

The Belinda & Bennett Mysteries

OVERKILL

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Chapter 1

If Belinda had known how exciting a home surveillance system could be, she would've installed one forever ago. She smiled and waved at the corner of the living room while Bennett hunched over a laptop at the dining room table on the other side of the room by the front windows. The shades blocked the heat from the sun on that July morning, the sheer white curtains fluttering from the AC vents on the floor.

"I'm sure this is exactly what your next house intruder will do," Bennett said dryly before telling Kyle via walkie-talkie to connect the camera in the upstairs hallway. He wasn't kidding when he said *next* house intruder. They'd already dealt with one, hence the camera installation.

"Is it working?" Belinda leaned in front of him, tucking a piece of blonde hair behind her ear. She grinned at the image of her and Bennett at the dining room table. "It's working!"

"Connected," Kyle's static-ridden voice said through the walkie-talkie. In the blink of an eye, an image of the upstairs hallway filled another square on the computer screen. Kyle stood back and gave them a peace sign. Belinda clapped. "Take that, suckers!" she said to no one in particular.

Bennett just shook his head. “Let’s hope you don’t actually need these, and that it’s just going to be a lot of boring footage of an empty hallway.”

The living room camera shifted to the right and a gray and white bundle of fur appeared squeezed behind the media cabinet. “There’s Poseidon!” Belinda pointed. “I’d wondered where he disappeared to.” They could just make out his light gray back slowly rising and falling. Belinda rolled her eyes. “Typical. Just so long as he didn’t chew the wires again.”

Bennett raised his arms high, stretching his back. “That’s it. Everything’s working. You’ve got coverage in here, upstairs, in the kitchen, and right outside the side door and garage for now.” The chair screeched on the hardwood floor as he pushed back from the table to stand. “We’ll get the rest of the outside cameras up soon so you have a full three-sixty view of your property.”

“I can actually watch the grass grow.” Belinda stood on her toes to wrap her arms around his neck, kissing him gently on the lips. “Thank you, pooh bear,” she said. Bennett jerked his head back and frowned. “What? You’ve given me stank eye for everything else I’ve tried. I’m running out of options.”

“There’s one perfectly good option any time you wish to use it.”

“What’s that?”

“My name.”

Belinda wrinkled her nose. “That’s no fun. We’re dating. We need cutesy pet names.”

“Pretty sure we don’t.”

“Pretty sure we do.” Belinda followed him into the kitchen, where Bennett stopped in front of the coffee pot to refill his mug. Kyle clopped down the stairs across from the kitchen and threw open the fridge door. “Kyle, tell him we need cute terms of endearment for each other. And we just ate.”

Her twin brother stared into the fridge. They were currently renting that house together from their grandmother. That could change, but Belinda was sick of moving and perfectly happy to stay put as long as her grandmother behaved, and she had since their last conversation about Bennett. At that moment, her grandmother wasn’t even in Portside, vacationing on the Vineyard with one of her other daughters.

Kyle said in a shrill falsetto, “You need cute terms of endearment for each other, and we just ate.”

Belinda kicked his leg. No help at all. And heaven help her if she sounded like that! “The just ate part was for you.”

“I’m hungry.” He slammed the door and finally acknowledged them. “I think you should stick with Bennett.”

“Why?”

“Look at that face.” Kyle took a step in Bennett’s direction, holding out his hand like he was about to cup Bennett’s chin. Belinda obeyed and took a moment to observe Bennett’s square jaw, tight lips, and gray eyes. “What else could you possibly imagine calling him? Ben? Benny? Ett?”

“Pooh bear.”

Kyle’s hand dropped and he tipped his head at Bennett, a swath of his honey brown hair falling across his face. His hair had grown longish and shaggy the last several weeks and she liked it. “Sorry, man.” Bennett waved his coffee mug in Kyle’s direction like brushing away the apology.

“What’s wrong with pooh bear?” Belinda crossed her arms, looking to Bennett for the answer.

“Everything.”

