

Detective Nia D'Amato unwittingly finds herself drawn to the scene of a shocking accident that may be no accident. She quickly finds the island paradise of Nantucket hides an undercurrent of clandestine relationships and disturbing events.

Inn Season

By Robert Tucker

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ROBERT TUCKER

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Part 1

Chapter 1

A jarring thump brought Detective Nia D’Amato skidding to a stop.

What the hell? She scanned the neat row of Nantucket houses—silent, save for the screams of hungry seagulls drifting overhead.

Probably just more construction work. She pushed off, rolling forward again. A low, pleading voice cut through the chilly mid-day March air.

“Help. Please, somebody.”

Nia dropped her beach bike and sprinted toward the nearest driveway. She passed a rusting mini trampoline, then stopped dead. The sweet smell of pollen still filled the air from the fallen pine tree.

She ran to a woman and what appeared to be the arm of a young child. Trapped. She knelt beside them, fumbling for her cell phone.

“Nia D’Amato requesting an ambulance and fire engine to...”

The woman whispered, “21 Hooper Farm Road.”

Nia relayed the address, adding, “and there’s an adult female and a juvenile pinned under a tree.” She knelt, leaning against the rough bark, looking at the panic-stricken face. “Try to stay calm. Help’s on the way.”

The woman's eyes widened, "My daughter. Please, help my daughter." She closed her eyes, gasping for air. "Here." She motioned with her head.

Nia could only see a pale arm with an upturned hand sticking out. She pressed three fingers against the wrist.

She shook her head. *Crap, nothing.* She readjusted her fingers. *Wait, no. Was that a faint pulse?*

She placed her good shoulder against the tree, closed her eyes, and pushed. Her voice burst out between short grunts of futile effort. "Too heavy. Can't budge it." She expelled a frustrated breath, dropping down next to the woman. "Sorry. Hang on. Help should be here any time now."

The first fireman, lugging a chainsaw, was quickly followed by others with long, iron pry bars. They strained to lift and prop the tree long enough to slide the mother and her daughter out. The young girl lay motionless, blood flowing from deep wounds in her scalp and the side of her face.

Thump! The prop used to hold the uprooted tree trunk suddenly slipped, causing it to crash to the ground. The mother and her daughter were loaded into the ambulance and it sped away, seemingly chased by a discordant cacophony of growling chainsaws.

Nia sat on the ground, elbows resting on her knees, exhausted from her futile efforts. Her shoulder protested her attempt to move the tree in short staccato bursts. A burly fireman in a white helmet lumbered over and squatted down next to her, extending a mitt-sized calloused hand.

"Scott Barrow, Nantucket Fire Chief."

Nia's hand disappeared in his welcoming handshake. "Detective Nia D'Amato, Boston Police Department, here on a little R&R."

"Well, Detective, glad you decided to choose our island for your R&R *and* that you were close by to call for help."

Nia shook her head. “That poor mother and daughter. I can’t imagine,” her voice trailed off.

Scott looked at her, rubbing his chin. “It’s a small island and I know the family. Good people.” He stood up. “I guess now all we can do is hope the doctors can help them. Our trauma center is better than many off-island.”

Nia stood and surveyed the accident scene for the first time.

What are those odd markings near the bottom of the trunk?
She took a step closer, then stopped.

“Chief, could you ask your men to stop cutting for a minute?”

He gave her a surprised look, shrugged, and walked over so they could see him. He waved, hollering, “Guys, hold up a minute.”

The roar of the chainsaws died down to a throaty, sputtering growl. His men had already cut up several foot-long slices from the top of the tree. Nia walked across the bits of wooden debris strewn all around the accident scene toward the upturned roots. She ran her fingers across some deep, flesh-colored gouges in the rough bark that looked new, about three feet above the base.

These are deep and appear random. Looks like they’re only on one side. They could have been made in frustration or maybe anger.

She bent down, examining the area around the bottom of the tree. A shiny object, mostly buried in wood chips, caught the sunlight.

Looks like it might be some sort of key.

She walked over to where the Chief was talking with one of his men.

“Chief, this may not have been an accident.”

He walked over and gave a puzzled look. “Not an accident? What do you mean?”

She pointed at the fresh marks scattered on the trunk. “Those look like someone or something recently damaged the tree.”

“Well I’ll be damned, Detective. You may be right.”

Chapter 2

Nia sat with her back against the rough tree bark and watched a tall, imposing figure with close-cropped hair approach as the cruiser's lights bathed them all in pulsing blue.

He's got his hanging holster and gun prominently displayed on that scarred leather belt. Guess there's no question who the alpha male is at that station.

Captain Miller wore an irritated look as he marched up to the fire chief and Detective D'Amato. She showed him her badge.

"Nia D'Amato, Boston Police Detective."

"Captain John Miller, Nantucket Police." He took a moment to survey the accident scene. "So I understand you think this might be a crime scene, Detective?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure. But I thought it deserved a second look."

He pulled on latex gloves and carefully examined the gouge marks on the trunk. When he was finished, Nia pointed to an object lying nearby. He looked around at the multiple footprints made by the firemen and the layer of wood chips.

