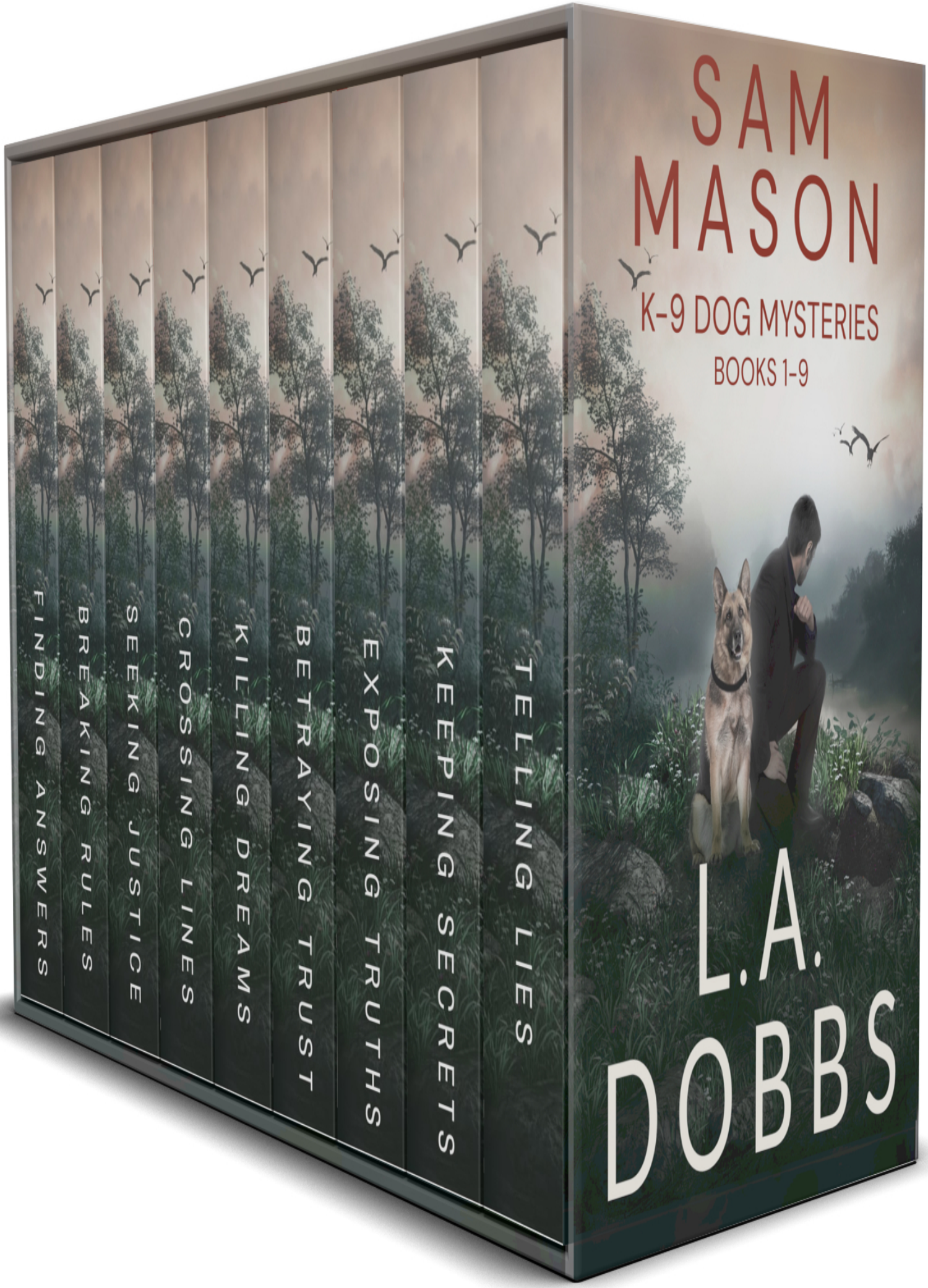
SAM MASON
K-9 DOG MYSTERIES
BOOKS 1-9
L.A. DOBBS
TELLING LIES
KEEPING SECRETS
EXPOSING TRUTHS
BETRAYING TRUST
KILLING DREAMS
CROSSING LINES
SEEKING JUSTICE
BREAKING RULES
FINDING ANSWERS

****

When wildlife photographer Ray Ingalls is murdered in the new owl-protection zone in rural White Rock, New Hampshire, Chief Sam Mason's number-one suspect is his archenemy Lucas Thorne.

... Until a mysterious stranger reveals that the victim was up to a lot more than just taking photographs of endangered owls. Suddenly it appears that a lot more people had motive to want Ray dead.

Sam, Sergeant Jody Harris and their K-9 Lucy now have a fresh batch of suspects, all of whom have secrets they don't want exposed. But when Sam's hopes of putting Thorne away for good dwindle, help comes in the form of an unlikely ally—one who promises to aid Sam in getting rid of Thorne and clearing up the mystery around officer Tyler Richardson's untimely death.

Just when it seems like Sam has it all wrapped up, the unthinkable happens, plunging Sam and Jo into an even deeper mystery and proving that nothing good ever comes from exposing truths.

SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERIES BOOKS 1-9

L A DOBBS

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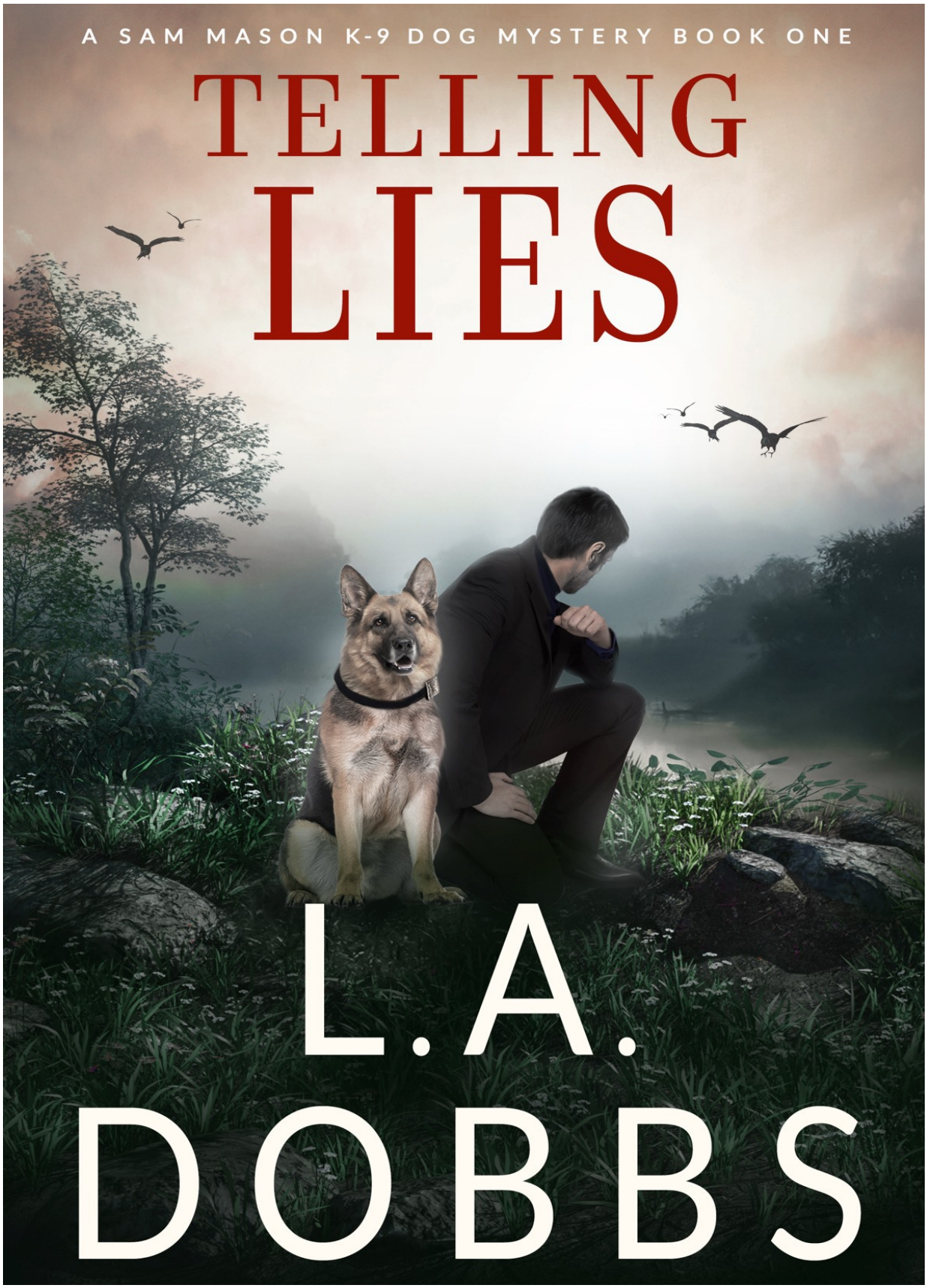
A SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERY BOOK ONE
TELLING
LIES
L.A.
DOBBS

INTRODUCTION

Thanks for your interest in the Sam Mason Mystery Series! This series is set in small-town northern New Hampshire where anything can happen and playing by the rules doesn't necessarily mean that justice will be served. It features a small town police force and their trusty K-9 Lucy.

This is an on-going series with a completely solved mystery in each book and a lot of ongoing mysteries in the background. Don't forget to sign up for my email list for advance notice on new release discounts:

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CHAPTER ONE

Officer Tyler Richardson shouldn't have been lying inside the silvery-blue casket that rested atop the open grave. He was too young, too good of an officer.... and the circumstances surrounding his death were too strange.

Chief Sam Mason stood in front of the casket, anger burning a hole in his chest. He made a silent promise to Tyler. He was going to find the person who shot him down and make him pay.

As chief of police of White Rock, New Hampshire, the responsibility for Tyler's death weighed heavily on his shoulders. He was supposed to serve and protect the public—and here he couldn't even keep one of his own officers from getting killed.

Tyler had only been twenty-eight—over a decade younger than Sam—and only a few months shy of making sergeant when his life had been cut short at a routine stop. Tyler had always been one to help the next guy. Ironically, that was what had gotten him killed.

He'd pulled over to help a vehicle with a flat tire. How was he to know the driver had stolen that vehicle? Or that the driver would shoot him down in cold blood and run off? The investigating unit had claimed it was just bad luck, but still, some of the evidence at the scene told Sam there might be more to it and the fact that he'd been forbidden from digging into the death officially on his own didn't sit well.

The incident had stirred up the quiet northern New Hampshire town. And this crime was cowardly. Even so, Sam had made sure Tyler got a hero's burial.

It was late spring. A time when the locals came out in droves to enjoy the good weather. A time for picnics and town celebrations. But not today. The chirping birds, budding trees, and smell of freshly dug earth and new spring grass had done nothing to ease the sorrow that clung to the crowd. Practically the whole town had come out to mourn Tyler. Dressed in shades of black and gray, they huddled in groups, the morning dew sticking in drops to their newly shined patent-leather shoes.

Across the gaping dark hole of the grave, Sam's second-in-command, Sergeant Jody Harris, stood just to the left of Tyler's family. She met his gaze, determination in her red-rimmed eyes. Whoever had killed Tyler Richardson was going to pay if Jo Harris had anything to say about it.

Tyler's mom, Irma, and sister, Clarissa, clutched each other, staring down into the hole as if they still couldn't believe he was gone. Their tear-stained faces registered a dull look of shocked disbelief. Sam could hardly blame them. The reality of Tyler's death still hadn't sunk in for him either, and he imagined it was worse for Tyler's two surviving family members.

Tyler hadn't been married and was devoted to Clarissa, who had a degenerative muscular disease. In fact, Sam was surprised she was standing, probably forcing herself to remain on her feet. The wheelchair that she'd had to rely on more and more since Sam had known her sat at the ready behind her.

Sam's chest constricted with worry about what would happen to her now. He knew Clarissa needed money for her medical condition. The family was not wealthy, and he knew Tyler spent most of his salary on Clarissa's care. Too bad they didn't have a fallen-officers fund. If they had, it would help alleviate some of the financial burden.

Sam knew Tyler's family was too proud to accept handouts, but Irma and Clarissa didn't know there wasn't a fallen-officers fund, and Sam's 401k could survive another withdrawal. Besides, he had no intention of ever retiring.

Sam caught a motion at the periphery of the crowd. Reese Hordon, the department receptionist, had her phone to her ear and was subtly waving to get his attention. The small White Rock police force had shut down the entire department so they could all attend the funeral, but crime didn't take the day off in order to pay respects to the dead, so Reese had the calls rerouted to her cell phone just in case.

And judging by the stricken look on her face, Sam knew that had been a good idea.

Sam scanned the crowd for Kevin, their part-timer. It was just the three of them now since Reese didn't do fieldwork because she hadn't graduated yet from the academy. Kevin must have already seen Reese's signal and was heading in her direction. Sam caught Jo's eye and tilted his head toward Reese. Jo nodded.

Sam trudged over and made his final good-byes to Irma. He held her dry hand and looked into her blank eyes. "We're going to catch the guy that did this. But in the meantime I'm going to come and call on you. I have a check from the fallen-officers fund."

Something flickered in her eye. "There's a fund?" Her voice sounded hopeful.

Sam nodded. "Any officer shot in the course of duty gets a stipend. I hope it'll help you get through."

Sam made hasty good-byes to the other mourners. Like any other small-town police chief, Sam knew just about everybody in town. Couple that with the fact that he'd grown up here, and you might say he knew everyone in Coos County.

His shoulders slumped as he walked toward the black-and-white Tahoe.

Reese fell into step beside him, her black trench coat flapping as they walked. Reese had piled her thick jet-black hair on top of her head today, and it made her pale-blue eyes look huge. She'd dressed up to honor Tyler. The tips of her heels sank into the damp ground and threw her slightly off balance as they walked.

"Got a DB out at the Sacagewassett River," Reese whispered. Her tone was somber, but her step was full of energy. He knew Reese wasn't cold-hearted, but she had the same enthusiasm for the job that Sam had when he was young. She hadn't been hardened by years of seeing people mistreat each other as Sam and Jo had.

"Any details?" Sam assumed since she'd mentioned the river that the body had been found in the water. He hated floaters. Depending how long they'd been in, it could be quite gruesome. And lots of times they were kids. Sam hoped to hell this one wasn't a kid.

Reese shook her head. "I can come along if you need an extra hand." Her eyes flicked toward the gravesite, and then she looked down, probably feeling bad about the implication that she might replace Tyler.

"Thanks, Reese. Can’t. You have to graduate from the academy before I can send you out in the field."

Sam reached for the door handle of the Tahoe. It was a little beat up, but their small-town budget couldn’t afford new cars, so they’d bought it used and made a deal with Al Riddell at the body shop to paint it with the police logo. It worked well enough for what they needed.

A hand fell on his shoulder as he opened the door, and he turned, looking into Jo’s wide gray eyes. They were moist and flecked with concern, but a fire of anger burned deep inside them.

"Don’t worry. We’re going to catch the guy that did this," she said.

Sam’s eyes drifted back toward the gravesite. The person that had shot Tyler had run off, and so far they had precious few leads. But Sam was making it an unofficial personal mission to bring him to justice. So was Jo.

"I know. But right now there’s someone else that needs our help."

Jo nodded then hopped into the Crown Vic with Kevin. Sam started up the Tahoe and headed toward the river. The loud gunshots from the twenty-one-gun salute rang in his ears as he drove past the wrought-iron gates and out of the cemetery.

CHAPTER TWO

Jo must have broken the speed limit on her way to the river, because when Sam emerged from the woods to the side of the river, she was already ankle deep in water and squatting over the body. John Dudley from the county coroner's office was crouched beside her.

The body had washed up in the shallow part of the Sacagewassett River. The river was a lazy river that wound its way down from the Canadian border and through town. Since it was early May, the river was high with runoff from the snowy mountains. Some small sections of the river had white water that attracted rafters. Other sections ran slower, better for canoeists. The section that ran along the Rock Ledge campground flowed at a medium pace because the area was wide and shallow.

Sam figured the body had come from somewhere upstream and gotten caught up on the rocks and branches in this shallow sandbar.

He splashed across the water, which saturated his newly polished black leather oxfords and wicked up the bottoms of his navy-blue dress uniform pants. They had worn their best uniforms out of respect for Tyler today. Normally, they dressed more casually.

Sam navigated the slippery rocks, the cold water freezing his ankles. Raising his eyes from the smooth, round stones, he risked a glance north at the mountain range. In the distance, layers of blue mountains, some still with white snow peaks, jutted up into the cloudless blue sky. He inhaled the smell of fresh running water, cleansing his mind before he had to deal with the grim scene before him. The clicking of Kevin's camera as he recorded

the various aspects of the death scene added an oddly mechanical feel to the natural sounds of rushing water and twittering birds.

Jo moved aside as he approached, giving Sam a full view of the body. Sam felt a mixture of guilt and relief. It wasn't a kid, but the now-lifeless body was still someone's child. It was a young woman in her mid-twenties. She wore only a pair of thin white cotton undies, and Sam thought she hadn't been in the river long, judging by the looks of things. Sam guessed about five or six hours.

"What do you think?" Sam asked.

Jo squinted up at him. John kept examining the body. Kevin kept snapping pictures. From what he could see of the body, Sam didn't know if this was an accident or something more sinister. If it was the latter, the water would have washed away key evidence. He hoped it was the former, but the burning in his gut told him otherwise.

"Hard to tell." John pointed at the side of the head where there was an obvious injury, though the water had washed away the blood that Sam knew would have otherwise been caked in the victim's hair.

"She might've died from a head wound. Could have slipped and fallen into the water, been knocked unconscious, drowned, and been carried downstream," John said.

They all looked upstream, where the water was rushing faster. Here, it had slowed down in the spot where the river widened and got curvy. Though the river wasn't very deep, you could still drown in an inch of water.

"Foul play?" Sam glanced back at the small crowd that had gathered on the bank just near the campground. People stood with their arms wrapped around themselves, a buzz of anxiety rising from the crowd as they whispered to each other while shuffling from foot to foot.

This early in the season, the campground wasn't very crowded. Things didn't really get rolling up north until after Memorial Day. The way Sam saw it, that could be good and bad. Good because there were fewer people to interview. Bad because there were fewer people that might have seen something that would tell them what happened.

"Hard to tell." John put a medieval-looking instrument back in the black bag he'd set on top of a rock and then looked up at Sam. "I have to get her back to the morgue and do an autopsy to know for sure."

Sam nodded. "Sure seems weird that she's only got her underwear on."

Jo tilted her head to look at the side of the victim's skull. "Maybe she went skinny dipping and hit her head."

"Who wears their underwear skinny dipping?" Sam eyed the gash in her skull. He doubted a fall would cause that amount of damage.

EMTs had arrived and splashed across the water toward them. John nodded to them, and they unrolled a piece of canvas that they would use to carry the body to the stretcher waiting at the riverbank. As they lifted up the body, someone screamed.

"Oh my God, it's Lynn!"

Jo stood, her eyes narrowing in on the screamer. She was studying her. That was Jo's area of expertise. Human behavior. Sam, on the other hand, was all about the evidence. He liked to take his time. Turning all the clues over in his mind to find that missing link, the oddity, the thing that gave the killer away. Jo focused on the human side. The way they acted, body language, and what they said and did. Between the two of them, they had a high success rate at catching criminals.

"Guess we know who to talk to first." Sam glanced back at John. "Are we done here?"

"Yep."

"Pictures?" Sam glanced at Kevin, who nodded, indicating he was done taking pictures.

John started across the river after the EMTs. "I'll call you with the results."

Sam, Jo, and Kevin started toward the crowd gathered on the riverbank.

"Kevin, you get names and phone numbers from everyone. Talk to Ellie and find out if anyone saw anything." Ellie was the campground manager. Sam had known her since he was a teenager. "Jo, you and I will go talk to the screamer. We'll meet you back at the station later, Kev."

Sam sucked in a breath and followed Jo toward the group of campers. He hoped to hell the girl in the river had died by accident, but his instincts told him otherwise. And if his instincts were right, one of the people in that group could be a cold-blooded killer.

CHAPTER THREE

The screamer, a blonde named Amber Huffman, was huddled with five other people all about the same age. Friends on a camping trip, Sam guessed.

"Did you know her?" Jo glanced back toward the river.

Their faces were solemn as they nodded.

"I think that's our friend Lynn Palmer," a girl with straight brown hair and a smattering of freckles said between sniffs.

Jo looked at the group with sympathy. "Are you camping here?"

"Yeah, back there." A tall guy nodded his head toward the campground.

"Maybe we should go back there and talk," Jo suggested. She herded them back toward the campground. They walked alongside her in a daze. Sam hung back, watching. They all appeared stunned by the discovery of their friend's body.

Jo took out a small pad and pencil and started writing down information, pausing every so often to swat at the swarm of black flies that had decided she'd make a good breakfast. She went through the group, asking their names and addresses, gathering little bits of information. Sam knew she was also studying them like a hawk. Looking for a twitch here or an eye jerk there that would indicate they had something to hide.

While Jo was asking the pertinent questions, Sam looked around the campsite. It was typical of what you might expect from a camping crowd of people in their early twenties. The equipment was adequate, the same kinds of things Sam would've used when he was that age. Canvas tents, Coleman lanterns, and stoves. A blue tarp stretched over each tent indicated these

were experienced campers. Anyone who had camped for a few seasons knew you prepared for rain even when no clouds were in sight. Once your camping gear got wet, it never dried out.

Woodsmoke wafted over from a fire that burned in a ring of circular stones. A pan of burnt eggs sat on top of a grate to the side of the fire. Their breakfast had probably been interrupted when news of a body spread through the campground.

"And how did you hear that a body had been found?" Jo had finished with the personal information and was starting to ask questions.

"We were finishing up breakfast." A short redhead named Tara Barrett motioned toward the picnic table where six waterproof lunch bags stood. "I had just finished packing the lunches for our hike today when we heard a big commotion, and someone yelled something about a body. We ran down and…" Her voice trailed off in a sob.

"Didn't you notice that Lynn wasn't here?" Their eyes all flew to a red tent that was situated at the base of a tall scotch pine.

"We didn't think much of it." Amber's eyes darted around to the others. "I mean, she was pretty drunk last night, and I guess we just thought she was sleeping it off."

She slipped her hand into that of a tall guy—Noah Brickey—and stepped closer to him as if for comfort.

"That's right. I was just about to check on her." The brunette, Julie Swan, blew her nose into wadded-up toilet paper she'd ripped from a roll that was sitting on the picnic table. "I never thought she'd be… well, what exactly happened to her?"

"That's what we're going to find out," Jo said. "Did any of you notice anything strange last night? Do you know why she would be in the river?"

"She probably went swimming," Tara said. "I mean, unless she hooked up with that guy from the bar."

Sam's brows shot up. "Guy from the bar?"

"We went into town last night and drank at some bar." This came from Joshua Moore, who stood next to Tara. Sam figured them for a couple. Noah and Amber were a couple, but the others looked as if they were solo. Which made him wonder, had one of them been with Lynn? Probably not on this trip if she hooked up with a guy from the bar, but maybe one of them was an ex-boyfriend.

"That place that looks like an old church," Noah added.

"Holy Spirits?" Jo asked. Holy Spirits was an old decommissioned church turned into a bar complete with original pews and altar. It was quirky and somewhat of a local hangout that made the best burgers in Coos County.

"Yeah, that's the place. Anyway, Lynn met some guy there, and they seemed to hit it off. He came back here afterwards. I don't know if he was camping out or lived around here," Noah said.

"What did the guy look like?" Sam asked. He knew all the locals that hung out at Spirits.

Amber screwed up her face as if trying to conjure up an image. "Kinda long hair… and he was wearing a baseball cap. Flannel shirt, untucked."

"Was his name Jesse?" Jo asked.

Julie snapped her fingers. "Yes! That was his name."

Jo looked around at the group. "So, one of you isn't Lynn's boyfriend, then?"

"You look like couples," Sam added.

"We're not all couples." Amber clutched Noah's arm. "Me and Noah are together, and Tara and Josh are together. Everyone else is single."

"We work together at my company." Noah's voice was tinged with pride. "We make video games. We've been working our asses off to put out a new version of the game. You know, nights, weekends, hardly any time off. Our reward was to take four days off and come camping. We left a skeleton crew back at the office to keep things running." His face crumbled as if he was realizing what the reward had cost them. "Lynn worked the hardest, and she was really looking forward to kicking back and letting off some steam."

"So you saw Jesse here with Lynn?" Jo asked.

Julie made a face. "I'm not sure about that. We were partying in the bar. Then we brought the party back here. Some other people joined us for a little while. Some from that campground over there." Julie slapped at a bug on her knee then pointed through the woods to a patch of blue tent and wafting campsite smoke. "I think that guy from the bar was here, but I'm not positive."

"I am," Amber said. "I think he followed us back. I saw him with Lynn, but I'm not sure if he was still here after I went to bed."

"So, who was the last person to see her? This guy from town?" Jo asked.

They all looked around at each other.

"Hard to say. I wasn't really paying attention," Josh said.

"What do you think would make her go in the water without her clothes on?" Sam asked.

"Swimming? She did that at night. Undies only." Tara's eyes turned misty. "I always warned her not to do it alone. And she was drunk, and the river has a lot of rocks… I mean, it was an accident, wasn't it?"

Sam didn't answer. Instead, he slapped at the high-pitched whine around his ear. A mosquito. Up here, once the bloodthirsty insects got a bead on you, they came in like a squadron of fighter planes. They made a noise like an incoming missile, had the sting of a harpoon, and their bite left a lump the size of a golf ball.

Here in the dense woods, both mosquitos and black flies were out in full force, and their conversation was punctuated by waving arms as the campers swatted at them. Sam had to stop himself from scratching, or he'd have a lump five times bigger than the tiny bug that had caused it.

He glanced through the patch of woods toward the river. There was a thin path leading from the campsite toward it. "Is that where you go swimming?"

"Yeah." Noah swatted at a bug in front of his face. "But her body wasn't found there."

"She could've been carried downstream." Sam walked down the path. The beach was about fifty feet away. Very small, with a thin sandy patch hardly big enough to put a towel on. Good enough for getting your feet wet, though. He studied the area, looking for anything out of the norm. The water ran faster here. Lynn could have entered the water here. The current wasn't strong enough to sweep away anyone that could swim, but if she'd been unconscious, it would have carried her away. Maybe she'd been so drunk that she'd passed out and drowned.

"Do you see anything?" Julie ventured.

"No." Sam spun and looked at her. "But I'm wondering if Lynn went swimming on her own, then where are her clothes?"

Julie frowned and looked around. "I don't know. She was wearing a red tie-dyed shirt and cotton pants. But she could've taken them off in her tent."

"And walked half naked through the campsite?" Jo asked. "You guys must all be really good friends."

Julie frowned. "No, she wouldn't—"

"Woof!"

Sam turned to see a large, scraggly dog. It had the markings of a German shepherd, but it was bigger. Some kind of mix, he guessed. Maybe Rottweiler… or bear. The coat was matted, and the dog was thin, as if it hadn't eaten in a while.

A pang of sympathy for the dog shot through him. They'd seen their share of strays. Usually, they took them in and Reese posted their picture on Facebook, then Sam or Jo dropped them at the shelter. Between him and Jo, they tried to make sure extra effort was made to find the dogs' families. But this one looked as if it might not have a family.

"Is that your dog?" Sam asked.

"No. Never seen it before."

Sam turned back to the dog. Its whiskey-brown eyes looked at him as if it knew something he didn't.

The dog turned and walked a few paces into the woods back toward where they had found the body.

"I think she wants you to follow her." Jo had come to stand beside him.

Sam didn't take his eyes off the dog, who had stopped a few feet into the woods and was now looking back over its shoulder.

"Well, if you're not going to follow her, I am." Jo started after the dog.

Sam shrugged and followed. How did Jo know it was a girl? The fur was so long and matted, Sam couldn't see any of the parts that might give a clue as to the dog's gender.

The dog didn't walk far. It stopped near another beach away from any of the campsites. It pawed at something on the ground at the base of a birch tree. A pile of clothes that contained a red tie-dyed shirt.

Sam and Jo squatted to inspect the clothes. Jo pulled a latex glove out of her windbreaker and poked through the pile. Thin cotton pants, the red shirt, and a red lacy bra.

Julie had followed them. They turned to her. "Is this the shirt?"

Julie nodded, her eyes filling up. "Those are hers. Those are Lynn's clothes."

"She must have taken them off here and gone for a swim from the beach there." Jo nodded toward a thin stretch of sand at the edge of the river. Here the river was wider and deeper. Probably about four feet in the middle.

Sam stood and turned around, assessing the area. It was away from other campsites. Private. "If she were meeting someone and wanted some privacy to go skinny-dipping, this would be the place."

Jo squinted up at him. "If she was meeting someone, we need to find out who. He could have been the last person to see her alive."

Sam’s eyes met Jo’s. "Or the first person to see her dead."

CHAPTER FOUR

Sam drove back to the police station after interviewing the people at the surrounding campsites. They'd given a similar story. No one had been paying attention to Lynn. They'd all been busy drinking and partying it up. They'd all gone to bed around two a.m., or so they said. Since Sam had no idea when Lynn had died, he couldn't very well be pressing them for alibis.

Not that he needed alibis at this point. The death could simply be an accident that wouldn't require an investigation.

According to the campers, Lynn Palmer had been from Massachusetts. Too far for him to do the notification to her family. It broke his heart to think that somewhere down there the local cops would be informing Lynn's parents of her death. He hated leaving that job to someone else, but the best thing he could do for them now was figure out what had happened in the last hours of their daughter's life.

Downtown White Rock was your typical northern New Hampshire town. Brick and concrete buildings accented with fine architectural details lined the main street. Most of the buildings dated to the early 1900s, but the town had been kept up, so they weren't in disrepair.

In the middle of Main Street, a grass median ran the length of the block where most of the town offices stood. In the center of the median sat a statue of the town's first mayor, Hiram White, mounted on a horse. Little kids liked to climb on the horse. The statue was often pranked by older kids who would outfit the long-dead mayor with quirky hats and, sometimes, stick mannequins or straw dummies on the back of the horse.

It was mostly all in fun, except for the time someone put a naked blow-up doll on the back and almost caused a fit of the vapors amongst the town biddies. The police station phone had rung off the hook that morning.

Like most small towns, the government offices had to make do with what they had. The police station had recently moved from the basement of the town hall to the old post office. The post office had gotten its own fancy new building. Apparently, mail was a priority over crime fighting in White Rock.

Sam liked the post office building. The building dated to the 1930s and had somehow managed to retain the black-and-white swirly marble floors and original oak moldings with carved details. It still smelled of old paper and stamp glue, which was a welcome improvement over the musty basement of the town hall.

As an added bonus, the post office had left most of their furniture behind. Even the old bronze post office boxes still sat in their oak wall, creating a partial divider between the reception area and what had become the squad room. Each box had twin dials at the top with gold numbers on a black background. Below the dials, a fancy embossed eagle with a US shield on its chest sat proudly amidst fluted rays that extended to the edge of the box. Below the eagle, a small beveled glass window let you see how much mail was inside.

Sam couldn’t understand why the post office had opted for ugly new plain metal boxes instead of taking the old ones, but he didn’t question it. Some people had no taste. The bank of one hundred twenty boxes made a perfect divider, and Reese used them to organize the various pieces of mail, tax payments she collected, and copies of the permit applications she issued.

Beyond the wall of post office boxes was the squad room. It used to be the mail sorting area and was one open room with three oak craftsman-style desks. The desks were scarred from decades of use, but the honey-colored stained wood still glowed. They were solid wood, not like the plywood junk they had today.

He rounded the bank of post office boxes and stopped short. Jo was on the floor, hand-feeding pot roast from the diner across the street to the dog.

"You know we’re supposed to turn him in to the shelter," Sam said.

"Her."

Sam looked at the dog and raised a brow. Jo sounded sure of the dog's sex, so he went with it.

She continued, "And technically we're supposed to turn them in at the *first available opportunity*."

More brow raising from Sam.

Jo shrugged. She was used to his unspoken messages. After four years of working closely together, they could practically read each other's minds. "I haven't had an *opportunity* yet. I've been following up on some of the things we learned this morning."

As if to corroborate this, the dog looked up at Sam with innocent eyes.

"Seeing as we're short-handed now, I may not have time to take her for a while." Jo's words had them both glancing at Tyler's empty desk. Sam's stomach tightened. Not only had he lost a good friend and a damn good officer, but now they were shorthanded, meaning they would have to work extra.

He thought about Lynn Palmer. If she'd been murdered, he wanted to be able to do right by her, and that would be harder with one less officer. On the other hand, he couldn't even think about someone else filling Tyler's shoes right now. It was too soon.

"Where's Kevin?" he asked.

"He left for the day. You know how he is. Doesn't like to put in a lot of hours." Jo pushed up from the floor and dusted off her pants. She had taken off her police belt, and it lay on her desk with all the bulky accoutrements. "Are you going to bring him on full time?"

Sam pressed his lips together. The dog finished lapping up the pot roast and came over and pressed herself against his leg. He rubbed her silky ears absently. Though the dog's fur was dirty and matted, the ears felt like fine satin sheets on Sam's fingertips. "I suppose so. Seems like the right thing to do since he's been here with us for a while now."

"Yeah. Don't know if he'll want it, though." Jo went over to her desk and plopped into the old Naugahyde-and-steel chair that had been left there when the post office vacated. Sam had a chair just like it. He thought they dated to the 1950s, but they were comfortable and still did the job. Why get new ones when these worked just fine?

Jo was right about Kevin—he wasn't exactly ambitious, though he did do an adequate job. Truth be told, Sam wouldn't be disappointed if Kevin

didn’t want the full-time job, but he’d offer it to him just the same when he was ready because it was the right thing to do.

"So what do you make of it?" Sam didn’t need to elaborate. Jo would know that he was referencing the campers and the body from the river.

"Could just be an accident. She could’ve gone swimming and passed out or slipped and hit her head. But I’m having Reese do some digging into the friends she was camping with just in case."

As per protocol with a death that was not natural, they’d blocked off the areas where Lynn’s body and clothing had been found with crime scene tape. They weren’t sure if it was a crime scene yet, but better safe than sorry.

Since Kevin had left before they’d discovered the pile of clothes, Sam had shot pictures of the area with his cell phone. Kevin would have to go back and take better pictures later. He used a Nikon digital camera, and the pictures came out a lot better than Sam’s blurry ones that were usually marred by a close-up of his thumb obscuring the subject of the picture.

"I got that information you wanted." Reese peeked around the corner of the post-office-box wall, and the dog trotted over to her, her burr-infested tail swishing back and forth enthusiastically.

"Good girl, Lucy." Reese bent down, scratching the dog behind her ears. The fur on the edges of her ears was matted, and the insides of her ears red.

"You named her?" Sam asked.

"We can’t just call her ’it,’" Reese pointed out.

"She’s not going to be here that long. We have to take her to the shelter." Sam didn’t like the way the dog narrowed her eyes at him, the whiskey-brown color turning to a sad shade of brown in the slanting light coming in from the windows.

Lucy switched her attention from Reese to Sam. She trotted over and pressed herself against his leg, looking up at him with those pleading eyes. Sam tried to resist the look. He was good at resisting it in women, and he figured resisting it in dogs should be even easier. It wasn’t.

"I posted her on Facebook already." Reese had sat in an empty chair, her laptop in her lap. Her bloodred fingernails clacked on the keyboard. "Hopefully, someone will claim her soon and she won’t have to go to the shelter. Jo said she helped you guys find a clue—she deserves special treatment. Anyway, check out the information I found."

"Information?" Sam tried to ignore the way Lucy was putting her head under his hand, trying to force him to pet her.

"Jo asked me to look into this gaming company that the campers work at. Lyah Games." She turned the computer screen toward him.

"And?" Sam asked. Reese was a fairly new addition to his staff, but Sam had already noticed she had above-average computer skills. Even though he couldn't let her do field work, there was no rule about letting her use the Internet.

"The company is legit. And the people Jo had in her notes are listed on their informational page. Well, most of them are." She angled the screen toward Sam, and he recognized five of the campers' names on the list of the company's officers:

NOAH BRICKEY - CEO
Lynn Palmer - COO
Tara Barrett - CFO
Joshua Moore - Director, Software Engineering
Julie Swan - Director, Human Resources

"THAT'S MOST OF THEM. Guess the others didn't rate," Sam said.

"They do make video games just like they said, but check this out." Reese swiveled the laptop back to face her, tapped on the keyboard some more, then swung it back to Sam. The screen showed a bunch of figures that were like Greek to him.

"They're not doing very well financially," she explained.

Sam squinted at the screen. "Is that what that means?" He frowned up at Reese. "Did you get this information legally?"

Reese rolled her eyes. "Of course. It's a company prospectus. Public knowledge."

"That's interesting," Jo said. "But why would that motivate one of them to kill her? Lots of companies are doing poorly, and he did say they just worked really hard to get a new release out."

"Good question. But at least now we know they weren't lying about their work," Sam said. "Whether or not they were lying about anything else remains to be seen."

CHAPTER FIVE

Sam's office was large. It had three ten-foot-tall windows with round tops that looked out over the town toward the White Mountains. The floor was wide pine boards scuffed by decades of use. The walls were thin strips of oak wainscoting on the bottom and a municipal green paint on the top. The old oak-paneled door with smoked glass window was original to the post office. Only the gold-and-black lettering had been changed from Postmaster to Chief of Police.

His desk was a long double-wide partners desk made of oak. By the amount of staples embedded in it and the blue-ink postmark stamps that tattooed the surface, it seemed the post office must have used it to sort and stamp mail. Sam used it to spread out his case files.

It was late in the afternoon. Sam was leaned back in his office chair with his hands clasped behind his head and his feet propped up on the desk, thinking about the girl in the river, when John called with the bad news.

"I got the time of death. Between 2:15 and 2:45 a.m. Your victim didn't drown, though. No water in the lungs."

Sam swung his feet onto the floor, sitting upright in the chair. "It's sounding like you don't think she died by accident."

"Cause of death was a massive blow to the head. I don't think she could've done that to herself. She could have fallen and slipped on the rocks, but she wouldn't have hit with the kind of force needed to kill her right away. Knock her out, sure. But with no water in the lungs, she didn't drown. That blow killed her." John paused to take a breath. "Not only that, but judging by the abrasions and contusions on her body, she was killed in

one place and dragged to another. This was done post mortem. My guess is the killer was hoping she'd wash downriver, maybe even out of town, but she ended up getting stuck on the shallow sandbar instead."

As Sam digested this information, he glanced out the window to see the mayor, Harley Dupont, walking toward the building. A bad day was turning worse. There was no love lost between Dupont and Sam. Dupont had been a few years behind Sam all through high school. He hadn't liked him back then, and he'd liked him even less when Dupont had returned to White Rock to practice law a few years after getting his fancy Harvard education.

He'd been a pain in Sam's ass ever since he became mayor four years ago. Judging by the determined look on his face, Sam knew he was fixing to be a pain in his ass right now, too.

Sam hung up with John and went out into the main area to give Jo and Reese the bad news. "Looks like Lynn Palmer was murdered."

Jo didn't look up from the pile of papers on her desk. A coffee mug sat half empty next to her, a jelly donut with one bite left beside that. "Not surprised. Already on it."

Reese wasn't as seasoned or jaded—her eyes softened. Her face showed compassion, and her hands reached instinctively for the dog, which was seated beside her desk. Before she could say anything, the door opened and Dupont walked in.

His suit was impeccable, his reddish hair parted on the side and combed over the slightly balding spot in front. His beady brown eyes flicked from Reese to Sam to Jo, looking at them as if they were the broccoli side dish on his plate that his mother was about to force him to eat.

Lucy got to her feet and growled.

Dupont's eyes jerked toward the dog, whose body was rigid, her attention focused on Dupont as if he were a threat. Sam's estimation of the dog went up tenfold. She was a good judge of character.

Dupont planted his fake mayoral smile on his face but kept his eyes trained on Lucy. "What's a dog doing here? You're not allowed to have pets in here."

Reese put a restraining hand on Lucy's neck. The dog stayed where she was. "She's not a pet. She's a stray. We're looking for her owners." The tone in Reese's voice told Sam that she liked Dupont about as much as Sam did. Good girl.

"Strays are supposed to be at the pound." Dupont's eyes softened just a tad as he looked at the dog again. Or was Sam imagining that?

"And that's where we're going to take her as soon as we get freed up," Sam said. "In case you didn't know, we have a murder to investigate."

Dupont straightened his jacket and looked away from Lucy. "I know. In fact, that's why I'm here. Nadine and Thomas Palmer are good friends of mine, and I want to assure them that everything will be done to bring their daughter's killer to justice."

Sam resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "We always do our best."

"I want this investigation done by the book." Dupont held a hand up at Sam's narrow-eyed look. "Let's not pretend here. I know how you like to take things into your own hands, sometimes, but I want your full attention on this case, and I want it done right." He leaned toward Sam, his voice lower. "The Palmers are very influential, and my reputation as mayor is on the line… and I wouldn't want to have to resort to tarnishing *your* reputation as chief of police to keep mine polished. I'm sure you wouldn't want your daughters to have to hear about your previous screw-ups."

Dupont didn't have to elaborate. The reference to what had happened twenty years ago when he was still in the police academy made Sam's blood boil. The vaguely threatening mention of Sam's twin daughters pissed him off even more. Sam's hands tightened into fists, but he shoved them into his pockets instead of punching Dupont in the face as he wanted to. He struggled to make his voice even toned and pleasant. "Of course. We want justice just as much as anyone else."

