

The background of the cover is a photograph of a person with long dark hair, seen from behind, walking away on a path covered with fallen autumn leaves. The person is wearing a dark jacket and pants. The path is lined with trees whose branches are visible against a hazy, orange-toned sky. The overall mood is mysterious and somber.

KATE BOLD

NEXT

LIFE

A MEG THORNE MYSTERY--BOOK #9

N E X T

L I F E

(A Meg Thorne Mystery—Book 9)

K a t e B o l d

Kate Bold

Bestselling author Kate Bold is the author of numerous series in the mystery and thriller genres, including Meg Thorne, Heather King, Brynn Justice, Beth Drake, Maggie Flight, Addison Shine, Barren Pines, Nina Veil, Nora Price, Kelsey Hawk, Alexa Chase, Ashley Hope, Camille Grace, Harley Cole, Kaylie Brooks, Eve Hope, Dylan First, Lauren Lamb, and Morgan Reid series.

An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Kate loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.kateboldauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

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NINA VEIL

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ALEXA CHASE

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DYLAN FIRST
LAUREN LAMB

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PROLOGUE

Maria Chan shifted in her hospital bed. The pain was easing now, thanks to the drug infusion procedure that she was undergoing periodically. The spiking agony had abated from a persistent clamor in her mind all the way down to a muted throb. Thanks to the wonders of medical technology, it would now stay this way for a couple of weeks. When it got worse, she'd be back again for a repeat. This was her third cycle so far. All part of the costly, time-consuming, and ultimately ineffective fight against the progression of the disease.

This was part of the palliative care stage of the process.

Unfortunately, for her type and stage of cancer, there were no solutions, no miracle cures, and no further treatments were possible. She guessed that she was lucky to be able to spend some time at home in between her procedures, although on each visit to the hospital, she was aware that she was a little frailer than the last time.

She wondered if she'd live to see summer. Winter was refusing to relinquish its grip on Boston, with cold snap after cold snap delaying the onset of spring.

Letting out a sigh, she tried her best to go to sleep, thinking of what tomorrow would bring. She'd see her niece, Alex. Alex was going to be collecting her from the hospital and taking her home – her neighbor had kindly brought her here earlier today. Alex was a ray of sunshine, and Maria was looking forward to hearing more about her job, working as a private investigator together with an ex-cop friend of hers called Meg Thorne.

“We’re doing more and more work in tandem with the police,” Alex had said the last time she’d called her. “They’re short-staffed and have had a hiring freeze for the past couple of months due to some logistical issues, but there’s a budget for consultants, and that’s us.”

Maria was always captivated by the stories that Alex told her about what she and Meg had been doing and the assignments that they'd taken on, either for private clients or else for the police. The work was fascinating. It was something that she'd have loved to do herself when she had been working, although she'd gone the route of being a legal secretary for a property company. Lots of routine paperwork and very little excitement. Then again, Alex seemed to have so much risk, action, and variety in her job that Maria couldn't help worrying about her.

She hoped that Alex would stay safe. Maria could tell that her job involved a lot of danger, and it wasn't as if she had the same resources as a law enforcement officer would.

Still, at least her complex, intelligent niece was thriving and happy. That was what mattered.

Shifting again, she wished she could get more comfortable, because she was sure that by now it was after midnight, and she hadn't slept a wink. The bed itself was ergonomic. It was the ache in her own bones keeping her awake – that, and the sounds and smells of the hospital, and the discomfort of the drip port in her arm, slowly seeping the painkilling drugs into her bloodstream. She knew that once she was back home again, she could look forward to a night of exhausted sleep tomorrow after this procedure.

A nurse appeared at the ward door, looking in.

On quiet feet, she walked through the four-bed ward, checking up on the

other patients as well as Maria.

Everyone else was fast asleep.

“You doing okay?” the nurse asked, giving her a sympathetic glance.

Perhaps she could ask her for a sedative or some other medication to help her sleep. She knew that she might not be allowed one, as there was a risk of it reacting with the drugs she’d had. They’d refused her the last time.

“I’m having difficulty sleeping,” she admitted. “Is there anything I can take?” She already knew what the answer would be, and couldn’t help a flash of resentment.

“Sorry about that. There’s nothing I can do now, though, with the ward doctor having gone off shift. Not with the medication that you’re on currently,” she said, glancing at the drip bag. “It’s only a few more hours until morning,” she added in a sympathetic voice.

“No problem,” Maria replied. She’d known it. She’d just been taking a hopeful chance.

“You comfortable otherwise? Can I bring you any water?” the nurse asked. “Do you need any help getting up to use the bathroom? I’ll take your medication port out if you do.”

Did she look that frail? Maybe she was becoming that way, Maria thought, with a twist of fear. She’d managed to get to the bathroom just fine the first time she’d been here for her pain control, but now, she had to admit, she could use some help. She’d needed help earlier today.

“I’m fine, thanks,” she said.

She was holding in her mind that tomorrow would be better and that the cessation of pain would mean a resurgence of her strength. And she was

holding the hope of seeing Alex. Right now, at this stage of her life journey, it was the small things that mattered. In fact, she suddenly wondered why she was bothered about her sleep at all. There were few enough nights left in her future. She might as well make the most of her waking hours.

She just hoped that she wouldn't be too tired to fully enjoy the company of her niece.

The ward nurse continued with her rounds and then left. This was the darkest and quietest time of the night. She knew that from experience. Even so, the wait until morning would seem endless.

No more footsteps, no more movement. Nothing except the quiet and her own thoughts.

And then, she saw movement from the door. She didn't know how much time had passed since the nurse had left. Maybe an hour, maybe less. Perhaps she'd dozed for a few minutes after all.

In the darkened ward, another orderly was entering – or maybe a nurse. The person making their way to her bedside was wearing a mask and a head cover, so perhaps he or she had been assisting in surgery.

At any rate, they put a gloved finger to their masked mouth as they approached her bed, and then, Maria saw that this person had a filled hypodermic syringe in their hand.

She instantly became more alert, her tired drowsiness dissolving as the attendant began working with the port to the drip that she still had attached to her arm.

Was this going to be more of the same? More painkillers? It was very late, and she hadn't had any additional doses the previous times. What was going on, and why the need for quiet? She didn't understand it.

Then, comprehension dawned. Perhaps the nurse who'd been here earlier had said something to somebody, or had gotten permission from one of the doctors, if any were still elsewhere in the hospital and hadn't yet gone off duty. That must be the case, and if so, then she was grateful, because she wouldn't be allowed to go home before midmorning, and by then, she'd be exhausted.

But this was all a little strange. Why wasn't this attendant saying anything? Why was it all happening in such silence? There wasn't even a light on in the ward.

A flash of fear ran through her. Could this be a mistake? What if this was a drug intended for somebody else, and it was being administered to her erroneously? The last thing she needed was for the pain relief to be countered by some other medication or not to work as well as it was supposed to.

"Is this right? Are you sure it's for me?" she asked in a soft voice, not wanting to wake any of the others in the ward. Her heart was suddenly drumming faster than it had been.

But the figure took a hand-off the port and again, touched it to their masked mouth, leaving her with no option but to lie back.

The world was already starting to swim. This must be some kind of sedative or sleep enhancer, because things were fading into fuzzy lines and graying out, and she was feeling unbelievably tired, the sleepiness flooding every cell of her body.

It felt as if she was too tired to keep her eyes open.

Too tired to breathe.

She let the mists engulf her, even though as she slipped away, the flare

of unease in her mind warned her that something was very wrong.

CHAPTER ONE

“Are you ready?” retired cop Meg Thorne asked her new investigation partner and employee, Alex Chan, as she stepped out of the car.

Alex, an ex-prosecutor, was now an employee in Meg’s new business, which handled private investigation work, tracking down anything from money to missing people to cheating spouses, as well as assisting the police with certain cases.

“I’m ready,” Alex nodded, leaning back into the car and taking out the folder that they needed for the case ahead before turning in the direction of the office building ahead.

This was no routine case. Today, she was helping Meg with another issue.

It was an important and deeply personal one to Meg. Something that she should have had the courage to look into long ago, but it had taken her a while to force herself.

It was the next step into the investigation of her husband’s murder.

Nearly six years ago, James had been stabbed to death while in the basement parking of a shopping center near Meg's home. The police had thought it was a botched robbery at first, but nothing had been taken. His phone, wallet, and cash were still on him.

“I wish it hadn’t taken me so long to do this,” Meg said, as the two of them walked in step toward the office building. Six long years. She was now approaching her mid-fifties, although Alex was more than a decade younger. Six years for the trail to grow cold and for the criminal to hide his

or her tracks.

James had been a forensic auditor, and at the time of his death, he'd been investigating a large company. One of the employees had been embezzling funds. James had been murdered to allow the looting to continue for longer. Eventually, it had been picked up, but it had been covered up immediately by the director, Mr. Engels, who hadn't wanted a scandal. Citing a 'restructure', several people had either left or been fired.

The director had refused to do more than give Meg the names of the key senior employees who had left the company within those few months, and not all of them were complicit in the theft. One by one, she'd been getting face to face with them. This hadn't been easy, especially since she was working discreetly, so as not to raise any alarms.

"I think you're doing it as fast as you could have done, given the trauma of what happened," Alex said firmly. "And also, the need to keep this undercover."

So far, she'd ruled out the person who'd been CFO at the time – and who'd been anonymously threatened with harm to his family and forced into ignoring the embezzlement – as well as the chief marketing officer, who had left earlier on and hadn't known anything about it.

And now, she was ready to question the next person – the dynamic chief information officer at the time, Suanne Brook.

Suanne would be in her early forties now. From the finance firm where she'd worked at the time of the embezzlement, she'd moved on to the corporation they'd just arrived at, located in a stand-alone, four-story building just outside downtown Boston.

From Suanne's social media, which Meg and Alex had researched

thoroughly, Meg had gleaned that Suanne had moved on to great things, and her career trajectory had peaked with this new role. If she had left under a cloud, she'd managed to make sure nobody knew about it. Her reputation was clearly intact right now. She contributed periodically to industry publications and had received a couple of industry awards over the last couple of years.

That filled Meg with ineffectual rage, even though she knew that her anger might be misplaced and that Suanne Brook might be innocent.

But as the CIO, in charge of the company's IT systems and strategy, she had always been one of the key suspects in Meg's mind. Why wouldn't someone heading up the IT department have been aware of the embezzlement? Had she also been threatened? Or this time would she be sitting face to face with the person who had committed the theft and made the threats?

"Time to see what she's hiding," Meg said.

They headed into the building, giving their names to the security guard at the door and only then being allowed to go through to the reception area. Access to this company without an appointment was impossible, and it had taken months for Meg to get an appointment.

The pressure was on because if Suanne was innocent, then Meg was left with only two other suspects who fit the parameters she was looking for in terms of their involvement with the firm James had worked for, and the time at which they'd quit.

Meg had her suspicions about both the remaining men on her list.

For a start, Mark Vernon had been fifty-nine years old at the time and had retired as the chief operations officer. She understood that he was now

doing occasional consulting work. Meg found it odd that he'd retired at fifty-nine. Why not wait until retirement age?

She'd taken early retirement herself, so she supposed he could have had innocent reasons, just like her. Frustration with the delays, red tape, and restrictions of her job, together with conflict with her boss, had eventually pushed Meg into the decision.

She had been lucky to have a trust fund, thanks to being part of the wealthy Ashworth family, even though she'd barely dipped into it other than for charitable purposes. But even so, it had been there as a cushion if she'd needed it. But a wealthy COO might also have acquired a financial cushion.

Patrick North, the operations assistant, had left suddenly and eventually moved into a higher position with another company. However, at only thirty-four years old, he certainly enjoyed the trappings of success. His social media showed a number of expensive sports cars, and he lived in a fashionable condo with a water view. He lived well and partied hard, and Meg wondered how he'd earned enough to do it.

"If it isn't Suanne, maybe she still knows who was involved. We could ask for more background," Alex murmured as they approached the reception desk.

"True," Meg replied. Raising her voice and meeting the receptionist's inquiring gaze, she said, "We're here to see Suanne Brook."

Meg knew that she didn't look particularly corporate. Since leaving the police, she'd dyed her hair a new, bright color every month. Her hairdresser loved her because she got to do fun shades on her every visit. It was currently dark plum, although Meg thought that the deep purple in the shade

didn't suit her skin tone and was intending to go redder the next time. Today she was wearing a bright mauve top to match the hair paired with a green jacket and gray pants.

Alex, in her stark black business suit, looked more the part.

“One moment. I’ll call Ms. Brook for you.” Stern and formal, the receptionist didn’t offer them a welcoming smile. Meg fixed her attention on the silver logo on the wall behind the glum-faced woman. The company itself was an IT firm that had begun as a startup and rocketed to success.

Once again, Meg tried to suppress the smoldering anger that all these five people on her

list should be still alive, working, living their lives.

James, the outsider who’d been hired to do a forensic accounting audit and who’d acted ethically in pinpointing the looting that had been occurring, had paid with his life, and they were still enjoying theirs.

Meg took a deep breath, trying again to subdue the anger. It wouldn’t help her now.

“You can go to the elevator,” the receptionist told them. “Fourth floor, second office on the right.”

Meg turned and strode to the elevator. She and Alex got in and swooped up to the fourth floor, both of them in thoughtful silence.

Nerves churned in Meg’s stomach – a relatively unfamiliar sensation, but this meeting meant so much to her that some anxiety was inevitable.

What would Suanne’s reaction be when she found out why they were here? Would she be defensive and angry? Would she conceal guilt behind a sleek, superior façade?

Would she become threatening, or would she capitulate and agree to work with them?

She reached the door with the silver nameplate on the outside: Suanne Brook, CIO.

Time to find out.

CHAPTER TWO

Meg tapped on the door, and a voice called, "Come in, please."

She pushed it open, finding herself face to face with a young woman in a jade green jacket that set off her honey blond hair. She was manning the desk in a small office that was as bleak and impersonal looking as the downstairs reception area. A closed door to her right indicated to Meg that this was where the CIO's actual office was.

One more gatekeeper to get past. Without an appointment, this meeting would have been impossible.

"You can go through," the blonde said, standing up and walking over to the side door. She tapped, and then stuck her head in. "Suanne, the people who want to discuss the charity work are here to see you."

Meg had used her family name, Ashworth, and the pretext of needing Suanne's help, expertise, and financial input for a charitable effort. It was a lie, but that had been unavoidable, because telling the truth would have meant showing far too much of her hand.

She had wanted to confront the woman at work because it was more discreet than looking up her home address and arriving unannounced on her doorstep.

There was Suanne, sitting behind a white desk, with a silver laptop open in front of her.

She had green eyes, brown hair cut in a flattering bob that enhanced her jawline, and was wearing a silver-gray blouse. Her office's décor was minimalist. On the wall behind her desk was a plethora of framed

certificates and awards.

The assistant closed the door, leaving Meg and Alex alone with Suanne. Only then did Meg speak.

“Ms. Brook, I’m Meg Thorne. This is Alex Chan.”

She deliberately used her married name, guessing that it would be the first time that Suanne had heard it, and wondering if it would get a reaction from her.

Sure enough, Suanne blinked, her gaze flickering to the laptop as if she’d had a different name in mind.

Meg hadn’t seen a guilty jump when she mentioned the name Thorne.

“I’m sorry,” Suanne said. “I was expecting Meg Ashworth.”

“My married name is Thorne,” Meg explained.

“Please, sit.” Suanne gestured to the visitors’ chairs opposite the desk. Meg saw that her cellphone was lying near the printer on the side table, plugged into a charger. “What exactly is this about?”

Meg had kept her reasons deliberately vague. Now she was going to send the conversation off on a tangent and see what Suanne’s response was.

“Alex and I are here because you used to work at Carter Engels,” she said.

Immediately, she saw the reaction in Suanne’s eyes.

“Carter Engels?” she said, repeating the name, buying time.

“Yes,” Meg continued, but before she could say anything else, Suanne drew herself up.

“Does this mean you made an appointment with me under false pretenses?” she accused. “Because I have a very busy schedule, and I fitted

this in because I believed it was something to do with charity. It's not sounding as if it is. Can you explain to me, now, why you're here."

Meg guessed that the woman's forceful approach did her credit when she was in the boardroom, an attitude she needed to have as a woman in a man's world.

Meg wasn't particularly impressed by it, though. She suspected Suanne was coming across strongly because she was guilty.

However, Meg needed to try to keep her true agenda under wraps just a little longer, so that she could get more information from Suanne. Beside her, Alex was watching and waiting and keeping quiet while observing Suanne.

"Well," Meg said, "the reason I knew about you is that my husband, James, was involved with that company."

"Oh, is that so?" To Meg's surprise, her suspicion now seemed to have abated. "I see. Yes, I don't remember him, but it was a large corporation. More than four hundred employees, I think?"

Meg had wanted to assess her reaction to the mention of James's name. But she couldn't toy with this topic any longer.

"You might remember that shortly before you left, an outside auditor was brought in to do a deep dive into the company's finances. His name was James Thorne, and he was my husband. He was murdered during the process of doing the audit, and I subsequently learned that he'd uncovered wide scale fraud. Or rather, he was busy uncovering it when someone stopped him. They murdered him when they realized that he had found out."

Given that Suanne had briefly relaxed at the mention of Carter Engels,

Meg hadn't expected her to do what she did next.

She jumped to her feet, her face flushing deep red.

"Out!" she ordered.

"But –" Meg protested.

"I said out. You came in here under false pretenses, and I refuse to engage with you about this. What you did in order to get face to face with me is underhanded." Her voice rose to a shout.

Now, the strategy Meg and Alex had discussed earlier needed to swing into action.

Meg had spent a couple of hours with Alex before this visit. She had discussed every possible eventuality with her, and they had run through a whole series of 'what if' scenarios.

Suanne losing her temper and raising her voice had not been one of them, and the scenario now was to divide and conquer. Shouting would draw attention – in the form of the assistant sitting next door.

Meg knew that within a few moments she would be at the door – flustered, worried, and probably on the verge of calling for help.

Now, Meg glanced at Alex, who got smoothly to her feet, headed to the door, and left the office.

She'd stall the assistant, explaining that things had just gotten a little heated inside, and making sure that the assistant didn't escalate things.

Meg rose to her feet, too, mainly so that she could continue to have unbroken eye contact with the angry CIO.

"Do you think that my losing my own husband was fair? Do you think a man being murdered for doing his job was fair? Because if so, your sense of

fairness probably needs a rethink," Meg said in a low, stony voice. "Right now, you seem to be angry because I told you I was here for charity reasons. As it happens, I am a supporter of a few charities, and you're most welcome to join in with my initiative to help homeless women. We can discuss it later. But now, I want to know what you know about that corruption. Because someone in that company killed James, or got him killed."

Suanne's eyes were cold, and her voice was terse. She wasn't giving an inch on this.

"How do you know that?" she snapped. "It could have been a botched mugging or robbery. We all discussed it. It sounded like a robbery for drugs, something like that."

"Strange that they didn't take his money, then," Meg shot back.

She was doing her best to control her own anger. She knew that now, of all times, she needed to keep a cool head on her shoulders. The more Suanne lost it, the more Meg needed to maintain icy levels of control.

"Did they not take his money?" Suanne said. "I thought they did."

Meg shook her head, trying her hardest to keep the bitterness out of her voice as she said, "Look at you. Here you are, arguing details with a person who knows the case inside out because it happened to her life partner."

Suanne stared her down. Meg noticed that her hands had clenched into fists.

"Why are you targeting me with these questions? What do you think I know about it?"

Her tone was rapidly changing from the sharp, businesslike voice she'd used when Meg had walked in. Now, her voice was shaking.

What did she know that was making her react this way?

Meg decided that she had no choice but to forge ahead with honesty. The situation had gone too far for any more subtle questioning. Suanne had been so blindsided by Meg's revelation that she hadn't had time to get her defenses up at first, but she was doing so now, and they were getting higher with every moment that passed.

"I'm looking for my husband's killer," Meg said.

"You? On your own? Are you mad?"

"I'm an ex-policewoman. I worked homicide for most of my career."

"But this murder was years ago. *Years*. The police investigated it then. Surely you worked with them then, and if you want to relook at it, you should be doing so in conjunction with the police?"

Meg was feeling encouraged by the extreme defensiveness of Suanne's reaction and how suddenly her demeanor had changed. What was the root cause of this? Was she guilty or fearful? Or was she simply furious? Right now, although she couldn't be sure about Suanne's reasons, it was a clear sign that she needed to dig deeper. If she was completely innocent, like the first manager Meg had interviewed, then she would have reacted in a very different way.

Did she know something and feel guilty that she'd never spoken up about it? Had she been pressured not to talk about it?

Or was she complicit in the crime?

They were both still standing, facing off. Not the ideal situation, especially since tension was thrumming from Suanne.

"What details do you know about this crime? Did you interact with

James when he worked for Engels?” Meg asked, not bothering to answer Suanne’s rambling and rhetorical outburst.

“I know nothing. I left the company at around that time. Now, you need to get the hell out of my office.”

“Why are you telling me what to do?” Meg asked.

It wasn’t the right question, that she knew. She should have been more diplomatic and restrained in what she asked, but in this pressured situation, she found herself becoming defiant, despite her best efforts.

“Because you’re standing in my office under false pretenses,” Suanne all but screamed.

Meg couldn't believe she was seeing such a different side to this industry icon. The one who'd accepted professional awards and honors with gracious speeches, who'd opened industry events on world stages, and who must, surely, earn a stratospheric salary.

All that was stripped away, and now, Meg guessed that what she was seeing was raw fear. That was the only plausible reason for the change in Suanne’s behavior.

“Why are you so frightened?” she asked.

“Frightened? Oh, this is hilarious. You’re telling me that I’m frightened? Why should I be scared of you? I don’t think so. I’m angry that you’ve wasted my time.”

“You are scared, aren’t you? Why? If you’re fearful, it must mean you know something about James. What do you know?”

Abruptly, Suanne sat down again, like a puppet whose strings had been cut. She stared at Meg with narrowed eyes.

"Get out," she said. "Just get the hell out of here. Now." She reached for the phone, and this time, Meg knew that she was going to do what she threatened.

"We'll speak again," she promised Suanne.

She turned and walked to the door and opened it, seeing that Alex was deep in conversation with the assistant, talking as loudly as she could to drown out the acrimonious exchange taking place in her boss's office.

"Let's go," she said to Alex.

Alex turned and walked out immediately, and they headed to the elevator, riding it down, and then hurrying out of the building.

"What was that about?" Alex asked as soon as they were striding to the parking lot.

Meg shook her head. "She started out reasonably controlled, but then, as shock caught up with her, she got more and more over the top. She knows something about this, without a doubt, Alex. And I think she's frightened. At first, I wasn't sure, and I thought it might have been anger. Then guilt, but ultimately, I think it was very like Donovan Carver, the CFO. She was just being more aggressive about it. Extremely aggressive," Meg said.

Alex gasped. "And you didn't get the chance to ask her more?"

"I wish I had," Meg said. "But it escalated so fast, and she threw up a wall of defenses. I wanted to calm things down and get back to the questions, but she was starting to get hysterical, which is the last thing I'd have expected from her."

"What are you going to do now?" Alex asked.

"Good question," Meg said. "I want to watch her from this point. I wish

I had the resources to monitor her phone calls. If only I could have an entire team in an unmarked van, waiting outside the offices.”

“You think that would help?” As they faced each other on opposite sides of Meg’s car, Alex quirked an eyebrow.

“Well,” Meg said, “I don’t know if she’s still in touch with anyone from those days, but if she was, I do believe that now might be the time she’d make a phone call. Or request a meeting.”

“If only we had that anonymous white van,” Alex agreed. “Failing that, though, what do you suggest as an alternative?”

“I’m going to reach out to Gabe,” Meg said. “I want her address, and I want to try to follow her later. Maybe she’ll do something unusual.”

“Does she have family?” Alex asked.

“Surprisingly, no,” Meg said. “She lives alone. She was divorced in her thirties, and she hasn’t mentioned a partner. I believe from the articles I read that she has a son who’s in his early twenties. He doesn’t live in Boston. Maybe they’re not that close.”

She didn’t know what Suanne might try to do. She supposed it partly depended on what she had done already, and who knew about it.

Or who Suanne thought would remember.

Meg was about to offload more to Alex about how strange and unexpected Suanne’s behavior had been when Alex took a look at her own phone. She’d had it on silent during their foray into the IT firm’s offices.

Concerned, Meg looked at Alex as she gasped.

“No! No, I don’t believe this. Meg, I feel as if today’s been cursed. This is a message from my cousin. My aunt Maria has died. She was found dead

in her hospital bed this morning after a routine procedure. She wants to know if I can get to the hospital now."

CHAPTER THREE

Meg had been about to start the car and drive back to her house, where the dining room had now been almost completely commandeered as a comfortable shared office. But looking at Alex's visible distress and hearing this shocking news, she abandoned the plan.

"We're going there straight away," she said.

"Thanks, Meg. I don't believe this. Dead." Alex shook her head, drawing in a shaky breath.

"You mentioned your aunt a couple of times. She was ill, wasn't she?"

Meg spoke the words gently. Alex had told her about her aunt's condition and progress over the past couple of months. Her aunt had a rare type of cancer that had spread to her bones. It was terminal, and she was in constant pain.

Given all of that, she wondered if Maria might have been sicker than Alex had realized, or sicker than Maria had allowed her to know.

She wasn't going to say that, though. Right now, Alex was in shock and grieving, and Meg hoped that she'd opened the door enough for her to speak as much or as little as she wanted to.

After a pause, Alex started speaking.

"Yes, you're right. I did mention her to you. I know I told you that she was sick. It was so desperately unfair. She was the biggest tower of strength in my life, apart from you. We always got along. I wish I'd had the chance to see more of her, but until recently, she was working full time, and of course, I've been so busy. But I was supposed to pick her up from the

hospital later on. I've been doing that while she's been having these treatments – driving her home and staying with her for a couple of hours afterwards."

"That was why you said you'd take the rest of the morning off today?" Meg queried. Now, she remembered that Alex had said that from 10 a.m., she was taking a few hours for family time. Meg liked it that she had created a workplace where things like this were possible. Neither she nor Alex kept to office hours or even noticed the weekends. It all depended on the workload they had. Weekends might be working days, or even busier than weekdays if they had a case on the go.

"Yes. I was going to meet Maria and take her home, make her comfortable, shop for a few things for her. Now, I won't see her again." With shaking hands, Alex reached into her purse and took out a tissue.

Just as with Suanne, the shock sunk in deeper as the minutes passed.

"I hope the hospital can give us some answers," Meg said.

"I don't understand it. It was such a routine procedure, and I know she was terminally ill, but she had some good months left. We had plans. We were going to go to the opera together. My uncle was going to come here from New York, and they were going to go on a mini vacation with some friends. Her life wasn't yet over. This hospital had better not have messed things up."

Alex's face was intent, her voice was trembling.

"Let's go and find out. We should be there in ten minutes." Meg got onto the main road, driving fast.

As they headed to the hospital via the quickest route, Alex got on the phone, calling and texting her relatives. Meg guessed that, as the news

spread, everyone was contacting each other, giving the latest updates, and commiserating.

Occasionally, as she drove, Alex would update Meg on the incoming messages.

“My uncle can’t believe it either.”

“They say she was fine the night before. Meg, I find this very strange.”

“They’d better not be trying to cover up any mistakes.”

Meg uttered soothing words, knowing that there was nothing much she could say right now that would make a difference, and that Alex was fully entitled to her outbursts.

It made Meg think back to those hours and days after she’d learned about James’s death.

Traumatized, reeling with shock, she'd been interviewed by numerous colleagues and police from other departments who'd been called in to help with the urgent case. With one of their own suffering and bereaved, the police had rallied around and done everything they could to help.

