

“Bay of Reckoning”

by Shawn Reilly Simmons in *Murder on the Beach* (Destination Murders)

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The girls got younger every year. At least it seemed that way to Sabrina Westfall. She wouldn't have been surprised if this year's flock of beauty pageant contestants toddled in done up in pigtails and wearing onesies. Of course she was the one getting older, another year gone by on the calendar each July when Briny Bay's Miss Crab Pageant and the Summer Crab Festival rolled around.

Sabrina had worn the crown herself thirty years earlier, and never forgot the feeling of elation when her name was called. For the last twenty years, she had helmed the pageant, months of work that always ended in that same moment she craved: the crown, the cheers, the satisfaction of an event well planned.

Sabrina paced slowly in front of the stage, eyeing this year's crop of local beauties, gazing up at them from knee height. She tapped a rolled-up copy of the pageant script lightly on her palm. “Good posture builds confidence, ladies. Nothing is more important in life than how you carry yourself.”

A soft titter floated through the air from someone Sabrina had already passed. She stopped, pivoted her high heels, and tilted her head, her updo defying the motion and the humidity in the air. The first girl in line was rubbing her nose, pretending to suppress a sneeze.

“Something funny, Connie?” Sabrina said, slowly clicking her heels back down the line.

The girl's cheeks reddened and she straightened her spine, her long legs wobbling on platform heels. Underarm sweat darkened her bathing suit, a modest one-piece that was blue and white with tiny cartoon crabs. “Sorry, Mrs. Westfall.”

“Oh dear, call me Sabrina. I'll be your mother-in-law soon.”

“Sabrina,” Connie said awkwardly, as if she'd never said the name before. “It's just that—”
”

“What?”

“Isn’t this kind of silly? I mean, it’s not like we’re in the Miss America pageant.”

“All I ask is that my girls be their best and take themselves seriously,” Sabrina said, her eyes on the young girl’s sweaty cheek. “If you can’t do that, you may leave now. Your mother would be disappointed though, I imagine. I’d think she’d want you to advance further in the pageant than she was able to. She was in sixth place behind me, if I remember correctly?” Sabrina’s lip twitched but she resisted the smile just below the surface. She remembered exactly the rank and where everyone had fallen in line behind her.

Connie’s legs quivered even more and Sabrina thought she might fall forward onto the sand-dusted floorboards. Better to find out during rehearsal which of them couldn’t take the heat. The Miss Crab contest was the biggest draw of the festival weekend, next to the Briny Bay Spice Competition, and Sabrina worked all year to make sure it was as close to perfection as it could possibly be.

Sabrina continued her inspection. “You’re not just representing yourselves or your families,” she said. “You’re representing me, and I hope to be proud of each and every one of you.”

“Mrs. Westfall!” A small man with a sweaty bald head rushed toward the stage, the damp air wilting his shirt collar. “Something has happened.”

“Jerry,” Sabrina said, “what can possibly be so urgent you must interrupt me? We only have one rehearsal left before the festival begins.”

“I’m sorry,” Jerry said. “But it really is an emergency. Someone...” Jerry trailed off, crushing the rim of his floppy sun hat in his hands.

“Someone what? Let’s assume for the moment I’m not a mind reader,” Sabrina said.

“A body has been pulled from the Bay. It was attached to a Westfall crab pot,” he said, lowering his voice. He glanced at Connie on the stage, then looked away quickly, as if holding his gaze on her would burn his corneas.

“Why does everything have to happen during the Crab Festival?” Sabrina muttered under her breath.

“Sorry,” Jerry said. “Mr. Westfall has called the police.”

“If my husband is handling things, why disturb my rehearsal? There have been accidents out on the Bay before, poachers...wait, was it someone from the Westfall fishing crew? It’s not

Darius, is it?” Sabrina’s son was spending the summer on the largest trawler in an effort to learn every aspect of the family business.

“No, it’s not Darius. That’s the thing,” Jerry said, scurrying behind the much taller Sabrina. “I’m afraid it’s Albert Eastman.” He whispered the last two words, but not softly enough.

Connie Eastman cried out, then fell to her knees.

The roll of papers Sabrina clutched fell to the floor. “Albert?” she gasped, turning to Jerry. Connie pressed manicured fingertips to her mouth.

Sabrina pressed a palm to her forehead and closed her eyes for a second, feeling the heat of the morning for the first time. “Where is my husband?”

