

Desolate Escape

A Contemporary Romantic Suspense

Jeopardized Reunions Series

SNEAK PEEK!

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Desolate Escape, First Edition
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Chapter One

Dr. Lacey Elrod stepped off the boardwalk onto the sugar white sands of Bon Secour Beach fully clothed and sipping last night's reheated coffee in a travel mug. This didn't top her list of things to do this Sunday morning. Not after the late night she'd had out as a bridesmaid, if that's what people called old friends of the woman remarrying her ex-husband these days. But Lacey's job as medical examiner didn't respect weekends, especially when an unidentified, washed up body waited for her on the beach. So, onward she stomped in her sneakers, lavender V-neck t-shirt and jeans. Hardly the professional attire she normally wore, but to her credit, she hadn't come to this weekend getaway at the beach prepared to work.

Pffing as she made her way to the first responders who circled the corpse like vultures, she sucked down more of the dark roast motivator. This was her first weekend off in over six months, since moving home from Galveston as the first-ever medical examiner of Baldwin County, Alabama. Didn't she deserve a break?

But why wouldn't they call her in to assess the scene? The body lay less than a mile down the beach from where she stayed with Tessa, Irene and Jenna. Tessa and Kyle's wedding 2.0 would begin at noon at the Fort Morgan historic site. If she moved fast enough, she could sign off on the body and still make brunch.

As Lacey neared the cluster of first responders, Officer Matthew Flick with U.S. Fish and Wildlife caught her gaze, and a rush of adrenaline flooded her heart. Was it because his eyes—like the Gulf—concentrated on her? Or had the stormy mood behind his stare set off alarm bells in her soul?

Although not in his tan uniform like his staff surrounding him, Matt's stance verified the official nature of his presence there. He no longer sported the wide smile and bright eyes he'd had at dinner with the old gang last night. This could mean only one thing. She knew the person whose body lay ahead in the sand covered with seaweed and crabs.

Lacey's abdominal and neck muscles tightened and she braced for the news.

Matt pulled away from the crowd and headed toward her. A September gust of wind from the shoreline ripped at his graphic tee and his jaw length dark hair, which simultaneously made him look like a Greek god and buckled her knees.

She'd been fine until last night. Seldom thought of her first love and had seen him few times since returning from Galveston. But last night, they'd celebrated today's re-nuptials of their longtime friends and reminisced about proms and first kisses. Now, she couldn't forget Matt not only was more than a pretty face, he was the big fish who got away.

Brushing her hair out of her face, she sucked in a deep breath to calm her upturned stomach. Matt reached her, his black Gone Fishing tee pressed to his chest, and clasped her forearms with urgency.

Lacey gripped her mug then released her breath and searched his face, his eyebrows and forehead drawn tight.

As he squeezed her arms and played back-and-forth blocking her view of the body, the wind-whipped around them and roared in her ears.

“Red?” Matt hollered over the gusts.

Tears stung Lacey’s eyes. Matt hadn’t called her that pet name since they’d broken up after graduation. “Just tell me! Don’t coddle me. I’m a medical examiner. I’m used to death.” Yanking her arms out of his grasp, Lacey pushed past him.

“Lacey, wait!” As he joined her a few feet from the body, he took her elbow in his left hand.

Despite the tidal wave surging through her over the yet-to-be-revealed identity of the body and the chill which threatened to turn her heart into a block of ice, electricity shot up her arm and through her spine when Matt’s warm hand made contact with her skin.

“Lacey, it’s Irene.”

“What? Irene? But how?” Like a once-caged bird upon release, Lacey flew to Irene’s body and dropped to her knees in the sand, dropping her mug of coffee beside her. “What happened to her?”

A deputy knelt beside her. “Dr. Elrod, looks like the deceased washed up on shore this morning. No obvious cause of death yet. No shark bites or any other wounds. We’ll have the body moved to your office after the team processes the scene so you can determine the cause of death. But for now, it looks like a drowning.”

Lacey pushed to her feet, dusting sand off her hands and the knees of her jeans, and circled Irene’s body. She assessed her surroundings and stuffed her emotions deep inside as she’d learned to do years ago in medical school and pathology training.

“Lacey? What are you thinking?” Matt stood on the other side of Irene’s body. His constant focus on Lacey made her feel like a porcelain doll high atop a shelf that someone had bumped into.

“I’m thinking, first of all, you’ve got to let me do my job. I have to do what’s best for Irene, and I can’t do that if you treat me like I’ll break.”

“Sorry, Red. But we were all friends. This must be hard for you.”

“Matt, I haven’t kept up with Irene. She’s lived in D.C. for a decade or more. Her career as an investigative journalist took precedence over everything else in her life, including friendships. I enjoyed catching up with her last night, but I hadn’t anticipated our friendship to blossom. So, help me figure out what happened to her and stop waiting for me to fall apart. Okay?”