Dupont studied Sam for a minute, the two men staring at each other like two gunslingers in the town square at high noon.

Dupont blinked first. "I expect frequent updates." He spun and strode to the door then turned back and looked at Lucy. "And get rid of the dog."

CHAPTER SIX

Jo tapped the end of her pencil forcefully on the desk, taking her frustrations out on the pink rubber eraser. She spun in her chair to watch Dupont walk away from the building. The guy was a jerk. Not only did he act like a pompous ass, but he had no respect for anyone on the police force.

This wasn't the first time Dupont had thrown a veiled threat at Sam. Jo had no idea what Dupont was talking about, but she could tell by Sam's reaction that the threat had hit home. Something had happened in Sam's past, but she had no idea what it was.

Jo had been able to tell that Sam was holding back from popping Dupont in the face. Couldn't blame him. Heck, she wanted to punch him herself. She'd seen the tells in Sam's body language. The way his shoulders stiffened. How he'd clenched his large hands into fists, and from where she was seated, she could just see the tick in his strong jaw even through the thick stubble that covered it. Sam hid his emotions well, but he couldn't hide them from her—she was an expert at reading people.

Jo had no intention of delving into what, exactly, Dupont had been referring to, though. She had her own skeletons that were better left in the closet with the door firmly shut. She wouldn't want anyone prying into her past business, so she wouldn't pry into Sam's. If he wanted her to know, he'd tell her.

Sam was a good cop and a good person. The kind of person that you wanted to have on your side. The kind of person that would have your back no matter what. That was all she needed to know, and if Sam had done

something in the past that was the cause of Dupont's threats, she was sure it had been for a good reason.

Dupont, on the other hand, was not a good person. Taking a jab at Sam's kids was a low blow. She knew Sam loved his twin daughters more than anything. They were in college now. Nice girls. Still young and innocent. To make a threat like that just proved what an asshole the mayor was.

"Don't listen to anything Dupont said. He's an ass clown," she said.

Sam sighed and dropped his hand to Lucy's head. "Even a dog knows that."

Jo looked at the German shepherd mix wistfully. No one had responded to the Facebook post claiming her, and she knew they would have to take her to the shelter before the end of the day.

As if reading her mind, Reese said, "She's smart. It'd be a shame to take her to the shelter. Maybe one of you guys needs a pet?"

"I wish," Jo said. "I'm renting my place, and pets aren't allowed."

Jo was a loner by nature, but another living creature might be nice to have at home. Something soft and furry, preferably. But the landlord had been very clear about that. She liked her little cabin up in the woods and didn't want to get evicted. Maybe a goldfish would have to do.

Reese's gaze flicked to Sam. He owned his own home, an old hunting camp he'd inherited from his grandfather.

Sam looked at Lucy. "Sorry, girl, I don't have time for a dog."

He spread his arms to indicate the squad room. "I spend most of my time either here or out on calls. It just wouldn't be fair to her."

"I suppose you're right." Reese glanced at the computer and hit the return key. "No one has posted to claim her or that they know who she belongs to."

"There's still time. People are just getting home from work. I can drop her by the shelter if you want," Sam said.

"No. I'll do it. Eric's working there tonight, and he'll make sure that she gets another good meal and one of the good kennels." Eric was Reese's boyfriend. He was going to veterinarian school and volunteered at the animal shelter. Jo felt a little better knowing Lucy would have someone to make sure she got good treatment. Hopefully, her family would show up and claim her, though with the way her coat looked and how hungry she'd been, Jo had misgivings about turning the dog over to her family. If she had one, they weren't treating her very well.

Jo leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms. "Now that we have a murder to investigate, what do you suggest we do next, Chief? I'm sure Dupont will be scrutinizing our every move."

She already knew what *she* thought they should do next, but she wanted to see if Sam was in sync with her.

Four years of working together had put them on the same wavelength. They were usually on the same page as to what to do, and they did their jobs efficiently. Now, with Tyler gone, they'd have to be even more efficient. Her stomach clenched at the thought of the dead officer. Just because they had this murder to investigate didn't mean she was going to forget about Tyler's case. His killer was still at large.

"At least Dupont won't get in our way and impede the investigation like he usually does," Sam said.

Jo nodded. It was weird how Dupont would often muck up the works for them. Especially if they were investigating something that had to do with the builder in town, Lucas Thorne.

Thorne had come to town a few years ago. The head honcho of a real estate development company, he was hell bent on buying up all the pristine land in town so he could tear down the trees and build a large resort. Hotels, restaurants, golf courses. Nothing was safe from him, and when people didn't want to sell their old farms that had been in the family for generations, he somehow changed their minds.

Jo and Sam had a sneaking suspicion that he was also responsible for the influx of drugs coming into the community, but they hadn't been able to prove anything.

Any time they had any sort of an investigation going, it had been thwarted by Dupont, who had the ear of Judge Thompson, who would become suddenly reluctant to sign the necessary search warrants. But even though they had never been able to prove anything against Thorne, that didn't stop them from trying.

Sam turned around. "Forget about him. We have an investigation, and it's almost quitting time."

"Which makes it the perfect time to question one of our leads." Jo glanced out the window at the small stone-and-wood church wedged in between two tall brick buildings. It was one of the oldest, if not *the* oldest, buildings in town. Old-timers said the people who settled the town were

religious and had built the church first so they'd have a place to worship, then the rest of the town had sprung up around it.

Religion must have gone out of style, though, because the old church had been decommissioned, and it was now a bar frequented by the locals. One of those locals was Jesse Cowly, who the campers had described as having been with Lynn the night before.

"What do you say we go grab a beer?" Sam asked.

"What a great idea." Jo tossed her pencil down on the desk and stood.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sam had discovered long ago that he got more information out of people in the bar when he didn't show up in his police uniform. Even though everyone in town knew he was the chief of police, apparently when he was in his civvies they saw him as just plain old Sam. He preferred wearing jeans and a tee shirt anyway. So did Jo.

It didn't take Jo long to change. She came out of the bathroom in a gray long-sleeved jersey and jeans. The outfit wasn't fancy, but the color of the shirt highlighted her gray eyes and her coppery-brown hair. He didn't know what she'd done to her hair. She usually wore it stuffed up under a baseball cap, but she'd ditched the cap and fluffed it up in the bathroom, and now the mass of curls framed her head like a halo. A few silver strands had snuck in at the temples since she'd first come to work for him, but somehow they looked good on her.

Jo didn't go in for a lot of primping. She was attractive without having to put any effort into it. She wasn't a glamorous stunner like Sam's second wife, Evie, but Jo had a down-to-earth charm that shone through without having to build it up with lots of makeup and fancy hairstyles.

Jo grabbed her black leather biker jacket off the peg. She shrugged into it, the buckle-and-zipper-clad jacket falling just below her slim hips. It was still chilly at night, but Sam suspected she wore it more to hide the gun that was nestled in her belt at her waist than to ward off the cold.

Sam wore his own leather jacket. A dark-brown bomber jacket with a shearling collar that he'd picked up at the army-navy store. He'd worn the same style almost all his adult life. Evie had tried to get him to wear

something more sophisticated. A shiny thin leather coat that reminded Sam of a leisure suit. Thing was, Sam wasn't sophisticated. The jacket didn't take, and he quickly went back to wearing his old comfortable bomber jacket. That was just one of the reasons why Evie was his *ex*-wife.

They spilled out onto the street. The late-afternoon rays of the setting sun gave the town a yellow glow and made Jo's curls shine like a new penny. Sam noticed a few new laugh lines were forming at the corners of her eyes.

She caught him looking and made a face. "What?"

"Nothing."

She smirked and punched him playfully in the arm as they fell in step beside each other.

They had an easy relationship, closer than most who worked together. Even though there wasn't a lot of crime in their town, there had been a few tense situations, and Sam and Jo had learned to trust each other with their lives. That tended to create a special bond. There was nothing sexual about it. Sam didn't want to go there. He valued having Jo in his life, and after two failed marriages, Sam was done with commitments.

Holy Spirits—or just Spirits, as the locals called it—still looked like a church on the outside and was often mistaken as such. Out-of-towners who opened the tall front doors seeking a quiet place to pray got a big surprise at what they found inside.

The church wasn't big, but the twenty-foot-high ceilings gave it a spacious feel. The atmosphere was dim. Lights low. The dark wooden floors were scarred, scraped, and stained. The walls were large fieldstone about halfway up, the mortar marred with cracks and patches where it had been repaired. The noise was a constant hubbub with the drone of a low-playing jukebox in the background. Sometimes it got rowdy, but tonight it was fairly quiet.

Four of the original pews had been rearranged so as to act as seating for long tables in the back. Up front, there were several round tables with maple captain's chairs around them. Half of those tables were occupied with locals, full mugs of foam-topped beer in front of them.

Sam and Jo headed toward the bar at the back where the altar used to be. It ran the length of the small building. The windows high up on the wall behind it had been fitted with red, blue, and green stained glass in a pattern of squares and rectangles—the original church windows had disappeared

long ago. The new stained glass didn't let much light in, which was exactly the way the owner, Billie Hanson, wanted it. She said dim lighting encouraged more drink purchases.

Under the stained-glass windows, colorful bottles of booze were lined up in front of a mirror that reflected the room behind them.

The seats around the bar were worn but comfortable. Sturdy wood with black pleather seat cushions edged with giant brass tacks. The bar itself was pitted and scarred with burn holes from when they used to allow smoking inside. The smell of grilled meat and french fries made Sam's stomach grumble.

Billie came to stand in front of them on the other side of the bar, her short-cropped gray hair sticking up in a blue-and-lavender-tinged spike on top. She wore one diamond stud in her left ear and a gold hoop in her right.

Her face, weatherworn from years of hard outdoor work, crinkled into a smile. Like most of the town residents, Billie had spent her lifetime outdoors doing manual labor. Her parents had owned a dairy farm, which she'd worked at year round. Now, in her sixties, she'd sold off the farm after her folks had died and bought the bar from the previous owner.

Billie could usually be found behind the bar during business hours. Most everyone called her Reverend Billie, but she wasn't a real reverend. Not unless you counted the certificate she'd gotten from the online Church of Good Will that hung behind the bar. She thought the title went great with the ambiance of the bar. She'd worked hard to build up the business, focusing on pouring a good drink and making the best gourmet burgers in the area.

Her left brow quirked up. She wiped chapped hands on her apron. "The usual?"

Sam and Jo both nodded. As Billie walked away, Jo leaned over the bar and yelled, "Add some curly fries to that, will ya?"

Billie raised a hand in acknowledgement and kept walking toward the beer fridge.

"Some day, huh?" Jo asked.

Sam huffed out a breath and nodded. It was hard to believe that the day had included Tyler's funeral, a death scene, and a run-in with the mayor.

Billie slid two beers in front of them. A Moosenose in a green bottle for Sam. Sam liked supporting local businesses, and this one was a local brew

with a slightly lemony flavor that Sam had acquired a taste for. Jo got a Sam Adams Boston Ale.

"Have you heard any more about Tyler's case?" Jo slipped a fingernail under the corner of her beer label and started picking at it.

"Not yet." They weren't supposed to be investigating Tyler's case on their own—the state police had already done an investigation, which had turned up nothing. But sometimes you needed to take matters into your own hands to make sure justice was served. Problem was, they didn't have much to go on. The car that Tyler had pulled over to help had been stolen, the owner a little old lady who lived a few towns over.

Sam figured the killer hadn't wanted to be arrested for driving a stolen vehicle and had shot Tyler then disappeared.

"I still think we can find someone who saw something. That killer must've gotten a ride from someone. That stretch of road is too far away from anything for him to have gone anywhere on foot," Jo said.

This far north, most of the roads were remote. Houses were spaced far apart. Tyler had been up at the north end of town, almost to the Canadian border. There would've been no one around for miles to see what happened.

"Whoever it was must've been smart enough to wipe the car clean," Sam said.

The car had been wiped of fingerprints. The only thing they'd found was a partial print in the ashtray along with a dusting of cocaine. Sam figured they'd had drugs in the car. The cocaine might've come out of a bag they were stashing in the ashtray. They must have been in a hurry to get out of there after the shooting. Maybe the bag ripped in the killer's haste to grab it out of the car, and some cocaine spilled out. "Seems like if someone knew enough to wipe for prints, they would've been a criminal with a record, but we didn't get a match from the database for the partial."

"Poor Tyler probably didn't know what he was stumbling onto," Jo said.

Hadn't he? Sam wondered about that. There were a few discrepancies, like the fact that he hadn't pulled his gun and that he'd been shot right in front of the police cruiser. If the killer had come out of the stolen car with a gun, wouldn't Tyler have pulled his? It was hard to know exactly—Tyler hadn't logged the stop in his logbook, so there were no notes as to why he was pulling over. Sam just assumed his intention had been to help the disabled vehicle.

"We'll get to the bottom of it." Sam glanced sideways at Jo. Logging a stop was police protocol. Usually, they called in or logged it in a book. That time of night, there was no one in the squad room to take the call, so they each carried a logbook. Sometimes they bent the rules a little and logged things after the stop—when they got back to the station. Except for Tyler—there was no "after." He never made it back to the station. Jo had forged the log in his notebook to avoid a black mark on his reputation during the state investigation. "By the way, thanks for covering for Tyler."

Jo shrugged. "We look out for each other, right?" She spun her chair around so that she was facing out into the main bar. She looked relaxed, casual. But Sam knew she was recording every detail of what was going on in the bar inside that superior brain of hers.

Her eyes widened, and she jerked her head toward the door as Billie slid a basket of fries across the bar to her. Sam turned to see Mick Gervasi, private investigator and his best friend since grade school, saunter in.

Mick was wearing a black jacket, leather like Jo's but bulkier. His dark hair was cut in a short military style. His clear-blue eyes scanned the bar much like Jo's but for a totally different reason. Mick didn't trust anyone, and he was looking around to see if there might be trouble he wanted to avoid.

A slight smile ticked up the corners of his lips as he spotted them. He headed toward the bar and slipped into the seat beside Jo.

Billie slid a tumbler half full of amber liquid and ice in front of him before his jean-clad ass even settled into the seat. Whiskey. Jack Daniels, to be exact. Mick was a regular.

Jo spun back around, and the three of them hunched forward, their elbows on the bar, leaning in toward each other with Jo in the middle. Sam had hired Mick to do a little investigating into Tyler's shooting, and Jo was totally on board.

The investigation by the state police wasn't going anywhere, and Sam and Jo technically weren't supposed to be getting involved. Conflict of interest or some damn thing. They weren't about to let strangers handle Tyler's investigation, but they had to be careful how involved they got. That was where Mick came in.

"So what have you got?" Jo picked up a fry and slid her eyes toward Mick.

Mick took a swig from the tumbler. The condensation had already dripped down from the sides of the glass to form a wet ring on the bar. He put the glass back down exactly on top of the ring.

"Not much. I'm digging into all the relatives and connections for Barbara Bartles. I'm thinking maybe her car wasn't stolen by a stranger." Mick shrugged and looked out over the bar. "But I haven't come up with anything concrete yet."

Sam swigged his beer. It was cold, slightly bitter with the lemony tang. He thought about the car that Tyler had pulled over. It was a late-model Ford. The registration in the glove compartment said it belonged to Barbara Bartles, who turned out to be an elderly woman. She claimed the car had been stolen the day before.

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Jo munched on fries and scanned the room by looking in the mirror behind the bar. "Here he comes."

She swung around in her chair again, her elbows on the bar as a young guy with thin brown hair pulled back into a ponytail slid in between her and Mick to capture Billie's attention.

Jesse Cowly leaned across the bar, his long ponytail swinging to the side and brushing her arm. He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. Sam could see he was already trying to turn on the charm, his smile wide as he looked at Jo's cleavage. Then his eyes trailed up to her face and widened with surprise when he recognized who she was.

"Hey, Jesse, you're just the person we've been looking for." Jo's words caused a flicker of concern in Jesse's eyes.

If he was guilty of something, he was good at hiding it, though. He squared his shoulders and gave Sam and Jo a blank look. "Oh? Why is that?"

"Heard you were partying with some campers last night," Jo said.

"Yeah, so? Is there a law against that now?" He grabbed a longneck from Billie and slapped a few bills on the bar then took a step back, still facing Jo and Sam.

"No law against partying," Sam said. "But when one of the other partiers gets murdered…"

Jesse's brows shot up. "Murdered? Hey, wait a minute. I didn't have anything to do with any murder."

Sam glanced at Jo. Jesse seemed panicked enough to be telling the truth, but that was more Jo's area. He knew she'd be studying his body language.

"But you were with them, right? One of them was named Lynn. Do you remember her?" Jo asked.

Jesse scratched the back of his neck. "I remember them. They were here in the bar. You can ask anyone. So what? Lots of people were in the bar."

"Yeah, but you went back to the campsite with her, didn't you?" He was acting cocky now. Arrogant. It reminded Sam of his cousin's trial almost twenty years ago. Those guys had been cocky and arrogant, too. Until Sam and Mick had stepped in with their own brand of justice.

Jesse frowned. "What is this? Are you interrogating me? You can't just come in here and ask me questions without reading me my rights or something."

Sam put up his hands palms out and plastered an easy smile across his face. "We're not interrogating you. We're sitting here in the bar having a conversation. If we wanted to interrogate you, we'd bring you into the police station. We just want to know what you saw out there at that campsite."

"I didn't see anything because I wasn't at the campsite. I was here in the bar all night. I never went out there, so whoever you got your information from is lying."

Jesse stormed off, and Jo and Sam exchanged a look.

"Well, looks like *someone* is lying," Sam said.

Jo turned back toward her beer. "They usually do when it comes to murder. The hard part is figuring out who's doing the lying and why."

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the way home from Spirits, Sam couldn't help thinking about the dog, Lucy. The shelter was on his way, and it was still open, so he swung by just to make sure Lucy was doing okay. Hopefully, she'd be gone, picked up by her family.

She hadn't been picked up, but Eric had taken good care of her, and she was nestled in a thick sherpa-fleece-lined dog bed in the corner of a squeaky-clean kennel. Someone had washed her and groomed out the mats, and her fur shone like silk.

Sam squatted in front of the kennel door, and Lucy trotted over, eagerly sniffing his hand.

"Hey, girl, you're looking good." She smiled and looked up with hopeful whiskey eyes.

Sam patted her between the bars then stood and turned away.

Lucy whined.

Sam turned back. She was seated on her haunches, her tail swishing back and forth and those eyes looking right into his soul.

"Sorry, I can't take you home. You wouldn't like it. You'd be alone every day and most nights, too."

Lucy shot him a recriminating look. When it became clear that he wasn't there to spring her from the kennel, she turned her back on him and curled up in the bed, facing the other way.

Sam headed to his hunting cabin. He'd inherited it from his grandfather, and it was his own slice of heaven on earth. It wasn't big, just two

bedrooms and a loft, but it had plenty of room for him and his daughters when they came to stay.

Evie had hated the place. She'd said it was too far out in the woods. She hated the deer-head mount that hung on the fieldstone fireplace and said it always seemed to be watching her with its black eyes. The taxidermy fish that dotted the rounded log walls freaked her out.

Funny thing, those were all the things Sam loved about the place. Especially the fish. Gramps had been an avid angler, and Sam still remembered the day Gramps had let him help pull the giant salmon they nicknamed Charlie out of Lake Howard. Charlie had gone on to win the county ice-fishing prize—five thousand dollars—that season, and he now hung proudly displayed on the wall above the overstuffed couch.

Evie had refused to live here. They'd bought a big old house closer to town, and she'd pestered him to sell the cabin, but he'd hung on. Good thing, too, because the cabin had outlasted her. Maybe Sam had always known that would be the case.

Sam tossed his keys on the aluminum fish-shaped tray beside the door and headed for the fridge, where another beer awaited. A feeling of calm settled over him as it always did when he was at the cabin. It was still pretty much the way Gramps had left it. The way he remembered it being his whole life. Since Evie had taken all their combined furniture in the divorce, he'd simply moved right into the cabin and left it as it had been when he inherited it.

The furniture was worn but comfortable. The rustic decor included many items made out of birch bark and logs. Old family photos littered the pine tables, and his grandmother's homey touches could be seen in the flow-blue china dishes displayed in the china cabinet and the quirky antique salt and pepper shaker collection that lined the kitchen windowsill. Even the old jadeite-green batter bowl that Gram used to let him lick her homemade cake batter from still sat on the stainless steel counter. The place was home.

The best part about it was that Gramps had the foresight to buy up twenty acres of land, so Sam didn't have a soul nearby. Nothing but deer and bear for company, just the way he liked it. He even owned a few acres across the street, where the land sloped down to reveal a pond. Sometimes at dusk the deer would come to the edges of the pond, and Sam would sit on the porch to watch them, just as he'd done with his dad and Gramps when he was a little boy.

Thorne had approached him about buying up part of the land, but Sam would never sell. Thorne would only get it over his dead body.

Sam brought the beer over to the little desk situated under the overhang of the loft. He cracked the small window on the wall next to the desk just an inch. The cool night air washed over him. In the woods, he heard the hoot of a barn owl and the reply of another.

He sipped his beer and thought about Jo. He admired the way she'd handled Jesse. In fact, she was probably one of the best cops he'd ever worked with. Funny thing, though, even though they'd been side by side every day for four years, he still felt as if he didn't *really* know her. Sure, they hung out sometimes and talked a lot at work, but there was something there, just below the surface, that he couldn't put a finger on. Something in her private life she wanted to keep private. Then again, who could blame her? Sam had some of that himself.

He fired up the computer and navigated to the financial site where he had his 401k just as his phone dinged.

He pulled it out of his pocket. His daughter, Hayley.

Hey Dad, just checking in. U keeping everyone honest up there?

Sam's heart expanded. One good thing had come from his first marriage—his twin daughters. He typed a reply.

Much as I can. How's school?

Hayley was studying at the Boston School of Pharmacology. Her twin sister, Marla, was studying marine biology, also in Massachusetts. He missed them both. They were too far away.

Semester almost over. Coming up to visit soon.

Sam replied:

Can't wait.

The phone dinged again. Marla this time. Sam smiled. When one of them texted, the other was soon to follow. He exchanged a similar text conversation with Marla. He figured they'd come to visit at the same time. Sam made a mental note to make sure there were clean sheets for the guest room and loft.

Texting with his girls brought up thoughts of their mother, his first wife. Vanessa. They'd been high school sweethearts and had a volatile relationship. It had been both good and bad. In the end, it was mostly bad. Still, she'd had some sort of hold on him. Sam thought maybe she had a special place in his heart because she was the mother of his children.

Whatever the reason, he could never refuse her anything. They'd tried to get back together a few times, but it never worked out. When she moved to Las Vegas, it had been a relief.

Thoughts of his daughters also reminded him of Dupont's threat. Had his words just been idle speculation, or did Dupont know more about what had happened during Sam's cousin Gracie's rape trial twenty years ago than Sam thought he did?

The rape had happened in Boston, and two of the rapists had been Harvard students, just like Dupont. But Dupont's name had never come up. He'd acted shocked and conciliatory back then. As far as Sam knew, Dupont hadn't even known them.

The trial had been splashed all over the papers, so Dupont knew enough just from that, but how much did he know about the part Sam and Mick had played in making sure justice prevailed?

Sam turned back to his computer. What did it matter what Dupont knew? He didn't regret what he'd done. Sometimes the system needed a little help to make sure justice prevailed and that people couldn't buy their way out of prosecution.

And sometimes you needed to skirt the system to make sure those who needed help the most got it. He clicked into his retirement account and withdrew a sizable chunk of money. He couldn't do anything to bring Tyler Richardson back to his family, but maybe this would help ease their pain.

CHAPTER NINE

Sam was the first one into the station the next day and headed straight to the coffee machine. The K-Cup brewer was a new addition purchased by Reese, who had gotten sick of cleaning out the old coffee pot that they always seemed to burn the last of the coffee in. It was expensive, though, and not in the budget, so they all brought in their own K-Cups.

Sam picked up his orange K-Cup of Gorilla organic, popped it into the receptacle, and pressed the brew button. The smell of coffee wafted up.

He glanced at the rack where their K-Cups were all neatly stacked. Tea for Reese, dark roast for Jo, generic for Kevin. His eyes fell on the Moonbucks brand. Tyler's brand. A hollow feeling filled his stomach, and his eyes flicked automatically to the empty desk in the corner.

"Pop one in for me, will ya," Jo said then stopped short, following his gaze. Her face immediately softened, her eyes misting.

Sam turned his attention back to the coffeemaker. He removed his spent K-Cup and popped hers in, swapping his now-steaming blue police-issue mug for the bright-yellow smiley-face mug she preferred. When it was full, he handed it to her.

They proceeded to Jo's desk. She sat in the chair, her hands curled around the steaming mug. Sam rested his hip on the corner of her desk, and she offered him a jelly donut from the white bag she'd brought. Their usual morning routine. It was the closest thing to a meeting they ever had, crowded around Jo's desk, discussing their plan of attack for the day. Of course, there were usually three of them. The fact Tyler wasn't there

weighed heavily on Sam, and judging by the way Jo kept glancing at the empty desk, he could tell it did on her too.

Sam was just about to start talking about the Palmer case when the door opened and Reese came in with the phone pressed to her ear.

"Yes, Mrs. Deardorff. I know that goats can be very destructive."

Reese shot a look at Sam and rolled her eyes. "Yes, I know Mrs. Hoelscher needs to keep Bitsy in her yard. No, we can't put a restraining order on a goat. I'll have an officer come by to take your statement."

"They're at it again, huh?" Jo asked.

Nettie Deardorff and Rita Hoelscher had been next-door neighbors for over fifty years. The two widows didn't have much to do but complain about each other. Sam didn't know what had happened to start it, but ever since he could remember, the two had been feuding. Lately, Nettie had been complaining about Rita's goat, Bitsy. The previous week, she'd complained Bitsy had eaten up all her bulbs from her garden. The only way to appease them was to send an officer out and pretend the other woman would get punished somehow.

"This time, she's saying Bitsy chewed her siding." Reese flipped a postcard to Sam.

"That's odd. She complained about Bitsy last week. I thought it was Nettie's turn this week," Jo said.

"Maybe they are getting senile and forgetting whose week it is," Reese said.

Jo eyed the postcard over her steaming mug. It had a big pink flamingo on the front. "What's that?"

Sam flipped it over and recognized the oversized shaky scrawl.

IT'S *hot as hell down here. And boring. Only talk about knee replacements and gout. Get me out of here. P.S. Sorry about Tyler*

-H

"IT'S FROM HARRY." Sam flipped the card to her, and she smiled. Harry Woolston was the former chief of police. Harry had held the job for what

seemed like a hundred years. He hadn't wanted to retire, but age had forced him out. Now he was down in Florida and bored out of his mind.

The two months he came back in the summer, he usually spent pestering Sam for information on the various cases they were working. Though Sam had to admit his advice did come in handy sometimes. Harry was more old school than Sam and didn't believe in any of the newfangled methods of forensics. He refused to use a computer, and Sam didn't even know if he knew how.

Jo set the card aside. "I guess we better get back over to the campsite. Let them know we're dealing with a murder."

Sam figured rumor might have already gotten around to them, but he knew Jo wanted to watch them as he gave them the news. Maybe one of them would have some kind of a nervous tic or something that would give them away. Sam wished it would be so easy, but he knew it wouldn't.

"Yep. Kevin can take pictures. The ones I took yesterday are just on my phone. We need something better." Sam held up his phone. "And we can compare what Kevin takes to what I took to see if anybody moved anything."

"And we can find out why they lied about Jesse." Jo drained her mug.

"Maybe Jesse was the one that was lying."

"Good point. He was acting kinda cagey. He has a tic in his shoulder that gives him away. And he was scratching a bug bite, so I know he was in the woods. But I think he would've been more nervous if he was the killer. He seemed genuinely surprised about the murder, even if he is hiding something."

The door opened, and Kevin sauntered toward the coffee pot. "Hi, guys."

"Hey, Kevin. We're headed back to the campground today."

Kevin turned while his mug was filling. "Whole different line of questioning when you know it's a murder, right?"

"I was hoping you could take more pictures of the area where we found the clothes after you left yesterday. We think that might be the murder site." Sam saw Reese waving around some paperwork at her desk. "Oh, and I need you to head over to Nettie Deardorff's. She's complaining about Rita Hoelscher's goat again."

Kevin rolled his eyes. "Sure. Okay."

"I was wondering if you wanted to log a few extra hours. With this murder investigation and us being shorthanded…" Sam's voice trailed off, and everyone looked in the direction of Tyler's empty desk.

"I can put in a few extra, I suppose." Kevin turned back toward them, and something dark flashed in his narrowed eyes. "Is there anything new about the investigation?"

"We're not supposed to be investigating it," Jo said.

"Yeah, I know. But you guys are investigating it, aren't you?" Kevin's voice rose at the end. "I mean, we want to find out what happened to him, don't we?"

Sam glanced at Jo. Since Kevin was part time, they didn't work as closely together. Kevin was a good cop, but he didn't feel a connection with him like he had with Jo and Tyler. But Kevin was part of the team, and his help might come in handy. Jo nodded slightly.

"I've had Mick looking into a few things," Sam said. "The only lead we have is the stolen car. And so far we have no leads as to who took it."

"And the fingerprint we found on the ashtray," Jo added. "We ran it through AFIS, but nothing came up. Whoever it is isn't in the system."

Kevin made a face. "Weird that the staties' investigation hasn't turned anything up. I mean, why was he out there? Why hadn't he pulled his gun? What did his log say?"

Jo cleared her throat. "Well, he didn't exactly put it in the log."

Kevin's brows shot up. "What do you mean? We're supposed to either call things in or log them in our notebook. And since it was after midnight and there was no one to call it in to…"

"Right. He should have written the stop in his notebook. But you know how it is when you're out there alone. He probably saw the car and was pulling over to help. I'm sure he didn't think it was going to be any police business," Jo said. "Probably figured he'd change the tire and send the motorist on his way."

"It's still supposed to be logged. Wouldn't that have been a red flag for the staties?" Kevin asked.

"Yeah, well, they didn't exactly know that he didn't log it." Jo took a deep breath. "I wrote the stop in his notebook the next day after he died."

"You *what*?" Kevin's voice rose. "If Dupont finds out, he'll have a field day with that."

Jo held up her palms. "I know. But I didn’t want anything to tarnish Tyler’s reputation. If they saw he didn’t go strictly by the book, they might’ve tried to make it into something it wasn’t." She shook her head at Kevin’s incredulous look. "Come on. We all know that Tyler was a good guy. He was probably just trying to help, and you know none of us go one-hundred-percent by the book in writing this stuff down. We all do it at the end of the shift. I just did it for him because he couldn’t do it for himself anymore."

The three of them stared at each other while Kevin thought about it. Sam started to get nervous. Would Kevin tell Dupont?

After a few seconds, Kevin sighed. "Yeah, I suppose you’re right." He slipped the rubber lid onto his travel mug and grabbed the digital camera off his desk. "You guys ready?"

CHAPTER TEN

The campers had told Sam the day before that they planned to extend their stay at the campground. They wanted to stick around until they knew exactly what had happened to Lynn. He reckoned at least some of them were going to be surprised by the news that Lynn's death had not been accidental. But was there one that wouldn't be?

When they arrived, Kevin headed straight to the spot where they'd found Lynn's clothes. Jo and Sam descended on the campsite.

The smell of bacon permeated the air, reminding Sam of dozens of camping trips he himself had enjoyed. At the picnic table, Noah was manning the Coleman stove. A pile of crisp bacon was stacked beside him on grease-soaked-paper-towel-lined plates.

A fire crackled inside the ring of rocks. A thick metal grate covered the fire, and on top of that, a cast-iron skillet held fluffy yellow eggs. Lawn chairs sat haphazardly around the site. Bottles of vodka, rum, and Jack Daniels were lined up next to a stack of sixteen-ounce red plastic Solo cups on top of a large blue cooler.

The campers were busy either cooking or tidying up the site. Julie was folding colorful towels. Derek collected kindling, twigs snapping under his hiking boots as he scoured the woods at the edge of the site. Up in the trees, a squirrel chittered. Birds twittered. Beyond the campsite, the river rolled past.

A mosquito buzzed Sam, and he waited patiently for it to land on his arm. When it did, he smacked it flat, leaving only a smudge of brown and a dot of blood as evidence.

Everyone stopped what they were doing and turned to Jo and Sam. Their somber faces reflected a mixture of hope and fear.

Noah stepped forward, the large fork still in his hand. "Any news?"

Sam nodded slowly. "Afraid it's not good. Lynn didn't slip and fall. She was murdered, and then her body was put in the river."

"*Murdered?*" Joshua's eyes widened.

The looks of shock on their faces seemed genuine. The women started crying.

Noah scrubbed his hands across his face. "I don't understand. Who would kill Lynn?" He looked around at his group of friends. No one had an answer.

"That's what we need to find out," Sam said. "Did she have any jealous boyfriends? Any enemies?"

Julie stepped up. "We're her closest friends. I don't know of anyone that would want to harm Lynn." She looked at the others, her face falling. "Do you guys?"

They shook their heads.

"What about that guy from the bar?" Tara said. "We don't know anything about him. He could be a killer."

"We talked to him last night," Jo said. She had her polarized Oakley Standard Issue sunglasses on and her hair stuffed under a navy-blue cap with WRPD stamped in white letters on the front. "He denied even being here."

"He's lying." Noah's voice rose in anger. "He was here. And the people from the other campsite were here, too. It could have been one of them. It couldn't be anyone that knew her."

"We'll look into it. But I want you guys to think hard if you know of any reason that someone would want to harm her. Was anyone angry with her?" Sam's gaze drifted around the group. "Maybe someone close to her that had a grudge?"

Derek's hands curled into fists, and he moved closer to Sam. "Now wait a minute. Are you saying it was one of us?"

Josh stepped in next to him. "Why aren't you looking into that guy from the bar instead of accusing us? Is it because he's a local?"

Sam held up his hands, his voice gentle. "We're looking into everyone. I'm not accusing any of you, but since you knew her best, you'd be the ones to know if anyone might have had a reason to want her out of the way."

That seemed to mollify them, and both Josh and Derek relaxed their stance.

"In the meantime, we're going to need to take her things," Sam said. "There could be a clue in there."

Everyone glanced toward the red tent, frozen on their spot, then finally Julie broke from the group. "I'll break things down for you."

Jo already had the latex gloves on. "I'll do it. It's important that we don't contaminate it."

Julie's eyes filled, and her lower lip quivered. She nodded and stepped back while Jo got to work.

Twenty minutes later, they were in the Tahoe with Lynn's tent and her duffel bag full of clothes. A few miles down the road, Sam saw the giant coffee cup of the Brewed Awakening coffee shop. The K-Cup coffee at the station was okay, but there was nothing better than a fresh brew from Brewed Awakening.

"Coffee?" Sam asked.

Jo made a face. "You have to ask?"

He signaled for the right turn, and just before he started to turn in, a candy-apple-red Cadillac swooped in front of him, cutting them off and making Sam slam on the brakes. Sam laid on the horn, but the man in the car simply turned an arrogant face to them, smiled, and waved.

"Thorne." Jo spat out the name.

As Sam drove forward toward the drive-through, Jo twisted in her seat, looking over her sunglasses at Thorne as he parked, taking up two spots. Thorne got out of the car. He was in his late forties, still in good shape but with a bit of thickening around his middle. His hair was dyed black, and he walked with the self-important air of someone who is used to getting his way.

"He looks so smug. We should arrest him for driving to endanger." Jo turned to face forward and pushed the sunglasses back up on her nose.

"Be more trouble than it's worth."

They ordered coffees in Styrofoam cups, and Jo bought her usual half-dozen jelly donuts. Sam had no idea where she put all the donuts she ate. Even with her bulky police belt, she was trim. He could never eat that many donuts. Since he'd turned forty, he'd noticed his pants fitting a little tighter. The only solution was to cut down on food and beer. Jo hadn't seemed to

cut down any since he'd known her. She wasn't much younger, but maybe she had a fast metabolism. Some people were just lucky that way.

"So, what do you think about the friends?" Jo fished a jelly donut out of the bag. "Do you think it could be one of them?"

"I don't know. They seemed genuinely surprised. I'll have Reese check into their backgrounds, but there doesn't seem to be any connection. And this murder was definitely done by someone who had a connection. What do you think?"

"I'm not so sure. They seemed nervous, like they were hiding something. Too quick to try to blame someone else."

"Natural reaction. No one wants to think their friends are capable of murder."

Jo bit into the donut, and a blob of jelly squirted onto her finger. She licked it off. "What about Jesse? I saw him scratching a bug bite last night. He probably *was* at the campground even though he said no. Which means he lied. I mean, I know he's not a pillar of society, but murder?"

"He could have gotten a bug bite anywhere." White Rock was loaded with wilderness, and the bugs could be persistent even in the middle of town. "I know what you mean, though. Seems like Lynn's friends would be pretty dumb to lie about Jesse being there. Too easy to prove them wrong. And most of them agreed he was there, so unless they were all in on it, I think it's a good bet he *was* there. But why would Jesse lie?"

Finished with the donut, Jo flipped the plastic tab on her lid and sipped the coffee. "Who knows with him. Probably didn't want to get into trouble and denied it as his first reaction. Maybe he isn't smart enough to figure out we'd catch him. Unless there is more going on with him that we don't know about."

"I guess I'll be paying him a visit," Sam said. "In the meantime, we need to find out more about Lynn's finances. I know the company isn't doing well, but she has a stake in it. That stake might be worth something after this new game is released. Which makes me wonder exactly who would benefit from that in the event of her death."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sam dropped Jo at the station and headed to Riddell's Auto Body, where Jesse worked, finishing off his coffee on the way. His stomach growled. Maybe he should have grabbed one of those jelly donuts.

He parked in the dirt lot and casually walked into the shop.

The waiting room was open to the service area, and he could hear the clank of metal tools and smell the grease and engine oil. Three people sat in the waiting room, bored looks on their faces as they stared at the syndicated talk show that played on the TV in the corner. Jesse was in bay number three, working on securing the lug nuts of a wheel.

He looked up as Sam approached, a frown creasing his forehead. He stood. His navy-blue coveralls were smeared with grease, and judging by the look on his face, Sam knew he'd guessed he wasn't there for an oil change.

"Hey, man, I'm at work here." Jesse glanced around nervously.

Sam had picked his workplace on purpose, knowing Jesse wouldn't be able to walk away from him. Not only that, but Sam was friends with the owner. He glanced over at the fat, balding man. "Hey, Al, you mind if I have a word with Jesse?"

Al's dark eyes were expressionless as he shook his head.

Sam jerked his head toward the back door, and Jesse wiped his hands on the front of his coveralls, adding a new grease smear in the process.

The landscaping in back of the shop consisted of a patch of dry dirt ringed with weeds. Jesse leaned against the thickly painted off-white

cinderblock wall and stuffed his hands in his pockets. He was trying to act casual, but Sam could see he was nervous.

"If this is about that camping girl, I didn't have anything to do with it. I told you I wasn't there," Jesse said.

"Really? I've got half the campground that says you were."

Jesse looked down and dug at the dirt with the toe of a scuffed black work boot. "I wasn't at *their* campsite."

So he *had* been lying. Sam had a good idea why. He knew a lot about what went on in town. He didn't always act on what he knew, which made some people assume that he wasn't clued in. Sam didn't mind that at all. In fact, he preferred it when people underestimated him. It made them act sloppy, and when people acted sloppy, they made mistakes. Sam knew that Jesse had recently started dealing pot, and his guess was that was what he had been doing at the campground.

Sam figured Jesse had lied because he didn't want to get caught selling pot. It was still illegal in New Hampshire. But Sam couldn't give a crap about that—next to catching a murderer, nailing someone for selling pot was way down on his list.

Sam thought about his suspicions that Thorne was the reason for the uptick in drugs in the area. Not just pot—it was much worse. Meth, heroin, cocaine. One minor pot dealer was nothing compared to catching the guy at the top of the chain. Much better to keep on friendly terms with Jesse. That alliance might come in handy later.

Sam leaned against the wall close to Jesse. He was taller by about five inches and used the intimidating size difference to his advantage. "But you *were* at the campground. And rumor has it you were doing a little business there."

Jesse's eyes darted around like a scared rabbit's, looking anywhere but Sam's face. "Look, I don't want to get in trouble. I don't know anything about that girl."

"Jesse, do you know what the sentence is for selling marijuana?"

Jesse's shoulders slumped, and all the wind whooshed out of him. Turned out he wasn't as tough as he liked to pretend. He caved easily. "I don't normally sell it. It's not like I'm a big dealer or anything. I just needed some extra money."

"Where'd you get it?"

"I don't know."

Sam lowered his voice and spoke slowly and steadily. He looked him dead in the eye. "You don't know? I'm not buying that, Jesse, and neither will the judge."

Sam paused for a few seconds to let his words sink in then added, "But I might be willing to make you a deal if you tell me the truth about what happened last night."

Jesse looked suspicious. "What kind of deal?"

"I won't breathe a word about your illegal extracurricular activities. In fact, unless you have any on you right now, I'm going to forget all about it."

Jesse spread his hands. Not so tough now. "I don't have any on me. I swear."

Sam simply waited.

"Okay. I was there last night. I'd seen her in the bar. She was cute. And we struck up a conversation. I met her friends, and I mentioned I had some weed, and they invited me back after the bar closed. But all we did was drink and smoke a few joints, and then I left. I swear she was alive when I left."

