



THE ESCAPE

LISA
HARRIS



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Lisa Harris, The Escape
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ONE

There is a razor-thin edge between justice and revenge, where the two easily blur if left unchecked. Five years after her husband's murder, Madison James was still trying to discover which side of the line she was on—though maybe it didn't matter anymore. Nothing she did was going to bring Luke back.

Her pulse raced as she sprinted the final dozen yards of her morning run, needing the release of endorphins to pick up her mood and get her through the day. At least she had the weather on her side. After weeks of spring rains, typical for the Pacific Northwest, the sun was finally out, showing off blue skies and a stunning view of Mount Rainier in the distance. Spring had also brought with it the bright yellow blooms of the Oregon grape shrubs, planted widely throughout Seattle, along with colorful wild currants.

You couldn't buy that kind of therapy.

Nearing the end of the trail, she slowed down and grabbed her water bottle out of her waist pack. Seconds later, her sister, Danielle, stopped beside her and leaned over, hands on her thighs, as she caught her breath.

“Not bad for your second week back on the trail,” Madison said, capping her bottle and putting it back in her pack. She stretched out one of her calves. “It won’t be long before you’re back up to your old distances.”

“I don’t know. I’m starting to think it’s going to take more than running three times a week to work off these pounds.” Danielle let out a low laugh. “Does chasing a toddler around the house, planning my six-year-old’s birthday, hosting our father for a few days, and pacing the floor with a colicky baby count as exercise?”

“That absolutely all counts.” Madison stretched the other side. “And as for the extra weight, that baby of yours is worth every pound you gained. Besides, you still look terrific.”

Danielle chuckled, pulling out her water bottle and taking a swig. “If this is looking terrific, I can’t imagine what a good night’s sleep would do.”

“You’ll get back to your old self in a few weeks.”

“That’s what Ethan keeps telling me.”

Madison stopped stretching and put her hands on her hips. “Honestly, I don’t know how you do it all. You’re Superwoman, as far as I’m concerned.”

Danielle laughed. “Yep, if you consider changing diapers and making homemade playdough superpowers. You, on the other hand, actually save lives every day.”

“You’re raising the next generation.” Madison caught her sister’s gaze. “Never take lightly the importance of being a mom. And you’re one of the best.”

“How do you always know what to say?” Danielle dropped her water bottle back into its pouch. “But what about you? You haven’t mentioned Luke yet today.”

Madison frowned. She knew her sister would bring him up

eventually. “That was on purpose. Today I’m celebrating your getting back into shape and the stunning weather. I have no intention of spending the day feeling sorry for myself.”

Danielle didn’t look convinced. “That’s fine. Just make sure you’re not burying your feelings, Maddie.”

“I’m not. Trust me.” Madison hesitated, hoping her attempt to sound sincere rang true. “Between grief counseling and support from people like my amazing sister, I’m a different person today. And I should be. It’s been five years.”

“Despite what they say, time doesn’t heal all wounds.”

Madison blinked back the memories. Five years ago today, two officers had been waiting for her when she got home to tell her that they were sorry but her husband had been shot and pronounced dead at the scene. They’d never found his killer, and life after that moment had never been the same.

Madison shook her head, blocking out the memories for the moment. She started walking toward the parking lot where they’d left their cars. She’d heard every cliché there was about healing and quickly learned to dismiss most of them. Her healing journey couldn’t be wrapped up in a box or mapped out with a formula. Loss changed everything and there was no way around it. There was no road map to follow that led you directly out of the desert.

“Did you go to the gravesite today?” Danielle asked, matching Madison’s pace.

“Not yet.”

She slowed her pace slightly. Every year on the anniversary of Luke’s death, she’d taken flowers to his grave. But for some reason, she hadn’t planned to go this year. And she wasn’t even sure why. She’d been told how grief tended to evolve. The hours and days after Luke’s death had left her paralyzed and

barely functioning, until one day, she woke up and realized time had continued on and somehow, so had she. She wasn't done grieving or processing the loss—maybe she never would be completely—but she'd managed to make peace with her new life.

Most days, anyway.

"You know I'm happy to go with you," Danielle said.

"I know, but I'll be fine. I'll go later today."

Danielle had been the protective older sister for as long as she remembered.

Her sister took another sip of her water and stared off into the distance. "Want to head up on the observation deck? The view of Mt. Rainier should be stunning today."

"I need to get back early, but there is something I've been needing to talk to you about."

"Of course."

Madison hesitated, worried she was going to lose her nerve if she didn't tell her sister now. "I've been doing a lot of soul-searching lately, and I feel like there are some things I need to do in order to move on with my life."

"Okay." Danielle cocked her head to the side, hands on her hips. "That's great, though I'm not sure what it means."

Madison hesitated. "I've asked for a transfer."

Danielle took a step back. "Wait a minute. A transfer? To where?"

Madison started walking again. "Just down to the US Marshals district office in Portland. Maybe it sounds crazy, but I've been feeling restless for a while. I think it's time for a fresh start. And I'll be closer to Dad."

"Maddie"—Danielle caught her arm—"you don't have to move away to get a fresh start. And there are plenty of other

options besides your moving. The most logical one being that we can move Dad up here. I'll help you look for a place for him like we talked about, and we'll be able to take care of him together—”

Madison shook her head. “He'll never agree to move. You know how stubborn he is, besides—he visits Mama's grave every day. How can we take that away from him? It's his last connection to her.”