* * *

“Rufus?” Sabrina said, stepping outside the tent. She hurried toward the front of the building and the docks overlooking Briny Bay. A cluster of police cars idled near the entrance of The Westfall Crab Company, where a sign declared “Three Hundred Bottles of Briny Bay Spice Blend Sold Every Day!” An officer was talking to Rufus and her sister-in-law, Heather, who was the company’s receptionist, near the water as a team of coastal police inspected the fishing trawler docked nearby. A small tent had been set up on the boardwalk, and a medical van hovered nearby. The lapel of Rufus’s suit jacket fluttered in the breeze rippling off the Bay.

Sabrina called to him again and he turned toward the sound of her voice. Heather continued speaking with the police officer, her tight pink dress hugging her ample curves as she shivered despite the warm breeze.

“Darling,” Rufus said as she made her way to him and the officer. “Are you all right?” He pressed Sabrina’s hand into his large damp palm.

“Is it true about Albert?” Sabrina said, clutching his sleeve.

Jerry popped up behind Sabrina like a sand crab from a hole. “I found Mrs. Westfall like you asked.”

Rufus glared at Jerry, his expression harsh. “I wish I’d been the one to tell you the details. I was hoping you could buffer some of the shock for Connie finding out about her father.” He waved an arm at the police activity humming around the dock.

Jerry blanched and took a few steps back.

“Oh, the poor girl,” Sabrina said, leaning into her husband. “And so close to the wedding. And the pageant!”

Rufus put an arm around her shoulders. “We’ll do whatever we can to help her and Darius, of course,” he said reassuringly.

A few of the contestants wandered over from the tent and huddled around the distressed Connie.

“Crazy, right?” Heather said, appearing suddenly at their side.

“The police are notifying Mrs. Eastman,” Rufus said. “Why don’t you keep an eye on Connie?”

“And what should I do?” Heather asked, her big blue eyes blinking in the sunlight. Although Rufus and his brother Cornelius were only a few years apart in age, Sabrina was at least twenty years older than her sister-in-law.

“Right,” Rufus said. “If you wouldn’t mind coordinating with the authorities. You know, mind the phone calls that come in. That would be great.”

“And should I say there’s a dead guy in one of our traps and to call back tomorrow or...” Heather began.

“No!” Rufus said abruptly, then softened his tone. “Let’s not say anything specific. Just...”

“Take a message?” Sabrina offered.

“Exactly,” Rufus said with relief. Heather gave a quick salute then turned on her high heels and went back inside the building.

“Sir,” the officer said, tapping a pen on his notepad. “A few more questions?”

Rufus waved a hand at him. “Please, just a minute. We’re all a bit...overwhelmed.” He hurried over to the cluster of young women and opened his arms to Connie for a hug. “I’m so sorry about your dad.” She nodded through her tears and leaned into his embrace.

Sabrina watched her husband console Connie and reminded herself how lucky she was to have Rufus Westfall for a husband. Their family meant so much to so many in their small seaside community, going back decades.

Finneas Westfall had founded the company in 1949 after he’d returned home from World War II, telling tales of heroism and glory. Rufus managed the company’s operations now along with his brother under Finneas’ watchful eye.

Rufus had proposed to Sabrina the night she’d won the Miss Crab Pageant, slipping a sparkling diamond on her finger with a slight tremor in his hands. She’d said yes, of course. She had been trying to catch Rufus’ eye ever since their freshman year in high school. His good looks

were a draw, although it was his kindness she really admired.

Rufus, with Sabrina by his side, and Cornelius, and most recently Heather, had brought the business nationwide with their popular spice blend. Sabrina thought how improbable that was, considering Finneas had started the company with a single broken down trawler and a small wooden shack of a warehouse he'd built himself on the Briny Bay docks. Back then The Westfall Crab Company was two people, Finneas and Jacob Eastman, his navy buddy.

Although well past retirement age, Finneas showed no signs of slowing down. His regular constitutionals on the boardwalk kept him fit, and his mind was still as sharp as the cheese he stirred into his shrimp and grits every morning.

Sabrina looked past the docks and out to the Bay and thought about the accidents that had happened over the years. Four fishermen had gone overboard from Westfall boats, their sodden bodies pulled from the water much too late for them to survive. Commercial fishing was a dangerous business, but the Westfalls had faced the challenges and strived to improve safety and working conditions for their employees. Sabrina admired how much Rufus cared for his staff, noticing more than once how he'd written checks from their personal account to cover medical or educational expenses for families in need.

Sabrina and a handful of volunteers worked all year long on the crab festival. Everyone who was anyone in town attended, and the population of Briny Bay swelled to twice its size for one weekend a year. Tourists came to feast on crabs, gamble during their casino night, and dress in gowns and black tie for the banquet gala.

She glanced again at the police tent on the dock and wondered what Albert Eastman's death was going to mean for the festival, the town, and her family. She also wondered why he'd been out on the Bay in the first place.