Belinda huffed. “Fine. I’ll keep working on it. You finish your coffee and I’ll go get ready.” Belinda jogged upstairs, past the camera in the hall. She’d decided against cameras in the bedrooms, thinking that could get a little weird. But she

was excited to have her very own video security system, installed by her security expert boyfriend. The next thief who came into her house wouldn't be so difficult to identify.

Belinda disappeared into the small walk-in closet in her bedroom at the end of the hallway, weighing her swimsuit options. Technically, she'd been debating that subject since two days ago, but was still unsure. She and Bennett were meeting their detective friend, Jonas Parker, at the beach later. It was Jonas' day off. Belinda's college friend, Ardith Coelho, was also joining them. Even though it was just a coincidence (Ardith had e-mailed to say she was moving back in state and wanted to get together), Belinda couldn't help but grin at the chance to introduce Ardith to Jonas. Or maybe vice versa. She wasn't sure about that either.

She finally closed her eyes and snatched one of the suits off the rack. Then after opening her eyes, she put it back and picked another one. After turning and posing and bending in front of the full-length mirror on the door, Belinda shimmied into a pair of denim short-shorts and slipped on a fitted graphic T-shirt, spending another five minutes adjusting her wavy bun until everything was as perfect as it was going to get. A few minutes of wind and sunscreen and sand, and her whole look would be demolished anyway.

She skipped downstairs with a pair of flip-flops dangling from her fingers, and hopped off the bottom landing, spreading her arms out. “Ready!”

Bennett glanced at the clock above the fridge, munching on some crackers Kyle had out, and looked back at her in amusement. Bennett had probably changed into his blue plaid trunks and O’Neill T-shirt in the time it took her to choose a swimsuit. “You try being a girl,” she said curtly and breezed out the side door.

Jonas and Ardith weren’t meeting them for another hour or so, but since Bennett had forced her out of bed so early to install the cameras, Belinda wanted to get a head start at getting a good spot on the beach. It was a hot day in July—it would fill up fast. Kyle would’ve joined them that morning, but he was giving sailing lessons at the yacht club.

They had to wait in line to get into the beach parking lot and pay and find a spot. Parents and kids, couples with babies, and posses of teenagers emptied out of minivans, SUVs, and sedans, popping trunks to grab chairs and umbrellas and bags and coolers of all varieties. In Belinda’s opinion, the beach was a great equalizer. The rich and the poor of every background and race and skin tone plopped

side-by-side on the sand, setting up tents and laying out blankets like it was some sort of great festival to the ocean.

Belinda and Bennett navigated around the groups webbing out from the center of the beach near the bathhouses and concession stands. To their left, the beach curved out and you could see the wildlife sanctuary building on a spit of rock sticking out into the water. To their far right was the town beach, annexed at high tide from the rest by a rock grouping jutting out from the sand. Sheer cliff faces shot up from the water with a few houses standing like sentinels on the fingers of land. On a clear day, you could see Portside, Rhode Island's, downtown at the tip. Closer to the beach, green grass led up a hill to a stone building that loomed over them like a great stern judge of everyone frolicking half-naked below. That was Belinda's old high school. Good times.

Belinda struggled to walk straight in the sand carrying her chair and beach bag. Meantime, Bennett marched ahead with ease hauling his chair, another beach bag, an umbrella, the lunch cooler, a food bag, and his boogie board. Unfair.

They found a relatively empty spot between the town beach and the bathhouses (more important, between the bathrooms and frozen lemonade stand) and started setting up. Rather, Belinda watched as Bennett dug in the umbrella

so it wouldn't fly away, and then she unfolded her chair in the shade and placed the bags so everything was in easy reach.

"Are you settled now?" Bennett's gray eyes were covered with aviators, but she knew him well enough to tell they held a glint.

Belinda looked up from her seat, testing out the placement of all the bags. She brushed sand from her hands and stood up. "All set. What do we do while we wait?" She wasn't hungry yet, nor ready to nestle into her chair for a bout of laziness. "Walk?" Bennett said. She took his hand and they strolled toward the water's edge, far away at low tide.