"Can anyone verify this?" Sam asked.

"Well, yeah, all the people at the campsite. I only stayed for about an hour and then went home."

"You didn't go anywhere else or see anyone?"

Jesse thought a minute. "I stopped to get gas at Cumbies then went straight home. Brian, my roommate, was already in bed."

"When you were at the campsite, did you see anything unusual? Was anybody angry with Lynn, or did anyone act funny around her?"

Jesse thought for a minute. "Come to think of it, I did see something. Not at the campsite. When we were in the bar. There was a blonde with them. She was kinda cute too, but she was with one of the guys. I saw her follow that girl, Lynn, to the ladies' room, and when I went down the hallway to the men's room shortly thereafter, I heard them in there having a rip-roaring argument."

"What were they arguing about?"

"I have no idea, but they must've made up. They didn't argue at the campsite." Jesse eyed Sam cautiously. "So do we have a deal?"

Sam studied him for a minute and then nodded.

Relief spread across Jesse's face. "Good, now I gotta get back to work."

Jesse turned and went inside the building.

Sam smiled. He had Jesse right where he wanted him now. He'd done Jesse a favor. So now if Sam got more evidence that Thorne really was involved in all the drugs coming into town, maybe Jesse would see his way to returning that favor by letting Sam know who he had gotten the drugs from. That person might be the next step in proving that Thorne was the source.

Not only that, but he had another lead to check out in the murder of Lynn Palmer.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jo leaned back in her chair. She had a half-eaten donut on her desk and her foot propped up on an overturned trash can. She tapped a staccato rhythm with the end of her pencil as she stared at the photos arranged on the big corkboard on the wall beside the window. She'd meticulously gone through Lynn's things, photographing each item and then putting them in an evidence box.

Near as she could tell, it was all normal stuff any camper would have. Lynn's belongings were practical, each item labeled inconspicuously with her initials. Nothing fancy. Even her undergarments were sensible. Plain white cotton with a tiny pink bow as the only ornamentation. It was a brand Jo wore herself—Plain Jane. It was known for the high-quality non-frilly designs. One thing was odd—no purse or cell phone. She could see not bringing a purse on a camping trip, and Lynn's seemingly practical nature made it plausible, but a cell phone? Didn't everyone have those at all times these days?

Over at the receptionist desk, Reese was taking care of the usual day's business. In a small-town police station, you had to wear a lot of hats, and Reese handled most of the administrative activities. Dog licenses, collecting tax and sewer bills, issuing permits. Right now, she was issuing a yard-sale permit to Bev Porterfield.

"No, Mrs. Porterfield. You can't sell your husband."

"Why not? He's about as useful as that old 8-track player I found in the garage. I'm putting that out for sale."

"I'm sure you'd miss him if someone snapped him up. You wouldn't want Dottie Aldrich to get him, would you?"

Jo couldn't see Bev from where she sat, but she almost laughed out loud picturing the look that must have been on Bev's face as she thought about her husband hooking up with Dottie. Dottie was known as somewhat of a gold digger in the senior-citizen circles.

Reese continued, "Anyway, I don't really need to know the exact items you are going to sell to issue the permit. I just need the dates."

"You sure? I'm going to have a lot of old clothes and some antiques from my mother. In fact, I'm going to have her old china set, and the bassinet from Louis and…"

Jo tuned Bev Porterfield's words out as she listed a plethora of items she would have at her yard sale. Jo could just picture Reese rolling her eyes. She let it turn into background noise as her mind tossed around the various scenarios that could have led to Lynn Palmer's death.

Her thoughts turned to Lynn's friends at the campsite. Most of them were definitely showing signs of hiding something. It could be that they were just nervous. Even innocent people got that way when a close friend was murdered. But Jo had a feeling that some of them, especially Noah, weren't telling the whole truth. The best bet was to separate them and talk to them individually—that was when the truth usually came out.

Her gaze drifted to the window. The maple and oak trees were sprouting fresh new green leaves. Birds hopped from branch to branch, swooping to the ground to grab up an occasional seed from the grass. In the distance, layers of hazy blue mountains contrasted with the white spire of the church at the end of Main Street. It was an idyllic small-town scene.

Ruining the pleasant scene, however, was Mayor Dupont striding down the sidewalk and into the town's one fine-dining establishment, Lago. Nothing but the best for the mayor.

He stopped at the door, plastering a fake smile on his face and greeting someone walking down the sidewalk. The smile dropped from his lips as the person passed, and he opened the door and pushed his way inside, cutting off a tourist who had been angling for the restaurant. Typical.

What wasn't typical was what she saw right after that. The cherry-red Cadillac pulled to the curb, and Lucas Thorne stepped out. He checked his watch—a Rolex, she knew from dealing with him previously—looked

toward the town offices, and then glanced into the restaurant before darting inside.

Was he meeting with Dupont? Or was her imagination just on overdrive? The restaurant was public, so even if they were meeting, they weren't trying to hide it, so it was probably nothing nefarious.

She was still staring at the door when a third surprise happened. The door opened, and Kevin walked out.

Had Kevin been lunching at Lago? Expensive on the salary of a part-time cop. But maybe he could afford it. Jo suspected that Kevin had family money. She'd been to his house once. The unassuming small cape had been upgraded with the finest trappings. Granite countertops, cherry cabinets, bamboo flooring, and all the electronic gadgets one could wish for. Maybe that was why Kevin never seemed to want to take on more hours. If he had family money, he probably didn't even need a job.

"Oh no!" Reese's distraught voice pulled her attention from the window, and she swung around, planting her feet on the floor. She peered through the glass slats of the post-office-box partition. Bev Porterfield must have left, and Reese was alone at her desk, staring down at her computer, her dark hair hanging down the side of her face like a curtain.

"What's wrong?"

"Eric just emailed me. Lucy ran away."

"Maybe she ran home to her family." Jo's words ended a hopeful octave higher than they started.

"I don't think so," Reese said. "Eric said he doubted she even had one. I mean, you saw the condition she was in. Nobody was taking good care of her."

A pang of regret speared Jo. She hated to think of the dog out on the streets. Maybe she should've taken her in. Another living, breathing creature to come home to might be nice. But her landlord had been adamant about the no-pets rule. Maybe she should think about buying a place where she could actually have a dog. Maybe it was time she admitted that she actually wanted to put down roots here in White Rock.

"In happier news, I was able to find out something interesting about Lynn Palmer pertaining to her company, Lyah."

"You did? How did you do that?"

Reese scooted her chair around the partition. Her laptop was in her lap, and she had one faded-jean-clad leg curled under her, the other used for

scooting.

"I have my ways," she teased.

Jo frowned. "Legal ways?"

There might've been times when they pushed the envelope, but if they wanted things to be admissible in court, Jo had to make sure that there was no way a defense attorney could have any evidence thrown out. If Reese had hacked into some computer files, they wouldn't be admissible in court. Jo suspected Reese was even more skilled in computer forensics than she'd let on to either her or Sam.

Reese held up her hands. "Totally legal. I simply called her lawyer and asked."

Jo held the white donut bag from Brewed Awakening out, and Reese took one. There were only two left. Had Jo eaten the rest? She didn't remember—she'd been so focused on the case.

"How did you find out who her lawyer was?"

"Does that part have to be legal? I mean, one could get that information from anywhere. Her friends. Her parents. We wouldn't have to prove how we found out who he is, right?" Reese bit into the donut, some of the sugar sprinkling down on the keyboard. She brushed it off and grabbed a napkin out of the bag.

Jo thought about that. As long as the information was gathered legally, who would know how she found out who the lawyer was? She made a mental note to ask about the lawyer in some official capacity so as to cover their asses. "You might be right. What did you find out?"

"Lynn and Noah used to be an item. They started that company together. The name, Lyah, is actually a mashup of their first names. They wanted to make sure the other could maintain control if something happened, so there's a codicil in Lynn's will that says her stock shares go to Noah in the event of her death. He has one leaving his shares to her, supposedly."

Jo leaned back in the chair and clasped her hands together, her elbows on the arms of her chair. "Now, that is interesting."

Kevin came around the post-office-box partition. "You guys found something interesting?"

"Reese discovered that Lynn Palmer's will lists Noah as a beneficiary of her interests in the company. Did you stop for lunch?" Jo said.

"Huh?" Kevin frowned at her. "Oh, no." He held up the camera. "I was out taking pictures. Just got back from the campground." He looked at his

watch. "In fact, I think I may have worked more hours than I'm supposed to. I don't know what the budget is for extra hours, do you?"

Jo shook her head. That was Sam's area.

Kevin handed her the camera. "You can tell Sam all the pictures are on here."

"Okay." Jo watched him leave. Weird that he said he wasn't at lunch when she'd seen him coming out of the restaurant. What had he been doing in there?

She'd never clicked with Kevin, not like she did with Sam and Tyler, but still, she had no good reason to think ill of him. She'd learned over the years that she had to rein in her instincts to be suspicious of everyone. Just because bad things had happened in her past, it didn't mean everyone was out to get her.

There were plenty of reasons for Kevin to be in Lago. Maybe he knew someone who worked there. Maybe he was following up on something else. Maybe he was handing them his resume. Jo wouldn't be too disappointed if it was the latter, other than the fact it would mean they were even more short-handed.

She was staring out the window at the disappearing taillights of Kevin's Isuzu when Sam's Tahoe came around the corner and pulled up to the curb.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

As Sam parked the Tahoe, a blurry black-and-tan movement at the side of the building behind the shrubs caught his eye. He got out of the truck, and a furry ball shot toward him. Lucy.

"What are you doing here?" He bent down and petted the dog. Had her family claimed her, and were they bringing her downtown? He doubted it—she had no collar or leash.

He headed toward the front door, Lucy on his heels. Sam stood with his hand on the oversized brass handle and looked down at her. "You can't come in."

As soon as one of the double oak doors was cracked open, Lucy shoved her nose through the opening and pushed her way inside. So much for the dog listening to him.

"Lucy!" Reese scooted her chair across the room and swirled to a stop in front of Lucy. Lucy wagged her tail profusely while Reese lavished her with attention. Reese cocked her head and looked inquisitively up at Sam. "What's she doing with you?"

"She was outside when I pulled up. I was going to ask you why she was here."

Reese shook her head. "I don't know. Eric said she ran away. She must've come here. Maybe she thinks this is home."

Sam's heart sank. No one had claimed the dog.

"Looks like she wants to be a police dog," Jo said.

"Yeah, don't tell Dupont. Unfortunately, having a K-9 unit costs money. She has to go back to the shelter. She looks good all cleaned up, though.

I’m sure someone will adopt her if she doesn’t have a family." Sam tried to ignore the pleading look in Lucy’s whiskey-colored eyes. There was no budget for a police dog, and he couldn’t have her at home.

He’d gotten used to living alone. He didn’t want another person. But a dog was another story. Dogs didn’t argue with you or talk back. Dogs were always happy to see you no matter what you’d done the day before.

But his days stretched out too long. He knew Dupont would balk if he tried to have her in the Tahoe, so he would be forced to leave her at home alone. And sometimes his day stretched out to fourteen hours or more. Heck, sometimes he didn’t even go home at all. Now that they were shorthanded, he’d be at work even more. It wouldn’t be fair to Lucy. She deserved better than that.

Reese’s smile faded. "I know. I’ll call Eric."

Jo grabbed the donut bag from the corner of her desk. Lucy’s ears perked up at the crinkle of the paper.

"Can dogs eat donuts?" Jo asked.

Reese made a face and patted her stomach. "Desserts aren’t good for them just like they’re not good for us."

Lucy thumped her tail and whined, her eyes fixated on the donut that Jo was now holding up.

"I suppose a tiny piece wouldn’t hurt," Reese said.

Jo broke off a piece and flipped it to Lucy, who leapt up in the air and caught it in her mouth.

"Pretty good catch." Sam rubbed Lucy’s ears then noticed the photographs laid out on the corkboard. His mind immediately went into investigation mode. "Are those the items from Lynn Palmer’s tent?"

Jo put the bag down and went to stand at the board. "Yep. Pretty standard stuff for campers." She pointed to the pictures in turn. "Rain gear, jeans, undergarments, sweats, hiking shorts."

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Sam said. His eyes were still on the items, his mind inventorying each piece for later use.

"No. Except." Jo drew out the word as she turned around and pointed to one of the photos. It was a pair of cotton pants ripped on the side. "This is from the pile of clothes we found in the woods. The pants were ripped as if they snagged on something or there was a struggle."

"Or maybe she was in a hurry to get them off."

"If that were the case, would she have taken the time to fold them in a neat pile?" Jo tapped her index finger on the photo Sam had taken of the clothing pile. "The other unusual thing is that I didn't find a cell phone."

"Maybe it wasn't in her tent. It could still be lying around at the campsite."

Jo nodded. "It'd be important to get it. You never know when that last text or phone call is going to provide a clue. Speaking of which, what did you find out from Jesse?"

Sam plopped into a chair and leaned forward, his elbows on his knees. He absently stroked the soft fur on Lucy's head as he told Jo what he'd gleaned from Jesse. He left out the part about the pot—not that he didn't trust Jo, but the fewer people that knew, the better. He didn't want word getting out that he let criminals off the hook, but sometimes you had to let the smaller fish go in order to catch the bigger one.

"That must be Amber she fought with. Do you think Amber had something to do with her death? Maybe killed her from jealousy?" Jo pressed her lips together. "She did seem awfully possessive of Noah. Maybe they had a fight about Noah and Lynn was killed in a jealous rage? That's interesting, because I have a theory too, thanks to Reese."

Jo and Reese took turns telling Sam about Lynn's will. He was getting a new appreciation for Reese's computer skills. She had a knack for digging up information, though he suspected she pushed the envelope sometimes.

"Noah was angry at the campsite. Almost too angry," Jo said. "Sometimes people act that way when they have something to hide, so—"

"*Woof!*"

They spun around to see Dupont standing in the lobby on the other side of the post-office boxes. Lucy had wandered over to the partition and was standing there glaring at him. The hairs along her spine were raised like a mohawk.

"What is this dog doing here? I thought I told you people to get rid of it," Dupont demanded.

Lucy must not have liked being called "it." She kept her eyes trained on Dupont and resorted to a low growl.

Reese rushed to Lucy's side. "We brought her to the shelter, but she must've run off. I'll bring her back as soon as I can."

Dupont looked at Reese dubiously. "Make it soon. We can't have an animal like that in a public office. Do you see the way she growled at me?

What if she bit a kid or something? Would make me look like a shoddy mayor."

"Wouldn't want that." Reese's voice had a tinge of sarcasm that made Dupont look at her twice. She ignored him and pushed Lucy behind her desk.

Dupont proceeded into the squad room. Sam stood as the man approached. He didn't need Dupont looking down on him. Sam was taller, and he figured it was better to have it the other way around.

"I don't think I need to remind you who has control of the budget here." Dupont's eyes flicked to Tyler's empty desk, and Sam felt that familiar hollow sinking sensation.

"I know you lost a good man." Dupont's face softened. For a second, he seemed almost human. "I'm willing to keep the third full-time officer in the budget, but you people need to produce results. What's going on in the Palmer case?"

"We were just discussing that." Sam pointed to the corkboard. "We have a few suspects, and we're going to continue questioning. If you would just let us do our job instead of coming in here and bugging us, we could have it solved sooner."

Dupont scowled, and Sam could practically feel Jo suppressing a smirk behind him. She usually remained quiet when Dupont was around, mostly because if she opened her mouth, whatever came out typically wasn't helpful.

"It was one of those hooligan friends of hers, wasn't it?" Dupont asked. "The parents have driven up and are very anxious and heartbroken over this."

An ache of sympathy bloomed in Sam's chest as he thought of how he would feel if one of his daughters had been murdered. He would be burning for justice. Sam wanted to do right by Lynn Palmer and her family. He couldn't give a crap about what Dupont wanted, but if they happened to be the same thing, then so be it.

"We understand that," Sam said. "We're working to get it solved as quickly as we can. Where are they staying? I could go talk to them. They might know something that could be helpful."

"I put them up at the Covered Bridge over on Route 11," Dupont said. "I want all hands on this. There's extra in the budget from the salary of

Richardson. I strongly suggest you bring your part-time man up to full time and speed up the timeline of this case."

Sam glanced over at Kevin's desk. Unlike Sam's and Jo's messy desks, it was stacked neatly with papers, pencils, and a notebook. Kevin wasn't much of a go-getter, though he was an adequate cop. Sam didn't know if increasing his hours would help, but maybe they could have him work on the smaller local calls, freeing them up for more investigative work. "I'll do that."

Dupont gave a curt nod. He glowered at Sam and Jo then shot a parting look at Lucy on his way out.

"Sheesh. The guy acts like we're just lollygagging around, not trying to solve the case. Doesn't he know we want to solve it as much as anyone?" Jo asked.

"He just likes to be a pain in the ass. Where is Kevin, by the way?"

Jo handed him the digital camera. "He signed out. Said he was afraid he'd already worked too many hours. Pictures of the area where we found Lynn's clothes are in the camera."

"Okay, I guess I'll talk to him tomorrow about moving to full time."

Jo glanced at Tyler's desk. "Temporarily or for good?"

Sam sighed. "I guess we should offer him the position for good. I mean, it's only right. He's been here over a year now, and it would be the right thing to promote him."

Sam was all about doing the right thing, but for some reason, the hollow feeling in his chest told him he didn't really want Kevin as a replacement for Tyler.

"Yeah, I guess so." The tone of resignation in Jo's voice told him she was as enthusiastic about bringing Kevin to full time as he was.

"In the meantime, I say we waste no time in finding out what the deal is with these suspects. Seems like Noah and Amber both might've had a reason to want Lynn out of the way. I say we question all the campers separately and see if we can find out what really happened the night Lynn Palmer was murdered."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jo was eager to see how the campers reacted to their visit. In her experience, the deeper you delved in an investigation, the more nervous people got, and the more nervous they got, the more apt they were to slip up. She shoved her yellow smiley mug under the coffee machine's spout and grabbed the little red K-Cup with the extra-caffeinated grounds. She could use the extra caffeine to keep her brain sharp so she'd be able to notice any telltale signs that their suspects were lying.

She balanced the warm mug in her hands from the passenger seat of the Tahoe as Sam drove them to the campsite.

They usually drove together like this when there wasn't much going on. They did a lot of their collaborating in the car on the way to talk to suspects or visit crime scenes. Somehow, the scenery of the mountains and the absence of traffic on the backcountry roads had a way of helping Jo think better.

"Thing is, they've already had over twenty-four hours to get their stories straight and try to cover their tracks," Sam said.

"I know. That's a bummer. But killers always make mistakes. If one of these kids killed her, they're bound to reveal themselves." Jo sipped the coffee. "But I don't think we should let on that we think one of them might have done it. We need to act friendly and see if we can get her cell phone. Once they realize we're treating them as suspects, they won't be so eager to comply with us."

"I want to check out the murder site again and the place where we found her clothes. Now that we know it's a murder, I need to look closer. You're

right about not tipping them off to our suspicions. I'm going to make it seem like Jesse is our main suspect. I don't think he did it. Doesn't make sense for him. He has no motive unless it was a fit of anger because she rejected him when he came on to her. Jesse doesn't seem the fit-of-anger type. He didn't get that mad when I came to his work to interrogate him," Sam said.

Jo agreed. "We've never had any calls about him fighting. He's more the sneaky breaking-in-and-selling-weed type."

"I still want to double-check what he told me, though. I would think one of them would've noticed that Lynn was still alive when Jesse left… *if* what he told me is the truth."

"Even if one of them did, they might lie if they are trying to point the finger away from them and toward Jesse."

"Playing along like we think it's Jesse will set them off guard and give us a chance to observe them before they realize what we're up to." Sam pulled into the campground, and the Tahoe bumped down the rutted path to the site. "It's late afternoon. I figure we'll start cutting them from the herd and getting down to business first thing tomorrow. Make it look like we're just asking them in for official statements."

They pulled up to the site. Jo set her mug in the cup holder. The base was a little too wide, but she'd found she could balance it at an angle on the top indentation and the mug wouldn't tip over. Usually.

Sam frowned at the precariously balanced cup, then his eyes moved to her navy-blue short-sleeved button-up shirt. "You have some jelly on your shirt."

Jo looked down to see a shiny red blob just below the white, gold, and light-blue police patch. "Darn it." She swiped at the blob, but it only smudged it in deeper.

Sam had already gotten out and was standing in the middle of the campsite. The campers surrounded him, their faces full of curiosity. Jo stood back and studied them. Was one of them a murderer? If so, she couldn't tell which one.

"Did you catch him?" a teary-eyed Tara was asking. She was holding a newer-model expensive backpack that Jo knew was supposed to be very lightweight. These folks really took their camping seriously.

"Not quite yet. We think she was killed over there." Sam nodded toward the area where they found the clothing. It was cordoned off with yellow

crime scene tape strung between the pine trees. "And I want to take a better look to see if there's any evidence."

"What kind of evidence?" Joshua asked, his eyes drifting over to the area.

"Signs of a struggle, blood. If we had a big forensics team, they'd be combing the area, but we gotta work with what we have."

"What about that local guy?" Noah asked. "Did you bring him in?"

"We've had him in for questioning. In fact, I was wondering if you guys could verify something he told me." Sam started toward the area, and the crowd followed. Jo admired the way he was handling it. Totally nonconfrontational, as if he were taking them into his confidence as though they were allies in the investigation.

Sam slipped under the yellow tape and started to walk slowly around the area, his eyes fixed on the ground. The others stayed back behind the tape, probably conditioned to act that way after viewing a billion crime shows on TV.

"Jesse." Sam stopped his pacing and looked back at the crowd. "That's the guy from town who was here partying with you." Sam walked to the place where they'd found the pile of clothing. Sam had marked it with a birch stick the other day, and Kevin had come back and put a yellow police marker on the spot.

Sam crouched down, pushing leaves aside. The campers watched him quietly while they waited for him to continue.

"Anyway, Jesse said he was only here for an hour. Said Lynn was alive when he left." Sam stood up and looked at them again. "I was wondering if anyone here could verify that. Does anyone remember talking to Lynn after Jesse left?"

The campers exchanged looks. Jo watched them carefully. Most of them had blank faces as if they were trying to remember. Sam continued his search, making his way down to the beach, which was about twenty feet from the area where they'd found the clothes.

Jo slipped under the crime scene tape but stayed close to the campers. She made a show of sweeping the ground for clues while also keeping one eye on the campers.

"I don't think he *was* here. Lynn disappeared, and I don't remember seeing him after that." Tara raised her voice so Sam could hear. She looked at Josh. "Do you?"

"I don’t know. We were all kind of drunk," Josh said. "I thought Lynn was in her tent."

Sam made his way back from the beach and slipped under the yellow crime scene tape, joining the campers on the campsite side. "Speaking of that, we didn’t find her cell phone or a purse in her tent. Did she have them?"

Julie shook her head. "Not a purse. No sense in taking a purse camping. But she had a cell phone. Even though we’re taking a few days off, we still need to be in contact with the people back at the office. We all brought our phones." As if to illustrate, she undid the flap on the side pocket of her khaki cargo pants and pulled out her phone.

Sam paced around the site. He inspected the picnic table and various chairs around the campsite. He didn’t find a cell phone.

Sam was incredibly observant, and Jo figured he was taking mental notes of everything around the campsite. But it didn’t take someone with Sam’s skills to see there was no cell phone lying around.

"So where is it?" Jo asked as she slipped back under the yellow tape.

More blank looks were exchanged. Finally, Julie said, "Maybe it was in the woods near her clothes?"

Sam shook his head. "I just looked all around there, and I didn’t come up with it. Have any of you found an extra cell phone?"

They shook their heads.

"Maybe that local guy from town took it for some reason," Amber suggested, looking to Noah for approval.

"Why would he do that?" Sam asked.

Her pretty forehead creased. "Well, I don’t know, but it’s missing."

"And none of you remember seeing Lynn alive after he left? When did he leave? I mean, it doesn’t make sense that he’d kill her and then come back to the party, right? So he must’ve left after he killed her. *If* he did kill her."

More silence.

Then Noah said, "We weren’t exactly looking at our watches every minute. We were having a party."

"What time did she die?" Tara asked.

Jo had been waiting for this. They purposely hadn’t let out the time of death. They preferred to keep that close to the vest so the killer wouldn’t have time to invent an alibi. But since it had been at 2:30 in the morning,

she didn’t know how useful that would be in this case. Most would claim they were in their tents sleeping.

"What time did your party end?" Sam asked as the phone in his pocket chirped. He pulled it out and glanced at the screen. "Gotta take this."

He stepped away, and Jo continued the questioning.

"Did anyone notice the time?" Jo asked.

Josh shrugged. "Like Noah said, we were partying, not clock watching."

"Wait a minute. We were at the bar till one. Then we came back here…" Julie’s face was scrunched up as if she were trying to recall the sequence of events. "That guy, Jesse, followed us. He sold us… I mean we had a few drinks, and then we all started making our way to bed. We were going hiking the next day. Couldn’t have been more than an hour after one."

"And Jesse was still there when you went to bed?" Jo asked.

Julie twisted her lips together. "I don’t remember. Does anyone remember?"

Nobody did. Or if they did, they weren’t saying.

Sam snapped the phone shut and came back to the group. "Okay. We have another call. Maybe you folks need a little time to think. I’d like you all to come to the station tomorrow so we can get official statements." At their looks of concern, he held up his hands. "Just standard procedure. We want to get to the bottom of this as much as you do. Officer Deckard has your phone numbers from the other day, and we’ll be calling to let you know what time we want to talk to you. In the meantime, could you please look for Lynn’s phone? It’s important."

They promised to look, and Sam and Jo got into the Tahoe.

Jo picked up her mug. The coffee was lukewarm now, but lukewarm was better than nothing. She was curious as to why Sam wasn’t taking them in right away. Maybe he figured if he gave the killer enough rope, they’d hang themselves. "You giving them some time to think things over, or to get their story straight?"

"Neither. We have business. Being shorthanded really does put a crimp in the investigation."

"We got another call?"

Sam held up his phone. "Several. We got a cat up a tree on Cross Street, a fender bender on the corner of Owings and Main, and an altercation over at the Laundromat. The interrogations will have to wait until tomorrow. Maybe by then we’ll be able to rule out one of our suspects."

"Really? Which one?"

"Jesse. He said he stopped for gas on the way home that night, and I have Ernie looking for the receipt. According to the campers, and Jesse's own account, he got there after the bar closed at one and left shortly after. That's a small time frame, and not too many people would have been stopping at the gas station that early in the morning. If Jesse paid with a credit card, all the better. We know Lynn was killed between two-thirty and three. Maybe the receipt will prove Jesse couldn't have done it."

Jo looked out the window. "I think we already know he didn't do it. We just need to figure out who did."

"Yep. Getting her phone would help. Do you think she could have dropped it in the woods? Maybe we should start a grid search."

Jo took another lukewarm sip. The coffee had turned bitter, and she forced it down her throat. She didn't think they were going to find the phone in the woods. "I think a search would be a waste. My guess is someone took it. I think there's something on that phone the killer doesn't want us to see."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jo and Sam flipped a coin for the calls. She'd lost and had spent forty-five minutes at the Laundromat, settling an argument between Lola Ehrsam and Judith Crawford because Lola had taken Judith's clothes out of the dryer prematurely. Lola claimed it wasn't so, Judith hadn't put enough quarters in for a full cycle, and the machine was sitting there useless. Jo settled the dispute by buying both the women coffee and making Lola promise to fold Judith's clothes once they ran through the full cycle.

When she was done, Sam had rescued the cat from the tree and smoothed over things at the fender-bender scene. The day was done, so they both headed home.

After making a pit stop at one of the stores near the Laundromat, Jo drove the police car to her small cottage in the woods. They often took the cars home if they'd been out late. Her own car, a Volkswagen, sat in the lot in town. She liked the Crown Vic better.

She took a cardboard box carefully out of the trunk. On the porch, she balanced the box on her hip and dipped her index finger into the planter full of purple pansies that sat on the porch railing. It was still cold for annuals, but pansies liked the cold. The dirt inside the box was cool and damp.

The wooden screen door of the cottage was thick with layers of chipped paint and squeaked when she pulled it open. The front door had almost as much paint, but the lock was new and shiny, and she put her key in and pushed the door open.

Inside, the cottage was small but cheery. Once a seasonal camp, it had been converted to year-round use and had been painted in light colors. Jo

had furnished it with comfortable overstuffed furniture from thrift stores and yard sales. It was all chipped, worn paint, large floral and striped prints, and muted colors. She supposed the decorating magazines would have referred to it as cottage chic, but she'd just cobbled together the best value for her budget.

She passed through the living room, the wide pine floorboards creaking as she made her way to the kitchen, which had been remodeled extensively. The ceiling rose up in a peak, and the old wooden cabinets had been painted a sunny shade of yellow. They stretched all the way to the ceiling—too high for Jo to store anything on the top shelf without getting on a step stool even though she was five foot seven.

Jo put the box on the butcher-block countertop. She carefully pulled out the small round goldfish bowl and set it on the counter. She leaned over so her face was at counter height and peered in at the fish. Its orange-gold fins flapped as it turned to face her. She wondered what she looked like from his perspective. Probably just a gigantic distorted face like when you looked in a fun-house mirror.

She took the jar of flake food out of the box and pinched one tiny flake between her index finger and thumb. She dropped it on the surface of the water. The fish zoomed up and devoured it, practically jumping out of the bowl to do so. He must have been hungry.

She contemplated putting another flake in, but Irving down at the pet store had warned her about overfeeding the fish. Too much food produced too much waste and could turn the water toxic. He'd also suggested a small tank with a filter. Fish bowls apparently weren't the best environment for keeping fish in. She'd consider that later—best to see how this worked out first.

She sat at the old farmer's table to admire her new companion. She thought about Lucy with her bright eyes and wagging tail. Reese had taken her back to the shelter. Jo hoped the dog would find a loving family. Maybe someday she could graduate from a goldfish to something with four legs.

When she'd come to White Rock four years ago, she hadn't expected to be there very long. It had seemed smarter to rent. That way she could pick up and leave once she'd finished her business. She'd told Sam in the interview that she needed a change of pace—someplace more rural. That was only half true. He didn't need to know the real reason she was here. But

as time had marched on, she'd come to love the job and love working with Sam. The *real* reason had faded into the background.

She'd never imagined she'd want to put down roots, but she'd come to love her cottage. It was small, but perfect for just one person. Her favorite part was the setting. It was secluded, set by itself in the woods, surrounded by pine trees and wildlife. To the east she had a view of the mountains, and there was a bubbling creek out back. It had the comfortable, secure feeling of home.

She supposed it wouldn't be so bad to settle down here. Maybe she could buy the cottage. She didn't have family to draw her to any other area.

Thoughts of her family stirred unpleasant memories. Images of the empty chair at the table where her eight-year-old sister, Tammy, should have been sitting. Her mother's vacant eyes. Her father's anger. The hollow, empty feeling that Jo should not have had to experience at the tender age of ten.

After Tammy had disappeared, there had been a flurry of activity. People searching. Cops asking questions. Jo had been terrified and intrigued at the same time. And sad. Especially when she would peek into her sister's room every morning, hoping that she'd see Tammy there. Hoping it had all been a bad dream. But instead she saw Tammy's toys sitting alone exactly in the same place Tammy had left them the last afternoon she'd played with them. It was almost a year before her mother even went in the room and picked them up.

Jo had snuck in herself a few times, though. Somehow, she knew her mother wouldn't want her in there. But she'd had to go in. To touch Tammy's favorite purple shirt. To smell the scent of her that still clung to her pillow. To wish her back.

But Tammy never came back.

Eventually, the activity died down. And then Jo was left with only her mother, her father, and her older sister, Bridgett. The idyllic childhood Jo had known up to that point vanished, replaced by a cold and empty existence.

The grief had sent her mother to an early grave and turned her father into a stranger. She hadn't seen him in over a decade. Bridgett had eventually turned to drugs. She lived a few towns over. That was one of the reasons Jo had moved here. But Bridgett had refused all the attempts Jo had made to help her.

She hadn't made a lot of friends since she'd come to town, but that was just as well. Friends would want to come over to her place, and coming over to her place might mean looking through her things, and, well… she couldn't have that.

Sam was about the closest thing to a friend that she had, unless you counted Marisol, who did her hair down at the salon. Sometimes they went out for beers and had even gone shopping a few times together. She liked Mari's quirky sense of humor and her down-home common sense.

But she didn't share nearly as much with Mari as she did with Sam. It made sense because Jo and Sam worked together every day. They had to trust each other; their lives depended on it. But, even so, their relationship had boundaries. Jo and Sam did their hanging out at Spirits. They'd only been to each other's houses a few times. Which was just fine with Jo. She didn't get close to people. What was the point of getting close to someone when they could just be ripped out of your life forever without even a moment's warning?

Jo reached over to the hutch that sat against the wall and pulled out a pencil and pad of paper and started scribbling down clues. Sometimes just brainstorming was a good way to get the mind working on solving a case. But it wasn't just the Palmer case she needed to think about. She hadn't told Sam about seeing Dupont and Thorne going to Lago. She hadn't told him about Kevin lying about being in there either. Truth was, she didn't know if Kevin actually was lying. He only said he didn't have lunch—maybe he was in Lago for some other reason.

It was possible Dupont and Thorne were just there at the same time as a coincidence. It didn't mean they were having some sort of nefarious meeting. Jo knew she shouldn't make assumptions. She'd gotten in trouble for that before at other jobs, but what had happened to her sister had given her a suspicious nature, causing her to always think the worst. Heck, she even suspected there was more to Tyler's shooting than met the eye when she had no good reason to think it.

She didn't want Sam to think she was the type that always jumped to the worst conclusions. She wanted him to value her opinion, and the only way to do that was to back her suspicions up with evidence.

As she scribbled on the pad, she listed out the names of the people who were involved with Lynn, then drew lines radiating out from each one and listed out her various suspicions.

Noah was right in the center. He'd been involved intimately with Lynn. They'd started the company together, and she'd even left her controlling shares to him in her will. Yet he'd neglected to mention that each time they'd asked about motive. The way Jo saw it, that gave him two motives to kill her. One if he was still carrying a torch for her and jealous of her fooling around with other guys, the other to get control of the company.

Oddly enough, she had a sneaking suspicion that Amber was also lying about something. But why? Amber was very possessive when it came to Noah. Maybe she was jealous of the previous relationship. What if Amber wanted to get rid of Lynn to make sure Noah didn't get back together with her?

And where was Lynn's phone?

Jo doodled on the pad. She thought about Dupont and his incessant threats. She thought about Kevin and his trip to Lago. She thought about the dog, Lucy, and she thought about Tyler's shooting. When her thoughts turned around to the suspects on the paper again, she realized that finding Lynn Palmer's killer might be the least of her worries.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sam liked his office at the police station because the solid oak door shut out all the noise. He could think better when it was quiet. Even though the office wasn't fancy, it had everything he needed. His doublewide mission oak partners' desk was big enough for laying out all his files. His chair was old but leaned back easily. He even liked the familiar squeak it made when he shifted position.

But his favorite part was the windows. They were ten feet tall and rounded at the tops. Facing north, they framed a majestic view of the mountains. Looking out of these windows, he could watch over the town. He could see the pedestrians going about their business. In summer, it was crowded with the tourists in colorful tee shirts and shorts who flocked to the area for fishing, hiking, and kayaking. In winter, they came for snowmobiling, skiing, and snowshoeing, adorned in ski suits and wool hats.

Right now, though, he didn't have much time for window gazing. He'd gone to visit Lynn Palmer's parents first thing. Talking to parents of a murder victim was always draining, and this morning had been no exception. At least he felt that he'd left them with a little bit of comfort, assuring them that he would seek justice for Lynn.

He hadn't gotten any new information from them other than the name of her lawyer, which they already knew, but he felt better that he could say he'd gotten the name from them. They'd also told him who her cell phone carrier was. Since her phone was still missing, Sam would have to get a court order for whatever records they had on their server. Of course, that

could take forever, so it was better if they could find the phone and get the information from it.

On the way back to the office, he'd had to make a side trip. Bullwinkle, the town moose, had caused a ruckus down by Paugus River, which had in turn caused a fender bender when a startled tourist had been watching Bullwinkle and not the road.

Sam had spent a good part of the early morning there sorting things out. Bullwinkle was famous around town, with many of the locals claiming they could recognize him by the shape of his antlers. He even had his own Facebook page where people posted pictures of him when he was sighted around town.

Sam didn't think it was actually the same moose, but he played along. In his mind, frequent sightings meant the moose population was healthy, and that was a good thing. Too much of the local wildlife was dwindling in size because of people like Thorne who were decimating the woods that animals lived in and turning them into hotels and golf courses.

Jo and Kevin had been busy that morning, too, with the usual neighbor squabbles, lost pets, and an old man with Alzheimer's who wandered away from home. Thankfully, someone had discovered him walking down Main Street in his pajamas and taken him into the diner for breakfast while waiting for Jo to pick him up and deliver him safely to his family.

Sam didn't like that the routine calls had delayed his investigation of the murder, but what could he do? Someone had to keep up the police work in the town. If they weren't so shorthanded, he would've had another officer to send out.

He'd had Reese call Noah and Amber in to give their statements after lunch. He wanted to talk to Noah first, seeing as he was the one with the biggest reason to want Lynn dead.

He figured Amber for the weak link. She was closest to Noah and might know more than she was letting on. Depending on what he learned from them, he'd decide on who to talk to next and what questions to ask. Maybe he'd get lucky and one of them would confess. Either way, the theory of it being Jesse wasn't going to hold water.

On the desk in front of him was a crumpled receipt from the gas station. Jesse had paid with a credit card, the time clearly stamped 2:23 a.m. By Sam's estimation, the campground was ten minutes from the gas station. There was no way Jesse could have killed Lynn between 2:15 and 2:45 if he

was at the gas station at 2:23. The killer had shoved her body into the river, and that must've taken some time.

Since they'd been out on calls all morning, Reese had rounded up sandwiches at the deli, and Sam was just finishing up his ham and Swiss. Reese had ordered it with spicy mustard just the way he liked it.

A soft tap sounded at the door.

"Come in."

Kevin poked his head in. "Reese said you wanted to see me?"

Sam gestured at the chair and Kevin came in and shut the door.

"You know we're shorthanded." Why did Sam feel like he was being a traitor to Tyler? He was going to have to hire someone sometime. He was pretty sure Tyler would've understood.

Kevin nodded.

"So I was wondering if you wanted to come on full time. We'd be happy to have you."

Kevin was silent for a minute. He wasn't exactly jumping at the opportunity. The relief that washed over Sam made him realize he didn't really want Kevin to move up to full time. But who would turn down a full-time gig?

"Thanks. I appreciate your confidence in me." Kevin leaned forward in his chair and looked down at his feet, scrubbing his chin. "But the truth is I'm not really looking to go full time."

Sam frowned. "Oh. Okay. Well, I just wanted to offer it to you first."

"It's appreciated. I mean, I can do extra hours and filling in in the interim."

"Okay. Good."

There was an awkward silence, and then Kevin said, "Are we done?"

"Yeah. Oh. Maybe you can head out to the campsite. We can't find the victim's cell phone, and I'm thinking it might've been dropped near where her clothes were found or on the beach. I poked around a little bit there yesterday but didn't do a thorough search. Maybe you could look more closely."

Kevin was halfway to the door. He shot over his shoulder, "Will do."

As he opened the door, Jo was standing outside. They did an awkward little shuffle in the doorway, and then she poked her head in and said, "You ready, chief? Noah Brickey is here for his statement."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Noah Brickey sat ramrod straight in the uncomfortable wooden chair. They put their suspects in that chair on purpose because one leg was shorter than the rest and it wobbled slightly, keeping the suspect off-balance.

Sam was behind his desk, leaning casually back in his chair, hands clasped loosely in front of him. Jo was in another chair, angled so that she could watch Noah. She had a notepad in her lap on which she was tapping the eraser end of her pencil at an annoying rate. Tap. Tap. Tap. Like water torture.

She thought she saw a bead of sweat on Noah's brow despite the fact that it was cool inside the police station.

"I have in my notes that you and Miss Palmer started Lyah software together," Sam said.

"We started it in college. The name, Lyah, is a play on the letters in our first names."

"Clever," Sam said.

"And you were lovers?" Jo added.

Noah swiveled his gaze to Jo, his brow creasing. "We were, but that was a long time ago. We broke up."

"Was this breakup amicable, or was there a lot of fighting?" Sam asked.

Noah swiveled his head back toward Sam, appearing to become slightly agitated. "There were a few fights, but then we ended up being friends. I mean, we have to work together, so we have to get along. We're good friends now."

"Uh-huh. And you're with Amber now," Sam said.

Noah looked momentarily confused, then his expression cleared. "Yes, Amber Huffman. She's a receptionist at work. We've been dating for a couple of months now."

"Really? That's not awkward?" Jo asked, causing Noah to swivel his head back to her again. "I mean, your ex-girlfriend and your current girlfriend working together and hanging out together? Seems like that could be opportunity for a lot of fighting."

Noah became belligerent, his voice rising. "What does this have to do with Lynn's death? Surely you don't think I killed her because I'm dating another woman. What about that local guy? He seemed like a lowlife. You should have him in here."

"Couldn't have been him." Sam pushed the gas station receipt on his desk toward Noah. "He was pumping gas at the time of death."

Noah looked down at the receipt then up at Sam. "If you're accusing me, I want a lawyer."

