

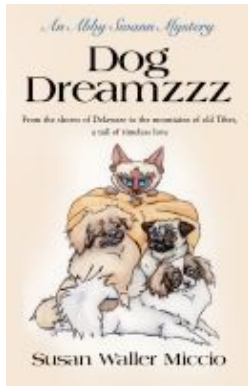
*An Abby Swann Mystery*

# Dog Dreamzzz

From the shores of Delaware to the mountains of old Tibet,  
a tail of timeless love



Susan Waller Miccio



*When Abby Swann's Tibetan Spaniels, Dawa and Senge, find Murderkill Beach's mayor sprawled over a tree trunk, dead, Abby believes he discovered something sinister in the swamp. Pursued by an Australian professor and his student, Abby navigates the town's waterways and secretive goings-on, past and present, while Dawa dreams of lives long ago, faithful Senge and sassy Siamese by her side. When Abby falls in trouble up to her neck, can the Tibbies save her?*

## Dog Dreamzzz

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**DOG DREAMZZZ**

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# **DOG DREAMZZZ**

Susan Waller Miccio



## **Dedication**

For Ciana, Bear, Sassy, Willy and Danny,  
who went to the Rainbow Bridge while I wrote this book.  
My precious and perfect angel-puppies—not a day goes by  
that I do not wish I could hold you in my arms once again.





## Acknowledgments

□

It is heartening to know that the story of the Underground Railroad in Delaware has come to light in recent years. The truth about those who traveled the Railroad and those who helped them is more compelling than any fiction. If I pique your interest, check out [www.whispersofangels.com](http://www.whispersofangels.com) and read these books:

- William H. Williams' *Slavery and Freedom in Delaware 1639–1865* published in 1996
- William Still's monumental first-hand account, *The Underground Railroad*, first published shortly after the Civil War.

□

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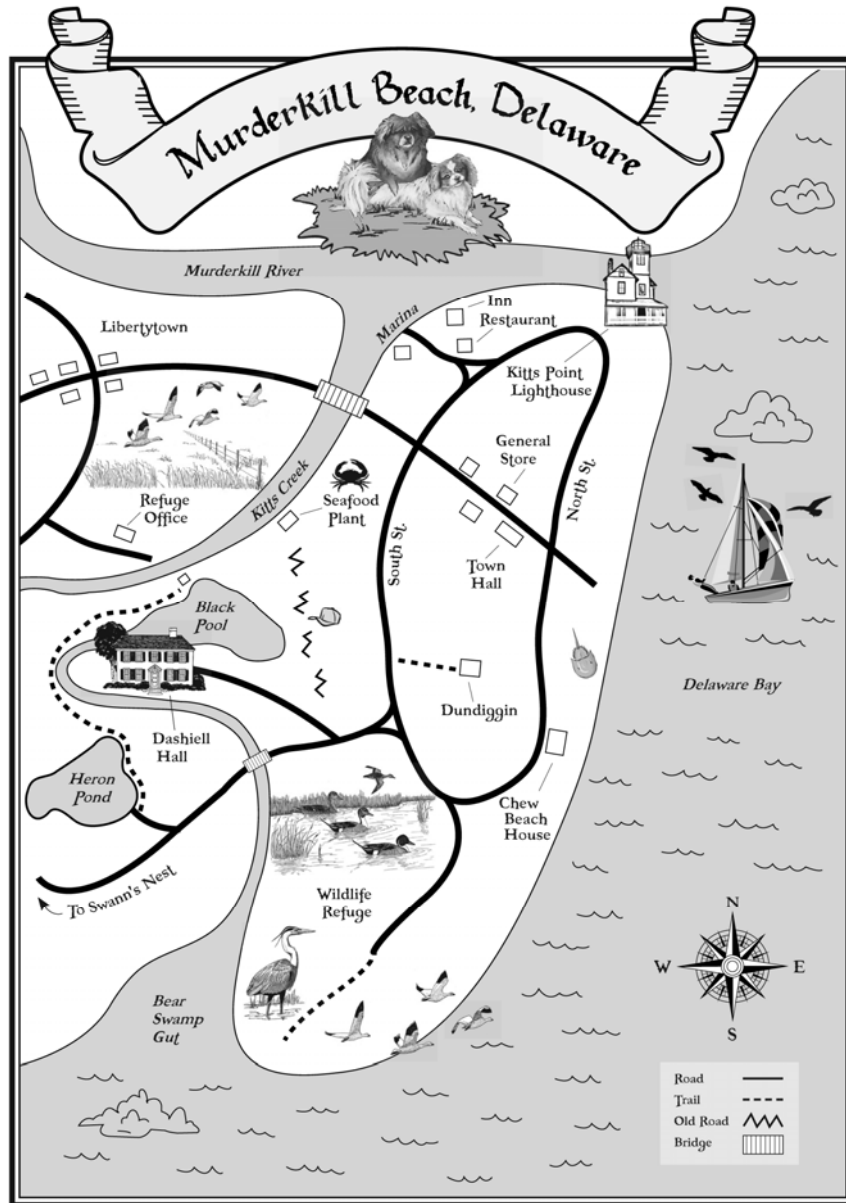
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□

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## Chapter One

I jumped as the ripping crack sounded somewhere above me. The dogs, who were glued to me, one to each side, jumped too. Senge crinkled his forehead and looked up at me wide-eyed. He leaned his body into my thigh. Dawa, his petite litter sister, circled and plopped matter-of-factly against my other thigh. Dawa and Senge—pronounced DAH-wah and SEN-gay—are my Tibetan Spaniels—“Tibbies” for short.

“I guess they don’t have hurricanes where your ancestors came from, little Moon,” I said to Dawa, calling her by the translation of her Tibetan name. She grinned at me, exposing a row of tiny bottom teeth, and I kissed the top of her head.

“Nothing to worry about, little boy,” I said to Senge on my other side. His name means Lion in Tibetan, but he was quivering and panting. I wrapped my arms tightly around him and rested my cheek against his head. He stilled.

It had been a busy hurricane season in the eastern Atlantic Ocean. Here it was the last week of September and we were up to “J” in the alphabetical names assigned to hurricanes. As I sat, cringing, with Dawa and Senge on the sofa in my great room, the latest—Jonah by name—was battering my house.

Although most of Jonah’s predecessors had spun away into nothingness in the north Atlantic, four had roared onshore. One had pummeled eastern Mexico, another Texas, another Florida and the last one North Carolina.

There’s a good reason Carolina calls its hockey team the Hurricanes. North Carolina usually gets the brunt of the hurricanes that head up the U.S. East Coast. Her Outer Banks, barrier islands jutting into the ocean, make a natural target.

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Their energy spent against the Outer Banks, only the remains of those hurricanes—high tides and rough surf—reach my native peninsula to the north.

Tonight, however, would be different. Named Delmarva for the parts of the three states that make it up, the peninsula was due for a direct hit. The last forecast called for the eye wall to come ashore at Chincoteague, a coastal town about 70 miles south of my house, at midnight. Seventy miles is a long way, but Jonah was a big storm—120 miles across.

I glanced at the grandfather clock—half past midnight. I shot to my feet and began to pace. Senge, who follows me everywhere, tagged along, while Dawa perched on the sofa-back, the better to watch over me.

On my way past the fireplace, I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror over the mantel. My shoulders appeared to be attached to my earlobes. I shook them down.

“Calm down,” I ordered myself aloud, closing my eyes and rubbing my neck where the aching muscles felt like iron bars.

I grimaced when I opened my eyes to my lamp-lit reflection. In place of my pleasant—some even say pretty—face was a Greek tragedy mask with great black eyeholes where there had been large—most even say pretty—green eyes. My blondish bob, streaked by summer sun and snarled by wind, was also a tragedy. Running my fingers through it, front to back, I succeeded only in standing the bangs straight up. I shrugged and, with a deep breath, attempted to relax my features into something a shade less tragic.

That’s easy to say, hard to do when a freight train was roaring outside. Jonah’s sustained 100-mile-per-hour winds hurled horizontal sheets of water against the house’s thick brick walls. When the gusts blasted the walls at 150 miles per hour, the train rammed into another train head on. Rapid-fire

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cracks, like rifle shots, were tree limbs breaking and falling in the woods that surrounded the house. The old oak shutters that I had closed and locked over the 200-year-old, 12-over-12 windows clacked and banged without ceasing. I hoped that the shutters would hold. So far, so good. No tinkling of broken glass had reached my ears.

As distressing as these sounds were, I worried more about those I couldn't identify. The screeching and ripping above me sounded ominously like a hammer prying nails out of hardwood. Jonah was clawing at my roof.

I gave up pacing and wringing my hands and plopped on the sofa. Senge hopped up and velcroed himself to my thigh again. I patted my other thigh, and Dawa climbed down from her perch to join us.

"This has to be the worst of it," I told the dogs. Senge's ears and eyes were now swiveling in all directions. Even the unflappable Dawa, formerly serene, had begun to tremble. I wrapped my arms around and tucked them closer to me.

