

Turtle Season

Chapter 1

Her skirt flapped against her knees in the wind. Anna felt encumbered. Wanted to rip off the skirt and her blazer and her underwear. Maybe she would leave her clothes strewn across the beach, slowly scatter the contents of her purse along the shore as she disappeared into Puget Sound.

Of course, the big diamond Mort had given her for their twenty-fifth anniversary would go down with her. Someday a lucky swimmer would come across a few karats wedged between knuckle bones.

She rolled her eyes at her own melodrama as she imagined the headline, “Prominent Widow Drowns in Puget Sound. No Foul Play Suspected.”

Anna pictured herself diving into the freezing cold waters of the sound, struggling for air, salt stinging her skin, water rushing up her nose. Disgusting. No way. She didn’t want to die, not really.

She just didn’t want to live. Up until that afternoon, no one had noticed she had become a ghost in her own life. Who paid that kind of attention?

Apparently, her students had. Her face flushed as she replayed her meeting with the dean earlier that afternoon. Anna Simon, the woman who had designed the hospice curriculum, one of the most respected instructors at Seattle Community College, was now on probation. Formerly respected. No longer.

As far as Anna could see, no horizon. Only gray. Seattle gray. The clouds blended into the water of the sound. No lines, no demarcations. Overcast. As she walked along the beach at Golden Gardens, her heels sank deep and sand shifted into her shoes. She looked around the empty beach, pulled off her heels and panty hose and tossed them into her large purse. Her legs trembled as she tried to balance, first one leg, then the other.

She hunched her shoulders together, clutched her purse to her chest, and lowered her head against the wind. By the time she reached the water's edge, cold sand had seeped between her toes, covering her feet. She sank into the sand. Comforting, she thought. Cuddle up with cold sand. She might as well cuddle up with Mort in his casket, for all the warmth the sand would give her.

She knew it was her fault. She had excuses: Mort's death last year, menopause. But still, other people did not melt away, like ice cream on a hot day. Other people lost spouses. Even suddenly. Prematurely. And lots of women complain about menopause, but they still function.

She wrapped her arms around her body, turned away from the wind, walked a short distance away from the gray water, and hunkered down behind a large driftwood log. Warmer and less windy here, but surrounded by the damp, briny smell of the sea mingled with old wood.

Anna looked north and south along the sound. Not a boat in sight, or another person. Only seagulls in the distance, gliding on the wind, soaring and then swooping.

Would that she could just fly away, she thought as she wiped the sand from her feet and put her shoes back on. Would that she could just crawl at this point, drag herself up from the fog that was her life. As she walked to her car, her mind drifted back to the meeting with the dean.

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“He’ll be with you in a few minutes.”

Anna had sat in small reception area on a stiff armchair upholstered in some easy-to-clean vinyl. Even with the elastic, the waistband of her skirt pinched her. She had no idea how much weight she had gained. It seemed as if all of a sudden she weighed more. Her stomach ached, felt raw. She had tried to summon a tougher self for this meeting, but to no avail. She waited naked, vulnerable, and stupid.

“He’ll see you now.”

Dean Saunders walked toward her and shook her hand, reached around her to close the office door, gestured toward one of the two chairs at a conference table. She’d forgotten how young he looked. She was sure he knew nothing about menopause.

They both sat. Through the glass tabletop she noticed his knee bobbing up and down.

“I haven’t seen you since my predecessor’s retirement party. You haven’t attended any of the staff meetings.”

“Sorry about the meetings.” She looked at his stiff face and knew there was only bad news coming.

His lips stretched across his face. “I know your husband died last year. Apparently that’s been very difficult for you.”

“Pardon?”

“I understand the previous dean spoke to you about the number of absences you had during the last school year.” He waved a letter in front of Anna and then studied it closely. “I notice your signature on this letter after that discussion. Clearly, you read it. Of course, he understood that your husband had just died.”

“I always arranged for a substitute.”

He reached for another document. “I see three documented cases in which you did not.”

He slid some forms across the table to Anna, who shook her head.

She listened to the traffic noises outside. A siren, cars honking.

“And now this semester, a full year after your husband’s death, there are other issues. Of course, we often overlook student complaints. We know students often blame the teachers. They have trouble taking responsibility. Don’t you think?”

He wants me to bond with him, Anna thought. She stared at his eyebrows. Perfectly straight lines. She wondered if he plucked them. He must be one of the metrosexuals she’d read about. He wanted her to agree, but she didn’t want to make it easy for him.

Saunders opened a file folder on the table, shuffled some papers, and shook his head. “But we can’t ignore the kinds of things we’ve been hearing about your classes, particularly in light of previous warning.”