But Detective Whitaker, her boss, had firmly forbidden her from participating in the investigation.

"You're too closely involved," he'd snapped, in a tone that had left no room for argument. And Meg had known he was right. She would only have been a hindrance in those early days because she was beside herself.

By the time she'd felt anywhere near ready to face James's death, the case had already grown cold, the leads all petered out, the camera evidence was deemed inconclusive, and the team was reluctantly admitting that they were getting nowhere.

Now, all her sympathies were with Alex as she embarked on the first stage of her grieving journey, which Meg was sure would also be punctuated with guilt at not having done more for Maria.

She parked in the hospital's lot, and they both headed inside.

"Alex Chan," Alex said to the receptionist. "My aunt passed away here last night, and we've come along to speak to some of the doctors."

The receptionist, her face an impassive mask with a hint of sympathy, consulted a list.

"Doc Bailey was her treating physician, and he's currently doing the rounds in ward two," she said. "Please go on up, Ms. Chan. He knows you're coming, and he's going to make the time to speak to you."

Alex turned and headed determinedly to the stairs.

"I hope they're not going to try convince me to sign anything saying they're not liable," she muttered to Meg as they hurried up the staircase.

"At least you can ask him if he knows anything else about why she passed away," Meg said. "Perhaps there were some signs that he noted when he was doing his rounds yesterday."

For the first time, Alex sounded more unsure, as if she was prepared to accept that this might have been a genuine medical event. At any rate, that frazzled note had gone from her voice when she said, "Yes, it'll be good to speak to him and see what he says."

They headed upstairs to the ward and asked for the doctor.

"Please wait here," said the ward nurse – young, dark-haired, with vivid freckles spattering her cheeks. She rushed off to call the doctor, and Meg and Alex waited. Alex was impatient, fidgeting, checking her phone, firing

off a couple of texts to family.

A couple of minutes later, Doc Bailey arrived.

He was in his forties, sandy-haired, with a receding hairline and an air of quiet professionalism. His white coat was creased, and the tiredness in his eyes told Meg that he'd probably been on duty for a good few hours already.

"Good morning," he greeted them, his gaze veering straight to Alex, obviously picking up the family resemblance to her aunt. "Ms. Chan? I'm so sorry that you've had this news."

"What happened?" Alex asked.

He shook his head. "As yet, we don't have answers. I can confirm that her death was unexpected and there's no obvious reason for it. All her vital signs were normal, and although she was suffering from advanced cancer, which was causing her pain, it wasn't yet at a life-threatening stage."

"But what do you think could have happened then? Could it have been suicide, or did she try to take her own life?" Alex asked, her voice shaking as she got out the words, her mind clearly veering to new scenarios in her search to uncover the truth.

"She wouldn't have had access to any medication unless she brought it with her and hid it away, and there's nothing in her files that she's been prescribed that could have been used," he said thoughtfully. "However, suicidal patients can find ways to achieve their objectives if they are set on this course of action, so I'd like to know from you – did you feel she was suicidal? Did she give any indication of being depressed or wanting to take her own life? Did she ever mention any plans to do so?"

Alex shook her head. "I've been thinking about that too, while I was on

the way here, and I don't believe she was suicidal at all. She said to me often that she knew she might only have a few more months left, but that she was ready to make the most of them."

The doctor was listening carefully to her, his mouth tightening as she spoke the words.

"That's helpful for us to know. She may have had an underlying health issue that simply worsened at the wrong time. And you know, it's stressful to come in for pain management treatment following a terminal cancer diagnosis. Stress itself can lead to other problems flaring up, and that can occur suddenly. We'll be conducting a postmortem, and that will hopefully give us clearer answers," he said.

"Can't you tell who visited her ward? Is there any camera footage?" Alex asked.

He shook his head. "Usually, yes. However, the cameras on this floor are in the process of being upgraded, and so this week they're not operational."

"You don't think that's a strange coincidence?" Alex demanded.

"Ma'am, I'm not able to say without more information on the cause of death, which I'm awaiting, and I'll share with you as fast as it arrives. I'm really sorry for your loss, once again."

"How soon will you get the results on all the tests?" Alex asked.

"In a day or two. They'll obviously include blood tests. They'll be very thorough, and I hope that you get the answers that will give you peace of mind."

"I hope they do," Alex said.

The doctor then turned away and hurried off to complete his rounds, and Meg put her arm around Alex.

“Listen,” Meg said, “I think you need to go home. You can’t work today after this has happened. Go and spend some time with your cousin, go and catch up with your other family members, and just take this all in.”

Alex shook her head. “I’ll be fine in a couple of hours,” she said. “How about you give me the morning off, same as I would have had anyway if I’d taken Maria home? I’ll go past my cousin’s place and spend some time with her, and then I’ll come back in the afternoon.”

"Okay," Meg said. "But if you don't feel up to it, then please call, and we can rearrange our day."

“I’ll let you know,” Alex said. “And thank you.”

Since Meg had picked Alex up before they’d headed to the fraught meeting with Suanne Brook, Alex said she’d take a cab back home from the hospital.

Meg left, but instead of heading home herself, she went straight to the police station.

She wanted to tell Gabe what had happened with Suanne and see if she could get her address.

If she knew where Suanne lived, then she might be able to do surveillance on her and see if she received any visitors after the incident in her office today.

Or else, now that she'd met her once, Meg could knock on her door this evening and see if Suanne was ready to answer her questions then.

CHAPTER FOUR

Half an hour later, Meg pulled up outside the police station, now headed up by Gabe, her former investigation partner. She hurried in, hoping that Gabe would be willing and able to give her the information she needed. Recognizing her, the officer at the front desk gave her a quick greeting before buzzing her straight through.

The station's backroom smelled of coffee and baked treats, as it often did since Gabe took charge of this station. It was Meg's opinion that the atmosphere had changed in other ways, too. Though stern-looking, her broad-shouldered, dark-skinned, grim-faced partner had a heart of gold when it came to caring for his team. Gabe didn't only supply baked goods whenever anyone had a birthday, or an important anniversary, or had performed well in handling a difficult case. He also supplied personal support, praise, encouragement, and recognition in front of the other team members.

As a result, despite the budgetary constraints causing the station to be short-staffed, Meg thought that morale was higher than it had ever been.

Gabe was sitting in his office, which she'd previously shared with him, and which he now occupied alone. The door, as usual, was open. A plate with a half-finished fruit cake stood on his desk, and Meg caught Gabe in the act of lifting a slice to his mouth.

He lowered it again as soon as he saw her and stood up.

"Meg Thorne." His face split in a beam. He moved around his desk and enfolded her in a bear hug.

It had been at least a week since she'd seen Gabe in person, although they'd communicated almost every day on various cases or simply to exchange chit-chat. "I didn't expect you to be here today."

"Spur of the moment visit. I need a favor," Meg said, pulling out the chair and looking hungrily at the cake. She hadn't eaten this morning. Knowing that she was going to have to confront Suanne, she hadn't had an appetite for breakfast.

"Well, have some cake," Gabe invited.

Meg wasn't going to say no. While Gabe took a mouthful of his own slice, Meg cut one for herself. Fruit cake was one of her favorites, and this particular one was heavy on the cherries. Always a good sign.

"What's the occasion?" she asked.

"We solved three tough cases last week. One of them – that money laundering case – with the help that you and Alex gave me, doing those extra pieces of research."

Meg was pleased that case was now wrapped up. It had been a tough one for the police to solve simply because it had required so many resources. Coming in on Gabe's limited consultant budget, she and Alex had been able to do many of the more onerous research jobs, mapping out the businesses that had been used as shell companies to cover up the fraud, and also finding connections between two of the kingpins.

"I'm glad we were able to make a difference," Meg said. "I'll have to take a piece of cake for Alex."

"Be my guest. I might even have a sandwich bag in here." Gabe rummaged in his desk drawer and handed her one. "Where is Alex today?"

"She had to go home for a while. Or rather," Meg corrected herself, "I

told her she must. She was due to fetch her aunt from the hospital today after a pain relief procedure, and she was told that she'd passed away last night."

"That's a shame," Gabe rumbled, genuine sympathy resounding in his voice. "Was it expected?"

"No. She had terminal cancer, but it wasn't affecting her overall health. She had a few good months ahead with the pain relief, I believe," Meg said. "Alex is very shocked, and we're waiting to hear what the postmortem uncovers."

Gabe took another bite of cake. Meg thought he was looking more pensive than usual.

"You know, Meg," he said, "I don't know if you remember, but this reminds me of an investigation of a few incidents that took place about five, six years ago." Then, he caught himself. "You probably wouldn't remember. It was around the time that James was murdered. I know what it was like for you then. You were in survival mode."

Meg nodded. "Yup," she said. "I was in survival mode. I didn't realize it at the time, but now that I look back, I was shutting out the world and just keeping on doing what I had to. But tell me, what did you pick up back then?"

Immediately, Meg's investigator brain was starting to question whether this unexplained death might be part of a pattern, and clearly, Gabe's was doing the same.

"Five, six years ago, we might actually have digital records," he said with a wry grin. "Let's see if I can get what I'm hoping for."

He logged into his system and took a look through, typing in a couple of

keywords and narrowing his eyes as he saw the result.

“That’s it,” he said. “It was the investigation by Frank Castellano. He looked into a few historic cases involving unexplained medical deaths. There were about ten different cases, over a six-year period, and the last of them was five years ago, shortly before his retirement.”

“And did he find anything?”

“No, he didn’t. It was never a high priority case. I think one of the deceased’s family members asked the police to investigate. Castellano did so, he found a few similar cases, but nothing was conclusive, including the blood tests and autopsy results. So, he closed the entire file when he retired. You remember Castellano, Meg?”

“Yes, I do,” she said, the picture immediately flickering into her mind. He was a tall, rangy detective whose hair had been jet black when Meg started working with the police, and which had become grayer over the decades. She remembered, too, that he’d started to look rather frail just before his retirement.

“I wonder if we should go and ask him about them,” Gabe said. “We can look the cases up, but there’s nothing like talking to the source of information first, especially if there’s a possibility that these were connected murders which might have started up again. What do you think, Meg?”

“I’d like to speak to him,” Meg said. “Over and above the case itself, Castellano was always one of the good guys. He used to stand up for me against Whitaker when we had our inter-precinct meetings. I’d like to see him again just to thank him for that. Do you have time, Gabe?”

He shook his head. “Theoretically, no. But given that Alex might have been affected by something similar, I’ll gladly take an hour out of the time I

don't have."

He grinned at her, and Meg smiled back.

"It's been a while since we headed out together," she said.

"We're overdue, I agree," Gabe confirmed. He took his phone off the charger, stuffed the last chunk of his cake into his mouth, and picked up his car keys.

Meg picked up the sandwich bag to give to Alex, feeling glad that they were going to be able to go and speak to Castellano. Especially given Alex's distress and the confusing circumstances under which Maria Chan had died, it would be very helpful to get more answers.

If nothing else, they might at least be able to confirm that the earlier cases weren't connected.

And if they were? In that case, Meg might just have a new cold case series on her hands.

CHAPTER FIVE

“Here we go. The Acres. This is where Castellano stays now.”

Gabe glanced at Meg as he pulled up outside the assisted living facility where Frank Castellano now lived. He couldn't help feeling a sense of foreboding about what he would find in here.

He saw that Meg looked surprised, and then concerned, to see that this was where the detective now stayed full-time.

“Did he just decide to move into a place like this early?” she asked him.

Gabe had to shake his head, wishing that the news was better.

“I saw him a couple of times over the past few years,” he said. “He's been suffering from a few health issues. He was in a car accident that left him with a bad leg, but I also think he's been going downhill mentally, too. You know, he told me that his dad had passed away from early onset dementia, and sadly, Castellano always knew that was going to be in his future.”

“It might not be easy to get the information from him, then,” Meg said. Gabe saw she was looking more worried.

He nodded. “Last time I saw him, about a year ago, he was holding up, but he'd deteriorated a lot. But you know, it's a cruel disease. I saw a good few changes in him back then, and I hope that they haven't progressed.”

Gabe had his doubts over Castellano's current state of health. It was one of the reasons why he'd suggested that they should visit him together, and why he had made the time to do this.

He often felt guilty about how his current workload had consumed his

focus, leaving little time available for other important things, like touching base with an ex-detective who was alone in life and probably needed some company.

If only there was time for everything he needed to do.

Gabe put his wife and two teenage daughters first, fighting to get the family time with them that they deserved, but beyond that, he knew that he wasn't doing enough.

Better now than later, he reminded himself, as he got out of the car outside the assisted living home – a single-story brick building that had a dull, institutional feel to it. It was set in a paved concrete desert. Not a tree in sight. The only greenery was a couple of struggling weeds that had sprouted up from between the paving stones and hadn't yet been killed off.

“Not the brightest and most beautiful place in the world,” Gabe said with regret in his voice. “But it's better inside.”

He glanced at Meg, seeing that she was looking troubled. “I don't like to think of Castellano spending his final days in a place like this,” she said, shaking her head.

Gabe offered his own rational take on the situation. “It's not as if he gets to go out a lot these days,” he said, heading up to the facility's gray-painted door. “Retiring on a cop's pension, this is what we can all expect if we need extra care. And like I said, it's better inside.”

He knew that Meg would be trying to suppress her own awkwardness about coming from a family with means. Gabe had been shocked when he'd accidentally found out how wealthy the Ashworths were, soon after he'd first been partnered with Meg. He'd never have guessed it from the way she'd dressed or behaved, or the car she'd driven, although her spacious

home with its gorgeous yard in a quiet residential suburb was one indication of her family's wealth. He'd later found out that the home was a gift to Meg from her family.

He pressed the buzzer and waited. A moment later, the door unlocked, and he pushed it open and headed into the gloomy interior of The Acres.

Breathing in the smell of cooked cabbage that hung in the air, Gabe wondered why this smell was common to every institution like this, no matter whether cabbage was on the daily menu or not. It was like an unspoken regulation, he thought, as he headed over to the front desk.

"Gabriel Reeves and Meg Thorne," he told the gray-haired assistant behind the desk. "Here to see Frank Castellano, if that's possible."

"Mr. Castellano?" She turned to her computer screen and tapped a few keys. "Yes, of course. He's down that corridor in room ten. He'll be in bed."

In bed, at nine-forty-five a.m.? That didn't bode well for his state of health, Gabe knew. Last time he'd seen him, he'd been in the living room with a few other patients, playing a game of backgammon.

He set off, his shoes squeaking over the faded but clean tiles, with Meg walking alongside.

They reached the room, where an orderly was just coming out, dragging a cleaning cart behind her. The tang of disinfectant made Gabe's nose twitch as he headed in. At least it banished the cabbage smell, though admittedly, neither was his favorite.

This was a shared room, and that was also different from the last time he'd been here. Then, Castellano had been in his own room.

Now, the room was quiet, and it took Gabe a confused moment to realize which of the frail-looking, gray-haired men was actually his ex-

colleague. There he was. He was the one in the bed in the corner.

"Hello there, Castellano," Gabe said, striding toward him, raising his voice to the level that seemed appropriate in this quiet room, which was fairly soft for Gabe.

Meg followed, murmuring greetings to the other, and made her way to the bed.

Gabe was sure that Meg was feeling the same shock as he stared down at Castellano, once tall, strong, and sharp, one of the police detectives who'd possessed an inherent sense of courtesy along with his natural investigative ability.

It was disturbing to see how effectively this cruel disease had eroded away his personality, his strength, his essence. The gray-haired shell of a man lying in the bed stared at Gabe with vague eyes, his gaze unable to focus properly, his hands shaking weakly as he raised them.

Gabe felt a terrible sense of pity as he grasped Castellano's hand, feeling horrified by what a year had done – although maybe it had been closer to two years, now Gabe thought about it. Every week, every month had clearly seen an erosion of this man's facilities. The man's fingers clenched around Gabe's tightly, and for just a moment, Gabe thought he saw a flash of recognition in his gaze.

"Gabe?" His voice was soft, hoarse, but it contained an echo of the man he once knew.

"Castellano." For some reason, everyone had called Frank Castellano by his last name, even the officers close to him. Gabe had thought he preferred it. It certainly had a ring to it. "How ya doing, bud?"

He hoped that his affectionate words might strike a chord somewhere in

the muddled depths of the detective's mind, but Gabe wasn't sure if he heard them at all. He was looking blank again; his expression settled once more in that faraway stare.

Gabe tried a few more pleasantries, and crowding in around the bed, Meg took his other hand and greeted him, too. But there was nothing. Apart from that initial moment of recognition, Castellano gave no sign of knowing they were there at all.

Eventually, Gabe met Meg's eyes, and she gave a little nod. They'd taken turns at offering him cheering words, a few memories of the times when they'd worked together, and affirmations on what a good guy he was, and always had been. There didn't seem much else to say, and Gabe knew with a feeling of inevitability that this was almost certainly the last time he would see his fellow officer.

Early onset dementia. What a damned cruel disease.

They left Castellano in the quiet ward and headed out.

Gabe had all but forgotten the purpose of his visit in the time that he'd spent with the man who would clearly have no memory of it. But as he got out of the main door and breathed in the fresh air again, the thoughts of that case came crowding back into his mind.

"Damned shame," he said to Meg, who nodded grimly as she got into the car.

"Good man. He never deserved to end up like this."

Gabe guessed that nobody knew what fate had in store. Not everyone got to live to a ripe old age in their retirement, enjoying leisurely days and surrounded by loving family.

"While we were standing in here," Gabe admitted, "I was thinking

about how passionate Castellano was about that case. I know we worked in different precincts, and I didn't see him day to day, but when I did see him, he was always trying his hardest to make progress on it. Castellano was convinced that there was foul play. We discussed it a few times."

"If you agree to it, I'd like to take it on as a cold case," Meg said, with determination in her voice. "Whether or not Alex's aunt's death is related, I feel that Castellano would have wanted us to use this death to relook at it. And in a way, I'd like to honor who he was by taking the case forward."

Gabe felt his heart swell with a complex mix of emotions as Meg spoke the words. Chief among them was the warm memory of the friendship he and Castellano had shared. Hot on its heels were admiration and gratitude that Meg would be prepared to do this.

"I know that all we have now are the deaths themselves, and obviously some of his notes in the cold case files. It's not a lot. But then, you've never needed a lot to get started," Gabe said, glancing at Meg affectionately as he pulled away from the assisted living center.

"It's not only Castellano who'd want me to do this," Meg said to him. "It's also Maria. Alex spoke so fondly of her, and I know what a generous person she was. If she was robbed of her last few months of life, and others have been, too, then she'd want me to look into that."

"It's a deal, then," Gabe said, and Meg stuck out her hand, and they shook on it while he drove.

"Deal," she repeated. "I'll get everything I need when we're back at the police station."

CHAPTER SIX

Meg hadn't yet had a chance to tell Gabe why she'd gone to the police station in the first place. The confrontation with Suanne Brook was still raw in her mind, and while Gabe was looking up the details on Castellano's cold cases, she ran the situation past him quickly.

"I was researching James's murder and came face to face with a CIO by the name of Suanne Brook this morning," she said. "She was one of the execs who left the company at around the time they finally discovered the embezzlement."

"Did you get any further with her?" Gabe asked as the printer whirled. He was forwarding some of the information to Meg online, but hard copies were always useful. Like Gabe himself, Meg was a tactile person and, having started her career in a paper-based office, she found the act of flipping through sheets of information helped her to focus her mind, and it was easier than scrolling through the same data online.

"She rapidly changed into my public enemy number one. She escalated from defensive to aggressive and then to downright incoherent," Meg explained as Gabe raised his eyebrows.

"That must mean something in terms of her involvement," he said.

"It wasn't just the reaction of someone who'd known about it and turned a blind eye," Meg agreed. "Not that I think any top exec would have done such a thing unless they were also getting a share, or they'd been threatened."

The way she said the last word caused Gabe to look in her direction, his

lips tight.

“You think she was?”

“I don’t know. All I know is that to me, her reaction was more fear-based than anything else. But fear of what?”

“Could be of getting found out. That would send her career crashing down around her head,” Gabe observed, shuffling papers together.

"Or it could be that she was seriously threatened and that's why she's said nothing so far. Either way, I'd like to know her address. It's not searchable anywhere online, and I want to try to do some surveillance on her, if I get a chance with this new case on the go."

“Sounds like a good idea to do that,” Gabe said. “I guess that when it comes to something as explosive as embezzlement of millions linked to murder, you wouldn’t phone your connections to discuss it after a visit from Meg Thorne.”

“Nor would you email,” Meg agreed, surprising herself with a grin. “So, if I have the time and I’m not too busy with this other case, then I’d like to check up on her – or else, knock on her door after hours.”

“She might call the cops on you then,” Gabe said with some amusement.

“And what will you do?”

“I’m a public servant. I’ll arrive at her door and assess whether you’re presenting a threat.”

Meg snorted. “That’s kind of you. However, given that she might be involved or at least complicit in historic criminal activities, I’m not sure that she would end up calling the cops, realistically.”

“If she doesn’t, that tells you something, too,” Gabe agreed. “And I’ve found her address.”

He gave it to Meg. Checking it against the map, she wasn’t surprised to see that Suanne lived in a gated community. She’d have to go there and see exactly how stringent the security was. Some communities took things to the max, with fully fenced-off areas, guardhouses, entrance booms, and no way of getting in unless the person inside knew you were coming.

Of course, that also meant there might be a record of any visitors that Suanne received. And if she left the community to meet somebody somewhere, then Meg could follow her tracks.

That was all in the future, though. Suanne might not even reach out to anyone. This was just a theory, and Meg had other things to occupy her time today. The same could surely be said of Suanne, whose schedule was so busy that it had taken Meg months to get the tiniest sliver of her time.

For now, she had something more important – Castellano’s cold case legacy, which might just reveal more about what had happened to Alex’s aunt.

*

By the time she walked back into her home, it was early afternoon, and her laptop bag was heavier than it had been when she’d left, thanks to the documents from all the cold cases which were now in a folder, each one neatly separated from the next with paperclips.

None of the case document stacks was very thick, and Meg knew that the paucity of information would prove a challenge, especially since it was now years down the line. But even so, her mind was racing with possibilities as she let herself in.

Her first thought was that a medical professional – a doctor, nurse, or maybe even an orderly might have gone rogue and decided they decide the fate of the terminal patients who came in for care. Possibly they had decided that they were brining a merciful end to their suffering.

That was her top theory, but there were others simmering below the surface.

Before she explored any of them, she needed to review the paperwork. No point in getting wedded to a theory that might prove to be instantly wrong.

She turned and closed the door and then headed to the dining room.

Her long-haired cat, Corrigan, was asleep on the sideboard where they both knew he wasn't allowed. At this time of the year, it benefited from a ray of afternoon sun that gleamed through the window, shining off the couple of ornaments and the porcelain bowl that Meg kept there, and glinting off Corrigan's coat as he stretched.

His back paws touched the bowl. As he stretched, it shifted slightly.

Meg froze, watching the bowl move toward the sideboard's edge. He was doing this on purpose. He'd waited for her to come home before showing her the power that he wielded over breakable things.

"If you knock that off," she told him, "I really am going to enforce the rules about you getting up there."

Corrigan gave her a knowing look, as if calling her bluff.

Giving up on her fruitless expedition into cat discipline, Meg walked over and scratched his head, before moving the bowl a few inches away from the edge.

Then, she went to the kitchen, got herself a cup of coffee, and raided the refrigerator for lunch. It yielded a few cold cuts and some premade salad that she'd picked up from the deli yesterday. Deciding this would do just fine, she assembled the food on a plate and took it through to the dining room.

Sipping her coffee, she looked through the files, getting a feel for what Castellano had assembled, while keeping her eyes open for any and all common factors. Since the cases hadn't been solved and had grown cold, Meg knew that the answer wouldn't be obvious. She was going to have to hunt for it.

Meg started reading, quickly becoming immersed in the cases. The spectrum of people was wide, but the common factor was that all of them had been terminal patients. A couple had diseased organs, cancer patients were the majority, and one had a blood disorder that had proved fatal.

They hadn't all occurred at one place; the cases were spread over four different hospitals in the wider Boston area.

What Castellano had noted was that camera footage wasn't available in any of the cases. Either cameras were being repaired or else they weren't installed at the time in those particular wards, or else they were offline for unexplained reasons. In one case, cameras had been sabotaged.

That was interesting to Meg. She was prepared to acknowledge that cameras were temperamental, and that footage wasn't always available when upgrades and repairs were in progress, but she guessed that most times, most hospitals managed to keep the footage they needed.

The fact that there was no footage in any of the instances, including Maria's death, was a big red flag, as well as a link between this case and the

previous ones.

Now, how would someone have known about this lack of footage? They must have been familiar with the hospitals at the time and either have known about the absence of camera footage or else been able to cause it when they needed to. Perhaps in some cases, they had been able to schedule the crimes for when the cameras were going to be offline.

Reading into the research notes, Meg saw that Castellano had tried to pinpoint hospital workers who could have committed the crimes – clearly thinking along the same lines as herself – but he'd run into logistical difficulties due to the sheer number of workers and the fact that doctors, employees, and contractors alike tended to move between the various hospitals. He'd jotted down a series of explanatory notes on this. Nurses could be deployed to different hospitals in order to fill empty shifts, doctors commonly did the rounds between multiple sites, and orderlies could be employed by outside contractors, who provided services like cleaning, maintenance, or catering

And of course, people changed jobs over the years and moved around.

Yup, it wasn't going to be simple, that was for sure.

While Meg was busy making lists of all the different job categories, her front door rattled, and Alex walked in.

She looked better than she had done this morning. Less upset and stressed. Meg thought the time spent with her cousin, comforting her and mourning Maria, must have been good for her. Instead, she looked filled with resolve.

"Meg," she said, before Meg could say anything at all about what she'd learned over the past hours, "I'm convinced that Maria's death was due to

foul play. And after talking to my cousin, we both agreed we have someone in mind.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Come sit, and tell me what you’ve found out,” Meg said. “I’ve got some news for you on this, too. And a piece of cake from Gabe to cheer you up. It’s a thank-you for our work on the last case we helped with.”

She set the bag with the cake down on the table.

Alex looked at the folders arranged on the desk in front of Meg and sat down, staring at her curiously.

“You’ve been working on this already, you superstar? What are all these files?”

“It’s the start of a new cold case series,” Meg told her. “And it’s one that might possibly involve your aunt. It’s only a possibility, but a detective called Frank Castellano collected evidence on a number of deaths in hospitals that occurred five to ten years ago. Quite a few of them, as you can see from the folders here. All terminal patients. None were expected to die when they did. However, I’m still working through the people who were at the hospital at the time, as well as all the lab results that Castellano was busy collecting. Unfortunately, so far, it looks as if some of the toxicology reports were inconclusive. And of course, if the killer had some medical knowledge and access to various drugs, then he or she could have used different ones each time, or else put a cocktail together that would be hard to pick up.”

Alex stared at her in utter surprise.

“This is incredible. Meg, I know you’re probably still on the fence about it and taking a more cautious approach, but to me, this must be

linked. The only question I have is, why the gap from five years ago until now?"

"Well," Meg said, "Maybe there wasn't actually a gap. Perhaps after Castellano retired, nobody kept joining the dots."

Alex stared at her, mouth open in surprise, before hastily closing it.

"Damn," she said, her voice soft. "That could be true. I hope it isn't."

"I've been looking through the lists of the hospital workers, and it's going to be a tough task to figure out who it was. That's what I was thinking, anyway. So, if your cousin has a lead, then it might give us a head start."

"Well, the nurse that my cousin suspects is someone called Frieda. She only knows her first name and can't remember her last name. She says that Maria told her Frieda was somehow untrustworthy, and she never felt comfortable when she was caring for her. I know that a feeling isn't much, but it might be important."

"We could start there," Meg said. "How old is Frieda? Did your cousin give an idea of her age?"