“Okay. Fine.”

“Besides, it’s no harder on me than it’d be on you.”

“Fair. You think she really drowned?”

“No.” Lacey locked gazes with him. “We stayed up talking until one this morning after you guys left last night. Then we crashed. Irene was all giggly about the prospect of going out with Gordon after the wedding today. They took that walk on the beach after dinner, you know, and apparently they picked up where they left off senior year.”

“So why don’t you think she drowned?”

“She wouldn’t have gotten into the ocean by herself because of her fear of sharks and riptides. She knew as well as you and I know how bad the rip currents are on this stretch of the beach. She wouldn’t have done it. But especially not alone and not at night. And not without telling one of us.”

“Okay so—”

“So she probably came out this morning for a jog on the beach around sunrise, judging by her workout clothes and sneakers.”

Matt nodded. “I hadn’t noticed the shoes.”

Lacey studied the sand around Irene’s body while choking down unexpected sadness. “It’s hard to tell, but those look like drag marks where someone potentially tried to drag her up to the dunes.” She turned her focus on the deputy she’d spoken with earlier. “Make sure the forensics team takes samples from underneath her fingernails as well as from every orifice. If she struggled with someone, that evidence could help us catch him.”

“Sure.”

Lacey knelt beside Irene again. “Gloves, please.” Someone handed her a pair of latex gloves and after she snapped them onto her hands, she did a preliminary examination. She rolled Irene onto her back and checked for wounds or bite marks. The deputy had been right. No obvious signs of struggle or trauma.

“High tide would’ve been around four this morning. If she’d gone for a swim, which she didn’t because she’s wearing shoes and her hair is still styled from last night, she’d be covered in sand but also seaweed, judging by the debris in the water due to storms over the past few days. She’d also be below this hump of sand and closer to the shore.”

“So we can rule that out.” Matt rubbed his chin and stared out to sea. The sun peeked out from behind a cloud and cast its glow on his face. Tanned from a long summer outdoors. Eyes like the Caribbean. Strong jaw, square shoulders, long legs.

Lacey sighed and tugged her ear then turned her attention back to Irene’s body as a crew in white jumpsuits arrived with a gurney. The deputies who’d been on the scene when she arrived disbursed and combed the area for evidence. “Yes, we can rule that out. Not a drowning. Not a shark attack. She wasn’t in the water.”

“Is it possible she died of natural causes while jogging? A heart attack, maybe?”

“I guess anything’s possible.” Lacey stood and called to a paramedic. “Do you have a scalpel and a thermometer? I don’t have my gear with me. I’m technically on vacation.”

“Sure.” She pulled the tools out of her black bag and handed them to Lacey.

Lacey knelt again beside Irene and lifted her shirt. “I’m sorry old friend. I need to get your liver temperature to determine when you left us.”

As Lacey took Irene’s temperature, a tear slid down her face.

Matt knelt across from her. “We can get someone else to do this, Red. You’re too close to the situation.”

Lacey shook her head and sniffled. “I’m done. I’m fine.” Then she slumped. “Truthfully, that was harder than I imagined, though. Someone else will have to do the autopsy.” After she checked the thermometer, she did the math in her head. “Matt, what time is it now?” She glanced his way but

tried not to focus too much on his face.

“It’s eight thirty-two.”

Sitting back on her heels, Lacey snapped off her gloves then stared into the lifeless face of the woman who’d had hope for the days ahead. “Okay, judging by her core body temperature, the mild rigor in her facial muscles and the discoloration of her skin around her mouth and fingernails, I estimate she died at sunrise, around six thirty. It’s a mystery why she was out here this early and who may have been here with her.”

“Why do you think someone was with her?”

“Because I don’t think a physically fit thirty-two-year-old woman who works in D.C. as an investigative reporter and walks everywhere she goes, eats organic and dairy-free and hasn’t smoked a day in her life would drop dead while jogging on a cool, September morning.” She ran her fingers through her hair and then propped her hands on her hips. “This is a suspicious death. Take her to my office and do a tox screen. Check for every possible drug and any mineral imbalances. Also look for puncture wounds.”

While the forensics team began removing the body from the scene, bystanders waited on the other side of the crime scene tape.

“Come on, we should inform the others. This will devastate Tessa and Kyle.”

“Oh...and Gordon, Matt! He’ll be so sad.”

“I know, Lacey.”

Lacey touched Matt’s forearm. “Who found Irene’s body?”

“I did.”

Lacey stopped in her tracks and glowered at him. “*You* did? Why were you on the beach this early?” Her heart constricted and her ears pounded. As the wind ripped at their hair and clothes, she tried to process how Matt would’ve found Irene. Had he found her? Or had he been with her when she died?