* * *

"You can't trust an Eastman," Finneas growled from his seat at the head of the table that evening. The old man's face was still handsome, despite the deep lines carved there by years of sea and sun.

"Dad," Rufus began. "It's time you quit—"

Finneas raised a hand to stop his son from speaking. "What? Darius isn't here. I can speak my mind."

"Must you, though?" Rufus said. "Tonight of all nights?"

“What do I always say?” Finneas continued, ignoring his son. “The Eastmans are liars. And now look. Old Jacob’s son got caught up in one of our traps. Now, if that’s not bad enough, your son,” he glared at Rufus and Sabrina sitting next to each other at table, “wants to marry one of them.”

“Really,” Sabrina said quietly. “Must we discuss all of this over dinner? It’s already been a very trying day.”

“Rina’s right,” Heather piped up from her seat across the table. Sabrina gave her a quick smile. She’d never taken to the shortened version of the name her sister-in-law had graced her with when they first met a few years earlier but figured it was too late to say anything about it now.

Finneas shot Heather an annoyed glance, then relented, pushing a piece of flounder around on his plate with his fork. He’d taken to ignoring Heather for the most part, which was better than being outright hostile to her, Sabrina thought. Heather wasn’t the sharpest harpoon on deck, but she meant well, and that was enough as far as Sabrina was concerned. She’d done wonders with the antiquated filing system at the office, and for that, Sabrina thought she ought to get a medal, or at the very least, Finneas’ respect. He hadn’t forgiven Cornelius for “dipping his pen in the company ink” yet, but they all hoped the old man would come around someday.

The stately dining room at the main house was where the family took their meals most nights before the two sons and their wives retired to their own homes on the Westfall estate, which overlooked the Bay. Sabrina’s house sat closest to the water, and on a clear day, she could see to the other side of the cove, where the Eastmans’ house perched on the cliffs. Sabrina wondered what was happening there now, how the family would have to go on after losing their patriarch so suddenly.

“Rina,” Heather said, filling the dull silence that had fallen over the room. “I’d like to help with the pageant. Remember you said you’d think about it last year?”

Sabrina smiled again. “Oh yes, I do remember that now.”

“She’d be great,” Cornelius said, elbowing his wife gently in the ribs. “You’re not the only beauty queen at the table. Heather won the spring break wet t-shirt contest three years in a row back in college.”

“I’ve heard,” Sabrina said with a gracious smile. “Several times.”

Rufus cleared his throat and carved into the fish on his plate.

“She went to college?” Finneas muttered under his breath.

“Community. Office management.” Heather smiled sweetly at her and pushed her shoulders back a nudge.

“You know,” Sabrina said after a stern glance at her father-in-law, “I think it’s a great idea. We should do more things together. We are family, and well, you never know when life might change suddenly—”

“What in blazes is everyone going on about?” Finneas shouted, slamming his fork onto the table. “Why are you talking about this nonsense?”

Sabrina took her napkin from her lap and dabbed the corners of her mouth before folding it and placing it on the table next to her plate. “Please excuse me,” she said, pushing her chair back. “I’m feeling a bit...tired.”

“Now look what you’ve done,” Rufus said, raising his voice.

Finneas sat back in his chair, the candlelight glinting on his thick mane of silver hair. “This is still my house.”

“Dad,” Rufus said, regaining his composure. He placed a hand gently on Sabrina’s forearm, urging her to wait a moment. “You have to let ancient grudges go. A man has died. Surely you can put aside your dislike of the Eastman family considering what’s happened. Just give it a rest. Darius and Connie will be married, and our families will be joined. You certainly can’t carry on this way for much longer.”

Finneas’ lips puckered as if he’d been fed a lemon. “I still don’t see how you allowed that to happen. With all the girls on this beach, your son had to choose an Eastman.”

“Dad, please,” Rufus said. “Enough is enough. Whatever happened between you and Jacob happened a long time ago.”

Finneas exhaled loudly and waved his hand. “You kids today don’t understand. A man’s word is his bond. At least it should be. Jacob Eastman was a no-good liar who tried to swindle me, and when that didn’t work, he up and disappeared, left me holding the bag, not to mention his young wife and family. Briny Bay Spice almost collapsed, no thanks to him. Everything I worked for on the edge of ruin. You ingrates wouldn’t be sitting at this fancy table if I hadn’t worked—”

“Sixteen hours a day,” Cornelius chimed in, mimicking his father’s raspy voice. Heather tittered a laugh into her napkin. Finneas shot him a look that would spear a tuna.

“Spared the rod on you too many times,” Finneas muttered under his breath. “I’ll warn you once more. You’re inviting trouble when you invite an Eastman into your life.”