Straight down the middle of the beach, there was nothing but pure ocean to see for miles, with an occasional barge or leisure craft in the distance. The water frothed a dark, murky green. This wasn't the Caribbean. You couldn't see your hands in the water, let alone down to your feet. Swimming, while refreshing on a hot day like that, always came with a sense of the unknown for Belinda. Anything could be down there and you'd never know it.

"Are you sure you didn't plan this whole thing with your friend?" Bennett said. "It's convenient she's showing up when Jonas is hanging out with us."

“I promise it’s just how it worked out. I swear I’m not matchmaking.” Belinda bit back a smile, though, leaping over a clump of red seaweed. At the worst of times, you couldn’t be on that end of the beach without gagging because of the stuff.

“You may not be trying to get them together, but you’re not avoiding the possibility either.”

“You know me so well.” Belinda walked backwards to face him, lacing her fingers with his. Their relationship had been on the upswing since they got their issues sorted during the whole Elena Campos murder investigation. They had some peace and they were making the most of it.

Water surged around their ankles. Belinda wasn’t sweltering enough yet to enjoy the chill that shot up her legs. She jumped away from the water and landed on something solid. She lost balance, her fingers slipping from Bennett’s, and toppled to her rump with a thud on the hard packed sand.

Bennett helped her up, grabbing what made her fall. Belinda blinked. She didn’t step *on* something, but *through* something. He held up a...painting. It was on a square canvas, roughly 16x20, no frame. She looked from the painting out to the water. Sometimes you’d see a boat or two fishing or speeding along the shoreline, but not today. Where did it come from?

Bennett examined it with both hands, bringing it closer to read the signature in the bottom corner. “It says Simone,” and he held it out to get a feeling for the entire painting, nodding. The greens and oranges that streaked together formed a field landscape. “It looks like her work.”

Simone was a famous local artist and good friend of Belinda’s family. “How did it end up here?” She touched the ragged part where she’d stepped through it. She couldn’t imagine tossing a Simone original in the water.

“Good question.” Bennett weighed the painting with his hands like that might tell them.

“I think we should hold onto it.”

“Why? You think you know where it came from?”

“No clue. But I can get in touch with Simone and see if we can track down who owned it.”

Bennett nodded appreciatively. He was getting used to her connections and coming to see their value. “I’ll go throw this in the trunk. Keep your distance from that frozen lemonade truck.”

Belinda stuck out her tongue. She watched him walk back to a different beach entrance, then gazed out at the water curiously. Of all the things she’d seen washed up on the beach, this was original.

Chapter 2

Soon enough, however, Belinda sidelined the curiosity of the washed-up painting in favor of an intense volleyball game: girls vs. boys. Belinda watched in admiration as her friend, Ardith, leaped into the air, back muscles flexing, and slammed the ball over the net—and straight into Jonas’ head. He stood there dazed for a few seconds.

Ardith swung her jet black ponytail around, glistening in the sunlight, her chest heaving. “Are you alright?” Ardith asked Jonas. “I didn’t mean to hit you in the head.” Belinda rubbed her lips together, knowing that might not be entirely true. Jonas had just landed a hit right out of Ardith’s reach and scored, and Belinda knew Ardith’s competitive spirit came out on the court.

The day was going how Belinda hoped it would. Ardith and Jonas arrived around the same time, settled their beach paraphernalia where Belinda and Bennett had staked a claim, and after intros and the initial weirdness of everyone settling in, they’d started talking with ease. Ardith was impressive physically, athletic with flawless bronze skin and the face of a glossy magazine model with dark, contemplative eyes. But she was impressive intellectually, too, and as the day

progressed, she could sense Jonas' growing interest in her friend.

