

Chapter 1

London, England

What's happening?

The room is spinning and I can't keep my eyes open. Jet lag? But my heart is racing, beating so fast I can hardly breathe. I gulp for air but it's useless.

I stumble...

Where am I?

"London, Verity. You're in London."

I narrow my eyes to focus through blurred vision. I'm in a suite at Claridge's, meeting Wendell Sharpe. He's flying in from Dublin. He's a private art detective.

Why do I want to meet with a private art detective?

Forgeries...

"My name is Verity Blackwood, and I'm just back in London from Maine and Boston and I'd like to talk to you about forgeries."

That's what I told Mr. Sharpe. I don't know if I repeat my words out loud or to myself, but it doesn't matter.

I sway, sliding into a pool of warm water that I know, somewhere deep inside me, isn't there. I fall onto the bed in my well-appointed hotel room—Claridge's is lovely...an iconic London hotel...Wendell Sharpe's choice...

I sink into the soft duvet.

"Graham?"

He's not here. My husband. He didn't fly home with me.

He gave me the micronutrient tablets, didn't he? They're supposed to help with jet lag, but they didn't agree with me. Maybe if I sleep I'll be all right.

I open my eyes and see Jacob Marley dragging his chains above the bed. "For your sins, Verity," he says. "For your sins."

He shuffles away, but it's not the Charles Dickens character. It's Stefan. Hot tears stream down my temples and into my duvet. "Dear Stefan, it wasn't me. I promise you. It wasn't me."

He's dripping in blood as he must have been the night he was killed. It's as if nothing's changed in the two weeks since then, but Graham and I attended his funeral. We saw his coffin. He can't be here.

He's a ghost. My imagination.

My guilt.

I try to lift my hand to place it on my racing heart, but I can't move.

"Help me."

Impostor's Lure, Carla Neggers

I speak in the barest whisper. No one will hear me, but it doesn't matter. All I want is to slide deeper and deeper into the warmth and sleep.

Chapter 2

Boston, Massachusetts

An antique Maine lobster boat was bound to draw attention at a Boston Harbor marina, but Emma Sharpe hadn't recognized any of the onlookers until now. She pulled off her work gloves and peered out the window of her apartment, located on the ground floor of a former produce warehouse that shared the wharf with the marina.

What was Tamara McDermott doing here?

Emma tossed her gloves into the sink. She'd been cleaning since midmorning. It was after lunch now—she'd grabbed a chickpea salad out of the fridge—but she was almost finished. Kitchen, living room, bedroom, bathroom. All in four hundred square feet. Plenty of space when it'd been just her, but now she shared the space with her husband. Emma smiled at the thought. She and Colin Donovan, also an FBI agent, had been married ten weeks. She hoped she felt this way in ten years. Twenty. Fifty. He was and always would be the love of her life.

But he hated chickpea salad, and he'd been mystified when she'd opted to stay home and clean instead of joining him and his three brothers, down from Maine, at their annual Red Sox game.

She took her keys and exited the apartment, ignoring the blast of mid-August heat. Tamara McDermott was in her late forties, a prominent federal prosecutor based in Washington, DC. Emma hadn't worked directly with her but definitely recognized the woman. It was Sunday, and Tamara hadn't called ahead to meet. She wore a casual marine-blue knit dress with diamond stud earrings, a simple gold watch and sturdy sandals. Little or no makeup, sweat dripping down her temples and matting her gray-streaked dark hair at her nape. She must have walked at least a couple of blocks. She wouldn't be sweating this much if she'd been dropped off by a cab. It was, though, a stifflingly hot day. Emma had on a shapeless linen sundress that didn't do her any favors, flip-flops, no makeup. She'd pinned up her hair haphazardly, thinking she wouldn't be seeing anyone until she'd had a shower and put on fresh clothes.

"Hello, Emma." Tamara squinted in the early-afternoon sun. "This is Colin's boat, isn't it?"

"It's his younger brother Andy's boat. He's a lobsterman in Maine."

"Who's Julianne?"

Julianne was the name of the classic wooden boat. "Andy's fiancée. She's a marine biologist. It was her grandfather's boat, and he named it after her."

"But it's Andy's boat now?"

Emma smiled. As a prosecutor, Tamara was known for her thoroughness, solid preparation and relentless focus. Of course she'd pick up on the nuances of the lobster boat's history. "Andy bought it from Julianne's grandfather. She objected. It was a source of tension."

"All worked out now, one can assume. Well, it's a beautiful boat—not that I know anything about boats."

"I didn't realize you were in Boston," Emma said.

"My daughter turned twenty-one yesterday. We're celebrating tonight. She's a student here in town. She's studying archives preservation. I came up for the weekend. I start vacation tomorrow. Unless I get cold feet," she added with a wry smile.

"It's been a while, has it?"

"It's been several years since I took a proper break, yes. I'm scheduled to be away for three weeks. I get clammy hands thinking about it." She laughed, glancing again at the *Julianne*, which bobbed in the quiet harbor water between two recreational powerboats. Few working boats used the marina. "I wonder what it'd be like to jump on a gorgeous old lobster boat and take off, see where I ended up." She turned back to Emma and smiled. "Drowned, probably."

Her voice had taken on an edge that belied her laugh and smile. "What brings you here, Ms. McDermott? How can I help you?"

"Tamara. Please. My daughter—Adalyn—started a new job with an art conservationist in Cambridge. Jolie Romero. I understand you know her."

"I'm familiar with her name," Emma said. "I don't know her personally."

"Have you had anything to do with her since you joined the FBI, or did you deal with her when you were a nun?"

"I've never dealt with Jolie Romero. What's this about?"

