

SAGE PARKER

HIDDEN
IN THE *Keys*

LONGBOAT KEY SERIES - BOOK 1



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ONE



Julia stood with her back to the window as she finished up the few dishes she had used that morning. She was distractedly drying the cup and staring absently at the open cupboard, oblivious to the amazing views outside her kitchen window. It was in fact the very view that had attracted her to this house in the first place. The minute she had walked in with the realtor and seen the view, she had envisioned herself and Frank drinking warm cups of coffee in front of the large bay window, talking and laughing while admiring the beautiful ocean just outside.

However, since moving to Longboat Key Island a few short months ago, most of the time she had been taking in the view by herself. Although Frank had retired as promised, he still seemed to have many loose ends to take care of and spent a lot of time away from their little beach house attending to *business*. Julia tried to be understanding, but she had hoped that he would try a little harder to enjoy their retirement together.

She put the last of the dishes away and glanced impatiently at her phone again. Still no return message from Frank.

She saw a few emails from some potential clients in the area though, asking her if she had any open sessions. Before they moved to the Keys, and she had dutifully told all her clients back in Ohio that she was no longer in business and referred them to other Reiki specialists. But when Frank had continued his habit of spending long hours away, she decided to put out some feelers in the

local area, hoping to help fill her time while he was gone.

Sighing, Julia walked over to the small desk she had set up in the corner of the family room. She loved the open feel of this little beach house. She could see from one corner of the main floor to the next and had taken great pains to furnish their home in a cool and beachy, minimal palette. The perfect atmosphere to relax and unwind.

Julia sat down and began to answer a few of her emails – responding to questions but still unwilling to commit to any sessions just yet.

When she heard someone at the front door, she jumped up excitedly.

“Frank?” she called out. Rushing to the front door, she flung it open, smiling in anticipation.

Standing up awkwardly, the UPS man gave her a sheepish grin. “Uh, hello Mrs. Masterson. Sorry to disturb you. I just thought that I would set this package inside as it’s marked fragile and contains food. Thought it could spoil out on the front porch.”

Julia glanced down at the package on the ground in front of the main door. It had to be the cookies from their local bakery back in Ohio. She had almost forgotten that she had ordered them. The shop did not often send cookies through mail, but Julia had insisted and paid extra. She had been so excited on the phone to the owner, telling her how she would surprise Frank with them this weekend on their special trip.

Frowning slightly, Julia bent down to pick up the box, doubting the surprise she had planned for the weekend would even happen now.

The UPS man stood back a bit, watching a range of emotions cross Julia’s face. The couple had moved in a few months ago, and since then, he had delivered several packages to the house. He was a married man, and relatively happy in his marriage, but he was still a man. He took every chance he got to admire Julia’s beauty. He watched her long dark hair cascade over her face as she bent down to pick up the package. When she stood, he saw that her clear blue eyes seemed unusually troubled.

“Is everything alright Ma’am?” he asked.

“Oh yes, it looks just fine,” Julia answered, interpreting his question to be concerned with the condition of the package. “I bought these for my husband and I’m sure he will be tickled pink when he sees them.” She smiled reassuringly at him, showing a set of perfect teeth and he wondered again how such a beautiful woman had ended up here with a man who looked so much older.

As he smiled back at her and walked out to the front porch, he gave her one last glance and hoped she was alright.

Julia carried the package into the kitchen and opened the box, appreciating how carefully the store owner had obviously packaged the cookies. Sighing, she glanced down at her phone again but only found a blank screen staring back at her. She wondered if maybe it was time to cancel the plans she had so carefully made for the weekend.

Their 25th wedding anniversary was the next day, and Julia had planned an incredible surprise that had been in the works for the past month.

She and Frank had been walking along the docks admiring all the boats, and he had seemed extremely excited by the big catamaran sailboats they had seen. “Will you look at that, Julia?” he had exclaimed happily. “That thing is huge and doesn’t look like it rocks around at all! Now that is something I could see myself touring around in!” Julia had looked at him in delight and surprise.

That very day, after they returned home, Julia had booked a catamaran for the two of them for their anniversary, ordering champagne and a fancy on-board dinner to surprise him. The cookies had been an afterthought; he had remarked how he missed them one day while they were talking about Ohio.

Now, as she put the cookies away, she tried to calm her racing mind. It seemed wrong that he would choose the weekend of their anniversary to leave without a word. Even though he was away often, in the 25 years they had been married, Frank had never missed their anniversary.

She sat down at her kitchen table, looking out at the waves gently lapping onto the shore. The ocean looked exactly as it had the day they decided to retire and move here.

She remembered how she had cried that day, telling Frank that she was