“Wonderful. Well, thank you for dinner. We have a lot of work to do for the festival tomorrow,” Sabrina said.

* * *

“What do you think happened to Jacob Eastman all those years ago?” Sabrina said into the bathroom mirror as she rubbed her middle fingers in opposite directions on her cheeks. Her imported night cream worked wonders, but only if she applied it with precision and a nightly facial massage. She’d let down her long red hair and swept it away from her forehead with a pink headband to complete the bedtime ritual.

Rufus was propped against the headboard, reading a book. His pajamas still held fresh iron creases. “He probably got sick of my father lording it over him and headed inland. The story goes he went out for a pack of cigarettes and never came home.”

Sabrina paused her massage and looked at him in the mirror.

Rufus twisted his mouth into a frown. “You’ve heard of those kinds of things happening.”

Sabrina resumed her circles, the skin on her cheeks tingling under her fingertips. She shifted them to massage her forehead and chin. “It’s very odd to disappear without a trace. With a young family and a business partner? Those are some serious anchors keeping him here.”

“Dad says they had an argument, and then he just took off. A few postcards were mailed to the family. One was from Alaska, I seem to recall.”

“So he went from fishing crab to king salmon?” Sabrina said. “What kind of man is okay with abandoning his family, but still feels the need to send postcards?”

“Jacob Eastman, presumably.”

Sabrina finished up in the bathroom and turned off the light, sliding into bed next to her husband. “You’d never do anything like that, would you?”

Rufus shrugged. “Would I ever leave you and the kids and send you a postcard from Alaska? No.”

Sabrina smiled.

“I’d send one from Hawaii. Much nicer weather there.” Rufus’ eyes twinkled.

Sabrina pulled a pillow from behind her and bopped him on the head with it. “You’re the worst.”

“I know,” Rufus said, pulling her closer. “You know I’d never leave you.”

“You had better not.” Sabrina sighed and laid her head against Rufus’ chest. “What made Jacob leave, I wonder?”

* * *

“Thank you all for getting here so early,” Sabrina said, taking a sip of her coffee. Her volunteer Board sat around her dining room table and watched her expectantly. Everyone had heard about the death of Albert Eastman, and their usual lighthearted banter had been replaced with a quiet anxiousness. “The plan is to go ahead with the festival.”

A few of the women looked at each other quickly, then turned their attention back to their leader.

“We will honor the passing of Mr. Eastman with a moment of silence,” Sabrina said. “And Connie Eastman has withdrawn from the pageant, poor dear, as she is grieving the loss of her father.”

A woman with tight tan skin and a tighter blonde bun sitting at the end of the table raised her hand. “Should we call up an alternate contestant?”

Sabrina thought a moment. “No, Fran, not in this case. We will leave Connie’s space open for her. She will be with us in spirit.” Fran owned Brawny Bay, the gym on Main Street, which featured tanning beds in the locker rooms. Fran always looked like she’d just spent the entire day at the beach, even on Christmas morning.

Murmurs of agreement swept around the table. Sabrina trusted the four women on her Board, and more importantly she knew they rarely challenged her decisions.

Sabrina heard her front door open and the click of high heels on the marble floor of her foyer. Heather popped her head into the dining room, then scurried to the empty chair next to Fran. She’d swapped the pink tube dress from the day before to a magenta one of the same style. Sabrina thought she might have found them on the rack of the beach shop Kelli owned, the Board member at the far end of the table.

“Heather,” Sabrina said. “Are you—?”

“Reporting for duty!”

“Great! I was worried you’d forgotten,” Sabrina said. “Everyone, you all know my sister-in-law.”

“Oh, I know all of you,” Heather said, nodding. “You’re Kelli,” Heather said, sweeping her

hand down her dress, confirming Sabrina's suspicion. "And Tan Fran..." Heather giggled. "You're Tiffany, from the jewelry store..." Heather flashed the large diamond Cornelius had given her on her left ring finger. "And Stella. Your husband owns that garage on Sandy Point. I used to take my 'vette in there, before I met Corny."

Stella eyed Heather up and down and her cheeks took on a rosy tint. Sabrina wondered if Stella's husband had a wandering eye, and if it had ever wandered over Heather.

"That's impressive," Tan Fran said with a laugh.

"I like to know what's what and who's who," Heather said.

"Right, well," Sabrina said, vaguely embarrassed by Heather's amateur detective display. "We're glad to have your help, of course. Maybe you can handle..." Sabrina leafed through the binder in front of her on the table.

"Whatever I can do," Heather said after a few moments of silence.

"You're great at keeping things organized," Sabrina said. "We can all use that."

The women around the table nodded in agreement, and Heather smiled, sitting back against her chair and crossing her long legs. "You should see the stuff I get to sort through at the office. Paper, records, junk shoved everywhere in every drawer. Like forty years of filing never done!"

