

One

A four-day drive unraveled the remnants of my life, but not the knot of memories that has followed me from Texas to Puget Sound. I was finally on the ferry taking me to Camas Island, in Washington state's San Juan archipelago. I close my eyes and let the wet air lave across me, loosening the knot, softening the ropes around my heart. I inhale the salt and spice of old conifer forests, the scents welcome after the fug of exhaust fumes that engulfed me as I'd inched through Seattle traffic on my way to Anacortes.

From the deck, the wild wind whipping across my ears, I can't stop looking at the water, this Salish Sea, this harbinger of a new world. I take a photo and text it to my daughter Abbie. It's May, a year since Nathan and I divorced. Shoving the phone back in my hip pocket, I'm determined to enjoy this new chapter of my life.

The breeze is damp against my skin, so unlike the Texas air that rushes by in dry bursts, impatient as tumbleweeds. I brush wisps of hair out of my face and look down at the railing I'm leaning against. The orange life preserver hanging on the railing is marked with the ferry's name, *Samish*. It seems to be unused, which loosens another knot of anxiety, as does the sight of green water unfolding against the prow. I inhale until my ribs creak.

The air. In it, I feel the promise of serenity to come—in walks on island beaches, in the alien wonder of the Resident pod of fish-eating killer whales that spends part of its year near these islands.

An animal shelter on the island accepted my online volunteer application, and I planned to call them and arrange a time to meet. Trading in my thriving Texas dog-training business for a volunteer gig at an animal shelter makes perfect sense to me in this bold new life. With my half of the sale of our family home nesting in my bank account, I'm set for at least a year. I reckon if I can't change my life in that amount of time, my clients, and my daughter, will welcome me back to Texas.

Looking away from the emerald water, my mind drifts back to the last days I spent in my Texas home. I'd packed my belongings, the heartache of leaving behind half of my library greater than the loss of my marriage. The tears I thought I'd cry while signing the papers that transferred my family home to a young couple from Tennessee never filled my eyes.

Spending my last sleepless night in an empty bed, I looked through the window, wondering what the silver moon would look like on Camas Island. My old and tattered Texas life was done; the house was sold, and I was moving as far away as I could, to a place where I wouldn't see pity or judgement in anyone else's eyes. Bad enough, according to my circle of friends, that Nathan cheated on me. I could imagine them at their favorite Odessa café, "Nolee Evans is now Nolee Burnett, bless her heart." But that was my first step to reclaiming my life, and I wasn't going to budge. Nolee Burnett at fifty was a different woman than she'd been when she married Nathan Evans at twenty-nine. The tears I thought I should be shedding refused to gather in my eyes, then, and now.

The view in front of me comes into bright, sunlit focus. The ferry glides across the glassy-green sea, and the forested islands dotting the inlet round up above the water, giant whale backs furred in pine trees. I had thought I would live and die in West Texas, a wrinkled wife and content

grandmother, but life had other plans for me. As did my ex-husband Nathan, who left me last year, for the man he'd been having an affair with.

In the end, it didn't bother me that my silent husband had fallen in love with a man; live and let live is my motto. It was the three years of secrecy, years in which I blundered along in barely happy enough ignorance, running a successful business and visiting Abbie in Austin, wondering if Nathan would ever warm up to me again—the subterranean current that ran beneath my denial that anything was wrong.

The affair began when Carlos hired Nathan's accounting firm. Carlos showed up as a new client with questions about how to grow his construction business, which had stalled. Nathan was excited about this client and the challenge of helping him increase his business. Within a year, Carlos's business had jumped two tax brackets, and Nathan had jumped into bed with Carlos.

These thoughts and the familiar anger glide in tandem inside my head, much like the ripples that follow along in the wake of the ferry. Trying to see into the water's depths, I realize I'm tired of shouldering the twin burdens of shame for my ignorance and my self-righteous anger with Nathan. Instead, I mutter out loud, "You can do this, Nolee Burnett." The words are whipped away from my lips, as much a reassurance as a prayer sent out to whatever forces watch over our small lives.

I wonder what adventures await me. The house I've rented in a remote cove on Camas Island is one I've never seen. My thoughts drift backward again, hearing Abbie's shock when I let her know I was swapping a life of Texas pride for the much wetter lifestyle of an island in the Puget Sound.

Abbie didn't want the changes that I knew would set me free. I'm old enough to know that we take ourselves wherever we go, but I'm also a dreamer. I want to believe that it's possible to drop our past. It's dead, yet I'd spent so much time doing my best to resurrect the corpses of my dead choices. Or rather, the corpses of the consequences of my choices.

The house in Texas held memories but was not the place I wanted to get to know myself at fifty. Half of my life was over. Nothing could shake the sensation that I was changing yet again, a snake sloughing off the old skin to reveal a shiny new one. A life of my own choosing. To get up when I wanted and not mince around someone else's mood. No more wondering if they were halfway out the door (in Nathan's case, that was a yes) or just tired. Or tired of me. Would I learn to cook? Would I turn the music on and dance until I was out of breath? Could I take long baths without worrying about who wasn't waiting for me? What would it be like to be visible to myself, I wondered?

