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Edited by Lila Bear

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Chapter 1: The Call To Adventure

Emmy Forester's high-tech life as a Silicon Valley computer engineer and data analyst was as glamorous as a spreadsheet and as thrilling as an A/B test. But her world buzzed with that distinct Silicon Valley energy—the kind that practically radiated ambition, from the kombucha taps in the kitchen to the bean bag chairs positioned strategically for "innovative ideation." And, of course, there was the almost sacred shrine to caffeine: espresso machines so complex they cost as much as a used car and could probably launch satellites.

She couldn't help but feel an amused fascination with it all. Part of her marveled at the ingenuity and drive surrounding her. These people believed they were changing the world, or at least some small part of it, one algorithm at a time.

But recently, a nagging feeling had crept into her mind, whispering that maybe, just maybe, she was chasing after empty numbers for the sake of someone else's bottom line. And it was not as rewarding as it had been in days past.

Last year she had gotten a huge amount of money, a fortune really, when the startup she helped form went public. She now had more money than most Americans could only dream of in their lifetimes. At first, she indulged in luxury items like a complete wardrobe of red-sole designer boots and her dream car, an expensive top brand Electric Vehicle. She made smart investments with some of the money and hired a wealth manager to keep an eye on her asset portfolio.

But she realized she didn't need to work anymore. She did it because she could. And because she didn't really have a life outside of work.

She had Wyatt Burp though, the world's most adorable pup. A quirky miniature dachshund with soulful eyes and a knack for comic timing, he was her constant

companion now. Emmy's life revolved around precision, but Wyatt was the embodiment of unpredictability—a trait she both adored and endured.

He had earned his name within minutes of their first meeting. At a rescue event in Golden Gate Park, she had been drawn to him instantly, charmed by his sleek chocolate-brown coat and slightly oversized ears that gave him an air of perpetual curiosity.

As Emmy bent down to pet him, Wyatt had leaned in close, looked her in the eye with what could only be described as mischievous intent, and let out a thunderous burp. The sound echoed across the park, causing heads to turn and laughter to ripple through the crowd.

The volunteer holding his leash had sighed dramatically. "That's Wyatt. Sweet as pie, but a little... gassy. Still interested?"

Emmy had burst out laughing. "Are you kidding? He's perfect."

From that moment, Wyatt became her shadow. They were an odd pair: Emmy, meticulously organized, with her color-coded spreadsheets and an app for everything, and Wyatt, who could sniff out or create chaos in the tidiest of environments. He had a particular talent for burping at the worst possible times, like during Emmy's Zoom calls with high-level clients or in the middle of yoga class when she'd foolishly brought him along for "pup-friendly" sessions.

"Wyatt," she'd mutter, her face burning as yet another loud burp interrupted the serene 'Om' of the group. The instructor had only smiled serenely. "He's expressing his truth," she'd said, which only made Emmy feel more ridiculous.

Despite his quirks, Wyatt was her grounding force. While the tech world buzzed with relentless energy, Wyatt reminded her to slow down, even if it was just to rub his belly or chase him around the apartment after he'd stolen a sock. He had a knack for emitting and sniffing out interesting smells—a skill Emmy often joked might make him a good detective. Little did she know how true that might one day be.

Now Emmy was faced with what to do for the rest of her life.

Her latest project was a data visualization for a client whose enthusiasm for "maximizing conversion rates" bordered on manic. She'd spent hours poring over

patterns, trends, and insights, her eyes blurring from staring at lines of code and color-filled charts. But every time she stepped back to look at her work, she felt like a kid who had just built a sandcastle, only to realize that what she'd constructed would be washed away by the next wave of data.

Emmy glanced around the office. A group of engineers huddled in a corner, debating something intense about blockchain, while a marketing analyst expounded loudly on the potential of Virtual Reality in dog grooming. She smirked. There were some bizarre ideas floating around, but this was Silicon Valley, where bizarre was always the new normal.

She took a sip from her expensive handled thermos mug that was all the rage right now—plain black coffee, none of that \$12 oat milk nonsense.

Sure, she'd adopted certain local habits like the overpriced salads and the yoga apps on her phone, but her taste for the absurd had limits, thanks to her dad, Hank Elliott. A lawyer, a military JAG officer by profession, he passed his love of logic to his daughter.

And thanks to her mother, Reba Forester, who grew up in poverty in Appalachia and knew the value of money. Even though her mother had passed away when Emmy was only nine years old, Emmy inherited her fierce independence and feminist ideals from her mother.

Before Emmy bought anything extravagant, she would ask herself what her parents would think of the purchase. Each had passed away many years ago, but their influence on her idea of wealth remained. There was always a practical element to her spending.

Lately, her mind drifted during work, and she'd started wondering if maybe she'd wandered into the wrong story altogether. This was supposed to be the pinnacle of her career, the reason she'd studied, strategized, and adapted her whole life.

But why did it feel like she was an actor in someone else's play, reading lines not written for her? It was an unsettling feeling, like realizing you'd taken a wrong turn off the freeway and were now in a different city with no GPS signal.

Despite the perks of her latest consulting gig—the paychecks, the luxury office, the company retreats in Tahoe—Emmy couldn't shake her growing sense of alienation. The

more she analyzed data, the more she felt like a tiny cog in a giant, profit-obsessed machine. This was a place where her co-workers didn't even know her real name. They just called her M. Not Em as in a nickname. Just M.

They saw her as nothing more than a digital oracle.

One evening, she was working late, poring over a series of data visualizations for a client she didn't particularly care about. The office was mostly empty, with only a faint hum of servers in the background and the soft glow of monitors illuminating her workspace. Her eyes felt gritty from staring at the screen for too long, and her brain was buzzing with an over-caFFEinated haze. She rubbed her temples, feeling the weight of yet another late night pressing down on her.

As she reached for her thermos, her phone buzzed with a new notification: a voicemail. Curious, she clicked play, expecting it to be a wrong number, a telemarketer, or some company-wide announcement. But the voice on the other end was none of those.

"Hello, Ms. Forester. This is Reginald Andrews from the law offices of Cartwright & Crane. We've been trying to reach you regarding an inheritance. If you could call us back at your earliest convenience, we need to discuss some particulars about a property left to you by your Aunt Gertie in Hope Springs. A property called The Oddity Shop."

An inheritance? She sat up straighter, her interest piqued. An aunt? She didn't have any aunts, not that she knew of, anyway. Her mother had always been the mystery-filled type, and she'd never mentioned a sister, let alone any property.

The attorney's voice had been as dry as a legal textbook, but there was something in his tone that made Emmy's pulse quicken—a kind of subdued urgency. "It's best if we talk directly. I don't want some of this information to be recorded."

Then it hit her: the place he mentioned. Hope Springs. It was a name she hadn't heard in years, a place only mentioned in stories told by her mother. A place her mother had escaped from as a teen.

The following morning Emmy returned the call to the law office. After enduring the bland recorded phone tree, she was finally connected to Reginald Andrews. As they

exchanged curt greetings, she recognized his hurried and stress-tinged voice, so common for those who live by billable hours.

“Uh, Ms. Forester, you may want to think long and hard about getting involved with this place. There’s a lot of what you might call ‘legendary history’ tied up in the land. And not all of it is pleasant. Some of the details would be better discussed in person. Hope Springs is...well, let’s just say it’s complicated.” His tone was dark and cautionary.

"There's a problem with back taxes on the land. It took so long to find you to notify you of your right to claim the property that now you only have 7 days to pay the back taxes before it goes to auction. You might just want to let it go."

Emmy felt the return of a familiar attitude. When others tried to control her thoughts or her actions, she dug in more. Maybe it was stubbornness, maybe it was just hard-headed optimism, but she determined right then and there that she wasn’t going to be talked out of her inheritance.

But the attorney had tried to dissuade her, even used the same phrase as her mother Reba had used: “It’s complicated.” What could be so complicated about a place? A property?

Hope Springs. The name flooded her mind with thoughts of her mother and the sting of longing. She could still hear her mother’s Southern drawl whispering the name with wistfulness and regret. Whatever legendary secrets Hope Springs held, they were now hers to discover. And no stuffy lawyer with his vague warnings was going to stand in her way.

Emmy sat in her sleek, minimalist office, her mind reeling from her conversation with Reginald Andrews. She glanced over to the floor-to-ceiling window that framed the cityscape of Silicon Valley—a shiny maze of innovation, ambition, and exhaustion. Wyatt Burp sat beneath her desk, gnawing on a chew toy shaped like a miniature computer mouse.

She opened her laptop, scrolling absentmindedly through spreadsheets and charts. Numbers blurred together, their patterns failing to spark the usual thrill of discovery.

Her desk was a shrine to efficiency: ergonomic chair, standing desk converter, an espresso cup warmer perpetually set to the ideal coffee temperature. Yet despite the meticulous order of her surroundings, Emmy felt a growing sense of chaos within herself.

She now realized there was more to life, and she was ready for it.

Chapter 2: A Dot On the Map

Emmy sat cross-legged on her living room floor, laptop perched on the coffee table, Wyatt Burp sprawled beside her. The dachshund was halfway through a nap, his snout buried in the folds of a blanket, occasionally letting out soft snores. Emmy glanced down and smiled. “What would I do without you, Wyatt?” she murmured, reaching over to rub his velvety ears. He twitched but didn’t stir.

The screen glowed in front of her, filled with satellite images of Appalachia. Emmy had typed in different permutations of keywords “Hope Springs, Oddity Shop, Appalachia” into every mapping program she could think of, but the results weren’t promising. The town itself barely registered—just a speck amidst rolling green hills and dense forests.

Zooming out gave her a better sense of the terrain: winding roads snaking through steep ridges, thick with clusters of trees that looked like broccoli heads from above. An occasional creek cut through the green. Emmy swore she could almost smell the pine in the air.

But zooming in didn’t help much. The resolution was blurry, as if the world had decided Hope Springs wasn’t worth photographing properly.

“No wonder it’s hard to find,” she muttered, switching to street view. Handmade signs advertised things like “Homemade Elderberry Pie” and “Apple Butter Festival.” A far cry from the steel-and-glass towers of Silicon Valley, where the only smell was the faint whiff of burnt coffee and ambition.