"We're not accusing you. We're just trying to figure out the group dynamics and find out what happened that night. You have to admit that jealousy from an ex would be a powerful motive, but you moved on, and she didn't have a boyfriend… unless you were jealous of Lynn paying attention to Jesse," Sam said.

Noah relaxed. "No, I wasn't. It doesn't make sense that I would kill her. If anyone would've killed her because of jealousy, it would be Amber…" His words trailed off, and his face scrunched. "Well, surely you guys don't think it was Amber? I mean, she wouldn't hurt a fly."

Jo thought about how Jesse had said he'd heard Lynn arguing with the blonde. Amber was the only blonde in the group, and it wouldn't be the first time she'd caught a killer who had murdered her boyfriend's ex. Especially if they were as close as Noah and Lynn had once been.

Noah swiveled his head between them, stopping at Jo. "No way. There was nothing for them to fight about. I mean, the whole trip was Lynn's idea, and she encouraged me to bring Amber. Neither one of us still had romantic feelings toward each other, so why would Amber be jealous?"

Sam leaned forward, the creaking of the old chair capturing Noah's attention and causing his head to swivel back in Sam's direction. "How come you didn't tell us that you get all of Lynn's shares in the company now?"

Noah looked momentarily confused, and then, as if a light bulb had switched on, he sucked in a breath. "Of course. I'd forgotten about that. When we started the company, we wanted to make sure it could still be run the way we wanted if anything happened. The lawyer recommended that we give each other controlling shares in our will… But you don't think I would kill her for that? The company isn't even doing that well."

"But you said that you had all just been working long hours to put out a new game. What if that game took off? The company could be worth a lot, couldn't it?" Sam asked.

Noah spread his arms. "Sure, but if it was, I'd have plenty of money. I wouldn't need to kill Lynn for her shares."

Sam nodded slowly. "Can you think of anyone who *would* want her dead?"

"No. That's the thing. Everyone liked her. That's why I figured it was someone we didn't know, like that Jesse guy. Maybe it was someone else, someone from the campground. Like another camper. Some people from another campsite joined us for a while. It could have been one of them, couldn't it?" Noah turned pleading eyes on Jo and then Sam.

"Maybe, but I wouldn't count on it."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sam had been watching the expression on Jo's face while they were interviewing Noah. He could tell that she didn't believe everything he had said, and neither did Sam. They didn't have a chance to compare notes, though, because as soon as Noah left, Amber entered.

Amber perched on the edge of the wooden chair, her knees pressed together, her red-tipped nails clutching the armrests. She looked like a murderer ready to be sentenced.

"I don't think I can tell you very much. I didn't really know Lynn, and I wasn't paying much attention to her that night," she said.

Sam got straight to the point. "We heard you had a fight with her in the bar."

Alarm crossed her pretty features. The chair rocked slightly. "Who said that?"

"We have our sources." Sam leaned across the desk. "Is it true?"

Amber looked at the floor. "No."

Sam figured Amber was lying. He glanced at Jo for confirmation. Jo nodded.

"Are you sure, Amber? Because lying would be obstructing justice, and there's jail time for that."

Her eyes flew up to his face. "Well, maybe we had a little argument, but that doesn't mean I killed her."

Sam leaned back in his chair. "Of course not. Why don't you tell me all about it."

Amber sighed. "You probably already know that Lynn used to date Noah. They started the company together. And I think she still wanted to get her hooks into him. When we were in the bar, she was flirting with that long-haired guy and with Noah, too. Well, I don't like anyone getting their claws into my man, so I laid into her." Amber grimaced. "Okay, maybe I had a few too many to drink, but she was out of line."

"That was in the bar—what about later on at the campsite?" Sam asked.

"What about it? We came back. We partied. As far as I know, she was still alive when Noah and I went into our tent."

"Can you specifically say that you saw her alive when you went to bed?" Jo asked.

Amber looked down at the floor. "I think so. I did have a bit much to drink, and things are a little fuzzy. But I remember her with that guy."

"He has an alibi," Sam said.

Her face pinched together. "Oh. Well, I don't know what more I can tell you."

"Do you happen to know where her phone is?" Jo asked.

Amber shook her head. "No. After you came this afternoon, we all looked all around the site, but none of us found it. It's the weirdest thing. I know she had one."

"And besides her flirting with Noah at the bar, did you see them together any other time?"

Amber's eyes narrowed. "What do you mean *together*? They weren't together. I was with him the whole time."

"What time did you go to bed?" Sam asked.

She thought about it. "It must've been around two-thirty, because we left the bar at one, and we weren't up much longer."

"And you went into the tent at the same time as Noah?"

"Yeah. Of course I did."

"And you were both in there the whole time after that?"

Her eyes flicked to the window. She crossed her arms over her chest. "Of course. I was with Noah all night, so he couldn't have killed her, if that's what you're getting at."

"Is there anything else? Any idea who might have done this? Did you notice anything odd maybe the day before when you were in town or that night at the bar?" Sam asked.

Amber narrowed her eyes as she thought. "I don’t know if I would say this was necessarily odd, but Lynn acted kind of strange when we were planning the trip."

"How so?"

"We talked about different places to go camping, but she insisted we come here. And the day she died, we all went downtown for groceries. She suggested we split up and do some shopping. You know, check out the local shops and stuff. It was all kind of spur of the moment and casual." Amber leaned forward in the chair, her face animated, as if she was suddenly realizing what she was saying could be important. "But Lynn wasn’t acting very casual. She was acting like she had an appointment, and when Julie, Tara and I came out of the secondhand store, Lynn was nowhere to be found."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

After Amber left, Sam and Jo took a break and headed for the coffee maker. Jo had finished her cup during the interview with Noah, and her brain was begging for the sharp tang of caffeine. It was also begging for a jelly donut, but there were none in the station.

Sam let her go first. She leaned her shoulder against the wall, her finger tapping on the mug as she watched him pop his orange K-Cup in and slide the dark-blue police-insignia mug underneath. Jo went back over the interviews in her brain while she waited for his cup to fill.

During the interviews, she'd studied both Noah and Amber for the little "tells" that would indicate they were lying. A twitch here, a furtive glance there. They both hadn't been straight about something.

"I don't think either one of them was being straight with us," Jo said.

Sam opened a packet of sugar and poured it into his coffee. "And what was that bit about the meeting? Do you think Lynn really had a meeting, or was Amber lying about that?"

"Why would she make that up?"

"And why did Lynn insist they camp here? Do you think Amber made that up to try to throw off suspicion? To make us think she had a local connection to who killed her?"

"Maybe she *did* have a local connection. This is where her cell phone would help tremendously. I hope Kevin finds it."

"Reese's got the paperwork to subpoena Verizon for her phone records, but that could take a while. At least Dupont won't try to block that."

"The way he's been hounding us, he'll probably rush it through, but what they have on the servers might not include what we need. Not everything is stored. Having the phone would be best."

The door opened, and Kevin came in, heading straight for the coffee maker. "Thank God, coffee."

Jo noticed he was empty handed. "You didn't find her cell phone?"

Kevin pressed his lips together and shook his head. "Afraid not. I looked all over that area and didn't find a thing except dirt, leaves, and rocks."

"Hey, guys, I hate to interrupt, but a bunch of calls came in when you were taking those statements." Reese, who had just come in through the front door, picked up several pink slips of paper off her desk and waved them in the air.

"What have you got?" Sam asked.

She looked at the slips. "Stolen pickles at the general store—Arty's holding the culprit for you. Joan Freemont called to complain about a fight between Nettie Deardorff and Rita Hoelscher." She looked up at them over the slips. "Said it was getting violent. And there's been a disturbance reported over at the Rock Ledge campground."

Jo's brows shot up, and she looked at Sam. "You think that has something to do with our case?"

Sam had already put the mug down and was heading for the door. "I don't know, but I'm going to find out. The other calls are urgent too. Jo, you take the general store, and Kevin, you go see what's up with Rita and Nettie. Everybody radio in when you're done."

KEVIN GOT into his Isuzu and headed out to Prospect Hill, where Joan Freemont lived. He wouldn't mind having to drive his own car all the time if he didn't always get stuck with all the crappy jobs. But that had always been the way.

Jo, Sam, and Tyler had always taken all the good calls, and Kevin had gotten the scraps. He was always the one that had to decorate the big tree in the green at Christmas, risking his life on the rickety ladder and going home full of pine pitch and needles. And he always got stuck with traffic duty on

the Fourth of July. Not to mention how they always seemed to saddle him with picking up the drunk and disorderlies, who would puke all over him. At least they let him drive the Crown Vic with the screen between the front and back seats on those calls.

Of course, being the one to get the crappy calls did have a lot to do with him being the only part-timer, and by the time he came on shift, that was mostly what was left. Because the important stuff was usually the most urgent.

Still, it wasn't just the calls. It was the way the three of them had treated him. Like he wasn't a real part of the team. Maybe if they'd treated him like he belonged, then he wouldn't have done what he had earlier that year.

Thoughts of what he had done sent a jolt of anxiety through him. Maybe he shouldn't have been so quick to think that Sam and Jo didn't see him as their equal.

When Sam had offered him the full-time position this morning, he'd been surprised. He'd thought they didn't want him, but now… well, it was too late. He'd already formed his alliances, and now that he had, he didn't need that full-time pay. Maybe Sam and Jo should have started treating him better *before* Tyler died.

Thoughts of Tyler's death brought on another jolt of anxiety. He sure hoped the few bits of information he'd passed along didn't have anything to do with what happened to Tyler. But if it had, that was because Tyler had been up to something bad. And if Tyler had been breaking the law, then Kevin had done the right thing, hadn't he?

Kevin wanted to believe he had, but doubts swirled in his mind like a flock of vultures. What if he'd acted too hastily? His father had always told him he was too quick to leap before he looked.

It couldn't have been his fault—Tyler had been killed by a crazy auto thief—that had nothing to do with the information Kevin had been asked to look for. And, besides, he hadn't found anything worth passing on. Not even after volunteering to clean out Tyler's desk. No photos. No notes. Nothing.

After that, Kevin had thought his little task for The Big Guy was done, but the other day, he'd been summoned to the meeting place behind Lago, and the note he'd gotten said otherwise. He didn't know if he could keep trying to dig up bits of information without blowing his cover.

Jo had sounded suspicious when she'd asked if he'd lunched at Lago. He'd panicked and said no, and now he realized that had been a big mistake. Her desk window faced that side of the street, and she'd probably seen him. The last thing he wanted was for Sam or Jo to find out what he'd done. He should have told her he was visiting his cousin who worked there. That part was true. He just didn't need to tell her the part about the note with the instructions he'd pocketed during the quick meeting *behind* the restaurant.

As he came to the crest of the hill, he saw Joan Freemont standing in Nettie Deardorff's front yard. She was wearing a pink bathrobe, her arms crossed over her chest. Nettie and Rita Hoelscher were standing on either side of the white picket fence that divided their yards, yelling at each other. Nettie raised her index finger and wagged it in Rita's face. Rita grabbed it and twisted.

The goat—what was its name? Betty or Bessy?—hopped around at Rita's feet, stopping every few seconds to nibble on her long brown skirt.

Kevin parked on the side of the street. He really did hate these calls. So what if Sam had rescued a cat from a tree and Jo had handled the dispute at the Laundromat the other night? The truth was that *he* was the one that got them the most.

If he had accepted the full-time job, would things be different? They'd hire another part-timer, and maybe the new guy would get all the crappy calls. But then Kevin would be working full time with Sam and Jo, and he wasn't sure he'd fit in. He just didn't click with them.

He didn't need the money, anyway. He patted the note that was still in his pocket. Not now that he had this little side job. The side job was easy. All he had to do was keep his eyes and ears open and report back specific pieces of information. It paid more than a full-time police salary, and he was still helping to serve justice in some way. Or at least that was what he told himself.

He got out of the car and headed toward the old ladies, the note crinkling ominously in his pocket as he crossed the street.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sam would have preferred to talk to the rest of the campers right after Noah and Amber, but the three disturbance calls that had come in were of an urgent nature and took precedence.

Then again, letting Amber and Noah report back to the others so they could all stew about it overnight could work in their favor. Might make the killer nervous. And nervous killers were bound to screw up.

Too bad the interviews had only left Sam with more questions. Maybe this disturbance at the campground would answer some of those questions.

He careened into the main parking lot, sirens blaring and lights flashing. Ellie ran out to meet him.

"There's a dog running loose down by the river, barking and making all kinds of ruckus. It's scaring the kids, and the campers are complaining."

Sam's stomach sank. Lucy? Hopefully she hadn't found another body in the river.

He headed toward the river. Sure enough, Lucy was there at the bank, barking and pacing. When she saw him, she stopped and ran over to him.

Sam crouched down to her level and patted her neck, his eyes scanning the water. No body. "I guess you ran away again? Don't like the accommodations at the pound?"

"*Woof!*"

Lucy swung around and splashed back into the water then looked back at Sam as if wanting him to follow.

"You want to swim? You're gonna ruin all that nice work they did on your fur."

Lucy did a half spin then planted her feet in front of her, those whiskey eyes demanding his attention. She barked again, this time low and insistent. She stuck her nose in the water then jerked it out, flinging drops around. She looked back at Sam as if she were hoping he wasn't too stupid to get the message.

Sam splashed out to her. This was the rocky part of the river, and the water was only about five inches deep. At least this time he didn't have his dress shoes on; his solid black boots were already in pretty bad shape.

The river was crystal clear. You could see every rock and grain of sand. In the slower-running sections, you could see tiny baby fish when the sunlight slanted in at just the right angle.

Lucy had her eyes fixed on a large gray rock. It was flat on the top, and something dark that wasn't a rock or sand or anything natural looked to be wedged underneath it.

Sam reached into the freezing-cold water, pried the rock up, grabbed the thing underneath it, and pulled it out.

It was a cell phone.

SAM HANDLED the cell phone gingerly, trying not to touch too much of it even though he knew the water had already washed off any fingerprints or DNA evidence. He wasn't even sure it was Lynn's or that anything could be recovered from it.

He rummaged an evidence bag out of the crime scene kit in the back of the Tahoe and slipped the phone into it. Lucy sat at his heels, looking up as if awaiting his praise.

"Yes, you did a good job. Seems like you've got quite a nose for police work."

Lucy gazed up at him. She looked happy. Her face almost looked as if she were smiling. Her thick, furry tail swished back and forth excitedly.

"But I can't keep you."

Lucy still looked happy, but her tail swishing slowed down.

"If you're hungry, maybe I could get you a burger."

Her tail swishing sped up again.

Sam hated the idea of taking the dog back to the shelter. What did they even feed them in there? Probably some kind of generic kibble. The least he could do was get her a burger at Spirits. Maybe one of the specialty burgers.

Sam wondered what kinds of add-ons dogs liked. Hadn't he heard that some "people" food was toxic for them? Better to get her a plain burger or maybe that pot roast from the diner that she liked.

Sam opened the tailgate. "Okay, get in."

Lucy hopped in and immediately trotted up front to the passenger seat, leaving a trail of wet, sandy footprints along the way.

Sam just shook his head and smiled. The fur on Lucy's legs and belly was soaked from being in the river, and the passenger seat would be all wet. That was Jo's problem, though. She was the only one that ever sat there.

He was just pulling out of the campground when the police radio in the car crackled. It was Reese. "Sam, I just got a call in. There is a disturbance down at Holy Spirits. Fight in progress, and it looks like a bad one."

Sam flipped on the siren and stepped on the gas.

THE INSIDE of Holy Spirits looked as if a tornado had ripped through it. It smelled of beer, sweat, and anger. The air buzzed with excitement.

One table was overturned, three chairs lay on their sides, and the bar patrons were standing in a circle. Two large men stood in the middle. Judging by the swollen lip on one and the shiner already making an appearance on the other, Sam knew they'd already been fighting for a while.

"Break it up! White Rock Police!" Sam pushed his way through the crowd, holding out his badge. There was no need for the badge—everyone in the bar knew him. Especially the two men fighting.

Jerry Vetter and Ed Clough hated each other. It was all because of Lily Simmons. She'd been dating Ed when Jerry caught her eye five years ago when they were seniors in high school. Lily and Jerry were married now.

You'd think Ed would've gotten over it by now, but occasionally, he started it up with Jerry all over again. Typically in the bar after a few beers. It usually only amounted to a few black eyes and sometimes broken fingers. But Sam had to stop the fight just the same.

"He’s got this coming, Chief." Ed addressed Sam but kept his eyes on Jerry.

"Come on, Ed. You know fighting never solves anything. All it does is get you with some doctor bills." Sam’s tone was casual, but his body was tense, waiting to take action if the fighting got bad. Sometimes he let them throw a few punches and get it out of their system. If things got too rough, he’d have to jump in.

"Bastard ruined my life." Ed swung again, his fist connecting with Jerry’s chin.

Jerry’s face jerked to the right. Spittle and flecks of blood flew outward. The crowd jumped back.

Jerry turned toward Ed, anger gleaming in his eyes. He punched Ed first in the stomach, then the chin. Ed staggered back then whirled around, picking up one of the chairs and holding it over his head.

Sam jumped in between them, holding his hand out. "You don’t want to do that, Ed. Willful destruction of property. Billie might sue you."

Ed swung the chair anyway. Sam barreled into him, disrupting the force of the blow. The chair grazed painfully off his shoulder and smashed to the floor, one leg cracking loudly as it splintered off from the bottom of the seat.

Ed turned his anger on Sam. "What’d you do that for? I need to finish this guy off once and for all."

"This isn’t the way to settle things." Sam put his hand gently on Ed’s arm in an attempt to calm him.

Ed pulled back his fist. Apparently, he’d forgotten that his beef was with Jerry and was going to continue to lash out at anyone in front of him. Even Sam.

"Don’t do it, Ed. Assaulting an officer of the law isn’t something you want to get into."

The words made Ed hesitate for a second, then he crouched down and rushed Sam, barreling shoulder first into his stomach and knocking him to the floor. Before Sam knew what had happened, the two of them were rolling around on the floor, fists flying.

Sam was a good fighter, but Ed must’ve been taking lessons. He got Sam into a stranglehold, increasing the force on his windpipe. Sam smelled stale beer and cigar smoke on his hot breath.

"Hey, Ed, cut that out. That’s the chief." This was Jerry’s voice, ironically.

Sam kicked back, connecting with Ed’s shin. Ed loosened his grip slightly, just enough to allow Sam to break free.

Sam spun around in time to see Ed stagger back a few steps. Then Ed pulled a fist. Sam got ready to dodge. He didn’t want to hit Ed if he didn’t have to. Even though he was within his right to break up a fight, it was better if you didn’t have to leave a mark on someone. You never knew when the public would believe a claim of police brutality. He just hoped Ed would tire out before Sam had to hurt him in order to get him to stop.

Sam didn’t have to worry about that for long. A hulking figure stepped in between them, brought up his fist, and popped Ed right in the face, sending him crumbling to the floor.

Mick Gervasi turned to face Sam, a grin spreading on his face. "You gotta work on your street-fighting skills, Chief. I can’t always be around to get you out of trouble."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"I could've taken care of Ed myself," Sam said as he peeled the buns off the burger he'd ordered at the bar. He squinted at the bare patty. Ketchup and mayonnaise were smeared all over the surface. He looked over at Mick. "Are ketchup and mayo bad for dogs?"

Mick shrugged.

Lucy whined, and Sam looked down at her. "You like ketchup?"

He scraped it off anyway. It didn't seem like something a dog should be eating. Then he threw the burger into a bowl and set it on the floor. Lucy sniffed it cautiously.

"Beggars can't be choosers there, buddy." Sam pressed his fingers against his bottom lip. It was sore where one of the punches had cut the inside of his mouth. He could still taste the coppery tang of his blood.

Mick leaned back in the kitchen chair. He was still wearing his leather jacket, and the deep pockets bulged out, the right one more so than the left. The amber-colored beer bottle in his hand tilted slightly as he leaned.

"I figured you could've taken care of him, but it looked like that might have taken a while. I didn't want to wait around. Got important information." His gaze flicked from Sam to the dog. "When did you get a dog?"

Sam joined him at the table with his own beer. He glanced at Lucy, who was licking the sides of the bowl. "She's a stray."

"You keeping her?"

Sam's heart pinched. "Nah. Got no time. I had picked her up on another call and happened to have her in the truck when I was called to the fight.

Figured the shelter would be closed by the time we were done, so I brought her here."

"Maybe you should let her stay. She'd be a lot better female companionship than either one of your ex-wives."

Sam laughed. Mick's words had a ring of truth. Because Sam and Mick had been friends since they were young boys, Mick had known both of Sam's wives well. He hadn't approved of either of them. Maybe Sam should have listened to him.

"Jo would be good female companionship too," Mick continued.

"Jo and I work together. She's off-limits."

Sam hadn't really considered Jo as female companionship in that way. He liked her and respected her. He couldn't imagine not having her in his life every day. But as a fellow officer. Not a girlfriend. She was attractive enough, but Sam didn't have a place in his life for a woman, and especially not one where the relationship was going to screw up the workings of his whole police department.

Mick just sipped his beer and shrugged.

Sam's eyes narrowed. Maybe Mick wasn't speaking about Jo being company for Sam.

"She's off limits to you, too." With Mick's black hair, steely blue eyes, and linebacker build, he never had trouble getting women, even now when he was pushing forty. The way Mick ran through women, he didn't want to subject Jo to him.

"Ed sure was mad," Mick said, changing the subject.

"Yep. Always the same thing."

"That's what women will do to you."

"Can't argue with that." Sam swigged his beer. "Good thing he didn't press charges against you."

Mick smirked. "Right. Good thing he came to his senses and realized pressing charges against me might result in you pressing charges against him. Apparently, assaulting a police officer wasn't something he wanted on his record."

Lucy finished licking the bowl and lay down next to Sam's chair.

Mick got up and paced around the kitchen. It wasn't a big room, so the pacing didn't last long.

He stopped at the low wall divider that separated the kitchen from the living room. Gram had made Gramps widen the doorway and put that in

when Sam was in his teens. The top of the divider was table-height, and it had bookshelves underneath on either side. Gram had used the surface as a buffet area to spread the desserts out during holidays.

Mick picked up a birchwood-framed photograph of Sam's girls that was sitting on top. It was Sam's favorite picture, both girls in bright ski jackets with a snowy mountain behind them. Mick's lips quirked in a smile as he looked at it. He had a special place in his heart for Hayley and Marla, and the girls felt the same way about their "Uncle" Mick. Mick had never married or had kids. Sam figured the girls were like a surrogate family.

"You heard from them?" Mick asked.

"Yep. Hayley just got done with finals. And Marla is finishing up her internship. They're planning a visit soon." Thoughts of the impending visit brought on a pang of emptiness. He missed his daughters, but they were grown women now with their own lives in towns far away. He couldn't expect them to hang around here.

"I can't wait to see them." Mick put the picture down and leaned his hip against the bookcase. Sam was glad Gram had made Gramps secure it to the floor.

"So, what were you in such a hurry to see me about?" Sam asked.

"I got something for you." Mick tossed his beer bottle into the trash next to Sam, opened the fridge, and pulled out another one.

Sam leaned over and retrieved the bottle from the trash and threw it in the blue recycling bin by the door. The glass clanked against the other bottles. Mick twisted off the top of his beer, flicked it into the bin, and came back to sit at the table.

"I did some research on that lady who had the car stolen. Barbara Bartles. Turns out she has a grandson that isn't exactly an upstanding citizen." Mick took a slow sip of the beer. "Got to thinking that maybe the car theft wasn't so random."

"He into drugs?" Sam thought about the trace of cocaine and partial fingerprint in the ashtray.

"Yep. Nothing on his record, but I have an in with the police down there, and he's been taken in on suspicion a few times. They went easy on him, hoping he'll eventually inform on the next guy up the chain."

Sam nodded. It was the same thing Sam was hoping to do with Jesse. "Think it has anything to do with Thorne?"

Mick shrugged. "He lives in Preston, but we don't know how far Thorne's influence reaches. Or even if Thorne is the source of these drugs."

Sam knew he was. Even though they didn't have any proof, it wasn't just wishful thinking. Thorne was up to more than just raping the land to build his resort. But this wasn't about Thorne—this was about Tyler and catching the guy who had killed him.

Sam felt a spark of excitement. This kid could know something about what happened that night. Possibly even be Tyler's killer himself. "What's this kid's name? Maybe we should go talk to him. You know, off the record. See if he knows anything."

Mick reached into his pocket, the grin spreading across his face. He pulled out a plastic bag with a shot glass in it. Sam had been wondering when he was going to show him what he had in there.

"I can do you one better," Mick said. "You know how you got that partial print from the car? I happen to have had a few drinks with Danny Bartles. He drinks shots of Sambuca. And it just so happens that I know the bartender at the bar he hangs out at. She's a pretty blond thing. Anyway, I persuaded her to give me the glass Danny drank from. Might be a print on there you could use."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Since everyone had touched base as instructed on the previous night's calls, no one was surprised when Sam showed up with Lucy and the remains of Lynn's cell phone the next morning.

Reese found a charger that fit the phone, and now it was sitting on Kevin's desk, and they were all standing around the desk, looking down at it. The screen was loaded with spiderweb cracks, and the back of the case had two chunks of plastic missing. It should have been fully charged, but wouldn't turn on. No surprise, given the shape of the device.

"So the killer probably tossed the phone in after Lynn," Jo said.

"Must have figured something on there might implicate them. Probably hoped it would never be found," Sam added.

"But the killer didn't know we had our secret weapon, right, girl?" Reese leaned down and rubbed Lucy's head. The dog thumped her tail on the floor and glanced from Sam to Reese. Sam swore the darn thing was smiling.

Sam scrubbed his fingers through his short hair. "Too bad we can't get anything off it. It's going to take forever to get the information from Verizon, and meanwhile, the killer has time to cover his tracks."

"Can I try?" Reese reached a tentative hand toward the phone.

"You think you can get it to work?" Sam was dubious. Then again, Reese did have a talent for computers. What the heck? The thing was dead as a doornail—it certainly couldn't hurt to have her try.

"Maybe. If not, I might be able to take it to the academy and get someone to work on it." She looked up at Sam hopefully. "It could be

quicker than waiting on the carrier to hand over the records."

"Okay, sure."

Reese smiled then cocked her head. "Did something happen to your lip?"

"Nope." Sam knew they'd all heard he went to break up the fight. They didn't need to know the details.

Reese shrugged then took the phone to her desk. Lucy trotted along behind her.

Kevin's eyes followed the dog. "What happens if Dupont comes in and sees the dog here?"

Sam got the impression Kevin wasn't exactly a dog lover. He skirted around Lucy as if she would bite. From the sideways glances Lucy gave Kevin, the feeling was mutual. And it was obvious Kevin didn't want to get on Dupont's bad side, which was somewhat of a mystery considering he didn't seem to care too much about his job.

"Maybe we should keep her in my office. That way if Dupont comes in, I'll come out to talk to him and leave her in there. He won't know she's here," Sam said.

"We can't just hide her in the police station," Kevin said.

"It's just temporary. She has to go back to the shelter. But she helped find the phone, and I'd like to reward her with some free time before she has to go sit in a lonely kennel over there."

"How is she going to get adopted if she's not over there?" Kevin asked.

Sam looked at Lucy, her eyes reflecting all the trust in the world. He wasn't keen on the idea of *someone else* adopting her, but he knew it was the best thing for her.

"She might not get adopted," Reese said in a low voice.

Jo's brow furrowed. "Why not?"

"She's a runner. She's already run away twice. Not too many people want to adopt a dog like that."

"What do you mean? What will they do with her, then?" Sam asked.

Reese glanced at Lucy, who was now lying beside her desk, and lowered her voice. "Eric said they might swap her with another shelter, but if nobody adopts her after a while, she could be euthanized."

As if she knew what they were talking about, Lucy whined. She put her chin on her front paws. Her eyes looked up, her brows twitching as she switched her attention from Reese to Sam to Jo.

"We can’t let that happen. She’s already helped us out twice. She’s practically an officer." Jo looked at Sam. Her gray eyes sparked with alarm.

Sam rubbed his hand over his chin, rough with stubble even at this early time in the morning. Had he forgotten to shave? The glass Mick had given him was burning a hole in the pocket of his windbreaker. He couldn’t wait to tell Jo about it. "I don’t know what we can do. I wish we could work something out, but…"

"There might be something…" Reese chewed her bottom lip. "Maybe for now we could just try to keep her with us for a little while. I’ll see if Eric can reset her time at the shelter so she has more time to get adopted before they trade her out."

"And if she doesn’t?" Jo asked.

"Let’s just buy her a few days," Reese said. "The shelter only gives them so many days, but if we can make it look like she’s a new surrender, then she’ll have that much more of a chance. If that doesn’t work, I might have something else I can try."

"Okay." Jo looked dubious. "I guess that’s all we can do."

Sam nodded. "Fine by me. In the meantime, let’s just make sure Dupont doesn’t find out we have her."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It was a light crime day, and no calls had come in. Sam assigned Kevin to any new disruptions so that he and Jo could focus on interviewing the rest of the campers. He owed it to the Palmers to solve this as quickly as he could.

Sam gave Reese orders to call the other campers in. Hopefully, with Kevin on the call-outs, he and Jo would have enough time to get through the rest of the interviews that afternoon.

He retired to his office with Lucy and called Jo in after him. Kevin looked a little put out that he wasn't in on the interviews, but Jo was a sergeant. Kevin was an officer—a lower rank. With no official detectives on the force, it made sense that Sam and Jo would take on the detective work. If Kevin wanted the better work, he'd have to earn it. Turning down the full-time job wouldn't help.

Jo sat in the chair. "I really hope Reese can find something on that phone, but I'm not optimistic. What do you think we—"

Her words were cut off when Sam put the glass on his desk.

"What's that?"

"Mick gave it to me last night. There's a print on it. Could lead to Tyler's killer."

"What? How did he get it?"

Sam relayed what Mick had told him while he dug the fingerprint dusting kit out of the bottom drawer of his desk. He slipped the glass out of the bag and dusted. There were several prints on it, and he lifted them all.

"So what do you figure? We test it against the partial print we found in the car?" Jo asked.

"Yep."

"And if it is the same guy, what then?"

"Punish him to the fullest extent of the law."

"The prints won't hold up. What about chain of custody? Mick got the fingerprints illegally." Jo tapped the eraser end of her pencil on the pad of paper. "We have to figure out another way. We can't test these prints officially because there'll be a record of it. And if this comes to trial, then even the greenest lawyer will use that against us."

"Yeah, I figured that. We need to know if this guy is involved first, *then* we can figure out the legal way to get him for it. 'Course, we could just go down and beat everything he knows out of him right now. But I figure it's better to see if the print matches—that way we know we're barking up the right tree. If we go down there and we don't have something solid to threaten him with, it gives him time to cover his bases, and we lose the advantage."

"Putting the match through the computer could screw things up for us later." Jo thought for a while. "We need a way to match up the print that isn't recorded officially. And who do we know that has access to crime labs at an academic level that isn't recorded officially?"

"Reese? But we can't ask her to do this. Can we?"

Lucy's tail thumped against Sam's chair as if she were giving her opinion that this was a great idea.

"Of course we can. She cared about Tyler just as much as we did. She wants to see his killer put away too," Jo said.

"I don't know." Sam glanced at the door. "We don't want to let too many people in on the fact that we're not doing things strictly by the book."

"Speaking of that, is Kevin coming on board full time?" Jo asked.

"No."

They stared at each other for a few beats. Nothing needed to be said. They were both relieved that Kevin wasn't going to be full time.

"I guess we'll have to get used to a new person, then. All the more reason to have Reese on our side." Jo pushed up from the chair and paced over to the long windows. She looked out at the mountains. "We're not doing anything that bad. We're just trying to expedite things. Stuff moves

so slowly up here. And it won’t be so bad to have Reese on our team—she could get a lot done for us."

"She does seem to have mad computer skills and resources…"

There was a soft tap on the door, and Reese poked her head in. "I figured I’d let you know. The campers are on their way. Should be here in a few minutes."

Sam motioned for Reese to enter and then gestured for her to close the door. She was a quick study, her eyes darkening with understanding as they flicked from the glass, now with black dust on it, to Sam and Jo.

"Reese," Sam started. "I think you know sometimes we might have to push the envelope a little for the sake of justice."

Reese’s eyes lit up. "Oh, I totally understand. Like with the phone."

Sam smiled, his eyes meeting Jo’s. "Exactly like with the phone. And if you’re on board with that, I have a way you might be instrumental in finding Tyler’s killer."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jo and Sam figured the best person to talk to next in the Palmer case was Julie. Jo had noticed she seemed a little hesitant when they'd been at the campsite. She was hiding something, and Jo wanted to find out what it was.

Reese ushered Julie into the room. She was dressed in camping attire—camouflage pants, tee shirt, light-blue windbreaker, hiking boots, and a wide-brimmed ball cap. She sat nervously in the chair on the other side of Sam's desk. Sam made her wait, pretending he was looking through paperwork. Jo could feel the tension in the room as Julie shifted around in her seat, causing the chair to rock and jolt on its uneven legs.

"Sorry, Miss Swan. I was just looking through my notes here from when I talked to Amber and Noah." Sam leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "So how long had you known Lynn?"

Julie's eyes misted, and she sniffed. "Four years. We were all friends. Lynn and Noah started the company. They asked me to work for them. I was third on board."

"So you knew Lynn pretty well, then?" Jo asked.

"You could say that. We all hung around together a lot. We worked long hours, so we became kind of like an extended family."

"And how would you say Lynn felt about Noah taking up with Amber?" Sam asked.

Julie's brows drew together. "Lynn didn't care. She was the one that broke up with Noah."

"And what about Amber? Was she jealous of their former relationship?" Jo asked. When they had interrogated Amber, Jo had gotten the impression

Amber was lying about both her and Noah being in the tent. Jo wasn't sure if Amber was the killer. She didn't know if there was a big enough motive there, but she wasn't being truthful about something. Maybe digging into what Julie knew would uncover what that something was.

Julie snorted. "I'll say. You ask me, she was just a rebound girl for Noah. She doesn't have a lot of self-confidence, always clutching at him and crowding him. I don't expect that to last long. But… well… that has nothing to do with what happened to Lynn, right?" Julie looked as if she might've wanted to say more but held off. Maybe the realization that Sam and Jo were doing a little bit more than just taking a statement had her nervous that she'd said too much already.

"So you think Noah was going to break things off with Amber?" Sam asked. "Maybe Amber caught wind of that. Maybe Amber thought Noah was going to go back to Lynn. Maybe Amber tried to make sure that wouldn't happen."

Julie gasped. "You don't think Amber would kill Lynn? Over that?"

"Someone killed her. We're trying to figure out the motive. Do you know why anyone would want her dead?"

Julie shook her head. "I told you before. No idea."

"What about the breakup with Noah? How did that affect the company? Is that when the company started failing?"

"No. I don't think that had anything to do with it. We're all professionals. Sure, at first it was kind of awkward, but after a while, that all passed." Julie shrugged. "Anyway, that was almost a year ago."

"And they still wanted to have equal shares in the company? Seems like that might be problematic eventually," Sam said.

"I wouldn't know anything about that," Julie said.

"Maybe one of them was trying to phase the other one out to get control of the company before this new game was released," Jo suggested.

"What are you saying? That Noah killed Lynn to get control of the company? Noah wouldn't do that, and besides, wouldn't her share go to her family or something?"

"Actually, no," Sam said. "When they started the company, they agreed to leave each other controlling shares. Of course, they probably didn't think they would be breaking up when they agreed to that. Maybe Noah wanted to make sure she didn't have a chance to change the agreement."

"Noah wouldn't do something like that!"

Julie seemed adamant, but Jo wasn't so sure.

"Where were you that night around 2:30 a.m.?" Sam asked.

"Now you're accusing me?" Julie straightened in the chair, causing it to tip to the left. "Do I need a lawyer?"

Sam held his palms up. "We're not accusing you. We're just trying to get a timeline. We need to piece together the events of the night to see if anyone saw anything that might help us find her killer."

Julie crossed her arms over her chest. "Well, I didn't see a thing. I was in my tent."

"What about earlier that day?" Jo asked. "Amber seemed to think Lynn had some kind of an appointment."

Julie frowned. "Appointment? For what?"

"We don't know. That's what we're trying to find out. Amber said Lynn was the one that wanted to come camping here in White Rock. Said she was very insistent."

Julie's gaze drifted out the window. "Yeah, actually, she did. I think she came here on vacation as a kid or something. Or maybe she had some friends here."

That caught Jo's attention. Maybe Lynn had an old score to settle and her death had nothing to do with her breakup with Noah or the company. "Friends? Who?"

Julie shook her head. "I don't know."

"So what happened that day? You all came to town for groceries and decided to do some shopping," Sam prompted.

Julie nodded. "That's right. We always do our grocery shopping together after we get to our destination. We'd arrived late the night before and gotten fast food on the way. So we headed into town." Julie frowned. "Now that I think about it, Lynn *was* acting a little anxious."

"What did she do when you got to town?"

"Whenever we go camping, we like to poke around in the local shops. Lynn collects marbles and wanted to check out the antiques store. The guys wanted to check out that Irish pub in the square there." Julie pointed out the window to O'Malley's. "We got to town just before noon and gave ourselves one hour. Then we would meet back at the pub then get groceries."

"And Lynn acted anxious?"

Julie shifted position, causing the chair to rock forward. "Sort of. Tara, Amber, and I decided to check out the secondhand store, Del's. Lynn acted kind of strange and, instead of coming with us, went to the antiques store."

"Why was that so strange?"

"Usually, we kind of hang together, but I guess Lynn was more interested in getting to the antiques store. We only had an hour."

"And you met up after you finished in the secondhand shop."

Julie's mouth twisted. "Not really. Tara isn't into used goods, and the woman in Del's told her about a boutique a few streets over, so she headed there. Amber went to get her nails done, if you can believe that. I looked for Lynn but couldn't find her. We had twenty minutes left, so I poked around in a few of the other shops until it was time to meet everyone."

"So the next time you saw Lynn was in front of O'Malley's?"

"Yes. She never said anything about any appointment. Are you sure about that?"

Jo wasn't sure. She glanced out the window, trying to picture the group. The antiques store was at the north end of the street. Lynn would've walked that way. The pub was across the green, and the men would've headed that way. The high-end shops were two streets over, so after they left Del's secondhand store, Tara would've gone down the side street to get to those. Amber would've gone right next door to get her nails done, and Julie would've been in and out of the other stores on the street. None of that told her much.

"I don't really see how any of this has anything to do with Lynn being killed. Honestly, I think you're wasting time here. No one in my group of friends would've killed her."

"That may be. But we need to establish timelines and get everyone's statement in order to determine who really did kill her. If it wasn't one of your group, then telling us everything you remember about that day will help us figure out who it was." Sam leaned across the desk toward Julie. "Is there anything else you can think of that you haven't told us?"

Julie's gaze flicked from Sam to Jo and back to Sam. The chair rocked slightly. She shook her head. "No. I think that's it."

"Okay, then you can go."

She left, and Sam looked at Jo.

"I don't think she's right about her friends. I think one of them *is* a killer," Sam said. "None of the other campers have any connection to Lynn,

and there seems to be some good motives brewing here."

"Yeah. Jealousy. Greed. Maybe even revenge."

"Right. Maybe Lynn was jealous of Noah and Amber and she was killed by accident in a passionate fight with Noah."

"Or maybe Amber didn't want Noah to take up with Lynn again. Maybe Julie was right and Noah was about to get rid of Amber. If she thought he was going back to Lynn, she might have thought that making sure Lynn had a little accident would prevent that from happening."

Sam leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. "Maybe Julie doesn't know everything. Friends often hide things from each other. Maybe Noah and Lynn's breakup wasn't as amicable as he said it was. Maybe they argued about the company. Maybe Lynn's appointment had something to do with her making sure she was going to get complete control."

As usual, Jo was in sync with Sam's line of thinking. "And maybe Noah found out and wanted to stop her."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

They interviewed Derek Winters next. He was a quiet guy. Tall and handsome with that geeky computer-software look that girls sometimes went for. He was wearing shorts and sandals with white socks. It was way too early in the season for sandals up north, but Sam didn't bother to tell him that.

"Truth be told, it was a little stressful at work," Derek said in response to Sam's question about the company problems. "Money was tight, and Tara was really clamping down on spending."

Sam consulted his paperwork. "That's Tara Barrett, the chief financial officer of the company, right?"

"Yep. Tara can wring blood out of a stone. That's why she was great at the job. She could source the things we needed at half the cost." Derek shrugged. "But I guess that wasn't enough. We were really counting on this new release."

"Tell me about the problems between Lynn and Noah," Sam said.

"There really weren't any problems. Not that I saw. Things were a little tense after they broke up, and we were all on edge with the downturn in sales, but heck, we all went camping together, right, so how many problems could there have been between them?"

"The night Lynn died. Did you see anything unusual at the campsite?"

"No." He answered way too fast, and Sam glanced at Jo. She'd noticed too.

"Are you sure? We'll find out if anything happened, and if you knew about it…" Sam let the unspoken threat hang in the air.

Derek fidgeted, and the chair wobbled back and forth. "Well, I was pretty drunk that night. I can't really say for sure what I saw. My memory's a bit fuzzy."

"Did you see someone fighting with Lynn at the party?"

"No. I actually wasn't at the campsite most of the night. There was this girl a few campsites over, and, well…" Derek shrugged. "I spent most of the night there but skedaddled out of there way before sunup. I don't know what time it was, but when I was sneaking into my tent, I'm pretty sure I saw someone else at the other end of the campsite."

"At the other end? Whose tent was at the other end?" Jo asked.