"Wow," Tiffany said. "That sounds like a big job."

"I know where everything is now," Heather said confidently.

"Now, let's get an update on our committees," Sabrina said.

"Catering," Kelli chimed in, "is all set. Six local restaurants have their booth assignments, and they all know what to expect as far as crowds."

"The Town's Time Capsule opening is scheduled for noon on the second day," Stella said as she tapped her knuckles on the table. "It's a big one, fifty years, so we think we'll get a crowd."

"Perfect," Sabrina said. "That should work nicely with the timing of the other events. Speaking of which, what about the spice contest? How many have signed up for the shrimp boil to showcase their spice blends?"

"All in hand," Tan Fran said. "We have eight contestants."

"And who are the judges?" Sabrina asked, jotting notes in her binder.

"The three Westfall men and..." Fran said, then hesitated. "We need at least one more."

"I'll do it!" Heather said, clapping her hands.

“Now there’s an idea,” Sabrina said, nodding. “I like it. Why not have a lady Westfall on the dais?” She glanced at Tiffany. “How is press coverage going?”

“A reporter from the *Gazette* will be on hand all weekend covering the event,” Tiffany said.

“Great news,” Sabrina said. “Well, ladies, it’s time to get out there and put on the best festival we can.”

* * *

Sabrina watched her Board members head off in different directions once they arrived at The Westfall Crab Company and festival grounds. As she headed for the tents, a feeling of dread settled in her stomach. Were they wrong to carry on with a fun-filled weekend, yards away from where someone had lost his life?

A young man loitered near the main tent, jotting notes on a small pad. When he saw Sabrina approaching, he stopped writing and made his way over to her.

“Hi, I’m Ray Northam, from the *Gazette*,” he said, sticking out his hand. “You’re Sabrina Westfall, correct?”

“Hello, yes,” Sabrina said with a gracious smile. “You’re a bit early if you’re here to cover the event. Nothing is happening until later on today.”

“Oh, the crab to-do, right,” Ray said. “Well, partly. I’m actually doing a story on a series of deaths in Briny Bay. The most recent one I’m sure you know about.”

“Albert,” Sabrina said, her chest tightening. “You said deaths, though. As in multiple.”

“It’s a funny thing around here,” Ray said with a nod. “Every year that ends in a nine, like this one, somebody dies under suspicious circumstances. I think there’s a connection.”

“Oh my,” Sabrina said. “That doesn’t sound like the flattering piece about the festival we were told we’d get.”

“I suppose not.” Ray shrugged. “I’ll be in touch, I’m sure.”

“Who else have you talked to?” Sabrina asked.

“I’m not able to reveal that,” he said. “Let’s just say, I’ve been working on this story for a while.” Ray glanced at his watch. “Sorry, I have to check in with my editor.” He hurried away, pulling his phone from his pocket and pressing it to his ear.

“Years that end in nine,” Sabrina muttered to herself as she watched him walk away. Her anxiety intensified when she noticed a pair of police detectives pacing the docks next to the tents,

an overly tall man and a much shorter woman in suits the same dull brown color. What could they want? She thought as she walked over to them.

“Is there anything I can help you with?” Sabrina asked when they noticed her approach.

“Not at the moment,” the taller one said. “We’re just—”

“Investigating,” the woman interrupted. “The murder that happened here yesterday. I’m Detective Southerland, and this is Middleburg, my partner.”

“It’s not common knowledge yet,” Middleburg said, nudging her in the arm. He leaned over slightly to do it, to bridge the distance between their heights. It seemed to Sabrina he must do this automatically when talking to his partner.

“What? It’s not like the news won’t be all over soon anyway,” Detective Southerland said. “And you are?”

“Sabrina Westfall. I’m sorry, did you say murder?” Sabrina looked over her shoulder to where she’d just been speaking with the reporter. “I thought Mr. Eastman had fallen in the water and drowned.”

“Helped along by a bullet in his chest,” Southerland said.

“Oh my,” Sabrina said, pressing a hand to her own chest. “Who shot him? Why?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out,” Detective Middleburg said.

“You’re working on the crab feast this weekend, right?” Southerland asked.

“The Crab Festival,” Sabrina corrected. “It’s an annual event that draws hundreds—”

A scream erupted from inside the tent. Sabrina spun toward the sound so quickly she made herself dizzy. Middleburg’s face froze in surprise momentarily before the two cops shuffled past her and dashed toward the tent. Another scream broke through the humid morning air.

“What now? What fresh hell?” Sabrina breathed, closing her eyes for a moment to stop herself from fainting.