“What am I doing?” she muttered to herself, laughing at the ridiculousness of her sudden fascination. But even as she tried to laugh it off, the feeling grew stronger—a sense of... connection? She couldn’t explain it. Hope Springs was just a dot on the map, yet here she was, looking at it like it held some secret she’d been waiting to uncover.

A craggy cafe and a forlorn feed store appeared to be the only buildings along that section of road. It was an unmarked gravel offshoot of an old, unmarked highway. She figured it must have been bypassed by a newer highway decades ago.

When the screen refreshed, her breath caught. There it was: The Oddity Shop.

It wasn't exactly a ruin, but it wasn't far from one either. The building had the weary look of something that had weathered centuries of storms and neglect. Its faded wooden sign hung slightly askew above the front porch, the lettering barely legible: "Oddity Shop" in what might once have been a cheery script.

The paint on the siding was peeling in long, curling strips, revealing layers of color—a history of someone's attempts to keep it looking fresh. The porch sagged in one corner, supported by mismatched pillars, and a crooked rocking chair sat abandoned near the front door. A pot of what might have been flowers in another lifetime leaned precariously on the railing, spilling dirt onto the steps.

But despite its shabby state, there was something about the shop that called to her. It felt... alive. Or maybe just waiting, like a book on a dusty shelf, its pages full of stories no one had read in years.

Wyatt stirred, then tunneled deeper into the folds of his blanket. Emmy laughed. "Even you'd look out of place there, buddy," she teased. He wagged his little tail in response, but would not come out of his cozy blanket.

She clicked back to her search results, her curiosity growing. She clicked on a link titled, "Top 10 Things to Do in Hope Springs." The cursor just blinked at her. Finally, a "404 Page Not Found" error message came up. *Well, I guess there are not even 10 things to do in Hope Springs* she mused.

One link caught her eye: a blog post from many years ago titled, "A Stop at The Oddity Shop." She opened it, and the screen filled with photos and rambling text from a self-proclaimed "roadside treasure hunter." The backwoods traveler had stumbled upon the shop during a road trip and described it as "a delightful mess of oddities and antiques," filled with everything from vintage postcards to jars of marbles to "what I'm pretty sure was a shrunken head."

Emmy's eyes widened. "A shrunken head? Seriously?" she muttered. Wyatt let out a long snore in response.

The blogger had also mentioned an encounter with the owner, a woman named Gertie. "She's a hoot," the post read. "Told me the history of half the items in the shop, though I'm pretty sure she made up most of it. Said the shop's been in her family for generations, since the 1800's. And she said if I ever wanted to learn some real ghost stories, I should come back after dark. I laughed, but the way she looked at me... I almost believed her."

Emmy sat back, staring at the screen.

Aunt Gertie. The woman who had left her this shop, this strange little piece of history in the middle of nowhere. Her mother's sister! What kind of person had she been? And what kind of stories were waiting for Emmy in that shop? Emmy had a flash of jealousy that someone, some stranger, had known Aunt Gertie, the hoot, even if only for 5 minutes. Emmy felt a little sad that she would never know her.

Mama, why didn't you ever take me back to Hope Springs to visit family? Emmy sat quietly for a moment pondering that question.

Switching tabs, Emmy found a forum called "Hope Springs Herald." It appeared to be a small-town message board, though the posts were more like public diary entries.

One thread caught her attention: "The Forester-Thorne Feud." She clicked it and scrolled through comments that were half gossip, half cryptic warnings. Words like "murder," "curse," and "vengeance" jumped out at her; along with references to "The Oddity Shop" and "the old ways."

Her brow furrowed. She'd known her mother's family had a complicated past, but this sounded more like something out of a Gothic novel. The idea of a feud spanning generations seemed absurd in contemporary times, yet the posts were recent, the language heated. Whoever these people were, they clearly took it seriously.

She glanced down at Wyatt, now sprawled on his back with his paws in the air. "What do you think, boy? Are we walking into some kind of Hatfields-and-McCoys situation?" Wyatt let out a sleepy groan, and Emmy sighed. "Yeah, me neither."

Still, the more she read, the more intrigued she became. Hope Springs wasn't just a tiny dot on a map; it was a place full of history, secrets, and grudges that refused to die. And somehow, The Oddity Shop was at the center of it all.

There was a thread on "mysterious noises from the forest" and another discussing the annual "Granny Bake-Off" where two elderly women, both named Mabel, had been "at odds for decades" over whose peach cobbler "tasted like Mama's" and could make the strongest man weep.

Emmy leaned back, her thoughts swirling. She'd spent years analyzing data, finding patterns in chaos, making sense of the incomprehensible. But this... this felt different. This wasn't about logic or algorithms. This was about people, stories, and something she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Wyatt stretched, his tail wagging briefly before he settled back into his nap. Emmy reached down and scratched his belly. "Guess we're going to have to see for ourselves, huh?" she said softly.

She turned back to the laptop, her fingers hovering over the keyboard. The Oddity Shop might have been just another forgotten roadside attraction to most people, but to Emmy, it felt like a doorway—one she was about to step through.

She imagined trying to tell Wyatt they were moving to Hope Springs.

"It's not all that bad, Wyatt. I mean, sure, they don't have self-driving scooters and \$15 matcha lattes, but it's quiet, and you'd finally get to chase real squirrels instead of that digital one on the tablet."

Wyatt's eyes opened at the word "squirrels," as if to say, "Wait—what?"

Emmy laughed, reaching over to scratch his ears as he gave out a burp.

"You'd like it there, wouldn't you? Trees to sniff, dirt to dig, and probably no corporate meetings in sight." He wriggled in agreement, and she couldn't deny that the idea of leaving behind her complicated yet predictable tech life for something simpler was starting to sound... appealing.

It was almost as if The Oddity Shop was calling to her, like some mysterious pull she couldn't explain or rationalize.

But then her practical side kicked in.

She'd worked hard for her job, for the Silicon Valley life. She had a 401(k), health insurance, an enviable investment portfolio, and a LinkedIn profile that would make her father proud if he were still alive to see it. Even though he had passed away years ago, the grief still felt new. She wished that he were here to help her decide what to do.

Who in their right mind would trade the life she had now for a dusty shop in a tiny hamlet with a population smaller than her building's tenant list?

Still, the more she thought about it, the more she couldn't shake the appeal of a life away from Silicon Valley's relentless drive. Here, she was just a cog in the great machine of tech progress, one slideshow presentation away from being replaced. But Hope Springs... there, she could have roots. Real roots, not the kind that had to keep adapting every time her company pivoted to "new and innovative" markets.

Emmy opened a new document on her laptop titled "Pros and Cons of Moving to Hope Springs." She started with the "Cons."

Cons:

- No reliable Wi-Fi (probably)
- Few coffee shops, if any
- Family history of feuds and... curses?
- Possible adjustment to "country time" (she'd once waited 20 minutes for an espresso in a small-town café and barely survived the experience)
- Too much raw nature

She paused, tapping her finger against her lips, then added:

- Mabel vs. Mabel Annual Peach Cobbler Bake-Off could get ugly

When it came to "Pros," she felt stumped for a second, until Wyatt gave her a lazy "woof" as if to say, "Get on with it." So, she wrote:

Pros:

- Order Starlink for internet connection
- Peace and quiet (minus whatever mysterious forest noises people were talking about)
- No one would care about conversion rates or "maximizing productivity" in her daily life
- Actual trees and nature not just screen saver (but remember, raw nature)
- Potential for a simpler life
- The Oddity Shop (a curiosity she couldn't explain)

As she typed, she felt her resistance melting away. Each pro seemed to add weight to a new reality, one where her life wasn't measured by 'Key Performance Indicators' and efficiency but by something far simpler, far more authentic.

Finally, with her list in place, Emmy glanced down at Wyatt, who had fallen back to sleep and was snoring gently. She leaned down and whispered, "We may have to go on a road trip, Wyatt."

His ears perked up, and his dark eyes popped open as if he'd just heard the best news in the world. She laughed, realizing she hadn't felt this excited in... well, a long time. There was something thrilling about the unknown, about discovering a part of her family's history, however quirky or cursed it might be.

She took a deep breath, looking back at the online images of the endless green hills of Hope Springs she now captured as her screensaver. Maybe it was reckless, maybe it was impulsive, but maybe that was exactly what she needed.

The decision wasn't final yet, but as she closed her laptop, she felt that familiar tug, stronger than ever, pulling her toward the mountains, toward The Oddity Shop, and toward a life she never thought she'd be curious about.

Should I stay or should I go?

Then she realized she had already made up her mind.

Chapter 3: Incite First, Insight Later

The next day Emmy sat at her office desk with her resignation letter open on the screen in front of her, the cursor blinking in sync with her pounding heart. She took a deep breath, then hit "send" before she could talk herself out of it. Her phone immediately pinged, and her CEO's name flashed across the screen. She half-expected it to be a message asking if she was feeling okay—or if she'd accidentally sent her retirement notice twenty years early.

Instead, he called her into his office, where he looked as though she'd just declared she was leaving to join a circus.

"Hope Springs? Appalachia?" he repeated as if he'd misheard. "Seriously? Is this some kind of tech-free sabbatical or...?"

Emmy tried to explain that, no, it was just a move to a quiet place, not a career strategy. And yes, she knew it didn't have any industry, and no, she wasn't planning to work on a "sustainable startup" from her porch. She was just... leaving. Quitting. Disconnecting.

But Emmy couldn't resist playing with his mind one more time. "Not exactly," she replied with a wry smile. "I figured I'd finally have time to work on my startup: artisanal, blockchain-tracked moonshine."

The CEO blinked. "You're joking, right?"

"Of course," Emmy said, deadpan. "Hope Springs doesn't have Wi-Fi fast enough for blockchain. I'll just stick to good old-fashioned feuds and front porch sittin'."

The CEO just stared at her dumbfounded. "It will be quite a change. I hope you don't end up regretting it."

As Emmy made her way back to her office, the rumors were already flying.

"Who does that?" her colleague whispered as "M" made her way back to her desk.

“Did you see the online images of that place she’s going? It looks like the setting of a horror movie,” one gossipy co-worker whispered loudly enough for Emmy to hear.