"Noah and Amber." Derek hurried on. "But I don't know who it was that I saw or even what time it was. It was just a shadow in between the tents. Could have been someone coming back from a trip to the bathroom. Heck, it could've been a bear, for all I know. It was dark, and I was still drunk. I wanted to get into my tent quickly before anyone saw me because I didn't want a lot of teasing the next day." He looked at them sheepishly. "I hope I'm not getting anyone into trouble, because I honestly can't say for sure what I saw."

"Don't worry. We'll take your condition into consideration. You've been very helpful." Sam dismissed him, and they both watched the door as he shut it.

Jo turned to Sam. "The plot thickens."

JOSHUA MOORE WAS NEXT. Since Joshua and Tara were the only other couple in the room, Jo and Sam hoped maybe they'd drunk less than the others and would have more reliable testimony.

Jo soon found out that wasn't the case.

Joshua's large frame sat slumped in the chair. He wore black cargo pants, and a white long-sleeved jersey stretched across his broad chest. He absently scratched a large welt on his neck. Mosquitos and black flies tended to love certain people, and apparently, Josh was one of them. He had several bites on his neck and arms.

"Man, I don't know what to tell you. I was pretty drunk. I passed out pretty early that night."

"So you didn’t see Lynn fighting with anyone? Maybe earlier when you were in the bar?" Sam asked.

"I know Amber and Lynn got into it a little bit." Josh shrugged. "Makes sense, right? Tara would be pissed if we broke up and I showed up with another girl. But it wasn’t that way with Lynn and Noah because Lynn had broken up with *him*. But Amber is not part of our group. She’s a little different. More high strung. I guess maybe she didn’t trust Noah or something. I’ve seen her and Lynn get into it a few other times, but it usually just blows over."

"What about Noah and Lynn? Did they argue?"

Josh shook his head. "Nope. It was a little awkward at work when they first broke up, but they seemed to have smoothed everything over. I didn’t see any animosity between them. Honestly, man, none of us could have killed her. You don’t think it was Noah or Amber, do you?"

Sam answered his question with one of his own. "What about that day when you went into town? Can you tell me what happened then?"

Josh’s eyes narrowed. "Nothing happened. We went to that Irish pub over there and had a few beers. We played a game of pool. That’s when we saw the other bar—that one in the church—and decided to come back later on. It looked kind of quirky, and we wanted to check it out."

"Holy Spirits?"

Josh laughed. "Yeah. That’s the one. Great name."

"What did the girls do while you were playing pool?"

Josh made a face. "Heck if I know. They all went off shopping, I suppose. I know Tara came back with a bunch of stuff. She usually does."

"So you, Noah, and Derek played pool in O’Malley’s, and the girls went shopping, then you met up and got groceries?"

"Yeah. Well, not exactly. Me and Derek played pool. We played against two locals. Won a hundred fifty bucks, too. But not Noah. He just sat at the bar."

"So he was at the bar the whole time you were playing?" Sam asked.

"Yeah. I mean, he was there when we went into the back where the pool tables are."

"Was he there when you came out?"

"We lost track of time and played past the time we were supposed to meet everyone. Julie came in to get us. So Noah was already outside with everyone, and then Tara came running over from the shop with her bags.

For once, her usual lateness worked in our favor since it didn't make us look so bad for playing pool past the meeting time."

Jo shifted in her seat and asked, "Did Lynn mention an appointment that day?"

Josh's brow furrowed. "Appointment? No."

"So then you bought the groceries, went to the campsite, and then came back later that night to Spirits?" Jo asked.

"Yep. Well, we started drinking at the campsite then came to town." Josh's eyes widened as he realized what he'd said. "But we didn't drink and drive. Noah didn't start drinking until we got back to camp. He was the designated driver."

"At the campsite, where is your tent in relation to Noah and Amber's?" Sam asked.

"It's the next one over. Tara and I have the big one you can stand up in. Bought it new for this trip."

"After you went to bed, did you hear Noah or Amber get up?" Jo asked.

Josh made a face. "Nah. I was pretty wasted. I passed out, and I don't remember hearing a thing until some damn bird woke me up that next morning."

SAM STRETCHED IN THE CHAIR, his neck cracking, while he waited for Tara Barrett to make her way into the room. Under his desk, Lucy snored lazily. They'd have to take a break and let her outside to do her business soon. Maybe Jo could go to the diner and get her some of that pot roast Lucy seemed to like for lunch. Sam could use a plate of it himself. They'd been interviewing straight through for a few hours now, and he was glad Tara was the last one. Too bad he still had a lot of unanswered questions.

Tara perched on the edge of the chair, a pink Gucci purse balanced on her lap. Her outfit was a little trendier, less woodsy than the rest. Her pants were more formfitting, and her V-neck hot-pink tee shirt dipped low, revealing just a hint of lacy bra. She wore full makeup, and her red hair was pulled up in a waterfall style on top of her head.

Sam went through the usual questions. Tara's answers matched with everyone else's. Yes, they partied the night before. No, she didn't think anyone in the group would've killed Lynn. Of course she knew the company was in financial trouble— she was the CFO. But she felt fully confident the new release would bring them back to profitability. Everyone did, so there was no reason to kill Lynn over that. She had no idea why anyone would want her dead.

But when he got to the part about what they had done the day before when they came to town, Tara's demeanor stumbled.

"As far as I know, the boys went to that pub, and the girls went shopping." She patted her purse. "I got this. You have a great shop on Vine Street. That's where I picked this up."

Sam knew the shop, though he'd only been in there once with his daughters. "Fern's, right?"

"Yeah, I think that's what it is."

"And Lynn went to the antiques store right at the end of Main Street, right?" Jo nodded out the window toward the main street of town.

Tara fidgeted in her seat, the chair pitching forward slightly as she followed Jo's gaze. "Is that what the others said?"

"Some of them. But some others think she might have had an appointment." Jo leaned toward her. "Would you happen to know anything about that?"

Tara's eyes flashed. "An appointment? I don't know. I wouldn't want to talk about Lynn now that she's… she's… well, you know."

Sam pushed up from his seat and came around the desk, leaning his hip on the edge so he could look down at her. "Tara. This is important. We're investigating a murder. I don't think Lynn is going to mind you talking about her if it helps us find her killer."

"Fine." Tara sighed. "I'm not sure if Lynn went to the antiques store. And I don't think she had an appointment. Not like you mean. Because I saw her meeting with someone. And that explains why she wanted to borrow my bra."

"Your bra?" Jo asked.

Sam's eyes flicked from Tara's lacey cleavage to the photos of Lynn's belongings spread across his desk. Now he knew what had bugged him about that. The bra found in her clothing pile in the woods was a fancy red lacey number, but the bras in her duffel bag were utilitarian. White cotton

with a little tiny pink bow in the center. Plain Jane style, in fact, was the name of the maker.

"We borrowed each other's clothes sometimes. We were the same size." Tara's eyes filled up. "When she asked to borrow a fancy bra, I just figured she was hoping to get lucky later that night. I never suspected what she was really doing."

"What was she really doing?" Jo asked.

"Lynn might have had an appointment like you said, but it wasn't a business appointment." Tara's eyes drifted out the window. "That afternoon, I saw her meeting someone in that secluded alley near the Irish pub."

"In the alley?" Sam said. "Why would she be meeting someone there?"

Tara's eyes came back from the window to look straight at Sam. "Because she didn't want to be seen. She was meeting Noah. A *real* friendly meeting. And I don't think they were discussing business, if you get my drift."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

After Tara left, Sam settled back behind his desk. Jo got up to pace the room. Lucy paced behind her.

"So Lynn had an amorous meeting with Noah in the alley," Sam said.

"But Noah was in the bar." Jo stood at the window looking out over the street. O'Malley's was two doors down from the alley where Tara had indicated she'd seen the romantic meeting between Lynn and Noah. "Then again, Derek and Josh said he was in the bar. They were playing pool, not watching Noah. He could've slipped out and met Lynn in the alley."

"But why go to all that trouble? Why the subterfuge? Why wouldn't Noah just break up with Amber and get back together with Lynn?" Sam asked.

Jo turned and paced back to Sam's desk, Lucy at her heels. "I have no idea. People do strange things. Maybe it has something to do with her will. Maybe he was trying to be nice to get her to change it. Or maybe they had just realized they still had feelings for each other now. That could explain what Derek saw. Maybe it was Noah sneaking out to meet with Lynn."

"Or Amber sneaking out to kill her so Noah *couldn't* meet with her."

"Either way, there's something off about this," Jo said. "At least that settles the whole business of the appointment."

"Maybe. I'd still like to find out what's on her cell phone. There could be texts or phone calls that would give us a clue about something."

"Those are always interesting." Jo patted Lucy's head. "And I think we better have another talk with Noah. He forgot to tell us about his alley

meeting with Lynn. But right now, I think we need to take Lucy out to do some business. And get some lunch."

Sam pushed up from his desk and walked to the door with Jo and Lucy. "Maybe we should get a leash for her."

"Why? She seems to stay right with us."

"She does, but it just seems like we should have one just in case." Sam opened the door and gestured for Jo and Lucy to proceed out into the squad room area.

Reese was at her desk. She looked up and smiled at them. Then her eyes drifted out of the window and widened in alarm. "Oh shit! Dupont's coming."

Jo spun around. Dupont was walking up the street, clutching a manila envelope.

Jo's first inclination was to shove Lucy back into Sam's office. But what if Dupont wanted to talk to Sam privately in there? There was an entrance on the other side they never used. It opened to a small parking lot where the mail trucks used to park in back. She rushed over to the door and shoved Lucy outside just as Dupont came in the front.

"Mr. Dupont, how nice to see you." Reese's voice was light.

Dupont scowled at her. "What's going on?"

Reese smiled, all wide-eyed and innocent. "Nothing."

Dupont cleared his throat and looked at Sam. "Thank you for visiting the Palmers. It meant a lot to them."

"Of course," Sam said.

"We still need to get this solved right away. The townsfolk don't like to think of a murderer running around." Dupont's tone turned hard. "And you need to think about hiring someone. Being shorthanded has impacted this investigation."

"Not really," Sam said. "We've been working extra hours, and Kevin has been filling in for the full-time hours to take up the slack."

"And will he be taking the full-time position?"

"No, but I think it's premature to—"

Dupont shoved the manila envelope into Sam's hand. "Here are the applicants for the job. I don't want the townspeople complaining the streets aren't safe. That could reflect badly on me in the election polls next year. So I expect to be fully staffed by the end of the month." Dupont turned toward

the door and shot over his shoulder, "And don't forget to keep me updated on the Palmer case."

"Man, what a jerk. He couldn't give a crap if we are understaffed or if there's crime in town—he just cares about getting reelected." Jo watched him walk away, making sure he wasn't going to come back before opening the side door to let Lucy in.

Lucy wasn't sitting on the step as Jo had expected. She looked further, in the shrubs and out into the parking lot, but Lucy was nowhere to be found. She was gone.

THE STATION FELT empty without Lucy. They had looked all around the building and into the town but didn't find her.

They were seated at Jo's desk, and Sam was eating a pastrami on rye. Jo was moving the chunks of her beef stew around in her bowl, a white bag with one last jelly donut sitting beside her. Reese munched on a salad at her own desk across the lobby. The room was filled with the smell of beef and cheese, but it was mostly silent except for their chewing. An air of sadness had descended upon them.

Kevin had come and gone. It was late afternoon, and nothing else was going on. He seemed eager to leave, so Sam had let him go home. Kevin wasn't exactly what you'd call a go-getter.

Sam glanced at the applications Dupont had given him. Maybe it was time to start looking through them.

"It might be just as well that she's gone. Eric said she might not be adoptable. If she makes the shelter circuit and no one claims her, she could be euthanized. Maybe it's better that she's out there on her own," Reese said.

Jo looked disturbed by this. She even put down the jelly donut she'd dug out of the bag and brushed off her fingers. You knew it had to be bad when Jo didn't finish her donut. "But what will she eat? In the winter, where will she sleep?"

"I don't know. It looks like she's been on her own for a while. Maybe we can look out for her somehow."

"If she sticks around the area." Sam wadded up the paper from his finished sandwich and tossed it into the trash.

Reese's computer dinged. "Good news. I ran the password decryption program on Lynn's Google account, and looks like it worked."

"How did you know she had a Google account?" Sam asked.

Reese shrugged. "It was just a guess. A lot of people have them. You know it's free. And you can get Google calendar and email. I figured she worked for the company, and they didn't have a lot of money, so they probably didn't spend money on fancy apps."

"Did you say calendar?" Jo's attention was focused on Reese.

Reese smiled. "Yes, I did. The program figured out her password. It runs a bunch of combinations. And guess what. She *did* have an appointment that day."

Sam and Jo were across the room in a second, looking down at Reese's laptop screen. "You mean the day they all came to town, she wasn't just meeting with Noah?"

Reese tapped her finger on the screen. "That was the twelfth, right? Look at where it says, 'meeting 1 PM. R. B.'"

"R. B.?" Jo screwed up her face. "Unless R. B. is code for mauling Noah near the dumpster, it looks like Amber might have been right about Lynn being up to something."

SAM WALKED UP Main Street toward the antiques store. Julie had said she'd seen Lynn heading in that direction and that Lynn collected antique marbles. No marbles had been found in her belongings, but it was possible she didn't find anything in the store that she wanted to add to her collection.

But while Julie had said that she'd seen Lynn walk up toward the antiques store, Tara had said she'd seen her in the alley next to O'Malley's. Could she have been in both places? It was possible since they had been downtown for an hour. But what about the appointment with R. B.? Would she have had time for all three?

The bell on the antique oak door of the shop jangled as Sam opened it. Inside, Clara Weatherby looked up at him from behind the counter. She looked the same as she always did, with snow-white hair, a deeply wrinkled

face, and a generous smile. Sam guessed Clara to be about eighty. She'd always owned the antique shop, and he'd known her since he was a little boy.

"Samuel! How lovely to see you. Have you decided to take up collecting? Start a collection now, and leave some family heirlooms for your lovely girls."

Sam chuckled. Antique collecting wasn't really his thing. He was more of a minimalist. "Not today, Clara. Today I have some questions."

"Hopefully, I have the answers."

"I was wondering if a tourist came in recently. A young woman looking for marbles." Sam leaned on the glass display case Clara used as a counter while she thought.

Clara frowned. "I don't recall anything like that. And you know I have a sharp memory."

Clara's memory was legendary. If someone had come looking for a cobalt-blue Meissen teapot in 1950, she'd remember it to the day and be able to supply that teapot even if she came across it decades later. He didn't doubt that Clara would remember if Lynn had been in there.

"Did you work every day this week?" he asked. Clara had a few part-time helpers that manned the store when she went to estate sales and auctions.

"Yep. No auctions for me to attend this week, so I've been behind the counter every day. If you're asking if the girl came in this week, I can assure you she didn't."

Sam thanked Clara and left. Someone had lied about the marbles, but he didn't know if it was Julie that had lied or if Lynn had lied to Julie. Why would Lynn lie?

She clearly did have a meeting and apparently hadn't told any of her coworkers. But why keep it a secret? And who was R. B.?

Several of them had said that Lynn had headed in the direction of the antiques store. That didn't mean she stopped there, though. Maybe if he continued down the street, something would jump out at him.

Sam walked slowly, looking down the side streets and into the shops. He wasn't just trying to figure out where Lynn might have really gone—he was also looking for any sign of Lucy.

He'd gotten attached to the dog in the short time he'd known her. He hated thinking about her trying to survive out on the streets alone. Up here,

there was a lot of wildlife that could be dangerous to dogs, and winter temperatures dipped well below zero.

Reese's announcement of how Lucy could be euthanized had chilled him. Maybe Sam could find someone that would take her. One of his daughters or his ex-wife? Maybe even Mick.

At the end of the street was a plain-looking gray concrete building. In Sam's opinion, it was the ugliest building in town. It hadn't been built in the early 1900s like the rest of Main Street and didn't have the fine architectural details the other buildings had. This one had been built around 1970 and was made of giant concrete blocks that would have been more at home in an inner city than in a quaint New England town.

Sam never paid much attention to the building, and not just because of its looks. It was loaded with lawyers and accountants. He didn't get along with many lawyers in town, especially the ones that defended those who broke the law.

He was about to turn back when the black-and-gold sign listing the occupants caught his eye. One occupant in particular. Richard Bannister Funding. R. B.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Richard Bannister's office was on the second floor. Sam took the stairs. Richard was about twelve years younger than Sam, but Sam had known his family since he was a kid. He remembered him as a somewhat chubby and awkward but happy kid running around at town cookouts and riding his bike up and down the streets.

Judging by the mahogany furniture, thick burgundy rug, and receptionist in the foyer of his office suite, Richard had done well for himself.

Sam wasn't wearing his police uniform, just the windbreaker with the White Rock Police insignia, his jeans, and a blue button-down shirt, so he flashed his badge at the receptionist.

"Is Mr. Bannister in?"

Her eyes widened at his badge. She had nice eyes. Light blue, with just a hint of dark mascara. Her outfit was a tailored suit. She looked worried.

"Is there some trouble?" she asked.

"Not at all." Sam introduced himself. "Sam Mason. Chief of police, but I'm sort of a family friend. Just here to ask a question or two."

Her relief was palpable. She pressed a button on the phone and announced that Sam was there.

She stood. "Right this way."

Sam followed her to a mahogany door with a large brass handle, which she opened to reveal a man in his late twenties sitting behind a gigantic desk. The awkward, chubby kid was gone. Richard had grown up to be trim and full of self-confidence. He still seemed happy.

He stood and came around the desk, extending his hand, a smile on his face. "Sam. Good to see you."

The two men shook hands. Richard didn't seem at all nervous, not that Sam expected him to be. Just because Lynn had met with him the day she died didn't mean he had anything to do with her death. Didn't mean it didn't have something to do with it either.

Sam wondered why Richard wouldn't seem a little nervous, knowing someone he'd met with had died shortly after the meeting and now the chief of police was standing in his office. Then again, maybe Richard wasn't the R. B. that had been on Lynn's calendar.

Richard gestured for Sam to sit, and he sank into a soft, buttery leather chair that leaned back easily without squeaking. Sam wondered if he should upgrade the ancient chair in his own office as Richard sat back down behind the desk.

"I suppose this isn't just a social call," Richard said.

"Why's that?"

"You're here about Lynn Palmer, right?" Richard spun in his chair to look out the big windows that looked away from town, toward the mountains in the distance. He sucked in a breath. "Terrible thing what happened to her. We were friends in college. She was a nice girl. Smart. Do you know who did it?"

"I have some suspicions." Sam leaned forward in his chair. "So you did meet with her that day?"

"Sure." Richard shrugged. "Is that some kind of a secret?"

"Apparently. When did you meet with her?"

Richard looked down at the appointment book that lay open on his desk. "From noon until quarter to one."

"Why was she here?"

Richard looked surprised, as if Sam should've known. "She was looking to get funding for her company. Hey, look, if I was supposed to come down and tell you that I met with her, I'm sorry. I figured you would've known and come to ask if you had a question."

Sam leaned back in the chair. "Were you able to give her money?"

Richard's face darkened. "Unfortunately, I wasn't. I'm just a little guy. I don't have a lot of capital. That's why I fund the smaller companies. But I don't have extra funds to get into anything too risky, even if they do offer a

high rate of return, and to tell you the truth, her company was just a bit too risky for my comfort level."

"Why's that?"

"The balance sheet. That company had way too many expenses for the income." Richard spread his hands. "I told her to tighten up expenses and come back and see me in six months." His face turned sad, and he looked down at the desk. "I guess that won't be happening now."

It made sense. The company wasn't doing well, and Lynn wanted more money. An influx of cash might help to fund a more lucrative project. But why didn't she tell any of the others? Was there someone in the company that wouldn't want her to get outside funding?

SAM WALKED SLOWLY BACK to the station, his mind turning over the particulars of the case. It made sense that Lynn was looking for funding given that sales had taken a downturn, but why had she kept it a secret?

Pedestrian traffic downtown was light, but still there was no sign of Lucy. Opening the large oak doors into the marbled foyer of the police station, he half expected to see the dog lying beside Reese's desk. But she wasn't. Somehow, the station seemed sad and empty without her.

Jo was sitting on the edge of her desk, studying the corkboard with the pictures of Lynn's belongings. She looked over at him, one brow raised. "Did you find Lucy?"

"No, but I found something else," Sam said.

"At the antiques store?"

"No. Well, I did discover that no one came in looking for marbles that day. Then, when I left the store, I noticed the sign on the ugly concrete building." Sam jerked his chin in the direction of the end of Main Street where the building jutted out from in between two others. "Richard Bannister. He does investment funding for small companies."

Jo crossed her arms over her chest. "The R. B. from her calendar?"

"One and the same." Sam told her about the conversation he'd had with Richard. "Turns out they're old friends from college, so when Lynn needed money, she looked him up."

"That's why she insisted on having the camping trip here," Jo said.

"Yep."

"So she really did have an appointment. Amber wasn't lying."

"Not about that."

Jo frowned. "But if Lynn was meeting with Richard, how could she have been in the alley with Noah?"

"It's possible. They were in town for an hour, and the meeting with Richard only lasted forty-five minutes, according to Richard. What I want to know is why didn't anyone else in the company know that she was going for funding? I think we need to ask a few more questions of our friendly campers." Sam looked around. "Where's Reese?"

Jo pointed at the door. "She stepped out to meet one of her classmates. Said he might have information on that fingerprint."

Sam frowned. "And where's Kevin?"

Jo made a show of looking at her watch. "It's six p.m. He's already gone home."

The door opened, and Reese breezed in. "I have some good news and some bad news."

"Give me the good news first," said Sam.

"The good news is my classmate was able to take your prints from the glass and run them against the partial that we found in the stolen car without logging it in officially. He logged the use in along with one of his class assignments."

"And the bad news?"

"Bad news is none of them were a match."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sam and Jo had a lot to discuss with the new information and the disappointing results on the fingerprint. But Tyler's empty desk sitting in the corner was too depressing. They headed to the bar.

It was a weeknight, so Holy Spirits wasn't as crowded as it would be on the weekend. There was plenty of room up at the bar, and Jo slipped into a seat on the corner, with Sam to her right.

They ordered beers and fries. Jo thought about her fish. She'd named him Finn, and so far, he'd seemed quite happy in his little glass-bowl world on her counter. Luckily, she didn't have to rush home to feed him or let him out, as she would've if she'd had a dog.

Her chest tightened with thoughts of Lucy. Hopefully, she was doing okay out on her own. There was no way Jo could handle having a pet that required that kind of commitment right now. Having a dog would be almost like having a person that counted on her, and Jo didn't want that. Finn was plenty of responsibility for now.

"Have you looked at any of those resumes that Dupont brought over?" She dragged a french fry through a puddle of ketchup and popped it into her mouth.

Sam took a swig of his beer. "You know, I don't really feel much like hiring someone. I mean, who could replace Tyler?"

"I know what you mean, but we *are* shorthanded. Kevin doesn't want the job." Jo picked at her beer label and looked at Sam out of the corner of her eye. "If you ask me, it might be a good thing he didn't want it."

Sam leaned back in his chair, his brows tugging together. "Why do you say that?"

Jo didn't know how much she wanted to reveal. Just seeing Kevin come out of Lago when the mayor and Thorne both were inside didn't prove a thing. But she couldn't help the strange flutter in the center of her chest. It was a warning feeling that told her to be cautious around Kevin. Seemed like he was hiding something.

Then again, Jo had her own things she was hiding and wouldn't want Sam digging too closely into them. Maybe she shouldn't raise his suspicions about Kevin. His secrets might have nothing to do with their work, just as Jo's didn't. "He's just not as enthusiastic about police work as we are, or as Tyler was."

Sam nodded and hunched back over his beer. "Yeah, I know what you mean."

Mick slipped into the seat around the corner of the bar next to Sam. No sooner had his butt hit the leather chair than a drink appeared in front of him. He really had Billie trained.

Mick leaned toward Jo and Sam. "Did you run the print?"

"Yeah. Bad news. It didn't match."

"It didn't?" Mick pressed his lips together and shook his head. "I know there's something funny going on there. It just adds up. The woman has a grandson into drugs. Drugs are found in the car. There's got to be a connection." He downed his drink in one swallow. "What about your other case? You guys look pretty down in the dumps. Things not going good?"

"Got a few new leads. But they're confusing." Sam took another swig.

"Anything I can help with?" Mick reached across Sam and snagged a fry. Sometimes they used Mick when they needed to get information that they couldn't acquire in their official capacity, but with the Palmer case, Jo knew they couldn't risk anything that wasn't on the up and up. Not at this point.

Sam shook his head.

"What about your girlfriend?" Mick asked.

Jo almost choked on a fry. Sam had a girlfriend? She coughed and punched her fist in the center of her chest where a strange pang had surfaced.

"When did you find time to get a girlfriend?" She hoped her voice sounded casual. It wasn't that she minded Sam having a girlfriend. Not as if

she was jealous or anything. But, somewhere deep down inside, she was afraid a girlfriend might change their work friendship. And her work friendship with Sam was about all she had in the way of human relationships. She really needed to get out more.

Mick stood and slapped some money on the bar. "Yeah, she's a real looker too. Brown eyes, black-and-brown hair, four nice legs. She could use a little shave, though."

"Oh, you mean Lucy." Jo laughed. "Have you seen her tonight? She ran off from the police station earlier today."

"Haven't seen her, but I'll keep an eye out," Mick said. "In the meantime, I'm going to dig a little further into this Bartles kid. I know there's a connection."

"Thanks, Mick," Sam said as Mick sauntered out of the bar.

Sam finished his beer and signaled for another. Jo pushed the basket of fries to him and swiveled her chair to face out into the bar, her elbows on the bar top, feet swinging slightly in front of her.

The bar was mostly empty. Two couples sat in the pews at one of the long tables near the door, burgers loaded up with specialty fixings in front of them. Jo could smell sautéed onions and figured one of them must have ordered the Alps Burger. It was her favorite, smothered in sautéed onions and Swiss cheese.

A couple sat at one of the round tables, their chairs pushed close together. Two tables over, four local guys sat with beers in front of them. Jo knew them all.

"The Palmer case is getting stranger and stranger. Why didn't Lynn tell anyone she was meeting with Richard? And what about her phone? Did the killer throw that in the river because there might be evidence on it, or did it fall in by accident?" she asked.

"Good question. Maybe if we ever get the information from Verizon, we'll find out if there was something else on there the killer might not want anyone to know about." Sam ate a fry.

"What if the killer wanted to hide the fact that she had that appointment or hide any calls or texts between her and Richard? They might not have realized she used an online app to schedule the appointment or that we could get her phone information from her cell phone carrier."

"Lots of people don't know about that. Doesn't help us narrow things down."

Jo turned back facing the bar and picked at her beer label some more. It had gotten nice and soggy and peeled off easily. "Sure do have a lot of things to puzzle over. There's the meeting with Richard."

"And there's Tara seeing Lynn with Noah right around the same time."

"And Noah and Amber were both acting sketchy about where they were the night of Lynn's death."

"And Lynn borrowed Tara's bra?" Sam scrunched up his face and looked at Jo. "Do girls do that? And why would she want a fancy bra if she wasn't having a fling with Noah?"

Jo had never had a girlfriend that she was close enough to to borrow a bra from. "Some girls borrow each other's clothes all the time. I guess bras would be no exception. But Lynn might not have borrowed it because of Noah. Maybe there was someone else."

"True. And let's not forget Derek saw someone at Noah's tent that night. Could have been Noah sneaking out to meet Lynn."

"Or Amber." Jo leaned over the bar and fished behind it for another ketchup bottle, which she found exactly where she knew Billie kept it. She twisted off the cap and smacked the bottom until a blob oozed out onto the side of the french fry basket.

"Julie was the one that said she saw Lynn going to the antiques store, but Lynn never went there. Why would Julie say that?"

"Maybe Lynn just told her that's where she was going and Julie assumed. Lynn would've had to head in that direction, and if she didn't want anyone to know about the meeting with Richard, then she probably just *told* them she was going to the antiques store."

"Something doesn't add up. Why wouldn't Noah know that Lynn was meeting Richard for the financing? We need to talk to Noah. My guess is he's smack dab in the center of this."

Jo crunched down on a lukewarm ketchup-covered fry. "He does benefit directly from Lynn's death with getting the extra shares of the stock."

"Maybe the financing would have diluted his stock," Sam said. "They would have had to give Richard some shares in the company. Maybe Lynn did tell Noah about it. Maybe he didn't want it. He might really have been meeting Lynn that day and lied about it to cover up that he knew she was seeking financing."

"Seems like he had a good motive, but there might be more to the story, and we need to talk to Lynn's friends again, because Noah's not the only

one in that group that’s telling lies."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sam drove out to the campground first thing the next morning. The early-morning sun filtered through the leaves, giving the air a golden glow. Just beyond the campground, the river gurgled. Sam battled a swarm of black flies as he approached the campsite.

On the picnic table, Tara was preparing lunches. Jars of peanut butter and jelly sat on the table along with the six waterproof lunch sacks. Something about that bugged Sam. Their friend was dead, and they were going about business as usual. Didn't seem right.

Derek, who was backing out of his tent with a backpack, looked around at him quizzically. Tara stopped spreading jelly.

Julie finished spraying her arm with the bug spray and tossed the can to Sam, who spritzed himself.

Noah turned from the makeshift clothesline where he was taking down some pants. "Chief Mason? Have you found who… who did that to Lynn?"

"Not yet. But I have some interesting news." They'd all gathered closer to the picnic table, and Sam put his foot up on the bench, resting his arm on his knee and bending forward slightly.

"Seems that Lynn had seen an investor in town. She was trying to get more funding for the company. Did you all know that?" Sam studied the faces. They all seemed surprised. Thing was, he knew that at least a few of them were accomplished liars, and he couldn't tell if they had already known and were covering, or if they were truly surprised.

"She never said anything to me, but we didn't normally discuss company finances. I was just a programmer," Julie said. "Was that the

appointment she had?"

Sam nodded then turned to Tara. "What about you? You're the CFO, aren't you?"

Tara shrugged, slowly screwing the top back on the peanut butter. "I didn't know anything about it. You mean she saw someone here in town?"

Sam nodded then turned his gaze on Noah. Amber stepped a little closer to Noah, glancing up at him uncertainly. "What about you, Noah? You guys owned the company together. Surely she would've discussed this with you?"

"She didn't. That can't be true. I'm sure she would have told me." Noah did look confused, but he could be an accomplished liar.

Sam slid his foot off the bench and stood. "Lynn getting financing could cause a problem, right?"

"Why would it cause a problem?" Noah asked quickly. His posture turned defensive. "We needed money. Nobody's made that a secret. And what does this have to do with her death, anyway? Why are you acting like you suspect us? We're her friends—none of *us* did it."

Sam wasn't anywhere near sure of that, but it was never good to tip your hand. He simply nodded slightly then looked at Noah. "Maybe it would be better if we talked further over there." He jerked his head toward the Tahoe.

Noah's eyes darted around to the others, then he broke from the pack and headed toward the Tahoe.

They leaned against the front of the car, Sam placing himself so that he could see Noah as well as the others at the campground. He didn't know who was lying, and he wanted to see their reactions to him taking Noah out and talking to him privately. If one of them had something to hide, they might show it in their actions.

"Does Amber know you were getting back together with Lynn?" Sam asked.

"What?" Noah's face scrunched up. "I wasn't getting back together with Lynn." He glanced back at the crowd nervously.

Amber was watching them, practically craning her neck to be able to overhear. Tara had gone back to making sandwiches. Derek and Joshua were sitting at the table, and Julie was stuffing the bug spray into her backpack.

"Really? One of your friends over there saw you in a compromising position with her in the alley in town the day she was killed," Sam said.

"What? Who said that? That's crazy! I was in O'Malley's pub with Derek and Josh."

"So you said. But Derek and Josh were playing pool and can't swear that you were actually in the pub the whole time."

Noah pushed his hands through his sandy-colored hair. "I was there. Why would I meet with Lynn? We broke up a long time ago."

"Really?" Sam said. "That's funny, because Derek says he saw someone sneaking around your tent the night Lynn was killed. Amber seemed a little uncertain when she verified you had been in the tent all night."

Noah's eyes shifted to the left, his jaw tightening.

Sam continued. "So when someone else said they saw you with Lynn in the alley, and given the fact that you are benefiting from her death by getting all the shares of the company, I figured you must've known she was going for financing. Then I figured maybe getting financing was a double-edged sword for you. It would water down your shares, but your company needed it to survive. Then again, if Lynn was out of the way and you owned all the shares, the watering down might not be so bad."

Noah's face showed increasing stages of horror as Sam relayed this information.

Sam kept going. He wasn't entirely convinced Noah was the killer, but Noah was lying about something, and Sam wanted to see if he could scare the truth out of him. "The way I figure it is that you *did* meet with Lynn. Maybe first you were trying to smooth-talk her out of the financing. But when that didn't work, you had to take more drastic measures. Derek *did* see you that night. You snuck out of your tent and did what you had to do to protect your interests."

"No!" Noah shook his head vehemently. Glancing back at the group again, he stepped closer to Sam. "I wasn't meeting with Lynn. But it is true that I wasn't in my tent. Don't tell anyone, but I—"

The radio in the Tahoe squawked noisily to life, interrupting Noah's confession. Sam had turned his phone off just so he wouldn't get interrupted. He'd told Reese to call only if there was a dire emergency. He went around to the driver's-side door to grab the receiver, when Reese's panicked voice rang out, chilling his blood. "Sam. Emergency. There's been a dog hit down by the Pembroke Bridge."

Sam’s heart jerked. Lucy? He grabbed the mic and pressed the button. "German shepherd?"

"Sounds like it. Driver said she was still alive. You better get there fast."

Screw Noah. He would catch up with him later. Might be a good idea to let him stew on what Sam had told him, anyway. Better yet, if he told the others, the real killer might do something stupid and reveal themselves.

Right now, Sam’s quick actions might be the only thing that kept Lucy alive. He jumped into the Tahoe, flicked on the siren and lights, and screeched out of the campground toward the Pembroke Bridge.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sam screeched to a halt behind the old 1970s station wagon that was listing into the ditch on the side of the road with its flashers on. He jumped out of the Tahoe, bracing himself for the worst as he ran around to the front of the car.

There was no dog lying in the road.

"She just came out of nowhere!" a balding man, his belly protruding over his belt, pacing in front of his car with a worried look on his face, said. "I hope she's not hurt badly."

"Was it a big dog? Looked like a German shepherd and mixed with something big?" Sam asked.

The man nodded and pointed to the guardrail that ran along the road just before the bridge. "She ran off over there."

Beyond the guardrail, the Sacagewassett River flowed by at a fast clip. If Lucy had fallen into the river, she was probably already gone. Sam vaulted over the guardrail and scrambled down the embankment, rocks clattering into the river as he went.

A high-pitched whine sounded to his left. Lucy was sitting next to a pile of debris that had accumulated at a bend in the river. Relief washed over him. She was sitting upright, so hopefully, she hadn't been hurt too badly. He didn't see any blood, but the lack of obvious external injuries didn't mean that she didn't have potentially fatal internal injuries. He'd better get her to the vet right away.

Sam squatted to her level. "Are you okay?"

Lucy trotted over, her brown eyes looking up at him. Sam checked her over, running his hands down her sides, her legs, and her chest. He didn't find any injuries except a small tear in her right ear.

"What happened? Did the car clip you here?" Sam asked.

"Woof!" Lucy broke away and trotted toward the debris.

"Hey, come back. I want to take you to the vet to get you looked after."

Lucy whined. Maybe she'd been hurt more than he thought. Maybe he could bribe her into going to the vet. "If you come with me, I'll get you one of Billie's burgers."

Lucy trotted up to Sam, nudged his hand, and then trotted back to the debris. She wasn't hurt. She was trying to tell him something.

Sam went over to the pile. There were empty soda bottles, cans, plastic bags, even part of a grocery cart. Sam hated to see the trash. He remembered a time when there was hardly any, but now the more people that came, the more trash there was.

Lucy was sniffing at something in the pile. It was soaking wet and filthy with dirt, but Sam could see it had once been white. The little pink bow on it was hanging by a thread. A jolt kicked his chest. Sam reached into the debris and picked it up. The maker was Plain Jane.

"Sam? What the hell are you doing?"

Sam squinted up at Jo, who was standing at the top of the rock embankment. She must've heard the call for the accident and rushed down. She had her sunglasses off and a quizzical look on her face. Her eyes flicked from the bra to Sam.

He turned to face her, the bra dripping from his hand.

"I think Lucy just solved the case."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Jo took care of calming down the driver and sending him on his way while Sam brought Lucy to the vet. Lucy had only been grazed by the car, the tear in her ear the only injury. Sam called Reese with the good news and told her to assemble the campers in his office in two hours. He had a few things to check into first.

By the time they gathered in his office, it was just past noon. The campers sat nervously in extra chairs they'd brought in from the squad room. Lucy was out in the lobby, being fed a sumptuous meal of steak and carrots. Apparently, she preferred that to sitting in on Sam's big reveal.

Jo sat off to the side, her notepad in her lap, the eraser end of her pencil tapping on it rhythmically.

Kevin was in the room too. He stood silently by the door in his blue police uniform, his arms crossed over his chest in an intimidating manner. The campers kept glancing at him. It all added to setting them on edge, which was exactly the way Sam wanted them to feel. He knew the more nervous they got, the more apt they were to turn on each other.

Sam came around to the front of his desk, leaning his backside on it and looking down at the campers in their seats.

"Did you find out who killed Lynn?" Derek looked around at his friends and back up at Sam. "I mean, that's why you called us here, right?"

"That's right," Sam said. "Some new evidence has come to light, and I think I know exactly what happened the night Lynn died."

Sam walked back behind his desk, where they had taped up all the pictures from the investigation on a giant corkboard. There were pictures of

the pile of Lynn's clothes they had found in the woods, pictures of the contents of her duffel bag and what they'd found in her tent, and even pictures of her body as they'd found it in the river, which Sam noticed the girls studiously avoided looking at.

Sam pointed to the picture of the pile of clothing. "Lynn was wearing these clothes the night she died. But, for some reason, she took them off. To go swimming in the middle of the night? We didn't think so." He turned to face the campers. "Our theory was that she was meeting a lover. Something went wrong, and he killed her, then dragged her body down into the river and sent it downstream, hoping it would look like an accident."

"I knew it! It was that guy from the bar," Amber said.

Sam shook his head and pointed to a picture of a receipt. "No. That guy had an alibi. He was pumping gas at almost the exact time that Lynn was killed. There was no way he could've killed her, dragged her body to the river, and then run back to his car and driven to the gas station."

Their eyes flicked from the receipt to Sam's face. Julie spoke up. "Well, then it must've been someone else at the campground."

Sam stared at her. "Really? Was there someone else there? I talked to each of you, and no one mentioned anyone else with Lynn."

They shifted in their seats and looked at each other uneasily. "There were some other campers that we talked to a little, but I don't remember anyone else *with* her," Josh said.

"Me either," Derek added.

"But wait a minute. If it wasn't anyone else, that means it was one of us." Julie's eyes shifted around the group nervously.

"Precisely," Sam said. "Now, imagine our surprise when we discovered that Lynn had something in her will set up so that Noah would get her shares in the company. A fact that Noah conveniently forgot to tell us."

All heads turned toward Noah. His cheeks flushed crimson. "Of course she had that in her will. We agreed on that from the start. It wasn't a secret. I just didn't think it was important. That's why I never mentioned it. I didn't even think about it, actually."

"Well, it meant that you would gain from her death," Sam said. "And since she was trying to get financing for the company, maybe you either didn't want the financing or maybe, if she didn't tell you about it as you claim, she was going behind your back to gain a broader control of the

company. You'd broken up, so why would she want to share control with you? Maybe she wanted it all for herself."

The room was silent.

"That's why I was so confused when someone saw you and Lynn in a compromising position the day she died," Sam continued.

Amber made a squeaking noise and shot a look at Noah.

"I told you, I wasn't with Lynn. I was in the bar!" Noah started to get out of his chair, but a warning look from Kevin had him sitting back down quickly.

"Too bad no one can corroborate that. Derek and Josh had their eyes on the pool game. They can't say for sure that you really were in the bar." Sam walked the length of the whiteboard, looking at the pictures slowly. Then he turned to face them again. "And Derek saw someone by your tent at almost the same time Lynn was killed."

Everyone was quietly staring at Noah.

"In fact, we know Lynn was planning on meeting someone because she borrowed a fancy bra from Tara." Sam pointed to the red bra in the pile of clothes they'd found in the woods. "And when I took the statements from you and Amber, I had a sneaky suspicion that each of you was lying about being in that tent."

Amber turned on Noah. "You snuck out to meet her? How *could* you?"

Sam raised a brow at Noah. "So you weren't in the tent? Where were you? Did you sneak down to the beach with Lynn and kill her so that you could get control of the company?"

Noah shook his head frantically. "No! I wasn't with Lynn. I swear!" His eyes drifted over to Julie.

"That's right. He wasn't," Julie said softly. "He was in *my* tent with me. He couldn't have killed Lynn."

The others gasped, but Sam wasn't surprised. He stood in front of Julie, arms crossed over his chest. "And you're willing to swear to this? Why didn't you tell me before?"

"Yes. Of course." Julie looked at the others apologetically. "We didn't want anyone to know. Things just sort of happened, and Noah wanted to let Amber down gently. We didn't want to tell anyone yet because things were so awkward after Noah and Lynn broke up."