"The eye must be traveling south of us now," I announced, masking my nervousness for their sake. "The eye is in the center of this swirling mass, spinning counterclockwise. They said the worst part would be the front right quadrant because the wind speed adds to the forward speed." I visualized the diagram I'd seen on TV earlier. "It's headed northwest, so I think we're in that quadrant right now. I really think this has to be the worst of it."

I paused to listen to some groaning somewhere above and then raised my voice above the din.

"But they also said it would speed up when it hit land—maybe 10 to 15 miles per hour." The dogs tilted their heads at me. Senge whined and yawned exaggeratedly, a sign of anxiety in his species.

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“At that rate, the winds should start to die down in a couple hours.” I hugged the dogs again. “Don’t worry. It’ll definitely be gone by morning.”

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Jonah had been on everybody’s lips for the past three days. Ever since forecasters predicted that one of Jonah’s likely trajectories would bring him ashore on lower Delmarva, weather updates preoccupied the media. They told us that Jonah was a category III out in the Atlantic but would diminish to a category II when he hit land.

Incredibly, some local people scoffed that he was going to be *only* a category II. Others had more sense. Delmarva had dodged the bullet for too many years, they said. It was time for the Big One.

As Jonah sped over the ocean, it became obvious that he would hit at high tide under a full moon—the worst possible scenario. The moon and tide would pull the great wall of water that Jonah was pushing into Delaware and Chesapeake Bays even higher—six to eight feet above normal. The wind and rain would be bad enough, but low-lying Delmarva, surrounded by the two bays and the Atlantic, was in for an unprecedented storm surge. Thus predicted the forecasters. Even the scoffers had shut up and paid attention to that.

People in hurricane-prone areas are more blasé about impending storms. On the other hand, maybe they’re just more prepared. Over the past two days, as brilliant autumn skies and balmy temperatures stretched over the peninsula, Delmarvans had systematically emptied the hardware stores of flashlights, batteries, matches, candles, oil lamps and lanterns. The bread aisles and dairy cases of all the grocery stores were swept clean. Canned goods and bottled water



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vanished. Handwritten “Out of Gas” signs appeared on gas pumps.

I was no different from anyone else. First things first, I rushed 30 miles south to the resort town of Rehoboth Beach. Only six weeks earlier, I had proudly opened a charming, Lilliputian antique shop in partnership with my friend Birdie Dunn. Not old friends but good ones, Birdie and I met the spring before when we both rented booths at a nearby art and antiques mall. Her booth, brimming with her whimsical works of art, adjoined mine, and we soon discovered we shared an ambition of owning a shop in town. When #10 Town’s End Alley suddenly came on the market, we decided to go for it.

With the storm fast approaching, Birdie and I had taped and boarded up the two tall, narrow windows that faced the street and the wavy glass in the front door. While she moved our inventory of objects of Asian art to the highest shelves, I gathered with other shopkeepers at the end of the brick-paved pedestrian alley to fill sandbags from a heap of sand that a Department of Transportation truck had dumped. I hauled the bags by the wheelbarrowfuls back to the shop. Birdie, a petite but deceptively strong 60-something, passed the bags to me, and I stacked them snugly around the entrance, filling the slight ramp up to the recessed door to a height of three feet. At the rear of the shop, we packed bags tightly against the steel back door as well.

“Well, I think that’s all we can do, Abby,” Birdie said, stretching and rubbing her back as she surveyed our handiwork.

“I agree,” I said with a sigh. “I guess we’d better get on the road. The traffic north is bad, and I have a lot to do back at the house.”

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“Me too. Buddy and I want to shut up Dundiggin and get to Bobby and Ellen’s as soon as we can.”

“Bobby and Ellen?”

“Buddy’s brother and his wife. They live over in Seaford.”

With a quick hug and promise to check on each other later, Birdie sped away in her SUV. I followed suit but turned the BMW into the alley and stopped at the shop to double-check the deadbolt on the front door. Finding it secure, I rested my fingers lightly on the ornate brass knob and glumly looked the door up and down. It was an old wooden door I’d found in a fallen-down barn and refurbished. I gave it a last good-luck tap with my knuckles. Back in the car, I watched my shop recede in the side mirror. Above the forest green door, the gold lettering on the shop sign glittered in the morning sun, *Abigail Forrest Swann Asian Antiquities*, but the shop’s eyes were closed. Turning out of the alley, I nudged my way into the stream of post-Labor Day tourists evacuating the town.

On the way north, I had stopped at the local superstore. I survived the mob scene and returned home triumphantly clutching bags of “C” batteries, powdered milk, bottled water, and canned beans. Senge had greeted me joyously at the door, but Dawa hung back. She eyed me, clearly annoyed that I’d left them home.

By noon the next day, I was surveying my precautions one last time. Sturdy shutters were closed and latched over windows with duct tape criss-crossing each of their 24 wavy-glass panes. I had dragged everything that could become a flying object into the carriage house. No power means no pump to bring up the well water, so every container I owned—from milk jugs to the turkey roaster—was full of water for washing and flushing. I was ready.

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Through it all, the ever-alert Tibbies observed my every move. As I moved around the house and yard, they followed me at heel and, being talkative types, offered the occasional comment. Sometimes they would stop and listen, heads tilted. I wondered if they could sense the approaching storm.

When a gale began to blow about four o'clock, I walked them one last time. Well, "walked" is an exaggeration. The ornery critters slitted their almond-shaped eyes and planted their butts on the graveled driveway. Despite my tugs and commands, they stubbornly refused to stand, let alone walk anywhere, lest the wind ruffle their fuzzy pants. Resigned, I toted them, one per arm, to the leeward side of the house where they conceded to do their business amid the sheltering mums in the flower border.

Back inside, we settled down together to wait it out. As the hours dragged by, the sky darkened and the wind grew fierce. While the Tibbies and I huddled in front of the TV watching live storm coverage, some Delmarvans were probably gathering to drink the night away at hurricane parties. Admittedly, the bottle of Shiraz in the pantry called to me. Too bad wine puts me to sleep, I thought. I decided to resist the temptation in case I was called on to do something requiring a state of awareness.

About seven o'clock, I called Peg Beauchamp, my best friend. She and her dogs—Teke the Chesapeake Retriever, Bits the Australian Shepherd and Dapper the Golden Retriever—were likewise battened down. Unlike my house, enfolded in forest, Peg's old farmhouse sits exposed, smack dab in the middle of flat fields, susceptible to the battering winds. A nearly imperceptible tremor in her voice belied her nonchalant conversation. Like me, she dreaded the long night ahead.

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Shortly after eight o'clock, my boyfriend Griff called from Rehoboth Beach to check on me. He sounded exhausted. A K-9 officer with the State Police, Griff and his German Shepherd Thor—like all other emergency personnel in the state—had worked steadily for 36 hours to evacuate and secure the coastal communities. With surf already breaking over the boardwalk, Thor and he were finally headed inland to wait it out.

About 10 o'clock, the power finally failed. After a couple warning blinks, the dogs and I were pitched into blackness. I grabbed for the matches at ready.

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The grandfather clock chimed two. A sepia glow from the oil lamps pooled in the center of my great room where the dogs and I waited for the worst to be over. Outside, it seemed that Jonah was slightly less ferocious than only an hour earlier.

Dawa had taken up position, chin on forepaws, on a pillow next to me on the sofa. So snowy in the sunlight, her coat paled to cream in the lamplight. Her glittering eyes gazed at the reflections in the 12-over-12 windows. At the other end of the sofa, Senge's golden coat blended into the sofa's beige fabric where he cringed against the rolled arm. Ears perked and twitching, his eyes darted to every corner as Jonah shrieked. I could do nothing, so I stared into the yellow flame, waited, and worried.

Called Swann's Nest, a fanciful name bestowed by an ancestor, my house was built in the eighteenth century. Barely 250 feet down a gentle slope from the house, Swann's Creek meandered through the woods. Upstream, another ancestor had dammed the creek to make a millpond, now Swann's Pond, in the early nineteenth century. I wondered

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what the normally placid creek looked like now and whether the dam would break. Maybe I should have sandbagged the creek side of the house, I fretted.

I imagined my little shop, only four blocks from the ocean, being pounded by the surf. I imagined my inventory, each item carefully chosen and valued, floating in seawater. I imagined the two-centuries-old house over my head, sitting in water from the creek, wild and swollen with downpour. I imagined friends and family, though smart and resourceful to a person, being holed up miles away and worrying, like me. Worst of all, I imagined all the terrified animals—dogs and cats in their homes, birds in their cages, horses in their stables, cows in their barns, even the millions of chickens in their houses—being left behind alone when their people evacuated.

“I would never, ever leave you guys,” I reassured the Tibbies.

Dawa appeared to be fascinated by the maelstrom around us while Senge was clearly terrorized by it. Buck-eyed and panting, he alternated between trembling and freezing stock-still. I scratched his ears, patted his side, and whispered reassurances, but he was inconsolable. The cat-like Dawa, on the other hand, accepted my pats and stroked her cheeks against my thigh. She soothed me rather than the other way around.