All her co-workers were baffled.

"You're going to miss out on so much!"

"What about the networking events?"

"The annual bonus?"

"The espresso machines that know you by name?"

She shrugged, imagining the very different kind of "networking" she'd have in Hope Springs. Maybe she'd chat with neighbors every day or discuss gossip with whoever ran the post office. Somehow, the idea didn't seem half-bad.

They all looked at her with a mix of pity and disbelief, like she'd just announced she was going to try and find Atlantis. Emmy just smiled, feeling strangely pleased that she was now the "odd" friend. Silicon Valley had too many people trying to be the same; same short, jet-black dyed hair with a purple streak—just like hers, tattoos, a nose ring or two; maybe it was time she became a little different.

Silicon Valley wasn't exactly known for being a place you leave willingly, especially as a highly compensated C-suite consultant like Emmy. And yet, as she began to clear her files and pack her things at the office, she felt oddly light, like she'd shrugged off a coat that had been weighing her down for years without her realizing it.

In the office landscape where farewell parties were rarer than Bigfoot sightings, Emmy found herself navigating the final chapter of her final job without any fanfare. No balloons, no weepy speeches, and certainly no co-workers wrangling for one last group selfie. Was it really a valid office departure if Denise from accounting wasn't weeping into the celebratory cake? Alas, Emmy would never know.

After years of non-existent office camaraderie, her co-workers were like the sugar-free candy in the receptionist's bowl—ever-present but unremarkable. Back in the harried golden days of startups going public, her previous co-workers splintered away—retiring, hobnobbing at new startups or sprinkling fairy dust on new projects as angel investors. The kind of folks who'd invite you to their TED Talk, not their barbecue.

Compared to the dazzling achievements of her former colleagues, the current team felt like a half-baked soufflé of potential.

But why dwell on lackluster goodbyes? Emmy wasn't one to clutch tissues and cling to shared memories of broken printers or poor cafeteria coffee. She had grander visions of strolling out those revolving doors in slow motion, sunglasses on, as if she was a protagonist in a mid-2000s rom-com.

It was time to embrace the freedom of a new adventure. A bit of packing and a nod to the past, and she was ready to flap her metaphorical wings and fly into the sunset, pity party not required.

Her office desk—the unofficial graveyard of sticky notes and paperclips—stood unnervingly tidy, almost as if to mock her impending liberation. A surreal calm washed over her as she packed her last few bits into a box (no, really, she wasn't stealing office supplies).

This was no grand exodus; it was a mild-mannered stroll out of monotony's office door and into the parking garage of possibilities.

"I could start a book club," she proclaimed to her withered potted plant she carried out on her hip. She had a hard time keeping the unfortunate thing alive. It was the only living thing in this office building that had warranted any emotional attachment. But it had always just sat there on the top of her bookshelf, greenish-brown and stoic, a silent partner in her corporate climb.

"I bet you'll thrive in Hope Springs," she pronounced to the struggling plant. "And I promise I'll take you with me."

With a casual swing of her bag and a final glance back over her shoulder, Emmy stepped into the elevator. The doors closed with a soft ding, muffling the office chatter into a faint ambient tune.

She passed through the lobby for the last time and the revolving doors spun her out into the world. She chuckled to herself as she approached her car with a bit of a skip.

And thus, Emmy embarked on her next chapter—not tethered by past friendships or lack thereof but buoyed by the potential of what could be.

As she started packing up her apartment, Emmy's excitement grew. She moved through the rooms, purging almost everything, shoving the remainder into storage boxes with a giddiness that bordered on recklessness. It was almost like she was clearing out an old life to make space for something entirely new.

Wyatt Burp followed her around, clearly sensing the change. She scratched behind his ears and said, "You ready for this, little guy?" He wagged his tail, blissfully unaware that his life was about to go from city-dwelling dachshund to country adventurer.

Emmy had already packed her essentials:

- All the tech she would need
- Protein bars and energy powder
- Supplements
- Clothes and boots for any occasion
- Favorite travel mug
- Coffee grinder
- French press she'd lugged through three different moves

She packed a travel bag and designer tote with Wyatt Burp's food, essentials, and treats.

By the time she finished, her apartment looked like it had been ransacked. Only a few boxes remained to be shipped later, and she felt a strange sense of freedom.

Chapter 4: Charging Stations and Chasing Squirrels

The next morning, Emmy toted boxes down to the parking garage and loaded up her car which suddenly looked comically small given all the stuff she'd crammed into it. Someone she assumed was a neighbor commented, "Your car looks like Ma and Pa Kettle loading up for a move."

"That's not too far off the mark," she responded with a friendly wave at the possible neighbor.

Wyatt claimed his passenger seat perch, his nose poking out the window as if he were already smelling the fresh air of the mountains. She clipped him in his safety harness, and he quickly settled for a nap. He knew the routine.

Emmy got behind the wheel, took one last look at her apartment building, and then, with a deep breath, pulled onto the street. She was leaving the high-rise buildings and fast-paced lifestyle of Silicon Valley in her rearview mirror.

It was strange—she had no idea what was waiting for her in Hope Springs, yet she felt more confident about this decision than anything she'd ever done.

She set her music system to her driving playlist and merged onto the freeway as Florence + The Machine sang out one of her favorite songs about freedom.

The drive felt like a transition, a literal bridge between one life and another. She planned to stop at EV charging stations which she had mapped out using her phone app. They became fewer and farther between the closer she got to Appalachia, but she had confidence it would all work out okay.

Wherever they stopped along the drive she always met other friendly folks at the charging stations and got lots of free advice about her journey. One cheerful guy in denim overalls wanted to share some wisdom and a warning. "Well, it's a good thing you're

charging here and not out on Route 15. Neighbor of mine swears he tried to plug in his wife's electric car at a barn outlet and nearly blew the circuit."

Before Emmy could respond, another electric vehicle owner pulled up—a young guy with sunglasses and a cowboy hat that screamed "suburban rancher." He hopped out and leaned against his car while it charged, like he was posing for a magazine. "You headed west?" he asked Emmy, flashing a grin. "If you are, watch out for the tumbleweeds. Took one out last week. Didn't think I needed a brush guard on an EV, but here we are."

Emmy raised an eyebrow. "Tumbleweeds, huh? I'll keep that in mind. Maybe I should pick up a snowplow attachment just in case since I'm heading in the opposite direction."

Wyatt, sensing the conversation needed a comedic boost, let out one of his signature belches. The cowboy's grin faltered as he glanced at the small dog in the passenger seat. "Is he okay?"

"He's fine," Emmy assured him. "That's just his way of saying he's unimpressed by your tumbleweed story."

The cowboy hat man looked taken aback, but the overalls guy burst out laughing. "Smart dog you got there. And don't worry, Miss Sparky—Kansas is pretty flat. The only thing you're likely to crash into is boredom." Emmy liked her new nickname.

She chuckled as she leaned against her car, scrolling through her phone while the charger did its job. She was not posting her journey on TikTok or Instagram or Snapchat or any forums. She decided she didn't need any more judgement on her relocation decision.

As the charger finished, she took Wyatt for a short exploration on his leash. His nose worked overtime with all the new scent trails.

"You ready to hit the road again, bud?" Emmy always made sure to click Wyatt into his safety harness. The last thing anyone wanted to see was a wiener dog missile flying through the air during a hard brake.

Wyatt wagged his tail, clearly eager to escape the stranger-filled parking lot. Emmy unplugged the car, gave the guys a nod of thanks, and rolled out toward the highway. She couldn't help but laugh. Charging stations in Kansas were less about innovation and more about keeping your sense of humor intact.

Emmy tried to keep her mind busy during the drive, making puzzles out of license plates, or counting the number of highway signs. She would add random numbers she would see, trying to come up with a meaningful pattern.

She set the satellite radio channel to her favorite classic jazz station but then decided to find some bluegrass. She gave a voice command, and her car found a station playing "Back Home" by The Judds and Alison Krauss. It was perfect. She allowed herself to be carried along by the melody and the lyrics and could feel herself relax. She visualized herself sipping sweet tea on a front porch, watching Wyatt chase actual squirrels. The thought made her smile.

She enjoyed the trip so far and it was amazingly trouble-free. Until it wasn't.

She'd forgotten how vast the country was, how the horizon seemed to go on forever without a skyscraper in sight. It was both intriguing and a little disorienting.

Then came the rolling hills with lots of elevation changes.

Glancing out at the scenery as it changed, she was aware of the distant mountains, now with gloomy clouds gathering around their peaks. The storm was moving quickly but lucky for Emmy, the weather front seemed to be moving away from her, or so she thought. She gave a little shiver as she felt the coolness of the air and the pressure change with the altitude.

Or was it something else she felt as she watched the darkness looming? It was an unfamiliar feeling.

On one empty stretch of highway when they hadn't seen another car in miles, Wyatt, who had been contentedly snoozing in his usual perch, suddenly perked up. His nose twitched furiously, and he let out a low, uncertain growl.

“What is it, boy?” Emmy asked, glancing over at him. Wyatt’s ears were rigid, his gaze fixed on the seemingly endless stretch of road ahead, as if he were watching something Emmy couldn’t see.

She slowed the car a little, scanning the area. Nothing but asphalt and the occasional telephone pole broke the monotony of the landscape. “Is it another squirrel dream?” she joked, but her voice faltered when Wyatt shifted to stand on all fours, his small body tense.

“Alright, you’re officially creeping me out,” she muttered, gripping the wheel tighter. She rolled down the window a crack, letting the cool air in. Wyatt sniffed it sharply, his nose jerked erratically. He barked once—sharp and urgent—then abruptly plopped back down, gave a small burp, and began licking his paws as if nothing had happened.

Emmy raised an eyebrow. “Okay, then. False alarm, I guess.” She tried to shake off the weird vibe, but her grip on the wheel didn’t loosen.

A few miles later, it happened again. This time, Wyatt’s head shot up, his eyes darting toward the rear passenger window. He let out a low whine, then licked and pawed at the passenger’s side glass, smudging it with clammy puppy drool.

“What is with you?” Emmy asked, checking her mirrors. Still nothing but an empty stretch of road behind them. She frowned and gave him a reassuring pat. “You’re acting like we’re in a Stephen King novel, Wyatt. Stop it.”

