

DEADLY TIDES by Mary Keliikoa

EXCERPT

CHAPTER 1

Abby Kanekoa rolled through town in her Prius, searching the empty streets and worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. Stonebridge Assisted Living Center had called an hour ago to let her know her mother, Dora Michaels, had walked away. Again.

It was early January on the Oregon coast. There'd been no substantial rainfall for several days. The chilly mist-filled winds had come through that morning, though, and the center couldn't say exactly when her mother had slipped out their door. *Time to put a better lock on that thing.* Mom might not be drenched to the bone, but she'd be cold.

Thankfully, this was Abby's scheduled day off. Not that the FBI didn't work with her regardless. After her daughter, Lulu, died of leukemia, they'd brought her back to the team as if she'd never left. They understood her *bad* days. Same since her divorce. Despite what Jax thought about how she'd handled her grief, burying herself in her work and having the support of the Bureau had saved her more than once.

Especially the flex schedule. With her mother's early onset of Alzheimer's, it allowed for these occasional searches.

Or not so occasional, as it were. Mom had escaped three times this month.

Greenery and garland from the holidays still clung to the streetlamps on Misty Pines' main strip. But she had yet to catch a glimmer of her mother's fiery red hair. At a crawl, Abby glanced inside each of the storefronts. Last time, she'd found her mother at the donut counter picking out an apple fritter.

"Honey's favorite," she'd repeated all the way to the car, her hand gripping a white bag full of them.

Abby's Hawaiian father—"Honey," as her mother had called him—had treated the family to fritters every Saturday morning since Abby could remember. He'd died twenty years ago, but Abby had continued the tradition with her own family until Lulu died, and it became too painful. Today, the donut shop's seats and barstools were empty.

On Scholls Ferry Road, kids played on the swings and monkey bars of the elementary school. The time before the donut shop, Abby had found Mom by the cyclone fence, her fingers clenching the metal lattice, watching the kindergarten class play kickball. They both cried as Abby drove her back to the facility. Alzheimer's had been brutal to her mother, stealing much of her mind. But memories of Lulu were ingrained, even deeper than those of Abby; Dora often gazed at her like they'd never met.

Abby pulled in front of the bookstore, ignoring the pang in her chest. Emily Krueger greeted her from behind the counter, sorting a new shipment of novels with bare-chested men and women in flowing gowns on their covers.

Abby explained the situation.

“I haven’t seen your mom. But I’ll call if I do.” Emily reached a hand across the counter and squeezed Abby’s forearm. Emily had endured the disappearance of her own daughter a few months ago. If anyone understood Abby’s concern, Emily did.

“Thank you. I’m sure she’s just out picking flowers or....” Or what? Where did a sixty-four-year-old woman wander to? What was she looking for when she left the warm confines of the assisted living home into the cool and murky outdoors?

“Maybe she’s folding laundry,” Emily said.

Abby chuckled despite her worry. During the summer, Dora had strolled into the laundromat down the road to fold a stranger’s tighty-whities. But that’s also why fear prickled Abby’s spine now. Dora stuck to the downtown area when she walked off.

Why not this time?

Abby slid back into her car and dialed Trudy at the sheriff’s station.

“No reports about your mom have come in today,” Trudy said.

“You’ll call if one does?”

“Certainly, hon. And I’ll let Jax know.”

Jax. Abby stretched her neck. “Don’t bother him. If needed, I’ll call him later.”

“Uh oh. I thought you two had decided to work on your relationship.”

“We’ve been so busy and....” Abby trailed off. She didn’t have a good reason for why things hadn’t progressed between them, only that she was to blame.

“It’ll work itself out,” Trudy said. “You’ve both been through a lot.”

Abby gnawed on her thumbnail. “Yeah. You’re right.”

“Have you checked the ocean parks?”

“Next on my list.”

Abby accelerated out of town, tension growing in her shoulders. It shouldn’t be so easy for residents to walk out of an assisted living center. In truth, she was more annoyed with herself that Dora had to be there in the first place.