The hours crawled by. By four in the morning, the wind in the blackness outside died down to a gale. By five, it was a stiff breeze with fits and starts. When the rain finally diminished to a pattering instead of a battering, I oozed down to horizontal. With Dawa calmly snoring under one arm and Senge, still trembling, snug behind my knees, I soon dozed off.

□

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*“Are you asleep, Sister?” Senge whispered, his voice trembling. “Sister?”*

*“Not now I’m not,” Dawa grumbled, peering at him through slitted eyes.*

*“Is it over yet?”*

*Dawa lifted her head, snorted out and sniffed in.*

*“Yes,” she declared.*

*Senge sighed and lowered his chin to his forepaws.*

*“Good.” After a few moments, he asked, “How do you know?” He sniffed. “I don’t smell anything.”*

*“‘All nature serves me for a book,’ Brother,” Dawa answered, quoting one of the many Tibetan proverbs she favored. She rubbed her cheeks against the soft quilt covering Abby’s legs. “I don’t smell rain on the earth anymore. I don’t smell lightning in the air anymore. And, I don’t smell fear from Mom anymore.”*

*“Oh,” Senge murmured, once again made speechless by his little sister’s wisdom.*

## Chapter Two

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Shielding my eyes from the sun that played peek-a-boo with scudding clouds, I craned my neck to scan the roof. Black patches of roofer's felt showed where Jonah had torn away cedar shakes and tossed them to the yard below.

Sighing, I slogged over sodden ground to the creek side of the house and headed down the slight incline toward Swann's Creek. The mud under the downbeaten grass sucked at my boots. Limbs littered the lawn.

Through the denuded trees with blackened bark that lined her, I could see that the creek was running out of her banks and fanning out through the woods up to the edges of my lawn. There was no sign of the landing. Doubtless, the little dock formerly at creek's edge was several feet under muddied water. Or, maybe it was in pieces somewhere downstream, tumbling toward Delaware Bay, tossed up against another bridge or buried in marsh mud. Up the creek, I could hear the thunder of water cascading over the spillway from Swann's Pond.

It was 10 o'clock on the morning after. Jonah was long gone. Earlier, he had shut down the federal government when he blew by Washington D.C., 150 miles west of the Nest. Weakening, he was now bisecting Pennsylvania, soaking the land and spawning flash flood warnings as he headed for the Great Lakes.

Having circumnavigated the Nest, I stood, hands on hips, surveying the grounds. Aside from the roof, my inspection found no other damage to the house. The venerable brick structure had taken yet another storm in stride. The

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outbuildings were also unscathed. One of the knots in my belly unraveled.

Dripping pines, spruces and hollies were bedraggled but intact. The hardwood trees had not fared so well. Leaves that had just begun to turn yellow and scarlet had been thrashed from their branches and now blanketed the ground and piled against the house. It would be a dull autumn without their colors.

I headed down my dirt-and-gravel farm lane toward Cattail Branch Road. Fully expecting to find downed trees across the lane, I wondered how long ago the chain on the old chain saw had been sharpened.

“You should’ve done that ahead of time,” I rebuked myself.

Kicking my way through the leaf and limb litter, I pulled my phone out of my shirt pocket and keyed Peg’s number. No answer. She’s probably outside without her phone, checking her outbuildings, I thought. I keyed Griff’s phone. No answer there either. I dropped the phone back in my pocket and crunched over the remaining few yards of lane to my gate.

I pulled open the gate and looked up and down the road. Muddied and littered with debris, the road surface was barely visible. The cause of the power failure was readily apparent; the lines were down, ripped off their poles.

It was quiet. The usual sounds of country life had been silenced. No birds sang, no crows cawed, no geese honked. No pickups or SUVs rumbled by. No leaves were rustling, trees creaking, twigs snapping under deer hooves. The only sound was the drip, drip, drip of droplets falling from every surface. Very still. Eerie.

And humid. I pulled up my sticky sleeves and pushed my hair off my sweaty forehead. My phone rang and I jumped.



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“Sheesh, get a grip, Abby,” I grumbled. Fumbling the phone from my pocket, I dropped it in the mud, picked it up and wiped it on my jeans.

“Hello?”

“Abby? This is Frank.”

“Hey Frank.”

“How are you making out up there?”

“Not bad really. Some roof damage, some tree damage. The creek is out of its banks, but it didn’t get to the house. Everything else is okay as far as I can tell. How about you?”

“Well, we lost one of the old walnut trees out front. Just went right over, roots and all. It could have fallen on the porch but, luckily, it went the other way. And one of the sheds is missing its roof—no sign of it. But, all in all, we were fortunate.”

“Do you have power?”

“Uh-huh. It came back on about a half-hour ago. You?”

“Not yet. Hope I get it back before the food in my freezer goes bad.”

Frank hesitated. “I’m worried about Dashiell Hall. I hope to hell it’s not up to its second story in marsh water. I hate to ask, Abby, but can you get over there and check it out?”

“I don’t think it’s safe to go over that way yet, Frank. The roads between here and the Hall are low. I’m sure there’s flooding all up and down the coast and back in the marshes, and I wouldn’t want to try to drive through standing water in the BMW.”

“Yes, you’re absolutely right. No need taking any chances.” He may have conceded my point, but he was obviously not happy.

“Did you call Mary? She’s closer to the Hall than I am.”

“I can’t get through to her.”

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“Yeah, the phone service is iffy. Besides, they probably evacuated. Libertytown is flood prone,” I said. “I hope they’re all right.”

“Me, too,” Frank mumbled. He was probably embarrassed that he was more concerned about the Hall than about our friend Mary.

“No need worrying about the Hall, Frank. Just keep trying to get in touch with Mary, and I’ll get there as soon as I can,” I promised him. “Besides, that house has sat out on that point for over 200 years, and it was neglected for almost half that time. There were other storms through the years and, as far as we know, water never reached the house. We can’t change whatever happened last night, but we can fix it.”

He sighed. “You’re right, Abby. Well, call me when you can get out there.”

“I will,” I assured him. “Listen, Frank, gotta go. I don’t want to run the battery down. Say ‘hi’ to Adam for me. Talk to you later.”

I understood why Frank was upset. Dashiell Hall was his pride and joy. The original one-room cabin dated from 1680, according to the dendrochronologist who had taken samples from the wood to study the tree rings. That made it one of Delaware’s earliest homes. Almost a century older than the Nest, the Hall was built in what was then a wilderness at the edge of Delaware Bay, contemporary with the early homes in Lewes, the first town in the state.

As the Hall’s champion, Frank Culver had invested years of his life to save the near derelict old house from destruction of one kind or another. First, it took years to convince its reclusive, heirless owner, William Dashiell, to sell the property to the historical society instead of developers. After founding the Friends of Dashiell Hall, it took more years to secure funding to undo tacky twentieth-century “remodeling”

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and to restore the house structurally and aesthetically. Of course, outwardly, it no longer looked like the seventeenth-century one-room cabin. The large, elegant brick home situated on a narrow point overlooking marsh and river had absorbed the original cabin in the mid-eighteenth century.

I don't know how they met, but Frank and my father shared an interest in old houses. All through my childhood, during the years that Dad and Mom were restoring the Nest, "Mr. Frank" had come over to help out, always willing to get his hands dirty. One memory that sticks in my mind was the hellishly hot summer they repointed the masonry. I still have an old photo of Dad and Frank, shirtless in overalls, standing on scaffolding, laughing while they troweled.

After I left for college, Dad occasionally mentioned how Frank and his partner Adam were doing. I was away for a decade earning my degrees and later running my business, *Abigail Forrest Swann Asian Antiquities*, in D.C. During that time, our paths crossed only twice—first for Mom's funeral and then Dad's.

After Dad died, I commuted home every weekend for a year, but I grew weary of the mind-numbing drive from D.C. to the Nest. The worst was during the rush of crazed tourists to the Maryland and Delaware beaches in summer. It was a surprisingly easy decision to move back to Delaware and try running my business from home with the help of the internet. When he heard I'd come home for good, Frank had showed up on my doorstep one summer afternoon last year.

"How would you like to help us furnish Dashiell Hall?" he had asked eagerly. "We'd like to see the furnishings original to the house brought back or at least pieces appropriate to the period."

I had the academic credentials as well as the all-important connections in the antiques world, but I hesitated to

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agree. My career was built on a specialty in Asian antiquities. Oh sure, I had grown up with American antiques and I had studied them in college, but I had never worked on a project of this importance. I wasn't sure that I could do it justice.