* * *

Inside the tent, the detectives stood over Ray Northam’s body, a boning knife sticking out of his neck.

“Dead,” the squat Detective Southerland said. “Real dead.”

“Is that your professional opinion?” Sabrina said. She immediately regretted speaking to the detective that way, but seeing the lifeless body of the man she’d just been talking to sent her into such intense shock she forgot her manners. “He’s a reporter from the *Gazette*. I was just

speaking to him.”

Sabrina noticed the members of her Board huddled in the corner of the tent, Tan Fran shaking in her sundress despite the warm summer air.

“You all have to go,” Middleburg said. “We need to call this in.”

“Of course, they have to call it in,” she said, waving the women away from the body. “Come on, ladies. Everyone back to my house.”

* * *

Sabrina made a round of tea for everyone, setting the cups down with shaking hands on the wooden dining table where they’d met earlier.

“What in the world is going on?” Tiffany said. “Two people dead in two days. That just doesn’t happen in Briny Bay.”

“Except it does,” Fran said under her breath. “That reporter was murdered. That knife in his neck? That’s definitely not an accident.”

“Maybe it was a suicide,” Tiffany said earnestly.

“Oh, obviously,” Stella said, an edge coming into her voice. “People are always shooting themselves in the chest and falling into the water and also knifing themselves in the neck in the middle of doing their jobs.”

Tiffany cowered, her shoulders creeping toward each other as she attempted to make herself smaller.

The rest of the Board stared at her for a few moments before Tiffany spoke again. “How will I ever forget finding him like that?” No one answered.

“Who would want to kill a reporter? For what reason?” Sabrina asked, steadying herself with the back of her chair.

The group stared at her with various expressions of disbelief and shock. Sabrina stared back and noticed for the first time that someone was missing.

“Where is Heather?”

* * *

“Darling, are you okay?” Rufus said over the phone. Sabrina twisted the curly cord in her fingers as she stood in their kitchen.

“I’m okay,” Sabrina said. “The ladies are here. We’re not sure what to do.”

“It’s a real mess,” Rufus said. “There are cops all over the tents, searching for clues.”

“Clues?” Sabrina asked. She nodded to Fran, who pointed at the water pitcher on the counter.

“I guess,” Rufus said. “Heather said you’d all come down to get set up for the day and then found that reporter.”

“Heather? Wait, when did you talk to her?”

“Just before I called,” Rufus said. “She’s here now, talking with the police. I’m sorry, dear. I thought you’d told her to help, I just assumed.”

“I’m...I don’t know,” Sabrina said. A headache was building above her eyebrows “Yes, she is helping. What is she saying?”

“I’m not sure. There are a couple of reporters here now too.”

“Oh good lord,” Sabrina said, alarmed. “She’s not speaking on behalf of the festival, or me, is she?”

“I wouldn’t know but I don’t think—”

“Stop her from saying anything she shouldn’t...or anything damaging,” Sabrina begged. “Please.”

Sabrina rushed to her front door, telling the committee to give her a few moments. Pulling it open, she found herself looking over the top of the head of Detective Southerland and mid-chest at Middleburg. She couldn’t decide whether to look up or down and so nodded to greet the pair.

“Detectives,” Sabrina said. “I’m surprised to see you here.”

“We’re now investigating two deaths. Murders.”

“Cold-blooded murders,” Middleburg said, wiping his nose.

“One of which happened right under your—” Sabrina said.

“We have a few background follow-up questions,” Southerland interrupted.

Sabrina sighed. “Very well, come in then.”

By the time Sabrina finished with the detectives, all she wanted to do was go upstairs and take a nap. The shock of the morning was finally wearing off, leaving only exhaustion and uncertainty in its wake. But she pressed on and headed out to her car to drive back to the festival tents. She’d sent her committee on their way when the interview ran longer than any of them wanted it to.

“Hey!” Heather called out to her as she stepped from her car. “Where have you been?”

“Don’t ask,” Sabrina said. “What is going on down here?” Her heart sank as her eyes traced over the tents, where yellow police tape flapped in the wind.

“They’re about ready to remove the body,” Heather said.

Sabrina eyed her curiously. “What are they saying? Do they have any idea who might have done this?”

“Something about a struggle, a fight of some kind,” Heather said.

“This is truly awful,” Sabrina sighed. “We’re done for.”

“Yeah,” Heather said. “It seems like maybe we are.”

“What could be so important to kill a man over? It’s not like there is anything valuable lying around.”

“Love or money,” Heather said with a nod. “That’s what they say it always is on the shows I watch.”

Sabrina fought back an exasperated sigh.

“What did that reporter say to you before it happened? The police mentioned you were the last to see him alive.”