But Abby had to work and couldn’t give her mom the full-time care she needed. Better facilities could be found in Portland, those focused on memory diseases, but they were a couple-hour drive. At least when her mom walked off from Stonebridge, she couldn’t get far, and Abby was close enough to hop in her car to search. She’d been in law enforcement long enough to know those thirty to sixty minutes could make all the difference.

A fact she was being reminded of today and another source of frustration. Abby hadn’t caught the call on her phone when the staff at Stonebridge first reached out this morning. It took three attempts. She’d been in the shower shaving her legs, of all things. As if anyone would notice.

Abby turned into the boat basin. She cruised through the parking lot, noting the fishing boats rocking dockside. She scanned each of them, spotting a crew of fishermen getting ready to brave the bar, but no redheads traversed the area.

Next, she headed out Ocean Drive, turning onto Meddle Road a couple of miles later. The route led to the ocean and was miles from the facility. Too far for Dora to wander? She'd been gone for half a day. If motivated, she could have made it this far. Abby's hands tightened on the wheel. Thick mist had rolled in and hung in the sky. The temperature had dipped.

She swung her car into the abandoned beach parking lot and got out. Wind whistled past her as she crested the top of the lot and scanned the shore. The sand blasted against her pant legs with hollow pops and stung her face. She lowered the sunglasses from the top of her head onto her eyes and wrapped her jacket tighter as the cool air bit through the thin fabric.

Where are you, Mom?

Seagulls squawked overhead, catching the drafts. A few landed near the surf, arguing over an empty Styrofoam container. Aside from birds, though, the beach was empty. Only rocks stood sentinel offshore, water eddying around them. This was too far south of one of the surfing beaches and too far north of the other. No place to crab or fish here either. Summer had long passed for tourists to visit, except for the random one or two that had lost their way and stumbled upon the place. The local morning beachcombers had already come and gone, likely sipping coffee in front of a warm fire by now.

Abby's focus drifted to the tree lined cliffs in the distance. Some trees had fallen, catapult and hapless, onto the dunes. Other had come in on the tide. Abby scanned the area for signs of her mother. That's when she saw the splash of red rising from a row of logs near the sandy ridge.

Whatever was there had hunkered down. Hiding?

Mom. Abby raced down the hill, the soft white sand sucking at her practical flats. She gave up and kicked them aside. Fifty yards farther, she hit the hardpack and sprinted, the wind at her back. As she drew closer, another flash of red provided certainty that it was hair flapping in the wind.

"Mom, is that you?" Abby hollered.

She slowed her pace to a walk as she approached. The woman was dressed in a nightgown and hunched like a turtle with only her back showing. Shaking. Her red hair, streaked in gray, whipped upward. *My god.* She was whimpering.

Abby's heart pounded. Her mother must be freezing.

She almost ran again but it was always best to approach Dora in the same manner she'd approach a small child. Or a suspect.

"Mom?" she said again. Still no response. If she was deep in her illness, the word might not register. "Dora?"

Her mother lifted her head. "It's mine."

Abby blew out a long, weary sigh. She'd found Dora—alive and talking. That's what mattered. Slipping out of her jacket, Abby draped it over her mom before sitting on the log next to her.

"You sure came a long way." Abby gazed out at the water. Relief at finding her mother unharmed whooshed through her like the breeze around them. Her heartbeat found its steady rhythm. "How about we get someplace warm and dry? Pancakes sound good, don't they? Let's find some hot pancakes and drench them in real maple syrup. You'd love that, right?"

“Okay. But I want to take it with me. I found it.”

Her mother had probably discovered some unique shell or glass fishing float. Whatever she'd found, she could keep. Abby would help her display it in her room. “Sure, Mom.”

Dora straightened, and Abby's stomach twisted at the sight of the blood saturating the front of her mother's white gown.

“Are you okay?” Abby said, her voice inching up.

Then she saw the source of the blood.

In her hands, she held a tennis shoe containing a severed foot.