Frank was persuasive and, after a year of hemming and hawing, I had finally agreed to take on the job. After all, I hadn't set out to be an antiquities dealer. That had been my ex's idea; he'd wanted an East Coast partner for his successful Seattle-based Asian art and antiques business. Before he diverted my career path, I had aspired to a position in a university's art department or, even better, a curatorship. Now, here was Frank offering me a chance to work on the kind of project I had always dreamed about—a scholarly endeavor combined with the thrill of the hunt. In the end, he convinced me that I could make a real contribution to Delaware's history. Doubtless, it would take me years to trace pieces original to the house, but the professional challenge would be rewarding.

Encouraged by my capitulation, Frank had sipped his iced tea and then asked me to volunteer a couple days a month as an interpreter at the Hall.

To my immediate, half-laughing 'Sorry, no,' he replied, "But, Abby, you know so much about eighteenth century houses already. You grew up in one. Just look around." He circled his hand over his head. "It'll be easy for you to learn."

"Frank, where am I going to get two days a month? I have a business to run, you know, and that's not easy in this economy," I protested. "Besides, all I know about these old houses is that they need constant work."

"Oh, that's not true. You know a helluva lot—more than most people do. Besides, it'll be fun," he had said with a wink.

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Succumbing to Frank's coaxing, I attended an interpreter workshop at the John Dickinson Plantation, home of a Delaware signer of the Constitution. By day's end, I was hooked. At Dashiell Hall, experienced and knowledgeable interpreters taught me the ropes. One of them, Mary Bishop-Nichols, was a recognized expert in African-American history. Another, Elaine Roberts, a chef by profession, was an expert in culinary history. Thanks to them and others, I had learned to spin flax into linen thread, wield a shuttle in the big loom, and demonstrate butter-making, all inexpertly but passably enough to convince the tourists. There would be many other workshops in my future. I have to admit that Frank was right—it has been fun.

I stared down the road in the direction of the Hall.

"I'll get out there as soon as I can, Frank," I whispered to the trees.

## Chapter Three

On the second morning after Jonah, the radio reported that many of Delmarva's coastal communities were still flooded. With some bridges out and low-lying roads blocked by water or debris, people without a real need to be on the roads were advised to remain at home. In southern Delaware, the National Guard had been deployed across the main highway to block access to the coastal resort towns.

Grubby and bleary-eyed, Griff had shown up at my door shortly after four o'clock that morning. Head and tail down, Thor crept in behind him. Pausing briefly in the mudroom, the weary dog tolerated Senge's exuberant welcome and Dawa's gentle ear-kisses before dragging to his big-dog bed in the corner and settling with a sigh.

"I am dog-tired, too," Griff said, as he lowered himself into a chair at the kitchen table. He propped his elbows on the table and dropped his forehead into his hands.

I moved to stand behind him and drew my nails through his silver hair and down his neck. He shivered. I began to massage the knots in his shoulders.

"That feels good," he said as he shrugged into my kneading fingers.

"What can I get you?"

"Something to eat. Anything. Don't care. Shower. Sleep."

"Sorry—no power, no shower. A sandwich I can do," I replied with a parting pat on his back. "And I can heat enough water for you to have a wash up. Coffee?"

"No, no coffee. I've had enough coffee to float a battleship."

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Emptying a couple milk jugs of water into my biggest pot waiting on the backburner, I turned up the gas. I quickly retrieved the makings of a ham sandwich and tea from the dark fridge and pushed the door closed with my hip.

Twenty minutes later, I had sat across from Griff, watching him finish a second sandwich, as the lamplight flickered and shadows danced on the kitchen walls. Dawa was napping in my lap, and Senge was snoring next to Thor. I poured Griff another glass of warm tea.

“Do you know anything about the shop?”

He grimaced. “Yeah. Sorry I didn’t tell you right away.” He washed down the last bite. “I talked to Ron. He went up Town’s End Alley last night and said your shop and the other ones at the far end look okay. The water’s down, but the beach is out to sea, and the boardwalk, what’s left of it, is a mess.”

I exhaled. Another knot in my belly untwisted.

“That’s a relief.” I scratched Dawa’s ears. “Is the highway still closed?”

He nodded. “They’ll probably keep it closed for at least a couple more days.”

“What about out toward Murderkill Beach?”

He shook his head. “Don’t know. Why?”

“Frank called. He wants me to check on Dashiell Hall as soon as I can get there.”

“The bridge over Bear Swamp Gut is probably out, but you might be able to go by way of Libertytown.”

Placing Dawa gently on the floor, where she twirled and rrr’ed, I rose from the chair and moved toward the stove where the water simmered.

“Why don’t you just wash up in the laundry sink so we don’t have to carry this upstairs?” I said, hefting the pot. “And there’s a clean pair of your jeans and a tee in the dryer.”

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Griff slept, too exhausted to snore, for seven hours. By noon, we—dogs included—were headed toward Dashiell Hall in Griff's pickup. Covered in mud and debris in places but passable with four-wheel drive, the road was deserted except for a haggard-looking crew from the electric cooperative. We stopped and swapped storm stories. They assured me that I would have power back within a couple hours. We left them to their work and headed toward Murderkill Beach by the short cut over Bear Swamp Gut.

A short drive later, we were descending to the bridge over the gut. Griff braked. Water was lapping over the bridge's road surface.

"I don't like the looks of that. We could drive through, but the bridge may be undermined. I don't think we should chance it."

"Me neither," I agreed. "Look. There's a truck over here."

On the opposite shore, a pickup was leaning in the ditch where the road began its ascent from the bridge.

"Is anybody in it?"

"Don't think so," Griff answered, craning his neck to see. "Must've run off the road and got stuck."

"I hope they weren't swept away."

Griff smiled and shook his head slightly. "Now, Abby, a guy would have to be really stupid to walk over a swamped bridge during a hurricane. Most likely, they turned around and walked back to Murderkill Beach. I'll let Burton know when we get over there. He probably knows whose it is or, if not, he can run the plate."



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With that, we turned around and headed back the way we'd come. With the bridge out, we would have to take the long way around through Libertytown.

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A half-hour later, we rattled across the metal grid deck of the drawbridge across Kitts Run, the narrow tidewater that separates Murderkill Beach from the mainland. The village stretched out ahead of us.

Murderkill Beach sits on a neck of land that missed being an island by only a narrow span of marsh between Kitts Run and the arm of bay water called Bear Swamp Gut at the neck's south end. To the north, Kitts Run empties into the Murderkill River near its outlet into Delaware Bay.

Due east of the drawbridge, the village's Main Street traverses the island and ends at the barrier dune topped by sand fence. Landward of the fence, on the right, is a bait shop—the word BAIT emblazoned in chipped red paint on its otherwise bare, weathered-gray clapboards. On the left is the Bowman Hotel. So-named because families from Philadelphia once lodged there in the village's heyday as an early twentieth-century getaway, it is now the vacation home of a wealthy Washingtonian. Its two stories imposing in an otherwise one-story village, the weathered gray exterior results from design rather than neglect. When in residence, its owner keeps the pebble yard, dotted with ornamental grasses and artfully arranged coils of rope and nautical artifacts, neatly raked. The bay-facing sleeping porches upstairs, now enclosed with pricey sunroom windows, overlook a narrow beach littered with the shells of horseshoe crabs. Beyond is Delaware Bay.

A left turn from Main Street, to the north, puts you on the aptly named North Street, a loop that skirts the landward side

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of the dune until it reaches the falling-down lighthouse at the north end called Kitts Point. It then turns back along the bank of Kitts Run and rejoins Main Street at the marina at the base of the drawbridge. Linking the east and west ends of the North Street loop, more-or-less paved lanes called by the names of states are lined with squat beach cottages of the last century, their paint peeling and their small yards cluttered with the customary cast-offs—ruined boats, rusty crab pots, and the occasional junk car.

Like North Street, the east side of the South Street loop tracks the landward edge of the bay dune. However, unlike those lining its northern counterpart, South Street's houses are twenty-first century and decidedly upscale. South of Virginia Avenue, gracious beach homes in a wide array of colors and styles—from out-of-place Williamsburg colonials to asymmetrical California moderns—perch haughtily atop their stilts on postage stamp lots with eco-appropriate landscaping.

At the southernmost reach of South Street's loop is a metal pipe gate, a red, white and blue "Area Closed" sign clamped to it. A half mile beyond the gate, over the dune, the neck disappears into the Bay at Plum Point. The gate, the sign and Plum Point itself belong to the National Park Service as part of Murderkill National Wildlife Refuge, which—in the manner of all things federal—goes by MNWR for short.

The western loop of South Street heads north to rejoin Main Street at the drawbridge. Just past the wildlife refuge gate, a left at the unmarked intersection with Bear Swamp Road leads to the Dashiell Hall lane. North of Bear Swamp Road, South Street overlooks not a vista of cottages or million-dollar beach homes but the refuge, its marshy expanse dotted with spits of wooded land and black pools, bisected by Kitts Run. Passing by the refuge on a nice fall

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day, blue herons, snowy white egrets and glossy ibis are often spotted foraging in the marsh while migratory ducks, snow geese, or the occasional bald eagle fly overhead.