Jonas grinned back and gave a thumbs-up, a definite twinkle on his roundish face. Apparently he liked it rough. Ardith smirked back, kicking sand around where she stood. She'd always been comfortable around any kind of sport, and Belinda felt a twinge of envy at her taut frame, though Bennett looked perfectly pleased once she stripped to her striped bikini, even if she was soft around the edges. (And, of course, with her sunglasses on, she'd felt free to ogle her boyfriend's gropeworthy abs—and chest—and biceps—as much as she wanted.) Belinda and Jonas had exchanged an appreciative once-over, too, so she guessed she was just different from Ardith, not hideous in comparison. Jonas was wiry compared to Bennett, but no less attractive topless.

Bennett grabbed the volleyball off the sand and served, shooting it in Belinda's direction. She punched it back over the net, and this time, Jonas returned with a sophisticated sideways move. Ardith dove and drove the ball down the middle and scored, winning the game. Belinda and Ardith high-fived. Bennett's lip curled up, and he smiled back at her in his way through the net. "Impressive, Kittridge."

“You hustled us,” Jonas said, grinning. Clearly, it either impressed him or turned him on, but didn’t seem to make him mad.

“Hustled is a strong word,” Belinda said. Ardith nodded in agreement. “How about, refrained from giving you the details of our volleyball accomplishments?”

“Or, hustled,” Bennett said flatly.

Belinda kissed him through a net loop. Jonas clapped his hands together. “I say it’s time to eat!” They all agreed, Belinda feeling weak from the exercise, letting Bennett guide her down the wood path back to the beach. The volleyball courts were to the side of the bathhouses, hidden by sand dunes.

They wove around the crowds now taking up most of the real estate, sitting, standing, and some walking to or from the bathhouses like them. Belinda could make out their rainbow-striped umbrella, relieved their food hadn’t been assaulted by audacious seagulls, when a blood-curdling scream cut through the noise of people and waves. Initially, Belinda figured it was an unhappy child—she’d heard plenty since they got there earlier—until a clearly adult scream followed and a few people rushed out of the water.

Shark? Belinda thought, not daring to utter that word aloud on a crowded beach. But sharks had been hanging out around the New England coast lately.

Jonas' policing instincts took over and he ran in that direction and the three of them followed. Belinda jumped over a crater someone had dug and saw one of the adults pointing toward the water. The woman hugged her crying daughter, shivering despite the heat.

Jonas ran toward the danger with Bennett right behind him. "Stay here," he yelled back at her.

Belinda waded in, ignoring his instruction, with Ardith right next to her. Bennett and Jonas swam out, corralling something hovering around the wave line. Belinda and Ardith pushed out farther, catching up. A rogue wave caught what was out there and rammed into Belinda's chest. She plunged under water, coming face-to-face with the lifeless eyes of a man. They floated together for a moment until another surge pushed him past her.

A hand caught her arm and dragged her up, coughing and blind. Ardith stabilized her, slapping her back to get the water out of her lungs.

"Dead...man," Belinda spluttered.

Once she rubbed water and salt from her eyes, she could make out his figure floating facedown. He was fully clothed in jeans and sneakers and a plaid shirt, which ballooned out from the water with pops of white skin peeking out. Another wave rode under him, lifting him up and forward.

She stared, unaware of the growing number of onlookers as the rumor spread that something went down on that part of the beach. Or of the lifeguards running into the water to help or whistled for people to stay out of the water and away from that area. Belinda didn't feel Ardith pinching her arm or notice the water pushing her to shore as she automatically started walking that way.

The scene became clearer once her feet sunk into the wet sand and the body that had floated above her like on air hit the ground solidly. Jonas told the lifeguards he was a police officer, and snapped into action. She made eye contact with one of the younger lifeguards, who'd pulled the body onto shore, his face drained of color. An older lifeguard took charge, asking Jonas what they needed to do. Regardless of the fact that Jonas was shirtless in a pair of striped trunks, he listed orders to the lifeguards with all the authority of a uniform. The older lifeguard delegated duties, mostly consisting of controlling the crowd and creating a wide berth for the police when they arrived, which happened in minutes.