Meg's first thought was whether she'd been in nursing fifteen years ago, or whether she was too young to have committed the earlier crimes – if indeed they were crimes. And even though Alex was clearly setting a lot of store by this potentially suspicious link to her aunt, Meg didn't know if it was as strong a lead as her friend thought.

It could be, but they would need to dig for a motive.

Just as Meg was about to explain that to Alex, she spoke up.

"I know I'm jumping the gun here, and we need to find a reason why

she'd have done this," she said. "But you have to trust your gut feeling initially, don't you?"

"Definitely," Meg said. "If your cousin and your aunt had a bad feeling about this nurse, then let's look into that first. Even if Frieda doesn't prove to be the person we need, she might know more about who else worked with Maria, and that can give us a new lead."

"Exactly," Alex said.

"I said to myself earlier, and I'm saying it to you now, that if these cold cases are linked, they're not going to be easy to solve. Castellano was a superb detective, and after a report from one victim's relative, he picked up the correlation but couldn't get any further. I don't want to repeat what he did and get nowhere if there is an easier way to do things. So, how about we find out who Frieda is, and when she gets off shift, we go ask some questions. We might not even have to go to the hospital if she's at home now," Meg added thoughtfully.

And if Frieda had been on duty and responsible for Maria's death in the small hours, she would be off duty now.

"I'm on it," Alex said.

Picking up the phone, she called the hospital, asking a few innocent questions while Meg stood by, ready to check the information that Alex received.

Within a minute they had learned that Frieda had been on duty last night, was off duty now, and that her surname was Harlow. Another call from Meg to Gabe, and they found out that she was forty-five years old, and that her home address was in an apartment building a few miles closer to town than Meg lived.

They had what they needed, and now it was time to get face to face with the first person who could give them more information on the case.

Leaving Corrigan to his satisfying snooze, they headed out and went straight to Frieda Harlow's home address.

*

By the time they reached the apartment building, it was after three in the afternoon. The morning weather had started out promising, but the afternoon had clouded over, and now, a cold rain was falling.

Meg hoped that Frieda would have hunkered down in the unpleasant weather and stayed home. Although they had a phone number for her, Meg didn't want to use it. That could give her a heads-up.

She guessed that if Frieda had committed serial crimes, then she might be expecting the police to show up at some stage, asking questions, but perhaps not this fast.

They parked outside and hurried up to the building's entrance.

It was somewhere between humble and dilapidated. A basic four-story building, nearly as bleak and unattractive as the assisted living home that she and Gabe had visited earlier.

Whatever Frieda's motives, if she was in fact the killer, it hadn't been done for financial gain. Not obviously, anyway.

Financial gain was still a possible motive, though. There was always a possibility that someone might have found a way to benefit from these people's deaths. Since revenge clearly wasn't a motive, Meg found her mind veering between two scenarios. Either this person saw themselves as some kind of savior, or they had somehow gained something from their patients' untimely demise.

They walked up the stairs in preference to taking the rather battered-looking elevator and marched along the corridor to the apartment.

Meg saw through the small pane of frosted glass on the side of the door that there was a light on inside.

She knocked on the door, and they waited.

After a minute, Meg heard footsteps approaching. The door opened to reveal a dark-haired woman. Her face, hair, and bathrobe all looked creased and rumpled, as if the knock had woken her from sleep. The frown lines between her brown eyes intensified as she stared at Meg and Alex.

"Afternoon," Meg said. "Are you Frieda Harlow?"

"I am." Frieda nodded. "What's this about? Why are you here?" She stared at them with suspicion, an expression into which her features seemed to fall naturally.

"We want to speak to you about Maria Chan," Alex said, and Meg could hear she was unable to keep the emotion out of her voice as she spoke her aunt's name.

"What about her?" But now, Frieda looked more worried as she stared from one woman to the other.

"She passed away last night," Alex said.

Frieda nodded. "Yes. I heard so. I was on duty in her ward earlier in the evening. I spoke to her. She seemed fine. I still don't know why you're here and what you're doing on my doorstep. I don't even know who you are."

"I'm Maria's niece, Alex, and this is my friend and work partner, Meg." Alex stared her down, and Meg could see she was trying to get a grip on her emotions.

“And you’re here?” Meg was surprised to see that Frieda’s face had softened.

“I guess you want to know if she said any last words, anything like that.” Frieda pressed her lips together ruefully. “Unfortunately, my last conversation with her was to tell her that I wasn’t able to supply her with any sleeping medication. She always battled after she’d had that pain relief drug. For some reason – it’s not common – it stopped her from sleeping well when it was infused. Or maybe it was the hospital environment. She asked me for something to help her sleep a few times during her stays, and each time I had to tell her no. She probably resented me for that, but there was nothing I could do.”

That was interesting.

Was it true?

Meg didn’t see any sign of a lie in Frieda’s face. She was speaking in regretful tones, as if she was genuinely sorry about having to deny a patient the help that she would have liked to give her. Meg wondered if the denial of a sleeping tablet might have been the reason why Maria had resented her. Little things like that could become big stumbling blocks when you were alone and in a hospital ward for the night.

“What time did you interact with her?” Meg asked.

"Must have been sometime before midnight. I'd have to check my sheet to see exactly. I filled it in when I left the ward," Frieda said. "I must say, I was surprised to learn that she'd passed away during the night, because I've been around a few patients who've passed suddenly, and in my experience, there are usually subtle signs that things aren't right, small changes in their behavior. I didn't see any of that with Maria. I thought she was a very brave

person, and I'm very sorry for your loss, Ms. Chan."

Frieda clearly didn't know that they were investigating potential foul play. She had no idea that this death was anything but a sad, unusual, but far from impossible event. Meg's experienced eye didn't pick up anything different.

"Can you confirm that you weren't in the ward at the time?" Alex challenged her.

Frieda looked at her, perplexed.

"Well, yes, I can do that. I was on duty in another ward at the time, and I can show you my time sheet. I was there from a few minutes after midnight until the end of my shift at six a.m. because we had a couple of patients who were high risk and had just come back to the ward after operations. So, I wasn't alone. Are you thinking I had something to do with her death?" Her voice sounded incredulous. "The answer to that is definitely no. I understand that you're upset, but I do think that coming to my home to ask me that is a bit extreme."

"I apologize," Meg said on Alex's behalf, quickly intervening to defuse the situation. "We unfortunately do suspect there was some kind of foul play, and as an ex-cop who's also an investigator, I'm looking into the case. I know that it's a horrible question to have to answer, especially when you're innocent, but I appreciate you doing that."

Frieda nodded, looking mollified.

"Understood," she said.

Time to ask the next question, then.

"Have you heard of any other unexplained deaths of that kind taking place in the hospital over the past few weeks or months?"

“You’re not accusing me?” Again, her face tightened in suspicion.

“No. I understand you were elsewhere in the ward. But you’ve been working as a nurse in Boston for a while. A previous investigator linked together a few other cases some years ago. He never got anywhere with them. Now there’s another one that looks to be similar. I just wondered if you’d heard of any other similar cases?”

Frieda frowned. “Well, I don’t know if it’s relevant, but there was a death a few weeks ago at another hospital. It was the same kind of scenario, and I admit, it shocked everyone.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Another similar death? Just a few weeks ago? Meg's instincts were now screaming at her that this was a serial crime and that the killer, after taking a break for a few years, might be back at work again.

She forced herself not to jump to conclusions, although that was hard to do. Instead, keeping her voice neutral, she did her best to find out more.

"Can you tell us who that was?" Meg asked.

"It was a patient called Bob Whitman," she said reluctantly. "I'm still not sure if I should be telling you this."

"We can, and will, look it up," Meg said. "However, it would be helpful to hear things from your point of view. So you say this was at a different hospital?"

"Yes, one in the north of Boston. I don't work there. I do occasionally fill in for shifts at two of the other hospitals, but not that one."

"So, how did you hear about it?" Alex asked. Meg could hear that she'd now gotten her emotions under control, and her voice and demeanor were back to normal.

"A friend of mine is the ward nurse there, and she told me about it last week when we met up for coffee."

"What exactly happened?"

Meg saw Frieda nod at her question as if she'd decided that it would be the right thing to talk about it. She took a moment to gather her thoughts, and then she opened up.

"He came in for open heart surgery, and it seemed to go very well. However, he then developed complications, and one of his aortas ruptured. He went from being ready to go home to basically having palliative care. It was very sad. His children were in different countries around the globe, and they were flying in to be with him, because he had a good few weeks left, and there was a chance that the aorta might stabilize enough for him to go home under nursing care. My friend said that his family already had nurses organized – they were fairly wealthy. So, it was a shock, and they never got to the bottom of it. My friend said –"

Frieda abruptly stopped herself, looking flustered. Meg guessed that she'd been about to say something and had then decided it was unwise.

"What did she say?" Meg asked.

Frieda shook her head. "I really can't tell you. I'd get fired."

"If you're not comfortable giving us the full story, then why not hint at it?" Alex encouraged her. "If you give us the basic information, then we can take it further. But right now it does look as if there's a problem. Losing a patient without a real cause is traumatic, and I'm sure that you and your colleagues don't want that happening again."

"You're right," Frieda said.

For a moment, looking at her face, Meg thought she was going to tell them everything, but at the last minute, she backed out.

"My friend wondered if someone was doing it for insurance fraud. You know, because he'd been wealthy. But of course, that was just malicious gossip and totally unfounded," she added firmly.

"Did your friend have any idea who might have possibly done such a thing?" Meg asked, feeling certain that there was.

"Well, she had an argument with someone a while ago about medication being administered, and it ended up escalating. She felt as if she was being treated very unfairly, and she believed that the person she had the argument with wasn't professional or ethical, and didn't regard other workers as human beings."

"That's a starting point," Meg decided. "Who was it?"

"It was one of the anesthetists. I really can't say more." She was looking deeply uneasy.

"What were the issues? Why that person?" Sensing that she had the thin end of the wedge in place, Meg pushed it forward.

"It's just that – well, he's a highly regarded anesthetist, but he's had some big setbacks in his career because he has a substance abuse problem that led to him having financial difficulties a while ago. That's common knowledge, so I guess I can tell you. He went to rehab at a place very close to the hospital, but he didn't lose his job because there's such a shortage of skilled anesthetists," she explained, her voice trembling. "I saw him just yesterday. He was there, at the hospital."

"And having given us all of that information, would you be willing to tell his name? We're not going on any gossip here, but a substance abuse problem is something that we'd investigate as a matter of course," Meg said.

Poor Frieda's cheeks were flushing deeply. She looked freaked out to have gone as far as she had. And Meg knew by now that they weren't going to get any further.

"I'm sorry, but no," she said. "I can't do that. You'll have to look for yourselves. And if you don't mind, I've still got an hour's sleep to go before

my alarm wakes me for my shift.”

She didn’t quite slam the door in their faces. She closed it softly after giving an apologetic shake of her head.

“I don’t blame her for not giving the name,” Meg said as they turned away. “She was scared. We were lucky to get what we did from her.”

“An anesthetist with a substance abuse problem, who was at the hospital yesterday? It can’t be that hard to find out which one he is,” Alex agreed. “Substance abuse could be a reason for needing money, right? I know which place she was talking about. I have a friend who used to work there, and who might be able to put me in touch with someone who can help.”

"I think we could get the details in a couple of phone calls," Meg agreed.

They made the calls in the car. Alex called her friend first. She was willing to help, called a connection of hers, and after then calling the connection directly once the link had been established, Alex got the information they needed after having promised not to mention any names.

The anesthetist with a substance abuse problem was Dr. Brennan, and he lived fairly close to where Meg’s mother stayed.

“The connection I spoke to said that he’s a bombastic person who’s not the same from day to day and isn’t stable. According to the report that she received from his workplace, he can make very callous comments about death and illness and other patients, and he’s disrespectful to them,” Alex said. “He’s about fifty years old and he’s an alcoholic and addict who keeps relapsing, but he’s one of those who’s in deep denial about his problems. I think he only attended rehab because he was forced to. It was that or lose his job. He had this way of trying to ‘charm’ everyone that he connected

with at the rehab place, but it wasn't really charming, and she didn't trust it at all. She said that it always seemed as if he was a very transactional person. He could be charming if he wanted something from you."

"That's sounding like the possible mindset of the person we're looking for," Meg agreed. "The money issue is something we need to look into more deeply and see if it's relevant to him, but let's get face to face with him first."

Knowing the hours that doctors worked in short-staffed hospitals, Meg called the hospital firsts to see if he was there.

Sure enough, Dr. Brennan had just arrived on shift.

"I reckon we go straight back there and try to get face to face with him," Meg said. "If he's doing a long shift and he goes into surgery, there's no way that we'll be able to get there."

"The sooner, the better," Alex agreed.

As they headed for the car, Meg couldn't help regretting that she couldn't get to Suanne Brook this evening. She'd wanted to knock on her door, and now that would have to wait. Pity. But right now, Alex's aunt's case took priority because, together with the earlier case Frieda had mentioned, Meg suspected this killer might be active again.

The afternoon traffic was already starting to build as they drove in the direction of the hospital again.

As if trying to deflect her focus from the tough topic of her aunt, Alex asked, "How's your mom doing, Meg?"

Meg felt herself relax as her mind veered away from the troubling topic of the case – for a while, at least.

“She’s doing well. I went to have dinner with her a couple of nights ago.”

“And how was that?” Alex seemed grateful for the general chat as they eased their way forward down the clogged road.

“It’s like dining with the queen,” Meg admitted, as Alex snorted.

“In what way?”

“Well, my mom has always led a very privileged, sheltered life. And she’s always had so much help in the house. I grew up that way, believing it was normal to have servants doing everything for you, and a housemaid fetching and carrying dishes from the dinner table. I rebelled against that big-time as soon as I realized how unequal life was for everyone. Servants included. I hated the fact that I was born into wealth.”

“Strangely, my aunt was the same as you,” Alex said. “She had some personal wealth from her husband, and she never flaunted it and was actually very apologetic about it.”

So Maria had been relatively wealthy? That snippet of information was disturbing. Perhaps there was a financial, insurance-related motive, and Maria had been murdered for financial gain.

“Anyway,” Meg said, getting back to the dinner party, “of course, caterers were called in to provide and serve the food.”

“For the two of you?” Alex’s eyebrows rose.

“Yup,” Meg nodded. “My mom was as proud as if she’d made the food herself. Chatted away about how excellent these caterers were, and how they were the best ones that she’d ever used, and how she’d pondered over the menu for days.”

“Oh, bless her,” Alex said.

“Exactly.” Meg nodded. “I’ve finally gotten over my rebellious phase. Only taken me fifty years. Strangely enough, I think that in the years after James’s murder, I started to think differently about family and realized that they wouldn’t always be there, and that finally ended up bringing my mom and me closer again.”

“And do you think of her the same way now?” Alex asked. “Or is there still that resentment?”

Meg shook her head. “She makes my eyes roll from time to time, but I can see now that she can’t help her own upbringing and background, and she’s only doing what she’s always done, and with the most loving intentions. If you throw a dinner party, you get the caterers in, whether it’s for ten people, twenty, or for you and your daughter.”

“So, what did you have?” Alex asked.

“The dinner started with a small glass of sherry as an aperitif, and a couple of canapes – mainly smoked salmon-based, served by a very sweet and keen young student waiter,” Meg remembered. “Then, we moved to the dining room where a fine bottle of Chardonnay was opened.”

She glanced at Alex, who was looking more and more amused as Meg’s rendition of the evening progressed.

“We were served a very good leek and potato soup, and then a chicken supreme with gravy and tender spring vegetables. Dessert was individual chocolate tarts with a swirl of vanilla cream.”

“Oh, my goodness,” Alex said, shaking her head. “That’s like living in another world, but how sweet of your mom to get so excited about the menu and the dinner.”

"It was a very pleasant evening," Meg said. "Luckily, I was able to persuade my mom to relax her standards, and we ended up having coffee with the student waiter, who sat down with us while he ate one of the spare desserts. He told us about his psychology studies and his hopes and dreams."

"So, you're teaching your mom to be more egalitarian?" Alex asked.

Meg nodded. "Yes. I think she's learning from my influence that you can actually socialize with the help and that they're people, too."

"That's a valuable lesson, and probably not the easiest to learn when you're in your eighties and you've had the life she has."

"Exactly," Meg said.

That conversation had taken them all the way to the hospital, and Meg headed into the visitor's parking lot, wondering if they would be in time to speak to the troubled Dr. Brennan before he headed into the theater.

CHAPTER NINE

“Doctor Brennan. Is he available?” Meg asked the receptionist.

She checked the list. "The doctor is about to go into the theater, but he might not be inside yet. What's this about?"

“We need to have a very quick word with him. It’s in connection with Maria Chan, the patient who passed away unexpectedly last night,” Meg said. She hoped that the mention of Maria’s name would open doors, and sure enough, the receptionist said, “He’s in the surgery ward on the second floor. I should really notify him if you’re coming up, though.”

Feeling bad for stealthing her, but grateful that they’d managed to get inside, Meg said, “We won’t be long.”

That was a promise she was almost certainly going to keep, she thought ruefully, as they headed for the stairs. The interview might be extremely short when Brennan realized why they were there.

Spotting the signposts to the operating theater, Meg and Alex hustled that way.

“Brennan is average height, dark haired, and in the photos I saw of him when I researched him online, he was wearing round-framed spectacles,” Meg said.

A moment later, she saw the man they were looking for.

He was standing near the theater, busy speaking on his phone, a mask hooked over one of his ears and those distinctive spectacles in place. Meg rushed over, bypassing two nurses who were pushing a stretcher into the ward, and rushing up to the anesthetist.

Close up, she saw that behind the glasses, his dark eyes did look somewhat reddened. His skin was dull, and his hair, which was receding slightly, looked greasy and limp.

Was he still in the throes of his addiction?

He wrapped up his phone call, and before Meg could approach him, he turned and strode away, down a corridor that was marked 'Staff Only'.

Feeling anxious that he might be about to go into the theater through another door, Meg hustled after him. She was only just in time. A shout from behind told her that someone had seen Alex following her and that her partner had been stopped.

She was on her own, then. Meg knew that Alex would comply obediently and then start changing the subject. Even if whoever shouted out had seen both of them, Alex would use her charm to delay and distract them from following Meg.

And, best of all, Brennan wasn't heading straight into the theater. Instead, he was veering into a room with large windows overlooking the cityscape below, which seemed to be a break room. And a smoking room, she realized, as he produced an e-cigarette from his pocket.

She tapped on the door and walked in. The room was warmer than the rest of the hospital, and it contained a variety of weathered but comfortable-looking furniture – couches, armchairs, easy chairs, and a couple of small tables and desks. Brennan wasn't sitting down but was staring out of the window as he drew on his cigarette. Meg's nose picked up the fruity fragrance of the steam as she headed toward him. He looked around in surprise.

"You're not a staff member. Are you lost?" he asked. He was fidgeting

with the cigarette in his right hand.

“Are you Dr. Brennan?” she asked in polite tones.

He stared at her in surprise. “Yes. I am Dr. Brennan. I’m about to head into surgery. What’s this about? Did you come here to see me?”

Meg wished there was more time to skirt around the topic and to try to gauge his reaction as she introduced the subject. However, there wasn’t, and if he had committed a murder last night, he was going to be more alert than usual to the presence of strangers asking random questions.

So, given that, she might as well get straight to the point.

“It’s in connection with Maria Chan’s death,” she said.

He stared at her in surprise that Meg didn’t think was faked. “Maria who? Is she a patient here? I don’t remember dealing with her.”

“She was a patient who came in to get pain management treatment. She passed away last night,” Meg said.

He nodded. "I was in the theater until the small hours yesterday. Had a tricky heart operation in progress, so I didn't know about that. I went straight home to get some rest before coming back, because there are two more operations scheduled this afternoon and then patients to check up on. I've got a busy calendar, and unless this is a patient that I'm directly involved with, I can't help you."

He was terse, had no bedside manner, but it really did sound as if he didn’t know Maria, and also, the timeframe of the operations was making it less likely that he could have committed this crime. Not impossible, though, Meg reminded herself. He could have come out of theater and immediately headed to her ward, ready with some lethal doses of the drugs he’d administered in lighter quantities during the operations.

She warned herself not to be too trusting. Just because she wasn't in the police didn't mean she should abandon the distrustful attitude that had served her well when questioning suspects.

"I'm working with the police," Meg said, "and trying to get some background on what happened to Maria. It seems that there have been other unexplained deaths at the hospitals in the Boston area."

She sensed a shift in his attitude. Perhaps it was aggression, building inside him. He'd started out fairly polite, but now he was squaring his shoulders as he looked at her, and there was a slight tremor in his jaw.

"You sound like you think I've got something to do with this."

"I'm simply looking for information," Meg said.

"That's not what I'm surmising from the way you're speaking."

"As an anesthetist, did you work on Bob Whitman?" she asked, wanting to distract him before he started getting all-out aggressive and calling security on her. Meg didn't need to end up getting banned from the hospital.

That name distracted him from his anger, at least.

"Whitman? Rings a bell, but not recently. That was a couple of months ago. I did work on the team. The operation was a success. Unfortunately, the aorta burst subsequently and couldn't be repaired. Beyond our powers."

"He shouldn't have died when he did," Meg said.

Brennan shook his head. "You're wrong, ma'am. He had a life-threatening condition. Anyone with any medical training and enough experience would have said that his heart was a disaster waiting to happen. Probably, the more training you had, the more you'd understand how possible it was. That's why anesthetists like me are so sought-after, because

we're so competent. I've never, ever lost a patient on the operating table or as a result of the anesthetic. I have a brilliant, unblemished record."

Meg felt frustrated that he was now evading the issue. On the other hand, maybe she was the one being unfair here.

Was he the killer at all?

Brennan clearly had his challenges in life, but it wasn't as if he'd succumbed to them. Whether or not he'd relapsed, he had been to rehab to address his problems, and now, he wasn't losing it with her. Not yet, at any rate.

"There have been a few unexplained deaths in terminal or near-terminal patients over the years," she said. "Did you ever speak to a cop called Castellano? He was investigating those deaths."

He closed his cigarette and shoved it back in his pocket.

"You have a cheek," he told her, his nasty side now showing, like a coin that had been flipped. "You're a random member of the public, and you're asking me questions that are frankly offensive. Why the hell should I answer them? I don't owe you a thing, and you're not paying me. I answer to my patients and their families, and my bosses and I don't owe you a damned thing."

"Look," Meg said, but he shook his head.

"Whatever the hell game you're playing, it stops, now. I have enough on my plate without being falsely accused. Now, get out of the hospital."

To Meg's irritation, he reached out his hands, spun her around, and shunted her out of the break room like a bouncer politely but firmly removing an unruly patron from a nightclub.

Meg gritted her teeth, knowing that as much as she wanted to grab his arm and twist it, the best thing for her to do now was to comply. She couldn't afford to make waves.

He stomped off toward an entrance, saying 'Private' that Meg guessed led to the back of the theater, and she headed back the way she'd come, feeling a sense of frustration that the interview had been so inconclusive and that Brennan had turned so hostile.

Had there been a way of preventing that?

Meg didn't think so. He clearly had a short fuse and issues that would contribute to him getting angry, fast.

He had a sketchy alibi, and although he'd had the opportunity to commit this morning's crime, would he have done it?

Replaying his words in her mind, Meg found herself dwelling on the fact that he'd had a note of pride in his voice when mentioning the success of Bob Whitman's operation. He might be plagued with problems, but you couldn't fake a genuine pride and passion for your work, and Meg had heard both in his voice.

She couldn't clear him yet. There hadn't been time to do that. Her gut feeling was that he was unpleasant, flawed, perhaps still fighting his addiction, but that he was truly proud of having never lost a patient.

However, she hadn't been able to ask him about his financial situation. He'd been too rushed, too brittle, and she knew that his ego certainly wouldn't have allowed for any of those questions. He'd have exploded.

Meg turned away and hurried back down the corridor, still feeling ambivalent about what she'd learned.

There would be a time-consuming way to clear him, and that would be

by looking through the hospital records. He was a very busy anesthetist who was working back-to-back shifts, and if he was in theater or at another hospital at the time when one of the deaths had occurred, then he'd be cleared. There were many deaths to check up on over the past six to ten years, and that timing might clear him.

Also, there might be other, more recent deaths in the past few months that they didn't yet know about.

Even so, why would there be such a long gap between this death and the earlier ones six to ten years ago?

Meg was mulling over that when she reached the theater's main entrance. Alex was there, looking eagerly in her direction. Meg pressed her lips together, wishing she'd been able to get more conclusive answers.

"Well?" Alex said.

Meg shook her head. "It was difficult. He was prickly, rushed, defensive, and I didn't have enough time to clear him fully."

Alex grimaced. "I had a feeling it might work out that way. What was your gut feel?"

"My gut tells me that he takes an immense amount of pride in having an unblemished record," Meg said. "His entire ego and self-image seemed to hinge on the fact that he hasn't lost any patients during or after their anesthetic. He's not a nice person – don't get me wrong. But now that I've spoken to him, he wouldn't be top of my list."

"Well," Alex said, thinking along the same lines that Meg had done, "we can always clear him by tracking his activities when the earlier crimes were committed. It won't be impossible from five or six years ago. And I don't see someone so egotistical murdering people for insurance fraud. That

would mean admitting to himself that he was short of money and desperate.”

“Let’s work on clearing him when we can,” Meg said. “That might mean getting Gabe to ask the hospital managers to cooperate and give us access to some of the shift records, and I’d like to do that as soon as possible. Because, if we’re able to get the records we need, we could also get the information on any other unexplained deaths.”

"Why don't we call Gabe and head to the manager's office right now?" Alex asked.

CHAPTER TEN

The hospital manager's office was tucked away on the first floor in an airless and windowless part of the building. The squeak of their feet on the tiles and the hum of the air-conditioning were the only sounds Meg could hear as she and Alex headed in that direction. It had taken a few questions and some false starts to locate the offices. They were all the way behind the first floor X-ray department, and not well signposted.

Meg had got a burst of energy from the hot, strong coffee she'd gulped down in the cafeteria while they were waiting for Gabe to make the call. After stalling with Dr. Brennan, she now felt motivated and ready to carry on until late in the evening.

If only she could split herself in two, and also keep track of Suanne, she thought, before turning her mind back to the current case.

Ahead was the office itself. Yellowish cream walls paired with bright overhead lights provided a slightly nauseating color scheme. The reception desk, flanked with ranks of files on shelves, was empty, but a man in a gray suit and tie was standing in the doorway beyond.

He had a bald head that gleamed in the unrelenting light, and a face that looked drawn and tired, as if he'd worked a long, hard shift. He looked at them with wary eyes.

"I'm Mr. Maurice, and I'm the area manager of three hospitals in this network. I've just been called by Detective Reeves, who said you need certain information from me."

"Please," Meg said. "I'm Meg Thorne, ex-cop, and this is Alex Chan,

ex-prosecutor, and niece of Maria Chan. We're assisting the police with some cold cases they're relooking at. A detective called Castellano was investigating a possibly linked series of cases from five to ten years ago involving the suspicious deaths of patients who were terminally ill, but who should have survived a few more weeks or months. There may have been two more of those here at this hospital in recent weeks, to my knowledge. One was Maria Chan, and the other was Bob Whitman."

"Understood," he said, his face giving nothing away. "Do you suspect that somebody at this hospital was involved?"

"We want to take a look at the shift records for your anesthetist, Dr. Brennan." Seeing the surprise in his eyes, Meg said, "He was on duty here last night and an anesthetist would have very easy access to the drugs needed to cause these deaths, so we'd like to rule him out."

Sometimes it was all in the way you phrased a question. Knowing that they wanted to access the shift record in order to rule someone out got Maurice looking instantly more cooperative.

"Anything else?" he asked.