This, however, was no typical fall day. As we'd rattled across the drawbridge, looking to our left, we could see that Randy Kitt, the marina owner, had pulled most of the boats out of the water. *Kitts Lady* and the *Joann K II*, his 85-foot and 65-foot head boats, were riding loosely in their slips, covered with fenders and secured by extra lines, fore and aft, in addition to the usual bow and stern lines. The smaller boats had been hauled into the yard and tied down on jackstands. The tiny restaurant at the marina was boarded up.

Main Street had disappeared under a thick sheet of gray sand-mud, its surface patterned by swirling baywater and the tracks of truck tires. The cluster of buildings that forms the village center—the brick firehouse with its two bays, the clapboard general store, and the tiny post office with *Murderkill Beach 19981* above the door—rose like an island from the sea of mud.

A half dozen people watched us glumly from the porch of the general store. With a nod and wave, Griff passed them by and crept toward the intersection of Main Street and North and South Streets to look around. This was where the bay had breached the dune. The sand fence was gone, its splinters scattered in the refuge by the storm surge. Without the protective dune, the choppy bay was tossing saltwater against the bait shop and the Bowman Hotel, its pretty pebble lawn and nautical ornaments dispersed to the bottom of the Bay or buried in the marsh.

After surveying the damage, Griff backtracked to the general store and pulled in next to the other trucks parked there.

“You guys stay here,” I instructed the Tibbies, who were stamping their forepaws impatiently on the seat in the extended cab. Dawa sat instantly, but Senge kept on bouncing.

“Senge, sit,” I said, sternly. He sat, twitching, and emitted a soulful whine, punctuated by a snort at the end. He then gave me that wide-eyed expectant look, as though I would relent and allow him to come with me.

“Nice try but not a chance, little man,” I told him and pushed open the pickup door. I slid off the seat onto the running board. Despite stepping down gingerly, I slipped in the mud.

“Whoops!” I blurted. Flailing, I grabbed the pickup door and steadied myself.

Griff, already climbing the steps to the store, glanced back, “Y’all right, Ab?”

“Fine. I just slipped,” I said. Klutz, I thought.

“How you doin’, Burton?” Griff asked the man in uniform on the porch and extended his hand.

“All right, Griff,” said the police chief as they shook hands.

At 6' 1", Griff towered over Burton Bishop's 5' 9", but whatever he may have lacked in stature, Murderkill Beach's chief of police made up in the dignity of his person. Twenty years in the U.S. Air Force, the last five at nearby Dover Air Force Base, gave him an iron-rod posture and spit-and-polish appearance.

If anything, Burton's experience in the military police over-qualified him to lead Murderkill Beach's two-man force. But, after meeting and marrying a Delaware native, Mary Nichols, Burton had decided to stay put when he retired. They settled in Mary's home town of Libertytown, a traditional African-American village of a dozen houses and a church at a

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crossroads about a half-mile inland. The job in nearby Murderkill Beach offered not only a short commute but also tranquility in winter and bustle in summer.

Burton acknowledged me with a nod. I nodded back to him and the other people in the group. My eyes paused briefly on the one person I didn't know, and I smiled faintly at him before returning my attention to Burton.

"I came out to check on Dashiell Hall," I said to Burton, thumping my toe against the riser to knock off some of the mud caked on my boot. "How did you and Mary make out?"

"Water got up on the front porch and in the cellar but not in the house. Mary's cleanin' up the mess. "

"Much damage around town?" Griff asked.

"No loss of life. There were only a few people who wouldn't leave, and they're accounted for." He paused, shaking his head. "They were damned lucky. The north end took a beating. Some trailers went over, and those are the only ones that still got roofs on 'em. The rest of 'em look like crushed beer cans. Most of the cottages flooded—I don't think there'll be much to salvage in them either. And I think this was the last straw for the old lighthouse. The tower is..." he paused again, "...well, it's gone, in little pieces out to sea I guess. Funny thing is, the south end made it through with relatively little damage."

Good, I thought, Dashiell Hall is southwest of the Beach.

"How's your place, Abby?" asked another of the group, a bleach-blonde with over-tanned skin grasping a muddy push broom.

"A little roof damage, Shoog, but nothing to worry about," I answered. "You?"

"Needs cleaning up and drying out. I think the chest freezer out back is ruined. But, hey, I'll be back in business in

a week,” she replied. She stuck out her hand to Griff. “I don’t think we’ve met. I’m Shoog Collins.”

Shoog, short for Sugar, was Felicia Collins, the proprietor of Collins General Store. Sugary sweet Shoog was not—more like salt of the earth—but everybody had called her by the nickname since she was a toddler. I noticed the crowbar lying on the porch where the plywood had been pried off her windows. The rough-hewn benches, so handy for perching while eating ice cream cones and tourist-watching in summer, were missing and, in their place, a heap of soggy sandbags. Her folksy hand-lettered sandwich boards advertising scrapple, muskrat, ham and oysters, usually arrayed along Main Street, were propped against the porch rail.

Griff shook her hand. “I’m Dave Griffiths, Griff for short.”

“And this is my deputy, Mitch Pusey,” Burton said, “and Dean Stephens from the wildlife refuge.”

Griff shook their hands. The introductions were for Griff’s benefit rather than mine. He was a foreigner from Pennsylvania, while I was a local. I had known Shoog from childhood, and I had met Mitch at the Bishops’. As for Dean, he sometimes gave talks in the small conference room in the Dashiell Hall visitor center. I waited, inwardly impatient, until Burton got around to the one person I didn’t know.

“And this is Dr. Reade,” Burton said.

“Shane Reade,” the tall stranger added, “from Chesapeake University.” His hands were stuffed into his jeans pockets. He didn’t take them out.

“Griff’s with the State Police, K-9,” Burton said, directing this comment to Dean and Dr. Reade.

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I didn't wait for Burton to offer my name. "Abby Swann," I said as I gave up trying to de-mud my boots and climbed the last two steps to the porch.

Despite now being on the same level, I was still looking up since the stranger dwarfed me by a foot. From my perspective, the slight cleft in his chin, shadowed with yesterday's beard, was very noticeable. He was a good-looking man.

He glanced down his nose at me. Good lord, what gorgeous brown eyes, I thought. I snatched my eyes away, ostensibly to inspect my still mud-caked boots, before my face could work up a blush.

"Shane heads up the Coastal Study Center at Chesapeake," Dean volunteered. "His group's doing research out at the refuge."

I would have asked a follow-up question or two, but Burton made a throat-clearing sound that discreetly but no less clearly conveyed that introductions and small talk were at an end.

"Griff, you got your dog with you?" he asked.

"Yeah," Griff said and gestured toward the large crate in the bed of his pickup. Well-mannered Thor was waiting in his crate patiently—unlike my Tibbies who, noses plastered to the side window of Griff's pickup, were screeching as only Tibbies can.

"Something goin' on?" Griff asked.

"Buddy Dunn's gone missing," Burton replied. "Birdie said he went out about ten this morning, on foot, to look for their dog and hasn't come back. I looked around their place. There's a mess of tracks, going both ways, around the house and tool shed out back, but I can't tell where he was headed. Could've been toward Plum Point or maybe the other way, toward Black Pool. I don't really think he came up

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South Street, but we can't rule it out. We were just getting ready to split up and look."

"I'll start Thor from their place," Griff said.

Burton nodded and issued orders to the others. "Mitch, you take the area from the marina and then south of the drawbridge. Dean, cover Plum Point. Abby, can you check around the lane to Dashiell Hall on your way out there? And, Dr. Reade, can you go out to the Heron Pond trailhead and work back toward Black Pool from there?"

"The bridge over Bear Swamp Gut is closed," I interrupted. "You have to cross it to get to the trailhead."

"I can walk over it," Dr. Reade replied, looking at Burton and ignoring me.

He had an accent but, with so few words, I wasn't sure what kind. English? No. South African or Australian? Maybe. There was something in his tone, too—not sure what. Impatience? Annoyance?

"Right," Burton said, putting on his impeccable trooper hat. "Let's get going."



## Chapter Four

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Ten minutes later, Griff and I followed Burton's cruiser as he fish-tailed through muddy tracks into a lane marked by a wooden sign, *Dundiggin Acres—The Dunns* carved into it. Birdie and Buddy had made their summer home at the Beach their permanent residence when he retired from his job as an engineer with the state transportation department. They had named it Dundiggin because, as Buddy loved to declare with a big grin, he was finally done diggin'.

With a sidelong look, I watched Dr. Reade's black Jeep continue south on South Street followed by Dean's tan SUV with U.S. Government tags. At the fork, they diverged—Dr. Reade going right toward the Bear Swamp Gut bridge and Dean left toward the Plum Point gate to the refuge.

Birdie was waiting. Ever since meeting her earlier in the year, I had figured her nickname owed its origin to her bird-like appearance, chirpy voice and perky mannerisms. The Birdie standing 10 feet above, on the deck of her beach house, reminded me of a brown sparrow perched on a fence rail, ruffled and shivering against a winter wind.

