



RAPID READS



LOU ALLIN

CONTINGENCY PLAN

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Summary: Sandra Sinclair realizes she's made a terrible mistake in marrying into an abusive relationship, putting herself and her twelve-year-old daughter in grave danger. (RL 3.8)

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ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
PO Box 5626, Stn. B
Victoria, BC Canada
V8R 6S4

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
PO Box 468
Custer, WA USA
98240-0468

www.orcabook.com

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*With many thanks to Carolanne Papoutsis,
Vancouver Island's best eagle-eyed reader.*

CHAPTER ONE

Nothing attracts attention like a dead whale.

A dozen people peered at a huge black carcass beached at low tide. Seagulls shrieked and dipped. Andy and I had loved picnicking at Aylard Farm Park. From here we would gaze across the glorious Strait of Juan de Fuca. Only two years ago. It seemed like ten.

Shortly after retiring early and moving to Vancouver Island, Andy was diagnosed with testicular cancer. Never a complainer, he'd been ignoring the symptoms. Half a

year later he was ashes for our climbing red rose. The way he'd suffered, I was glad for his release. "Let go, love," I'd said, holding his hand on that last morning. "Jane and I will be fine." He squeezed back until my fingers ached. Then he was gone.

The mighty whale, collapsed under its own weight, lay on the exposed tidal shelf. People were circling, even touching it. One teen was using a sharp rock to cut off pieces of skin. What the hell was wrong with some people?

I headed back through the bushes to the main path. Why had I thought coming here would cheer me up? Tears blurred my vision. I shoved my chilly hands into my pockets. One foot caught on a gnarly root. I would have gone sprawling, but a hand grabbed my arm.

"Whoa! Watch that first step. It's a killer," a deep male voice said.

I'd ripped my tights, nothing worse. Still kneeling awkwardly in the weeds, I looked up at my Good Samaritan. The sun backlit his head like a halo. By his side was a border collie pup that began licking my face. It had a heart-shaped black mark on its white muzzle.

"Scout, watch your manners. Not every lady likes doggy kisses. Up we go," he said, pulling me to my feet. I braced myself against a gigantic Sitka spruce. "Anything sprained? Can you stand?"

I cleared my throat, feeling like a fool. Then I noticed a burning, prickly feeling on my hand. "Ouch," I said. I shook it to relieve the discomfort. "What did I land in?" A spindly plant surrounded me.

"Stinging nettle. Let's see," he said, taking my palm and examining it. "Wash it well with soap and water. It'll only bother you for a day or so. Not like poison ivy."

“Lucky me then,” I said. I frowned. Acting crabby in front of a complete stranger.

“My name’s Joe Gillette. There are some moist wipes in my car. I always plan ahead. Coffee too, if you take it black.”

His brown eyes sparkled, honest as a calf’s. A stranger looking at me like this was a new experience. I felt girlish and shy, despite my age. I’d been married for the last fifteen years. The last time I’d dated before that...one pathetic, forgettable evening with a friend’s brother. All he could talk about was his mother’s pot roast.

Five different answers raced through my mind. None of them sounded right. An eyebrow arched and Joe looked off at Scout chasing a seagull. “If you’re okay, then...”

“Sorry,” I said, blushing. “Coffee would be super.” I almost added “kind sir.” Soon I’d be curtsy-ing. Wet wipes? Did he have a child? Was he divorced? Few people

came here alone. The coastal trail was a place for serious hikers, while the park attracted families.

I followed him to his shiny black X-6 with a 1-LGL-EGL plate (one legal eagle?), parked near my rusty Neon. Given the soothing towelette, I wiped my hand. The prickly sensations eased.

“Feel better?” he asked. A corner of his expressive mouth rose.

I nodded and looked around. “There’s a place we can sit.”

At a nearby picnic table, we talked over the excellent Kona coffee he’d had shipped from Hawaii. Joe was a lawyer, he said, working with the elderly. “I’m no hot-shot criminal attorney like in the movies, but I feel good about what I do. Estate planning takes plenty of care. Elders are so vulnerable. Meet the King of Loopholes. Every penny counts for those folks. I can chase a deduction faster than a ferret after a mouse.”

His friendliness was relaxing me. “Hey, liking your job is important. If you can help others, bonus.”

“And yourself? Sounds like you care too. Social worker? Teacher? You can’t be a nurse or doctor. They know about nettle.”

It sounded more sincere than patronizing. I liked the fact that he was assuming I had a profession.

“I worked with my husband Andy. He... passed last year.” I gave a few brief details. A story told too many times. Poor pathetic widow. Andy made me swear not to waste the rest of my life grieving.

“Sorry for your loss,” Joe said, the lines around his mouth deepening in concern. A moment of silence followed. “Andy must have been a special man. What business were you in?”

“We owned a motorcycle and snowmobile shop. Quads, too, and boats in the summer. Dawson Creek.”

He gave a low whistle and a mock shiver. "I like to go to the snow. Not have it come to me. Some Canadian, eh? What's it like way up north, bush woman?"

That made me laugh. The unfamiliar sound amazed me. Who was that woman? "It's funny, but I miss the snow. It made everything clean and bright in the winter. Cross-country skiing, snowshoeing."

"Some people can't take the dreary rain from November to April, but remember that you—"

I finished his sentence. "—don't have to shovel it." That bond had us both grinning.

Scout bounded back with a stick and dropped it, his rear end up and wiggling in play mode. Joe tossed it again and again. Finally the dog flopped down, panting with his long, comical tongue. "Usually I get tired before he does."

At last I had to check the time. Swimming at the rec center ended in twenty minutes.

I hoped he didn't hear me sigh. "I'd better go. I have to pick up my daughter."

He smiled and cocked his head. "But you're so young. Day care?"

Even if he was teasing, I was flattered. I'm thirty-six, hardly a teenager. Somehow it coaxed a chuckle. My smiling muscles almost hurt from lack of use. "She's twelve. And look who's talking. You're the one with the towelettes," I said.

"*Semper paratus*. Always prepared with a contingency plan. I was an eagle scout. Won every medal. Even cooking. And by the way, you haven't told me your name," he added.

"It's S-s-sandra, Sandra Sinclair." I'd never stuttered before in my life.

"And your daughter?"

"Jane." I was glad there was no S in her name.

He nodded. "Sweet and old-fashioned. Good for you. My aunt's name was Jane.

There are way too many Brittanys and Brandys.”

“And Lindseys and Nikkis,” I added, joining in the entertainment-industry game. “Scarletts, Angelinas. I think we’re dating ourselves.” More confident by the minute, I gave him a more assessing look. A brush of gray at the temples of his chestnut-brown, razor-cut hair. Fresh-shaven face with a strong jawline. I pegged him in his early forties. Flirting was coming awfully easily.

“Dating *myself* was not what I had in mind,” Joe said. “I wonder if I dare ask for your cell number. If you like to visit Aylard Farm, we have something in common already.”

I felt my face blush when I answered. Should I have asked for his? Would he really call? And then what? This was happening all too fast, like a dam bursting. A quick check of his left hand showed no ring.

Even so, some married men didn't wear them. Or he could have removed it. Was I naïve or optimistic? My head was turning every which way *and* loose.