Sam looked at Amber. "That's why you faltered when we asked if you and Noah were both in the tent for the rest of the night, isn't it? You knew

Noah wasn’t in the tent."

Amber looked down at the floor. "Yes. I didn’t know where he was, and I didn’t want to think that he could kill Lynn. But I wasn’t gonna be the one to get him in trouble." She sniffed then scooted her chair away from Noah and fixed him with an angry glare. "Now I wish I *did* tell you."

Sam nodded slowly then turned to Derek. "And you saw someone at the tent, but you didn’t know what time it was. It could’ve been Noah sneaking off to Julie’s tent or slinking back to his own, couldn’t it?"

Derek shrugged. "I’m sorry. I just wasn’t looking at my watch or anything, so I have no idea. I was sneaking around myself."

"Then it could have been Amber, right?" Sam asked.

"Hey, now wait a minute!" Amber shot out of her chair. "I might have lied about Noah being in the tent, but I was in there the whole time. Why would I kill Lynn?"

"Jealousy?" Sam said then held his palm up. "Don’t worry. Now that we know Noah was meeting with Julie, we know it’s unlikely that you were the killer. If you’d left the tent to follow him, you would have seen him with Julie, and then you’d have no reason to kill Lynn." Sam made a motion for Amber to sit back down.

"Right." Amber sat.

Sam walked back over to the whiteboard. "Seems like there was a lot of sneaking around and lying going on with you people."

They shifted restlessly in their chairs.

"The day you all went into town, Julie said Lynn went to the antiques store."

"She did." Julie seemed mad.

"She collected antiques. Marbles," Noah said.

"But she didn’t go there. She went to see Richard Bannister about financing," Sam said.

"So this Richard Bannister guy was the lover she met that night on the beach where you found her clothes?" Josh asked.

"There was no lover. We think she was fully clothed and the killer took her clothes off after they killed her." Sam pointed to the picture of Lynn’s pants that clearly showed the tear in the fabric. "That’s how her pants got ripped. It’s not easy to get clothes off a dead body. The pants must have gotten ripped in the struggle. But the killer needed to get the clothes off and

pile them up to make us think she met a lover. They even left a little extra piece of clothing there to seal the deal… or because they had to."

Josh made a face. "They *had* to? What do you mean?"

Sam pointed to the picture of the bra he'd fished out of the river. "I found this downstream yesterday. It happens to be the same exact size and make of bra that we found in Lynn's duffel bag."

Amber scrunched up her face. "So what? A lot of people wear the same make and size of bra."

Sam crossed his arms over his chest. "Sure, but this one had Lynn's initials on it."

"But she was dragged into the river in her underwear. Her bra probably came off and floated downstream," Derek said.

"I'm sure it did." Sam turned back to the whiteboard and pointed again at the picture of the pile of clothing. "But how many people wear *two* bras?"

"What?"

"See, we found a bra in the pile of clothing, too." Sam tapped the picture that showed the bra. "Derek's right, though, the bra did come off when the killer was putting her in the river. It couldn't have been easy to drag her in deep enough so she would float in the current. The bra must have come unhooked and floated away before the killer noticed. And that presented a problem for the killer."

"How so?" Josh asked. "I mean, the bra could have come off while she was meeting this supposed lover."

"True," Sam said. "Except the killer's initial plan was to pretend that Lynn died by accident. It was a pretty good plan, too. Everyone knew that Lynn swam alone at night. She'd been drinking, so it was plausible that she could have gone for a swim, slipped and hit her head, then died in the river. If her death had been ruled an accident as the killer planned, there would have been no investigation, and the killer would have gotten off scot-free."

Sam paused, watching them as it sank in.

"The problem was that everyone knew that Lynn swam in just her underwear. So if she took her clothes off to go for a swim, that pile would have a bra in it. In fact, the absence of a bra would be suspicious. So the killer did something she probably thought was very clever. She put one of her own bras into the pile. Later on, when things didn't go according to plan and the death was ruled as a murder, she even used that as part of her plan B

—to make it look like Lynn was meeting a lover." Sam turned to Tara. "She even told us she'd loaned Lynn the bra herself."

Tara sucked in a breath. "I did. I wasn't lying. Why would I want to kill Lynn?"

"Ahh... That is the question. I'll get to that." Sam went back to the whiteboard. "Julie said she'd seen Lynn going to the antiques store the day you all went into town."

"She told me that's where she was going," Julie said. "When I saw her head in that direction, I just assumed…"

"Right. But she wasn't going to the antiques store. I checked. Her real destination was at the end of the street. Because at the end of the street was an old friend of hers, Richard Bannister. He invests in small companies like yours."

"But why would she be secretive about that? Why not tell us?" Noah asked.

Sam had wondered about that himself. "That, I do not know. Maybe she was afraid the funding wouldn't go through and she didn't want to get people's hopes up. But there was one person here who I think already knew the funding wouldn't go through. Isn't that right, Tara?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tara looked at her friends imploringly. "He's making this up. He's just trying to pin this murder on me so that he can close the case."

Sam ignored her. "When Tara's plan to make the death look like an accident didn't work, she tried to blame Jesse. And when she found out he had an alibi, she tried to implicate Noah. She said in her statement that she saw Lynn and Noah kissing in the alley next to O'Malley's."

Noah let out an exasperated sigh. "For the millionth time, I was *not* meeting Lynn."

"I know that." Sam pointed at the picture of another receipt. "She couldn't have seen you meeting Lynn in the alley because she was three streets over, buying a purse."

"I saw them before that!" Tara was becoming irate, exactly as Sam had planned. People always said too much when they got pissed off.

"The timing doesn't match," Sam said. "Lynn's meeting with Bannister was from twelve until twelve forty-five. So she couldn't have been meeting Noah then."

"It was after that." Tara spat the words out. Sam noticed everyone was leaning away from her.

"You couldn't have seen them," Sam said. "According to Julie, you left the secondhand store around twelve forty and went to Fern's. You were on foot, so it takes about five minutes. But Fern's is two streets over. You can't see the alley next to O'Malley's from there. And Josh said you were meeting them. You rushed over from Fern's, and everyone was already gathered on the sidewalk."

Noah narrowed his eyes at Tara. "Tara, is this true? Why would you do this?"

Tara's eyes darted back and forth between all her friends. They all had strange looks on their faces, as if they were starting to see that what Sam was saying made sense. The clues were starting to sink in, and she wasn't going to be able to wriggle her way out of this. He gave the final blow.

"Tara had a reason. When Lynn met with Richard, he told her he couldn't give your company more financing because your expenses were too high for your income. But I think the truth was, if you look at the company books, you'll see some of those expenses were overinflated." Sam tapped the receipt from Fern's. "Tara had expensive tastes, like this three-hundred-dollar purse." He gestured to her outfit. "She's wearing expensive camping gear, and I noticed her backpack on the first day, as it's a very expensive model."

"I don't have to listen to this!" Tara tried to get out of her chair, but Josh held her arm, his fingers making white marks in her flesh.

"I think you do. We all do." Josh's voice was tinged with sadness.

"Naturally, after Lynn talked to Richard, she would have approached Tara. She's the CFO. She would know about the finances."

"Tara never said anything about that." Noah looked at Josh. "Did she say anything to you?"

Josh shook his head sadly.

"Of course she didn't," Sam said. "Tara couldn't have an audit happening. She was embezzling from the company."

"Now, wait a minute," Noah said. "If Lynn knew about that, she would have told me."

"I don't think Lynn knew. But if she wanted the financing, they would have to scrutinize expenses. So she must have mentioned that to Tara, and it must have been that night. It was probably the only time she had her alone

after she talked to Richard. Maybe she still didn’t want to tell the rest of you until she was sure of what would happen with the financing."

Tara must have been out of excuses—she sat there silently.

Sam continued. "I’m not sure how it happened. I imagine Tara tried to talk her out of doing an audit, and Lynn insisted. Maybe Tara snuck up on her later that night in the woods, or maybe she lured her there. Or maybe Lynn didn’t mention the audit until that night when they were on the beach and it erupted into an argument. Tara hit her with a rock on the beach and killed her then pulled her clothes off to make it look like she had an accident while swimming. But her bra must have floated away, and her pants got snagged. Tara shoved her in the river, tossed the phone in after her, then folded up her clothes and added her own bra so no one would notice one article of clothing was missing. Isn’t that right, Tara?"

Tara dissolved into tears. "I didn’t mean any harm. I was just borrowing the money. I was gonna pay it back when we released the new game and were all rolling in the dough."

She looked up at her friends through her tears, begging them to believe her, but now they were all pushing their chairs back away from her. "I didn’t mean to kill her, but she accused me, and we argued, and then we started fighting. The next thing I knew, I had smashed her with a rock. I had to do something. So I pushed her into the water, hoping it would look like an accident. I threw the phone in too so no one would see if she had calls from that finance guy."

Josh buried his face in his hands. The others looked stunned.

"No. I don’t believe it." Noah looked at Tara in disgust. "And you tried to blame it on me?"

"Unfortunately, we have the evidence to prove it. And now a confession." Sam nodded to Kevin, and he went over to Tara, taking her elbow, gently lifting her from the chair. He read her her rights as he walked her out of the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Kevin glanced in the rearview mirror at the redhead in the backseat of the police car. She'd cried for a while at first but was quiet now, looking out the window. Accepting her fate.

The White Rock police station was too small to keep anyone overnight. They only had one cell, and it was used rarely. Mostly for drunks to sleep it off. But this girl would be locked up until she could go before a judge, and Sam had asked him to drive her to the county jail. Sam had never asked him to do that before—usually he relied on Jo or Tyler.

Sam had never asked him to sit in on an interrogation before, either. Pride warred with regret in Kevin's chest. Did Sam trust him and want him to be part of the team?

Would Kevin's little side job put that in jeopardy?

Watching Sam get the redhead to confess had been interesting. He admired the way Sam went about it. Forcing her hand into admitting she'd done it. Kevin could learn a lot from Sam, and it had felt good to be in on things for once instead of sitting on the sidelines.

And now he felt guilty because passing along that information he'd been paid to look for felt like spying on Sam and Jo. It felt like a betrayal.

The information wasn't anything that would hurt Sam or Jo. It was just general stuff. Stuff that might help them, or at least that was what Kevin wanted to think. Especially if Sam and Jo weren't doing anything wrong. And he was pretty sure they weren't.

But if his contact was right and Sam and Jo and Tyler had been a part of something that wasn't on the up and up, then he didn't want to be an insider

in their little club. It was his duty to expose that, right?

Something sharp unfurled in his chest, obliterating his earlier cozy feelings of inclusion. He wasn't really sure who wanted that information. The large sum of money he'd been offered had been enough for him to accept with no questions asked. But he had to wonder if the sheriff's department or state police would be paying him so much money. Did they even pay officers on the side like that? Heck, he hadn't even really given them much information yet at all, and they still kept sending money.

The redhead's sorrowful sniffle caught his attention, and he looked in the rearview mirror again. According to what he'd heard in Sam's office, the girl had screwed over her friends. And now she looked miserable. She'd lost her friends and her freedom. Kevin just hoped what he'd done wouldn't end with similar consequences.

AFTER KEVIN HAULED TARA AWAY, the campers sat in Sam's office in disbelief. None of them had wanted to believe they had a killer in their midst. Sam wasn't surprised—you never knew what was lurking around underneath the surface when it came to people. When they finally left, they said they were planning to pack up and head home. None of them had any enthusiasm for camping.

Reese had just taken Lucy out for a walk when Kevin came back. The three of them leaned against Jo's desk, coffee mugs in hand. Jo passed around the donut bag.

"So I was wondering. How did finding the bra in the river help you figure things out?" Kevin asked.

Sam thought he saw something flicker in the officer's eyes that he hadn't seen before. Interest. Sam realized that was one of the reasons he'd never really taken to Kevin. He'd never seemed interested in the cases. Until now. Maybe it was because Sam had never included him as he had in the office here. Might be a smart idea to include him more often.

"Actually, I should've figured it out earlier. When we were at the campsite after we discovered the body, Tara was making lunches for the campers. She only had six lunches," Sam said.

"So? They were going hiking, right? Makes sense they would be making lunches," Kevin said.

"Sure. Except there were seven campers. Why was Tara only making six lunches? Because she knew one of the campers wouldn't be joining them."

"Why even make the lunches?" Jo asked. "She had to have known that Lynn would be discovered missing. Even if the body washed downriver and wasn't found, they wouldn't have gone hiking if she was missing."

Sam shrugged. "Keep up appearances, I guess. She couldn't very well refuse to make the sandwiches. Then everyone would know something was up. She must have been not thinking straight and subconsciously not made one for Lynn since she knew Lynn wouldn't be eating lunch that day."

Jo squeezed her donut in the middle, causing a blob of jelly to poke out of the hole. She swiped at it with her finger then licked it off. "Yeah, but there was no motive for Tara. At least not that we could figure, so why would we be scrutinizing everything she did? I wouldn't beat myself up for not noticing that."

"The signs were there. Company doing badly. Tara was the CFO." Sam chewed his donut thoughtfully. "She was very clever, though. When her initial plan of making it look like an accident didn't work, she adapted pretty quickly. Like how she told us that Lynn borrowed her bra. She knew she put it in the pile. Probably, no one would have noticed that if Lynn's death had been ruled accidental, but with us asking questions, she was afraid it might come up, and telling us Lynn borrowed it was the perfect way to explain it being there."

"Not to mention it gave her extra ammunition to push her lie about Lynn and Noah," Jo said.

"Too bad she didn't know we could get Lynn's phone records." Kevin held up a sheet of paper that was on his desk. "Verizon finally came through, and Lynn *had* made calls to Richard Bannister. We would've tracked him down eventually and found out about the company's troubles."

"Yeah, Reese really helped speed things up with that one." Jo looked at Sam pointedly. "She might be a little green, but I think she's a great asset to the team."

"Agreed. Maybe we should give her more to do." Sam glanced at the piles of resumes that were still on the corner of Jo's desk. "I suppose we still have to hire someone new, though."

He glanced at Kevin just in case the officer had changed his mind about coming on full time. Kevin looked away.

The door opened, and Dupont entered. Instead of his usual scowling face, he looked almost jovial.

"Congratulations on solving the Palmer case! This is wonderful news." He clapped Sam on the back, and Sam nodded and stepped away. He still didn't trust Dupont and didn't need his praise.

"I hope it brings some closure to her parents," Sam said.

"I've talked to them. They are relieved. Of course, they're upset that it was a friend of Lynn's but glad that justice will be done." Dupont glanced over at Tyler's desk and back at Sam. "How are the new hires coming along?"

"We've been kind of too busy solving this case to interview people, but now that it's over, I guess I'll have to start weeding through the resumes." Sam put the donut down. Suddenly, he didn't have an appetite.

"Good. I want to make sure this town is in tiptop shape. Show the citizens that I keep crime to a minimum here and that I'm the best man for the job of mayor," Dupont said.

Across from Sam, Kevin's eyes widened. He was facing the door, and Sam turned around too late to see Reese coming in with Lucy. Lucy saw Dupont and growled, her hackles rising.

Dupont whirled around.

"Have you people been keeping this dog here?" He jerked his head back in Sam's direction. "I thought I told you to get rid of her. It won't do to have dogs in the police station. I'm running for reelection, and I can't have any blemish on my reputation."

Sam didn't give a crap about Dupont's reputation and was about to say so when Reese cut in.

"Oh, don't worry about that, Mayor Dupont," Reese said.

"Don't give me any bullshit about bringing her to the shelter. You people have told me that twice already. Now, I want to tell you there are no—"

"It's not that," Reese interrupted him, but in the nicest way possible. She went over to her computer and hit a few keys. The printer hummed to life and spit out a page. Reese grabbed it and held it up. "I thought you knew. We've been accepted for a K-9 LEAP grant. Lucy is an official K-9 dog now."

Dupont ripped the paper out of Reese's hand and glowered at it. "K-9 program? That costs the town money. I don't remember authorizing this."

"Actually, it's a grant. It won't cost any taxpayer money from the town. In fact, I've talked to a bunch of people in town, and they are very impressed with how you were able to get this extra resource for the town without having to raise taxes." Reese smiled at Dupont. "Very clever of you."

Dupont's demeanor faltered. "They are?"

"Yes. Everyone knows that Lucy was instrumental in solving this last murder. Having her here as a resource will be a great asset to the town and help keep crime levels low."

Dupont cleared his throat. "Well, I see what you mean."

He looked down at Lucy and held a tentative hand out toward her. The dog eyed him suspiciously but gave his hand an obligatory sniff.

"Very well, then." Dupont tapped his lips with his finger. "Maybe this is something I should play out in my campaign. People like dogs, right?"

"Absolutely, they do," Reese said.

"Good. Well, carry on." Dupont exited, and Jo turned back to Reese.

"What was that all about? Did you make that up?"

Reese laughed. "No. Remember the other day when we were talking and you said it was too bad we couldn't hire Lucy?"

"Yeah, but I was joking."

"That got me thinking. I know other precincts have K-9 dogs, and I did some research and asked around at school. It turns out there's a grant program. So I took the initiative to apply." Reese looked sheepishly at Sam. "I hope you don't mind me doing it without asking, but you were busy with the case, and I figured it was a long shot, so I didn't want to get anyone's hopes up."

"I don't mind at all. But how did you get it past the mayor's office? Don't they have to sign off on this?" Sam asked.

"Sure they do, but I have a friend who works in city hall, and she just happened to put the paperwork in along with a bunch of other paperwork, and Henley Jamison, the vice mayor, rubber-stamped it. Then I have another friend who's really good with computers, and we managed to, um... fast-track the application."

Sam narrowed his gaze. "Fast-track? How did you do that?"

Reese grimaced. "Well, I—"

Sam held up his palm. "Never mind. I don’t want to know. The important thing is you got it done."

Reese beamed. "Now Lucy can be here officially all day. We don’t have to take her to the shelter. She could stay here in the cell, or someone can take her home at night. And she won’t be alone all day while we’re at work. Plus, she really did help out. The grant pays for dog food, a bulletproof dog vest, even a dog bed."

"Excellent work." Sam squatted down, and Lucy trotted over. Maybe it was his imagination, but her fur looked a little shinier today. The rip in her ear looked to be healing.

Jo crouched down beside him and scratched Lucy’s neck. Even Kevin bent down to pet the dog. Sam glanced back at Tyler’s empty desk in the corner, then at his crew now huddled around Lucy. They were happy, laughing. Even the dog was smiling. Maybe things were looking up for the White Rock Police Department.

EPILOGUE

Two weeks later...

SAM PUSHED the stack of resumes onto Jo's desk, nudging the white donut bag aside. "I want you to look through these. I only see three applicants who would be good for the job, but I want to get your take on it."

"Sure thing." Jo leaned back in her chair, slapping her feet up on the open desk drawer. Things had been quiet since they'd closed the Palmer murder case.

They'd had the usual small-town disturbances. Finding the owners of lost pets, arbitrating problems between neighbors, even solving the fascinating case of the missing milk bottles from Mrs. Murphy's steps. It turned out some bored kids had been playing pranks on her.

But, even though it was quiet, things were looming in the future.

"You going to the town council meeting tonight?" Jo asked as if sensing Sam's gloomy thoughts.

That night, the town council was meeting on a rezoning law. Thorne wanted to rezone a parcel of land he'd purchased so he could continue on the build-out of his resort. Sam was alarmed at the rate that Thorne was buying up properties from the old-timers. He suspected there might be some strong-arming or at least hard persuasion going on to get that land but had no way to prove it.

"You bet. I don't know who Dupont thinks he's kidding. He can't keep influencing the council members so that Thorne can ruin the land and build

more hotels and restaurants."

"Tell me about it." Jo glanced out the window. "The scenery is so beautiful here. I'd hate to see it turn into a city."

"It's not gonna. Not if I can help it."

"*Woof.*"

"Even Lucy agrees." Sam crouched down and patted the dog. Lucy was now a permanent fixture due to the grant. Dupont had stopped complaining about her when he'd seen how much the locals loved the idea of a police dog in town.

For Dupont, it was all about the votes, but in this case it also worked in Sam's favor. Of course, Dupont had taken the credit for getting the K-9 grant. Reese played along—she was happy just to have saved Lucy.

Sam had taken to bringing Lucy home with him. He'd gotten accustomed to having the dog as company. She was better company than either of his ex-wives, just as Mick had predicted. She never talked back, was always happy to see him, and didn't expect him to take her out to dinner.

Jo opened the manila folder and started shuffling through the resumes. "I don't know. It seems disloyal somehow to be hiring someone else in Tyler's place."

They both glanced over at the empty desk. Lucy must have agreed with them. She trotted over and started sniffing around then looked back at Sam and whined.

"I know. Even Lucy senses the loss. But we have to fill the opening," Sam said. "Maybe we can get a different desk for the new person."

"*Woof.*" Lucy scratched at the corner of the desk.

"Are you hungry?" Sam glanced at her dish. He'd fed her just a few hours ago.

Lucy kept scratching and looking back at Sam with those whiskey-brown eyes as if she was trying to tell him something.

"Looks like she's after something," Jo said. "Did you ever clean out Tyler's desk?"

Sam nodded solemnly. Kevin had done that job shortly after Tyler died. He'd handed all of Tyler's notebooks and all his notes for the various cases to Sam. The desk was empty.

"Well, I don't know what she's after," Jo said. "Maybe some old food stuck in the bottom of a drawer?"

"*Woof!*" Lucy's scratching became more persistent. She shoved her nose into the three-inch space under the bank of drawers on the side of the desk and sniffed loudly.

Sam went over and crouched down beside her. "What are you doing? Is something under there?"

"*Woof!*"

Sam pressed his cheek to the cold marble floor so he could get a better look at the bottom of the drawer. As if to encourage him, Lucy pressed her snout under the desk too, looking sideways out of the corner of her eye at him.

The desk was old, made of solid wood, not like the new particleboard crap. Even the bottom of the drawer was old oak. Except for a small piece of metal that glinted gold. He wedged his hand under, his fingertips brushing the smooth surface of packing tape and thin bump of something the tape was holding. He peeled the tape away, and something small and metal clinked onto the marble floor. He grabbed it.

Jo had come over and was squatting next to him. "What is it?"

He pulled it out and opened up his hand. A small gold key tarnished and pitted with rust gleamed in his palm. The numbers 317 were engraved on the rounded top.

Jo plucked it out of his hand. "What is this? A post-office key?"

They both looked back at the row of post-office boxes. Those old boxes didn't take keys—they were a combination lock with two dials on the front. And besides, they didn't need a key to get into those boxes. The backs were open.

"Or a safety deposit box, or locker key? Those types of keys are all this size with numbers on them." Sam took the key back and flipped it over in his hand. "It would be impossible to tell where it came from."

"How long do you think it's been under the desk?" Jo looked up at Sam. Their eyes locked. "Do you think Tyler put this here?"

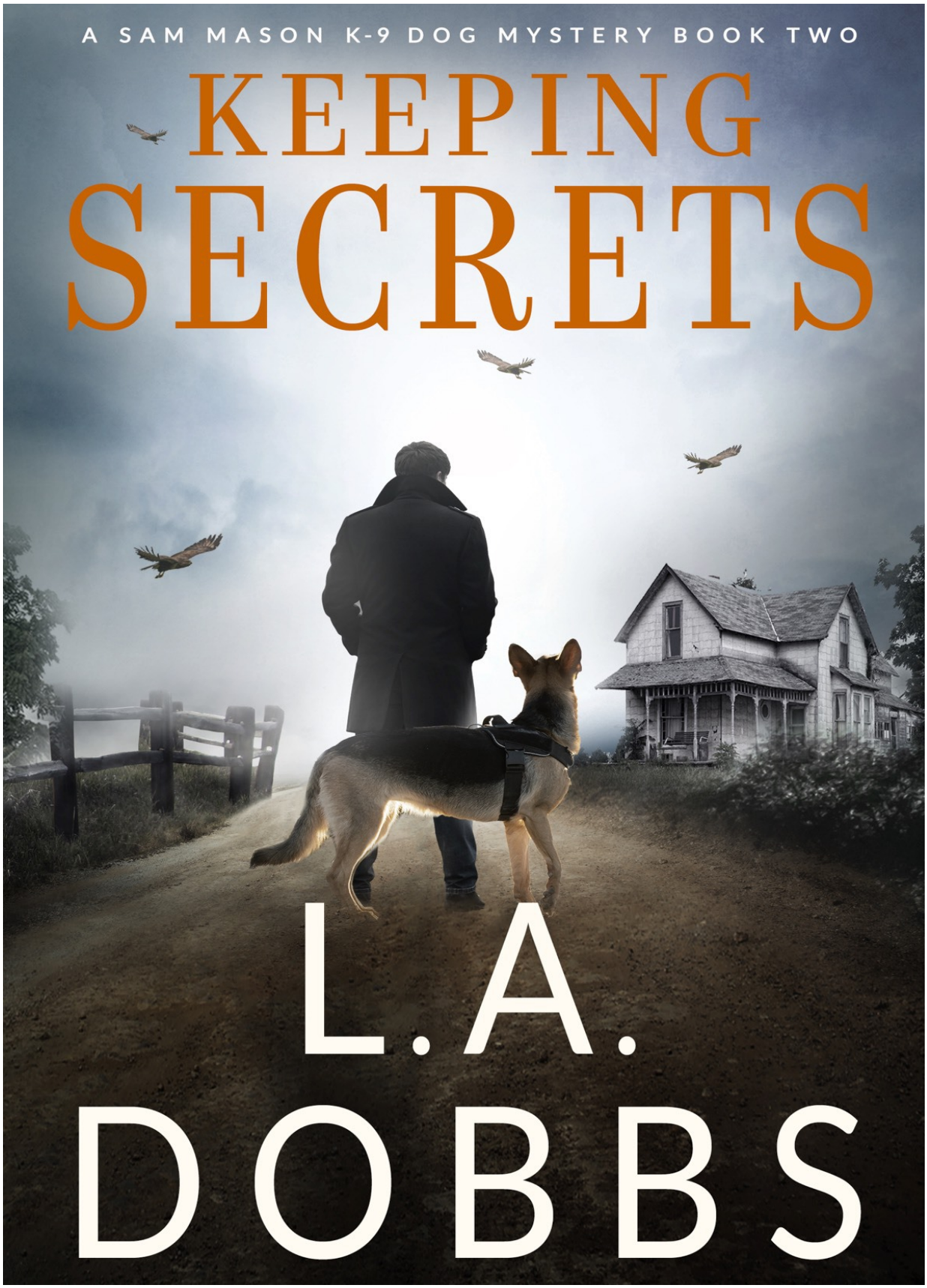
Sam got that tightness in his chest. The feeling that told him this was something important. That this was something he needed to investigate. "Hard to say. These desks are left over from the post office. The key looks old. So anyone could've put it here, but..."

"Yeah, I know. It seems awfully strange. I don't think this is something we should just put off as coincidence."

Sam stood up and glanced back at the empty desk, a feeling of foreboding darkening his thoughts. "But if it was Tyler who hid this key under the desk, then that begs the question… what the heck had Tyler been up to before he was killed?"

A SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERY BOOK TWO

KEEPING SECRETS



L.A. DOBBS

CHAPTER ONE

White Rock New Hampshire Police Chief Sam Mason studied the pile of resumes spread out on his antique oak desk. The steel-and-Naugahyde industrial chair he sat in let out a familiar squeak as he leaned back. The chair was a leftover from the post office that had once occupied the building where the police station now resided. The resumes were to replace one of Sam's officers, Tyler Richardson, who had been killed in the line of duty a month before.

A wave of guilt washed over Sam at the thought of replacing Tyler. He'd been a good officer who had been shot down when stopping to help a motorist. A random senseless act. Or was it?

Sam slid the middle drawer of his desk open. The sun's rays slanting in from the tall arched windows illuminated a small brass key with the number 317 stamped on top. The key looked just like the other keys in the drawer, but this particular key was no ordinary key. Sam and Sergeant Jody Harris had found it taped to the bottom of Tyler's desk after his death.

There was no concrete evidence that the key had been hidden there by Tyler. It could've been under the desk long before they'd moved in. The post office had left all their old furniture, and Sam and his crew had adopted it, leaving their flimsy desks and chairs back in the musty town hall basement they used to occupy. But Sam didn't think the key had been there when they'd moved in. Sam's gut told him that Tyler had hidden it there, which made him wonder if Tyler's death really was as random as it appeared.

Sam slid the key out. The metal was cold on his fingertips. He flipped it onto his palm and stared at it as if the key itself could clue him in to what

exactly it would open. It was a small key, the kind that fit into a locker or post office box or safety deposit box, but Sam and Jo had searched every PO box, bus station locker, and bank in the area. None had been rented by Tyler. The box that the key unlocked and what was inside it remained as much of a mystery as the identity of Tyler's killer.

He tossed the key back into the drawer, his eyes drifting out over to the main street of town.

It was a typical New England town with a lush-green-grass common area and streets lined with brick and wooden buildings abundant with the fine architectural detail characteristic of the early 1900s. From Sam's desk, he could see a view of the mountains. The town was small, the area rural and filled with streams for fishing, mountains for hiking and skiing and fresh air. Sam loved White Rock and took his job as chief of police seriously. And, since he was responsible for the town's protection, he had to replace Tyler no matter what his personal feelings were. Tyler's death had left them understaffed, and an understaffed police force could hardly be effective in protecting its citizens.

His gaze fell back on the resumes, and he gathered them into a pile, revealing the worn surface of the desk. It was studded with staples and old circular inked post office date stamps. Apparently the previous occupants had used it for sorting mail. It was worn, but the honey-colored oak still glowed despite its age and neglect. Sam wouldn't dream of parting with it--it came in handy for spreading out his notes on the cases he was working. Right now, they had no cases, which made it even more important that he start contacting some of these applicants while he could spare the time to interview them.

Lucy, the German shepherd mix that was part of the new K-9 unit, shifted at his feet, and he leaned down, running his palm over her soft fur. Lucy had been a stray who had helped them solve a case. Now she officially worked with them full time during the day and came home with Sam at night. After years of living alone, he had to admit he enjoyed the company.

"Well, Lucy, what do you think? Do any of these candidates seem viable?" Sam asked.

Lucy whined.

"I don't really see any that stand out, either." Sam shuffled the resumes around and placed them onto the desk one at a time like a poker player

laying out his cards.

"These two are a definite no." He pushed two resumes over to the corner, which left three. "I suppose I'll have to call these three in and talk to them. Might as well do it before we have any real cases to investigate."

Police work in northern New Hampshire towns consisted largely of feuding neighbors, lost animals, and fence disputes. Though, lately, there had been a large influx of drugs, and Sam had been battling the crimes that came along with that. He thought he had an idea of who was responsible for the drugs, but no solid evidence yet. An extra officer would be a big help. The department was small with just Sam, his sergeant and right-hand investigator Jody Harris, and a part-timer, Kevin Deckard. Once he filled Tyler's position, he'd have another full-timer on board.

He picked up one of the resumes. Gary Newport. Military service. Three years police experience in a neighboring town. He seemed like a good candidate, but somehow Sam couldn't get excited about it.

"Maybe I'll like him better if I talk to him in person. I guess I should have Reese start scheduling some interviews," Sam said to Lucy. Reese Hordon was the receptionist, town clerk, and dispatcher. She was attending the police academy at night and had hopes to join the police force, but until then, she eagerly did all the administrative work for the police department.

Lucy swished her tail back and forth.

Hiring someone would have its benefits. Sure, it would be a new person to train and get used to working with, but it would also leave Jo and him more time to look into what had really happened to Tyler. Finding time for that was problematic because the investigation wasn't exactly "official." Sam and Jo weren't even supposed to be looking into it--the state had already given up and had shoved the case onto the back burner even though the shooter was still at large. But Sam and Jo weren't going to sit still for that. Right now, they fit Tyler's investigation in between their other duties.

Tyler had been dedicated to his family and had lived with his mother to help with his disabled sister, Clarissa. Sam knew Tyler's entire paycheck went to Clarissa's medical bills. Not an easy thing for a twenty-eight-year-old young man to do. Sam could remember being that age twelve years ago, and the last place he would have wanted to live was with his mother. Sam had been married with two daughters at that age, but Tyler was single. Living with your mom when you were single could really cramp your style.

Sam figured he owed Tyler's mom, Irma, a visit to see how she was doing. So what if the real reason was to go through Tyler's things and see if he could find any kind of indication of what the key in his drawer might unlock.

He was thinking about the visit he and Jo had set up for later that day when a knock sounded on his door. Sam glanced up to see a shadow behind the textured glass window that sat in the upper half of the solid oak door. The door had also been original to the post office--only the gold-and-black stenciling on the door had been changed from Postmaster to Chief of Police.

"Come in." Sam welcomed the break from having to look at the resumes.

The door opened, and Jo popped her head in, her eyes falling on the stack of resumes and then up to meet Sam's. For a second, her wide gray eyes reflected Sam's own feelings. Guilt at replacing Tyler and determination to find out what had actually happened to him. And then she shifted into work mode.

"Got a call, Chief. Nancy Ritchie on Logging Road Number Four. She sounded frantic. Claims Bullwinkle just killed someone."

CHAPTER TWO

Bullwinkle was the White Rock town moose. He could be seen periodically in various parts of the town. Sometimes he'd been seen at the river, sometimes walking up someone's driveway, and a few times he even ventured into town and walked through the grassy common. He had his own Facebook page where people would post pictures of his sightings. As far as Sam knew, Bullwinkle had never killed anyone.

Sam hit the lights on the police-issue Tahoe. Jo rode shotgun. Her yellow smiley coffee mug was snugged in her hand, tendrils of steam wafting out from the fresh coffee she'd just made in the department K-Cup brewer. She had her polarized Oakley Standard Issue sunglasses on. Her hair was stuffed under a navy-blue cap with WRPD stamped in white letters on the front, a few unruly copper curls escaping out the sides.

Lucy had fought Jo for the passenger seat and lost. She sat on the folded-down seats in the back, her black muzzle resting on the console, her whisky-brown eyes switching from Jo to Sam as they talked.

"So what happened? Did someone run into a moose with their car?" Sam asked. He'd rarely heard of a moose killing anyone except unintentionally when they smashed through the windshield of a car after being hit, or if someone was dumb--or unlucky--enough to get between a cow and her calf. Sam hoped it wasn't a car accident. Those were usually messy. Trouble was, he often felt worse for the moose than the person.

"She didn't say." Jo sipped her coffee. "She was a little bit hysterical. Said something about it being out at the Donnelly camp."

Sam turned onto the dirt Logging Road Number Four. Decades ago, the paper mills had come to the area and devastated the forest by cutting down the trees. It had been a big operation and controversial. Sam remembered seeing old pictures of giant logs floating downstream in the river. And clear-cut forests that made an ugly scar on the landscape. They didn't do much of that anymore. The logging roads still existed. The land was still owned by paper companies. Now the paper companies leased the land to people who wanted to build camps. The Donnellys had such a camp.

Nancy and Bill Ritchie were waiting at the solid metal gate that blocked access to the road. The paper mills had installed them, and anyone who leased the land up there got a key to the gate. Nancy and Bill's camp was just north of Mike and Margie Donnelly's.

Sam eased to a stop. Nancy must have gotten control of herself--she was standing calmly next to Bill. For a second, Sam thought maybe she'd just overreacted, but the dark shadows of the turkey vultures circling overhead soon squashed that hope. It didn't take long for the birds to find a decomposing body, and they weren't picky about what species it was, either.

He rolled down the window and slowed to a stop. It being mid-June, the air outside was warm and fragrant with the scent of early-summer flowers. He could hear the silky whisper of leaves as the breeze passed through the trees, but the woods seemed eerily devoid of the usual noises made by birds and squirrels. Probably most of the animals were keeping away from the vultures.

"What's going on?" Sam asked.

"I was sitting on my porch just like usual, having my morning coffee, and Bullwinkle just came barreling past. He stomped right through my tomato garden and took off like a shot. He was coming from the Donnellys'." Nancy glanced up at the vultures, her voice high and panicky.

Bill put his hand on her shoulder. "Nancy came running in. Said Bullwinkle was on a rampage. We've never seen him run like that."

Moose usually just lumbered along unless something spooked them. Bullwinkle was no exception. If the moose Nancy had seen actually even was Bullwinkle. Sam had a suspicion the townspeople's sightings of Bullwinkle were really several moose, but he didn't bother to correct them. He was glad there were frequent sightings. It meant the population of wildlife was still abundant despite the current effort of land developer Lucas Thorne to ruin most of the pristine land in order to build a big resort.

"Anyway, I walked down to the Donnellys' to see, because that's the direction he came from. Wanted to make sure everything was okay. It's only about a quarter mile down." Bill's face turned grim. "But when I got there..."

"What did you see?" Jo asked.

Bill glanced up at the vultures. "Something bad happened to Mike. I couldn't get a close look. All I could see was Mike lying on the ground, and the vultures..." Bill paused to take a deep breath. "Well, they were practically covering him. It was too late to help him, so I ran back and waited for you to come."

SAM AND JO left the gate open so the medical examiner and Kevin could get in. The Donnelly cabin was exactly as Bill had described. A pair of denim-clad legs were on the ground just beside the porch, the rest of the body obscured by vultures. Even outdoors, the putrid smell of death hung in the air. One red squirrel sat on a pine branch, chirping at them--otherwise, the only animals that could be seen were the vultures.

Bill and Nancy hung back in the driveway while Jo and Sam approached the body. The vultures flapped away as they got close, roosting in the trees and looking down at Sam and Jo, angry that they had interrupted their meal.

"Holy crap, there's hardly anything left," Jo said.

Lucy wore a dark-blue vest with K-9 Police stamped on the side in white. She sniffed at the body cautiously, working her way from the feet to what was left of the head, and back. She snarled at a vulture that had flown to the ground and was brave enough to try to venture too close. She went back to the hands then whined and looked up at Sam. He made the signal, and she trotted back to his side.

"Is it Mike?" Jo stood at the head, looking down.

"I assume so." To be honest, Sam couldn't tell. The birds had made short work of the flesh that wasn't covered by clothing, so his face and hands were a bloody pulp.

The sound of a car in the driveway garnered their attention, and Sam turned to see the medical examiner van pull up. Sam was more than happy

to turn the body over to him.

John Dudley, the county medical examiner, got out of the van holding a black crime scene bag and came to stand beside Jo and Sam. They all looked down at the body.

"Sure is a messy one," John said.

"Yeah, no kidding," Jo answered.

John squatted beside the body and got to work with his tools, measuring this and probing that, and then putting various things into plastic bags.

Sam took the time to study the scene. He had a good eye for details and was looking for some kind of a clue as to what might have happened. Near as he could tell, Mike--or whoever the body was--had been standing on the porch and then had either fallen or been pushed off. The camp was a rough work of old lumber and logs, as were most of the camps on the logging roads, which had been cobbled together years ago by the previous generation, who had leased the land in the first place. No one put much money into them, knowing they would be dismantled eventually if the timber company no longer wanted to lease the land. Mike's camp had a wide porch with no railings that was typical of the small camps in the area.

Sam didn't see any evidence of a fight or any kind of disruption, certainly nothing that would be caused by a rampaging moose. Maybe Mike had a heart attack and tumbled off the porch? Or maybe he'd been doing something by the side of the house and spooked Bullwinkle. Was it possible the moose got scared and gored him, and if it was, what could Mike have been doing that caused that to happen?

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Jo asked.

"Depends on what you're thinking." Sam and Jo had worked as a tight team for about four years now, and they had developed a close rapport, each often knowing what the other was thinking. Jo was a good cop. A loyal friend. And someone he could trust to have his back. Sam didn't have a lot of people like that in his life.

"I'm thinking something's not right here." Jo pointed toward the body. "Look. The bottom of his feet are toward the house as if he fell off the porch backwards. How could that happen and why?"

"Heart attack?"

"Maybe. But what are the odds of that? And I doubt it was a moose attack. Last I heard, they don't come up on the porch and rarely attack people."

"Unless he was doing something to piss the moose off or she was protecting her calf."

Jo shook her head. "This body has been here for a while. Look at the vulture damage. How long do you think that took? When Nancy called, Bullwinkle had just run past her house."

Sam had already thought of all this, so he simply nodded. John, who was now going through the pockets, pulled out a wallet. He opened it up then looked up at Sam. "Mike Donnelly."

"Well, that answers that." Sam looked at the head again. "Unless that's not his wallet. But the other question is what happened to him? Nancy said she saw Bullwinkle run through her yard. Could a moose have had anything to do with how he ended up on the ground?"

John eased the shoulder of the body over so he could look at the back, and his face turned serious. He looked up at Sam then pointed toward the grass near where Mike's hip had been.

"A moose? I don't think so. Not unless they've started carrying guns."

JO SQUATTED NEXT TO JOHN. "That's a .38. Where did the bullet go in?"

"Hard to tell with this bird damage." John squinted up at the vultures. Most had flown off, but a few sat high in the trees, watching. "I don't see any gunshot on the torso, so my guess is the head, but exactly where, I couldn't tell you right now. Maybe not ever with what the birds have done."

"Let's not touch anything more until Kevin comes with the camera. I want a record of how the gun is positioned," Sam said.

John nodded and rolled the body back. "It was partially under his hip. See, the position of his hand right next to the hip hid it at first."

Jo narrowed her eyes at the hand. "You think he could have shot himself?"

"Either that, or the killer stuck the gun under him after he shot him."

Jo looked at the gun again then walked over to the porch and looked back, tilting her head to the right and squinting her eyes. "I suppose it's possible he shot himself on the porch there, then as he fell off, the gun fell under him. Hard to say for sure. We might need to do some tests."