As she came down the deck steps, her frailty contrasted sharply with her vigor only three days before. Gathered back into a severe bun secured with her trademark chopstick hairpin, her white hair pulled her face taut over her beak of a nose and sharp cheekbones. Her black-brown eyes were shadows against her blanched skin. Despite the heat and humidity, a sweater, tied by its arms around her neck, was draped over her stooped shoulders.

The pickup's gate creaked open and slammed shut as Griff unloaded Thor. Without a word, Birdie handed Griff a shirt of Buddy's.

"We'll find him, Miz Dunn," Griff said in a business-like tone. Finding people was, after all, his business.

"Let's start with the tracks by the shed," Burton said to Griff and headed toward the outbuildings. Griff followed, Thor at heel.

Birdie gestured. "Come on in, Abby," she said, "and bring the Tibbies." She trudged up the steps disappeared into the house.

Leads in place and paws on the ground, Senge and Dawa tugged me toward the deck steps, acquiring a thick coating of gray mud on their fuzzy pants, under-fringes, and slippers in the short journey. On the deck, I held them back as I leaned through the open slider to the kitchen.

"Birdie?"

No reply.

"Birdie?"

"Come on in," she called from somewhere in the house.

"The dogs are covered with mud."

Birdie appeared. "Never mind that. The house is filthy. Ollie's already tracked mud everywhere."

She bent over to beckon the dancing, smiling Tibbies into the house. Dawa stood on hind legs to give her gentle licks on the cheek, while Senge snuffled her hands for treats.

"Is Ollie here now? I thought... I mean, they said that Buddy went out looking for him."

"He came back about a half-hour ago. He's here somewhere," she said and called, "Ollie! Come 'ere. Where are you, boy?"

When Ollie failed to appear instantly, Dawa and Senge, freed from their leads, went in search of him. We heard their

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nails scratch to a halt, and a chorus of snorts ensued as the short-nosed dogs greeted one another. Birdie and I followed the sound of snorting into her family room, still darkened by its boarded windows.

When she lit an oil lamp, the art-lover in me glanced around appreciatively. Free-hand paintings of shorebirds and stenciled flora decorated the board walls. On bookshelves and tables, art pottery reflected the colors of earth and sky. Her home was an original work of art complementing the sea, marsh and forest views all around it.

Birdie set the lamp atop the pellet stove in the corner. Next to the stove, Ollie, the Dunns' fawn Pug dog was lying in his own bed, chin resting on his forepaws. He was allowing Dawa to wash his ear. Birdie bent over him and scratched his other ear.

"He showed up right after I called Burton to tell him about Buddy. I thought Buddy would be right behind him, but..." She trailed off and sat down on the sofa.

Joining her, I pulled Senge, who was whining, into my lap. He hushed and leaned into my chest.

"So, do you know what happened to the shop?" Birdie asked.

Startled by the question, it took me a moment to summon a reply.

"Oh, it's fine. One of the troopers checked it out and told Griff the sandbags kept out the water. The highway is still closed though," I paused. "What time did you get back from Seaford this morning?"

"About eight. Burton called us about seven to let us know we could come back. When we got here, we were looking around, you know, to see if anything was damaged. I'd just let Ollie out to do his business. I didn't think anything

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of it. He never goes off—always stays around the house. But, after we'd checked over everything, I couldn't find him."

She reached over and patted her shin. Ollie slunk from his bed and stood before her, head hanging. She leaned over and hoisted him onto her lap, where he circled and settled with a sigh. Her hand rested on his side.

"He wasn't anywhere around the house. We called and called, but he didn't come. Buddy found some prints crossing South Street, so he went after him." She stroked the dog. "When he hadn't come home by noon, I called Burton. I can't understand why he hasn't come home. He must've had an accident."

Ollie opened his eyes and looked up at his mistress. In the lamplight, it seemed that his eyes were brimming. When I looked at Birdie, hers were as well.

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When I left in Griff's pickup fifteen minutes later, headed for my assigned search area, Dawa and Senge rode shotgun. They stood with forepaws on the passenger door's armrest, peering intently out the window. Birdie, Ollie in her arms, watched us leave from the deck.

Following the mish-mash of tire tracks down South Street, I veered onto the fork to Bear Swamp Road and shifted into a lower gear. With only the tracks where Shane Reade's Jeep had passed earlier to guide me, I straddled the roadbed to avoid a slide into the ditches on either side.

As I neared the turn to Dashiell Hall's lane, a red truck approached from the other direction. Slowing down and pulling slightly to one side, I stopped and waited, wondering who was in the truck. Senge and Dawa growled.

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“Oh, it’s Randy Kitt,” I told them as I recognized the freckle-faced man with thinning, red hair behind the wheel. A passenger sat next to him.

Randy braked and draped his elbow out the window, a cigarette in his fingers. He squinted at me and smiled.

“Well, well, it’s Abby Swann. What the hell you doin’ out here? I ain’t seen you in a month of Sundays.”

“Hey, Randy,” I said. The dogs continued growling punctuated with the occasional bark.

“Quiet!” I said sharply. Dawa silenced but Senge kept a rumble going. “Some of us are out looking for Buddy Dunn. He went out this morning to look for his dog and he’s missing. Birdie’s worried sick.”

“Oh yeah, I heard about that,” he said, looking out his windshield at, well, nothing in particular that I could tell. He took a drag off the cigarette. I couldn’t remember a time when Randy didn’t have a cigarette in his hand.

With the hand draped over the steering wheel, he gestured toward his passenger. “You ever meet my kid brother, Ryan?” he asked.

“No, I don’t think so.” I glanced around Randy. “Hi, Ryan.”

Ryan’s redheaded family resemblance to his older brother was obvious but he was much better looking. He smiled and nodded hello.

“Helluva mess, ain’t it?” Randy went on.

“Yeah. Guess it could have been worse though. How’d you all make out at the marina?”

“Pretty good. Most of the owners come and pulled out their boats aforehand or run ’em upriver to find a hole. The rest we hauled and blocked. Got some damage on one of the head boats, and some of the docks got beat up some. Other’n that, it just got mud all over everything.” He chuckled and

took another drag. “That water come up high though. Scared the shit outta Joann.”

“You and Joann stayed out here during the storm?”

“Yeah.” He took a final drag and flicked the butt into the mud between the trucks, then snorted in a way that clearly conveyed his disdain for anyone who had evacuated. “I ain’t goin’ to no damned shelter.”

On the other side of Randy, Ryan looked away. Nearly imperceptibly, he shook his head—once, twice—then looked back. Shrugging, he grinned at me over his brother’s shoulder. I raised my eyebrows and nodded, but I decided not to comment on the stupidity of staying on a near-island at sea level during a category-anything hurricane.

“Well, I gotta go, Randy. I’m supposed to check on Dashiell Hall. Say ‘hello’ to Joann for me, will you?”

“Yeah sure. Hey, you better stay up on the trail back in there and don’t go off in the marsh. That ground is really swamped.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll be careful.”

“Listen, you all stop by the house sometime. Joann’d love to see you,” he said with a yellow-toothed smile.

“I’ll do that, thanks. Nice to meet you, Ryan. Bye.” I said, with a little wave.

We each began to creep forward but we’d moved only a few feet apart when Randy beeped his horn.

“Hey Abby! Wait a sec.”

I backed up.

“Which way did Bishop head?”

“He has a K-9 tracking. I think they went toward Black Pool.”

“Is that right?” Randy said, nodding.

It wasn’t really a question, so I didn’t answer.

“Mebbe I’ll catch up with him and see if I can help.”

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“I’m sure they can use all the help they can get.”

Randy reached up to the visor and pulled another cigarette out of the pack wedged there, put it in his mouth and was lighting it as we pulled apart.

## Chapter Five

By the time I turned into the sand and oyster shell lane that leads to Dashiell Hall, I'd all but forgotten meeting up with the Kitt boys. Although the flanks of the lane were heavily wooded, all but the hollies and cedars among the big oaks and locusts were bare of leaves. Shifting into the lowest gear, I held my breath while we churned through the low spots with standing water. As we neared the point of land where Dashiell Hall is situated, the lane began a slight rise, and I exhaled.

Ahead, among tall poplars, stood the restored barn that served as visitor-slash-conference center. I pulled into the adjacent parking area marked by felled logs. From the far end of the parking area exited an oyster-shell alley lined by cedars. Down that alley, past the outbuildings, the Hall stood on a point of land formed by a horseshoe curve in Bear Swamp Gut.

"Listen, guys," I said to the dogs, "I'm going to put you on your leads. Okay?"

The Tibbies wiggled unhelpfully as I grappled with the snaps on their leads.

"Look, we're not going up to the house right now. First, we have to look for Ollie's dad, and it might not be safe for you to be off-lead. So, it's on-lead or in-the-car. Yer choice. What's it gonna be?"

Dawa rrr'd, and both dogs sat and lifted their chins to have their leads attached. The Tibbies' command of the English language has long since ceased to amaze me.

