picking up on Margot's pointer. That was a big part of Margot's job these days. "How are you?"

"Fine, ma'am. It's good to have you back in East Neuk."

"Mr. Burke will be joining us next week," she said, shivering as she looked at the steel gray sky. "Though it doesn't look much like golfing weather, does it?"

She didn't notice the look that passed between the two in the front seat, didn't see the question that arose in Evan's reflected eyes. "Aye, that's for sure. It's been a brutal winter."

Julianna closed her eyes against the airport traffic for what seemed only moments, but when she opened them again, rain was spitting on the windshield, and they had crossed the frigid waters of the Firth of Forth. Now they were passing barren fields with the waist-high stone walls that lined miles and miles of these winding roads. It had been too long, she thought, too long since she and Connor had been back to this eastern coast of Scotland where her writing career began.

Twenty years or better that they'd first discovered the stone house – or castle, as they laughingly called it – along the Fife Coastal Path, almost exactly halfway between Crail and Anstruther. Connor had wanted to play the fabulous golf courses of Scotland with the natives – who could've been his cousins had his ancestors not "crossed the pond," he'd claimed. But he didn't want to be alone every night. Truth be told, Connor never wanted to be alone.

She'd been halfway through her first book and said she could write anywhere. So he'd booked the turreted house of gray stone because it was reasonably priced in April before any semblance of warm weather arrived. At a desk overlooking the North Sea, Julianna had been invigorated. The book was set in her native Charleston, and somehow, with only her memory to rely on, the setting came alive more vividly than when she was actually writing in the Deep South.

After her third book, they'd bought the house in Scotland.

Her eyes flicked to Margot, who was turned again to the back seat, apparently awaiting an answer. "I'm sorry. What?"

"Evan said his wife has potato soup and sourdough bread waiting for us. Doesn't that

sound good?”

Did it? She supposed so.

Margot must have sensed her confusion. “Sheona knows what we need on a day like this,” she said smoothly, indicating the gathering darkness and rain, which was pounding harder.

“Ah, yes, right. Soup.” Julianna did remember Sheona, a pretty little thing who came in upon occasion to cook, when she and Connor didn’t feel like going out. But had she already decided not to go out? She looked at the rain and the trees permanently bent by these winds. Well, good decision if she had.

Julianna saw Evan’s eyes squint in the mirror. She attempted a smile. “Margot, you did pack my laptop, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” Her assistant hesitated. “Why?”

“So I can write, silly. Why else?”

“I packed it so you could keep up with the news from Charleston.”

“I can do both.”

“I . . . I’m just surprised. That’s all,” said Margot.

Julianna laughed. “Why else would I come to Scotland in March?”

Again, a look passed between the two in the front seat, but this time Julianna caught it. She hesitated. “Margot?”

The young woman turned and faced her. “It’s just that you and Dr. Fitzgerald and Liza Holland thought it’d be good for you to get away. You hadn’t said anything about writing.”

Julianna frowned. Charlie Fitzgerald was her longtime neighbor and family physician. He was always offering advice. But Liza Holland? *Why would she weigh in?* Julianna did remember the silver-haired neighbor who lived six doors down. They walked their dogs together and

compared notes about what had possessed them to adopt Shiba Inus, a highly anxious Japanese breed. They apologized repeatedly as the dogs tried to attack every other dog on Sullivan's Island. *But why would Liza Holland think she needed to get away?*

Julianna puzzled over the question for a minute, then lost interest. She laid her head back and closed her eyes once more. She was tired, so very tired. More tired than the plane trip from Charleston to Philadelphia to Edinburgh warranted. A tiredness that had crept into her brain and made thinking difficult. She needed to talk to Connor. She relied on him, personally and professionally. It'd been this way for the twenty-two years of their marriage, years in which he'd become much more than a husband, had become her first reader and business manager and publicist and travel agent, dealing with editors and publishers, bookstore owners and hoteliers.

For one thing, he encouraged her wanderings. That's what they called it when Julianna's mind left the prosaic world of victims and killers and weapons and alibis to arrive at the furtive twists and psychological turns that so captivated her readers.

Her first wandering had occurred in this very place, in the house overlooking the North Sea, when Connor returned from an afternoon of golf to find Julianna gone. He'd told her the story a hundred times, and she'd repeated it a hundred more. He'd opened a beer and poured her a glass of white wine, sure she'd be back at any moment. But as the long and chilly day stretched toward sunset, he'd grown worried and, guessing correctly, had hurried down the coastal path toward Anstruther.