“He needs to be here. You need to be here.”

Madison hesitated, wishing now that she hadn't brought it up. “Even if Daddy wasn't in the equation, I need to do this for me. It's been five years. I need to move on. And for me that means finally selling the house and starting over. I've been dragging my feet for too long.”

“I'm all for moving on, but why can't you do that right here? Buy another house in a different suburb, or a loft downtown if you want to be closer to work. Seattle's full of options.”

Madison's jaw tensed, but she wasn't ready to back down. “I need to do this. And I need you to support me.”

“I get that, but what if I need you here? I know that's selfish, but I want my girls to know their aunt. I want to be able to meet you for lunch when you're free, or go shopping, or—”

“It's a three-hour drive. I can come up for birthdays and holidays and—”

“With all your time off.” Danielle shook her head. “I know your intentions are good, but I'd be lucky to get you up here once a year.”

“You're wrong.” Madison fought back with her own objections. “I'm not running away. I'm just starting over.”

Danielle's hands dropped to her sides in defeat. “Just promise me you won't do anything rash.”

“I won’t. I’ve just been doing some research.”

Danielle glanced at her watch. “I hate to cut things off here, but I really do need to get back home. I didn’t know it was so late. Come over for dinner tonight. I’m getting Chinese take-out. We can talk about it more. Besides, you don’t need to be alone today. I’m sure the anniversary of Luke’s death is part of what’s triggered this need to move.”

Madison frowned, though her sister’s words hit their target. “You know I love you, but I don’t need a babysitter.”

“Isn’t it enough that I love your company?” Danielle asked.

“I was going to spend a quiet night at home.”

“Maddie—”

“I might be your little sister, but I’m not so little anymore. Stop worrying. I’m good. I promise. I just need a change. And I need you to support my decision.”

“Fine. You know I will, even though I will continue to try and change your mind. We could go house hunting together. In fact, remember that cute house we walked through that’s for sale a couple blocks from my house? It would be perfect—”

“Enough.” She reached out and squeezed Danielle’s hand. “Whatever happens, I promise I’ll still come up for the fall marathon, so I can beat you again—”

“What? I beat you by a full minute and a half last year.”

Madison shoved her earbuds in her ears and jogged away. “What? I can’t hear you.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She flashed her sister a smile, then sprinted toward the parking lot. She breathed in a lungful of air. Memories flickered in the background no matter how much she tried to shove them down.

For her it had been love at first sight. She’d met Luke in the

ER when she went in with kidney stones. He was the handsome doctor she couldn't keep her eyes off. Ten months later they married and spent their honeymoon on Vancouver Island, holing up in a private beach house with a view of the ocean. As an ER doc and a police officer, their biggest marital problem had been schedules that always worked against them. They'd fought for the same days off so they could go hiking together. And when they managed to score an extra couple of days, they'd rent a cabin in Lakebay or Greenbank and ditch the world for forty-eight hours.

Their marriage hadn't been perfect, but it had been good because they'd both meant the part about for better or worse. They plowed through rough patches, learned to communicate well, and never went to bed angry. Somehow it had worked.

When they started thinking about having a family, she'd decided that she'd pursue teaching criminal justice instead of chasing down criminals after the first baby was born so she could have a regular schedule and not put her life in danger on a daily basis. And Luke looked for opportunities to work regular hours.

But thered never been a baby. Instead, in one fatal moment, everything they planned changed forever.

Madison's heart pounded as she ran across the parking lot, trying to outrun the memories. Five years might not be enough time to escape the past, but it was time to try making new memories.

Tomorrow, she was going to call a Realtor.

She was breathing hard when she made it back to her car. She clicked on the fob, then slid into the front seat for the ten-minute drive back to the house she and Luke had bought. It was one of the reasons why she'd decided to move. The starter

home had become a labor of love as they'd taken the plunge and moved out of their apartment to become homeowners. A year later, they'd remodeled the kitchen and master bath, finished the basement, and added a wooden deck outside. Everything had seemed perfect. And now, while moving out of state might not fix everything, it felt like the next, needed step of moving forward with life.

Inside the house, she dropped her keys onto the kitchen counter and looked around the room. She'd made a few changes over the years. Fresh paint in the dining room. New pillows on the couch. But it still wasn't enough.

No. She was making the right decision.

She started toward the hallway, then stopped. Something seemed off. The air conditioner clicked on. She reached up to straighten a photo of Mount St. Helens that Luke had taken. She was being paranoid. The doors were locked. No one had followed her home. No one was watching her. It was just her imagination.

She shook off the feeling, walked down to her bedroom, and froze in the doorway as shock coursed through her.

There. On her comforter was one black rose, just like she'd found every year at her husband's grave on the anniversary of his death. But this time, it was in her room. In her house. Her heart pounded inside her chest. Five years after her husband's death she still had no solid leads on who killed him or who sent the flower every year. If it was the same person, they knew how to stay in the shadows and not get caught. But why? It was the question she'd never been able to answer.

She'd accepted Luke's death and had slowly begun to heal, but this this was different. Whatever started five years ago wasn't over.