Tires crunched on dirt, and they turned to see Kevin pull up in the department Crown Victoria. The Crown Vic was the other car in their two-car stable. Both had been painted dark blue and had the white lettering and police department insignia. Having only two cars could be inconvenient at times, but none of them minded driving their personal cars if they needed to.

Kevin got out with the camera and came to stand beside them. Lucy sniffed his pants and looked up at him until he took a treat out of his pocket and threw it to her. She caught it in midair.

"What happened to him?" Kevin thrust his chin toward the body.

"Not sure yet. Take photos all around the body. Check the grass for clues and casings. Make sure you get photos of the body as it is, and have John roll it so you can get the position of the gun before you bag it up. And snap the outside of the cabin." Sam walked onto the porch as Kevin started taking pictures of the body.

"What are you looking for?" Jo asked.

"Up here, folks look out for one another. There's a tight network of people that own these camps. Most are from down south, but some, like the Donnellys, live around town and have the camp for weekends. Since most people are from 'away,' neighbors check on each other's camps, so there's usually a sign-in board." Sam pointed to a small chalkboard that hung beside the door. A white piece of chalk duct-taped to a string hung from the side. "Kind of like an old-fashioned calling card."

Jo noticed the board was blank. "No one came to visit."

"No one that wanted their visit recorded, at least."

"Shit. I guess we'll have to go talk to Margie Donnelly," Jo said. She knew how Sam hated these notifications. She didn't like them much herself, but she'd been hardened to the news after what had happened in her own family. Though Sam seemed tough on the outside, she knew telling people about a dead family member affected him. She liked to think that her standing beside him when they had to tell a family one of their members would never return home helped a little.

"I mean, assuming this *is* Mike and someone didn't mess with his wallet. Either way, we can find out if Mike is missing and if there's been any trouble lately. We can't ask the family to make an identification on that." Jo pointed to the body.

"Nope. We'll use dental records. Maybe he can find a fingerprint."

Jo looked at the hands. They were pretty messy. She looked at her watch and lowered her voice. "We have a little over an hour before we're supposed to see Irma Richardson." The name of Jo's former coworker made her gut tighten. She'd liked Tyler, and even though he was ten years younger than her, they'd clicked at work. He was a good cop and a good person--that wasn't something Jo could say about a lot of people.

"Right. Let's go talk to Margie." Sam's jaw tightened. "That's the hardest part, telling the family. Sometimes they take it real bad."

Jo pushed her sunglasses up on her nose and whistled for Lucy, who was busy sniffing the tire tracks in the driveway. "They sure do, unless one of them is the killer."

CHAPTER THREE

Kevin watched Sam and Jo drive off in the Tahoe. So they were going to visit Tyler's mom? Sam's voice had been low like he was saying something he didn’t want Kevin to overhear. Why were they being so secretive about it?

Maybe he was making something out of nothing, but it rubbed him the wrong way that he was often left out of whatever Sam and Jo were doing. Maybe their visit to Tyler's mom was just a social call, but Kevin had to wonder, especially considering the odd circumstances surrounding Tyler's death.

As a part-time officer, Kevin hadn't worked with Tyler as much as Jo or Sam had. He really didn't work much with any of them. The three of them had been full-timers and had seniority over Kevin, so they'd worked investigations together while Kevin was sent on the crap jobs.

Now that Tyler was gone, he was getting better jobs, and Sam had even offered him the full-time gig, but Kevin didn't want that job. He didn't need the money, not with the lucrative little side job he had going.

Thoughts about the side job sent a wave of unease through him. He still wasn't sure if what he was doing was the right thing. But it paid well, so he pushed those aside and focused on taking pictures. Bile rose in his throat as he snapped every inch of the mutilated body. He could practically feel the vultures' eyes drilling into his back as they watched him from the trees, waiting for him to be done so they could continue their meal.

He repositioned himself, lying in the grass to take pictures of the body from a low angle. The cool grass pressed against his cheek as he focused on

the copper stain under the victim's head.

As the job of picture taking became mechanical, he started to regret his distrustful feelings about Sam and Jo. They had been making an effort to include him. Was he being overly sensitive? His father had always said that he acted too hastily, and now he was trying to make a concerted effort to think things through before reacting. It was probably just an innocent visit and they hadn't thought to include Kevin because Kevin had already been to Tyler's mom's house when he dropped off Tyler's things from the office.

He'd been surprised that Tyler's mom didn't live in a big place. He knew Tyler had moved in, and he thought maybe they could've afforded something better. Kevin's own house was modest but updated with all the latest accoutrements. The updates were because of the side job, not his police salary, though, and Tyler had the added medical expenses of his sister's muscular disease. But still, he couldn't imagine living in that one small bedroom. What Tyler had sacrificed for his sister had given Kevin a newfound respect for the officer. Too bad it was too late to tell him.

Done with photographing the body, he stood up and scanned the grass for any bullet casings, footprints, or anything that might be a clue. He wanted to do a good job to find a clue that Sam could use to solve this case. He glanced back at the body, which the EMTs were now loading onto a stretcher, then went back to bag the gun as evidence. Had the man shot himself? It seemed likely. With the body gone, he could do a better search of the area. He meticulously combed every inch, carefully taking photographs of the grass, especially the indented areas where the body had lain. He snapped shots of the position where the body had been in relation to the house and the woods, making sure he photographed everything just the way Sam would want.

As he worked, Kevin's thoughts turned to Tyler again. What if Sam and Jo were after something more than just a sympathy call? What if they were looking for the same things that Kevin's contact had asked him to search for?

Kevin had brought Tyler's personal things from the squad room to the house Tyler occupied with his family. He'd gotten lucky on that because it allowed him to search through the boxes without anyone getting suspicious. He hadn't found anything, though, except the thumb drive.

Too bad the thumb drive was blank. But he'd kept it anyway, just in case.

In case of what? His contact had been vague about what, specifically, they were looking for, and it didn't quite sit right with him. Kevin was even starting to question exactly who the contact worked for. At first he'd thought it was the FBI looking into suspicious activity they'd found on Jo and Sam. But now he was beginning to wonder. Did the FBI have that kind of money to pay out?

But if Sam and Jo weren't up to something, why were they still investigating Tyler's death? He knew they weren't supposed to be. A separate task force had investigated it, saying their department was too close to the victim to investigate. He knew the investigators had ruled it as a random and unfortunate killing. But Sam and Jo didn't seem to agree. Which made Kevin wonder if the people that were paying him for this so-called information were right about Sam and Jo. If they were corrupt, why would they be sticking their necks out to make sure Tyler got justice?

Now that Kevin had worked with them more closely, he could see no indication that Sam and Jo were corrupt. In fact, they seemed to be good people. Honest people. People who wanted to make sure the law was followed and justice was done.

Then again, they did push the envelope when it came to procedure a little bit. He knew for a fact that Sam had looked the other way when Reese had done some things for them that were outside department protocol, and Jo had filled in Tyler's empty log from the night he'd been shot. She'd claimed it was so that Tyler wouldn't have a blemish on his record, but what if there was another reason?

He proceeded up onto the porch with the camera, taking pictures of the door, the snowshoes tacked up in an X on the wall, the old porch rockers with their chipped green paint, and the old-fashioned bicycles that leaned against the side of the cabin. He wondered, if Sam and Jo weren't the bad guys, then that meant the people that were paying him *were* the bad guys, and that made him wonder just exactly whose side he was on.

CHAPTER FOUR

Mike and Margie Donnelly lived on the north end of town in a big, sprawling fifty-acre farm that the Donnelly family had owned for four generations. Now that Mike and Margie were getting close to seventy, they didn't farm the land as much. Like many children of the old families, their two kids were now in their thirties and didn't have an interest in farming. As was the way with too many farms, the acreage used for crops had shrunk to one small patch near the house.

On the way out, Sam and Jo passed by a new hotel that was part of the resort that Lucas Thorne was building. Jo turned her head to look at it as they drove past. Sam didn't want to look. Seeing the concrete and steel where there should be trees and grass made him angry. Even Lucy was upset. She stared out the side window and let out a high-pitched whine.

"The Donnelly farm abuts this land, doesn't it?" Jo asked, her head still turned to look out the window at the passing construction sites.

"Yep."

"Huh."

Jo didn't say any more, but Sam knew what she was thinking. The same thing he was. It was no secret that Lucas Thorne was after the Donnelly farm. He'd been after folks to sell their land in this area for quite some time. Sam suspected that sometimes he did something a little more forceful than just make an offer for the property.

Both Sam and Jo hated the way the town was being built up. Hotels, golf courses, restaurants. The company Thorne worked for wanted to turn White Rock into a vacation mecca with a big resort. The beautiful scenery

was second to none, and there were activities to bring tourists in every season.

Sam wanted the land to remain unspoiled, but right now things were working against him, not the least of which was the town mayor, Harley Dupont, who seemed to be influencing the rezoning of the town so that Thorne could build wherever he wanted.

The Donnelly farm was a typical two-story farmhouse. A porch ran along the front and on one side. A big red barn sat next to it at the end of the driveway. It could've used a new paint job. The barn didn't have any animals in it anymore. The fields, which should have been sprouting with new crops, were filled with weeds. A pang of sadness flared in Sam. It seemed that many of the old farms were going to ruin--or worse, being bought by Thorne.

They knocked on the door and waited for Margie to answer. Sam's stomach sank lower and lower, as it always did when he had to give this kind of bad news.

The door creaked open, and a small woman looked out quizzically, her eyes widening as she took in the police logo on Jo's cap. The woman wore a loose-fitting shirt and sweatpants and looked incredibly pale and fragile. Her silver hair was cut close to the scalp.

"Can I help you?" Her voice held a fearful note.

Sam didn't know Margie Donnelly personally, but he figured this was her. "Mrs. Donnelly?"

She nodded. "Yes. I'm Margie Donnelly."

"Sam Mason. Chief of police in White Rock."

"I know who you are." She opened the door wider and indicated for them to come in. "Is somebody in trouble?"

It was neat and clean inside. The furnishings looked as if they'd been handed down through the generations, which they probably had. Margie walked unsteadily, leading them past the living room into the dining area, the wide pine floorboards creaking under their feet.

She indicated for them to sit at the mahogany dining table. The room was decorated with family pictures and old cross-stitches. There was a china cabinet in the corner filled with flow blue china. Sam recognized it because his grandmother had had the same china, and it was now sitting in a china cabinet inside the hunting cabin Sam had inherited from his grandfather and now called home. He noticed a few empty spots in the

china cabinet. Did Margie use the china for everyday use? His grandmother never had. She'd said it was quite valuable.

Sam remained standing. It didn't feel right giving this sort of news while seated. "I'm afraid there's been an accident. At your hunting camp."

Margie sucked in a breath and grabbed the back of the nearest chair. "Is it Mike?"

"We think so, ma'am. You don't know where he is?"

Margie sank into the chair, her hands over her face, her shoulders shaking. Jo came to stand beside her, putting a consoling hand on the woman's shoulder.

Sam went into the adjoining kitchen and filled the stainless-steel teapot then turned on one of the gas burners while Margie composed herself.

"I was afraid something happened," Margie said after a while. "He went out to the hunting camp last night. He's been going there more and more by himself. He's been very depressed." Margie's eyes flicked to a bowl on the table, and Sam noticed several blue prescription-drug bottles inside.

"Was Mike ill?" Sam asked.

Margie shook her head. "Not Mike. Me. Cancer. I don't have long. Chemo helped for a little while, but now..." She shrugged and touched her short-cropped hair. Sam realized it was growing out from the chemo. "Anyway, the medicines help a little. But Mike knew there wouldn't be a lot of time. I was afraid he might do something..."

"Are you saying that you think he killed himself?" Sam asked.

"He said he wouldn't be able to live without me. I told him he'd be fine." Margie burst into tears again, and Sam waited while Jo poured the steaming water into a cup that had a teabag nestled inside. She gently placed a cup in front of Margie, who took it in her frail hands and sipped.

"So he went there last night. And he was supposed to be back but never came back?" Sam asked.

"That's right. I wasn't sure if he came back and then left early in the morning. Sometimes I don't always know. You see, the pills knock me out. I have a high dosage for the pain. I was getting worried, though, but thought maybe he'd been home and I didn't notice. Things get a little foggy..."

"I see." Sympathy flooded through Sam, and he spoke gently. "Do you own a .38 revolver by any chance?"

"Sure. Mike has one. It's in a lockbox on the top of the gun cabinet over there." Margie pointed to a scrolled oak gun cabinet, an antique piece that

would've made Sam's grandfather envious. It was made of solid quarter-sawn oak and had etchings of elk and moose at the top. Six shotguns rested inside. Some of them were also antique.

Jo went over to the cabinet. She was fairly tall and only had to reach her hand up to run it along the top of the cabinet. She pulled down a slate-gray box and brought it over.

"Who knows the combination?" Sam asked.

"Just me and Mike. And the kids, of course." Margie pushed the buttons and flipped the lid open.

The box was empty.

CHAPTER FIVE

"If he didn't leave a suicide note at the house, maybe he left one at the cabin," Jo suggested as they drove away from the Donnelly farmhouse.

Margie had searched the usual places, but no note had been found. Jo looked out the window at the ugly resort looming in the distance. "I wonder if Margie will sell the land to Thorne now."

"Or the kids will. Sounds like Margie won't be around long enough," Sam said.

"Yeah. Sad, huh?" Jo took out her phone and thumbed something in. "Making a note to run down the serial number and make sure the gun we found is his."

"It's just about time to go to the Richardsons'. Let's swing by there and then go back to the cabin to look for a note," Sam suggested.

"As long as one of those trips takes us by Brewed Awakening. I need a coffee."

"You betcha."

Fifteen minutes later, they were pulling into the Pine Boughs mobile home park where Irma Richardson lived. Jo had a bag of jelly donuts in her lap and a Styrofoam coffee mug in her hand. Lucy was eyeing the bag hopefully.

The mobile home park was one of several in the area and probably the nicest one. Each trailer was well kept, with a nice grassy yard and a tidy tool shed in back. Picket fences, window boxes, and flowers decorated the neighborhood.

The Richardsons had a double-wide, and Sam parked in the driveway. The two of them got out, giving Lucy the command to stay in the car. They left the windows rolled halfway, and Jo shoved the donuts in the glove compartment just in case Lucy got adventurous.

Irma was happy to see them. Her eyes seemed a little less sad than they had at Tyler's funeral. The house was as neat as a pin. Irma had laid out cookies on a plate and had coffee and dainty porcelain teacups dotted with tiny blue flowers waiting for them. Sam's large hands made the teacups look like miniatures as they sat politely at the table making small talk.

While Jo could tell their visit meant a lot to Irma, she could barely pay attention. She was eager to get into Tyler's room so they could inspect the boxes and see if they could find anything that would lead them to the location of the box for which he'd hidden that key.

"We're getting along just fine, thanks to that donation from the police fund and the big deposit of Tyler's last check." Irma pushed the plate of cookies toward Sam.

"Donation?" Jo flicked her eyes from the cookies to Sam. What was she talking about? Jo didn't know of any donation from the police fund, and she certainly didn't think Tyler's last check had been anything big.

Sam gave her an I'll-tell-you-later look, and Jo snapped her mouth shut. But she noticed Sam also had a quizzical look on his face.

Sam scarfed down his fourth cookie and patted his lips with a napkin that had a fancy design embroidered in pink on the corner. "I was wondering since we were here if you still had the boxes from Tyler's things. We have some police stuff that we might've put in there by mistake, and we need it back."

"Why, sure." Irma pushed up from the table. "His room's just the way he always had it." Her eyes shone with sadness. "Haven't had the heart to go in there and clean anything out. Anyway, the boxes and everything are just the way they were when that other nice police officer brought them by."

Jo had forgotten that Kevin had been the one to clean out Tyler's things and bring them to Irma. She didn't totally trust Kevin. She had a funny feeling that he was up to something, and it wasn't just her imagination. Last month, she'd seen him going into a restaurant where Thorne and their shady mayor, Harley Dupont, were meeting, and he'd lied to her about being there. Jo hadn't said anything to Sam about it. It was in her nature to be overly suspicious, and she might be seeing something when nothing was there. She

needed more proof than him being seen in a restaurant before she accused Kevin of something nefarious.

Irma led them down a narrow hallway into a small bedroom. The walls were a grayish blue, the twin bed had a blue bedspread, and there was a little blue rug next to it. Had Tyler lived in this room? Jo couldn't picture a grown man staying in the tiny room.

"I'm sorry Clarissa can't be here to see you," Irma said. "She's getting some treatments. Thanks to that big deposit. I know Tyler would be grateful for that."

"It's the least the department could do." Sam opened the lid of a box that sat on a small white desk.

"Well, I'll leave you to it." Irma turned and went back down the hall.

There were two boxes on the bed. Jo sat down on the bed and started going through one of them. It held the usual stuff-- pens, pencils, notebooks. She leafed through the notebooks, but there was nothing unusual, just handwritten notes on some of the tasks the police department was saddled with, like where the lights were stored for the town Christmas tree and how many fireworks should be purchased for the Fourth of July celebration and what kind of treats Rita Hoelscher's goat, Bitsy, preferred. Her heart weighed heavy as she looked at Tyler's writing and remembered what a stickler he was for jotting everything down. She put the notebooks back in the box. They weren't exactly confidential police work and didn't need to go back to the station.

"Nothing in here." Sam closed the box and eyed the desk. "But maybe Tyler wouldn't keep it at the station. Maybe he kept it at home." He leaned back to look out in the hallway to make sure Irma wasn't coming then opened the desk drawer and started riffling through.

"What was that business about a deposit and a donation?" Jo watched Sam open another drawer. He paused to look back over his shoulder at her.

"You know how some police stations have a fallen-officer fund that donates money to the family?" Sam turned back to the drawer.

"Yeah, but we don't have one of those." Jo looked under the bed. Nothing there but dust.

"Well, I might've helped that along a little bit." Sam deftly avoided eye contact.

"You mean you used your own money?" Jo stopped what she was doing to stare at Sam, but he simply shrugged and went to the closet. Her heart

swelled. Sam really was one of the good guys.

He reached into the closet, his broad shoulders framed in the doorway. "I have plenty. But, the thing is, I don't know anything about this deposit in his bank account. What do you make of that?"

"No idea." Jo opened the middle drawer in the stand next to the bed. There was nothing inside but a bunch of hardcover mystery books. Tyler had been a reader? It looked as if they were well worn. Jo and Tyler had been fairly close and had worked together day in and day out for years, but there was so much she hadn't known about him, which made her wonder all the more about the circumstances of his death.

"We should check into that. Might give us a clue as to what really happened." Sam closed the closet door and looked around the room. "In the meantime, I don't see anything here that will give us any clue about the key."

"I was hoping to find a receipt from a gym or a bank or something, but no such luck." Jo tapped the laptop on the desk. "This is Tyler's personal laptop. I know Internal Affairs looked all through his work computer and his personal computer and didn't find anything, right?"

"That's right." Sam frowned at the computer then turned back to the two boxes. "Did you find any thumb drives in those boxes?"

Jo shook her head.

"And these are the three boxes that Kevin brought from the office, right? Seems weird Tyler wouldn't have a thumb drive to transfer files, doesn't it?"

"Maybe he used Dropbox or Google Drive or something. Maybe he did have a thumb drive and hid it like he hid the key." Jo carefully closed the flaps on the boxes then stood, taking one last look around the room as if she were saying one last farewell to Tyler. "Are we done here? I think we need to get to the cabin and look for that note."

Sam followed her out the door then turned back, taking his own last look. His strong jaw tightened as his eyes roamed over the room. Jo knew that he was taking a mental inventory that he'd go over later in his mind.

"Yep, we're done. Let's get a move on."

CHAPTER SIX

Sam glanced up at the tall pine trees as he pulled into the dirt driveway of the Donnelly cabin. The vultures were gone, but not the blood on the grass or the bird droppings or the indentation where Mike Donnelly's body had fallen.

Inside, the cabin was typical of the northern logging-road cabins. It was small, with two bedrooms and a combined living room and kitchen area. The ceilings were low, the walls covered with knotty pine. It was furnished with cast-off furniture that was probably worthless a generation ago but now would bring a pretty penny down at Clara Weatherby's antique store.

Everything was neatly placed, down to the green-and-orange granny-square afghan that was folded along the back of the couch. If there had been a fight, it didn't happen inside the cabin.

Sam didn't see any note on any of the surfaces in the living room. He crossed the faded green-and-tan braided rug, past the small black cast-iron stove, into the kitchen. The countertops were yellow-speckled laminate, the stove an old two-burner white gas stove. The fridge was a miniature style with a rounded top that must've been forty years old, and Sam thought it was a miracle that it still even worked. But there was no note to be seen.

Lucy had come in beside him, and she sniffed around the trash barrel. Sam looked inside to see a plastic ham-salad container from the deli and an empty carton of milk. Dinner for one.

He glanced at the sink. Two drinking glasses sat on the drying board.

Jo came from the hallway that led to the bedrooms. "There's no note anywhere here."

"No, but check this out." Sam pointed to the glasses. "Why would Mike have two glasses if he was the only one here?"

"Good question." Jo spun around, taking in the scene. "But everything looks to be in place. If he did have someone here, then whatever happened to get him shot didn't happen inside."

"And just because someone might have been here, doesn't mean they shot him. We can't rule out suicide just because there was no note."

"Can't rule it in, either. What we need to figure out is who was here." Jo opened up the crime scene kit she'd brought and took out evidence bags. "These glasses have been washed, but there might still be something useful on them."

Sam poked around the living room, looking for anything that seemed out of place. They couldn't actually call the cabin a crime scene yet. Maybe the autopsy results would reveal more.

Jo focused on putting the glasses into the bags and casually asked, "So you really gave Tyler's mom money?"

"Yep." Sam didn't like anyone knowing about his generous side. Why had he even mentioned it to Jo? He could have stayed silent and pretended it was tied into the mysterious deposit that Irma mentioned. But that would have been like lying, and he trusted Jo. She knew most everything about him, anyway... except for one thing, and *that* thing was something he hoped no one else would ever know.

"What do you think that deposit was?" Jo asked.

The deposit worried Sam. "I have no idea. Maybe it was nothing, but I think we need to find out. It could have bearing on what happened to him, but we have no idea what Irma means by 'big.'"

"Apparently it was big enough for Clarissa to get that treatment, unless you gave her a huge sum."

Sam remained silent on that one. "Well, whatever it is, it's not something normal. Which makes me even more convinced that Tyler *was* the person who taped that key under the desk."

"And if that's the case, you gotta wonder... *who* was he hiding it from?"

WHEN THEY GOT BACK to the station, Reese was sitting at her desk, her long dark braid pulled over one shoulder and a look that waffled between patience and agitation flickering across her face. She was young, still in the police academy, but she'd already proven to Sam that her superior computer skills were a great asset to the department.

Right now, though, she was negotiating with Bernie Cumberland about his sewer tax bill. In small-town police departments, one had to wear a lot of hats, and collecting tax bills and handing out licenses and yard sale permits were some of the many jobs Reese was assigned.

Her pale-blue eyes lit up when they fell on the white donut bag that Jo had taken in from the glove compartment.

Sam headed across the marble floor and straight to the K-Cup machine. The machine looked out of place in the old-fashioned building, which had been built eighty years prior and never been renovated. The building still retained the original marble floors, paneled oak partitions, and even the original craftsman-style oak desks.

The best part was the old bronze post office boxes that had been left behind. Each box had twin dials at the top with gold numbers on a black background. Below the dials, a fancy embossed eagle with a US shield on its chest sat proudly amidst fluted rays that extended to the edge of the box. Below the eagle, a small beveled-glass window let you see how much mail was inside. Sam couldn't understand why the postal service preferred ugly new metal boxes, but he was grateful. The old boxes still sat in their oak wall and now created a partial divider between the reception area and the squad room.

Lucy took up her usual station beside Reese's desk, watching intently as Reese explained to Bernie why he had to pay the full amount. As Reese talked, she slipped her hand into her drawer, took out a small dog treat, and fed it to Lucy.

Kevin was already at his desk, his head bent over paperwork. He looked up as they came in, stopped working, and swung his chair around to face them.

"The gun found at the scene was registered to Mike Donnelly," Kevin said.

"Oh, you looked that up already?" Sam was surprised. Kevin didn't usually do things without being prodded, but this time, he'd taken the

initiative. Perhaps Sam wasn't giving him enough credit or utilizing him to his fullest. "Good job."

Jo sat on the edge of her desk facing into the room. She opened the white donut bag and tilted it out toward them. "Anyone want one?"

"I do." Reese came in from the lobby as Bernie exited the building. She hopped onto the desk beside Jo and peeked into the bag then stuck her hand in and pulled out a donut. Kevin and Sam declined.

Sam pulled a chair out into the middle of the room and turned it so the four of them were in a circle. He sat leaning forward with his forearms on his thighs.

"So did Mr. Donnelly kill himself?" Reese asked. Sugar sprinkled into her lap as she bit into the donut. Lucy had come to sit in front of Jo and Reese. Her eyes watched each falling grain of sugar as intently as a hawk watching a baby rabbit.

"Not sure. He was depressed, and we didn't see any sign of a struggle. It was his own gun," Sam said. "But the position of the body in relation to the gun seems off. And those two glasses in the sink make me wonder."

"Glasses?" Reese asked.

Jo pulled the evidence bags out of the crime kit she brought in. "We found two glasses in the kitchen sink. It could indicate someone else besides Mike was there."

"Or it could simply indicate that he used two glasses," Sam said. "It won't hurt to see if we can find any DNA or fingerprints on them, but they were in the dish drainer, so they've been washed."

Reese leaned forward eagerly. "But right away those two glasses are somewhat of a discrepancy. He might not have been alone, and we have to treat every unattended death as potentially suspicious until the criteria of a suicide is met without a doubt."

Everyone looked at Reese silently, and she explained, "That's what we learned in school, anyway."

Sam didn't disagree. He had a funny feeling about this case. Maybe it was his predisposition to think that everyone was up to something sketchy. Maybe it was just his gut instincts that he'd learned to trust after so many years on the police force. But he didn't want to put the Donnelly family through the stress of an investigation, so he needed to proceed with caution. He wanted to make sure there was cause to investigate first.

"I'm just glad Bullwinkle didn't have anything to do with it," Reese said.

"He probably was just walking in the woods and something spooked him. Maybe the turkey vultures. Or maybe the killer came back. Either way, those vultures did a number on Mike. That makes it hard to look for any of the signs one normally sees with a suicide, and until we can rule it as a definite one, we need to investigate."

"Vultures?" Reese looked down at the blob of jelly in her donut and swallowed hard.

"Doesn't take long to discover a decomposing body. But that means he must've been there for at least a few hours. Likely overnight, because it would take a while for the gases to accumulate. Turkey vultures can smell that gas miles away, and that's what attracts them," Sam said.

"It was hard to even tell where the bullet went in. We didn't even realize he *had* been shot until John found the gun under the body," Jo added.

Reese wrapped her unfinished half of the donut up in a napkin and put it back in the bag. "So you can't really tell where the wound was at the angle of entry. In school, we learned that a suicide will shoot themselves in certain places, and the angle is critical."

"That's right. Anything that wasn't covered by clothing was mutilated, so we know where he wasn't shot. Maybe John can figure out more. He could certainly figure out the time of death. Maybe he can rule out whether or not Mike could have shot himself. His hands were pecked up, and I don't know if there was enough skin left to find traces of gunshot powder."

"Heck, we couldn't even tell if it *was* Mike," Kevin said.

"Yeah, I don't want to subject the family to making an ID. How could they? His face was... unrecognizable," Sam said. "But he didn't come home, so it's a pretty sure bet he was the victim. And Margie said he'd been depressed."

"But being depressed is one thing, and especially considering Margie's illness, it seems natural that he would be. Killing yourself is another," Jo said. "While we're waiting for John to come back with more information, it wouldn't hurt to find out if anyone might've wanted Mike dead."

"Isn't it obvious?" Reese said. "The Donnelly farm is right next to all that acreage where Thorne is building the hotel. The farm is a perfect place for the golf course he wants to put in. Everyone in town knows that Mike Donnelly would never sell to Thorne. Margie wouldn't either, but I know she's very ill and doesn't have long to live. The kids don't want the farm. So with Margie gone, Mike would be the only thing standing in Thorne's way."

CHAPTER SEVEN

By the time the end of the day rolled around, they'd gotten word back from the medical examiner. He'd been able to make a positive ID through the victim's dental records and a partial fingerprint on one finger of his left hand that hadn't been mutilated. It was Mike Donnelly.

Around six p.m., Jo headed over to the local bar down the street from the police station with Sam. Sam's twin daughters were visiting from college, and he'd arranged to meet them there. Jo didn't want to impose on his family time, but he'd talked her into going. His daughters had mentioned they wanted to say hi to her, and since Jo had nothing else to do, she agreed.

Holy Spirits was a decommissioned church. It was a favorite hangout for locals, and its reputation for making the best burgers in Coos County brought in a steady flow of outsiders too.

The owner hadn't done much renovation, and opening the double doors felt like walking into the vestibule of a church. Even some of the original pews remained and were rearranged, facing each other with long tables in between. But that was where the resemblance to a church ended. The rest of the bar was dotted with round maple tables surrounded by captain's chairs. The lighting was dim, and it smelled of hops and grilled meat.

The bar itself ran the length of the back, where the altar used to be. Jo liked to sit at the bar because the mirrored wall behind it gave her a view of the entire room without having to turn in her seat, and she could see who was coming up behind her. Above the mirror, a colorful stained-glass window lit the bar with a dim ambience.

The chairs at the bar were comfortable solid-wood swivel chairs with black-leather-cushioned seats. Jo took her favorite spot in the corner and ordered a beer and a basket of curly fries with a side of mayonnaise.

Sam ordered a Mooseneck, the local beer he favored. Jo swung her seat around to face the room, the heels of her black boots hooked into the rungs of the barstool. In the corner, younger people were dancing to the jukebox music. She recognized Sam's daughters, Hayley and Marla. Hayley was taller, with long, thick dark hair, Marla a little shorter and bleached her hair blond, cut in a bob. They spotted Sam and Jo and waved.

The beers came, and Jo swung back around, sliding an un-manicured fingernail under the corner of the label, peeling it back just a little bit.

Sam swigged his. "Do you think we should have Reese look into Tyler's bank accounts?"

"I don't know. I mean, I know she can be discreet, but this seems like it's big. What if Tyler was into something? I don't want her to get involved if it could mean trouble for her," Jo said.

"Yeah. I don't want to ruin her career before it gets started."

"What about Mick? Has he found anything that would indicate why Tyler had a big deposit?" Mick Gervasi was Sam's best friend and a private investigator they sometimes used to look into things that they couldn't look into in their official police capacity. Since they weren't supposed to be investigating Tyler's death, they had Mick doing much of the groundwork.

"He's out of town. Still looking into the grandson."

Jo nodded. Billie, the owner of the bar, was approaching with the fries, and she didn't want her comment to be overheard. Billie shoved the fries at her with a friendly nod then turned to the other end of the bar, where someone was hailing her for a drink.

"I can look into Tyler's bank account." Jo dipped a fry into the mayonnaise then popped it into her mouth. She usually smothered her fries in ketchup, but using mayonnaise was "a thing" that the locals did, and after four years, she was finally trying it. Much to her surprise, it was actually quite tasty. Not tangy like ketchup--more smooth. Maybe she'd add mayo to her fry-eating repertoire more often.

"Sounds good," Sam said. The jukebox turned to a slower song, and Hayley and Marla rushed over to Sam. They greeted Jo like an old friend as they squeezed in on either side of their father, brimming with energy, their faces happy and flushed from dancing.

Jo's chest constricted as she watched Sam and his daughters. Seeing the look of joy on his face as he hugged each one of them hammered home the fact that she had no one.

She'd never married. Never had kids. Probably because of what had happened when she was young. Her early childhood had been wonderful, but when her sister had disappeared, everything had changed. Her parents had turned into emotional zombies, and life had never been the same. She hadn't talked to her father in decades, her mother had died of grief, and her only remaining sister had turned to drugs.

Hayley glanced at Jo's beer. "Can I buy you another?" She winked at Jo, and Jo's heart warmed at the secret that passed between them.

When Jo had first come to White Rock, the twins had been in high school. On one of her regular rounds, she'd caught Hayley in a car with an older boy out at the lookout point. Not only had their clothes not been where they should've been, but there had been beer in the car, and they were underage. The beer had been unconsumed, so they hadn't been drinking and driving. Jo had let them off. She wouldn't tolerate drunk drivers, but she didn't like busting kids that weren't causing any real trouble. Hayley had begged her not to tell Sam, and Jo never had.

The shared secret made Jo feel as if she was part of something, and it reminded her of the way she'd felt all those years ago when her family was still a real family.

Jo nodded, and Hayley signaled Billie for a refill, which Billie promptly placed next to the beer Jo was currently working on. She'd managed to drink three quarters of it and peel off half the label, which now sat in a soggy pile on the bar beside the bottle. Hayley and Marla were still too young to drink, but apparently Billie didn't mind taking their money for Jo's beer. It might not have been quite legal, but since Sam was probably really the one paying, no one would complain.

The jukebox started up again, and the girls turned to Sam. "One more dance, Daddy, and then we'll go out to eat."

Marla looked over Sam's shoulder at Jo. "Daddy's taking us to The Chophouse for steak. You want to come?"

Jo wouldn't dream of imposing. "Sorry. Can't, but thanks for the invite."

The girls hurried off. Jo finished her first beer and started on the second, drinking more slowly this time. One and a half was her limit when she was driving.

"Hey, there's Kevin over there. I hardly ever see him come in." Sam jerked his chin toward the corner, and Jo looked to see Kevin talking to someone who was seated at one of the tables. She didn't know who they were, but they look to be about Kevin's age. Probably a friend. He glanced up and caught her eye.

"We should invite him to join us." Jo motioned for him to come over even though she wasn't sure if she actually wanted Kevin to join them. She still had a funny feeling about him, but maybe that was because she hadn't really given him a fair chance.

"Hey guys, I just dropped off some treats at the station for Lucy and stopped in for a quick one. Lucy really likes those bacon treats, and you can only get them down at Grovesner's over in Colebrook." Kevin stood in front of them, looking as if he wasn't sure if he should stay or not.

Sam gestured to the seat next to him. "Have a seat."

Kevin sat, and the three of them faced forward, their elbows on the bar. "Did you talk to the Donnelly family and give them the news that the medical examiner made a positive ID?"

Sam shook his head. "Gonna go there first thing tomorrow. I think they already knew it was him. I mean, he was missing, so where else would he have been?"

Kevin nodded. "Still hard hearing it for sure."

"Yeah."

Jo pushed the basket of fries toward Kevin. "Want one?"

"No, thanks. So do you guys still think it was a suicide?"

Jo had been thinking about that all afternoon. She was suspicious by nature, especially after what she'd seen happen in the investigation of her sister's disappearance. She knew people weren't always what they claimed to be. And she knew people kept deep, dark secrets.

In college, she'd studied psychology and was somewhat of an expert in human behavior. She was hoping Mike's kids would be there when they went to tell Margie about the positive ID. She wanted to see their reactions. Margie had obviously been upset, and no wonder with her current prognosis. It didn't seem fair to heap this on her, and it also didn't seem fair for Jo to be suspecting one of her children. But, as Jo had learned when she was ten years old, life wasn't fair. She had to consider all angles.

"Can't say for sure," Sam said. "We need to establish three things without a doubt before I'm comfortable and willing to rule it a suicide. One

is the presence of the weapon at the scene. That one we got. The second thing is to be sure the wounds could have been self-inflicted. With the condition of the body, it's hard to tell. And the third thing is motive or intent. I'm not convinced that Mike was intent on taking his own life. Sure, Margie said he was depressed, but many people are depressed and they don't kill themselves. We need to see if he attempted suicide before, and need to dig a little further before we can comfortably close the case as a suicide. Don't you agree?" Sam glanced at Jo and Kevin, who both nodded.

"Yep. Needs a little bit more investigation, in my book," Jo said.

"Would you look at that asshole?" Billie stood with her back to them, her neck craned as she looked up at the TV over the bar. On the TV was Mayor Harley Dupont in a shiny pressed suit, his fake smile radiating out from the screen in a way that made Jo want to jump on the bar and punch it.

What was he doing on TV? Jo tilted her head to listen, and her ears were assaulted by Dupont's tinny voice listing off all his accomplishments as mayor. They were coming up on an election year, and Dupont was really pulling no punches to try to get elected. He'd even taken credit for getting the government grant that had allowed them to take Lucy on as a K-9 investigator. It had actually been Reese that had done the work, but none of them complained as long as they got to keep Lucy. The dog, who had been a stray with an uncertain future, had a good nose for police work.

"Bad enough we have to deal with the guy in person--now we have to watch him on TV too?" Sam said.

"Gotta wonder how he can afford commercials," Jo said as she picked at the label on her new beer.

"With the way he's swaying the rezoning laws to be in Thorne's favor, I wouldn't be surprised if Thorne was helping him out," Sam said.

Kevin's brow creased. "You think Dupont can be bought?"

Jo snorted. "Are you serious? You've seen how sketchy he is. And you know he's had a role in blocking some of the search warrants we tried to get on some of the drug cases that we suspect lead back to Thorne." Jo didn't actually know how much Kevin knew about that, but by the way he nodded, apparently he had been paying attention. Maybe he wasn't as much of a slacker as she thought. Maybe he was just naïve.

"I did see them having lunch together at Lago last month," Kevin said.

Jo angled her chair to look at him. She'd seen them having lunch together too, and she'd also seen Kevin come out of the restaurant at that

same time. But Kevin had lied to her when she'd asked about it. Or at least she thought he lied. Maybe it had just been a misunderstanding.

"You eat there?" she asked. Lago was an upscale restaurant. No one on a cop's salary would go there for lunch, unless they had an ulterior motive.

Kevin laughed. "No. Not on my salary. But my cousin works there, and sometimes I poke my head in to say hi. He flips me a few free rolls, maybe some leftover steak. Anyway, I was visiting him one day, and I saw Dupont and Thorne in there together. But I guess it makes sense that the mayor would have lunch with a prominent developer in the area, right? I didn't think anything of it. I mean, they were right there in public." Kevin sipped his beer thoughtfully, his brows pinched together. "You don't think they could be up to something together, though, do you? I mean, you don't think that the mayor is really on the take?"

"I wouldn't put it past him," Sam said.

Hayley and Marla came rushing back. They nodded at Kevin before surrounding Sam. "We're starving! Are you ready?" They glanced back at Kevin and Jo. "You sure you don't want to join us?"

Kevin and Jo both declined, and Sam threw some money on the bar and said his good-byes.

"Nice kids." Kevin hunched over his beer.

Jo didn't think Kevin was much older than Sam's daughters. "Do you know them from school?"

"No. I grew up a few towns over, but I'm five years older than them, anyway." Kevin tapped his finger on his beer. He was fidgety, as if he wanted to say something.

Jo sat quietly finishing her fries, dragging them through the mayonnaise dish to scoop out the last blobs.

"Is there anything new on Tyler's case?" Kevin asked finally.

Jo didn't want to let on that they were investigating. So far, Kevin had seemed a little taken aback any time he'd learned that they weren't doing things exactly within the confines of the law. "You know as much as I do. The state investigation didn't find much of anything."

Kevin shot her a sideways glance. "I didn't mean the state investigation."

"What *did* you mean?"

Kevin kept his eyes trained on his beer. "I know there's a lot of unanswered questions. I know that Tyler was out there helping someone and

got shot. But how come they can't find the killer? The car was stolen, and there was evidence of drugs, but usually criminals that deal drugs and steal cars aren't that smart. Not smart enough to hide from a full investigation, anyway. Unless the state investigator didn't put much effort into it. In which case maybe someone else should."

Was Kevin suggesting that he'd be on board with looking into Tyler's death on the side? Did he know they were already doing it? Jo decided to play it safe. "Maybe. But we could get into big trouble for that."

"Right. I wasn't suggesting we do anything like that. But I do want to see justice for Tyler. So if anyone *were* to do that and they needed help, well..." Kevin shrugged. "Anyway, I gotta get going. Nice talking to you."

He slapped enough bills on the bar to pay for Jo's beer and fries along with his own and left.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kevin clicked the fob, and his Isuzu, which was still parked over at the police station, chirped as the doors unlocked. The station was dark--everyone had gone home. Even Lucy was gone, Sam having taken her in the Tahoe, he assumed. Sam didn't leave Lucy alone in the station for long, and it gave Kevin a warm feeling knowing that Lucy was that lovingly cared for.

He got in his car and pulled onto Main Street, heading north. The car still smelled of bacon from the special dog treats, and Kevin's stomach grumbled. Maybe he should find some fast food or hit up a restaurant. But not the one Sam had gone to--he didn't want to look like a stalker if he ran into them.

His eyes fell on the town offices, and his thoughts turned to Harley Dupont. He knew commercials were expensive, but he thought Dupont had family money. Maybe he'd paid for the commercials himself, or maybe Thorne had helped him, as Sam and Jo had alluded.

Kevin knew that Dupont and Sam butted heads all the time. Dupont seemed to have no qualms about rezoning rural land to commercial. He didn't seem to care about cutting down acres of forest and obliterating old farms to make way for Thorne's facilities. And if Dupont was in Thorne's pocket, how far would the two of them go?

Kevin thought about the envelopes stuffed with cash and cryptic notes that kept showing up under his doormat. He knew what the money was for--information. He'd only been half telling the truth when he told Jo about meeting his cousin at Lago.