He overtook her within the first mile, and with relief, suggested they continue on for the village's famous fish and chips. But his relief soon gave way to puzzlement at Julianna's passivity. He tried to engage her in conversation, and she smiled and agreed with everything he

said, but her eyes were glazed, trance-like. He was beginning to be alarmed when she tripped and went sprawling. Connor rushed to help her up, and she looked at him in surprise.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, then looked around and laughed shakily. “What am I doing here?”

“I found you on the path,” he said, the incoming tide crashing on the rocks below. “Are you all right, Jules?”

She smiled. “I know exactly what happens next,” she said. “And exactly how to set it up.”

She insisted they turn around immediately, without dinner. Back in the stone house, Julianna worked feverishly through the night, jotting down the numerous changes she would make in the manuscript, crafting the ideas that would make her plodding story soar, deleting entire sections and writing new ones. They’d talked about it in the years since, named it: Julianna’s *wanderings*. When her subconscious or her soul or her spirit or her muse or whatever the heck you called it took over her conscious writing self and saw possibilities that simply weren’t there before. It was not so much a silencing of her inner critic as it was a releasing of her inner genius. In the trance of wandering out of the day-to-day, Julianna was able to access complex mysteries that swayed critics and readers alike.

She’d like to wander now, she thought peevishly. She always awoke from those episodes energized and excited about the next twist in her novel. She might stay up for eighteen to twenty-four hours straight, pounding out sentences and paragraphs and pages that made critics swoon, made readers stand in line on the days her books went on sale, even in this sorry day of online publishing. She shook her head, felt the satisfying weight of a book in her hand. *But wait. She wouldn’t wander now. There was no book, no plot, no mystery to be worked out. Or was there?*

She opened her eyes and stared at the rain, pounding now, shrouding the countryside like the inside of a charcoal coffin. Odd metaphor, she thought idly. Can an entire view be reminiscent of the *inside* of a coffin? And why charcoal? Didn't Charlestonians prefer highly polished cherry to burnished metal? When was the last time she'd been to a funeral anyway? Recently, it seemed. *Focus, Julianna. Was she working on a book?*

She honestly didn't know. She felt like she was in that strange land between sleep and wakefulness, when the sticky remnants of a dream were so overpowering that she wasn't sure who she was, who she was married to, where she lived. Part of her wanted to fight to the surface to answer the questions. Part of her wanted to sink deeper and ignore them. The latter won, and she fell asleep.

Julianna startled awake at the slam of two doors in quick succession and found herself alone in the plane. *No, not the plane.* The Volvo, of course. She heard the trunk open and squinted to see a man – what had Margot called him? – carry her suitcases through a doorway where a young woman stood. He bent to kiss her. Then Liza Holland's face was at her window, and she startled again. Liza opened the door and the cold wind off the North Sea whipped in.

But this face was younger, and the hair a swirl of flying red curls, not silver. Julianna peered more closely.

“Julianna, are you all right?”

“Oh, Margot, of course. I was just, ah, dreaming.” She was ashamed of her confusion. No reason to confess if she didn't have to.

She took Margot's arm and let the younger woman lead her across a drive of pea-sized pebbles to the brightly lit kitchen. Sheona – *see? she remembered just fine* – greeted them with a

smile, and hurried to close the door behind them before the wind could rip it off its hinges. She took their coats, shaking off the rain and hanging them in a room beside the kitchen.

“Evan’s taking your luggage to your room, and supper’s on the stove,” she called. “I’m so glad to see you, Mrs. B.” Bustling back to the kitchen, she looked like she wanted to hug Julianna, but resisted. Instead, she patted her arm awkwardly. “I’ve been praying for you.”

Julianna stopped for a moment to study Sheona’s face. What did that mean, *She was praying for her*? It might mean something or nothing. Back home, people said they were praying for you or *Have a blessed day!* like they said *Good morning*. Many – many! – put the blessed day refrain on their voicemail greeting. Frankly, it annoyed Julianna, though that wasn’t the kind of thing you expressed aloud in South Carolina.

Sheona was smiling tentatively. Maybe she meant she was praying for their safe travel. Julianna returned her smile and let it go, patting Sheona’s arm in return with a well rehearsed “Thank you, dear.” That got her through a great many encounters when she wasn’t quite sure what was going on. Because of her celebrity, chances were good the remarks were complimentary. A vague *Thank you, dear* covered a lot of territory, Connor assured her.