We departed the grounds on the walking path to the Black Pool fishing pier. What had been hard-packed gravel was now merely a string of puddles. In the forest, it was easy



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enough to steer myself and the Tibbies around them. When the forest petered out, we were compelled to plop through gooey black mud as the path threaded through flattened phrags.

The dense blanket of six- to seven-foot tall reeds called phragmites—phrags for short—would normally have reduced my vision to a tunnel opening out at Black Pool. Jonah, however, had given me a 360-degree perspective on the marsh. Ahead lay Black Pool like a glossy oval of tar.

“Sheesh. Didn’t take long for the darn bugs to come back. Glad I DEET’ed myself or else I’d already be bitten to death.” I swatted at the assortment of insects buzzing in frustration as they circled my head looking for a place to land.

“And I will never get you two clean,” I grumped as I assessed the inky globs clinging to the Tibbies’ undercarriages.

While Dawa’s mincing steps told me that she was seriously displeased by the untidiness of her slippers, Senge’s carefree gait told me that he was cheerfully uninterested.

At last, I hopped onto the raised boardwalk that ended the narrow approach to Black Pool and strode to the railed deck at water’s edge. The Tibbies flanked me—necks stretched, heads up, ears forward, eyes shining, noses twitching.

Most people around here don’t place much stock in my ‘frou-frou’ dogs with monkey faces, but I know better. From ancient times, they patrolled monastery walls in Tibet, surveying the surrounding valleys and plains, and warned the monks and guardian Tibetan Mastiffs of approaching strangers. Whatever my dogs lack in size or strength, they make up in keen eyesight and inquisitive intelligence. Furthermore, even if they are short in the muzzle, those noses

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are good—maybe not as good as Thor’s nose but a heck of a lot better than mine is.

I scanned south to north along the eastern shore of the pool, looking for any hint of color or shape out of place. I really did not expect to spot anything. Birdie said Buddy had been wearing an olive green jacket over a brown shirt and jeans. So not helpful, I thought, he might as well have been wearing camouflage.

As I gazed at the overlook tower rising from the reeds on the pool’s far shore, the image of a body, face down in a pond, involuntarily came to mind. One day last spring, the Tibbies had led me to the pond-side spot where I had found the body of old Doc Twilley. That scene had haunted me ever since. Shaking away the thought, I squinted and forced my eyes to survey the inky water for any break in its surface. Nothing.

My eyes returned to the tower. It stood, I knew, at the northern terminus of the wildlife refuge’s Heron Pond trail. As the crow would fly over water, the tower was fairly close; by foot overland, it seemed impossibly far. If only I could climb the tower, I could see everything for miles around from the top.

“There’s no way I can get there without a boat.”

My spoken-out-loud remark distracted the Tibbies from their scrutiny of the pool. They turned and tilted their heads in unison.

“However, I think there’s a footpath that runs around the eastern shore,” I said, “assuming it hasn’t washed away.”

My course laid, the Tibbies and I backtracked through the phrags to solid ground—I knew better than to try to skirt the edge of the pool where I might get stuck knee-deep in muck—and we began scouting for a deer path or other way to cut through the woods to the eastern shore of Black Pool. The

*DOG DREAMZZZ*

Tibbies forged ahead, Senge nose down and Dawa eyes up, while I trudged behind. Tibbies are unnervingly perceptive, but I wondered if they really understood what to look for.

Halting to rest for a minute, I wiped stinging sweat away from my eyes and swatted at the unrelenting bugs. I was bitterly regretting leaving my water bottle in the truck. Annoyed and agitated, my mind involuntarily summoned Shane Reade's face for further inspection. Those striking eyes—brown but with tones of gold, almost like polished bronze. I shook the image out of my head.

“Okay, he's attractive—duh. But this is not the time to be thinking about him. Focus, Abby,” I instructed myself sternly. Dawa turned toward me, tilted her head and showed me her tiny lower teeth in a Tibbie smile.

A crash sounded in the trees to my left. In a flash, Senge ripped his flexi-lead from my clutch and bounded away. I yelped and jumped off the path behind him with Dawa bringing up the rear. Ahead, the bouncing plume of his honey-colored tail and explosions of leaf litter across the forest floor marked his passage as he zigzagged through holly and maple saplings.

I called him but, like most Tibbies, Senge has his own agenda. Right now, his quarry—whatever it was—was the top to-do on it. At length, he skidded to a stop and launched his body up a tree. Had the trunk not been perfectly perpendicular and its girth not so great, I've no doubt Senge could have scaled it. Tibbies are good climbers. But the old poplar defeated him. Sliding down backward, he nonetheless clung to its trunk with prehensile paws and barked upward. Dawa and I joined him in gazing into the treetop.

A slight sound drew my eye.

*Susan Waller Miccio*

“I see it! Ohmigosh!” I whispered, eyes wide. “It’s a fox squirrel.” I watched intently as the silvery creature crept farther out on a branch. “How beautiful.”

Reaching for Senge, I detached him from the trunk and, securing him under my arm, I backed away. All the while shushing him (to no effect), I continued my retreat until Senge finally quieted and ceased squirming. Still within sight of the tree, I sat down and held both Tibbies in my arms.

“Sh-h-h-h, Senge, sh-h-h-h. Be still and let’s just watch, okay?”

Never fails, I thought. Once again, I’d forgotten to bring my binoculars.

Even though I’d grown up on Delmarva, I had never seen the endangered Delmarva fox squirrel. They are shy creatures. I’d always heard that you could never mistake one for the common gray squirrel, and now I knew it was true. My squirrel was over two feet long, including fluffy silver tail, obviously much larger than a gray squirrel, with a lighter coat that stood out against the backdrop of the canopy.

After several minutes of silent, motionless watchfulness on both sides, the squirrel ambled back along his branch and began a deliberate, cautious descent. Although Dawa remained relaxed in my right arm, Senge tensed in my left. I redoubled my hold on him and fixed him with ‘the eye.’

Nearing the base, the squirrel paused for a reconnaissance, after which he lowered himself into the leaf litter beneath the tree and crept from sight. I hugged and whispered thanks to both dogs for restraining their natural instinct to give chase. Roused from her meditation, Dawa yawned and stretched.

While unfolding and stretching my semi-numb legs, I stored my observations of the squirrel and wondered how many ticks had crawled into my jeans while I sat on the forest

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floor. Meanwhile, Dawa tiptoed to the end of her 20-foot lead where she arffed to draw my attention. I followed her gaze and glimpsed a dot of red. Caught in a young holly's sparse spiny leaves was a red baseball cap embroidered with the distinctive 'P' logo of the Philadelphia Phillies. It was the kind of cap I'd seen Buddy wear.

It may not even be Buddy's, I thought. Birdie didn't mention that he was wearing a baseball cap. Maybe she forgot, didn't notice or didn't know. Before I could reach it, Senge had loped past me to join Dawa in inspecting the cap. They gave it a thorough smell-over.

"Let me see that, dogs," I said, dropping their leads as I reached to pick up the cap.

I turned it over and looked at the band. There was nothing to identify it as Buddy's cap.

"So, what about it, Tibs? Does this belong to Ollie's dad?"

Dawa rrr'ed and Senge woofed.

One thing was clear to even my inferior human senses. The cap had not been here during the hurricane. It was clean and completely dry.

Up to this point, I suppose I hadn't really considered that Buddy could be in serious trouble. Sure, he was late, but I could come up with several explanations for that. Like—maybe he slipped on some mud, sprained his ankle and was hobbling his way home right now. But I couldn't come up with a plausible explanation for why he would purposely leave behind his Phillies cap.

I was considering calling Griff on my phone when I noticed that Senge and Dawa had sidled to a nearby tree stump and were vigorously sniffing around its base. I decided in favor of a quick look around first.

*Susan Waller Miccio*

“What’ve you found, guys?” I asked, but they ignored me.

□

*Senge snorted to clear his nose and resumed snuffling, pushing his nose into the leaf litter piled around the tree stump. A dozen beetles scampered in all directions.*

*Dawa raised herself on her hind legs and placed one forepaw atop the stump for balance. Her delicate sniff gathered a potpourri of oily metal, gasoline and burnt wood. She sneezed vehemently.*

*“What are you getting, Sister?”*

*“Sawdust,” she replied and sneezed again. “You?”*

*“Ollie.”*

*“I thought so, too, but your nose is better than mine.”*

*Senge paused to savor the rare word of praise from his younger but wiser litter sister. Redoubling his effort, Senge followed his nose around the stump, moving in ever-widening circles. He stopped and, lifting his head slightly, inhaled deeply. Swinging his head slightly side to side, his long ear fringes collected the faint scent rising from the forest floor and fanned it into his nose.*

*“This is it,” he rrr’ed quietly to Dawa without exhaling.*

*“Ollie’s dad?”*

*Senge lifted his head and snorted to clear his nose again.*

*“No, the other one. That way.”*

*“Ah, good job, Brother! Let’s go. We must ‘hasten slowly to arrive soon’.” Dawa darted in the direction Senge was pointing.*

*Senge called after her, “Sister! Wait!”*

*“What?” she called back without stopping.*

*“What does ‘hasten’ mean?”*

*“Hurry, Brother, hurry!”*

## Chapter Six

One minute they were sniffing around a stump and the next, they shot off like rockets, Dawa in the lead, their tail plumes bouncing in tandem and leads dragging after.