Wyatt let out one more subdued bark, then huffed dramatically and turned in a tight circle before settling back down. Emmy sighed, shaking her head as the car hummed quietly along. “You’ve got a flair for the dramatic, you know that?”

Wyatt didn’t respond. His nose wiggled, but he was relaxed in his curled-up state. Emmy cranked up the radio, trying to drown out the odd sense of foreboding Wyatt had left lingering in the air.

As she got deeper into the mountains, Emmy encountered more than her fair share of curious strangers whenever she stopped, including one elderly woman who asked if Wyatt was “a special breed of groundhog.” The woman thought this was an especially

funny question and laughed with a loud guffaw. Emmy played along and assured her that yes, they were breeding them like that in California now. The woman seemed horrified.

At the last charging station, an odd woman had given Emmy a dire warning about the quick-changing weather, which made Emmy feel even more unsettled. California weather was steady, almost boring to some people—except for the earthquakes and wildfires. Those can quickly snap a person out of boredom. But this storm threatening in the distance was just another reminder to her that she was in unfamiliar territory.

Emmy's car glided smoothly along the winding Appalachian highway while Johnny Cash and Willie Nelson sang an ode to “The Highwayman” on her stereo system.

The scenery outside the window unfolded like an old Technicolor movie teeming with eccentric rural props. She couldn't help but chuckle as she imagined herself as Dorothy in the eye of a whirling storm, where each character flying by outside her window was brought to life with engaging, humorous detail.

They journeyed past quirky roadside attractions shrieking for attention with giant fiberglass mascots. There was a decrepit, irreverently decaying giant chicken, plastic feathers askew as though it had just survived a tornado. Wyatt whined to get out and chase the comical creature with its tattered, flamboyant plumage.

Further along, Emmy spotted a crumbling old billboard. It had once proudly declared, "See the World's Largest Rocking Chair," but now an aggressive vine had taken over, covering it in a leafy camouflage spelling a cryptic message. "World's Last Rocking Chair."

Then the mountains loomed nearer.

A pickup truck passed her with eyes painted on the rear window, gazing backward with the enigmatic stare of an ancient oracle, never blinking, having already seen it all.

The roadside forests grew denser. The trees seemed to snicker to each other in rustling volleys as if spreading juicy gossip along a line of evergreens. Their shadows darted across the road. A flock of crows rose with a raucous caw into the sky, their flight a synchronized ascent of jet-black feathers glistening like a necklace of backlit onyx.

The weight of her transition finally began to settle over Emmy. The laughter that had bubbled so easily at quirky roadside attractions and Wyatt's antics now gave way to a quiet unease she couldn't quite name.

The deeper she got into Appalachia, the more her imagination played surreal tricks on her.

What if we're driving straight into a place where we won't be welcome?

Generations of grudges, mysterious curses, and whispered secrets were nothing she could chart in a spreadsheet.

"What if they don't like us?" she asked aloud, the words slipping out before she could stop them. Wyatt yawned, letting out a sound that was halfway between a bark and a sigh that seemed to say 'Who cares? They'll love us or they won't, and we'll still have each other.'

Emmy smiled despite herself.

Along the last leg of the highway, the storm clouds that had loomed in the distance rolled in faster than she anticipated, darkening the sky with an eerie greenish hue. Had the storm changed direction? Emmy felt disoriented. The unpredictability of the weather unnerved her.

Emmy was starting to feel claustrophobic from all the tall trees blocking the sky. She drove past a green highway sign stating "Welcome to Piney County" with a large pine tree icon. "Well, that's kind of redundant, isn't it?"

The horizon winked one last time between the trees. Little did Emmy know that she would not see a horizon line again for a while.

The storm was imminent now. She could feel electricity in the air.

She pulled off at a mysterious antique shop tucked in among the trees that boasted a handmade sign reading "Jasper's Junk & Jewels." The shop was cluttered and strange, every corner filled with eclectic, forgotten treasures.

Wyatt was particularly interested in a pair of antlers resting on the floor, sniffing them with the reverence of a canine historian.

Emmy chatted with the shop owner, Jasper, an older man with a twitch in his eye and wearing a hat that looked as old as the shop itself. When she mentioned she was headed to Hope Springs, he nodded knowingly, turning serious. "That's a good place to disappear to," he said, winking. Or maybe it was just a twitch, she couldn't tell.

She wasn't sure what he meant, but it left her with an inexplicable sense of anticipation. Or was it dread?

"They don't always take kindly to outsiders though." He changed to a more serious tone and gave her a long stare, his eye straining not to twitch. She was a bit unnerved but couldn't explain why. "Watch yourself now, ya' hear." She suddenly had the urge to bolt out the door.

Jasper disappeared quickly through a dark doorway into a back room.

Wyatt, normally curious about everything, seemed on edge. His tail was low, and he occasionally let out a low growl as if sensing something Emmy could not. He suddenly moved beside her, his little body stuck to her leg. She blamed his actions on the storm's approach, but a prickle of creepiness settled over her, too.

She heard the rise of strident voices arguing in the back room. She couldn't make out what they were saying, but there was an edge to the shouting that made her pause.

She wandered over closer to the back room to try to overhear what was going on. She tried to look casual. She picked up a tarnished brass candlestick from a shelf next to the counter, turned it and gave it a skeptical once-over. "Who even buys these anymore?" she murmured, half-expecting the thing to double as a murder weapon in an Agatha Christie novel.

Wyatt tugged on his leash as he zeroed in, nose deep, on something extremely smelly. "Whatcha' got there Wyatt? Boot prints? Someone must have stepped in something interesting."

Wyatt dashed toward the back room door. "Wyatt!" Emmy yelled out, trying to hold on to his leash. Jasper suddenly appeared and moved quickly to block the doorway leading to the back, his shadowy figure framed by a flash of lightning.

"Sorry, ma'am. Staff-only area back there," he said, his tone sharper now.

She scooped Wyatt up, his legs paddling the air in protest as she carried him to keep him out of trouble.

As she turned toward the counter, something glimmered in her peripheral vision. Sitting on the dusty countertop, amidst chipped porcelain figurines and a questionable ceramic ashtray, was a beautiful black pearl necklace with a jeweled clasp nestled in a velvet box. High-quality pearls, the kind you'd see in a catalog titled 'Dreams You Can't Afford.'

Emmy's brow furrowed. "Ooo, how'd you end up in this circus of junk? Did Grandma's jewelry case take a wrong turn at the estate sale?"

Next to the pearls, a red leather phone case sat at an odd angle, the phone half-tucked in like it had given up trying to fit. There was a calculator open on the screen.

Emmy tilted her head, noting the scene: the pearls, the phone, the mess of knickknacks. Something was going on, but she decided it was none of her business. She made a mental snapshot, her data analyst instincts cataloging the mismatched details.

Wyatt let out a small bark, which startled her, and she quickly shushed him.

Jasper jerked to the front counter, his eye twitching more rapidly.

"You best be heading out. Now." he growled with a forced smile, his voice unusually tense. "Storm's coming in real bad."

The thought of the incoming storm derailed her musings. "C'mon, Wyatt, let's beat the rain before we end up swimming back to the car." She turned toward the door, only to see the downpour begin and hear the rumble of thunder overhead. "Or not," she muttered, stepping outside as a jagged crack of lightning split the sky.

From inside the shop, muffled shouting and cursing broke out, male voices rising in anger. Emmy froze, her stomach flipping. She glanced back, uncertain whether to stay and investigate or follow her better judgment and get far, far away from whatever small-town drama she'd inadvertently stumbled into.

"You need my help to sell it!" shouted one man. The other answered with a short inaudible shout that Emmy couldn't make out.

Thunder rolled again, and Wyatt gave a small, concerned whimper as the deluge soaked them both. Emmy sighed, shaking her head, *they sound like they're ready to kill each other.*

The rain came down in furious sheets, drenching her before she could even get Wyatt buckled into his perch.

As Emmy got into her car, the storm intensified, and her car shook with the force of the wind. Wyatt would not calm down. He was barking wildly, his front paws against the car window as he stared back at the shop. Emmy hesitated, her gut telling her she missed something. But as the storm raged, she slowly drove away.

Chapter 5: Pearls and Peril

The rain was coming down in biblical proportions as Emmy squinted through the windshield, the wipers doing their best but losing the battle. “This isn’t driving,” she muttered to Wyatt Burp, tucked snugly in his perch on the passenger seat. “This is survival.” A sharp crack of thunder made Wyatt give a startled yelp, and Emmy sighed. “Okay, okay, we’re pulling over.”

She scanned the roadside for a safe place to stop, her heart pounding from a mix of adrenaline and unease. The encounter at Jasper’s shop replayed in her mind like a scene from a crime noir film—the raised voices, the pearl necklace, Jasper’s twitchy demeanor. And then there was Wyatt’s odd behavior, sniffing at those muddy boot prints like they held some secret he couldn’t quite unravel.

A glowing neon sign pierced through the curtain of rain, its flashing letters spelling out “PINEY DINER” in cheerful red and blue. Emmy let out a sigh of relief and eased her car into the small parking lot, which was quickly becoming a swamp of muddy puddles deep enough to host fish. She grabbed Wyatt and sheltered him in his tote, his head poking out as he glared at her, thoroughly unimpressed with the weather.

Inside, the diner was crowded, the smell of damp clothes and hot coffee mingling with the faint scent of french fries. Emmy shuffled in, dripping like a broken umbrella, while Wyatt sulked in his soggy bag. Conversations hummed around her as she slid into an open booth. Wyatt hopped onto her lap and eyed a basket of leftover fries on the next table.

The diner was a scene straight out of a country postcard—checkered tablecloths, a chalkboard menu boasting “Granny’s Best Pie So Good It’ll Make You Cry.” And a waitress in a bright pink uniform that matched her lipstick, giving her the appearance of a 1950s time traveler. Her name tag read “Marge.”

The place was packed with locals who'd apparently had the same idea to escape the storm. The air buzzed with chatter, forks clinking against plates, and the occasional loud guffaw.