"Well, for a start, I'd like to know if there have been any other suspicious or untimely deaths in this hospital chain in the last few months. I'm talking about people whose vitals were normal even though they were ill, but who then inexplicably died."

"Come in and sit down," the manager said. He led them through to his office. At least the oddly-colored walls were so shrouded by shelves and ranks of files that the effect was camouflaged.

They sat down on two rickety office chairs while he squeezed his way around the side of the desk in the cramped space. He turned one of two

computer monitors on and tapped at the keyboard.

“I don’t usually help civilians,” he said. “However, given that Ms. Chan is related to the person who passed away, and you’re working with the police, I’m prepared to give you some basic information. However, please do not get the media involved. We don’t want a torrent of bad press coming our way.”

“I don’t intend to take this to the media, and can guarantee you it’ll stay confidential and a police matter,” Meg assured him.

"I was working here ten years ago. I was the assistant manager back then for this specific hospital, and I do remember a couple of those untimely deaths. We looked into them because, between you and me, and I'm only telling you this because Detective Reeves said I should regard you as proxy police, we wondered if there was any sabotage and if a staff member was acting out of turn or 'putting them out of their misery'." He air-quoted the words.

“Do you know if anyone ever spoke about doing that?” Meg asked, thinking that he’d used those words very specifically.

He nodded. “There was a nurse who worked here a while ago. I can look up the exact details of the day she quit. She was a senior nurse, and she moved between all the different hospitals. She said that on more than one occasion, both to us in meetings and also to the patients’ families. It was unacceptable to us, and she was disciplined for it, and she eventually quit, a few years ago.”

A few years ago? Meg glanced at Alex, immediately seeing that her friend was also noting the significance of that timeframe. A few years ago? Could her dismissal be why the murders had stopped?

In that case, perhaps the nurse had recruited or influenced someone new who had started the same process again. Meg considered it unlikely, though.

“What’s her name?” Meg asked.

“Her name is Rebecca Santos,” Maurice said.

“And do you know where she moved on to?”

“I believe she went to work for one of the private clinics,” he said, inflaming Meg’s suspicions still further.

“So she’s still in the industry?” Alex asked.

"Yes, she is." He nodded, his face grim. "She was an excellent nurse. Her views were contrary to our hospital policies, but in the end, we were satisfied that she had been warned not to speak that way, and it was her decision to leave."

“Understood,” Meg said.

Maurice looked up the last few shift cycles that Rebecca Santos had worked and printed that information out for them.

“Please keep this strictly confidential,” he said. “While I am prepared to give you the information on who was working where in the hospitals, I can’t give you any of Rebecca’s personal information. Even the police wouldn’t get that without a warrant. We keep our records highly secure.”

“That’s no problem,” Meg said. Knowing what they did about Rebecca, they would be able to track her down. In fact, she started the process herself, opening her phone while the hospital manager was looking up Dr. Brennan’s recent and historic shifts.

She found what she was looking for almost immediately. Rebecca Santos had striking looks, with a dark beauty to her features, brilliant blue

eyes, and smooth skin that made her look younger than her approximately forty-five years of age.

She was now working for a private practitioner who specialized in cosmetic surgery, and after a couple of minutes more research, Meg was able to track down that clinic's address and key it into her phone. It wasn't too far from where they were now, and she thought they'd still be able to make it there today.

It took a couple more minutes for the manager to look up and print out Dr. Brennan's shifts over the past few months, and then from five to six years ago, which was as far as the available records went.

"We'd have to go into our archives to look up anything older than that," the manager said. "And shift scheduling won't be easy for us to track down, so this is probably the best that we can do now."

"I appreciate it," Meg said. "Is there anything else that we should be looking into? Any other workers who've ever behaved in a strange way or had to be disciplined?"

The manager thought about that for a while, his eyes narrowed. Meg knew he was trying his hardest to help them.

"There have been a few issues with our maintenance crews recently," he said. "A couple of workers ended up either missing their shifts or else breaking things they should be fixing – like the cameras in one of the wards. I did get their names, but I remember checking that both of them were fairly new and had only been working for us for a few months, which would also explain them having made mistakes. No history with the hospital prior to that. Their names are Devon Ledger and Marco Murano, and we noted down the problems, but neither of them were serious enough

to merit a disciplinary hearing. However, since you're looking for even the smallest possible issues, I thought I'd mention them."

"Appreciate it," Meg said, noting down the names. They weren't prime suspects, and she agreed that there were more important angles to consider than maintenance workers with no previous history at the hospital, but it was better to have too much information than too little.

The manager handed her the thick wad of paper, and Meg and Alex stood up and headed out.

"Right," Meg said, when they'd made a couple of turns along the bright corridor. "We could go to this clinic now. It's nearly six p.m., and perhaps we manage to catch a shift change there."

"You drive," Alex said, "and I'll read. Then, by the time we get there, we might have found out whether Rebecca's shift schedule rules her out – or in."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The private clinic specializing in cosmetic surgery felt like a world away from the stark, institutional hospital environment. When Alex pulled up outside the building, she thought it looked more like a grand old home than a hospital. This was definitely a place that catered for the wealthy, she thought.

She guessed that the environment was targeted towards well-heeled patients who wanted to pay for luxury and discretion while having their procedures done.

Glancing at Meg, she wondered if murder for financial gain was top of her mind again.

It was for Alex, and knowing that someone might have claimed her aunt's life for greed gave her a flare of wrath that she had to suppress, because it was interfering with her logical thought processes.

She felt guilty and disbelieving and still shocked that her beloved aunt had died.

Yes, she was terminally ill, but Alex had been ready to treasure those last few months, and she knew Maria had, too. The guilt she felt over this death wouldn't go away, even though it was even more illogical than her anger, because there was surely nothing that she could have done to prevent it.

She'd checked the shift list on the way, and the results had been surprising.

Dr. Brennan was cleared. When one of the earlier deaths, six years ago,

had taken place, he'd been on duty at a hospital on the other side of town.

But Rebecca Santos had been on shift and in the right hospitals when the last two of the earlier deaths had occurred – both were in Castellano's case files.

It made Alex suspect even more strongly that Santos was somehow instrumental in these deaths, too.

"So, do we just march in?" Alex asked, looking at the ornate front door with a few shallow stairs leading up to it. "Or should we be more discreet?"

"I think we need to do both. March right in, but we reserve the right to make plan B if we need to," Meg decided.

"Should I go around the back and see if I can find a staff entrance?" Alex asked, hoping that Meg would agree to this double-pronged approach.

"You want to do that, don't you?" Meg asked.

Alex nodded. "Just in case they turn us away when we set foot in the door."

"Let's do it, then," Meg agreed.

While she headed up the stairs to the front of the building, Alex went around the side. There was a steel fence set in the wall and a security gate barring the way, but as she reached it, she saw it was standing slightly ajar. She guessed that they had gotten lucky with the change of shift possibly happening now.

Or maybe it was only locked at night. Now, it was almost dark, with a fine mist hanging in the air.

Walking around to the back of the building, Alex saw that the clinic was set in a small but well-maintained garden. There were a couple of shaded

benches and a small pavilion, all of which were discreetly lit, with spotlights accentuating the green.

She could imagine the patients walking along these smoothly paved paths and resting on the benches while they recovered from their procedures.

Then, resolve clenched at her insides again as she wondered what the death rate was here. Had any patients passed away unexpectedly at this place? If she was, indeed, the killer, did Rebecca Santos confine her urges to terminal patients only?

Or had she expanded her reach to include other patients?

Or, as Alex thought was more likely, had she influenced others? She might have tried to do that if she'd left, and maybe it had taken a few years for her to find the right new acolyte to continue her work. If so, then Alex promised herself that she was going to find out who that doctor, nurse, cleaner, or orderly was.

Here was a back entrance. Alex peeked through a well-lit window, seeing that she was looking into a small but immaculate kitchen area. Meal prep was clearly done for the day because the counters were gleaming, all appliances shining. A worker in a white overall was busy mopping the floor, and Alex moved quickly away from the window as she looked up. She didn't want to blow her cover or let Meg down.

The door just beyond the window was closed, but as Alex reached it, it opened.

A nurse hurried out who definitely wasn't Rebecca. She was short, blond-haired, blue-eyed, and sturdy. She was clearly coming off shift because she had a big dark jacket slung over her shoulders and a battered

leather purse over her arm.

She stared at Alex in surprise.

“Evening,” she said. “You looking for anyone in here?”

“Yes,” Alex said, wondering if this nurse might believe she was here for innocent reasons of socializing. “I’m here to see Rebecca. Is she on shift?”

“Just coming off,” the nurse said, causing Alex’s heart to speed up. Her subterfuge had worked. She was taking a few leaves from Meg’s book, thanks to working with her so closely. “She’ll be here in a couple of minutes if you want to wait.”

“I’ll wait. Thanks,” Alex said.

The nurse hurried around the side of the building, and Alex waited, moving under the roof overhang as the mist turned to light rain, and wrapping her hands under her armpits to keep them warm.

And then, the dark-haired woman that Meg had shown her briefly on her phone screen appeared at the door.

Rebecca had her hair tied back in a ponytail, and she was wearing a touch of mascara but no other make-up. She was smiling, relaxed, a bright red waterproof jacket over her shoulders, and she didn’t show a trace of suspicion as Alex moved forward.

“Are you Rebecca Santos?” she asked.

“I am, yes,” Rebecca said.

“I want to speak to you about a couple of things that happened when you worked at the main hospital,” Alex said in a low voice, acknowledging the tightrope she was walking. It was damned difficult, in the tight timeframes that she and Meg were necessarily experiencing, to make this

questioning subtle.

Rebecca's eyes opened in surprise – and was there a look of suspicion there? Alex thought so.

“I haven't worked in the main hospital for years,” she said shortly.
“You'd need to ask someone else those questions.”

She hadn't asked what the questions were about. That was interesting – and Alex considered it to be a red flag.

“I'm interested in what happened years ago,” Alex said.

Rebecca stared at her, eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm talking about the deaths of certain patients who were terminal, but who weren't expected to die. They were found dead in the morning. My partner and I are helping the police with cold cases that an earlier detective started, and we've worked out that you were on shift and in the hospitals when both those deaths occurred.”

Alex showed her the names of the two earlier patients.

Rebecca stared down at the page and then up at Alex. Alex's heart pounded harder as she saw the expression in her eyes.

It was a bleak sympathy.

“You must have learned my views,” she said. “And I actually don't even owe you an explanation, but I'll give you one anyway.”

“What's that?” Alex asked.

“If you want to listen to it, then walk with me,” she said.

Why was she saying that? The only reason that Alex could think of was that she wanted to be out in the pattering rain, with ambient noise around her as she left the premises.

Rebecca began walking, and as Alex had guessed she would do, she spoke in a voice so low that even if Alex had been recording her, it probably wouldn't have picked up very much.

"I believe in quality of life," she said softly as she rounded the corner of the building. Out of the corner of her eyes, Alex saw Meg's car. She thought that Meg was waiting in her car, but didn't look in her direction. Meg would have seen her, too. At least, if Rebecca suddenly tried to make a run for it instead of giving Alex the promised information, she'd be able to join the chase.

But she wasn't running. Instead, in that same quiet voice, she was talking.

"I've always felt very strongly that people who are suffering should be allowed to make the choice to die. I'm talking about voluntary euthanasia. That's a very separate issue from the deliberate murder of someone who wants to live. I'm talking about people who are desperate for death. Who want to die. Who are suffering but who are unable to do so because medical ethics, which I personally consider to be warped and unfair, is basically tied into keeping them alive." Her voice dropped so low now that Alex could barely hear it. "You have no idea of the pain that some patients experience and how it feels when they're pleading with you to do something about it. It happened often. Sometimes, late at night, when they were lonely and things were at their worst."

As they walked, the rain was intensifying. Rebecca didn't pull up the hood of her jacket, but instead, she walked with her head high, letting the drops sting her face.

"And what did you do about that?" Alex asked.

Glancing at Rebecca, Alex saw that she was regarding her with a sly expression.

“What could I do?” she asked.

“Well, exactly.” Alex now felt a flare of anger that this woman was playing games with her. “When you say that, you might just be describing exactly what’s happened with these murders. Because that’s what they are, and I don’t believe it’s up to anyone except the living, breathing person themselves to judge whether they should live or die. And you were on shift five or six years ago for two of those deaths. As I said.”

She was so furious, she felt like grabbing Rebecca by the shoulder, spinning her around, and yelling in her face. But there was no chance to do that as Rebecca veered down a side road, heading for an off-street parking lot.

“You’re not listening to me,” Rebecca said.

“I think I am,” Alex insisted.

“Firstly, I know about the unexplained deaths – a few of them, anyway. Do you think we nurses didn’t get called in and questioned by our ward managers and supervisors when patients died unexpectedly? Of course we did. We had to account for our actions and our whereabouts. The hospital did its own internal investigation at the time when those earlier deaths occurred. I was even questioned by a cop. He had an Italian name, I think, though I can’t remember what it was.”

She had to be talking about Castellano. So, somewhere down the line, the determined cop had interviewed her.

"We were all cleared. And yes, I believe there was foul play. But this is where you're not hearing me. I didn't wish ill on anyone. And although I

believe that people should be allowed to choose the ultimate mercy, I mean 'choose'. I don't mean have death inflicted on them. If you think I'm that kind of person, then you don't understand me at all. And if you think I was complicit in doing it, you're wrong. For a start, I wasn't even working at the hospital at the time of this last incident, which I just heard about this morning. I don't know if there were others. I quit because I didn't want to have to endure people's pain. I moved to this cosmetic surgery clinic because it's a more positive environment to treat patients, and I didn't feel broken at the end of every day."

"Understood," Alex said. "But you believe in killing people who are terminal?"

"Will you listen to me? I believe in allowing them the option of death, under the right circumstances. When they and nobody else choose. Maybe there are others with different views, and maybe you need to look harder to find out who they are."

And with that, she turned away from Alex, walking to a small sedan in the corner of the parking lot. She got in and slammed the door.

Alex let out a deep breath, unclenching her cold hands from the fists that they'd inadvertently curled into during this conversation. She sympathized with Meg. Questioning people on this topic was harrowing, and Alex was realizing that for Rebecca, this hadn't just been a job but a calling, a passion. That was why the suffering of people had affected her so badly.

As Alex walked back, she decided that she didn't think that Rebecca had influenced anyone else; she'd moved away from that hospital because she was suffering emotionally from the burden that her sick and dying

patients were carrying. And of course, she hadn't been around for the last two murders herself.

But Alex was now thinking harder about Rebecca's last words to her.

What if someone had started out by releasing those people who were suffering, even though to do so was illegal – and it had then become an obsession?

Maybe someone from a pro-euthanasia group or organization had tipped over into believing that all terminally ill people should die, and had then gone rogue.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Meg glanced in concern at Alex as she slumped down in the passenger seat. Water was dripping from her hair and her shoulders, and her eyes were troubled.

"That was hectic," she said.

"You okay?" Meg asked immediately, stretching into the back seat and finding a spare fleece jacket. "Here, go on. Use this to dry yourself."

"Thanks." Alex looked ruefully at the jacket before rubbing it over her head, face, and hands. "Seems Rebecca doesn't mind walking in the rain."

"And what else did you learn about her?" Meg asked.

"Well, she gave me a different point of view. She said that she'd had experience of patients who were begging to be freed from their pain and that she quit her job and moved to an area of nursing where she didn't have to care for terminal patients. Because she couldn't handle having to refuse them these requests."

"That must have been difficult for you to listen to."

Alex breathed in deeply. "It was. She gave me a different perspective on what it's like being a nurse. However, she was very proud of her job, and she emphasized to me repeatedly, and angrily, that she would never want to end anyone's life if they weren't ready to give up on it. That said, she believes that people who don't want to live in pain should be given a freer choice. She also reminded me that she wasn't at the hospital when this started up again. I think she was authentic. And also angry for different reasons. Angry that people have to suffer."

“If only life was different,” Meg said.

"She hinted at something just before she got into her car. She seemed to be reminding me that other people might think and act differently from her. And that got me thinking about pro-euthanasia groups. I know they're generally of the opinion that people should choose, but what if there was a rogue group member who decided to go a step further?"

“That’s our new angle.” Meg nodded. “But it’ll have to wait until tomorrow.”

“Why?” Alex argued. “There’s still time tonight.”

Meg shook her head. “No organization is going to be open now. It’s getting well into the evening. And you’re exhausted, Alex.”

“I’m not,” she protested, but Meg shook her head.

“You are. You just haven’t realized it yet, and you need to be safely at home by the time you do. Or else, you could crash at my place. I have a few easy ingredients in the refrigerator. We could have an early dinner and then hit the ground running tomorrow.”

Alex paused, fight written in every line of her body, and then she shook her head, her shoulders slumping.

“I’m finished. What a day. I’d appreciate the offer to crash.”

Meg started the car and drove away. Alex stayed in one of the spare rooms from time to time. Usually, every couple of weeks, when cases ran late or they had a very early start, it would be the better option. She kept a few clothes in the cupboard and some toiletries in the bathroom. And tomorrow would be far better to start this new angle. They could do their research early, over coffee, and if they found any suspect places or people, they'd have the whole day to work on it.

The only thing that did bother Meg slightly about this decision was that she wouldn't be able to drive to Suanne Brook's house and stake it out – or even knock on her door, hoping that she'd be back from work by dinnertime.

That was out of the question now, and maybe it was a good thing. Meg decided that she might also have been pushing herself too far. She should probably take the advice she was handing out to Alex so wisely. Tomorrow would be better.

They drove home in silence, and Meg guessed that Alex was just as immersed in her own thoughts as she was. It was a relief to park in her garage and head into the house, out of the chilly rain that seemed to have set in for the night.

Heading inside, Alex greeted Corrigan, who was waiting for her in the middle of the entrance hall. Maybe he'd also been waiting for Meg, but he greeted Alex a lot more enthusiastically than he ever welcomed her. He gave a chirruping meow and wrapped his paws gently around Alex's ankle before flinging himself onto his back and staring at her worshipfully through his green eyes.

Meg glanced at James's photo, which she kept in the hall, seeing the faint smile on his kind face and his eyes crinkled up with humor.

If he was here, she could laugh along with him at the antics of their traitorous cat.

Maybe he was here. She thought she could sense his presence.

Feeling as if tears were prickling her own eyes, she headed straight to her bedroom, changing into some old and shabby clothes so that she could enjoy her evening. Clad in shapeless tracksuit pants and a sloppy blue knit

top, she headed through to the kitchen and got a bottle of wine out of the refrigerator. By the time she'd poured two glasses, Alex had come down from the spare bedroom, also much more casually dressed.

“So,” Meg said, bending and staring into the fridge again. “We have some fresh tortellini – spinach and ricotta. We could have that with a jar of tomato sauce and some freshly grated Parmesan. What do you think?”

“Damned fine idea,” Alex said.

Since they needed something to munch on while they cooked, Meg opened a packet of salted crisps. Why not? It had been a tough day, and they both deserved an unhealthy treat.

She got the kettle on and took the pack of pasta out.

As she went about the business of cooking – easy as it was with these premade ingredients – Alex grated the cheese and sliced a few plum tomatoes to add to the sauce. That way, at least they could pretend that it was freshly cooked instead of all from a jar.

Corrigan sauntered into the kitchen to join the cooking process, slumping down on the warmest part of the floor near the stove so that Meg and Alex had to step around him while they cooked. They both kept the conversation light. They talked about the weather, and the seasonings they should use, and what time they should start tomorrow.

Meg didn't suggest a morning run. Tomorrow was going to be a long day. After completing her Ironman a while ago, she'd kept exercising lightly, but she hadn't gotten into serious prep for any more triathlons. In the summertime, she'd do that, but for now, she felt as if the erratic early spring weather was giving her an excuse for a well-earned break in her training.

There wasn't much to do after dinner but get to bed. Meg showered and

then climbed between the sheets, grabbing her e-reader and setting the alarm on her phone for tomorrow.

Maybe it was because Alex had lost someone close to her, but she found herself missing James more than usual. If only he was here. Their nighttime rituals had been such a contented time. Lying in bed reading, while chatting in a relaxed way about their days, and what his daughter Naomi would be up to tomorrow.

It had been the comforting structure of her life, interspersed with a whole lot of love and passion that still tore her heart to think about.

Meg sighed, setting aside her reader, realizing that she, too, was exhausted.

Time for bed. No cat for her tonight. Corrigan would sleep on Alex's bed, fickle double agent that he was.

And hopefully with the new angle to explore, tomorrow they'd get closer to the truth about who was murdering people with precious days, weeks, and months still left to live. But Meg wasn't going to start her day there.

Even though the weather was forecast to be atrocious, and she'd canned the idea of a run, there was one place she was determined to go. Early.

She wasn't giving up on the fight to find out what happened to James.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The shrill of Meg's alarm tugged her from an uneasy dream. Rain was lashing the windows. It was going to be a gray, dismal day, but she sat up feeling adrenaline thrumming through her.

The cop inside her was always on high alert when there was a case on the go. And this time, two cases.

She got dressed, picking practical but reasonably smart clothing since – apart from the first step in today's activities – she didn't know where the day would take her. Black pants, charcoal top, and given the weather, she decided on her ankle-length boots. She got a black jacket out of the wardrobe and then headed downstairs.

The house was still quiet. Alex was in the other wing and wouldn't hear Meg leave, especially not over the ceaseless patter of the rain. Hopefully, she'd miss the traffic going out and coming back. And with any luck, Suanne would still be at home.

Meg rushed to her car. She hadn't told Alex about this trip, partly because she'd only confirmed it with herself after Alex had gone to bed. Besides, Alex was still raw and grieving over her aunt, and although Meg knew that she would willingly have come along, she didn't want to ask her to.

She headed in the direction of the gated community, driving fast along roads that were rainswept but thankfully quiet. Meg had done some research on that community last night, and she'd discovered that there were a couple of businesses inside it – a hairdresser, a beautician. Although it

was early, she hoped that claiming to have an appointment with the salon would get her through.

She reached the boom, stated her business, and sure enough, they opened up for her, and she drove through. Gated communities often weren't as secure as the residents believed they were, especially if they contained businesses that were open to outsiders. Now to find out where Suanne lived.

Meg glanced at the map, winding her way through streets that contained large, stately houses. Suanne's must be the one ahead, on the corner. It was a double-story house, well maintained, with a garden that was perfectly tended and already bright with a few spring blossoms in the beds. Meg guessed this was the result of expensive landscaping services.

Had the money been legitimately obtained through Suanna's tireless work as the CIO? Or had it been stealthily funneled out, providing an added cushion of luxury for this already wealthy woman?

Thinking of that caused anger to surge inside her. That seemed to be happening more now that she was actively investigating James's case.

When she was busy with other projects, that simmering sense of rage retreated to the back of her mind, but now, here it was in full force again.

It motivated her to scramble out of the car and power up to the home's elegant front door without even bothering to yank the hood of her jacket over her head. She didn't care about the rain. All she cared about right now was finding out who had robbed her of James.

She banged on the front door, guessing that at this early hour, Suanne herself would answer it. She didn't see a housemaid starting work so early. It wasn't even seven a.m. yet.

She waited, feeling the rain chill her even though she was standing

under the shelter of the front door's overhang.

A moment later, the door was flung open, and she stood face to face with Suanne.

Blank surprise was on the other woman's face as she stared at Meg.

She was already dressed in a charcoal pants suit and a steel blue top, but with her make-up and hair not yet done, and slippers still on her feet, the effect looked weirdly unfinished.

Behind her, Meg caught a glimpse of her entrance hall, which was every bit as grand and sumptuously decorated as the home's exterior had promised. The dark-stained hall table with the carved legs was exquisite, and Meg felt sure that her mom would know the name of the artist who'd painted that desert landscape on the wall, executed in striking oranges and grays. She knew she'd seen similar work before.

"What are you doing here?" Suanne demanded.

"I didn't get answers from you yesterday," Meg said. "I looked up your address to see if you were ready to say more."

"But I – but – this is an invasion of my privacy. You here, on my doorstep?"

"Yesterday I made an appointment with you. You supposedly booked off half an hour of your time to see us. You allowed me five minutes before you kicked me out. I'm curious to know why. Yes, the appointment ended up being about something different than I stated, but it wasn't something illegal. I wasn't asking you to betray your company or tell lies or commit a crime." Meg raised her chin, her adrenaline surging as she decided that she might as well throw caution to the winds. "But perhaps you did that in the past."

“How dare you say such a thing!” Suanne’s eyes flashed, and Meg subtly adjusted her foot so that if Suanne decided to slam the door on her, it would bounce back into her face.

That was an apt metaphor for their entire interaction so far, it seemed.

Suanne might be irate, but she wasn’t wrathful. Meg had the feeling that she really did know more than she was telling.

“Were you involved?” she said, getting the question in while Suanne’s emotion ran high. Yesterday, at her work, she’d gone from icy control to irate fury in the blink of an eye, and she’d had resources at her disposal to ensure Meg got evicted before their conversation could get anywhere.

Now, she was alone. She could try to close the door on Meg, but she had her foot ready to shove into it.

And Meg was determined to get answers. The cold wind on her damp back and the discomfort of the gusting rain weren’t even impacting on her world right now.

“I can’t believe you’d think such a thing,” Suanne retorted.

“If you weren’t involved, then why did you react so strongly? Suanne, I’m an ex-cop. I know what people’s reactions mean. Yours was textbook guilt. I never accused you of the crime directly, but simply asked you what you knew. All I’m interested in is how caught up in this whole murderous debacle you were. And now that I’ve figured out who may be responsible, I’m not going to stop digging.”

“You’re going to regret it,” Suanne said. And now, Meg saw something else in her face and her voice.

She picked up the tinge of fear.

“Were you forced into cooperating? Did you get paid to turn a blind eye? Or were you the instigator?” Meg asked. “I don’t know if you were the instigator. If you were, I think you’d have responded to me differently. But you were involved somehow, weren’t you? And maybe you should tell me now. It’ll count in your favor down the line, because soon you’re going to be talking to the police, and they’ll ask you what you said to me.”

She had a lot more to say. These weren’t empty threats. She knew that the conspirators in this crime would have tried hard to erase as much evidence as they could – whoever ‘they’ were – but here was the rub.

Six years down the line, there might be old evidence that they hadn’t bothered to cover up and now couldn’t erase.

That could be waiting somewhere. Lurking in records and biding its time for someone determined to come along and uncover it. It couldn’t be destroyed now – some of it, at least. It would be on the record. They’d thought they had gotten away with it, and now time itself might work against them.

Suanne’s mouth was twitching, and Meg didn’t think the color in her face looked very healthy anymore. It was pale, with two bright pinpoints on her cheekbones.

“I can’t talk to you now,” she muttered.

“You’ve already had one chance. This is your second. I don’t have time to give you a third.” Meg retorted. She felt as if her spine was made from steel and her eyes from ice as she stared Suanne down. She knew for sure that the other woman could sense the fury in her, because Meg could feel it herself, the anger at James’s death and the final sense that at last she was getting closer to the person or people responsible.

“I mean it,” Suanne said, a note of desperation in her voice. “I can’t speak to you now. My housekeeper is coming in any minute, and I’ve got a work call that I need to take. They’re probably calling me now.” As she spoke, Meg could in fact hear the trill of her cellphone coming from somewhere inside the spacious house. “I will tell you more. I know I must. I wasn’t involved in this – but I was paid to keep quiet. I turned a blind eye to it because it wasn’t just payment, it was threats. If I talk to you, I need some assurance that I’ll be safe. I can do it tonight. After work. Will that work for you?”

Finally, she'd stopped being evasive, and Meg now believed she might get the truth from her.

“What time?” she asked, thinking of the other case and where it might take her today.

“Six-thirty. I should be home by then. I’ll make sure I am. Please, bring the cops along if you want, but just so you know, my main priority is that I stay safe if I tell you anything.”