Tamara waved a hand. "Sorry. I don't mean to interrogate you. Adalyn moved into the apartment above Jolie's studio. I got the grand tour this morning. It's in Porter Square. It's nice. I suppose I'm being an overprotective mother. That's what Adalyn would say. You remember being twenty-one. Or were you in the convent then?"

Emma didn't take offense at the blunt question. "I was a novice with the Sisters of the Joyful Heart in southern Maine for a short time, but I never made my final vows."

"So you were never a real nun?"

Fishing for something. Definitely. "Not in the way you mean."

"The convent specializes in art conservation, doesn't it?"

"As well as art education," Emma said.

"Now you're an art crimes expert on Matt Yankowski's elite team here in Boston. Quite a change. Why didn't you stay with your family's art recovery business?"

"Yank recruited me out of the convent. That's the short answer. Ms.—Tamara, would you like to go inside? I have iced tea, water—"

"No, no, I won't keep you. Forgive me. I swear I've lost the ability to have a normal conversation. Adalyn is just back from three months in London, and all of a sudden she's interested in art crimes. She'd love to meet you. We're having dinner at Stephanie's on Newbury Street. Why don't you and Colin join us? Yank will be there. We're old friends."

"Thank you, I'd love to join you. I don't know what Colin's plans are with his brothers. I can let you know."

"No need. Just come." Tamara touched the thick rope that secured the *Julianne*—Donovan style—to a post. "I made a reservation for six o'clock, but I'm meeting Adalyn at the bar around five-thirty. She wants Irish whiskey for one of her first legal drinks. Yank says he knows what to recommend thanks to Colin."

"I imagine she'll have her own ideas, too."

"Ha, she always does. We'll see you tonight, then."

"I look forward to it," Emma said.

Tamara relaxed visibly. "A belated congratulations on your wedding. Colin's a keeper."

Emma smiled. "I think so, too."

"I'll bet you do."

Tamara headed toward the street, her ankles swollen, no doubt from the heat and humidity, as she crossed the brick-paved wharf, passing more boats and empty slips. She took a water bottle from her tote bag and when she reached the street, turned left, picking up her pace and quickly disappearing from view.

Emma returned to her apartment and pulled on her gloves. She and Colin did certain tasks together and took turns on the rest, but she was quite content not being at Fenway Park on a hot Sunday afternoon. She'd finally convinced him she was sincere when she said cleaning had a meditative effect on her, a product of her years in the convent. To him, cleaning was work. Get in, get it done, then have a beer.

He *was* a keeper.

She glanced out the window as new onlookers stopped to admire the *Julianne*.

Whatever else tonight's dinner was about, it wasn't just to celebrate Adalyn McDermott's twenty-first birthday.

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When the four Donovan brothers descended after the game, the Red Sox had won, Emma had finished cleaning except for the oven—she'd leave that to Colin—and her husband had been in touch with their boss about tonight's dinner. "Yank says he'll mop our floors for a month if we both go tonight."

"What about these guys?" Emma asked, referring to Mike, Andy and Kevin Donovan.

Mike grinned. "*These guys* will be just fine. We're heading back up to Maine. Kevin's on duty in the morning. Andy's got lobster traps to check and I have two retirees from Florida to outfit for a week-long kayak trip on the Bold Coast." He winked at Emma. "Things to do, places to go."

Mike was a former Special Forces soldier with a cabin on the Bold Coast of Maine and a fiancée in Nashville. He was a licensed wilderness guide and outfitter, and he did the occasional contract security job—with Naomi McBride, an intelligence consultant. An odd relationship, but it seemed to be working. Kevin, the youngest, a Maine marine patrol officer, was unattached. All four brothers were strongly built, with blue-gray eyes and a no-nonsense manner Emma found in concert with their upbringing in a rugged Maine fishing village.

They'd arrived on the *Julianne* late yesterday. Andy had slept on the boat. Mike and Kevin had camped out in Emma and Colin's tiny living room. It was enough family time for now. They were packed up and out the door in thirty minutes.

Colin slipped his arm around Emma as they watched the lobster boat glide across the harbor. "Does part of you wish you were going with them?" she asked.

"All of me, provided you were with us."

"Mike would throw me overboard."

"Hey, he likes you now."

"I know he does, but he'd still throw me overboard. He gets restless. It'd be something to do. You guys used to do stuff like that as kids, didn't you?"

"Always wearing life vests."

Emma laughed, leaning into him. "Tamara says you're a keeper."

"She's insightful and smart as well as tough."

"You worked with her?"

"Once. My first undercover mission."

Five years ago, when Emma had still been with the Sisters of the Joyful Heart, Matt Yankowski had come up to Maine to meet with Colin as his contact agent. He'd stopped at the convent to talk to Emma about *not* making her final vows. About joining the FBI instead. She'd taken a detour to work with her

grandfather at the Dublin offices of Sharpe Fine Art Recovery, but within a year, she was getting put through her paces at the Academy. She'd been in Boston for seventeen months, again recruited by Yank, this time for HIT, a small team that specialized in transnational criminals and criminal networks. HIT stood for high-impact target. Yank's idea.

Colin was a relative newcomer to HIT, shoehorned in as much for Yank to keep tabs on him as anything else. He'd had a rough landing after a major deep-cover mission. Of course, that was exactly when he and Emma met, and here they were, not quite a year later, in love, married.

"Do you think Tamara is working an investigation and that's what tonight's about?" he asked.

"Using her daughter's birthday as cover to talk to us?"

"What if it's about the daughter?"

"I don't know. Something was off about her visit. Why not just have Yank invite us if they're friends? Spend the day with her daughter. Sometimes family needs to be your sole focus."

Colin drew her closer. "We should have stayed in Ireland longer."

"An extended honeymoon. I'd have liked that."

He kissed the top of her head. "Save any cleaning for me?"

"The oven."

He laughed. "How appropriate."