“Hey! Forget that squirrel! Stop! Grrr!” I hollered as I rushed after them. A minute later, I found myself sprawling, half-kneeling and half-prone. Something had caught my left foot and tripped me, and I threw my hands forward to catch myself.

Ahead, unseen, Senge was whining. I could hear him as I gasped to recover the breath knocked out of me. I disentangled my left foot and dragged my left knee forward.

“Ow, ow, ow!”

I rolled onto my backside. Tugging the hem out of my boot and rolling up the grubby pant leg, I touched the four-inch abrasion on my right shin experimentally and blew on it. The heels of my hands were skinned too.

Wiggling my bottom, I realized that I was seated on a hard slab. Its protruding edge had caused my tumble. I twisted around. Propelled by the forward momentum of my fall, the Phillies cap lay a few feet away.

“No wonder I’m scraped up. What the heck is this thing?” I muttered as I ran my fingers along its rough edge.

Senge’s sharp bark behind my left ear startled me.

“Hey fella. Where’d you come from?” As I reached back, he ducked under my arm to press against my side. He gently nuzzled my scraped hand. I kissed him on the head.

“Where’s Dawa?”

*Susan Waller Miccio*

He barked and, bouncing on his forepaws, backed out of my hug. He raced away, still barking, his flexi-lead tumbling behind.

“Wait!”

Hauling myself upright, I stumbled after Senge. Scooping up the Phillies cap, I ran along the broken, pitted and overgrown remains of what I could now see was an old concrete roadbed.

After a few feet, the single lane road ended; apparently, it was a road to nowhere. I stopped where the last slab vanished underground and, hands on knees, gulped air. I had my eye on the dogs. They were sitting side by side, in sphinx pose, among a stand of pines about 30 feet away. Being Tibbies and thus inherently mischievous, they would likely run from me if I approached them on the run. I sauntered up to them nonchalantly. They pointedly ignored me.

“What’s up, Tibs?”

I drew nearer.

“Oh no.”

□ □ □

“Is he dead?”

I snatched my fingers from Buddy’s throat and, sitting back on my heels, I twisted and glared at the person who had surprised me.

“Jeeminee Christmas. You almost gave me a heart attack,” I said through gritted teeth.

“Sorry,” Shane Reade replied flatly and halted, his thumbs in his jeans pockets. “I assumed that you’d heard me. They did.”

The Tibbies were circling him, their tails wagging. He reached down to scratch their heads.

“No, I didn’t,” I snapped.



*DOG DREAMZZZ*

I turned back to Buddy, lying on his back, arms splayed, the way I'd found him.

"Dead?" he repeated.

I'd felt no pulse. "Yes."

"Buddy Dunn?"

"Yes."

"Right then," he said and produced a phone from his back pocket. "Better call."

He walked a short distance away and, after a brief conversation, returned.

"They're not far away," he said, tucking the phone back in his pocket.

I stood up. He walked to my side.

"What happened to him?"

"I don't know." I pointed at Buddy's legs. One was stretched over a rotten log, and the other was bent at the knee, the lower leg canted awkwardly to the side. "I think he fell backward over the log. Looks like he broke his leg. Maybe he broke his neck too."

We stood silently for a minute or two.

"Where did you come from?" I blurted, barely disguising the suspicion in my voice.

He looked down his nose at me and then away before answering, "Heron Pond. I saw you from the Black Pool tower, coming this way. I was going to ask for a ride back to my Jeep."

We stood silently for another minute or two.

"So, you didn't know Buddy?" I asked.

"No. Never met him."

Senge stiffened and barked a warning. Dawa echoed him. A woof that I recognized answered from the trees.

"That's Thor. Burton and Griff are coming."

*Susan Waller Miccio*

Shane Reade and I remained on the sidelines with the Tibbies and Thor while Griff and Burton checked Buddy's body. After calling emergency services, they began a grim inspection of the area. When Griff picked up the Phillies cap where I'd dropped it at Buddy's side, I stepped forward.

"The cap wasn't there. I found it..." I hesitated and looked in the direction from which I'd chased Senge, "somewhere over there." I pointed vaguely.

"Show me," Griff said.

I thought for a moment. "We were watching a fox squirrel and then Dawa saw the cap. It was caught in a holly bush a ways back from the end of the old road."

"Old road?"

"Yeah, they were chasing the squirrel and I was chasing them when I fell over a slab in an old road. C'mon."

Even before I'd said 'c'mon,' Dawa and Senge had already known, in the uncanny way of Tibbies, that another walk was imminent. They had rounded up Thor and were waiting impatiently, dancing and quivering. As we started toward the woods, they touched noses, like football players fist bumping as they run onto the field, and trotted ahead. Griff and I followed with Shane Reade bringing up the rear.

When I spotted the half-buried slab at the end of the road, we followed the broken slabs until they disappeared under soggy leaf cover.

"Too far. It must be back here." I walked backwards until the heaved slab was under my boots. "Okay, I think this is the one I fell over."

The sun was low in the sky to my right. I pointed that way.

"I was chasing them east. Look for a sawn poplar stump, about a foot high, somewhere over that way."

*DOG DREAMZZZ*

After a few minutes of back-and-forthing, Griff called, “Is this it?”

“Yeah, that’s definitely the one,” I confirmed.

The Tibbies were chattering and circling the stump, while Thor was giving it a thorough smell-over.

“The dogs were fascinated with it, just like they are now, and I noticed it had been cut, not rotted. So, the cap was over there.”

I led them to a clearing where only a half dozen spindly young holly trees grew.

“This is where we found the cap, but I don’t know which holly it was. They all look the same.”

I pulled the Tibbies aside as Griff inspected the site.

“Some of these hollies have been trampled, like something or someone fell on them,” he called.

I jumped when, behind me, Shane Reade asked, “Where did you see the squirrel?”

“Up there, in that old poplar.”

“Are you certain it was a fox squirrel and not a gray squirrel?”

It was a reasonable question but, for some reason, it ticked me off. “Yes, I’m sure,” I snapped. My glare fell on his hair, the color of dark brown sugar shot through with gold, and I instantly regretted my rudeness.

“I got a good look, and I know the difference,” I said in a neutral tone. “It was silver with a big fluffy tail, and it was huge. Like this.” I held my hands a little over two feet apart. I raised my eyes from my hands at the same time he raised his.

□ □ □

Burton was waiting with Mitch Pusey when Griff, Shane Reade and I returned.

“He’s been dead about three or four hours, I’d say. No obvious sign of violence on the body,” Burton said. “What did you find?”

“There are signs of a possible struggle where Abby found the Phillies cap.”

“It might not be his,” Burton observed.

“True,” Griff acknowledged. “But the cap wasn’t here through the hurricane, so whoever it belongs to dropped it sometime yesterday or today.”

“He was in his sixties,” Burton said, “and carried too much weight. It might’ve been a heart attack, stroke, something like that.”

“Look,” I said, stepping forward, “he obviously fell backward over that log. Maybe he was backing away from something, or someone, who was, uh, chasing him.”

Griff nodded, but Burton looked skeptical.

“I don’t think he would’ve left that Phillies cap if he’d just dropped it,” I added.

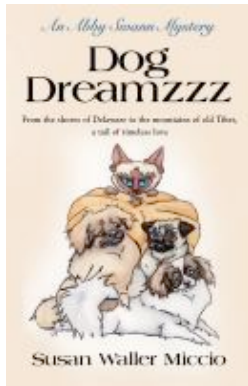
“Well, it’s up to the medical examiner to determine whether the death was natural or accidental.” Burton looked up at the sky. “It’ll be dark in a couple hours. They’d better hurry up. You stay here with the body, Mitch. Griff and I will go back to South Street and lead in the M.E. when she gets here.” He sighed. “Then I need to go break the news to Birdie.”

“I should go back and stay with Birdie,” I said.

“Right,” Griff agreed. “Abby, go back to Dashiell Hall and get the truck. I’ll meet you at Dundiggin when we’re done here.”

“Can you give me a lift to my Jeep?” Shane Reade asked me.

“Sure,” I said. My heart gave a flutter.



*When Abby Swann's Tibetan Spaniels, Dawa and Senge, find Murderkill Beach's mayor sprawled over a tree trunk, dead, Abby believes he discovered something sinister in the swamp. Pursued by an Australian professor and his student, Abby navigates the town's waterways and secretive goings-on, past and present, while Dawa dreams of lives long ago, faithful Senge and sassy Siamese by her side. When Abby falls in trouble up to her neck, can the Tibbies save her?*

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