

# **THE LEGACY**

## **A Thornton Mystery**

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#### **EXCERPT**

#### **CHAPTER ONE**

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Sally Wilcox wiped her hands on the dish cloth and folded it neatly before placing it on the kitchen counter. It had been a long day at the shop. Two funerals down and they had already started preparing for a weekend wedding. She loved working with flowers, but the job triggered her sciatica. She could hardly stand by the end of the day. She was glad to be home.

She hobbled to the TV room, and sat down on the couch, the pain in her body immediately eased by the down-filled cushions. She bumped into the table next to the couch and knocked over her favorite photograph of her kids, Jeremy and Becky. She placed the frame back on the table and stared at it for several seconds. She missed them so much.

The cat curled into a circle on her lap as she propped her legs up on a fluffy ottoman. Comforted by her surroundings, she dozed off almost immediately.

Three hours later she was awakened by the sound of static from her television. Channel Six had signed off for the night and refrains from the national anthem had just begun. An American flag fluttered across the television screen. It was just past midnight. She moved the cat from her lap, turned off the television and all the downstairs lights, and began making her way up the stairs, toward her bedroom.

She stopped when she heard something that sounded like a restrained step. The cat's ears twitched in the direction of the noise. Could someone, a stealthy burglar or worse, be creeping around the house? She almost laughed out loud, amused by her own foolishness. She was such a worrier. Of course, it had to be Charlie the parrot ruffling his feathers. She couldn't remember if she draped the cloth over his seven-foot-tall cage.

Still, she waited, and listened, not moving for several seconds. Then she froze as she heard a thump. She glanced out of a nearby window and could see wind blowing in the trees. Thinking

that a branch must have bumped against the roof, she stood on the stairs for a few more seconds. Just to be sure. Hearing nothing, and convinced everything was okay, she continued up the stairs. Six a.m. came early.

In her bedroom, she changed into her favorite nightgown, the silk one that felt like butter on her skin, cleaned her face, and flossed and brushed her teeth. No matter how exhausted she was, she always completed her nightly routine. Her mother had insisted on it when she was young and still at home, pointing to an aunt's ravaged face as an example of what could happen if she didn't comply. The practice had become her only indulgence.

The cat had already curled up on top of the coverlet when Sally pulled back the sheets. Then she heard another sound. A muffled bump.

She grabbed a robe and stepped into the upstairs hallway. The staircase and the light switch were only a few feet from her bedroom door. She found the switch and flipped the toggle up, but nothing happened.

"What the..." she whispered.

The cat rubbed up against Sally's legs, and she jumped.

Then she heard another sound, and glanced out of the window at the end of the hall. The trees were still blowing fiercely. She tip-toed down the first two steps and peered over the banister, unable to see anything in the dark. She continued down the staircase, stopping every few feet to listen.

When she was at the second step from the bottom she stopped.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" Her voice quavered.

"Youuu Whooo!" Charlie was awake now.

She still couldn't see anything but didn't hear any unexpected sounds in the house. She shook her head, embarrassed by her over-reaction. The sounds had to be from Charlie, or maybe it was the wind in the trees. But just to be safe, she fled to the kitchen, feeling her way in the dark, and grabbed a knife from the block on the counter. Then she stopped, making certain all was well, and turned to retrace her steps back to her bedroom.

Seconds later she felt a sharp punch in her stomach. She swung the knife she clutched in her hand, wildly stabbing into space until she felt a resistance. She'd nicked something. She turned, and raised her hand, stabbing blindly, then felt another punch in her stomach, and one in her chest. Then another and another. A warm liquid flowed down her legs. Her hand flew to a spot on her chest where she felt piercing pain and she realized that blood was pouring from her

body. Something had happened. Someone was in front of her. She could sense their presence. Hear their breathing. She'd been stabbed.

Her robe was wet, and blood was beginning to drip onto the floor. She felt dizzy. Her legs were on fire, as if a thousand needles had been jabbed into her shins. Then her legs started to shake. She collapsed, falling to the ground on her knees.

Then a swift rush of air. She wasn't certain what it was until it was too late. She saw the knife this time. And a dark figure.

Charlie squawked, "Youu whooo!"

The last thing she felt was a crushing pain in her chest. Her heart, already broken, had stopped.