The locals were a study in small-town archetypes: a gray-haired man in overalls chewing on a toothpick, the waitress with a beehive hairdo pouring coffee like she was dispensing wisdom, and a group of chatty women in rain-slickers who seemed to know everybody's business.

"I swear, if the power goes out, my freezer's gonna melt, and I'm gonna lose all those casseroles I made last month," one woman fretted, her glasses fogged up from the rain.

"Well, if it does, you can always bring 'em here," the waitress quipped. "We'll have a casserole potluck and charge folks for a plate. We'll call it Flood Feast." The room chuckled, but the atmosphere shifted as the lights flickered ominously. Emmy glanced around, wishing for a cup of coffee but unwilling to draw any attention.

The chatter halted when the bright flashing lights of a sheriff's car lit up the rain-soaked diner windows. Everyone leaned over to peer outside as the car slowed and stopped a block away.

"Now what in the name of fried okra's goin' on over there?" asked the man in overalls, his toothpick wobbling as he spoke.

"It's Jasper's place, ain't it?" another chimed in. "Probably someone complaining he overcharged 'em for a fake antique again."

"Or maybe his ol' taxidermy bear fell over and scared the pants off someone," the beehive waitress added.

The room erupted into speculative chatter. Everyone had a theory.

"No, I bet it's his ornery ex-wife. She's still on the warpath with him."

"Could be he got in another tussle with Clint."

"You mean his cousin? Over what?"

"Over everything! Land, women, money."

The last comment made Emmy freeze. Her fingers tightened around Wyatt as she replayed in her mind the argument she'd overheard in Jasper's shop. Thunder boomed again, making the windows rattle, and Emmy felt a chill unrelated to the rain.

"Wait, wait," someone interrupted, leaning forward conspiratorially while talking on their cell phone. "My sister's cousin-in-law is married to the deputy radio dispatcher—she says it's a murder. Right there in Jasper's shop."

Gasps rippled through the room.

"A murder?" the beehive waitress whispered dramatically, her coffee pot trembling slightly in her hand.

Emmy's blood ran cold. She pieced together that someone was killed not long after she left Jasper's shop.

Emmy's stomach dropped as her mind connected the dots: the shouting, the pearls, Jasper's agitation. Her face must have betrayed her realization, because a woman at the counter squinted at her and asked, "Hey, you okay, honey? You look like you just saw the ghost of Granny Thorne."

Wyatt let out a low whine, as if he too sensed the weight of what Emmy now understood. She forced a tight smile, gripping the edge of the table to steady herself. "Fine," she croaked. "Just fine."

Emmy's mind was racing. She had been at Jasper's just as the storm hit. She'd heard the voices, seen his agitation. And now someone was dead.

Chapter 6: The Caterpillar

One thing was clear: this wasn't just a random crime. There was something deeper here, something tangled in the roots of this strange, stormy place.

Wyatt burrowed deep into his tote bag and Emmy gave him a reassuring pat. "Looks like we've got a mystery on our hands, buddy," she whispered.

Emmy sat in silence in the diner as the storm was holding. As she listened to the locals spin wild theories, the door swung open with a gust of wind and rain. Two deputies strode in. They were dripping wet, their hats pulled low against the storm. The room got very quiet as their boots clomped across the floor straight toward Emmy's booth. Wyatt let out a small, inquisitive bark.

"Miss," one of the officers looked straight at Emmy, as he pulled out a notepad. "Are you the owner of that electric car with the California license plates parked out front?"

"What's going on?" someone whispered. A murmur of confusion spread through the diner, punctuated by nervous glances.

Emmy felt the room begin to tilt. She instinctively reached for Wyatt, her fingers curling around his warm body as if he could shield her from what was coming.

"Yes, that's me. I'm the owner," Emmy nodded slowly.

"Would you tell us who you are and what you're doing in Piney County?"

Emmy nodded again, trying to think about how she should introduce herself to this room full of strangers. "I'm Emmy Forester. I'm on my way to Hope Springs to claim an inheritance. The Oddity Shop. From my Aunt Gertie. Forester. My Aunt Gertie Forester."

Emmy realized she was talking in fragments, but she hoped she made enough sense for the deputies to understand who she was.

At the mention of the Forester name, the locals groaned and looked at each other with knowing looks.

The other officer, a wiry man with a bushy mustache, squinted at her like he was trying to read her thoughts. “We got a report that someone saw your car at Jasper’s Junk & Jewels. Jasper’s dead. And witnesses saw your car at the shop just as the storm hit.”

Gasps erupted from the crowd again. The gray-haired man’s toothpick stopped moving. The waitress stopped her coffee pouring midstream. Mouths were agape.

Time seemed to stand still. The crowd seemed to have grown. Emmy noticed people she hadn’t seen at first. There was an emergency worker in a bright reflective vest, a postman, and a young woman in a red hoodie staring straight ahead with a shocked look on her face. Everyone looked cold and unfriendly now.

Dead. The word echoed in Emmy’s mind, an icy, unyielding truth that sent a shiver down her spine. She opened her mouth to protest, to explain, but the words wouldn’t come.

Wyatt growled softly, as if sensing her distress. Emmy clutched him tighter, drawing strength from his small, warm presence. “I—I was there,” she stammered. “But I didn’t—”

“Ma’am,” the mustachioed deputy interrupted, his expression unreadable.

As he spoke his fuzzy mustache moved in the air, disconnected, as if it were a squirming caterpillar. Emmy watched transfixed.

“Please come with us.”

Emmy suddenly felt lightheaded. “I didn’t—Ugh, I need to sit down.”

“You already are,” the waitress pointed out helpfully, setting a fresh cup of hot coffee in front of Emmy.

Emmy could feel a leaden web of suspicion holding her down. “Look officers, I didn’t kill anyone. But I did hear raised voices in the back room, and when the owner told me to get out, I left. That’s it.”

The cops exchanged a skeptical glance but seemed to soften slightly. “We need you to come to the station to give a statement.”

Emmy put Wyatt in his tote and rose unsteadily to go with the deputies. As she followed them out, the door jingled cheerfully, completely at odds with her mood.

Outside, the storm had stopped and the sun had suddenly started to shine brightly, glaring off the wet pavement and puddles. Emmy felt even more disoriented.

Everything outside was fresh and colorful. She felt like Dorothy landing over the rainbow. She could even see a part of a rainbow peeking between the treetops. Everything sparkled in a different light. There was a clean earthy scent of a storm-washed world. Every sound was sharper.

“Uh, Sirs, may I drive my own car to the station instead of riding in yours?” Emmy felt awkward, unsure of how to address law enforcement officers.

The deputies exchanged a look and nodded in agreement. “Okay, follow us to the station.”

The storm seemed like a fever dream now, except for the lingering knot in her stomach. Jasper’s twitching eye, the arguing voices in the back room, the brass candlestick—everything played on a loop in her mind like a bad crime drama with no commercial breaks. It was all in crisp vivid detail: the muddy boot prints, the glint of the pearl necklace on the counter. Every moment seemed laden with meaning now, becoming clues she hadn’t recognized at the time. She glanced down at Wyatt, his small head resting but his eyes still watching her. “We’re in it now, buddy,” she whispered.

When they reached the station, it looked like something out of a small-town brochure. A squat brick building with peeling paint, a flagpole out front, and a short row of police cruisers lined up like ducks in a pond.

Emmy walked into the station with Wyatt tucked in his tote. She was nervous but knew she didn’t have anything to worry about really. *You’re okay, Emmy*, she repeated to herself more than once.

Inside, the air was thick with the smell of stale coffee, old paper, and leather holsters. A fan whirled lazily in the corner, doing little to combat the humidity still hanging in the air.

"Have a seat, Ms. Forester," the younger deputy said, gesturing to a hard plastic chair. She sat and let Wyatt curl up in her lap, his warm weight grounding her as she tried to process the whirlwind of the last hour.

She felt everyone in the station look at her with suspicion. That is, until Sergeant Glinda came in to question her.

If the storm had left Emmy disoriented, Sergeant Glinda brought her back to earth with the force of a sunbeam. She was a sturdy woman in her late 40s, with sharp eyes that seemed to take in everything at once. Her uniform was crisp, and her demeanor said she didn't have time for nonsense.

"Ms. Forester," she said, her voice a perfect blend of authority and calm. "I understand you've had quite the day. Let's hear it from the top."

Under Glinda's steady gaze, Emmy recounted everything—how she looked at the merchandise, picked up the candlestick, Jasper's strange reaction to her, the voices in the back room, the necklace, the storm, and finally, her refuge at the diner.

"The necklace? Did you touch it?"

"No," Emmy said quickly. "I noticed it, but I didn't touch it. I barely even looked at it."

When Emmy finished, Glinda leaned back in her chair, tapping a pen thoughtfully against her clipboard. "Sounds like you were in the wrong place at the wrong time," she said finally. "They've taken the candlestick as evidence in Jasper's murder. And you say they will find your fingerprints on it?"

Emmy realized the gravity of that statement.

"Yes. Yes, I did pick it up to look at it. But Jasper was in the back room arguing with someone when I was holding it."

"Yes, I understand," the Sergeant said calmly. "We are bringing someone else in for questioning, and we believe that person has a motive." And then Sergeant Glinda smiled at Emmy—a smile so gentle and sweet it reminded Emmy of her mother's smile, one she hadn't seen in so long.

Before Glinda could add anything more, the station's front door banged open. A deputy walked in, escorting a skinny man with a sour expression and a noticeable scowl. The man's clothes were rumpled, and he looked like he'd been hauled out of somewhere mid-argument.

"Clint Thorne," the deputy announced, steering him toward the holding area. "Here for questioning."

Before Emmy could grab him, Wyatt Burp sniffed the air and took off, his little legs carrying him straight toward the doorway.

"Wyatt!" Emmy yelled, scrambling to follow. But her dachshund had already zeroed in on the boots of the man being led into the station by the officer. Wyatt sniffed eagerly at Clint's muck-caked boots, then barked twice, his tail wagging furiously as his nose clung to the ground.

Emmy's mind flashed back to Jasper's Shop, to the trail of muddy boot prints Wyatt had been so interested in earlier. Her heart skipped a beat.