Her defiance drew simultaneous feelings of pity and scorn from Meg. She sympathized with Suanne’s predicament but hated how weak she’d been, even though she might have felt forced into it, trapped with no option but to comply.

The CFO had been forced to turn a blind eye because they’d threatened his kids. In fact, they’d followed through on their threats by actually abducting one of his children for a couple of days.

That had broken him. She'd seen it when she sat facing him and he'd finally spilled the truth. Maybe they'd figured out that he was the kind of man who wouldn't take a bribe. But they'd clearly pegged Suanne as

someone who would. She'd taken money, and a good man had been brutally stabbed, bleeding out in his car, leaving Meg without her husband and Naomi without her father.

Meg stared into the other woman's eyes.

"At six-thirty tonight, I'm coming back here. And you'd better be here. I'm bringing the cops if I can. Don't try anything. Don't go on vacation. Don't try to hide, or I'll be waiting when you get back."

Suanna grimaced, her face hard.

"Go on vacation? I don't have time for that. I barely have time to handle my workload, I haven't taken a vacation for nearly two years, and yes, I'll be here tonight. Then you'll understand that this is more complicated than it appears, and that I'm not just a corrupt sellout."

Meg stared at her for a few more moments before she stepped back and closed the door.

She turned away with thoughts churning in her mind.

More to it? Really? What was there – and would Suanne be prepared to tell her tonight?

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Meg drove home as fast as she could, puzzling over what Suanne had said, and with a strange feeling that she couldn't quite name. Perhaps it was simmering fury or maybe dark expectation. Maybe it was both, coiling around each other like a frayed twist of rope in her mind.

She tried to get the conversation out of her thoughts because there was so much else to focus on today, and she needed to give the present case all of her attention.

By the time she'd gotten back home and parked her car in the garage, Meg thought she'd done a reasonable job of banishing it.

She headed into the house, feeling relieved that the entrance hall was still dark and quiet.

As she turned on the lights, she heard footsteps, and Alex appeared a moment later from the other wing of the house.

She looked well rested, and much calmer than she had yesterday. She was dressed for work in her usual Alex attire, which consisted mostly of dark colors. Today, she was wearing black pants, black boots, a dark jacket, and by way of contrast, a deep navy top.

They gave each other quick greetings. Alex wasn't much of a conversationalist until she had a cup of coffee inside her. Meg got the machine on and then they settled down at their dining room workstation to see what she could find about pro-euthanasia organizations.

"Shall I do the searches, and you check the news?" she asked Alex. That way, they would round up the official groups as well as individuals who

might be proponents of euthanasia and could have developed more extreme views.

Meg worked methodically, checking the search results and then doing a deep dive into the details of each organization. She was checking out their structure, their size, and their supporters. She couldn't ignore a single detail.

After a long, silent stretch of intensive work, Meg looked up.

"You ready?" she asked Alex.

"Yes," Alex nodded. "I'm still searching, but I'm getting the same results over and over. I've found two main groups whose underlying ethos might reflect the mindset of this killer."

"Me, too," Meg said. "One is called Dignity First."

"Yup. And the other is called My Time."

"What do you think of the two?" Meg asked.

Alex sighed. "The problem is that they both sound reasonable, and as if they have a solid ethos which they believe in. Both simply believe that people who have a terminal diagnosis and are going to die should be able to do so at a time of their choosing with medical assistance. Neither one seems extreme."

"But they might have attracted someone who is extreme," Meg said. "I think we're going to have to go and speak to them to get these answers. It seems to me that the chairman of My Time is more outspoken and less politically correct than the woman in charge of Dignity First."

"I got that impression too, now you mention it," Alex said. "Some of the comments that the My Time spokespeople made were more inflammatory."

“Shall we start there, then?” Meg glanced at the window as a gust of rain spattered the glass.

“Might as well get out in this weather as in any weather,” Alex quipped. “At least we didn’t schedule in a morning run.”

Meg nodded wryly, glad that the weather had forced her to go and confront Suanne again. “Just as well. Let’s get going and see if My Time can give us any further leads.”

They headed out to Meg’s car and got onto the road. It was still too early for the main rush hour to have started, but even so, the roads were clogged, with seas of taillights stretching ahead of them.

Alex did more research while Meg edged her way through the traffic.

“The head of My Time is a man called David Veredus. He says that his dream is a world where people can choose the manner and time of their passing, within reason, to achieve a dignified end and freedom from pain. But he also says that he believes society is unnecessarily burdened by people’s suffering and ill health, and that makes me more dubious about his real motives.”

Meg had to agree. Those two statements were very different, and they pointed toward vastly different motives.

Which one did Veredus believe more strongly in personally? She guessed they would find out soon, because finally, the traffic was easing up and they could turn down the road where the My Time offices were.

The headquarters were located at the back of a plain, double-story brick building that looked to be a converted house, in between a shopping center and an office park. Everything looked dark and wet. Even the branches of the trees in the parking lot were drooping in the weight of the incessant rain.

They headed inside, through a glass door that led into a tiny lobby. Meg looked around, interested to see the posters and information on the walls. There were a lot of emotive posters highlighting the importance of being able to free yourself from pain, the cost to society and family of suffering, and the need to do things differently as a society.

Heading to the front desk, Meg greeted the man behind it. She wasn't sure that he was a receptionist, because the portly man, with a bald spot in his brown hair, was in his fifties, wearing a suit and tie, and rather than sitting at the office chair, he was standing behind it and peering at a shelf on his side of the console.

"Good morning," Meg said, and he stood up hurriedly, staring at them in surprise.

"Good morning," he said. His voice had an accent to it that Meg couldn't immediately identify. Maybe those plummy tones meant he'd spent time in Britain. "How can I help you?"

"We're looking for David Veredus," Meg said. "Meg Thorne and Alex Chan. We're assisting the police with an investigation."

"Well," he said, placing a hand on his navy blue tie, "I am in fact David Veredus. You've caught me with a few minutes to spare until I have to go into an online meeting. So, if I can help you, I will."

Meg got the information across as fast as she could.

"A few years ago, there was a succession of suspicious events in various hospitals where terminal or seriously ill patients were found dead in the morning. That seems to have started up again recently, and there have recently been two more. We're looking for answers and trying to work out if there might be a connection with your organization."

In heartfelt tones, still with his hand on his tie, Veredus quickly sought to correct their thinking.

“No, no,” he insisted. “You don’t understand. We are not proponents of murder. Merely of having the right to choose.”

“I’m aware of that,” Meg said, holding his gaze. And I’m not criticizing your society in any way, or pointing fingers at you. What I want to know is if you might have attracted anyone extreme. Who held views that you didn’t necessarily agree with, but which might have led to this outcome.”

His face settled into glum lines as he considered that possibility. Meg wondered if he was going to deny it outright, but to her surprise, he gave a reluctant nod.

"I would love to say you're wrong, but the truth is that we do sometimes attract extreme people. Most of our members follow our ethos. But there are a few who take it further, and we don't encourage that, because it reflects badly on the rest of us. It's an emotive topic, and it can cause strong reactions. We often get misinterpreted."

“Are you thinking of someone specific?” Meg asked, and he nodded.

"Our previous spokesperson. He moved on from our society a couple of years ago. He was a hospital physiotherapist who worked with bedbound patients. He still is, of course, but he's no longer our spokesperson, as we found his views too extreme. He was damaging the society. Some of what he said, he attributed to me, and it caused problems for me and the organization."

“What’s his name?” Meg asked. A hospital physiotherapist might work at a few different hospitals and would be so familiar to the nurses and doctors on duty that they might not even notice him or her.

Veredus looked at her cautiously before replying.

“His name is Raymond Latimer.”

“And he’s still working as a hospital physio?” Alex confirmed.

“Yes, he is. He also has a private practice, so he isn’t in the wards full time, but he does work there a few days every week. At any rate, he used to. I haven’t spoken to him since he resigned from the organization.”

“And when was that?” Alex asked.

Resting his hands on the desk, Veredus sighed. “I finally let him go a few months ago. He’d been with us for five years, so it was a wrench. He was angry about it and said that we were the ones turning the clock back on progress, not him. He said that he would continue on his own and that he’d ensure his ethos made its mark on society.”

Meg was running the timeframes through her mind and coming up with a lot of checked boxes. It seemed that Raymond had been working for My Time during the five years in which no murders had been committed. Maybe that was just coincidence, but perhaps being part of the society had allowed him to express his urges in a less deadly way. Or perhaps he’d had to curb his views for the sake of the organization, and after he was fired as the spokesman, he’d returned to his true self.

“Anyone else?” Meg asked.

Veredus shook his head. "Because of what happened with Raymond over the years, and the fights and arguments we ended up having – behind closed doors, of course – I became even more careful about who I allowed to be part of our management team. I currently work with three other people, and I trust them all."

“Do any of them have medical backgrounds?” Meg asked.

“No. They don’t, but of course, we wouldn’t rule out someone with a medical background, and we regularly seek opinions and comments from doctors and other medical professionals. Those are important to us.”

“Well, thank you,” Meg said.

“We appreciate the information,” Alex added. “And it’ll stay confidential.”

“That’s good,” Veredus said, looking relieved. “I was going to ask you about that. I’d prefer that my name isn’t associated with this investigation at all. It could taint us irreparably. If we’re linked to unexplained deaths in hospitals, it’s going to strip our movement of all credibility and set us back hugely.”

His words reminded Meg that for this organization, these murders were anathema and potentially hugely damaging to their reputation and their aims.

But as for Raymond Latimer?

He was the wild card.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Looking at the most time-effective way of covering all bases, Meg decided that she and Alex needed to split up now, each investigating a different angle. They couldn't afford to leave anything unexplored, and although they had a strong lead from My Time, they also needed to get face to face with the people at Dignity First.

"I think you should go to Dignity First," Meg told Alex, who nodded, as if she'd been thinking the same.

"Much as I want to hunt down Raymond Latimer with you, I agree that needs to come first," Alex said. "So, I'll go there and do what we did here and let you loose on Raymond Latimer."

Meg couldn't help a smile at Alex's vivid language.

They agreed that Alex would take a cab to Dignity First, and if there were no strong leads from that meeting, she would then head back to Meg's place and carry on working. If there were strong leads, then she would check in with Meg before heading out to explore them further.

As for Meg, her job was now to find out where Raymond Latimer was working.

She started off by calling his practice, hoping that she'd get lucky and find him there.

Luck was on her side.

"Mr. Latimer is in at the moment," the woman who picked up said, "but he's going to be heading out in about half an hour's time to do his hospital rounds."

“And where is he heading first?” Meg asked, hoping that the question sounded innocent.

But hesitancy now flavored the woman’s voice as she replied. “I’m afraid I’m not sure about his schedule, ma’am. Is there a reason that you need to know?”

“I’m assisting the police with some cold cases involving patient deaths that have started up again,” she said. “I’d like to speak to him about what he might have seen and heard at the hospital, and his association with My Time.”

“Is that so? I’ll tell him.” The receptionist sounded intrigued. Meg hoped that she’d done enough to help her cause, rather than harm it. “What cases are these? Do you have any names?”

“I’ll speak to Mr. Latimer about them as soon as I’m there,” Meg said, deciding that the best course of action would simply be to get to Latimer’s rooms as quickly as possible. “Can you tell him I’ll be there in about twenty minutes?”

“I’ll do that,” the receptionist promised.

Meg hung up, started her car, and set off on the route that would lead her there.

His rooms were in an office park across the road from one of the biggest hospitals in Boston, and the traffic was now past its peak, although the rain was still pelting down and causing delays. Meg did her best to get there as fast as possible, weaving her way through the backstreets and taking all the shortcuts that she knew about.

The office park was stark, newly built, and seemed designed to accommodate the overflow of practitioners from the hospital itself.

Latimer's rooms were in a corner unit, and by the time she parked outside, the rain had eased to a chilly spatter.

Meg climbed out and hurried to the door of the practice, ringing the bell and sheltering under the overhang as she waited to get inside.

It buzzed open, and she walked into a tiny lobby dominated by a wooden desk and a rank of filing cabinets, and with two waiting chairs wedged into the remaining corners.

A woman behind the desk – around Meg's age, with graying hair and an anxious expression, greeted her.

This was the woman she'd spoken to on the phone.

"Good morning. We spoke earlier," she said. "Is Mr. Latimer still in?"

"No, I'm afraid he's just left," she said in regretful tones, her anxious expression intensifying, causing Meg to start worrying. She hadn't expected this. It had sounded as if Latimer would be willing to be interviewed. But maybe things had changed after the woman had spoken to her boss. Maybe Latimer had realized she was homing in on something that he wanted to stay hidden.

"Where did he head out to?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I can't give you his schedule, ma'am," she said. "As I explained on the phone, he's a very busy man and once he's out and about, I can't allow him to be disturbed by non-work issues. I did suggest that you leave a message for him."

Nope, a whole lot of red flags were now waving in Meg's mind.

"Did you tell him who I was?"

"Yes, I did do that, but he was unfortunately too busy to wait," the

woman replied, now wringing her hands. She hadn't sounded nearly as anxious on the phone. Something had definitely happened.

At that moment, Meg heard a sound that she thought might be worth following up on. It was the banging of a door from the back of the office building.

Immediately, she wondered if 'just left' might be more literal than it had originally sounded.

Deciding to risk it, especially since her confrontation wouldn't get her any further now, she said, "Thank you," and rushed out of the building, heading around the corner to where she'd heard that noise.

She was just in time to see a slim, dark-haired man carrying a large gym bag heading to a sleek silver sedan that was parked in a lot behind the offices.

"Mr. Latimer?" she asked.

He glanced up, looked at her, and she saw him immediately tense.

"I'm busy," he snapped. "Are you the woman who called earlier?"

"Yes, I am," Meg said. "I'd like a word with you. It shouldn't take long."

"I don't have any time at all." He slung the large duffel bag into the trunk of the car and swung himself into the driver's seat. The next moment, to Meg's consternation, he'd started up the car and was heading out, the hood passing within a couple of yards of where she was standing, and the water from the tires spraying up to drench her shoes.

Meg stared after him, suspicion rising. That wasn't just reluctant, it was downright rude. And had there been an element of unease there, too?

Either way, she decided that she was going to follow him. He had to be heading to one of the hospitals with that big bag in the trunk. Maybe she could catch up with him there. At least if he got to where he was going, he couldn't drive away from her again.

Meg jogged back to her car, climbed in, and sped after Latimer.

It was easy to pick up the silver sedan because he was stopped at a light. She managed to ease into the line of traffic a few cars behind him, watching carefully as the light changed and he pulled away.

He wasn't heading to the hospital across the road, and must therefore be on the way to another one, further afield.

The traffic was slow moving again, and for a moment, Meg feared that she wouldn't be able to get through this light before it changed again, and she'd lose him.

By edging forward and taking a gap at the last possible moment, she got through. Now it was just a case of sticking to him without him noticing her there.

He might assume that she'd be trying to follow him, after he'd so rudely driven away. Or maybe his ego was so large that he thought she'd simply accept his decision not to speak to her.

Either way, the rain was helping her, damping down visibility so that she guessed all he'd see in his mirrors would be a sea of blurred headlights. It was easier for her to keep him in sight from her vantage point a few cars behind. Meg had done her share of tailing practice when she'd been with the homicide team. She could remember a few instances when she'd had to follow suspects, sometimes keeping it slow and easy and staying discreetly behind. Other times, when the chips were down, she'd had to flatten her

foot and keep pace with them while they fled, her teeth gritted, palms welded to the wheel.

She didn't think that this particular pursuit would end up in an all-out chase, but you never knew. This case was still a mystery, as were the exact motives of the killer. Raymond Latimer had already shown himself to be unwilling to speak to her, and that meant that he might be hiding something.

He turned down a side road, and she followed, wondering where he was going, because this didn't seem to be a known route to any of the hospitals. Was he taking a shortcut?

She moved a couple of cars closer to him so that only one vehicle separated them. He was driving fast – not quite recklessly, but impatiently.

Now the car in front of her turned off, and she was directly behind him.

Did he know it was her? Had he spotted her car as he'd headed out and onto the road, and if so, would he realize that she was now right behind him?

Meg was dubious, especially when he turned right, and then turned right again.

Damn. He trying a rookie tactic to see if anyone was following. Basic but effective, and now that he'd turned two of the three corners, there was nothing for her to do but to stay behind him. That meant he'd probably realize he was being tailed, if he hadn't already.

What would he do?

The answer to that surprised Meg, because suddenly, his behavior changed.

Getting back on the main road, Latimer flattened his foot and abruptly

accelerated, weaving through the slower traffic at lightning speed, horns blasting as he shot past the slower traffic, veering all the way over the yellow lines.

He was on the run.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“This is not my forte,” Meg muttered to herself as she flattened her foot. A high-speed chase in rainy conditions wasn’t her idea of fun. When she and Gabe had been partnered up, he’d always been the one who had taken the wheel during these chases.

Now, the responsibility rested on her shoulders alone, and she needed to make damned sure that this man didn’t get away.

She sped past a slower moving car, her hands tight on the wheel, gritting her teeth as a horn blasted in her ear. Drivers, already annoyed by Latimer’s antics up ahead, were now taking their frustrations out on her.

As a civilian, with no siren and flashing lights, the job wasn’t made any easier, but Meg pushed on, doing her best to keep the silver sedan clearly in her sight, because she anticipated that if he grew panicky, Latimer might start to try some evasive tactics like suddenly swerving off the road. She’d need to watch him.

He hadn’t seemed like a panicky person, but now his driving was making her think she might have judged him wrongly. Was he panicking? Or was he simply furious that she was daring to follow, and trying to teach her a lesson?

Then, he did exactly what she’d anticipated. He veered across three lanes, tires squealing, forcing Meg to follow. Hands clamped to the wheel, she skidded across the road, hearing horns blare as a truck loomed up behind her, flashing its lights at her. She got past it in one piece, managing to keep Latimer in sight as he left the main road and sped down a narrow

side road.

Meg followed, going far too fast on this minor road, but she had no choice now, because Latimer was speeding along like a lunatic. What had gotten into him? At this rate, she was going to have to call for police backup.

Alone in the car, with no radio, that wasn't going to be easy. For a start, she'd have to let go of the wheel and locate her phone. That was impossible now. She should have put it in the holder on her dash. Then maybe she could have managed to voice-activate a call to Gabe. But it had been in her purse when she'd headed into the physiotherapy practice, and that was where it still was. There had been no time to take it out.

Latimer turned down another side road, the car fishtailing on the wet asphalt, and Meg followed more cautiously. She didn't want to crash while pursuing him. She didn't want him to endanger anyone else either, even though he looked hellbent on doing just that.

He swerved down another side street, and she followed, tires wailing, holding her breath as she steered out of the incipient skid before it could escalate to disaster. There. Made it. Now, she just needed to remember not to do that again. Safety first. Right? Easy does it around the next bend, she reminded herself.

And for heaven's sake, don't stamp on the brakes if you feel yourself skid.

She was breathing hard and could feel cold sweat on her armpits and temples as a result of the chase. Her tires wailed again as she rounded another corner, catching her breath as she saw a car approaching from the side road.

She stamped on the brakes, feeling the tires slip again as she waited for it to cross and then set off, burning rubber as she strove to keep up. Where was he? Had he managed to get away during that delay?

No, he hadn't, although he'd tried. To her relief, she saw the now-familiar silver shape accelerating down a side road and swung her own car that way. Now, he was in her view again.

Meg was wondering if he had a clear idea of where he was heading, because there seemed to be something mindless and desperate in the way he was fleeing. She guessed that his overriding aim, which had overtaken all his logic, was simply to get away from her. He'd have had a better chance of doing that on the main road.

Well, she was managing to stick to him closely enough to follow, she hadn't crashed yet, and she was now feeling more in control of herself and her car as old muscle memory and techniques kicked in. She just needed to stay calm and wait him out. Whatever his plan had been, it hadn't worked, and now he was clearly desperate.

And, at that moment, he made the mistake she needed.

He swung down another narrow road, and Meg saw his brake lights flash as he realized his error too late.

Latimer had just fled into a dead-end road.

Now, she had him.

Keeping her car squarely behind him, Meg closed in. Latimer swerved left and right, looking for a way out of the trap that he'd gotten himself into, but the sides of the road were lined with parked cars, and there wasn't enough space between their two vehicles for him to even attempt a three-point turn.

He slewed to the left and right, and then his brake lights flashed.

Meg swerved her car sideways so that she was effectively blocking the road. Then, hoping he wouldn't try something utterly stupid like running her down, she jumped out of the car and ran over to his vehicle.

All her nerves were jangling after that chase. Her palms were damp, and her limbs were trembling from the focused tension. She inhaled a gasp of the cool, fresh air as she ran over to his car.

The driver's door opened, and he got out.

Meg saw immediately that he'd also been rattled by the chase. His face was pale and he was shaking, too. He was breathing hard, and his gaze pierced hers angrily.

"Is this some kind of a practical joke?" he raged.

"All I've done is follow you," Meg pointed out, keeping calm. "You're the one who went on a mad race through the suburbs. You could have caused a crash. You knew that I wasn't threatening you because I spoke to you earlier. I'm Meg Thorne, ex-homicide cop, now working with the police on cold cases, and all I wanted was to ask you some questions. And that makes your behavior very puzzling. Maybe now would be a good time to explain it."

His gaze darted left and right, his face tense.

"I don't have a reason, other than that I didn't want you following me. Maybe I went a bit overboard in my efforts, but I value my privacy."

"You're out on a public road," Meg said incredulously. "I don't think you have any right to privacy in the context you refer to."

"You know what I mean," he spat at her.

“I certainly wish I did,” Meg retorted, feeling that he was getting under her skin despite her best efforts to prevent it. “All I wanted to do was ask you a couple of questions. You have gone to extreme lengths not to answer them, and they’re relevant questions that might help solve cold cases.”

He sighed, his shoulders sagging, as if the tension of the case was catching up with him and he was suddenly tired.

“I know you probably want to pin the blame on me because you know I was asked to leave the management board of My Time. Isn’t that right? I knew, when I first heard about these two deaths, and then I heard the police were looking into them, that I’d probably end up getting persecuted.”

“Persecuted?” Meg raised her eyebrows. “That’s a very strong word to use.”

“It’s how I feel,” he said, but his gaze slid away again, and she had a strong suspicion that there was more to it than he was telling her.

Standing here, blocking a cul-de-sac, in the spattering rain was far from the ideal circumstances to have this discussion, but luckily the cul-de-sac was quiet, with nobody coming in or out. And she didn’t want to risk moving away. Latimer was still on the edge.

“I want to know if your views on euthanasia have any bearing on these cases,” she said, and he grimaced.

“There we have it. You’re blaming me. You’re pointing the finger in the wrong direction, you know, because I do believe strongly that people should have the right to die, but I’m not one of those who go around trying to make it happen.”

“And you know of such people?” she asked.

He nodded. “Oh, yes. It’s an open secret in the medical profession that

there are people who will help patients along when they've had enough, and I've researched that."

"In what way have you researched it?"

Shrugging, Latimer evaded her gaze again. "Let's just say there are certain communication pathways that people use. I'm not naming names."

"What type of pathways are these?" Meg felt shivers prick her spine that weren't just from the chilly rain and gusting breeze. She was wondering if this was part of something bigger and more organized – somehow.

"It's not for me to say. I stumbled on one of those groups a while ago. To be brutally honest with you, it's my belief that everyone should be able to choose the time of their passing, even if they don't have terminal health issues. Why should someone have to live if they're suffering from deep depression that isn't responding to medication? Why should they have to live if they've been sentenced to life in prison and would prefer not to burden the state? Why should they have to live if they're bankrupt and can't afford their living expenses and decide that they would prefer not to exist as a pauper?" He saw her face and nodded knowingly. "Those are difficult questions to answer, aren't they? What do you think, Ms. Thorne? Where should the line be drawn?"

Meg could certainly see why his views had clashed with the official stance of My Time and its director.

"Those are deep philosophical questions," she said, "and I agree with you that they're talking points for society. But nobody should want to take their life because they fear living as a pauper, and as a society, we shouldn't let that happen."

He nodded, as if he was now entering into the spirit of a debate, rather than simply lashing out defensively. That was good, Meg thought. The more he talked, the better.

“Exactly,” he said. “I can see that we could have a coherent debate on this.”

“I’d be interested to do that,” she said. “But for now, we’re looking for a killer. Someone who took the lives of people who weren’t ready to die. How do you feel about that?”

She watched him closely, and he shook his head.

"I don't agree with that. Everything I believe in hinges on free will. As I've said, I don't believe that people who feel they're a burden to society should be forced to live, and that there should be choices. But the flip side to that is that people who desire to live should be given the best chance. You might think I'm the killer. And maybe part of the reason why I didn't want to engage with you is that I do know of chat groups and dark web forums where people discuss such things. I've been on them, and I've read what's been discussed there. I'm willing to admit that to you, while emphasizing that I do not have any interest in ending the lives of people who have the will to live. The fact that I feel strongly about one side of the coin means, logically, that I have to feel just as strongly about the other side. Do you understand?"

Meg nodded.

That was an issue that she’d encountered time after time in this case. The people who felt that death should be allowed by choice were ironically also the strongest proponents of life being allowed by choice, too. Ethically, that suggested to her that they were not the killers, but Meg wasn’t going to

rely on ethics alone to make decisions. Since she was face to face with him, she was going to see if she could confirm Latimer's alibi.

And then, if she could, she was going to ask more about these online forums.

She hoped that a car wouldn't arrive, going in or out of the cul-de-sac, and break the fragile rapport between them before she could get the facts.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Meg looked in both directions, a quick glance each way, checking that they weren't holding up any traffic as they debated. Once that was confirmed, she turned her attention back to Latimer.

"In the small hours of the morning the night before last, a woman called Maria Chan was killed. She was at the hospital closest to where we are now, and she also happens to be related to my business partner. Where were you at that time?"

Latimer's gaze was steadier now. Meg still wasn't sure why he'd been so evasive earlier. At least now he was meeting her eyes with a reasonable expression on his face.

"I was asleep." He caught himself. "In fact, no. I wasn't asleep. Our ten-year-old boy is running a fever at the moment. He has a throat infection. My wife and I were up and down all night caring for him. So, at two or three in the morning, I might have been asleep at home, but I might also have been in the kitchen, making him some honey and lemon to drink or getting him some medication to bring his fever down. I didn't get much sleep the night before last. Last night was better, as his fever broke. And if you want proof, I will supply it, but not to you. Only to the police, because I believe you're stepping out of line in demanding it."

Fair enough, Meg thought. She was now convinced that he hadn't been prowling the hospital wards and looking for an opportunity to get lethal drugs into Maria Chan's bloodstream. If needed, Gabe could request the evidence, but Latimer's confident demeanor told her that he would probably

be able to supply the relevant information – and his wife and son could confirm it.

“Those online forums you mentioned,” Meg said. “Tell me more about them.”

He shook his head. “I’m not prepared to talk about those.”

“Why?” Meg pressured him. “You’ve talked about everything else so far. You’ve actually ended up being very cooperative. What’s the problem now?”

He folded his arms, a subtle sign that he was shutting down and that the window she had for finding things out from him was rapidly narrowing.

“I actually do have to be at the hospital,” he said. “I know I left early to avoid you, because I thought you would start accusing me and embroiling me in a fight, but my patients are waiting.”

“The forums,” Meg said again. “I don’t care if you’ve been on them. It wouldn’t be illegal to access them, and I’m sure you have. Given that you’re a proponent of people being allowed to die, it would be surprising if you hadn’t looked into those possibilities. But I need to know who else did, because someone managed to kill people both now and a few years ago, using combinations of drugs that are virtually undetectable.”

He looked down, shook his head again, shifted his feet. He glanced at his car, clearly wanting to get inside it and away.