It was my fault for believing that Nathan's attitude defined me. In a moment of nastiness, I'd started calling him "Silent Nate," though never to his face. I'd lived with eyes that didn't see me, ears that didn't hear my voice, and a heart that grew cold to me. Keeping his attitude toward me alive wasn't a part of the plan for rebuilding my life.

I make my way from the deck to inside the ferry; people are reading and mugs of something hot steam in the cold air. The smell of coffee is strong, but I order tea. Coffee has always smelled better than it tastes, I thought, even when it's loaded with milk and sugar.

Holding the steaming cup in my hands, I inhale the sharp tang of what must be cheap black tea—any port in a storm, I tell myself—I turn and see an older man holding a small, trembling dog against his chest. They're sitting in a worn booth by the window, the sun glinting of the dog's blond coat. She (*or he, Nolee*) is wearing a pink nylon harness with gold crowns embroidered on it. I'm drawn toward them, walking with measured steps on the moving floor, the warm cup in my hand forgotten.

We make eye contact and I smile. “Your dog is adorable,” I enthuse. “What breed is she? Or he?”

The man looks away from the window. He glances down at the trembling ball of fur in his arms, gently stroking the dog’s head.

“She’s half Corgi and half Pomeranian.” His voice has a slight tremor, but he gives me a quick grin before looking down at her again.

“I had a dog too. A Border Collie named Luna.”

He gives me another flash of a grin, petting his dog.

“What’s her name?”

“Willow. The Queen of England had a Corgi with that name.” Willow trembles, and I feel stirrings of the same frenetic movement in my gut. I take a step closer, but neither the man nor Willow seem to mind.

“That’s a perfect name for her. Do you mind if I sit down?”

He shakes his head and motions to the seat opposite him. I put out my hand.

“I’m Nolee. Moving here from Texas.” His grip is warm and dry, and he releases my hand without looking me in the eye.

“Gerald. Visiting a friend on Shaw.”

I want to ask him which island that is, but the trembling moves from my guts to my head. I blink, putting the tea on the table and my hands in my lap because they’re shaking too. Both Gerald and Willow look at me. I take a deep breath, and another one, closing my eyes.

“Ma’am? Nolee? Are you okay?”

I open my eyes and smile. “I am, thank you. Not used to being on the water.”

He makes a comment I don’t hear, because in that moment, my ears are filled with howling and whining that bounces off a windshield in a car with all its windows rolled up. I feel as though I’m on a ship in the ocean during a storm. My heart is beating against my ribcage, my teeth are shredding fabric. I shake my head, clearing my vision and glance out the window where the sun is shining on the calm, viridescent water.

“Does Willow get anxious in your car? Tear things up?” I’m used to the shock that moves across people’s faces when I say these things, and Gerald isn’t any different. What is different is that he isn’t a client. I take another breath, focusing on Willow, who is now squirming in Gerald’s embrace. It looks like he’s holding on to her more tightly.

“How did you know that?” He shrinks away from me.

“Just a guess. I saw a lot of dogs in cars when I came up to the deck. Most of them were curled up asleep. She seems a bit more worried.”

Gerald gives me a wary glance. “She gets anxious. She chews on the seats and has even destroyed a kennel, so I bring her up here with me.”

I nod. Give him another smile. “Have you tried letting her sit next to you up here?”

His bushy eyebrows, already raised, go even higher.

“I couldn’t risk that!”

“Oh. It’s just—” I dart my eyes away from his glare. “--she’s on a leash and I thought maybe she would feel better on your lap. Or walking around.”

There’s silence then, and enough of it that I regret scaring this kind old man and his dog.

“I’m sorry. I’m a dog trainer and unsolicited advice just pops out sometimes. It was nice to meet you and Willow.”

We both stand at the same time. He turns away from me and, stoop-shouldered, leaves.

An announcement over the loudspeaker shouts me out of my embarrassment. “Please return to your vehicles and prepare for departure at Camas Island.” Jogging down the steep metal stairs to my car, I can feel the knots tightening again. As I’m sitting behind the wheel, my hands clenched, my stomach flips, and my brain joins the party. *What in the hell are you doing, Nolee? You don’t know anyone here. You’re too old to change your life. If you wanted to move, you should’ve moved to Austin to be closer to your daughter. Hell, most of your clients are there. All your life is in Texas. This is nuts!*

There’s a bump and a sliding-sideways sensation, then another announcement tells us to drive off the ferry. In front of me is a truck loaded with a variety of flowering shrubs. I inch closer, thinking that the voice that ran me down sounded way too much like Nathan’s for comfort. I give the steering wheel a bang with my fist, uttering, louder this time, “You can do this, Nolee Burnett!”