"Well, Detective, I think it may be a little late for us to worry about crime scene contamination." He walked over, bent down, and visually inspected what looked like the ornate top of a small silver key. "It looks like it might go to a small jewelry box or maybe a fancy little chest."

He stood up and made a face. “That key could easily belong to someone in the Holtz family and have been dropped by accident.”

Nia held up a finger. “Or, it might have dropped here by accident during commission of a crime.”

He fixed on her a skeptical eye. “Detective, while those fresh marks on the tree are curious, I’m not sure there’s enough here to warrant labeling this a crime scene. Maybe you do that automatically back in Boston where violent crime is common, but here, we only do it if we believe there’s sufficient evidence to warrant further investigation.”

An angry burn began to build in the pit of her stomach. *It’s clear from that look on his face he doesn’t appreciate getting advice from an outsider.*

“Well it’s your rodeo, Captain. I was just going by what my experience suggests is credible evidence, that this might not be just a simple accident.”

He narrowed his bushy eyebrows and gave her a look that was difficult to decipher. “Well, *Detective D’Amato*, while I’m not sure there’s enough evidence, I suppose, there might be sufficient cause to take a closer look at this accident.”

Was that an eyeroll? Seriously? It’s a good thing he can’t tell what I’m thinking right now.

“Until we know more, Detective, I’ll treat this accident as suspicious. Though I’m afraid a lot of potential evidence has already been corrupted.”

He hollered over to where the fire chief stood talking with two of his men. “Chief, just leave everything where it is. I’ll have my men cordon off the yard. Do you know if Rachel’s husband Alex has been notified yet? I’ll need to talk to him. And Detective D’Amato, I’ll need you to come to the station at your convenience and give a statement.”

“I’ll plan to come by in the morning. And if you have any other questions for me, I’m staying at the Union Street Inn.” She started to turn, but then remembered how she arrived. “But first, I need to return my rental bike.”

Captain Miller seemed to notice for the first time her dirt-smearing shirt and disheveled hair.

“Detective, can I give you a lift back into town?”

The last thing I want to do is to spend any more time with this pompous island cop, but my shoulder is freaking killing me.

“Ah, thank you, Captain. Much appreciated.”

She struggled to fit the rental bike into the trunk of the cruiser, while he cleared room for her to sit in the passenger’s seat.

They pulled away, kicking up a spray of sand, and peppering an Apple Watch that had fallen unseen from Nia’s pocket.

“Let’s try to kill two birds with one stone. I’d like to get a better idea of what brought you here, and then what you saw and heard right before and after your arrival at the house, if you think you’re up to it.”

Really? Kill two birds with one stone. Wow, what cave did you crawl out of, Captain Clueless?

“Interesting choice of expression.”

He looked over, puzzled. “What?”

“Oh, nothing. I’ll be fine as soon as I get myself cleaned up and take something to relieve this pain.” She nodded at her shoulder.

“From today? I can swing by the hospital and have them take a look.”

“Oh, no. Not today. It’s from a bullet I took several months ago in Vermont on a robbery-murder case.”

“Vermont? Isn’t that a little out of your jurisdiction?”

Figures. This guy must follow the same playbook bible as my boss.

“That’s a long story. The short version is, I got shot when I followed a murder suspect to an inn in Vermont. A few months later, my boss ordered me to take more time off for this damn thing to heal. So I got a boat over first thing this morning.

“Okay. Let’s start with your bike ride.”

“Well, I decided to rent a bike and go sightseeing. Thought I’d test my shoulder a bit. Guess I was lucky enough to be riding in the wrong place at the right time.”

“Wait a minute. Let’s back up. Did you see anyone or hear anything *before* you got to the Holtz house?”

“It was pretty quiet. When I turned onto the street, I stopped to take a picture. There was an elderly couple on the sidewalk, heading in the other direction. Didn’t see anyone else.”

“Okay, so you continued down the street. Then what happened?”

“I stopped when I heard this really odd loud noise. And it felt a little like the shock wave you feel in an explosion. It was quiet after that, so I thought it was construction and started biking again. Then there was a cry for help—really soft. If it wasn’t so quiet on the street, I would never have heard it. I dropped the bike and ran to investigate. I saw a mother and her daughter pinned under a tree.”

“Okay, Detective, now I’d like you to close your eyes and look around the yard. Tell me everything you see.”

She closed her eyes, trying to ignore the rhythmic, pounding pain in her shoulder. “I ran by a kid’s trampoline that was at the end of the driveway.” She turned her head slowly. “There’s a rope still attached to one end of the hammock and a standing tree.” She paused a moment, speaking deliberately. “I think that’s a hose connected to a faucet. It’s lying in a big

tangled heap on the ground near the foundation. Over near it is a green steel bulkhead against the back of the house.” She turned her head again. “On the other side of the yard is a white shed with double doors and some scrub pine trees in back of it. There are some tools propped against it, and...” Her eyes sprang open. “Wait a minute. I did miss something. There’s a long-handled gardening tool on the ground near the back corner of the house. But I’m not sure what kind it is. Might be a rake, or shovel, maybe. I forgot about seeing that.”