"Look," he said eventually, "what's your phone number? I'll send you a couple of links that I know about, and you can research them for yourself."

Then, as if rethinking his reticence and deciding that he should tell her more, he walked a couple of steps toward her and said in a low voice, “Look out for the user called The Sandman. When I was on there, he was

the one that troubled me. And now, I must go.”

Meg read out her number. He got into his car, and a moment later, her phone beeped with the incoming links.

The Sandman.

She had information that might be able to get her a step further. As she climbed into her own car and moved it off the road so that Latimer could pass, Meg hoped it would.

Checking her phone, she saw that Alex had called her.

Meg called her back straight away. “Any news on Dignity First?” she asked.

“Nothing, unfortunately,” Alex said, sounding surprisingly discouraged and down. “They were very helpful and concerned, but they said they've had no extreme people in the management of their organization. Their team is mostly new, and a couple of them are in their twenties. The others are very experienced, and the director knows their views well. He emphasized that none of them would speak out of turn when it came to euthanasia and that they all believe in a person's right to choose. So, I don't think we're going to get anywhere there.”

“Is anything else wrong?” Meg asked.

Alex sighed. “Yes. Gabe called me and said that the toxicology results from the postmortem are back, and Maria’s results are inconclusive. They can’t pick anything up. Nothing in her bloodstream that points to any one cause of death, but it had to be something she was given, because her heart and breathing were compromised, but at the same time, her heart was healthy. I don’t understand it, Meg. How can it be that someone managed to kill her without leaving any trace of exactly what they used?”

She sounded as if she'd tipped all the way back into the stressed and upset mind frame of yesterday. Meg guessed that would happen in surges, regardless of whether the case was progressing well or not. But this must feel like a setback to her, and she was glad that thanks to her conversation with Latimer, she could offer Alex some hope.

"That's a real shame," Meg said. "But given the fact that all the causes of death so far have been inconclusive, I think all it does is prove to us that this is a linked case. It wasn't an accidental overdose and nor was it someone new. This is the same MO and the same perpetrator. And I might have a lead as to who they are."

"Seriously?" Meg was pleased to hear the hope in Alex's voice.

"I managed to get face to face with Latimer, which was surprisingly challenging, but once I did, it was a very interesting conversation."

"Did you clear him?" Alex asked, her tone now edgy with suspicion.

"Yes. He's cleared. He was looking after a sick child on the night that Maria was murdered. However, I did learn something interesting from him."

"What's that?"

"There's an online forum where, reading between the lines, I think the participants discuss how to untraceably cause death with a variety of medical drugs. He's clearly been on it, and he has given me some links, as well as the name of someone that we should watch out for."

"And who's that?" Alex sounded intrigued.

"All I have is the user name, The Sandman."

"The Sandman? Sleep?" Alex immediately made the association.

“Exactly,” Meg said.

“We still don’t have a motive. What do you think the Sandman’s motive is, Meg?”

"We need to pinpoint the motive," Meg agreed. "Right now, though, it might be easier to start off with the suspect, chase that down, and then see if the motive becomes clear. There are only so many possibilities, Alex. Either it's someone who's a total psychopath and gets off on murder, or it's someone who is trying to save these victims in a twisted way, or else it's someone who's looking to gain financially from their deaths."

“Agreed. I guess we need to get hold of someone who can help us navigate the dark web.” There was a thread of excitement in Alex’s voice.

“You know of anyone?” Meg asked.

"Actually," Alex said, "I do have a couple of old friends who went into IT and have some hacking ability. Would one of them do? I've asked them for occasional favors during my prosecutor days, and they've usually been ready to help."

“I think a hacker is exactly what we need now,” Meg agreed.

“Okay,” Alex said. “Give me half an hour, and I’ll be back at your place. Then, I’ll do my research and see who’s available to help us follow those links and find out more about The Sandman.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Climbing out of the cab at Meg's house, carrying a deli bag with some lunch inside for both of them, Alex felt a fresh surge of encouragement, as if this new lead was taking things forward. She'd felt demoralized after drawing a blank at Dignity First, sensing as soon as she walked into the pristine building that she was on the wrong track and looking in the wrong direction. Gabe's phone call had made things even worse, and she'd stood outside the Dignity First office premises, blinking tears of defeat and frustration away, feeling as if she was letting her aunt down by her own inability to get answers on her killer.

But now, this was promising.

The dark web. The Sandman. The secret discussion of drugs recipes that could cause death.

Alex let herself in and went straight to the sideboard to greet Corrigan. He really was the best cat in the world. No doubt about it. She adored him as if he was her own.

"What do you think, you whiskery Buddha?" she asked him, feeling cheered as he rubbed his nose over her hand. "Do you think we're going to manage to get to the truth of this?"

Alex grabbed a porcelain bowl that was at risk of being tipped over the edge of the sideboard by Corrigan's outstretched back paws and moved it a few inches further in. She was sure she recalled Meg doing that a few times recently. Corrigan was clearly getting the knack of nudging it.

With that done, she sat down and got straight onto her phone calls,

starting with the hacker that she hoped would be the best prospect.

He didn't pick up, so she moved quickly onto the next one. No time to delay. They needed to move forward on this. She didn't want anyone suffering what she'd gone through. She didn't want any other terminal patient to be robbed of the time they were still looking forward to, and had planned to use.

Not happening, if she could stop it.

She got hold of the next hacker. He was her second choice just because he was usually busier. She'd gone through high school with him, and even then, he'd been IT obsessed and had been the best programmer in the area. She thought he'd gone straight to university with a bursary from a company that had already wanted to hire him, and she'd kept track of his career on and off since then.

"Hello, Alex?" he asked, sounding surprised. Well, that was understandable. It had been years since they'd spoken. She'd reached out to him once or twice when she was a prosecutor and had needed help with small jobs.

"Hello, Sam," she said. "I'm calling to find out if you can do a quick job."

"Quick?" he asked, with some amusement in his voice. She guessed that there was no guarantee a job would ever be fast.

"As quick as possible," she elaborated.

"And what is it?"

"I have a couple of links," Alex said. "The links lead to a dark web site where people, including someone who goes by the code name of the Sandman, have been discussing how to end people's lives using cocktails of

drugs that are undetectable.”

There was a surprised silence. Alex imagined Sam’s face – broad, pale, with an expressive mouth and dark, intelligent eyes. He’d probably be raising his eyebrows, propping one of his stubby fingers onto his pudgy chin as he took in her request.

“You’ve been getting yourself into a complicated situation,” he observed with some amusement.

“Not my fault,” Alex immediately countered. “My aunt was murdered in the hospital when she came in for treatment. She was a terminal cancer patient, but she had a few good months left.”

Emotion surged inside her, and she tamped it firmly down. Now wasn't the time.

Apologetic, poor Sam was trying to make up for having laughed.

“Geez. Alex, I’m sorry, man. That’s terrible. I’m going to get onto this as fast as possible. However, I don’t know if I’ll be able to trace who this Sandman is. It will all depend on if he or she’s around online and if I can even get into the chat forum and if so, whether I can trace him or her back. Some people take layers of precautions and become almost invisible. I just want you to know that before I start.”

“I totally get it. And there is a budget available for your time.”

She knew that Sam was kind that way and would charge police and prosecutors a nominal fee, not the sky-high rates that he could and did charge in other situations.

"Send it along, and I'll see what I can do," he said, leaving Alex to thank him again and then start fidgeting. What else could she do now? How could she work this from another angle?

As she always did, Alex thought: what would Meg do?

Hopefully, Meg was on her way home now, and when she got here, both of them could work together. But in the meantime, one sensible thing she could get done was to put a fresh pot of coffee on.

Alex went and did that and then returned to her seat at the dining room table, her mind working furiously. Right now, they were working on pinpointing the perpetrator, thanks to Sam, but she was still wondering about the motive.

“Looking at all the motives,” she told Corrigan, “the cold blooded psychopath seems the least likely. I think there’s a reason over and above that for killing people who are going to die anyway in a few weeks or months. What do you think?”

He yawned widely, showing Alex that all his shining teeth were in excellent condition.

“Thanks for that,” she said. “I keep on coming back to financial gain, myself.”

Maria had a sizeable nest egg that she’d never bothered to dip into. She’d always lived comfortably thanks to her own career and her husband’s money. Had someone somehow tried to get their claws into it?

The thought made Alex feel as if she could throttle them then and there. But her cousin had repeatedly said that there were no insurance claims on Maria’s life, and her will was standard. Alex had been touched to learn that she was going to receive part of the estate – Maria herself had told her that a while ago. But there were no unusual inclusions in the will. Nobody was named who wasn’t either family or a close associate. There was nothing untoward about it.

She shook her head, wondering again how someone could have benefited, and at that moment, the front door rattled, and Meg walked in.

Alex jumped up, keen to update her on the latest progress.

“I’ve called my contact, Sam,” she said. “He’s working on the ID of the Sandman, but said it might not be possible. In the meantime, I’ve put the coffee on and got us some lunch. Two cheese and salad rolls.”

“That’s so welcome,” Meg said gratefully.

Alex got the rolls out of the bag, they poured coffee, and then they sat down with their food.

“I’ve been thinking about motives,” Alex said.

“Have you reached any conclusions?” Meg asked her.

Alex tried her best to explain why she was thinking the way she was.

“I keep on leaning toward financial gain. It’s just that nothing else feels right to me. I know I’m probably overthinking this and missing things and focusing too narrowly.”

She sighed, feeling the tension rise inside her again. But Meg believed her, she could see. In fact, from the way Meg was nodding, she seemed to agree.

“Instinct is important,” Meg said. “It’s definitely nothing to do with the will?”

“No. I’ve checked and double checked, and triple checked,” Alex confirmed. “Definitely nothing to do with that.”

“What else?” Meg mused. “Did your aunt have medical insurance?”

“Yes, she did, but there were never any problems with the claims. I don’t even think the broker who handles her claims is based in Boston. I

can check, though.” Alex rummaged in her purse for her phone.

“Since we’re confirming everything, let’s check. Let’s not leave anything to chance right now,” Meg encouraged.

Alex stood up, filled with a restless energy as she confirmed this important fact, and got on the phone to her cousin Lily. Again. With all the back and forth at the moment, they needed a hotline to each other.

Grabbing up a notepad, she headed through to the entrance hall to take the call there. Her gaze veered to James’s photograph. It always made her feel sad to see his kind, wry smile when she walked in, to know how much he meant to Meg.

Lily answered, and Alex quickly explained what she needed.

“The medical insurance. What information do you have on it?”

“Um, let me check,” Lily said. She was understandably even more upset than Alex was. She was a slender, taut-nerved woman who Alex always felt was a little too fragile for the real world. When she was younger, she’d been bullied at school and Alex had stood up for her and smacked the bullies to within an inch of their miserable lives.

“It’s been done through an agency office,” she said. “The company is called Quantum Health Insurance, and the agency office isn’t in Boston.”

“It’s not?” Alex said.

“No. It’s in Georgetown, up north. They do visit Massachusetts regularly, though. I don’t think Maria ever had any bad service or any problems from the company or the agency office.”

“Thanks for the information,” Alex said.

“Why do you ask?” Poor Lily was clearly feeling anxious all over again

– her default emotion, whereas Alex’s tended to be anger.

“We’re just getting a full picture of Maria’s situation,” Alex reassured her.

“Oh, good. Let me know if there’s anything else I can help you with,” she then said, sounding relieved.

Alex came back through to the dining room with the information.

“The company is called Quantum Health Insurance, and the agency office is based in Georgetown. Would it be worth calling them?”

Meg nodded, which Alex felt pleased about. Right now, every lead counted.

“Let’s call them,” she said. “Maybe someone’s been putting in fraudulent claims for administering certain treatments, and then killed the patients so that they can’t deny the treatments were given. That’s an angle we haven’t yet explored.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Meg made the call, looking up the details for the agency office and then finding out who it was run by.

"Sure," the woman on the other end of the line said. "The person in charge is Mrs. Hellmann. Grace Hellmann. She's run it for many years, and she'll be able to answer all your questions. But she's not in this office. She's actually in Boston right now."

"Is she?" Immediately, Meg's suspicions flared at this possible coincidence in terms of timing. "When did she travel here?"

"Early this morning," the other woman said, causing Meg's suspicions to damp down again as quickly as they'd surged. "She's there for a couple of days, and she has a busy schedule, but I suppose I could give you her number in case she has a gap. She always asks that any emergencies get referred to her."

"I'd really appreciate that," Meg said. A moment later, she was writing down the number, saying thank you, and hanging up.

Without waiting, she dialed Mrs. Hellmann's number, listening to it ring and ring. She was busy composing a voicemail when it was finally picked up.

"Hellmann speaking," the voice said.

"Mrs. Hellmann, it's Meg Thorne here. I'm doing some research into a client of yours who died under suspicious circumstances in the hospital the night before last."

"I think I know who you're speaking about," Hellmann said

immediately. "Would that be Maria Chan?"

"That's correct," Meg said.

"Please accept my condolences," Mrs. Hellmann said immediately.

"What did you want to know from me about her? Obviously, she's a client, and there may be things that are confidential. Are you related to her?"

"My investigation partner is," Meg said. "I work with Alex Chan, assisting the police, and we're following up on this death, thinking that it might be linked to other cold cases."

"Is that so? That's very disturbing," Mrs. Hellmann said immediately. "In that case, I'd be prepared to meet with you. If there's a family member in attendance, then I can probably give you more information than I could otherwise. I'm available... let me see. Not now. At two p.m., if you can make that time."

It was in an hour and a half. Sooner than Meg had hoped for.

"We can make that time. Where's convenient?"

"I'll be at the Pines Clinic. You know where that is?" Without waiting for an answer, clearly assuming Meg would know, Hellmann continued.

"There's a coffee shop across the road from it where I hold a lot of my meetings. I can be there and see you at two."

"Thank you," Meg said.

Hellmann hung up, and Meg raised her eyebrows at Alex.

"Well," she said, "we seem to have gotten lucky. She's in town, and that means we might be able to get more information from her than we would have done in a phone call."

"Do you think she'll be able to research any fraudulent claims?" Alex

asked, frowning. “Or will that fall under something she considers confidential?”

“I hope she’ll be willing to,” Meg said. “She sounded like she wanted to cooperate.”

Alex made a face. “Given what we’ve dealt with so far, that’s a breath of fresh air. And I think we should go to that meeting early. The more time with her we have, the better.”

“Agreed,” Meg said.

*

At quarter to two, she and Alex headed into the small coffee shop opposite the Pines Clinic. The coffee shop was light and bright, with red and white décor that included cheerful, old-fashioned plaid curtains in the window. At this hour, the lunchtime trade was emptying out, and there were a few available tables.

Meg headed over to the one nearest the door, after looking around and checking that nobody of Hellmann’s description was sitting down yet.

Nope. No women on their own. They sat, both at an angle where they could watch the door, and Meg ordered a pot of coffee.

Five minutes later, a woman headed up to the door, looking around expectantly just the way that Meg and Alex had done.

She was probably in her late forties, with brown hair that was artfully dyed in tortoiseshell shades, wearing a sky-blue business suit, her slim legs in stylish black boots.

She carried a laptop bag and a large folder in her arms.

Meg waved, and the woman headed over to their table with a smile.

“Good afternoon,” she said. She put the folder down on the table and slung the bag over the back of the chair, and then shook hands with them. Her gaze rested on Alex when she introduced herself.

“I'm so sorry for your loss, Ms. Chan,” she said sympathetically. “It's good to meet you, and I'm here to answer whatever questions I'm able to.”

She exuded an air of brisk competency as she sat down and opened the folder, getting out a gold pen and a silver laptop. By that stage, she'd just about taken over the table, with the coffee jug and the cups now crowded into a corner.

“Please,” she said, “can you tell me exactly what you're investigating and how it relates to our client?”

“Sure,” Meg said. “Maria Chan obviously died under suspicious circumstances, and there have been a number of other deaths at hospitals throughout Boston that have followed the same MO. Bob Whitman was the most recent one. Was he a client of yours?”

Hellmann raised her eyebrows in surprise. “He was, actually,” she said. “But that's not unusual as we are one of the biggest service providers in the area.”

“We're linking this with a number of other cold cases,” Meg said. “They were picked up from five to ten years ago and investigated by a detective who since retired. He didn't get anywhere with the investigation, so the cases have gone cold.”

“And you feel it's worthwhile going back into them again?” Hellmann asked.

“Absolutely,” Meg said.

“I think you're doing a great job then,” Hellmann said softly. “You

know, if something fraudulent is occurring, I'm a great believer in exposing the rot. So, let me know what you need from me, and whatever I can help you with, I will."

Meg glanced at Alex, who spoke first.

"I'd like to know what claims there have been on Maria Chan's account, and if anything raises any red flags with you."

"Well," Hellmann said, "that's an easy question to answer, because we have a whole system of checks and balances in place. It would be virtually impossible for anything fraudulent to occur. We confirm each claim with the service provider, and once the claims are lodged, the client also signs for them. All our clients are kept in the loop, and we try our best to make sure there are no unforeseen expenses. We don't like nasty shocks, and we don't believe that sick people should have to cope with that kind of stress," she said in sympathetic tones.

"How about your employees?" Meg asked. "Is there anyone who could have been involved in any fraudulent business, and might have sought to cover their tracks? Perhaps someone who quit suddenly, or you picked up any irregularities in their activities?"

It wasn't as if such a thing was impossible. Experience had taught her that even at the biggest, best, blue-chip companies, fraud could and did occur. If it hadn't done then James would still be alive.

But Hellmann shook her head. "No," she said.

She sounded more uncertain. Meg homed in on her tone.

"Are you sure about that?" she asked.

Now, Hellmann was looking dubious, scissoring the pen in between her fingers and glancing down at something in the folder.

“I am fairly sure,” she said.

Meg shook her head. "Fairly sure isn't good enough. We're dealing with multiple murder cases, and from the MO, it's highly likely that the perpetrator has knowledge of the industry and would be able to access various hospitals without raising suspicion. An insurance consultant, or an agent, would check those boxes. If there's anyone that you're thinking of, then it would be better to tell us sooner. Or else, we're going to have to get the police involved immediately. That'll take a lot of time. They might seize your paperwork or close you down for a while.

Hellmann sighed and then nodded. "We have an employee that I'm concerned about. I doubt she'd do anything like this – or so I think."

“How long has she been working for you” Meg asked.

“She’s been working with us for a year, but before that, she did work for another company in the same industry for a decade or so. She’s highly experienced, you know. But there have been a few blips in her performance and a couple of inconsistencies in the client accounts that she’s delivered that have made me wonder about her. I’ve been meaning to pull her in and go through everything that she’s been handling, just for my own peace of mind. She lives well,” Hellmann said thoughtfully, almost as if she was speaking to herself. “But that’s no reason to suspect someone of skimming off any money, is it? She might be personally wealthy,” she mused. “And I don’t see how committing fraud would relate to a patient’s untimely death.”

Every word she spoke was triggering Meg’s suspicions more strongly.

“Your employee might have forged a patient’s signature for receiving drugs or treatments that were never administered, or murdered a patient pre-emptively before they could deny that a treatment was given. In any case,

who is this employee?" Meg asked.

"Do I have to give you her name? I'd rather pursue this internally until I'm surer of the situation," Hellmann said. "It won't take me long. I only became aware of it when I checked the accounts yesterday, and I don't think it's fair to throw her to the wolves, so to speak." She grimaced.

"Is she based here in Boston?" Meg countered.

Hellmann pursed her lips. "For about three weeks out of every four, yes. I don't have her schedule with me, though."

It might not matter. They still needed to look into her more closely. They could check up on her shifts at a later stage. For now, the inconsistency in her performance and the fact that her employer was worried about her was reason enough to look into this more closely.

"If she's working in Boston, then we do need her name."

"She's Angela Mouton," Hellmann said with great reluctance. "I really feel bad about this. She actually left the industry for a couple of years, and I headhunted her back because I thought she was capable."

"Where is Angela working today?" Meg asked.

"Look, I don't want you rushing in here. I'd rather handle this myself," Hellmann insisted.

"There won't be an option if we get the police involved, and there's a strong chance we might need to do that," Meg said.

"You really are taking every lead seriously, aren't you?" she said.

Meg nodded. "This is a case of multiple murder, and it's very possible that financial gain has somehow been involved. If you have misgivings about your employee, we need to speak to her before you do."

Hellmann sighed. "Angela has a busy day today. And I don't want you to mention my name, please, if you do catch up with her. If she's innocent, which is almost definitely the case, then I don't want to end up souring my relationship with her. She's a valued person with a whole host of industry knowledge."

"Understood," Meg said.

She was feeling very grateful that Hellmann had agreed to this meeting and that they'd been able to speak to her while she was here in town.

"Any other employees, past or present, that you have any issues with?" Alex asked.

Hellmann sighed. "I don't even have issues with Angela. I do have a gut feeling that I want to pursue. Now, I feel as if this has been taken out of my hands. Just because of a few little issues that might mean nothing?" She was now twisting the pen between her fingers faster, looking upset that the situation had escalated this way.

"If she's the only employee that you have issues with, then that's all we need from you, apart from Angela's schedule today. I assume you have that with you?"

Meg leaned forward as Hellmann leaned back.

"Look, she's doing the rounds at the hospitals today, going to all the major ones. I'll give you a list of the patients that she's due to check up on, if that'll help you. There are several of them at each hospital, so when she arrives at a hospital, she'll be there for a couple of hours at least. I'd come with you but unfortunately I have to head back in a couple of hours, and until then, my schedule is packed. But she'll be going from ward to ward, checking up on each patient's paperwork and obviously also checking in on

them.”

“That sounds perfect. I appreciate that you’re doing this. If she’s innocent and cleared, then all we’ve done is help you to rule her out.”

Hellmann looked through her folder and slid out a piece of paper, handing it over to Meg, still looking reluctant to have to do this.

Meg stood up, motivation surging.

Her next stop was going to be the hospital. She couldn’t wait to get to face to face with the employee who had a long history in the industry, and who might have committed this fraud, murdering patients to cover her tracks.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The killer allowed herself a small smile as she reflected on the work she had done while packing up her paperwork and focusing on her next destination. It was genius – pure, simple genius. It was like a package that was perfectly fastened – something which, strangely, gave her a lot of pleasure.

She liked the symmetry and the pleasing order of a well wrapped parcel. Everything important was inside, and all the evidence was neatly tucked away. She liked to compare that parcel to the series of projects that she'd undertaken, starting ten years ago. She was reluctant to think of them as crimes, because in her mind, they weren't criminal at all. To think so was far too simplistic, and only the unintelligent would do so.

Nobody else could have figured out such a neat, tidy, and brilliant way to build an empire.

It hadn't been done fast, but rather, slowly. It had taken excessive amounts of patience and control. Waiting until the time was right had been essential because, in order to stay invisible, you had to plan every step of the way.

She knew that this had been a work of pure genius. It was just a shame that she wouldn't get to brag about it the way she wished she could. Nobody would ever know – well, apart from one person.

One trusted person was the only other human being on the planet who would be able to confess to these crimes. And of course, that person would say nothing.

“Besides,” she murmured to herself, so softly that even the people close by would have battled to hear, “they’re not crimes. What I’m doing is a mercy. I’m freeing people from a terrible predicament. Who wants to be waiting to die?”

She’d pondered about death a lot over the years that she’d been doing this. It was inevitable, of course, because that was her business – well, this side of it, anyway.

Long ago, she had decided that life without quality was no life at all, and it was easy to see when it deteriorated. She was one of the people who were in the very best position to see such a thing. And never mind what was on paper, the expensive procedures, the pain relief, the extra interventions that were done with such hope, clinging to the idea that an extra hour or day might be bought or bargained, when the end was looming inexorably.

It was sad, really. Sad for everyone involved. And it was only right that a clever person should have figured out a way to benefit along the way, to become part of the journey, so that in the midst of suffering, there could also be hope.

Hope for her, of course. Not for the patients – or victims, as she supposed the world insisted on calling them, although they were victims long before she came along. They were victims of the terrible diseases that robbed them of the long lives they should have had. With only a few months to go, what was the point of suffering?

There was also another reason why they had to go, and that was a darker one, of course. Dead people didn’t spill secrets. And it was incredibly important that these few secrets died with them. Because otherwise her plans would all fall apart.

She didn't want that. She'd realized early on in her career that there was no way of adding to her wealth just by hard work. Hard work was a fool's game. It was like spinning your wheels in the mud. You thought you were getting somewhere, but all you were doing was miring yourself deeper and deeper in place.

To continue the analogy – and yes, she was a fan of comparisons – this project had been like a series of wooden struts that had given her wheels purchase and gotten her out of the mud. Not everyone was smart enough to think of a similar solution. Most people just floundered along. Not her.

She'd seen a clever way – no, a brilliant way – to save herself from the fate of the average person. She had never been destined for normality, never been ordinary. She'd always been extraordinary.

Of course, there had been terrible losses in her life, too – and she'd had to overcome them and work around them.

Still, she felt a sense of loss when she thought about what had happened five years ago.

It had been so tragic – a series of events that had almost put a stop to what she was able to do. Firstly, that damned cop had started looking into the cases. What an idiot he was. A bumbling, interfering man doing his best to make trouble while on the cusp of retirement himself.

He'd nearly succeeded and had come very close, and as a result, she had thought it wisest to stop for that time. It had been a grudge decision, and she regretted every lost opportunity since then.

But she knew that patience was the name of the game. Nothing could be done if someone was going to find out. It was better to wait.

And then the other tragedy had struck, the one that still tore at her heart,

and that had put a complete stop to proceedings. There was no way that she could carry on. It was impossible. For a while, she'd thought that she would have to give up entirely.

It had been a wrench, and she'd suffered all the emotions. Grief, anger, bitterness, denial – and finally, a new resolve. She'd thought very carefully and she had realized that she could still carry on. Of course, she could. It would simply mean some changes.

Quite a few changes. Each one important. Patience was the name of the game. Gradually, she had regrouped, surprising herself with her own strength. And then, piece by piece, she'd started moving on her board again.

Certain moves had been lucky. Others had been carefully planned.

Each move felt like a big win against adversity, but now, here she was.

Two down and a few more to go before she wrapped things up and retired permanently – from that side of things, at least. She knew it couldn't continue forever. But there was so much benefit in doing it. A double benefit. The money to be made, and also, the lives to be freed.

Nobody wanted to live in pain, even if they thought they did.

She knew better.

Not only was terminating their lives essential for the viability of her project, it was also an act of kindness. Perhaps even an act of love.

Slinging the bag over her shoulder, she put her thoughts aside.

Time to get back to work, which included the planning of her next target's demise.

CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

The rain had finally cleared, and a watery afternoon sun was gleaming by the time Meg and Alex arrived at the hospital, where they had figured out that Angela Mouton was going to be, according to her schedule. Meg knew that they'd need to fight every step of the way to get the information they needed, and she was grateful when Alex's phone rang and she picked up, saying expectantly, "Sam? You got anything for us?"

Meg stopped right there in the hospital lobby while the hacker updated Alex on what he'd been able to find. Alex switched the phone onto speaker so that Meg could hear.

"Yes, I have found something," he said. "I managed to get onto the dark web forum where they discuss drugs and their combinations. There are a few people there, and they obviously go to huge lengths to hide who they are, but I looked back over the conversation, and I did find a few clues that might help."

"What did you find?" Alex asked.

"The Sandman, whoever he or she is, has been operational on the group for about a year under this pseudonym. And he or she definitely stays in Boston – most of the time, anyway. They have been asking about some of the medications needed, willing to buy stolen goods on the black market, and they've had some responses, so I'd say it's likely they managed to get hold of the cocktails they needed. Some of the medications are quite obscure, and there's even one that's more commonly used in the veterinary industry, so that must have taken a lot of time and effort. According to the

chit-chat, the combination of drugs is even better than it was ‘years ago’ – perhaps that means something?”