"What's with the dog?" Clint grumbled, shifting uncomfortably as Wyatt continued his sniffing investigation.

Sergeant Glinda, who had stepped closer to observe the dog, paused. "That your dog's normal behavior?" she asked Emmy, raising an eyebrow.

"No," Emmy answered, her gaze drifting upward from the floor—and then she saw it. Hanging from Clint's belt was the unmistakable red leather phone holder she'd seen on the counter at Jasper's shop, right next to the pearl necklace, just before she left.

Her stomach tightened. "Sergeant," Emmy whispered calling the officer aside. Her voice trembled slightly but gained strength as she pointed. "That phone holder he's got clipped to his belt—it was at Jasper's shop earlier. It's the one I saw on the counter, by the pearls."

Glinda's eyes narrowed as she turned to Clint. "Okay, Thorne. You know why you're here, right?"

Clint scoffed, but his face reddened. “I didn’t kill anybody, if that’s what you’re thinking!” he snapped. “I just—look, I was there, but—” He clamped his mouth shut, his jaw tightening.

Emmy tapped Sergeant Glinda’s shoulder. “And those boot prints,” Emmy spoke in a low tone. “They match the ones Wyatt was sniffing at Jasper’s. He found a trail of muddy prints leading to the back room. You’ll probably still find the boot prints on the floor at Jasper’s shop.”

Glinda folded her arms, her sharp gaze cutting between Clint and Emmy. “Well, well,” she said, her voice calm but laced with authority. “Looks like we’ve got some things to clear up here, don’t we, Thorne?”

Wyatt let out a triumphant yip, and Emmy couldn’t help but feel a strange mix of pride and anxiety. She hadn’t set out to become the star suspect and star witness in a murder investigation, but here she was, with her dachshund playing Sherlock Holmes.

As Clint was led away for further questioning, Emmy sat back down into her chair, clutching Wyatt like a lifeline.

But Clint Thorne was not finished with Emmy.

"You'll be sorry for this," he shouted over his shoulder. "We'll see to it. We'll be watchin' every move you make. You won't see us, but we'll be watchin' you."

We? Who is this we he's talking about? Emmy felt frazzled again. But she felt safer since Clint was now in custody.

“Good work, Wyatt,” Emmy murmured, scratching his ears. “But let’s try not to make a habit of this, okay?”

"So...I can go?" Emmy asked, trying to keep the hope out of her voice.

Glinda nodded. "I don't see any reason to hold you. You're free to go, Ms. Forester. But if you think of anything else—anything at all—you let me know. Stay within reach by cell phone."

"Yes. Yes, I will. Thank you, Sergeant." Emily felt so relieved.

"By the way, Ms. Forester," Sergeant Glinda stated warmly, "I changed my last name when I got married. I was born a Forester and will always remain a Forester. Welcome to Piney County."

Emmy's mouth dropped. She tried to speak but could not find any words to express what she was feeling. Here she was face-to-face with a true blood relative. Something she had not experienced in her life since her Mama had passed. She tried to come up with something clever to say.

"Well, I feel like I should say something profound, Sergeant, like, 'Well, butter my biscuit I'm awful glad to meet you.'" Emmy stopped to smile, but she felt a little bit corny.

"Well," Sergeant Glinda responded with bright eyes... "if I weren't in uniform, I'd give you a big welcome hug." Instead, Sergeant Glinda gave Emmy her personal cell phone number, and they shook hands with promises of staying in touch.

As she walked out of the station, Wyatt trotting at her side, Emmy felt an odd mix of relief and discomfort. She was free for the moment, yes—but what now? Jasper's death, the lingering suspicions, the unsettling realization that she was seen as an outsider, a killer even, and now Clint Thorne's threats against her—it all clung to her like the humidity in the air.

Once in the car Emmy put her head back and forced herself to relax as she tried to coax the distressing thoughts from her mind. With her eyes closed she mentally played the scenes from earlier in the day, over and over. She felt something was still missing.

What am I missing?

She began to visualize the storm, the shop, the voices, the boot prints. *If Clint didn't kill Jasper, who did? Was someone else lurking around the shop?*

Then Emmy bolted upright in her seat as a thought came to her. *The car! The perimeter scan mode on the car!*

Chapter 7: A Flash of Discovery

With her heart pounding as she looked at the car's app on her phone, Emmy could see a notification that the perimeter scan mode had in fact been activated, turning on the outer cameras. This mode was one of the safety features she loved about her new high-tech electric vehicle. But she had been so distracted by events that she hadn't seen or heard the notification.

She extracted the USB drive from the console of the car, grabbed her laptop from its case, plugged the drive into the port on the laptop and accessed the video footage. It was like a surreal time lapse video.

First, she could see someone approach her car from the rear, close enough to activate the rear camera. But the person crouched down. With the dark storm clouds and a dark hood pulled low, it was difficult to make out who it was. Then as the person moved up the side of the car, trying to hide as they cased the shop, a flash of lightning illuminated their face.

"Aha, we got you!" Emmy froze the video and took a screen shot. She could not contain her excitement.

Wyatt Burp lay curled on his perch on the passenger seat now, his snout twitching as if even he sensed her jubilation. But he watched her with sleepy eyes, too tired to move.

She felt a pang of discomfort watching the past unfold, knowing what she knew now.

Then realization spread through Emmy's mind. "It's her," she whispered, a chill running down her spine. Emmy recognized the young woman. *She's the one who sat in the diner as the deputies were questioning me!*

This person in a dark red hoodie that Emmy saw on her car's video footage had been sitting in a nearby booth listening to every word the deputies said. Emmy thought the young woman was just someone who was curious, a looky-loo. But now she realized that woman was likely the killer making sure someone else was taking the fall for the crime.

Emmy's stomach churned. How had she missed it? The young woman apparently slipped in and out of the diner unnoticed in the chaos of the storm and gossip and excitement.

The storm had masked so much that day, but now the pieces were starting to fall into place. Someone had wanted the pearl necklace badly enough to kill for it, and they'd used the storm as cover. But why? And what was this woman's connection to Jasper—and the pearls?

Wyatt let out a small groan as he stretched, and Emmy glanced over at him with a faint smile. "You're right, Wyatt," she said. "This is all so strange. Good work today, Detective Burp," she said softly.

Emmy took a screenshot of the still frame from the video. She texted it to Sergeant Glinda's work cell phone number and got an immediate response. The sergeant asked for the USB thumb drive to make a copy for their report.

Since Emmy was still in the parking lot of the substation, she told the sergeant she would be right in to hand it over. Sergeant Glinda took the USB drive to their video technician to make a copy and soon returned the drive to Emmy.

"This is great evidence, Emmy. It cuts a lot of time off our investigation. Thanks for finding it and sharing it with us. We'll take it from here."

Emmy felt thankful she could make a difference in a murder investigation, but she still needed to find out who that woman on the video was and why she was lurking around Jasper's when a murder was committed. *Was she the murderer?* Emmy needed to know.

Returning to her car, Emmy noticed a piece of paper stuck onto her windshield under the wiper blade. She unfolded the paper and read the scrawled message: ‘If you don’t keep your mouth shut, I’ll shut you up for good. And your little mutt too.’

A death threat. *Great. Now we’re getting a death threat.* Emmy started to hyperventilate. She sat in her car, held Wyatt tightly, and tried deep breathing for a couple of minutes to calm herself. Soon, with Wyatt snuggled under her chin, she felt her heartbeat quiet down, but her brain was still screaming. She realized she needed to steady her nerves.

“They called you a mutt, Wyatt!” Wyatt ruffed indignantly. She took a deep breath, grimacing as the enormity of everything sank in. This time there was no video evidence of the culprit leaving the death threat note on her car since Emmy had taken the thumb drive out to let the deputies make a copy of the video.

“Who would want to snuff us out, Wyatt? Was it an accomplice of Clint Thorne or the woman in the red hoodie?” It didn’t make sense to her or to Wyatt either as he turned his cute puppy head side to side trying to understand her question.

She opened her laptop again to the still shot of the woman from the car video. “Now to find out who you are,” Emmy whispered to the frozen image on the screen. She scrolled through the timestamps, isolating the exact moment the woman came into view.

Emmy had used Open Source Intelligence for work plenty of times but now it was personal. Social media searches, facial recognition, forums. “Enhance, enhance...” Emmy muttered, clicking through her video editor. “Why does Hollywood make this look easy?”

She exported the isolated clip to a forensic video enhancement tool. The program allowed her to stabilize the footage, adjust the brightness, and sharpen the edges.

Wyatt sniffed the screen and tilted his head.

“I know,” she said. “Still looks like Bigfoot in a poncho. But wait—there’s more.”

Using a still frame of the woman’s face she uploaded the image to a facial recognition app. It was one of the more robust ones she knew of, designed to match faces against public social media profiles and publicly accessible databases.

“Let’s see if she’s Insta-famous,” Emmy muttered, tapping her fingers on the laptop as the program churned through its search.

Wyatt barked softly, his tail wagging like he knew something big was about to happen.

The app returned a series of possible matches, most of which were dead ends—stock photos, unrelated profiles, and one image of a mannequin that briefly made Emmy question her sanity.

But then...

“Bingo.” Emmy’s voice was barely above a whisper as she clicked on a profile that matched the woman’s features with 75% accuracy. The name read *Lila Anders*, and the profile picture showed the same piercing eyes and sharp cheekbones, this time with a bright smile.

“Gotcha,” Emmy said, glancing at Wyatt. He wagged his tail enthusiastically, as if he’d been the one to crack the case.

Emmy pulled up Lila’s social media accounts and scrolled through her public posts. It didn’t take long to notice a pattern: the photos alternated between selfies in scenic spots and pictures of antique jewelry and trinkets—things that looked suspiciously like Jasper’s shop inventory.

“Okay, this just got weird,” Emmy murmured, her eyes narrowing. “What’s your connection to this place, Lila?”

Using an open-source tool, Emmy cross-referenced Lila’s posts with metadata—timestamps, geotags, and hashtags. One geotagged post caught her attention: it included GPS coordinates and the hashtag #PineyCounty. The photo showed Lila holding a black pearl necklace with the caption: “Every piece has a story.”

Wyatt rumbled softly, his nose wiggling.