“You’re sure, Detective?”

“Couldn’t swear to exactly what it was, but yes, there was definitely something on the ground there.”

After arriving at the bike shop, Nia pulled her bike out of the trunk and closed it. She watched the captain raise his hand and speed away.

Yeah. Listen it was really good chatting with you too, Captain Miller. She shook her head. *Where have all the good guys gone? Either gay, married, way too young, or way too old.*

She turned to face an open-mouthed worker who stared wide-eyed at her disheveled appearance.

“Ah, were there any problems with the bike, miss?”

“Oh no. The bike is fine.” She looked down at her clothes. “But I guess I must look like I’ve been wrestling in the dirt.”

Glad it’s only a short walk to the inn. As she trudged along with aching shoulder, she caught her exhausted face, dirty clothes, and wild hair filled with bits of wood, in a restaurant window. *What man wouldn’t be happy living with that vision of beauty? And it explains all the curious stares and mothers corralling their young children, giving me a wide berth.*

She impatiently unlocked the door to her room and immediately began shedding her clothes leaving a trail to the

bathroom. She leaned into the tiled shower stall with one hand and adjusted the water as hot as she could stand it.

Oh God, let me die here under this steamy water. She moved her left shoulder in small circles, feeling the sharp water-needles bounce off her two-inch scar. When she finished, she quickly toweled dry and dropped onto the bed while replaying the scene of the terrified mother pleading with her to save her gravely injured daughter.

And I know all about how violence can change everything in an instant. She rolled her head toward the picture on her nightstand of her dad, Detective Rob D'Amato, with his arms wrapped around her.

Baby. That what he always liked to call me, even when I was a freshman at Boston Latin Academy.

We'd just finished our soccer game at Madison Park Field in Roxbury and Dad met me. We talked about the game and the goal I almost made as we walked to the car.

He turned, looked up the street, and stopped. His eyes got wide and he pushed me out of the way as a car sped by with an open window. He shouted, 'Christ, no,' holding up one hand.

I stumbled to my knees, wondering what game he was playing. I was so naïve. The air filled with gunshots. Dad seemed to just deflate and crumple backwards into me. We collapsed to the ground. I cradled his head in my lap. My tears fell on his face. I brushed them away. Helpless. All I could do was stare at him and squeeze his hand. He looked up, gritting his teeth, sucking in little puffs of air. Blood slowly began to trickle down one side of his mouth.

"Love you, baby."

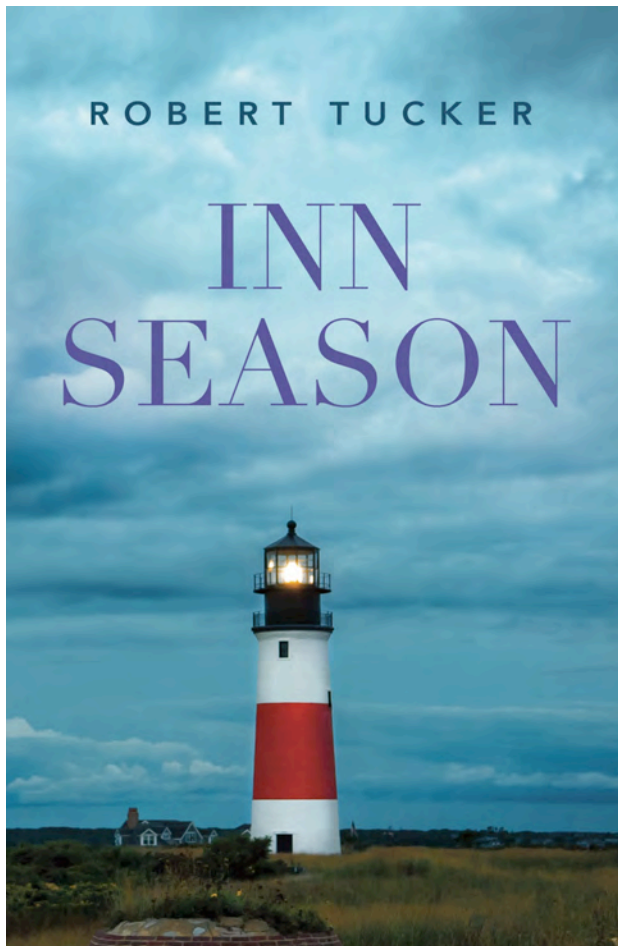
I pulled him against me and started to rock back and forth, whispering, "Oh God please, no. Don't leave me, Dad."

He whispered, "Never." His hand opened, and he lowered his head. It rolled to one side. His eyes saw nothing. Gone. I

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closed my eyes and remembered him smiling when he used to lift me up above his head and spin in place. I floated high above the world, soaring like a bird—loved, without a care.

Haven't thought about that in a very long time. Everything crashed and burned in that one instant. Pain like a knife. Helpless, out of control, falling down. Could only watch his life leak out. Cold death. Never want to feel that way again.



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