“Warning?”

The dean nodded. “That’s the form you signed last year. A warning.”

“I didn’t realize.”

“That’s why the previous dean got your signature. Now about the current issues . . .”

“Current issues?”

“Well,” he said, selecting another document from her file. “Last week after your class, three of your students came to see me. They’re worried about you.”

“Worried? Who?”

“That’s confidential.” The dean adjusted the knot in his tie and continued, “It doesn’t matter who came, but what they said concerns the whole department.”

Anna pressed her hand down against the cramp in her stomach. She tried to smile, to look alert. She wondered what the appropriate expression might be.

“Well. I’ll try to summarize the main points for you.” He studied the papers in front of him again as if he were reviewing the Magna Charta. “They said you lost the first set of papers they submitted. Apparently their midterm papers were returned with grades, but without comments. When they asked why you gave them certain grades, you told them to find partners and discuss it amongst themselves. After twenty minutes, they told me, you left the room and never came back.”

Anna said nothing.

“The final is coming up, and they’re anxious.” Saunders glanced at the file. “You seem ‘out of it’ is what they said.”

Anna focused on his eyebrows. She looked for tiny hairs just growing back, but couldn’t see that kind of detail without craning her neck and using her bifocals. The office felt stuffy. She could smell sweat from her body.

She remembered the midterms. A bunch of stupid papers. She hadn’t been able to concentrate, they were so boring. She had thought that if they showed their classmates the papers, they’d come to understand their grades. It had made sense then. Now it sounded foolish.

“Nothing to worry about.” Anna lifted her chin and made eye contact. “If they’ve read the assigned readings and followed the discussions in class, they’ll be fine. They’ll all pass.”

“They are worried. So am I. We have a reputation to maintain here. We’ve come a long way as a community college. Our degrees are worth something. This is more than a warning, Anna. I’m sorry, but I have to place you on probation.”

As he spoke, Anna felt her face grow hot; her body, while actually rigid in the chair, felt as if it were collapsing in on itself. She watched the dean’s fingers as they tapped against her file. Her mouth opened, but no sentences came out. She wanted to defend herself, but she knew no defense.

“We cannot tolerate more complaints from your students. If necessary, we’ll find someone else to teach the class. I understand your husband died. But it’s been a year. You have to pull yourself together.”

She looked from his eyebrows down to his mouth. His lips were chapped. Without craning her neck, she had a clear view of his chin. He’d missed several hairs when he shaved. No clue about how to respond. As if she stood behind a Lucite wall, observing herself, but couldn’t participate.

“Do you have any explanation? Is there something the department can do to assist you?”

She shook her head and looked at her fingers, the nails filed but the cuticles torn. Anna’s throat was dry. “Not really. Just some women’s issues . . .” she murmured.

Saunders didn’t respond immediately. Then he coughed.

Anna looked out the window toward the main parking lot. People walked back and forth. All of them going somewhere. People got in and out of cars. Reached back for briefcases, kissed someone good-bye, loaded book bags into trunks.

“Oh. I see. We have a form for medical issues, for doctors to complete, if that’s what you mean. I don’t see anything in your file,” he said as he sorted through the papers again. “As I understand it, you designed this course, you developed it.”

Then he tilted his head and leaned closer to Anna. “You had an excellent reputation. I’m sure you want to continue to teach this course. Hospice is now a requirement for the major. We absolutely need to count on whoever is teaching the class.”

He closed her file and folded his hands on it. “Perhaps you want to get that medical form completed by your doctor? Maybe arrange for a leave of absence . . .,” he said as he stood up and stepped out from between his chair and the table.

Anna stayed seated and addressed her question to the chair he had vacated. “Would you hold my position for me if I took a leave?”

“We’d certainly try. But I can’t promise. Anna, you know we don’t have a tenure system here.” He gathered the contents of her file and replaced it in the cabinet behind his desk.

Dismissed. Chastised like a delinquent student. Elementary school principal Saunders. He walked toward her again, placing his hand on her shoulder. “I know this may be uncomfortable for you, but you can expect me to observe your class. It’s for the good of the college.” Then he opened the door to the reception area.

A flush crept along her neck as she rose and forced her eyes up to gaze directly into his. She saw no expression.

He shook his head. “Frankly, this meeting with you is not reassuring me. I’m not sure what it is. I don’t know what I expected. But you’re . . .” He shook his head again and put his hand on her back as he guided her through the door. “Now take care of yourself.”

Patronizing bastard. Young enough to be her child. Probably had been a bed wetter, Anna thought as she walked out of the office and down the stairs to the street.