People up and down the beach tried to see what was happening as on-duty police officers taped off the area and stood guard. Belinda saw one guy on the town beach end standing on the rocks with binoculars. People closer to the scene tried to snag video and photos...as souvenirs? Even Jonas was sidelined with them after he spoke to one of his colleagues. "So much for a day off," he muttered, taking a stance next to them. Energy radiated off him, and Belinda could tell it took all his self-control not to dive under that yellow tape and do something.

A hand rubbed her back and Bennett slid his arm around her waist and pulled her closer. She let him support her weight, realizing she had goose bumps in the breeze. His skin was warm and she rested a cheek against his chest, his steady breathing a comfort. "Are you okay?" he said into her hair.

Belinda evaluated herself before replying, "I feel...numb. Do you think he drowned?"

His arms tightened around her. "It's possible."

Belinda shivered. Growing up around the water, she'd always feared drowning on some level. Most people on the beach glanced up as a helicopter flew overhead. "We've got news crews," Bennett said. He nudged her. "Your friend's here."

Belinda followed his gaze and whispered, “Oh no.” Colleen Maguire of the local news station was plowing into the fray with her crew to report. For a second, Belinda froze, thinking Colleen was staring at her. After her recent news escapades, and finally shedding the social ostracism it brought, Belinda was in no hurry to be interviewed. But then she saw Colleen’s face fall a little, even from a distance, and turned to notice Jonas and Ardith whispering to each other, their bodies and faces in close proximity. When she looked back to Colleen, she was focused on work again, setting up with her cameraman like nothing had happened.

“Should I wave?” Belinda said to lighten her own feelings more than anything.

Bennett rubbed her shoulder. “I think we should slip into the crowd and get out of here before she sees you.” They’d already given their statements to the police, and there was nothing else they knew, so they tapped Jonas on the shoulder and the four of them grabbed their stuff and went out to the parking lot. Even if they couldn’t drive off yet, they could at least hide from Colleen.

Belinda’s face fell when she opened the trunk. The painting. She frowned up at Bennett. “We should give this to them. It may be more than a curiosity now.”

“Give them what?” Jonas strolled over, peeking into Bennett’s trunk. “What’s that?”

“It washed up on the beach,” Belinda said.

Jonas’ eyebrows arched. “When?”

“This morning. Before you guys came down. We were walking and I stepped on it.” Belinda shrugged. “It just seemed weird at the time,” but maybe it belonged to the dead man, she added to herself. She moved over so Jonas could get a better look. He propped his sunglasses on his head and squinted down, keeping his hands off like he’d been trained, though with what it had been through in the salt water, it didn’t matter much. “I don’t know if it helps, but I know the artist.”

Jonas smiled up at her. “Naturally.” Belinda bumped him playfully with her shoulder. “But, yeah. You should turn this in.” Jonas’ face went flat again like he was filing things away in his mind. Belinda figured he’d get involved one way or another.

Belinda pulled out her phone and took several photos of the painting. If she had to give it up, that didn’t mean she had to forsake her find completely. She still knew the artist, and now this painting could have special significance. Satisfied, she looked to Bennett. “What’s the safest route around Colleen?”

“Who’s Colleen?” Ardith stood next to Jonas, also fascinated by the painting, or maybe Jonas’ manly demeanor as he morphed into his Super Detective persona.

“You don’t want to know,” he said without emotion. Belinda had been tempted to ask Bennett about the Jonas and Colleen situation, but she’d shied away from it. That might be a topic better left closed.

Belinda picked up the torch when Ardith gave her a curious look. “Colleen’s a news reporter who nearly ruined my life.”

Ardith nodded sympathetically. “Oh.”

“But she didn’t,” Belinda added, “and we’re on okay terms now. Doesn’t mean I want to see her, though.” After taking out the painting, they threw their beach chairs and umbrella inside.

Bennett picked up the painting, and he and Belinda hurried back to the center of activity, her momentary worry about other matters dissipating when she caught sight of a white sheet over the body in the middle of the beach. Bennett squeezed her hand and they marched toward the officers guarding the crime scene.