“It definitely does,” Alex said, as Meg thought of how the crimes had started up again after the break. Maybe the killer had taken a break or been unable to source the drugs that were needed.

"I also understand that there's a list. I found a mention of it and went digging deeper. Elsewhere on the dark web, in more private forums, I picked up more chatter, and I found out that this killer has a list of victims that are chosen in advance, but I'm not sure how far in advance. This list has been referred to a couple of times during the conversation. It seems to be carefully planned. This isn't a spur of the moment thing. The victims are picked weeks or months in advance – that's according to the snippets I've picked up. I'll send you through the screenshots. I can't give you a link to the actual chat because I was only in for a few minutes before I got automatically kicked out by some software that's operational there. Then, the link changed, and now I can't find it again. So, they have a mechanism in place to keep it secure."

"Thanks for what you've done. Please send the screenshots. This is so helpful."

“I’ll keep trying to get back in,” Sam confirmed. “There won’t be any way of finding out who the Sandman is directly, though. It’s too secure for that. But if I get back in, I’ll be able to take another look back at the chat.”

Alex said goodbye and hung up. A moment later, her phone beeped, and the conversation started filtering through. Meg looked eagerly down at the screenshots, wanting to see if she could tell anything further about the Sandman from the way he or she spoke.

A quick read through showed her that it wouldn't be that easy. The conversation was terse and abrupt, stilted, and a lot of the products that were talked about were referred to by code names. This wasn't the long streams of conversation that might give more of a clue to background, education, personality, or anything else.

Still, it was very clear that the Sandman had been actively trying to source the cocktail of drugs needed to kill without a trace. That meant that he or she had been trying very hard to keep these murders from being picked up. A deliberate overdose would have been easy to spot, and if that had happened, then it was likely these crimes might have been investigated far more thoroughly. As it was, if it hadn't been for Castellano's tenacity, they would still be in the dark.

"Right," Meg said when she'd finished reading through the sequence of screenshots. "I think we've got as much as we're going to get from this, so let's go find Angela now."

She took a look at the list, which contained the ward names and the bed numbers of the patients. With this, they would be able to go from patient to patient, and if Angela was still in the hospital, they'd track her down.

"First one is bed two, ward B, second floor," Alex said. There was nobody to stop them from going straight there, now that they knew their destination. Meg was sure that they'd meet up with a ward nurse along the way, but she hoped that the ward nurse would simply be able to tell them faster whether Angela was in that ward or not.

They headed up, running along the corridor, powering their way to the main desk. A nurse was on duty there, and Meg stopped at the desk.

"Good afternoon," she said. "Is Angela Mouton here? She's the

Quantum consultant, and I understand she's doing the rounds."

"She left about twenty minutes ago," the ward nurse said without even looking up from her computer. Meg and Alex raced on to the next stop on the list. This was a floor higher and a smaller ward. Again, they had missed Angela, and she'd just left.

The next ward was on the hospital's top floor, and they raced up the last flight of stairs with Meg hoping that this time, they'd find her, and that she hadn't done her visits in a different order or left the hospital altogether.

They reached the desk, and Meg asked her now-familiar question, her voice a lot more breathless than it had been the first time she'd asked it.

The ward nurse looked behind her.

"I think she's just finishing up in there," she said.

"Can we go in?" Meg asked hopefully, but the sturdy, gray-haired woman shook her head.

"I'm sorry. Visiting hours are over, and you're not friends or family of these patients. You'll have to wait until she's finished up."

Meg stood near the desk, impatiently at first, but then deciding it was actually better to speak to Angela outside the ward, because the nurse was right. The questions they wanted to ask most definitely weren't for patients' ears and would upset them.

After a few minutes, a woman walked out of the ward.

She had brown hair held back from her face, porcelain skin dotted with freckles, and was smiling to herself, her narrow mouth curved up at the corners. Like Hellmann had been, she was carrying a large black folder that Meg now saw had the company logo embossed on its corner in pale blue.

Meg stepped forward, ready to intercept her as soon as she passed the desk.

“Are you Angela Mouton?” she asked.

Angela stared at her, surprised.

“Yes. That’s me. What’s this about?” she asked.

"Angela, we're working with the police. I'm Meg Thorne, and this is Alex Chan."

Immediately, Angela heard the last name, Meg saw her face change. Her features tightened and her eyes narrowed.

“Good to meet you,” she said in wary tones.

"We want to speak to you about your last interaction with Maria Chan, as well as a few other patients. You handled Maria's claims and her insurance processing. Is that correct?"

Now, Angela’s eyes widened, and Meg saw a look of concern in them.

“Yes, that’s correct. Why? Is there a problem?” She caught herself, as if realizing that she was being rude. “I’m so sorry for your loss. I imagine that you must be related to Maria, Ms. Chan?”

Meg saw concern in her eyes now, and heard it in her voice. It hadn’t been there to begin with. Was it fake?

“She was my aunt,” Alex said. “And she was murdered. We suspect that it might have been done for financial gain, although we’re not sure yet, but it’s connected with an earlier series of crimes.”

Angela was looking pale. Meg saw her face was looking far tenser than it had done. Her gaze was darting from side to side as if looking for a way out.

“You suspect me?” she said. “Is that what you’re saying?”

“We need to know your movements. And I’d also like to look into the transactions that you’ve put through over the past few months, in case there are any discrepancies there.”

“Do you have the right to do that?” Angela might have turned sheet white, but she was coming back strongly.

"We are working with the police, and we're authorized to ask you questions," Meg said patiently. "However, if you'd prefer to answer them at the police station, then that's fine. We can drive you there and you can speak to the station commander, Gabriel Reeves, who's fully up to date on these cases."

Angela was looking pale. She drew in a deep breath, and Meg could see her hands were shaking.

“I want a lawyer,” she said.

CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"You can have a lawyer," Meg said. Her voice was calm, but her heart was pounding with excitement and resolve. The fact that she even wanted a lawyer meant that she had something to hide. Innocent people didn't start lawyering up when non-police detectives started closing in on them.

"We're going to call Gabriel Reeves, who's heading up this case," Meg said. "He'll take you in to the police station and question you there."

She wanted to be around for that questioning, even if it was tucked away in a backroom somewhere. But first, she needed to know something else.

"I'd like a copy of your schedule for the past few weeks," she said to Angela. All the color had drained out of her face. She was breathing fast, her eyes were panicked, and Meg thought that if she'd had more of a head start, she'd have tried to run. That was what she was looking like – as if this had tipped her all the way into flight mode and all she could think of now was getting out of this predicament.

"My schedule? Sure, I'll get that for you."

"And how about from the last time you were working in the industry? That was for a different company, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Angela said. Her voice was shaking. Alex was already on the phone, talking to Gabe. From the snippets of conversation that she overheard, Meg guessed he was on his way to the hospital.

"Which company was that?"

"Why don't you look it up?" Angela lashed out, as if the tension and

fear inside her had built up to such a head that she needed an outlet.

“I can look it up, or you can tell me. You’re going to need to think back on a lot of your actions over the past years, so now might be a good time to start,” Meg said inexorably.

Angela huffed out a sigh that Meg thought she’d intended to sound exasperated, but it just sounded helpless.

"I was working for Goldswain health insurance," she said. "I left them about three or four years ago and went into other work. And then, I was offered a job with Quantum, and I took it."

“And what other work were you involved in? Anything industry related?”

“I took a break from the industry,” she said defiantly.

Meg nodded. This would mean a lot of research. First and foremost, she’d need to find out if the ten previous victims, from years ago, had all been insured with Goldswain. That would be a complex piece of research to figure out, because Meg knew that some of these patients might have had different sets of cover with different companies. They’d need to do an exhaustive amount of research to get a full picture, and of course, time had passed, so it wouldn’t be easy.

However, what she could – and would – do was to call Goldswain and speak to Angela Mouton’s bosses, and find out more about which patients she’d dealt with, and why she’d eventually left.

*

An hour later, Meg and Alex were sitting in the back office of the same police station where Angela had been taken, which happened to be the one under Gabe's current command. They were working intensively, sitting at a

spare desk. Being Gabe's police station, there was a pot of good coffee brewing in the tiny tearoom, and there was also a tin of cookies on the shelf.

A few of those cookies were on a plate in front of Meg. While doing her research, she was trying her hardest to exert her self-control and not eat them.

Luckily, she was so busy and learning so many fascinating details that it wasn't the hardest battle she'd ever had. With Angela's lawyer still a couple of hours away, they had a lot of time to gather information before Gabe would move in for the official questioning.

For the time being, Angela was sitting in one of the spare offices, supervised by a cop on duty. She wasn't charged with anything – yet – but all the same, Gabe wanted to keep an eye on her. Like Meg, he didn't trust her not to run if she got half a chance.

“I'd like to speak to someone who knew Angela Mouton, or can give me information on her,” Meg said.

It was surprisingly difficult to get this information. There seemed to have been a high turnover of staff at the Boston office of Goldswain insurance, where Angela had worked.

Eventually, she got hold of someone who she thought could help.

“Good afternoon, Ms. Thorne. I'm Katy, the HR manager here. I understand you're looking for information on one of our previous employees?”

"That's correct," Meg said. She'd spent fifteen minutes so far being shunted around the company, and she hoped this was her final stop.

Katy paused. “Are you with the police?”

"I'm an ex-cop, currently assisting the police with a case. We're waiting to question Angela and get more information from her. She's not currently a suspect. However, her background might be relevant, and I need someone who can give me some details."

"Would you be able to come to our offices?" Katy asked.

Meg sighed. Now? This was only going to delay things. Why was this HR manager being so obstructive?

However, a moment later, Meg pushed past her initial frustration and started thinking about why, in fact, that might be so.

Maybe there were things that she was only prepared to disclose face to face.

Meg stood up, checking the maps app on her phone. The head office wasn't too far away from the police station. If she was quick, she could get there and back before rush hour and she could then sit in when the lawyer arrived.

"I'm going to go there in person," she told Alex. "I hope I'll be back in time for the interview with Gabe, but if I'm not going to get back in time, and I learn anything important, I'll call you."

"That sounds perfect," Alex said.

She had the tough job of making call after call to try to trace the full medical insurance portfolio of all the previous victims. Meg hoped that when she'd done so, they might find that Goldswain intersected with all the older cases, just as Quantum was in common with the two more recent ones. That would create the strong link they'd need.

Then, they'd have to take a deep dive into Angela's finances and see what they could track down there.

Alex went back to her phone calls, and Meg headed out.

As she rushed to her car and got on the road, she thought about the fact that most cases were solved just this way. It took hours of intensive research, and probing into background details, getting information on transactions, movements, and activities.

In a way, being a cop at its most basic was a lot like being a forensic auditor. No wonder she and James had experienced such a meeting of minds when they'd gotten to know each other.

She knew that he'd be cheering her on now, encouraging her and Gabe and Alex to do whatever was necessary to start building a watertight case.

The thoughts of James brought that confrontation with Suanne back into her mind. She wondered what kind of a day Suanne was having, and whether she felt a stab of fear or regret every time she thought about Meg coming back in the evening.

Meg still wasn't sure whether Suanne would be there and agree to talk, even though she'd stated so vehemently that her calendar didn't allow for her to do a runner.

Hopefully, if she and Gabe arrived on her doorstep and were able to promise her the security she needed, she would spill what she knew.

For now, though, she was pulling up outside the head office of Goldswain Insurance. That drive had passed surprisingly fast, but then again, Meg had a lot to occupy her mind.

The four-story, glass-clad office building looked stark and modern. Heading inside, Meg saw that the interior was sleek, shiny, immaculate. Huge posters advertising Goldswain's services lined the walls, together with a few awards that the company had won.

Meg headed up to the reception desk.

“I’d like to speak to Katy, from HR,” she said.

To her surprise, a woman with a cloud of curly blond hair, holding a laptop under her arm, was standing behind the reception desk, and she stepped forward.

“Meg Thorne?” she said, extending a hand for a handshake that only went as far as Meg’s fingers. “I’m Katy. Please come this way.”

She bustled over to a side door, up a flight of stairs, and led the way to a small boardroom with a shiny wooden table and plush black chairs. Pulling out one of them, she sat down and opened her laptop. Meg sat opposite.

Checking Katy out, Meg guessed she was in her early thirties. She radiated youthful energy, and Meg could barely see a line on her face.

If she had worked at this company while Angela was employed, Meg was going to guess that it hadn’t been in a senior position. Would she know enough to be able to help Meg with what she needed?

“So,” Katy said, all business. “This is in connection with a previous employee of ours, Angela Mouton, correct?” As she spoke, she was calling something up on her laptop. Turning the screen to Meg, she saw to her surprise that it was a nondisclosure agreement.

“Before I give you any employee information, I’d like you to sign this,” she said. “It’s a standard agreement that says you won’t publicly disclose any of the information you learn, unless it’s strictly necessary for the record of a criminal investigation. In other words, you won’t talk to people about it or speak to the media at all.”

“I won’t do that,” Meg said, feeling intrigued. Why was this necessary? She didn’t think it was standard. Perhaps her trip here would be even more

fruitful than she'd thought.

"Great. You can e-sign." Katy handed her a stylus, and Meg awkwardly scribbled a jagged signature on the screen in the places where Katy indicated.

"I'll email you a copy. What's your email?"

Meg gave it to her, and Katy tapped a few keys.

"What do you want to know about Angela Mouton?"

"When did she start working for Goldswain? And when did she end her employment?" Meg asked.

Efficiently, Katy gave her both the dates. Meg saw that Angela had, in fact, spent eight years with Goldswain. She'd started her employment two years before the first of the murders, and she'd left the company a year and a half after the last one.

"Were there any issues during her employment?" Meg then asked.

Katy stared at her, folding her hands. "In fact, yes. I wasn't working here at the time, but I've read through the confidential records. There were some serious issues with her employment, and we asked her to leave when we became aware of them," she said.

"What were the issues?"

"She had provided alternative banking details for a few of the payments made to clients by our company," Katy said.

Meg took a deep breath. This was exactly the information that she'd been hoping to find.

"So, she was stealing money?"

"In essence, yes. At the time, there was a loophole that made what she

did possible. We actually discovered it when we upgraded our system security, and we ran a check. We picked up a couple of anomalies, and we then looked into them more closely, and we found out that this had been happening regularly. She was clever about it and she never took too much – just enough to bump up her salary by a few hundred dollars every month, but that adds up, you know."

"What did you do when you found out?"

"The company decided not to prosecute her, but simply to fire her. The problem with prosecuting her was that it would reflect badly on the company. What she did was a huge breach of security, and we only found out by chance. She was able to do it without any clients finding out, although that was obviously a ticking time bomb, and someone would have found out. However, we decided that the trust that would be lost if we made this information public would be more damaging to us than anything else. We closed up those doors, made sure nobody else could do the same, and we fired her – of course, without any references. We wouldn't provide those for her. I was actually surprised when you told me on the phone that she was working in the industry again."

"So, you weren't contacted for a reference?"

"Not to my knowledge. Perhaps she falsified one." Then, Katy shook her head. "I'm sorry. I'm talking out of turn to say such a thing, and that's just guesswork. But we would most definitely not have provided any references. Not after what happened."

"Can you give me the details of who she stole from?" Meg asked.

Katy nodded. "I can, but not now. The records that go back that far are all sealed, and I'd have to get authorization to go in and look for them. It

was a long time ago, and we've had a lot of staff changes since then, because we had a merger, so it might be harder to retrieve that information."

Meg nodded. What the company had chosen to do, essentially, was to sweep that information under the carpet and pretend it had never happened.

She could understand them deciding that their reputation needed to be protected above all else. But this didn't help her now, when she needed facts.

"It's urgent," she said. "We're looking to link up her activities and fraud with certain cases of unexplained death that occurred five to ten years ago. Can you tell me whether certain people had insurance with Goldswain at that time?"

Katy shook her head. "That falls under client confidentiality, and it's a different matter from telling you about a staff member. I'd need to get authorization for that."

"How fast would you be able to do it?" Meg asked.

"I guess I could ask permission now, and I could get that information for you by the end of the day if the permission is given fast. But that's outside of my control, you see, because it's not an HR issue."

Meg nodded, seeing the issues of dealing with a big company in a competitive environment that handled healthcare matters for clients. She personally thought that the end of the day was optimistic, given the probable quantity of red tape. More likely, it would be tomorrow, and even more likely was that the company would say they required a warrant to release the information. Lawyers would be involved. Meg could see it.

This was one of the reasons why she'd found police work in general to be frustrating. It was a reminder of what had ended up wrapping around her

ankles and holding her back, figuratively speaking, on almost every single case she'd handled.

"The sooner, the better," she said. "But thank you very much for what you've given me in the meantime."

"Glad to have been of help," Katy smiled.

Meg handed over her business card and also gave Gabe's details and the main police station number to Katy. Katy was less willing to hand over individual names, telling Meg that she'd speak to her bosses and find out who was the right person to handle this.

Meg left, feeling as if she'd made important, hard-won progress. She had definite confirmation of Angela's misdoings. Better still, she'd managed to get this initial information fairly quickly. That meant she'd be back in time to brief Gabe and sit in on the interview.

Meg hoped that this would be the start of unraveling a horrific crime series, whose greed-driven tentacles stretched far into the past, and who might have murdered to cover her tracks before her fraud could be discovered, moving on from patient to patient over time.

CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

The observation room adjoining the interview room felt overly warm. Meg thought Gabe had cranked up the heating in there because he'd been worried that Meg and Alex might get cold.

Meg felt far too tense and expectant to be cold. Sitting on plastic chairs, she and Alex watched through the one-way glass as Angela, together with her lawyer, was escorted in to sit on the side of the table facing them.

Angela still looked as if she was walking in a dream, or maybe a nightmare. Her hands were tightly clasped in front of her, and her face was pale and rigid. Next to her, her lawyer also looked unsure. Meg wondered if she'd known him beforehand or sourced him via a few panicked calls. He couldn't be more than twenty-five, surely? He looked wide-eyed and fresh out of law school, a young man with a trendy hairstyle dressed in a conspicuously new-looking suit and tie.

Gabe, on the other hand, was all experienced ease as he lowered himself into the chair on the opposite side. His broad-shouldered bulk filled the space, and as he checked his notes, she thought he looked very confident.

She'd told him everything that she'd learned from Katy in HR. Gabe had told her that he was going to go in hard. He suspected that there wouldn't be much resistance from the pair of them, but if there was, then he had one of the other officers standing by to provide an alternative approach.

The interview room door opened, and that officer walked in.

He was an experienced detective who'd been with the precinct for more than a decade. He knew Meg and also Alex from her prosecutor days.

“Meg. Alex.” He nodded respectfully as he sat down.

“Graham,” Meg replied.

“Going to be interesting to see what plays out here,” he said.

“Yes, it will be,” Meg agreed.

“My guess is that Gabe’s going to slam-dunk this,” he said. “Look at how nervous both of them are. And is it that lawyer’s first case?” He rubbed a hand over his balding head and then propped his elbows on his knees, leaning forward to survey the scene through the window.

“Let’s hope so, but don’t get too confident.” Alex warned.

“You mean I might jinx it?” he said.

She nodded. “I don’t want anything to go wrong. This is my aunt’s murder we’re dealing with here.” There was a thread of anger in her voice as if right now, she felt too raw to be able to handle the typical cop humor that accompanied a situation like this.

Knowing that, Meg had stayed away from it, and now, Graham nodded apologetically.

“I’m sorry, Alex. I didn’t mean to make light of this or sound disrespectful.”

“Understood,” she said in a gentler voice.

At that moment, Gabe cleared his throat, and they all stopped talking among themselves and started watching. Meg had her phone ready to text him if she thought of anything that he needed to say or ask. They’d discussed using an earpiece but had decided against it, as they usually did in these situations. Gabe didn’t like having voices chattering in his ear when he was formulating a strategy for questioning, which could be akin to

planning a series of chess moves, and Meg felt the same.

“Ms. Mouton, and your counsel, you’re here because we want to question you in detail about your activities while you’ve been working in the health insurance industry,” Gabe said, in that low rumble of his that tended to make guilty people feel even worse about their actions. She’d seen criminals practically writhe under questioning, and Angela was already showing distinct signs of unease. She was pale, fidgeting, her gaze veering from the desk to her lawyer. She certainly wasn’t meeting Gabe’s eyes.

“What do you want to know?” the lawyer asked, his voice ringing with bravado and nerves.

“Sir, with all due respect, I’m here to question Angela, not talk to you. I want her version,” Gabe said firmly.

“I – but –” The lawyer clamped his lips together and stopped speaking. Meg guessed that his argument had broken on the rocks of Gabe’s confidence. At any rate, in a shaking voice, Angela then replied.

“I’m ready to answer your questions.”

"Good," Gabe said. He rocked back in his chair, which squeaked under his bulk as he surveyed the two of them. "Then, tell me if you've ever been accused of any financial wrongdoings at any of the companies you've worked for."

“Not officially, no,” she replied, and Gabe sat up in his chair again.

“I’m not playing games with you here. But since you want to focus on the details, I will. Have you ever committed any financial wrongdoings at any of the companies you’ve worked for? Let’s start with Goldswain. How about there?”

She was silent. Her hands were clenched in front of her, and Meg could see that her knuckles were white.

“Why were you fired from Goldswain?” Gabe asked.

Again, Angela was silent. Gabe let the silence build for a while, and then he said, “You don’t have to answer. We can sit here for as long as you like. I’ve got nothing else to do this afternoon – or this evening. All that’ll happen is that your lawyer’s charges will add up. It won’t change the outcome, and it won’t change the truth.”

His voice resounded in the interview room, which Gabe had redecorated to be deliberately stark. Ice white walls, steel furniture, no hint of warmth in the room at all. He wanted it to feel empty. His aim had been, subtly, to encourage the suspects to fill this bleak space with their words.

Whether it was Gabe’s voice or the décor, Meg didn’t know, but finally, in a stammering voice, Angela began to speak.

"I-I was fired from Goldswain. They found a few errors in the applications I'd made."

“Tell me about those errors,” Gabe invited.

"I – look, their system for allocating costs was very complicated, and a couple of times I accidentally entered my own banking details instead of the correct banking details for the transaction."

Meg couldn’t see Gabe’s face, but she knew the cynical look that he’d have pasted on his features as he listened to this nonsense.

“I see. So, you accidentally paid yourself numerous times? How many times in total? And we will check.”

"It-it happened about thirty or forty times," she said in a near whisper.

Meg guessed that was a conservative number and that the truth was probably double that or more. She was sure that, over as many months as she could, Angela had squeezed a couple of hundred extra dollars here or there. Little numbers added up just as they had with the company that James had been investigating when he was murdered.

Gabe kept questioning, kept pressuring. The lawyer kept drawing breath as if he was about to interrupt, but then being silenced by a glance from Gabe. Angela looked as if she was about to throw up. She was a wreck, Meg saw. She was visibly sweating, her face grayish and shiny. If she was Gabe, she'd get a bucket in there around about now, she thought.

"How do you think this is going?" Alex asked the question in a low voice.

Meg and Graham glanced at each other. Meg replied.

"I think it's going well," she said.

"She hasn't actually broken yet, though." Alex also had her hands clasped together hard.

"Gabe's getting there," Meg said encouragingly. "Give him time. He's got to get her to admit to the smaller things first. Once she's started talking more freely about the theft, then he's going to nudge her in the direction of the murders."

"I just want this to be over. I hate being here. It's horrible to watch when it concerns somebody you love. I didn't realize it was going to be this tough." Alex spoke the words in a low voice, and Meg gave her a sympathetic glance.

It was tough when you were personally involved. That was why Whitaker hadn't allowed Meg to be involved in James's murder

investigation, and to be fair to him, that had been the correct decision, because she hadn't been in the right headspace to participate in an investigation into his death.

Gabe was now switching timeframes, asking her about her activities in her current role, and from the way she was stammering guiltily, Meg was sure that as soon as Angela had gotten herself back into the health insurance industry, she'd started up the same behavior again. She must have found a way to do it. Leopards didn't change their spots, and Hellmann was entirely right in suspecting that her employee was up to something.

The problem was that, despite her encouraging words to Alex, and the fact that Angela was undeniably guilty of large-scale theft, Meg didn't feel as convinced as she should that the murders and the theft were linked.

Angela had stolen a lot. A lot. And by the time Gabe drilled down into the details, Meg felt sure that it was going to end up being far more than just a few amounts from a few selected patients whom she'd then killed.

She might have only resorted to murder when she needed to, when there was a risk of the patient realizing what had happened.

"Does the Sandman mean anything to you?" Again, Gabe switched up his approach, keeping Angela off-kilter and letting the questions jolt her.

"The what?" she replied, now sounding even more frightened. "No. That doesn't mean anything to me."

Meg noted the tone of her voice before getting back to her own thinking.

The disjoint between the murders and the theft was one of the stumbling blocks that she was finding it difficult to get around.

The other was Angela's employment in the industry.

She'd been headhunted. That was what Hellmann had told them. She had specifically stated it.

Now, Meg was starting to wonder about that.

Why would you headhunt someone who hadn't worked in the industry for a few years and who didn't have checkable references?

There was no way Goldswain would have provided any reference for Angela's performance after she'd been fired for theft that had been hushed up.

So, why had Hellmann employed her?

Why?

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Meg's mind raced as she finally allowed herself to confront the doubts that had been simmering there.

Meanwhile, in the interview room, Gabe was inexorably leading the topic to the murders.

"Where were you in the small hours of the morning, two nights ago?"

"I was at home."

"You live in Boston, right?"

"Just outside."

"Can you account for your time?"

"I live alone. I was asleep at the time. I can't account for my time. I didn't drive anywhere."

"There are cameras in the neighborhood." Finally, the lawyer managed to say something.

Gabe fixed him with one of his stares.

"And I'm sure there are routes without them, too."

They continued talking about the logistics of getting in and out of the neighborhood where Angela lived, and then moved on to the timing of the previous murder of Bob Whitman, but Meg couldn't suppress all the questions that were now building in her mind.

She'd caught a glimpse of Angela's face again as she had stared directly into the one-way mirror, and Meg had caught a look of total desperation in her eyes. Fair enough. Of course, a criminal was going to look desperate.

But there was something in her expression that was causing Meg to have doubts.

The look in her face now that the murders were being discussed was frantic. Her face was filled with consternation, whereas when she'd been accused of the thefts, it was a picture of fear and guilt.

"I didn't do it!" Angela spluttered. "Stop calling me a killer! Just stop it!"

Meg suddenly couldn't sit here anymore. She stood up, stress flaring inside her, seeing Alex's worried gaze.

"What's up?" Alex whispered.

"I want to check something," Meg said.

Alex sprang to her feet as well, scraping her chair back. "Check what? I'll come with you, if you like."

"Sure," Meg said. Alex would be far better off helping her work through her misgivings than she would be here, in a state of unhappy tension as she watched Gabe's harsh questioning play out.

They headed out and went to the back office.

"Things aren't working. Are they?" Alex said.

Meg shook her head. "Gabe's doing a great job. If she's guilty of those crimes, he'll wear her down. The problem is that I have questions that aren't going away in my own mind.

"What are those?" Alex asked. "I know I'm way too emotionally involved in this case, but over and above that, I can't help thinking that it isn't going the way it should, and I feel that there are inconsistencies, even though I can't put my finger on what they are."

“I feel the same,” Meg admitted. “My two inconsistencies are firstly the disconnect between the thefts and the murders, and secondly, why did Hellmann hire Angela?”

“I was wondering exactly the same,” Alex admitted. “I was even wondering if she was the mastermind behind this, and Angela was the killer? Did she hire her knowing she was a criminal?”