She looked around the kitchen and wished Connor were here already. They’d have a glass of wine in the solarium before they got to the soup or whatever it was Sheona had cooked. They’d talk about the flight, how the writing was going, whom he’d played with today. But no, he wouldn’t have played in this driving rain, she thought, looking out the kitchen window into impenetrable darkness. The wind fairly roared off the sea, and rain attacked the windowpane like machine gun fire. Even a golfing fool had his limits.

But wait. She struggled to clarify her thoughts. If they’d flown today, he couldn’t have played anyway. And she couldn’t have written. She’d never been able to write on planes.

She sighed. Margot was looking at her, and Sheona was busying herself at the stove so she wouldn't have to look. That much was clear. Julianna pulled herself together.

"I understand you have made soup for us," she said. "How very kind."

Sheona and Margot looked relieved. "Yes!" said Margot with more enthusiasm than potato soup usually warranted. "Let's eat!"

The soup was indeed delicious but the two generous glasses of cabernet sauvignon were what Julianna needed. She felt more relaxed, mellow. So what if she couldn't remember every little detail of every single day? She lived in parallel worlds.

There was the workaday world of Sullivan's Island in the warm and shabby beach house where she'd been raised. Her pine-paneled office overlooked the side yard of the Atlantic Avenue home, and a screened-in porch perched above the dunes to offer a view of the mighty Atlantic Ocean. She padded barefoot back and forth with her laptop and coffee to write passages in each place, depending on her mood and the mood of the ocean. Next door lived the Fitzgeralds, good friends and an unending source of hilarity for her and Connor. Meg and Charlie never told their horde of adult children who was visiting when, so there were screaming matches in the driveway and on the exterior decks during long, sodden drinking parties.

The workaday world also included book signings and university lectures and launch parties, the exhausting and necessary marketing side of the business that followed every release. That had been fun in the beginning, but it had grown close to unbearable. Connor had taken on the nuts and bolts, but when it came to facing readers, she was the commodity, she was the celebrity, she was the creator, she was the one they wanted to hear, to see, to touch. What had been exciting at first became grueling, and then foreboding. All those people, they wanted her

advice, her celebrity, as if her success might somehow rub off on them, her glitter might sprinkle into their lives.

And then there was the world inside her head, the world of twisty plots and dark traumas and characters who lived and breathed as surely as those noisy Fitzgeralds next door. But what those characters did and had done to them was the key. *How did a genteel Southern lady come up with this stuff?* critics repeatedly asked. *Are you not afraid?* Connor's friends echoed. She and Connor had laughed out loud when they read thrill-master Gillian Flynn's acknowledgment of her husband: "What do I say to a man who knows how I think and still sleeps next to me with the lights off?"

"Oh, I sleep with a night light," Connor assured his friends. "And a sand wedge."

That was Julianna's cue to add to their shtick: "If a little fear keeps him in line, so be it."

But that had been when she had clarity between her worlds, when she might lose a few hours deep in thought at her laptop, sure, but a ringing phone or a doorbell or the barking of her Shiba Annabelle would rouse her.

Lately that clarity had blurred. When she was deep into a plot, it might take her several minutes to surface, not unlike a diver kicking free of the ocean's pull. That's how she felt sometimes when she re-emerged on her porch, like she was gasping for air, surprised, relieved even, to find herself in familiar surroundings. She was always glad if no one was around because she didn't want anyone to see the time it took for reality to click into place.

Parallel worlds, she thought, finishing her second glass of wine. She lived in parallel worlds, one literal, one literary. That meant she had twice as much to remember as most people. No wonder some of the details got lost. Totally understandable.

Julianna glanced around the dining room and found that she was alone. But there was an empty glass and plate across from hers. *Margot*, she remembered triumphantly. She heard movement in the adjoining kitchen and Margot returned, hoisting a nearly empty bottle of wine.

“Want the last few sips?” she asked.

“No, you go ahead,” Julianna replied. “I think I’ll go on to bed. I’m beat.”

“I won’t be far behind you.”

“Margot, what day is Connor coming? I know you’ve told me, but I’m rather hopeless with times and dates.” She smiled. “As you well know.”

Margot looked stricken. Julianna felt dread rush into the pit of her stomach, but she had no idea why. She waited for her assistant to speak. “Margot?” she repeated.

“Julianna, honey, we’ve talked about this. Connor’s not coming.”