“Right? It’s creepy,” Emmy said. “What story are we talking about, Lila?”

Emmy ran Lila’s name through public records using a background-check site. A few results popped up, including an address in a neighboring town and an archived article from a small newspaper.

“Wyatt,” Emmy said, her voice low. “Looks like we found her.”

Wyatt growled, his tail stiff.

Emmy’s fingers hovered over her keyboard. The pieces were falling into place, but they only raised more questions. Why was Lila near Jasper’s shop in the middle of a storm? What had drawn her there in the first place? And, most chillingly, why had she killed Jasper?

Emmy saved everything—video, enhanced images, social media profiles, and the article—to a secure folder. She opened her email and hesitated, debating who to loop in. The local sheriff’s department would be her logical first step, but Emmy couldn’t shake the feeling that she needed more evidence before she took it to them.

Wyatt wagged his tail smugly, his expression making it clear that he considered himself the real brains of the operation. “I think you bring the cuteness factor to this partnership, buddy.”

Emmy made notes about places where Lila posted selfies and hashtags. She decided to confront Lila at “Noah’s Arc Arcade and Alley,” the business Lila shared online with the hashtag #NAAA as her place of employment, an aged arcade and bowling alley.

Emmy left Wyatt in the car sprawled on his perch in the front seat, with the dog entertainment system playing smooth jazz and air conditioning set at his favorite temperature. “Stay here, buddy,” Emmy murmured, scratching behind his ears. “I’ll be right back.”

On her phone she pulled up the screenshot image of Lila from the video. She also clicked on the record button. She felt like one of those undercover investigative journalists whose clips she binge watched online.

She walked cautiously into the dark, stuffy old arcade which hadn’t seen an update in 40 years. It smelled of old carpet and older cigarette smoke. She spotted Lila instantly in the dim lighting. There were no customers around.

Emmy hesitated for a moment, her pulse quickening. What was the right approach? She couldn't exactly accuse the woman outright. Instead, she took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, and walked over to the booth.

"Excuse me," Emmy said, her voice steady despite the adrenaline coursing through her veins. Lila looked up, her piercing eyes narrowing slightly as she sized Emmy up. "You're Lila Anders, right?"

Lila's expression didn't change. "Who's asking?" Her voice was calm, but there was an edge to it—a guardedness that made Emmy's nerves prickle.

"Emmy Forester," she said, sliding into the seat across from Lila before the woman could protest. "I think you know who I am. And I think you and I need to have a little chat."

Lila's eyes flicked to the door, then back to Emmy. "About what?"

Emmy pulled out the screenshot on her phone and set it on the table between them. "About this," she said, her tone firm. "You were at Jasper's shop the night he was killed. I have you on video."

For a moment, Lila didn't move. Her eyes darted to the image, then back to Emmy, her expression unreadable. Finally, she leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms. "So what if I was?" she said, her voice cool. "Doesn't mean I killed him."

"Then why were you there?" Emmy asked, keeping her gaze locked on Lila. "Because from where I'm sitting, it looks an awful lot like you were casing the place."

Lila's jaw tightened, and for a moment, Emmy thought she might get up and leave. Instead, Lila leaned forward, her voice dropping to a near whisper. "You really want to know why I was there?"

Emmy nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. "Yes. I do."

Lila glanced around the arcade, her eyes scanning the room as if checking for eavesdroppers. Then she leaned in even closer, her voice so quiet Emmy had to strain to hear.

"Jasper had something that didn't belong to him," Lila said. "And I was there to take it back."

Emmy's stomach churned. "The pearl necklace?" she guessed.

Lila's eyes flashed with something that looked like surprise. "How do you know about that?"

"Lucky guess," Emmy said, though her mind was racing. "Why didn't it belong to him?"

Lila hesitated, and for the first time, Emmy saw a crack in her armor. "Because it was my grandmother's," she said finally. "And Jasper stole it."

Emmy's breath caught. "Are you saying Jasper was a thief?"

Lila's lips pressed into a thin line. "Everybody knows he wasn't a saint."

Before Emmy could respond, Lila slid out of the booth, her movements quick and fluid. "Good luck, Ms. Forester," she said, her tone laced with irony. "You're going to need it."

And with that, she was gone, leaving Emmy sitting alone in the booth with more questions than answers.

Chapter 8: Two Questions

When Emmy returned to her car, Wyatt gave a long lazy stretch but was not ready to wake up. “Go ahead, finish your nap. There’s nothin’ worth staying awake for yet.”

She decided to rewatch the perimeter scan video to see if she could catch any other visual clues she might have missed. Most of the video was dark due to the pouring rain. But near the end of the video, in the last few seconds, the silhouette of Lila came into view again near the rear of the car. Emmy leaned closer, her heart pounding. For just a moment, cones of light from car headlights swept across the parking lot. Lila appeared frozen in the darkness, like a deer in...well, headlights.

Lila bolted out of frame, disappearing into the shadows just as the mysterious car stopped. “Whoa, plot twist!” Emmy whispered, eyes widening. The camera didn’t catch the driver or the vehicle’s license plate—just a hazy glimpse of the car itself through the rain. Then the camera stopped recording.

Emmy stared at the screen, her mind racing. “Okay, Wyatt. Let’s break this down. One creepy suspect creeping—that’s Lila. And now, one mystery car pulling in just as things get interesting. But who’s in that car?”

Wyatt sat up, tilting his head from side to side, his ears flopping with exaggerated curiosity.

“I know, right? Someone else showed up! And if they’re not guilty of murder, they’re at least guilty of the worst parking timing ever.” Emmy rubbed her temples. “We’ve got more suspects than a dog’s got fleas!” Wyatt barked as if he were insulted—or maybe just hungry. Emmy wasn’t sure.

Emmy clicked the laptop shut and started the car. “I need coffee and food too. Detective work is exhausting.”

Emmy pulled into the now familiar Piney Diner. After she fed Wyatt from a travel bowl and gave him a little drink of water, he was good to go for a few more hours of detective work. She tucked him in his snuggly tote, and they went inside the near-empty diner. Emmy ordered a burger with fries and while she was waiting, Lila Anders walked in. Emmy called out to her and invited her over.

“I’ll buy you something to eat if you answer two questions for me.”

Lila nodded her head and sat down.

“One: did you kill Jasper?”

Lila shook her head no.

“Two: did you take the necklace?”

Lila shook her head no again.

“Okay. Order anything you want—it’s on me.”

The two of them sat in silence as they ate. Wyatt, who already had a full tummy, slept quietly in his tote bed.

Emmy broke the silence. “I know you saw who killed Jasper. I know you’re afraid of them or you’re trying to protect them. And I know they have your necklace.”

Lila sighed and her body went limp like she was releasing a heavy weight.

“I’m not your enemy here, Lila,” Emmy looked straight in Lila’s eyes, which began to flood with tears.

Lila began to cry softly. “I just wanted to get my grandmother’s necklace back.”

“I know. It’s rightfully yours. But whoever has it now doesn’t have the right to it. It’s yours. Don’t you want to get it back from them?”

Lila let her head hang. She whispered softly, “She has a right to it.”

Emmy’s mind raced. *Lila wanted to get her grandmother’s necklace back. It was her family heirloom. Who else had a right to it? Who else would have a motive to kill for that necklace?*

Emmy remembered the chatter in the diner right after Jasper’s murder was discovered, “I bet it’s his ornery ex-wife. She’s still on the warpath with him.”

But who is the ex-wife? Someone related to Lila?

Emmy mentally clicked through Lila's social media posts in her memory. There had been several posts with Lila and her "Mamma"—several happy smiling faces on Mother's Day and other holidays.

Emmy spoke slowly, piecing everything together aloud.

"So, whoever took the necklace must have grabbed the candlestick off the counter for a weapon." Emmy noticed Lila nod the slightest of nods, so she continued in her summation. "It was heavy, easy to reach. And when Jasper wouldn't give her the necklace, she... lost control." Another almost imperceptible nod from Lila.

"What happened after I pulled away in my car, Lila? Did you see her argue with Jasper?"

Lila's lips trembled. "She was so angry. She just wanted her necklace back. That's all."

Emmy leaned forward, her voice soft but insistent. "And Jasper didn't give it to her, did he?"

Lila hesitated, then shook her head. "No. They started shouting. I was outside, by the door, and I heard her yelling about how he'd taken everything from her. She said... she said he didn't deserve to keep anything after their divorce."

Emmy's pulse quickened. She was beginning to understand the scenario and the players. "And then?"

Lila looked away. "There were sounds like they were fighting. Then there was this... crash. And I knew something bad had happened. When I went inside, Jasper was lying there. Mom was gone. And the necklace—it wasn't in the shop anymore."

Emmy took a deep breath as the realization washed over her. Now she knew what she had to do.

Chapter 9: Formula For A Murder

The pieces of the puzzle lay scattered in her mind, fragments of conversations, observations, and emotions. The pearl necklace. The argument. The candlestick. The storm. The headlights. The hatred.

She replayed Lila's words in her head: "She has a right to it."

It all began to click in Emmy's mind. *Clint and Jasper's argument had been about the necklace, but Clint had left the shop still breathing fire, not blood.*

Lila had gone to the shop to reclaim the necklace from Jasper, who had taken it when he divorced Lila's mother.

Jasper was Lila's stepfather!

The headlights...that was the killer arriving. Lila's skittish behavior outside wasn't that of a murderer; it was someone avoiding confrontation—or worse, witnessing something she didn't want to admit.

Then there was the necklace itself. Emmy leaned back, recalling the research she'd done. The heirloom had once belonged to Lila's grandmother, passed down to her daughter Margaret who was Lila's mother—and Jasper's ex-wife. That kind of sentimental value wasn't something a woman like Margaret would let go of easily.

Margaret went to Jasper's to confront him; Emmy pondered the implications of the thought as she pieced it all together. Margaret saw the necklace in his shop and lost her temper. And if Jasper refused to give it back...

She glanced at Wyatt, who opened one sleepy eye. "It was her, Wyatt. Margaret killed Jasper. She clobbered him with that candlestick in the heat of the moment and took back her necklace."