The line of cars exiting the ferry is slow-moving. The road forks, and some head right, and some left. I can see the ocean through the buildings and trees. Elation fills me as the road curves up and around hills. This is how a dog who’s lived most of his life tied up must feel: no more tug at the neck, no more measuring steps by the length of a chain. As I pass the green valleys where I spot sheep and barns, it’s hard to believe that the ocean is just beyond the ridge of the green mountain slope, not just another valley. Rolling the windows down and turning up the volume, I sing “*Goodbye yellow brick road*” at the top of my lungs.

Passing the car in front of me, I notice the speed limit sign and ease my foot off the gas. When I glance at the speedometer, I see I’ve been flying along at sixty through a forty-mile-per-hour zone. As I slow, I check my rear view mirror. The driver doesn’t flip me off or honk at me. It sinks in that I’m not in Texas anymore.

I enter a forest so dense that I take off my sunglasses to see. The car bumps along a dirt road that meanders down a steep hill, doubles back on itself, then flattens out. I think I’m seeing the sky through the trees, then realize it’s the sea. Mountains still covered in snow rise in the distance, and the sheer rocky faces of evergreen islands cut down into the dark water. As I park the car and get out, stretching, I see wooden chairs and a picnic table in front of the A-frame cabin I’ve rented. I walk down to the rocky beach, and all thought is erased by an unlikely landscape of the forest at the edge of the sea.

From the photos online, I’d thought my cabin was the only house in the small cove. It isn’t. I see another house to my left, which is where the road I came in on dead-ends. There are trees between us, the sun-dappled ground showing patches of spring green grass. My cabin is the smaller of the two. It has one loft bedroom, a bathroom with a clawfoot tub, and a kitchen and dining area with large windows that frame the cove, and the ocean beyond it. I couldn’t have found something more perfect if I’d built it myself.

Osprey Bay is shaped like a small crescent moon, with a gentle tide pushing and pulling against the rocks, making a susurrant similar to ones I’d heard when the wind swept through prairie grasses. Although I could tell the sun would come up around the bend of land on my right, I could also see from the mountains and islands in the hazy distance that sunsets would be spectacular. I take a deep breath, the air going into my lungs a counterpoint to the waves whispering against the shore of this calm inlet. I exhale, watching as a small boat speeds by out in the channel beyond the buoys. A plane passes overhead, its engine the only human-made noise I hear through birdsong and the waves. The air is cool and damp on my face.

Walking to the porch, I see a weathered rocking chair, wood stacked to the left of the door, and a welcome mat that says, “Wipe Your Paws,” with dog prints scattered around it. I smile, and once again feel the grief of losing my Border Collie, Luna. She would have been out on the beach, doing her best to herd the waves into her sense of order.

My landlord, Ava, had texted me yesterday. *Welcome to Camas! The house key is under the mat. Let me know if you need anything.* Bringing my suitcases from the car, I open the door, seeing the boxes I’d shipped ahead stacked inside. The tower they formed would have fallen over were they not filled with books. As I look around at the bare living area, I notice a small bookshelf with a smaller television perched on top of it. A potbelly woodstove squats close to the door I’d just come through. I unplug the television, walk it over to a coat closet, and set it inside on the floor. Who needs it, when there is an entire world to discover? Who wants to watch other people living an exciting life when your own life is on the brink of becoming exciting and new? I pick up one of the suitcases, carrying it into the bedroom upstairs.

The sliding glass door on the far wall allows light to fill the room and opens onto another spectacular view of the beach and sea. The double bed is covered with a white quilt stitched in blues, greens, and the black of the orcas that swim around otters, gulls, and seals. I run my fingers over the smooth threads, marveling at the skill of the artists needlework. A dresser, a lamp, and an overstuffed chair take up the rest of the triangular shaped room. The advertisement had said “shabby chic,” and I smile at the euphemism. “Shabby chic” wasn’t too far a stretch to describe my own personal style.

After carrying the rest of my bags to the bedroom, I thump down the stairs and wander into the kitchen to make a list of the food I would need. The nearest grocery store is in Northsound. Besides books, I’d brought what little there was from my kitchen in the trunk of my Honda. Some cast-iron skillet that my grandmother used to make jalapeño cornbread. Silverware from my mom. Dishes from my marriage. I’d also brought a couple of pots and pans and things that I hoped still worked.

The rhythm of cleaning and unpacking replaces thinking too much about what was next. As the day coalesces into darkness, I walk out to the porch and watch the sun set through the clouds over the hazy islands. I’d need to look at the map I brought and learn all their names.

At first, I think the gray cloud that appears from the water is the beginnings of evening fog. Then I hear the rush of an exhale and see a tall black fin rise above the surface. My first sighting of a killer whale. I stand on my tiptoes, scanning the horizon before walking to the beach. I don’t see a fin, but the exhale floats up into the last light of the sun, evaporating like the killer whale.

I find a log softened by the ocean and bleached by past summer days. Sitting down, I look out at the now-dark cove, noticing a line of distant lights on the islands across the channel, their presence the only way I know there is anything beyond the deep dark. I counted time in the wind through the arms of the trees and the sea drumming against the beach. Then there was nothing except the waves, and me, and the sea filled with my dreams.