“I know,” Sabrina said. “They’ve been grilling me up at the house for the past hour. He was working on an article about the deaths in Briny Bay. He thought there was some kind of pattern. Years that end in nine.”

“Whoa,” Heather said. “And then he ended up being one of the deaths. I wonder if he knew that was going to happen?”

Sabrina squinted at her then shook her head. “I wouldn’t think so.”

“Right,” Heather said. “If he knew he was going to be murdered, he would probably have called in sick today.”

Sabrina put a hand over her eyes and wondered how much more she could take.

* * *

Sabrina sat at her dining room table and stared at the binder in front of her as the sun dipped lower in the sky, tinting her dining room in deep orange. She began flipping through the pages, leafing them over carefully and reading the minutes of all the meetings they’d had leading up to that weekend. Reaching the first pages of the binder, a thought struck her. She sat up straighter, then headed to the library off of the foyer.

In the far corner cupboard, Sabrina pulled out a few binders that looked exactly the same

as the one on her table. Sitting at the antique secretary desk, she began flipping pages, pausing occasionally to read meeting minutes in more detail.

Twenty minutes later, Sabrina picked up the phone on the desk.

“Heather, it’s me,” Sabrina said. “Odd question for you. When you were clearing out those old files at the office, did you ever run across anything unusual?”

She pulled the phone away from her ear slightly as Heather’s always louder than necessary voice echoed over the line.

“Well, that is very interesting,” Sabrina replied. “Would you mind grabbing those from the office before coming to dinner tonight? I’d love to get a look at them.”

Sabrina hung up the phone and stared at the receiver for several minutes before sitting down and making some notes.

* * *

That night at dinner, the Westfall family was subdued. The Crab Festival had been called off for the first time in fifty years. Sabrina was devastated, but she knew real strength meant not showing how upset you were, especially in front of others. She took her seat at the table and politely pushed pieces of crab cake around on her plate.

“First an Eastman and now a reporter,” Finneas groused from his seat at the head of the table. “What the hell’s going on?”

“What I want to know is who’s out there killing the residents of Briny Bay?” Rufus said. He squeezed Sabrina’s hand under the table. “You’d like to know your family’s safe.”

“None of us is safe,” Finneas said. “I learned that in the war. I also learned you can only trust your family.”

“That reporter thought the murders fit into a pattern. That they were related, maybe committed by the same person, I think,” Sabrina said quietly. “What on earth could be so important, I thought to myself.”

Heather twirled her silver fork in her fingers and winked noticeably at Sabrina. “People kill for lots of reasons.”

“You would know,” Finneas sniffed at her. “Your lot would kill each other over a block of government cheese.”

“Really, Finneas,” Sabrina snapped. “I’m so tired of you treating Heather this way. Honestly, it’s unbecoming of a war hero like yourself, a man who built a company up from

nothing. Can't you show the woman your son chose to marry a modicum of respect?"

Rufus gazed at his normally quiet wife, then nodded in amazement. "Yeah, Dad. It's enough."

Cornelius slid over and kissed his wife on the cheek.

"Thank you," Heather said.

"What has gotten into everyone?" Finneas huffed. "A man should be treated with respect at his own table."

"It's time for you to listen, old man," Heather said. "Your lies are done. I know you're not who you say you are."

Finneas stared at her, then sputtered, "You know about—"

Sabrina sat forward, her heart racing.

"That Navy Cross you keep in your desk. It's not yours. You're no war hero," Heather said.

Finneas exhaled as he glared at her. "Stupid little—"

"Dad," Cornelius said. "Don't."

"What is she talking about?" Rufus asked.

"He's a deserter," Heather said. "I called and asked for your Navy record. It's not hard to figure stuff out if you know how to ask. I've been waiting until just the right time to open up this particular can of worms." She leaned forward and pointed a long pink fingernail at him. "You've disrespected me from day one. On day two I started finding stuff out."

Cornelius put his arm around his wife's shoulders. Rufus set his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands.

"I know what happened to Jacob," Sabrina said quietly. Rufus lifted his head slowly and looked at her.

"It makes no sense," Sabrina said. "A man leaving his family like that. A decent, respected man, from the way Connie tells the story." Sabrina leveled a look at Finneas. "I figured out what you did."

Finneas shifted in his chair and shook his head. "That bastard took off. That's what happened."

"I don't think so," Sabrina said, gaining momentum. "He disappeared, all right. But not the way you've been saying."

“I think your wife has the vapors,” Finneas said to Rufus. “What’s she going on about?”

“You killed him,” Sabrina said. Her heart was beating so hard she was sure the others would hear it. “Jacob threatened to quit and take the spice blend he’d created with him. The Briny Bay Blend, the original recipe that earned you all of this.” She waved at the large dining room, the antique silver, the crystal chandelier. “You couldn’t have that. You got rid of him and told everyone he’d left town after an argument. Did you drop him out past the Bay, into the sea?”