Emmy's mind was throbbing. *Jasper's death wasn't about money or pride—it was personal. Jasper had taken the necklace, a piece of her family's history, and put it on*

display like any other trinket. To Margaret, that was the ultimate insult. Margaret had clearly come to the shop with the intent to confront Jasper.

Lila's account of that night painted a clear picture: Margaret's rage had boiled over, and in a moment of fury, she'd grabbed the nearest weapon—the brass candlestick.”

“And our death threat on the car?” Emmy continued explaining to Wyatt. “That was Lila, trying to scare us off before we uncovered the truth. She didn’t want us poking around because she knew it would lead back to her mother.”

She paused and looked down at Wyatt, who was now fully awake and watching her curiously as she shared all the clues with him. “We’ve got her, Wyatt. Margaret thought she was taking back what was rightfully hers, but she’s not getting away with murder. Not on our watch.” Wyatt gave a little burp.

Emmy texted Lila and asked her to bring her mother to the Sheriff’s Station to talk to Sergeant Glinda. She assured Lila that the sergeant was a kind person who would handle the situation with care and there would not be a public spectacle of Margaret being arrested.

When Emmy arrived at the station for the meeting, she had a flashback to being there under unpleasant circumstances. “This could have turned out so differently for us Wyatt,” she deadpanned.

With a determined nod, Emmy grabbed her bag and her dog, ready to take her realization to Sergeant Glinda.

Margaret might have acted in the heat of passion, but Jasper’s life—and the truth—demanded justice.

Chapter 10: The Revelation at the Station

The small conference room at the sheriff's station was filled with tension, the overhead fluorescents casting a harsh gray light over the faces of the assembled.

Sergeant Glinda leaned against the wall, arms crossed, her expression skeptical. Clint, still handcuffed, sat slouched in a chair, scowling. Margaret, Jasper's ex-wife, sat ramrod straight, her face a careful mask. Lila sat beside her mother, avoiding eye contact with everyone.

At the head of the table, Emmy stood; Wyatt Burp looked out face forward from her cross-body bag, his wide brown eyes blinking occasionally.

Emmy cleared her throat dramatically, channeling her best *Hercule Poirot* style. Wyatt punctuated Emmy's statements with cute little dog expressions, undercutting Emmy's serious demeanor.

"Thank you all for being here," she began, clasping her hands behind her back and pacing slowly. Wyatt Burp stared at Clint with suspicion.

"I believe it's time to unravel this tangled web and reveal who actually killed Jasper."

Glinda sighed. "Forester, we already know Clint did it. He had motive, opportunity, and—"

"Sergeant," Emmy interrupted, holding up a hand. "Please, allow me to present the facts. Step by step."

Step 1: The Argument

"Let's begin with what we all know," Emmy said, addressing Clint. "You argued with Jasper inside the shop. I overheard it myself. You were furious because Jasper was going to sell the black pearl necklace and you wanted a bigger cut of the money."

Clint's scowl deepened, but he nodded. "That's right. The guy was a real greedy piece of work."

Wyatt let out a low growl at Clint.

"But here's what you didn't do," Emmy continued. "You didn't kill him. When I left the shop, you were still arguing. Jasper was very much alive."

Glinda frowned. "So, you're saying Clint didn't do it. Who did?"

Step 2: The Lurker

Emmy's eyes shifted to Lila. "That's where you come in, Lila. My car's perimeter cameras caught you lurking near my car that night. Lightning illuminated your face. But the very end of the footage showed you retreating as another car pulled into the lot."

Lila's eyes widened, but she said nothing.

"At first, I thought you, the stepdaughter, might be the killer. It definitely looked like you could be the killer. After all, you were acting suspiciously. And you were there as I left. You were also there as Clint left. You saw him leave."

Glinda put her hands on her hips, taking in all the new information.

Emmy turned her gaze to Margaret Anders. "Then I realized it wasn't Lila who had the strongest motive. It was you, Margaret."

Step 3: The Motive

"You've hated Jasper for years. He took that necklace, a family heirloom, when you separated. That necklace represented everything he stole from you—your dignity, your family's trust. When you learned he still had it at the shop, you couldn't resist confronting him."

Margaret's lips pressed tight. She said nothing.

"You arrived at Jasper's shop as I was leaving," Emmy continued. "You arrived as Clint stormed out. That left you alone with Jasper. Lila, listening unseen, heard the two of you begin to fight. Things escalated. You picked up the brass candlestick from the shelf—the nearest weapon—and struck him."

Lila glanced at her mother, her face pale. Margaret still didn't speak, but her fingers tightened into fists.

"Lila didn't know what to do," Emmy said. "She froze, too terrified to intervene."

Step 4: The Evidence

Emmy continued, "The necklace, Sergeant. It wasn't with Jasper's inventory when you searched the shop, was it?"

Glinda's eyes narrowed. "No. We assumed Clint had taken it. But we haven't been able to recover it yet."

"But he didn't take it," Emmy said, her gaze locking on Margaret. "You did. After you killed Jasper, you took the necklace and left, hoping to cover your tracks. But you didn't account for my car's cameras or your daughter's presence."

Margaret shot to her feet. "This is nonsense! You can't prove any of it!"

Emmy smiled calmly. "Can't I? Between the footage of Lila, the missing necklace, and the candlestick bearing your fingerprints, I'd say the evidence is overwhelming."

Glinda stepped forward, her voice firm. "Margaret, you're under arrest for the murder of Jasper Thorne."

Margaret's defiance crumbled as Glinda took one hand and placed it in handcuffs. "You haven't heard my side of the story yet! He deserved it," she spat. "That man ruined my life."

Glinda continued: "Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law."

“He tried to kill me,” Margaret blurted out with a growl. “When I grabbed at the necklace, Jasper grabbed my throat and he wouldn’t let go.”

Margaret began to cry as she pulled her shirt down from her neck with her free hand. “See! See where he grabbed me!”

Sure enough, Margaret had deep red and purple finger grip marks around her throat where Jasper had tried to strangle her. Everyone in the room was momentarily at a loss for words. But Sergeant Glinda continued on with the protocol for the arrest of Margaret.

“Our detectives will take your statement in a few minutes. And Thorne, you can go now.”

As Clint Thorne was uncuffed and turned to go, he gave everyone a departing dirty look, even Wyatt whose body stiffened in response.

Emmy asked Clint who he meant when he threatened her earlier; “Who is the ‘we’ you said would be watching me?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know—just watch out that’s all I gotta say.”

Emmy was creeped out by Clint in a way she had never experienced before, and she understood this would not be the last she saw of him.

As Margaret was led away, Emmy turned to Lila, who sat trembling in her seat. “It looks like this will be a self-defense case now. For what it’s worth,” Emmy said gently, “I don’t think you’re to blame for any of this. And you might want to put that necklace in a safe deposit box at the bank.”

Lila nodded, tears streaming down her face. “I just wanted to protect her.”

Wyatt let out a soft bark, breaking the tension. Emmy glanced down at him and smirked.

“Okay, yes, I’m going to give you a treat after all this stress.”

Sergeant Glinda paused at the door, “You’ve got a knack for this, Forester. But don’t make it a habit of solving my cases, alright?”

Emmy grinned. “No promises, Sergeant. Piney County has a way of keeping things... interesting.”

Emmy glanced at Lila. “For the record, next time you want to leave a death threat note, maybe try something less terrifying. Like a Post-it note.”

Lila managed a weak laugh. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter 11: Epilogue: Hope Springs Eternal

The road into Hope Springs was as twisted and unpredictable as Emmy's new life. She couldn't shake the feeling that she'd just taken a step back in time. She half expected to see her mother as a child, skipping down the side of the road, maybe on her way to school—or maybe on the way to The Oddity Shop. There was something distinctly... nostalgic about the place.

Ancient trees leaned over the road like they were gossiping about her arrival, probably something along the lines of, "Here comes another Forester, back to stick her nose where it doesn't belong."

She finally saw a sign that made her heart skip a beat: "Welcome to Hope Springs." But one end had fallen from its hook so it just flopped in the breeze. And the letters were faded and some were missing so it said:

"We come to Hope Springs."

Emmy chuckled. No one had bothered to fix it in years. It was just an old sun-bleached sign, nothing fancy, probably unnoticed by most who passed it by. But to Emmy, it felt like a beacon, a signal that she had arrived. Even though the welcome message was a bit understated.

The final crossroads leading to The Oddity Shop was as empty as a ghost town at high noon. Emmy noticed there were no sidewalks. The only sound was the crunch of gravel under her tires and the whoosh of rustling leaves. No bustling streets, no coffee shops, no tech-heads on electric scooters. Just pure, unadulterated silence. The kind of quiet that made her wonder if she'd taken a wrong turn and ended up on the edge of the world.

"Well, Wyatt," she murmured, smiling as she scanned the deserted street, "I've got a feeling we're not in California anymore."

Then, The Oddity Shop came into view. To say it was “quaint” would be generous. The building looked like it had been assembled by someone who thought duct tape was a legitimate construction material. The sign swung precariously from a single rusty chain, and the porch sagged like it was preparing to give up on life altogether.

The car slowly rolled to a stop.

“Charming,” Emmy muttered dryly. “Really puts Silicon Valley to shame.”

“So, Wyatt,” Emmy finally exhaled, glancing over at her dachshund, who was poised in his passenger seat like a bored prince on his throne. “This is it. Our new home. Try to contain your excitement.”

Wyatt let out a long, dramatic yawn, his head flopping to the side as if to say, “Wake me when there’s bacon.”

But he immediately perked up as he sniffed the air. A low growl rumbled in the back of his throat, he began to shiver, and his fur bristled on his back.

“Don’t start with the drama again,” Emmy sighed. “We’re here now. It’s too late to turn back.”

As Emmy stepped from the car the gravel crunched under her designer boots. Wyatt was acting strange, fluctuating between aggressive barking and frightened whining. She hooked him on his leash, set him down, and his nose immediately hit the ground like he was auditioning for a role in a detective drama. He strained against his leash, struggling to reach something Emmy could not yet see.

Emmy swallowed hard, glancing up at the shop’s darkened windows.

“Okay, Forester,” she coached herself. “You’ve faced a murder, sleuthed through muddy footprints, and survived diner coffee. How bad can this be?”