"I'm also thinking that we didn't look at her closely enough," Meg admitted. "But Hellmann was definitely not in town herself when the murders were committed, which is why I think both of us mentally ruled her out from the get-go. But, I'm wondering something different. Whether Angela was hired because she'd provide a very convenient patsy for the crimes if we ever focused on Quantum, and more than that, she'd provide a warning."

Meg saw Alex nodding, realization in her eyes.

“So, Hellmann might have played a part in this?”

“I don’t see a normal, ethical businesswoman hiring a worker with a track record of theft and references that wouldn’t add up, unless there was some ulterior motive,” Meg said. “That’s what I’ve been thinking. And it reminded me that there is one angle we haven’t yet explored.”

“And what’s that?”

“It’s the accomplice angle,” Meg said. “You see, I was thinking to myself, when it comes to fraud, if you were going to systemically start to commit fraud on a smaller scale, and you were involved in the industry, and found a reasonably undetectable way to do it – such as if you were a healthcare insurance agency and you found a loophole, then you could siphon off small amounts. Let’s say you have a small additional income

filtering in from a few well-hidden sources, but you also think of another way.”

“What way is that?” Alex asked.

“Let’s say you have a terminal client. And suddenly, there’s an opportunity to add a few bigger charges, or inflate existing charges, because healthcare for a terminal patient is vastly complicated and expensive. So, you get the client to supposedly ‘sign’ and approve the charges. Then the client passes away suddenly. All very sad. All very sudden. Not entirely unexpected because they were terminal and everyone was prepared for their death. But the extra charges go through. Maybe some of them are to fake service providers that the agency has quietly added to their list of approved creditors.”

“I see. So a client like that represents an opportunity for bigger profits?”

“Exactly. A criminal could misappropriate funds from patients’ accounts, knowing that they wouldn’t be around to argue or correct the charges. A criminal agent could use fake service providers to inflate the bill and take the profits – and if the patient passes away, that’s a lot easier to do. A few larger amounts get added to the kitty, and the criminal person running the agency quietly accumulates them. If that’s been happening for years, and to at least twelve patients that we know of, then it would have added a sizeable chunk of profits.”

“You think that’s what Hellmann’s been doing?”

“The only way she could do the bigger amounts successfully is if she murdered the patients. And since she clearly didn’t do that, it means someone else did. I don’t think it was Angela. But I want to follow up on two leads that we were told about and we never pursued.”

"I remember." Alex's face lit up, and her eyes blazed with intent. "'Two loose ends. Devon Ledger and Marco Murano. The cleaners that we were told about."

"Time to follow up on them," Meg said. She opened up her laptop and logged into the police systems. "I want to find out more about them and who they are. And in the meantime, Alex, you can do a deep dive into Hellmann's background. Let's find out more about her."

For a while, there was only the tapping of keys in the back office. Meg was vaguely aware of a couple of cops going in and out, but she was so focused on her research that she didn't take much notice of them.

Then, Alex said, "Meg, I've found out something important."

"What?" Meg asked.

"Hellmann was widowed four years ago. Her husband was killed in a motorcycle accident. She doesn't mention it at all on her social media, but I looked it up in the records. He was a pharmaceutical supplier who owned a company, Adler-Boone Medical, who supplied a lot of expensive drugs. And you know what? I looked at my aunt's bill a couple of days ago, and the company name is familiar. There are some huge charges from that company. Does it even still exist if he died?"

"A pharmaceutical agent?" Meg raised her eyebrows. "That makes sense, Alex. It's all coming together now, and I can see how this works. That's where the charges were from. They had a clever scheme going where he'd bill them for drugs that weren't used, run it through the insurance company via his wife's agency, and collect the profits for them both. I wonder if he was responsible for the deaths of the patients who incurred the biggest charges. That would make sense, because he would have had access

to the hospital, and be able to bill a whole variety of patients for obscure drugs, including higher charges for the ones who were terminal, because they had a plan in place to make sure those patients wouldn't ever be able to question the bills."

"So, in the earlier crimes, he killed them. But then what?" Alex asked.

"I think I've got answers," Meg said. "She must have stopped the fraud when Castellano started digging. Then, just as he retired and she was ready to start up again, her husband was killed, and that punctured her plans. I think she probably kept going with the smaller charges, adding Adler-Boone to the ticket whenever she could, but in the meantime, she started putting someone in place so that she could get back to doing the bigger cases of fraud again by adding lethal drugs to the IV systems, just the way that he used to do. And I know who the person is. I've just looked up the family connections for Devon Ledger. And he's her younger brother."

"Hellmann's younger brother?" Alex raised her eyebrows, and Meg knew that, like herself, she was realizing what had happened.

"She infiltrated him into the hospital system so that he could continue to do her work, and presumably receive a slice of the pie. It must have taken a while to sort out the logistics, but I think she got him on one of the maintenance crews who worked for contractors. That's who he is – a contract worker who moves around from hospital to hospital with the team. And nobody would be overly surprised to see a maintenance worker in the hospital late at night. Not one who belonged to a company they were used to seeing there. They'd just assume he was doing some urgent after-hours work."

She let out a deep breath. At last, the pieces of the puzzle were all fitting

together. There was only one problem she could see now – and that was the criminal kingpin herself.

"We have to get to Hellmann as fast as we can. Because now that she knows we're focusing on her company, I think she's using Angela to buy time. She always had that plan in mind. She hired her in order to throw her to the wolves if the police ever ended up focusing on her, to give her time to wrap things up and escape. And if we don't get to her, then she's going to run. She's probably got her exit strategy planned, and she's about to disappear. I can see from her footprint – there isn't one. She doesn't own a vehicle. She rents. Doesn't own property. She rents. Office premises? Rented – and they look to be the bare basics. Just a couple of rooms, according to my search. Everything she has is set up so that she can abandon it at a moment's notice if things go bad."

Alex let out a heartfelt series of curses. Meg could hear the fury in her voice as she said, "No way can we let that happen. No way! Meg, we have to track her down. Would she have bought tickets to get out? Would she be planning on crossing the border? And we need to get some police to her brother, fast, or he's going to try the same trick."

Meg nodded, checking the points off on her fingers.

"There aren't a lot of us available, given all the angles we'll have to cover. The airports are the first priority. We can try to track her phone if she hasn't turned it off already. We're going to have to send police to Devon Ledger's house straight away, arrest him, search for lethal drugs, look for dark web links on his devices." Meg's mind was spinning as she stood up. "Given all of that, I think we'd better call Gabe out of his interrogation. Given how intelligent she is and how well she preplans, she may have bought two or more sets of tickets at different airports to create decoys."

We're going to need everyone on this – and we're going to need them fast."

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

An hour later, Meg was speeding to Boston's international airport.

She was sitting in the passenger seat, and Gabe was in the driver's seat. This time, thanks to his lights and sirens, the trip was going a whole lot faster.

"I'm damned glad you got me out of that interrogation," Gabe rumbled, calm as always, even in this tense situation. "I had a feeling that the questioning wasn't going the way I needed it to. My gut was telling me I was on a hiding to nothing with the murders, but that it was going to take a whole lot of fighting to confirm it."

The radio crackled before Meg could reply. It was Alex, who was coordinating the various teams from the main police station with Graham.

"We've found two flights booked in her name from different regional airports," she said. "Teams are on the way to both those airports. No international flights picked up yet, but we've flagged her passport. She's not at home, and her place is empty and locked up. Phone is off. The receptionist at her work, who's a young student, says she hasn't checked in today, and she hasn't seen her."

That didn't mean much to Meg. A woman who was as cunning as Hellmann clearly was might have organized fake documents to get her out of the country. She might be using them at any of the airports, but the fact that flights were booked at two of the closer regional airports signaled to Meg that she was using them as decoys.

Her feeling was that Hellmann would be taking the quickest route out of

the country if she had fake papers, and that meant the international airport.

"Terminal E and Terminal C are the two main terminals for international flights," Gabe said. "The problem is that I don't know what she looks like. You do. So, I think we should stick together. Check terminal E first, as that's where she's most likely to be, and then check terminal C."

"I think that sounds best," Meg said. "Sticking together will also allow me to get past security and into the international departures area. Otherwise, I'll run into problems there."

Gabe chuckled. "So you will. Damned if I don't keep forgetting you're not still a cop."

She wondered if Hellmann would have chosen the very first flight she could get, or whether she'd risked it and booked a later one. She might have double-bluffed them and decided to take a local flight to a different destination using her fake ID.

But Meg felt strongly that she'd want to minimize the risk, and that meant getting out of the country as fast as she could.

Getting the bookings information for the various flights would help her with that. Anyone who'd picked up a last minute seat could be red-flagged. But even that would take time they didn't have. Airlines had their own set of red tape, just the same as the police had, and Meg doubted that they'd be able to cut through it in time, although they could try.

Alex and Graham were on that, as well as handling everything else.

The radio crackled again. It was Graham.

"We're getting the FBI on board and briefed with this so that we can widen the search to other states if needed," he said. "Whitaker is handling that and briefing them right now. He's working from his office and

coordinating with the other police departments in the state as well."

"Right," Gabe said. "

Meg didn't want to allow herself to hope. This criminal had been ice cold, such a practiced liar that Meg hadn't picked up a wrong note in the version she'd given. She'd even cleverly been hesitant about giving them Angela's details, which had been deliberately done in order to intensify the focus on an employee whom she knew full well was stealing petty amounts.

Meg guessed that Hellmann had made it easy for Angela to do so. She'd probably been lax, maybe even made a couple of errors in her financial favor, and got her up to her old tricks again, knowing that the amounts she would steal were insignificant compared to what Hellmann herself was taking, but that she'd make the perfect fall guy when the time came.

"Well," she said, as Gabe pulled up outside the airport, parking in the closest yellow-line zone to the international departures entrance, "Let's go. I've got her features in my mind, and you've got pics on your phone. She's about my height and a little younger than me. Her eyes are blue. Her face is narrow, with a pointed chin. At the time we saw her earlier, she had tortoiseshell colored hair."

"Wait, what?" Gabe looked at her, startled. "Hey. I don't go to your hairdresser. The barber down the street gives me a clipper cut every three weeks. Explain again what that is."

As they hustled into the airport, Meg did her best.

"A combination of rich brown, pale brown, and dark blonde shades. Very attractive, and not as out-there as blonde. But she might be wearing a wig. She won't have had time to dye her hair. So, a wig will be the only alternative to her if she's planning on looking different for her getaway."

“Right. Tortoiseshell,” Gabe said, in the tones of a man for whom this might just be the last straw at the end of a difficult day.

Meg looked around the airport, feeling a sense of helplessness as she saw how crowded it was. There were people everywhere. Innocent people, going about their business. Greeting friends, hugging family, whirring their bags over the tiles.

“Right,” she said, her instinct immediately veering towards organizing her thoughts. She hated that helpless feeling. “Let’s figure out a way to do this methodically. I reckon we go according to the risk.”

“Highest risk, shortest timeframe first?” Gabe asked.

They’d worked together for so many years that they could practically read each other’s minds, and could definitely read each other’s strategies.

"We start with the flights that are busy boarding or about to board. Then, we work back from there. So, we'll have to head through security first and into the international departures zone. If she's about to leave, we'll be able to stop her."

“And by then, we might have backup,” Meg said. “The FBI or another police unit might be able to join us, and then, they can start from the outside and work in.”

“Exactly.”

Meg had to admit, she loved working with Alex, but as a civilian, partnering up with Gabe again gave her all the benefits of their previous partnership with fewer of the frustrations and drawbacks.

Gabe strode that way with Meg alongside. They hustled straight up to security. Meg waited, standing back while Gabe explained the situation and showed his ID. She didn’t think the security guard at the gate was overjoyed

about letting her through with him, but people didn't argue with Gabe.

A moment later, a gate in the side of the barricade was opened, and they were through, passing through passport control in a similar way, with Meg taking an immediate look at the flights that were about to take off.

"We're going to have to split up," she said, looking at the departure times and gates. At opposite sides of the building, two flights were announcing their boarding within a few minutes of each other. Both were possibilities. One was to Greece, and one was to Brazil. Either one, Meg reckoned, would do for a fleeing criminal with a fake passport ready to go.

"I'll take Greece, you take Brazil?" she asked. The Greece flight was boarding even sooner than the Brazil flight was. That would give Gabe more time to look for a face that was more unfamiliar to him.

"We check those flights, then regroup and decide what next?" he asked.

"Perfect," Meg said.

They split up, with Meg jogging through the corridors of the international departures terminal. There wasn't much time to spare before the Greece flight boarded. She reckoned that if Hellmann had hustled, she'd have been in time to make it. She wasn't sure about any earlier flights. Maybe there simply wouldn't have been time to get a seat and get to the airport.

Meg knew that she was probably being optimistic, but she couldn't accept the possibility that Hellmann had already gotten out of the country free and clear. She wasn't going to allow herself to think of that eventuality. She was going to think positive – that they were just in time and that even the best prepared criminal would have taken some time to organize her speedy getaway.

Especially if she thought she had more time. Surely she couldn't have anticipated that they would catch up with her so fast?

Meg reached the boarding gate just as the flight was being called and the passengers were starting to shuffle into line. It was a crowded flight. Her gaze moved through the crowds, searching for the person she needed, remembering Hellmann's distinctive bone structure, the shape of her nose, the way she'd carried herself.

Those things were not so easy to conceal under a wig, and they gave her the element of speed in her checking, which Gabe wouldn't have, because he hadn't seen Hellmann in person. The sooner she was done, the better. Then she could get back and help him again.

Despite scrutinizing every face, Meg couldn't see anyone who resembled Hellmann, either with or without different hair and other disguising accessories. She wasn't on the flight to Greece. Time to head back across the terminal and help Gabe.

She started out, heading back down the corridors, looking at the other boarding gates where people were starting to gather, and watching all the latecomers heading to the gate that she'd just checked. There was a flight to Honduras that she wanted to take a better look at in a few minutes, because that was a possibility, and so was the one to Mexico City.

But, as Meg was heading past that departure's gate, her eye was caught by the briefest of flashes, and she turned her head in the direction of a service corridor.

She'd only glimpsed the woman who'd paused and turned before she'd hurried down the corridor, but Meg thought that woman had looked a lot like Hellmann.

Had she seen Meg and decided to hide down that corridor?

It was worth checking, she decided. Getting back to help Gabe was urgent, but then, everything was urgent. What if she had hidden down that corridor, and then she was going to rush to the boarding gate that Meg had just checked and be one of the last on the flight to Greece?

Meg headed down the corridor, wondering where she could have gone. She hadn't imagined her. She'd been wearing a loose black top that had made her look bulkier than she'd done the first time Meg had seen her, and a wine-red headscarf wrapped around her head.

The service corridor was long and narrow, and it twisted and turned, with doors at intervals. Meg checked all the doors, feeling more and more perplexed, because there was no sign of her. Had she looped around and gone back to the terminal somehow?

Meg rounded the corner.

And out of the corner of her eye, she saw the crimson shape of the fire extinguisher whirling down, aimed straight for her head.

CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Meg's reflexes reacted faster than her conscious mind. She cringed down, and the heavy steel object crashed onto her shoulder instead of her head. She flung herself sideways, pain flaring, but a vicious kick to her ankle knocked her feet out from under her, and she fell to the ground.

She sprawled on her back, landing hard on the concrete, her head slamming down so that stars bloomed in her vision, the breath knocked out of her.

Standing over her, with businesslike efficiency, Hellmann raised the fire extinguisher again.

So, she wasn't just a hardened criminal and a thief. She was a seasoned fighter who clearly had some experience in martial arts or other training, and that blow had taken Meg completely unawares. She hadn't known that this slim woman would be willing to use a fire extinguisher as a weapon, but now she realized that, here as in everything else, Hellmann had managed to use a combination of sneaky preplanning and clever spur-of-the-moment tactics to lure her down the corridor and ambush her.

Hellmann wasn't hesitating as she brought the crimson weapon down again. Winded, taken entirely by surprise, her shoulder flaring and her head still pounding, Meg managed to twist aside, taking the brunt of the blow on her thigh.

Now that was also exploding with pain. Meg hadn't expected such a vicious attack, and she could see exactly what the purpose of it was.

The purpose was to leave her in the corridor, broken, unconscious, alone

– most likely dead, if Hellmann got in a hard enough blow – while she rushed to catch the flight to Greece, boarding the airplane before she could be stopped.

Problem was that Meg hadn't expected a physical attack and she'd been taken completely unawares. Now, with her right shoulder exploding in pain, her head throbbing, and down on the floor, she needed to regroup. Fast. If she didn't do it now, then she wouldn't be able to do it at all.

Gasping in a breath as she saw Hellmann lift the fire extinguisher again, Meg used her left arm to pivot up off the floor. Her thigh might be painful and numb, but she forced it to take her weight as she kicked out at Hellmann's legs, using her other foot.

The attack wasn't nearly as graceful and lithe as she'd have liked it to be. It was more of a lurching sprawl. But Meg had her target in sight, and although she didn't manage to connect with the force she'd hoped to use, she did succeed in slamming her foot into Hellmann's ankle, sole first, knocking her off balance and causing the fire extinguisher to clang down onto the floor instead of onto Meg herself.

It was still in Hellmann's grasp, though, and she was still intent on her mission as she found her footing again.

"You won't!" The words hissed from Hellmann's mouth as she caught her balance, raising it again, her shoes squeaking on the tiles. But the pain and shock were subsiding now, and after that reflexive move to save herself, Meg was regrouping. Her shoulder was still weak, but at least the nerves had recovered enough for her to use her arm. As Hellmann whirled her weapon towards Meg again, she shoved herself off the floor and into her adversary, ramming herself forward and into her thighs, so that the fire

extinguisher flew past her and then, a moment later, Hellmann herself sprawled backwards.

She thudded against the wall, her head hitting it with an audible impact, and then, Meg was on top of her, grabbing for the weapon and doing her best to wrestle it out of Hellmann's hands as they rolled together on the floor.

Street fighter from a distance, Hellmann was a hellcat up close. Meg twisted away as her fingers, with sharp-pointed, pearly nails, jabbed at her eyes. Her knee slammed viciously into Meg's solar plexus, knocking the breath out of her.

But she'd managed to wrestle the fire extinguisher out of her grasp, and although she had no air in her lungs and was choking painfully, she was able to slam it down into Hellmann's head with enough force, finally, to stun her.

She sprawled down, the breath rasping in her lungs, her arms and legs twitching. She might be down, but she wasn't out, and Meg knew she had to work fast.

She had a couple of cable ties in her jacket pocket. Effective makeshift handcuffs in an emergency. Keeping out of the way of those clawing hands, she fumbled the cable tie around Hellmann's ankles and yanked it as tight as it would go.

That would do for now. She stood up, aching all over, knowing that she was going to find scratches, grazes, and bruises all over her body in the next few days. In her pocket, her phone's screen had cracked during the fight, but it was still usable.

Their hoarse gasps punctuated the silence as Meg dialed Gabe.

“I’ve got her. Here. I’ll send you a location. Down a service corridor,” she said.

She hung up and sent him the location, knowing that Gabe would take only a couple of minutes to arrive.

In a voice that resembled the harsh cawing of a bird, Hellmann spoke.

“You’ll regret this,” she threatened. “There’s still time to let me go. If I were you, I’d do it. Now. Just let me go.”

“If you think that your tame accomplice is going take revenge on us, you’re wrong,” Meg told her, rubbing her shoulder. Nothing felt broken, but it was going to be black and blue from that crashing impact. “We know about Devon Ledger. If he’s not arrested now, he will be soon. He was your helping hand, wasn’t he? Sourcing what he needed to add to the IV lines so that the patients could pass away without any visible traces? Whatever you paid him, it isn’t going to be worth the money for life in jail. And the same goes for you.” Meg shook her head. “Whatever the maximum sentence is for your crimes – and it’s going to be hefty – we’ll push for it. What you did was beyond cruel.”

“I saved them,” she cried, but Meg shook her head.

"You robbed patients of time they had left. The last few precious weeks or months that they were relying on to say their goodbyes. What you did was despicable. And it wasn't just out of the goodness of your heart, either." Her fingers dug into a bruise, and she winced as she continued. "It was for coldhearted financial gain, nothing more. Don't fool yourself that you were doing anything but covering your tracks. The fact that you're prepared to justify it otherwise only makes it worse."

Hellmann’s face twisted into a snarl, and she lapsed into silence.

A moment later, the thud of Gabe's footsteps sounded in the corridor, and her partner arrived, ready to make the arrest.

EPILOGUE

“I don’t believe it’s over. At last, it’s over. Meg, thank you.”

Meg held her friend tightly as Alex hugged her hard.

They were standing outside the police station in the dark. It wasn’t raining, but the evening air was chilly. It had taken a couple of hours to finalize their section of the paperwork.

Hellmann was locked in a holding cell, and Gabe assured them that her bail would be denied. And Whitaker was out on the road, bringing in Devon Ledger, who had been captured during a high-speed chase by a joint police-FBI operation that had tracked his phone. In his panic, he hadn’t turned it off in time as the police cars and the helicopter had closed in.

Both the conspirators to this crime would get life imprisonment.

Gabe had told Meg that he was going to visit Castellano tomorrow and tell him that he’d been right, and that they’d finally found the common factor in his puzzling cold cases.

Meg had said she’d meet him at the assisted living center. She hoped that in some corner of his mind, Castellano would understand that the cases had been solved – and she wanted to say a final goodbye to her likeable cop friend.

“I’m just sorry that your aunt didn’t have the last few months with you, Alex,” Meg said.

Alex scrubbed her eyes and sniffed hard.

"She's always been a feisty person, and she's always had a strong sense

of justice. I think that if she knew her death saved others from the same ending, she'd be good with it. That's my take, anyway."

"I think you're right about that, if she's anything like you," Meg said, glad that Alex was seeing things this way, and that she'd started her own journey of healing after the heartbreak and stress of the last couple of days. "Do you need the day off tomorrow?"

"Day off?" Alex raised her eyebrows. "No way. If you're working, I'm working. Whatever's next on the agenda, I'm up for it."

"Well," Meg said, "I'm heading to Suanne's house now, to see what she has to say – if she's finally willing to speak. So, tomorrow might be a busy day, and we might have a tough job in a different direction."

"I'm ready for it," Alex said. "Whatever it takes, Meg. I've got your back on this, just like you had mine. You want me to come with you now?"

Meg shook her head. "You need your rest. Get home, order your favorite takeout, and have an early night. We'll speak tomorrow, and I'll update you then."

"Okay," Alex said.

They turned away from each other, Meg heading to where she'd parked, rubbing her shoulder again as she got in. She hoped that she didn't appear too battered and bruised for what was going to be an important interview. The adrenaline that had been thrilling inside her was ebbing now, but she was confident that enough of it would surge again when she stood on Suanne's doorstep.

She didn't foresee that she'd have any problems in staying fully focused for what was to come. And if she needed to record anything or make any calls, at least her phone was in a semi-working condition.

Checking the time, she saw that she was going to be at least fifteen minutes late for the appointment with Suanne.

Nothing she could do about that, unfortunately. Wrapping up this case had taken priority.

Shaking her head as she considered what a cold, callous mindset it had taken to do what Hellmann did, Meg got in the car and set off on the quickest route to Suanne's house. It was totally dark now, and at least the traffic had ebbed, so she was able to make good time getting there.

She got through the boom gates with relative ease, simply saying she was going to consult with the beautician and had a late appointment.

She didn't think the guards at the boom gate cared much. It was more of a token barrier. They let her straight through, and she drove on the now-familiar route to Suanne's house.

Lights were on. That was a good sign.

Meg stopped outside the house, sitting in the car for a moment and getting her thoughts straight. She was going to need to focus fully on this interview. What she learned here would be critical.

Breathing deeply in and out, Meg focused her mind, setting aside the chaos of the day, forcing herself to ignore the aches and pains she felt from that unexpected tussle with Hellman. That was all in the past, and her conversation with Suanne was in the future, and what she needed to focus on.

It took a minute for Meg to feel as if she'd achieved the balance she needed. When she'd done that, she got out of the car and walked up to the house, with her notebook and pen in her purse and her damaged though working phone in her pocket.

She knocked on the door and waited.

As a minute ticked by, expectancy gradually turned to worry. Was Suanne out? She'd said she was in. Her lights were on – but then again, a housekeeper could have left them on if she'd been caught up in a meeting or needing to work late.

Meg tried again, this time with less patience, knocking louder.

Nothing.

Well, since she'd made an appointment and Suanne had confirmed it, perhaps she should call her and ask her when she'd be back.

Meg dialed her number on her broken phone, pressing the cracked screen carefully.

She waited for it to connect, then listened to it ring.

But there was something strange here.

She could hear the phone from inside the house, the trilling sound regular and persistent, causing Meg to frown.

She didn't like this.

Why was it ringing unanswered inside?

Pressing her lips together, she felt a flare of worry prick her spine. Maybe, if she hadn't been so preoccupied with the other case, she might even have felt it sooner.

For now, though, she grasped hold of the front door handle and tugged.

Not open. Locked. How about the rest of the house?

She walked around the double-story home, looking carefully for any way in, testing the windows, trying the handle of the glass French door on the side.

But when she reached the back of the house, Meg caught her breath. There had been no need to check the other doors, because this was open. Forced. The lock was splintered, the door hanging ajar.

Before she even went in, Meg got on the phone and called Gabe. The sooner he got here, the better.

“I’m on my way,” he said sharply.

Meg listened carefully, not wanting to walk into danger, but the house was quiet.

She might as well go in. The sense of urgency inside her was spiking. Beyond this smashed door lurked a host of unknowns. Everything was not right – but how badly wrong was it? Was Suanne somewhere inside, hurt or injured? If so, then the sooner she went in, the better.

She stepped cautiously over the threshold, walking through a kitchen that was all pristine steel surfaces and top-end appliances that looked unused. Beyond was a passage with an entertainment area on the right, dark and empty.

Ahead was the living room, where the lights were on.

Step by step, Meg made her way to the door.

She didn’t have to go further. Just inside the doorway, she saw a slumped form, and her heart pounded faster.

Meg felt a terrible sense of regret and a numb disbelief as she stepped closer to the figure on the floor, still wearing the smart work clothes that she must have arrived home in.

Suanne’s eyes were wide and staring. The blood that stained her navy suit and bloomed on her cream top had leaked onto the tiles, the smell sharp

and coppery.

She'd been stabbed, not just once, but repeatedly.

The attack was starkly similar to the MO that James had suffered.

The killer had got to her before Meg could.

Her witness was dead.

NOW AVAILABLE!



NEXT MISTAKE

(A Meg Thorne Suspense Thriller—Book Ten)

“This is an excellent book... When you start reading, be sure you don’t have to wake up early!”

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NEXT MISTAKE is BOOK #10 in a new series by #1 bestselling mystery and suspense author Kate Bold, whose bestseller NOT ME (a free download) has received over 3,000 five star ratings and reviews. The series begins with NEXT GIRL (BOOK #1).

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“This book moved very fast and every page was exciting. Plenty of dialogue, you absolutely love the characters, and you were rooting for the good guy throughout the whole story... I look forward to reading the next in the series.”

—Reader review for The Killing Game

☆☆☆☆☆

“Kate did an amazing job on this book and I was hooked from the first chapter!”

—Reader review for The Killing Game

☆☆☆☆☆

“I really enjoyed this book. The characters were authentic, and I see the bad guys as something we hear about daily on the news... Looking forward to book 2.”

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—Reader review for The Killing Game

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“WOW what a great read! Talk about a diabolical killer! Really enjoyed this book. Looking forward to reading others by this author as well.”

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“Extremely well written, and well worth buying and reading. I can't wait to read book two!”

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NEXT MISTAKE

(A Meg Thorne Suspense Thriller—Book Ten)

Kate Bold

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An avid reader and lifelong fan of the mystery and thriller genres, Kate loves to hear from you, so please feel free to visit www.kateboldauthor.com to learn more and stay in touch.

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