“You’re crazy,” Finneas bellowed.

“And you’re a ruthless, cruel man.” Sabrina stood and pulled a notepad from her pocket, taking a quick glance at the scribbles she’d jotted down in the library. “In 1969, twenty years after the festival committee buried the town’s time capsule, there was a break-in at city hall. The security guard was shot and killed. Heather found a stack of old newspaper clippings in the files at work.”

Finneas sneered at her. “Bad luck for him during the Summer of Love. A bunch of hippies were camping out here then. One of them most likely was the culprit. I always save articles. What of it?”

“Because hippies are known for their violent tendencies and love of time capsules,” Cornelius said under his breath.

Sabrina cleared her throat and continued, “In 1989, Briny Bay’s cultural center was vandalized and the caretaker was hit over the head and later died. The coroner determined he died of a heart attack. The capsule was taken and never recovered. It was actually a replica, but no one knew that except the Crab Festival committee. It’s in the archived meeting notes.”

“Tell your wife to sit down,” Finneas warned.

Rufus tightened his fists and glared at his father.

“Today, 1999, on the fiftieth anniversary of the capsule being buried, we have two deaths,” Sabrina said, looking up from the notepad.

“Murders,” Heather whispered.

“Yes, Murders,” Sabrina said. “Thank you, Heather.”

“How do you know these things?” Rufus asked, looking in awe at his wife.

“I thought about what that reporter said right before he died,” Sabrina said. “And then went back through the minutes of all the committee meetings, and matched them up with the local news at the time of each incident.”

“You’re guessing,” Finneas scoffed. “All of those incidents are unrelated.”

“Dad,” Rufus said, “what Sabrina is saying...”

“And then Heather found these,” Sabrina said. She pulled an envelope from her other pocket, opened it up, and fanned out a stack of yellowing postcards with Alaska printed on them.

“They were in the old filing cabinet upstairs at the office,” Heather said with a grin. “It’s a shame when people can’t keep themselves organized.”

Finneas lifted from his chair as if to lunge at Heather, but then sat back down and began to laugh, quietly at first, then building to a roar. “None of you would be anywhere if it weren’t for me and what I’ve done for this family. I went off to war...seventeen years old, and killed people. People who deserved it. Then I come home, and a man, this Eastman, who’s supposed to be my partner, my brother-in-arms...he wants to go off and sell our spice blend to the first Tom, Dick, or Harry who shows him any attention. Three hundred dollars...can you imagine? We sell three hundred dollars of that spice blend every hour. What an idiot.”

“So you killed him?” Rufus asked. “Dad, how could you do something like that? The man had children.”

“How could I? You’d do the same thing in my shoes. All of you.” Finneas pointed at Sabrina and Heather. “How dare you two...strangers...go poking around in my business.”

Sabrina pressed on, undeterred. “When the time capsule was opened, what were we going to see? That it’s not your recipe...it’s actually Jacob Eastman’s? The Briny Bay Blend, supposedly created by the Westfalls, that’s made you millions? You stole Jacob’s recipe and murdered him to cover it up. You knew his widow donated the recipe to the time capsule that inaugural year to commemorate the founding of the company you started together. Once you’d killed him, you had to worry every decade about your secret being revealed.”

“How dare you judge me?” Finneas roared, weaker this time.

“The only judge you should worry about is the one you’ll see in court when you’re charged with murder,” Sabrina said.

* * *

Finneas Westfall was arrested for the murders of Jacob and Albert Eastman and Ray Northam, the reporter from the *Gazette*. Albert had spoken with Ray about his father’s disappearance and his suspicions he’d met with foul play after threatening to leave with his spice blend recipe. Finneas had agreed to talk to Albert out on the docks afterwards, after an entire

lifetime of avoiding everyone in the Eastman family. During the confrontation, Finneas shot Albert, then rolled him into the water near the trawler, where he was snagged by a submerged crab pot. Police were also looking into the other deaths connected with the time capsule to see if Finneas Westfall would face additional charges.

Ray Northam had attempted to contact Finneas with questions about Albert's story, and had met with the old man, mentioning he'd keep digging until he uncovered the truth behind the Briny Bay murders. Then he turned his back on Finneas, to his misfortune.

Rufus finally took over the day-to-day operations of the Westfall Crab Company, and paid back-royalties on the spice blend to the Eastman family.

Connie Eastman and Darius Westfall were married the following summer, after she was crowned Briny Bay's Miss Crab.

Sabrina and Heather Westfall co-chaired the entire event.