He knew Jo had seen him that day last month, and he'd panicked and screwed up when she'd asked about him eating there. He'd thought it was weird at the time that she was asking if he'd had lunch. Later on, he'd realized she'd asked because she'd seen him come out of Lago. Ever since then, she'd acted a little bit suspicious of him.

Kevin knew he'd screwed up and had to fix it. Luckily, he'd only said he hadn't eaten lunch, not that he hadn't been in Lago. Tonight had presented the perfect opportunity to explain further. The real truth was he had been meeting his contact in the alley behind the building. Thankfully, he really did have a cousin that worked there, so his little white lie would hold up if Jo checked it out.

But would she check it out? Kevin got the distinct impression she didn't really trust him. Why should she? He was going behind her back to feed information to his contact. Then again, the contact had alluded that Sam and Jo weren't necessarily on the right side of the law, and if they were doing something sketchy, then wasn't it Kevin's duty to report it?

Jo hadn't admitted that they were investigating Tyler's death. Kevin wasn't stupid, and if they thought they'd been able to hide their activities from him, they were wrong. It was just one of the many things they did to exclude him. Aside from tonight, they'd never made any overtures to hang around with him outside of work other than that one cookout he'd invited them to at his place.

Then again, other than the one cookout, Kevin hadn't made overtures either. And they'd gone out of their way to include him in this suicide investigation. Sam had even said he'd done good work in checking on the gun's serial number without being asked. It was the first time Kevin had done anything without being asked--maybe he should do that more.

He turned off Main Street and headed toward his house, his spirit sinking as the sun dipped below the mountains. He felt as if he were caught between a rock and a hard place. He wanted to do the right thing, but was the right thing giving information to his contact about what Sam and Jo were doing, or were Sam and Jo the ones who were doing the right thing and giving information to his contact was the wrong thing?

Kevin didn't know the answer. The best he could do was keep his eyes and ears open and collect all the information he could. Knowing what he could about everything that was going on would only benefit him in the

long run. And once he knew all the information, *then* he'd be able to figure out which side he was on.

CHAPTER NINE

Jo loved the little cottage she rented deep in the forest outside of town. It was set out on a back road away from everyone else. The woods teemed with wildlife--birds, chipmunks, squirrels, deer. Turkeys often pecked their way through her yard, and she could hear the owls hooting at night and the hollow echo of woodpeckers drilling the trees during the day. A few feet behind the cottage, a bubbling stream flowed over smooth rocks. The stream was only about six inches deep, but it was enough to dip her feet in so the cold mountain water could cool them on a hot summer day.

When she'd come to White Rock four years ago, she'd had no intention of staying. Even so, she'd given the cottage a homey feel, keeping the outside tidy and planting lots of flowers. Impatiens in white, coral, and red lined the perimeter of the house. Vibrant purple petunias hung from baskets, their flower-laden stems reaching almost to the ground. Colorful pansies bobbed and weaved at her from the planters that lined the porch railings.

Inside, the cottage was just as charming. She'd furnished it with flea market and thrift store finds. Overstuffed sofas and chipped white paint all in the classical muted tones that magazines referred to as cottage chic.

The cottage had the comfortable feeling of home, but it was missing something. Other living creatures. Jo wasn't one to form deep relationships. Sure, she worked closely with Sam and considered him to be one of her best friends--well, practically her only friend--but the relationship was mostly relegated to work. She didn't like getting close to anyone because she knew from bitter experience they could be ripped away without a moment's notice.

She made only one concession to that rule--her goldfish, Finn. Right now, Finn was floating around happily in his round goldfish bowl that she kept on the antique sideboard she used for a TV stand in the living room. She'd moved him from the kitchen counter a few weeks ago, figuring he might also like the company of the TV. The fish wasn't very stimulating when stacked up against human company, but he never argued with her and was easy to care for.

Jo peered inside the bowl at the golden-orange colored goldfish, and he turned toward her. Was the water getting cloudy? Maybe she should spring for the oblong fish tank with the filter that the man at the pet store had said would be better for Finn's longevity. Somehow the tank had seemed like too much of a commitment, but maybe it was time to start thinking about putting down roots here and committing. She'd gotten quite comfortable in White Rock. She liked it here. She liked the people. And she liked her job. The thoughts of moving on that had plagued her when she'd first come had subsided, and now, for the first time in her adult life, she actually thought she'd found a place where she could spend the rest of her life. After all, Sam had been born here, and he hadn't gotten tired of the area yet.

She wondered what it was like, though, to have a close family like Sam and his daughters. She wasn't close with her sister. Any advances she'd made toward helping her had been rebuked. Apparently Bridgett preferred to live in drug-addicted squalor. Should Jo have made more of an effort?

She unscrewed the cap on Finn's yellow plastic flake food container and took out a big flake. She held it just above the water on the top of the bowl. Finn darted up, his lips piercing the top of the water and sucking the flake in as if it were one of Billie's gourmet cheeseburgers. She'd been working on hand-feeding the fish for a few weeks, and now he would come on command. It was a little thing but had created a bond between them, and Jo wondered what other tricks she could teach him. Would he roll over like Lucy?

Of course, having a fish wasn't anything like having a dog. Jo's landlord had been adamant that she not have any animals, so adopting Lucy had been out of the question, and besides, Lucy was clearly Sam's dog. She would have to make do with bonding with Lucy at work like everyone else in the office. Even Kevin had taken to the dog, much to her surprise. He'd seemed reluctant at first, almost as if he were afraid that Dupont would

catch them with the dog and he would get in trouble. Tonight, Kevin had even gone out of his way to bring the special treats to her.

Perhaps she had misjudged Kevin. His explanation as to why he'd been at Lago made perfect sense. But the way he offered to help in Tyler's case had set her on edge. He must've caught on to the fact that they were investigating. She'd have to warn Sam to be more careful at work when they talked about it. She still wasn't sure it was a good idea to let anyone else know about their stealth investigatory activities.

She made her way into the bedroom, past her queen-size bed with the powder-blue silk bedspread and over to the white-painted scroll armoire. She flipped up the corner of the rose-decorated rug on which the trunk at the end of her bed sat and picked up the small silver skeleton key then fitted it into the armoire and opened the doors.

The armoire didn't contain clothing, jewelry, or any of the other things that most women kept. This one contained photographs, casework, and paperwork. It wasn't a closet. It was a workstation.

On the right side hung photographs and old papers that had to do with her sister's disappearance. Yellowed newspaper clippings. Handwritten notes she'd taken herself after researching old police files. Her heart twisted as unwanted childhood memories flooded back. Images of her sister, only a child the last time she'd seen her, laughing and smiling flickered through her mind, and then they were gone, replaced with images of her sister's toys sitting unused for over a year. Images of her mother's drawn face as she sank further into depression the longer it went with no news about her sister.

The day her sister had disappeared, Jo hadn't lost just her sister--she'd lost her mother too. Maybe that was why Jo was compelled to find out what really happened. It was like an obsession. She'd thought about asking for Sam's help a dozen times, but this one was hers alone. It was too personal. She didn't want anyone else to know she was looking. Maybe if she found the answer, she could finally stop torturing herself about what had happened to her sister. Had she suffered? Had she been terrified? And the final question... was she dead or alive?

Jo wasn't going to work on her sister's case tonight, though. She opened the left-hand side of the armoire. This one was less populated but with more recent photos. Photos of Tyler lying on the asphalt in front of his car. The inside of his police car. The car pulled over to the side of the road with a

flat tire. The ashtray with the partial fingerprint. The dusting of cocaine. All of which had led nowhere.

Maybe this new lead of the large deposit into his account would give them something. She pulled her laptop out of the drawer and got to work.

CHAPTER TEN

The next day, Sam and Jo headed over to Margie Donnelly's. Sam had called ahead to make sure it was okay. Given Margie's condition, he didn't want to just barge in. Margie hadn't been surprised at the news that they'd positively identified the body. She seemed to have come to terms with the fact it was Mike. Sam guessed when you were facing a death sentence yourself, the mourning of a lost loved one took on a different meaning.

Margie had asked that they bring Lucy. Everyone in town knew about the police dog, and she was very popular. When Sam and Jo arrived, the Donnelly children were there as well. Sam had already done his homework on the family and knew that Brian Donnelly was in his early thirties and Melody in her midthirties. They were both married.

Melody met them at the door. "Chief Mason, nice of you to stop by." She juggled the stack of mail she was carrying into her left hand and held out her right. "I'm Melody Donnelly... Well, my last name's actually Marchand, but you know."

Her handshake was limp, and her eyes were red rimmed from crying.

"I'm sorry about your loss, ma'am. This is Sergeant Jody Harris."

Melody nodded to Jo and ushered them in. She turned to a man that was seated in the living room. "This is my brother, Brian."

They exchanged greetings as Melody put the stack of bills down on the table. Sam's eyes followed it. "I've been taking care of Mom's things for her. She can't handle this anymore, and Dad wasn't any good at it." Melody's

voice caught, and Sam gave her a moment to compose herself. "Cancer's expensive, and these bills need to be handled."

Sam's eyes stayed on the bills. Cancer was expensive. And he knew that even if you had good insurance, it didn't always cover everything. Would Mike's life insurance help the family out?

Lucy trotted into the dining room and went straight to Margie, who was seated at the table. She looked even worse than she had the day before. Laid out in front of her was a pile of silver and the flow blue china Sam had seen in the cabinet. Margie's face brightened at the sight of Lucy, and she bent down with effort to pat the dog. Lucy licked her, sniffed the edge of the table, then moved on to the walker that sat beside Margie, apparently finding something interesting to sniff on the bottom. Sam's heart pinched. Margie hadn't had to use a walker when they'd visited the day before. Was she really failing that fast, or had Mike's death hastened it?

"I'm just putting things in order," Margie said. "Don't want to leave the kids with a mess now."

"Listen, Chief," Brian said. "We'd like to make arrangements for my father. We were wondering... about the body."

"Well, that's the thing," Sam said. "We'd like to do a few more tests."

Melody frowned. "Tests? Why would you need to test anything? He shot himself."

"He was shot, yes."

"You mean you think someone else shot him?" Margie asked. "Who the hell would do that?"

"That's what I was gonna ask you. Had Mike tried to kill himself before? Did he have any enemies?"

Brian shot up from his chair. "Of course he never tried to kill himself! And everyone liked him." He gestured toward his mother. "You could see why he would be upset. Haven't we been through enough? Are you going to drag this out now and cause my mother further suffering?"

"We're not going to drag it out. That's the last thing we want," Sam said. "But we have a certain protocol, and certain criteria must be satisfied before we can rule his death a suicide."

Margie struggled to get up from the table. She clutched the walker, her bony knuckles turning white with the effort to help herself stand.

"You don't have to get up, ma'am," Sam said.

"I need to while I still can. I'm getting a lot worse, but I'm not dead yet. And if something happened to Mike, I want to find out what it was. But like I told you, he was very depressed, and I don't know of anyone that would want to kill him."

"Did he argue or fight with anyone recently?" Sam asked.

Margie snorted. "Just that Lucas Thorne."

Sam's left brow shot up. "They had a fight? What did they fight about?"

"He came sniffing around about selling the land again. Probably heard I was sick and wanted to take advantage."

"He was always asking about that." Brian pointed to the bills on the table. "Maybe Dad should have been thinking about selling, but it's ludicrous to think someone like Thorne would kill my father over the land."

"Probably. But we need to consider every angle," Sam said.

Brian crossed his arms over his chest. "Seems like a waste of taxpayer money."

Sam nodded. "I just want to cover all the bases. I'm sure the medical examiner will be done with his full investigation any day, and we'll be able to clear this all up. I don't want to put you people through any more than you're already going through." He turned to Margie. "Mike wasn't thinking of selling to Thorne, was he?"

Margie leaned on her walker. Her body was frail, but her voice was strong. "No way. He told that bastard that he'd get the farm over his dead body and then sent him packing."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"So what do you think?" Sam asked once he and Jo were in the Tahoe heading back to the police station.

"Hard to say. I realize the family is upset with everything going on, but it seemed to me that the son protested a little too much at us continuing the investigation," Jo said.

Lucy whined from her place in the backseat as if in agreement.

Sam looked at Jo out of the corner of his eye. "Did you get a chance to look into that deposit and Tyler's account?"

"I had to call in a few favors. Since we can't get a subpoena for that information, it has to be done in a different way," Jo said. "I happen to know a few people, and we should have some information soon."

Sometimes it was hard being a cop--everything you did was tracked and recorded. Maybe that wasn't always the best way to serve justice. But with the strange things coming up in Tyler's case, Sam wasn't exactly sure if serving justice was going to end up the way he'd previously thought it would.

Reese was waiting for them anxiously inside the lobby of the police station. The way her sneaker-clad foot was tapping out a rhythm on the marble floor indicated to Sam that she had some interesting news.

Lucy ran straight over to Reese's desk and sniffed at the drawer. Reese opened it and fed her a treat.

"I think we might want to lay off the treats," Sam said. "We don't want her getting fat. I'm feeding her a premium dog food at home. These snacks might not be good for her."

"Kevin brought them in special," Reese said. "We don't give them to her a lot."

"Where is Kevin?" Jo peeked over the post office box divider. "He's not in there."

"He clocked out already," Reese said. "I have good news and bad news."

"Bad news first?" Sam phrased it as a question. He wasn't sure which he wanted first.

"The glasses were washed. Only Mike's fingerprints and some touch DNA that was a partial match."

"That was quick." *And inconclusive,* Sam thought. Having a partial match meant anyone from Mike's family could have left the DNA, but everyone knew the family used the camp, so there was nothing new there. Even though the drinking glasses were clearly used that night, Sam knew it didn't prove a thing.

"I have friends in high places," Reese said.

"Okay, so what's the good news?" Jo asked.

"John sent this over from the autopsy." She held up a piece of paper and wiggled it in the air.

"What's it say?" Sam asked. Judging by the look on Reese's face, he knew it was something interesting.

Reese handed it over, and Sam looked at it while Reese gave him the abridged version of the technical report.

"There wasn't enough of the fingers left to test for gunshot powder. Mike was right-handed, and that's the hand that the birds worked on the most. He got the partial print from the other hand." Reese grimaced. "Anyway, judging by the trajectory of the bullet, the placement of the gun, and the lack of gunshot powder, John thinks we need more investigation before we rule it a suicide."

An undercurrent of electricity ran through Sam. His gut feeling had been right. Could someone have killed Mike? He looked down at the report. Time of death was fixed at between six fifty and seven twenty that night. "Says here he died around seven p.m."

"At least gives us something to go on." Jo headed toward the K-Cup machine, grabbing her bright-yellow smiley mug and shoving it under the spout. "First order of business, find out where our favorite suspects were around seven p.m."

"The only people that could get into the logging road are people that have the key for that gate. That being Mike's family and the others that have camps up that road." Sam wondered if Thorne could've gotten the gate key somehow. He had contacts and knew people in high--and low--places. Sam wouldn't put it past him to have bribed someone at the logging company to give him keys to all the logging roads for his nefarious drug-dealing activities. The mountain trails in there would be perfect for transporting all over the county.

"Only the Ritchies have a cabin on Logging Road Number Four. The rest of the land is empty," Reese said.

Jo pulled her mug out from under the spout of the machine then turned to look at Sam over her shoulder. "Coffee?"

"Yeah. Thanks. Looks like we need to go interview the neighbors and back to the family again. They could have a motive if Mike's life insurance was going to pay out. Margie had a lot of medical bills, and Mike wouldn't sell the farm to pay for them. Maybe the kids didn't want to get dragged down by that. Guess we better make these coffees to go."

"Not so fast, Chief," Reese said and then at Sam's confused look added, "Remember how you asked me to call in some of those candidates for the job opening?"

"Uh-huh." Sam had forgotten.

Reese thrust her chin toward the front door. "Well, one of them is coming in for his interview right now."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sam spent an hour interviewing Gary Newport. He sat him in the chair with the shorter leg that they normally put suspects in to throw them off balance. Sam thought it might work just as well for seeing how job applicants reacted to having the added stress of a wobbly chair.

Gary, who was in his midthirties, seemed competent enough. He had the right things on his resume, but Sam just couldn't get excited about him. He needed more than some bullet points on a resume and a good education. He needed to get a feeling about the person. But with Dupont on his case about filling the job, Sam didn't have all summer to wait for the perfect candidate. Maybe the perfect one would never come along.

After the interview, Sam grabbed a ring of keys out of his middle drawer. He'd almost forgotten that he'd been given the keys to the logging roads when he'd taken the job. He'd never had to use them before, and he really didn't need to use them now either because Reese had called the Ritchies to let them know they were on their way, and they'd opened the gate for him. He brought them along just in case.

The Ritchies' camp was just like the Donnellys', cobbled together with bits and pieces. It was nothing fancy, but it served its purpose. Nancy put out coffee, and they all sat around the kitchen table as if it were a social visit.

"So what is it you want to know, Chief?" Nancy asked. "Surely you're not going to arrest Bullwinkle."

Sam smiled. "Bullwinkle had nothing to do with it. Mike was shot. Bullwinkle must've been spooked by something, and that's why he ran by

your place so fast."

Nancy's hand flew up to her heart, and her mouth gaped open. "Shot? By whom?"

"That's what we need to find out." Jo leaned her elbows on the table. "Have you seen anyone at the camp? Maybe a car that didn't belong?"

Bill shook his head. "Only ever saw one of the Donnellys' cars here. The truck and the brown Ford. The kids didn't bother with the camp too much, so it was mostly Mike's truck."

Nancy pressed her lips together. "Of course, our camp is beyond theirs, so anyone visiting their camp wouldn't have driven by here. We try to bring all our supplies in so we don't have to go into town, and we don't leave much once we get here. So it's possible another car was there. We wouldn't have seen it."

"Did you hear anything unusual that night? Gunshots or yelling?" Sam asked.

Nancy shook her head. "No... Oh wait! That was the night we heard those darn ATVs. It used to be so quiet up here. That's what we loved about it, but lately there's been kids on those ATVs, and in the winter, the snowmobile noise makes quite a ruckus."

Bill nodded his head in agreement. "That's why we didn't hear the gunshot. Those kids aren't just joyriding on ATVs. I think they're out poaching deer and God knows what else."

Sam frowned. In his book, poaching was as big a crime as murder. Hunting seasons were in place so that the population of wildlife remained healthy. He hated it when people ignored that. "So you did hear gunshots?"

"Rifles. Is that what Mike was shot with?"

Sam shook his head. "No, but with all that noise going on, you probably wouldn't notice another gun. Do you think the ATVs were at the Donnelly property?"

Nancy shrugged. "Hard to tell. The noise did come from that direction, but if you want to know for sure, why don't you ask that Jesse Cowly? He's one of the kids that rides on them."

"Jesse Cowly? Are you sure?" Jo shot a look at Sam. Jesse Cowly was a local that flirted with the wrong side of the law. Sam had caught him in minor crimes but had always let him go, thinking it might not be a bad idea if Jesse owed him.

Thing was, Sam had a suspicion that Jesse was involved in Thorne's drug ring. And if Jesse and his friends were involved with Thorne and the ATVs were over at Mike Donnelly's, maybe his theory that Thorne had killed Mike to get his farmland wasn't so far-fetched.

ON THE WAY out from the neighbors', Sam and Jo stopped at the Donnellys' to look for the ATV tracks. Sam didn't recall any tracks being there before the pictures, and he was pretty good at remembering the specifics of a crime scene, but it never hurt to take a second look.

"Did you see any ATV tracks in the grass when we found Mike's body? The tracks in the grass probably wouldn't be there anymore," Jo said as they let Lucy out of the back of the SUV.

"I don't think so," Sam said. "But Kevin's pictures would probably tell us if there were."

They went around to the side. The grass was still stained a muddy red. Lucy sniffed around but apparently didn't find anything of interest and trotted off toward the driveway.

They stood looking out at the woods, where birds chirped and flew from branch to branch. A tufted titmouse swooped down to the ground. A chipmunk poked its head out of a decaying woodpile.

It was quiet out there. No signs of ATVs now. Just the rustle of leaves and the slight summer breeze. "I don't know if there are many trails in this area for all-terrain vehicles." Sam walked over to the edge of the woods. It was midafternoon, and the low sun elongated the shadows of the tree trunks. He could see a thin deer path but nothing that was wide enough for an ATV.

"Maybe they drove right up the road," Jo said.

They slowly crossed the front yard to the driveway.

"So what did you think of the guy you interviewed?" she asked.

Sam shrugged. "He was okay. I might like to get your take on some of these interviewees."

Jo made a face, and Sam laughed. "I know it's a pain in the ass. But we have to hire someone, and it'll be a lot more pleasant for us if it's someone we like."

"Sure, I get that." Jo stopped at the edge of the driveway, where Lucy was sniffing the tire tracks. The driveway was dirt and a little bit muddy. It had rained two days earlier, and the sun didn't hit the driveway directly, so the dirt stayed damp for a long time. Mike Donnelly's truck was still in the driveway. She could see the tire tracks leading up to it. But there were other tire marks.

"These are Mike's tracks, but looks like there was another car here recently, too," Jo pointed out.

"The Ritchies said they saw the other family car here. Maybe one of the kids or Margie came out," Sam said.

Lucy was sniffing at something on the edge of the driveway. She barked then looked at Jo and Sam.

"What have you got?" Jo squatted next to Lucy.

"What do you think this is?" She looked up at Sam. "A bicycle track?"

Sam looked at the thin track. It was barely even noticeable, but he could faintly see several tracks as if the bike had been ridden back and forth. "Sure looks like it. It's certainly not from any ATV. Those tires would be wider than this but not as wide as the car."

Jo stood. "A lot of people ride their bikes out here. There's even a bike trail in the woods."

"And the Donnellys have bikes up on the porch."

"So it's not much of a lead." Jo pulled open the passenger door of the Tahoe and let Lucy jump in before getting in herself. Sam was still in the driveway, and she leaned across the car and talked to him through the open driver's window. "We need to find those ATV riders and ask them exactly where they were riding. They might have seen something, though chances are slim they'll admit to being here if they were poaching deer."

Sam opened his door and got into the driver's seat. "Even slimmer if they were involved in the murder."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jesse Cowly lived in an old run-down 1950s ranch with one of his buddies. Jo and Sam knew it was a party house, and after swinging by the auto-body shop where he worked and discovering it was Jesse's day off, they decided to pay a visit to him at home. It was late afternoon, so Jesse and his roommate would be up and probably doing something illegal.

The house was painted a faded blue. Faded black shutters hung on the windows. The front yard consisted of brown patches of dirt and weeds. A section of screen flapped down from the top corner of the screen door. A dirty curtain flapped in and out of one of the open windows in tempo to the loud music blaring from inside.

Jo pulled the brim of her cap down and secured her sunglasses. She figured that made her look more official and a little bit more badass.

Sam knocked on the door. Loudly.

The music volume was lowered, and the door opened to reveal Jesse's bleary-eyed, puffy face. He looked at Sam, and his eyes widened then darted to Jo. "Uhhh... Can I help you guys?"

"Yeah. We got some questions." Sam pushed his way into the house. He didn't act confrontational, but Jesse got the message.

Jesse stumbled back a little bit. "Hey, you can't just come in here, can you?"

"Sure we can. We're the police," Sam said.

Lucy pushed her way in beside Sam and stood at attention, her eyes trained on Jesse. Jesse's gaze flicked to Lucy with alarm.

Jesse's roommate, Brian Carlson, bolted up from the couch, sweeping something that had been sitting on the coffee table next to a crusty pizza box under the couch. The house was spiced with the sweet smell of pot mixed with stale beer and greasy pepperoni. A cloud of smoke hung over Brian's head, and he waved it away.

"This is entrapment or something, isn't it?" Jesse's eyes darted around the room as if he was looking for other things he should hide.

"Calm down." Jo pushed Jesse into a chair. "We're not here to arrest you for anything you might be doing in here." She looked around the room pointedly.

Lucy sat in front of Jesse's chair and stared at him.

"We have some questions about your ATV activity out down near the logging roads," Sam said.

Jesse and Brian exchanged a look. "What do you mean?"

"Nancy Ritchie said you guys ride around back there in the woods." Jo lifted the top of the pizza box carefully with her index finger. Inside was congealed cheesy pizza. She let the lid flop back down.

"No, she must be mistaken." Jesse leaned back in his chair. Apparently he was trying to look relaxed, but it just made him look more nervous.

Lucy let out a low growl, and his gaze flicked to her.

Jo decided to capitalize on Jesse's nervousness by making her way around the room and looking into various boxes and behind sofas while Sam asked them questions about where they were the night Mike had died. She even picked up the corner of the rug.

"Hey, you can't search in here like that," Brian said.

Lucy swiveled her head in his direction and barked.

"We can if we have probable cause like a witness telling us you were out on those roads," Sam lied. "Our witness also heard gunshots out there. What do you know about that?"

The two looked at each other. Brian said, "We don't know anything about any gunshots, right?"

"I might ride an ATV once in a while, but I don't know anything about any gunshots," Jesse said.

"Really? Where were you Monday night?" Sam asked.

"We were right here." Jesse's answer tumbled out way too fast.

Lucy inched closer to Jesse and growled.

Jo could see that Jesse and Brian would try to deny they had been there, but she knew how to make them tell the truth. Her experience with most small-time criminals like Jesse proved that they would easily confess to something minor if they thought they were going to be nailed for a bigger crime.

"Really?" She came to stand in the center of the room. "That's funny because we know someone who says otherwise. This person saw you out there right about the time that Mike Donnelly was shot."

The looks of surprise on their faces were almost comical. Apparently, they hadn't known about the shooting. Jo wasn't surprised, though--she didn't think Jesse was the type to escalate his criminal activities to murder. But she did think he had something to do with Thorne's drug operation, and she knew Sam had let him off on a few minor things. She figured Sam was grooming him to be an informant, looking the other way on lesser crimes so that Jesse owed him and he could use him later to catch the big fish.

"We don't know anything about Mike Donnelly." Brian's face had turned white.

"Really?" Sam leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. "Well then, how do you explain being seen out there at the time he died?"

"And why would you lie about it, if you weren't involved?" Jo asked.

Jesse held his hands up. "Okay, okay. We were out there, but we didn't kill anybody. We were just joyriding on our ATVs."

"You expect us to believe that? We've got DNA evidence from the body just waiting at the lab, and my bet is that it has your signature all over it, and even if it doesn't, we've got witnesses, and they saw you with guns." Sam smiled. "Oh, did I mention that Mike was shot? I wonder if we'll find the same kind of gun in here."

"What? No way! We didn't shoot anyone." Jesse shifted in his chair. Lucy edged closer. A bead of sweat formed on Jesse's forehead.

"Well then, explain to me why you were out there with a gun," Sam said.

"Screw it," Jesse said. "I'd rather get in trouble for poaching than murder. We were out there poaching deer. We don't know anything about Mike Donnelly getting shot."

Sam appeared to think it over, causing Jesse and Brian to become even more nervous. "But you *were* out there near the Donnelly cabin?"

Jesse shook his head. "Not near it. But we rode up the logging road past it to access the trails in the back."

"I told you we should have started at the trail on the other side of the woods," Brian muttered.

"If you rode up the road, then you would've gone past the Donnellys' place," Jo said. "Do you know what time that was?"

"Shortly before sunset," Jesse said. He looked at Brian then shrugged. "The deer come out at dusk, and we wanted to be in place in the field by then."

It was June, and the sun set around seven. If someone had been at Mike's, Jesse and Brian might've seen them. "When you drove by, did you see anyone at the Donnellys' camp or anything strange going on there?"

Jesse screwed up his face and thought for a second. "I didn't see anything funny going on, just a couple cars in the driveway."

"A *couple* of cars?" Sam said. "What did they look like?"

"One was a big black truck. I've seen that one in the driveway before, but the other one was a small white car, a VW Jetta. I recognized it because my sister drives one," Jesse said.

"Do you know who was driving that Jetta?" Sam asked.

Jesse shook his head and shrugged. "No, man. Sorry. But whoever it was must have been in the cabin, because I know there was no one outside."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Ritchies had said that only the family cars had been in the driveway, so Sam and Jo headed off to the Donnellys' to find out who drove a white Jetta and deliver the news that Mike's death might not have been by his own hand. Since Margie had seemed to be fond of Lucy, they brought her again. Melody answered their knock, her eyes narrowing when she saw them.

"I hope you're here to tell us you're releasing Dad's body." Melody stood in the door, giving the distinct impression she wasn't going to invite them in.

"Can we come in?" Sam asked gently.

Melody's eyes flicked to Lucy and then back up to Sam. "Okay, but just because Mom likes the dog. She's not feeling good today."

Margie was lying on the couch, a colorful afghan wrapped around her. Brian sat in the chair. He tensed when he saw Sam and Jo. Lucy trotted over to Margie, and Margie's eyes flickered open. She put her hand out to stroke Lucy's fur, a ghost of a smile passing over her lips.

"Sorry to interrupt, ma'am," Sam said.

Brian pushed up from his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "I hope you're gonna let us bury my father while my mom can still make it to the funeral."

"We'll be releasing the body today." Sam paused and cleared his throat. "But I'm afraid the medical examiner wasn't able to specifically rule that your father shot himself."

Melody's brows knitted together. "What are you talking about?"

Margie struggled to sit up on the couch. Lucy sat at her feet, Margie's hand still rubbing the dog's head. "What's he saying, Melly?"

Sam walked over to stand in front of Margie. "Mike might not have shot himself."

"What do you mean? He's not dead?"

"He is. But someone else might have killed him."

"Oh, but he was so depressed. I just thought..." Margie's face crinkled, and she looked up at Sam. "Who would do such a thing?"

"Someone who was angry with him or benefitted from his death."

Brian scrubbed his hands across his face. "What? Nobody would *benefit* from his death. He barely had any life insurance. And no one would want my father dead. Everybody liked him. You guys must be wrong."

"I don't think we are," Sam said.

Melody collapsed into a chair. "I don't believe it. I thought he was shot with his own gun."

"He was. Which makes me think he might've been expecting an argument with someone. Otherwise, why would he have taken his gun from the house and brought it to the camp? He didn't normally do that, did he?"

"No. He would bring the rifles at hunting season but not the revolver," Margie said.

"He could've been expecting a fight or some kind of altercation," Jo suggested. "Is there anyone you can think of?"

"Nobody except Thorne." Margie's hands stilled on Lucy's head, and her gaze jerked up to Sam. "But you don't think he would..."

"Hard telling," Sam said.

"We know Mike was at the cabin that night. His truck is still there. But which one of you drives the white Jetta?"

They all looked at each other.

"My car is a red Toyota," Melody said. "And Mom drives a brown Ford Taurus."

"I have a truck like Dad's." Brian looked down at the floor, and Sam glanced at Jo. Was he not telling them everything?

"Were you all here at the house that night?" Sam asked.

Margie smiled wryly. "I don't get out much anymore."

Jo sat next to Margie on the couch and patted her hand.

Sam looked at Brian and Melody. "And you two were here with her? Did you go to the cabin with your dad that day at all?"

"This is all so tiring." Margie looked drained, as if this news was sucking what life was left out of her. Sam's heart clenched. It was messy business, but he owed it to Mike Donnelly to get to the bottom of it. Especially if Thorne was involved.

Melody went to her mother, protectively tucking in the afghan and shooting angry looks at Sam and Jo.

"I think my mother has had quite enough now." She ushered them out of the room toward the foyer. "Mom's declining rapidly. Just the other day, she was driving, and today, she can barely walk around the house. The doctor said that would happen after she stopped chemo and the cancer started to grow rapidly. I don't know if all this business about my father is good for her. Can't you people go easy on her?"

"We'll try to bother her as little as possible. Maybe you can help us with just one thing. We need to create a timeline, and I was wondering if any of you could remember what your father did that day. Who he talked to. Did either of you see him or talk to him? Did he mention anything? Did he sound off at all?" Sam asked.

"I talked to him that morning on the phone, and he sounded fine," Brian said.

"I saw him at lunch, and he seemed fine, too," Melody said.

"And where were you both that night?" Sam asked.

Brian looked at his shoes. "I've been having some car trouble. But that night I was at home."

"Where do you live?" Jo asked. "Is there anyone else who could verify?"

"I can," Melody said. At Brian's funny look, she continued. "I wasn't there, but I was picking up Mom's pills at the pharmacy across the street. You can see into Brian's apartment, and I always look over to see if he's home. I was waving like a crazy person out on the sidewalk to catch his attention, but I guess he didn't see me."

"No. I didn't see you over there. I don't look out the window all the time."

"Of course not. But I saw you. I didn't have time to go over and visit because Mom needed her pills right away. She'd almost run out, and I didn't want her to be in pain."

"What time was that?" Jo asked.

Melody pressed her lips together. "I'd say it was around seven p.m. I'd gotten out of work at the flower shop late and picked up some fast food. Joel--that's my husband--was working at the hospital. He's an RN. Mom needed the pills, and Dad wasn't around. I had no idea that he'd be..."

"Do either of you know anyone that has a white Jetta? A family member or friend of your Dad's?" Sam asked.

Brian and Melody looked at each other and shook their heads.

"Why are you here asking *us* this stuff? Why aren't you out there finding Dad's killer?" Brian asked. "*We* sure didn't kill him."

"That's exactly what we're doing. Starting here with the people that knew him the best. We figure you would know what was going on with him, and that could help us find who did this," Jo said.

"Well, we don't know anything," Melody said. "Mom and Dad didn't have a lot. Just this run-down farm, and the life insurance is minimal. Won't even cover Mom's co-pays on her medical bills. And everyone liked my father. Like Mom said, about the only person he ever fought with was Thorne."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sam dropped Jo off at the station to double-check on the value of Mike's life insurance. He sent Lucy in with her. He had an idea of where to look for the white Jetta, and he didn't want the dog to get hurt.

He headed up Prickett Hill to the site of the condo village that Thorne was building. Once beautiful woods with a view of the lakes below, it was now clear cut, a scar on the landscape that made Sam's stomach tighten with disgust.

The site was still under construction, and Thorne had a plush office inside the construction trailer that Sam had been inside only once before. The opulence had surprised him. Every other construction trailer he'd been inside of had been utilitarian and plain, but Thorne's was done up like the inside of a Las Vegas suite.

Before Sam knocked on the door, he made an inspection of the parking lot. There was no white Jetta. But, then again, if Thorne had people that worked for him doing his dirty work, they probably didn't also work at the construction site. He probably kept them far away from his legitimate business.

Sam looped back around. The sound of machinery grinding, men yelling, and metal beams clanging rang in his ears. Thorne's red Cadillac was parked beside the trailer on the side that was away from the construction. Thorne must park it there on purpose so it wouldn't be marred by a stray nail or get dirt on it.

Sam knocked on the thin metal door.

"Come in."

Sam opened the door and stepped in.

Thorne was seated at a mahogany desk. He looked tan and healthy in his button-down shirt, but when you looked closely, you could see the signs of aging in his dyed-black hair and slightly thickening middle. The surface of the desk was stacked neatly with folders and paperwork. A gold penholder sat on the edge.

He looked up, an immediate scowl crossing his brow. "What are you doing here?"

"Police business," Sam said.

Thorne stood but stayed behind the desk, keeping the piece of furniture between them. "We have our permits, and there's been no police calls, so..." Thorne spread his hands, adopting his usual cocky manner.

"I'm not here about permits. I'm here about Mike Donnelly."

"I heard about his suicide. What's that got to do with me?" Did Thorne's lips quirk up in a slight smile, or was Sam imagining it?

"Yeah, turns out it wasn't a suicide." Sam stepped a little closer to the desk. "And in tracking down suspects, we discovered that you had a beef going with Mike."

"I wouldn't necessarily call it a beef. I offered to buy his land. I was doing them a favor. They were getting older, and the farm is in disrepair. They couldn't handle it anymore," Thorne said.

"I don't think Mike saw it as a favor, though, did he?"

"He wasn't ready to sell yet," Thorne said. "But I figured he'd come around soon, especially with his wife and all those medical bills."

"So you went to his cabin to try to persuade him, and when that didn't work, you shot him," Sam said.

Thorne laughed. "Shot him for land? I didn't have to resort to that. All I had to do was wait him out. Those kids were chomping at the bit to sell."

A seed of unease sprouted in Sam's gut. If what Brian had said about Mike's life insurance was true, they wouldn't get anything from his life insurance, but they sure would get a bundle from the sale of the farm. "But they wouldn't be able to do that until they inherited the land. And even though Margie didn't have long, Mike had been fit as a fiddle."

"Maybe so, but once a man's wife dies, his priorities change. Kids often have more influence."

"Maybe you didn't want to wait for the kids to influence him. Maybe you took matters into your own hands, knowing that Margie was going to

die soon and Mike was the only thing standing in your way."

"Are you accusing me of murder, Chief?" Thorne asked.

Sam leaned over the desk and got right in his face. "Where were you at seven p.m. two nights ago?"

Thorne narrowed his eyes and stepped around the desk, so close to Sam that he could smell his spicy aftershave. The move surprised Sam. Usually, Thorne was weaselly, not confrontational. He preferred to do things behind your back. But the move told Sam that Thorne was confident. Why was that?

"Listen, Chief Mason. You can go around accusing me all you want. I'm not afraid, because I didn't kill Mike, so you can't prove that I did. But if I were you, I would think twice about continuing to accuse me, because turnabout's fair play, and if you run around town accusing me of killing someone, then I might just have to do the same for you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't think I don't know what happened twenty years ago. I'm in tight with Harley Dupont, and Dupont has connections. Connections that might even have solid proof about your extracurricular activities back then." Thorne smirked, turned, and walked back behind his desk. He waved a dismissive hand at Sam. "So if I were you, I would go about my business and look for the real killer before casting accusations and getting yourself into a heap of trouble you won't be able to get out of."

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When Sam got back to the station, Jo and Reese were feeding Lucy pot roast from the diner. It was near quitting time, and the homey smell of dinner made Sam's stomach growl. He didn't have anyone at home to cook for him. His daughters had left the day before, and the fridge was bare. Looked like he'd be eating dinner at Holy Spirits.

Sam headed straight for the coffee machine. The meeting with Thorne had rattled him. How much did Thorne know about what had happened twenty years ago? How could he know anything?

Thorne was probably just bluffing. How could Dupont know anything? He'd barely known Gracie, as far as Sam could tell. Mick was back from his trip, and the threat involved Mick as well, and maybe he could shed some light on it. Sam took out his cell phone and thumbed in a text to Mick to meet him at Holy Spirits.

"There's over three hundred white Jettas in the county," said Kevin, who was seated at his desk watching Lucy chow down. "We need something more to go on. Like a license plate or some distinguishing mark. Being shorthanded like we are, we don't have the manpower to run down all these cars in a timely manner."

Sam grimaced. Mike's investigation had taken his focus away from interviewing people to replace Tyler, but he was starting to realize the sooner they got someone in, the better off they would be. Sam couldn't let his personal feelings about "replacing" Tyler get in the way if being shorthanded impeded their investigations.

"I called Jesse to see if he got the license plate." Jo shrugged. "It was a long shot, but I figured I'd try. He didn't, though. He barely even remembered seeing the car."

"I checked out Thorne's construction site. No white Jetta there. I figured that was a long shot too, but what the heck," Sam said.

Kevin looked up at him. "You think someone that works for Thorne is the killer?"

"Not really," Sam lied. He hadn't let Kevin in on much of the investigation Sam and Jo had done on the side regarding Thorne. Kevin had been stepping it up lately, but he just hadn't done enough yet to earn that level of trust. "Just checking every angle. Thorne had an interest in Mike's land, so I had to check it out."

"Oh yeah. Makes sense," Kevin said.

"We need to figure out another way to find out who was with Mike at the cabin. We need to start retracing what he did that day," Jo said.

Sam sipped his coffee and glanced out the window, the brew turning bitter in his mouth as he saw Mayor Dupont coming up the walkway. "Here comes trouble."

Jo and Kevin looked, each of them making a face.

"It's quitting time. I gotta run, or I'll be late for class." Reese pushed up from her chair and grabbed her slouchy hobo purse. "See you guys tomorrow."

"I better head out to Rita Hoelscher's. Nettie Deardorff got a chicken, and she claims it pecked a hole in her fence." Rita Hoelscher and Nettie Deardorff had a long-standing feud that had gone on so long that no one even remembered what started it. Kevin gave Lucy a quick pat on the head and followed Reese out, giving a curt nod to Dupont as they passed in the doorway.

Jo hastily picked up the spoils of Lucy's supper and scurried over to her desk. She usually avoided talking to Dupont because whenever she did talk to him, things slipped out of her mouth that weren't good for her career.

Dupont stopped in front of Lucy and tentatively stretched his hand out. Lucy sniffed. He petted her on the head. "Good girl."

Lucy gave Sam a look as if saying, "Do I have to be nice to him?"

Dupont's change of tune toward the dog was suspicious. Barely a month ago when they'd discovered Lucy at a crime scene, Dupont had been angry to find the dog in the station. He'd ordered them to get rid of her. They'd

taken her to the animal shelter. No one had claimed her, and when she kept running away, it made her unattractive for adoption. Sam had considered adopting her, but since he spent most of his time chasing down criminals, he didn't think it would be fair to the dog.

Reese had saved the day by pulling in some favors to secure a K-9 grant for the station, and they'd been able to officially keep her. When Dupont had discovered how much the townspeople loved Lucy, he'd taken all the credit for her being on the police force.

Lucy still seemed wary of him. Sam figured she was a good judge of character.

"I know you're investigating a murder, *Chief*." Dupont put emphasis on the last word, making it sound like an insult. "But I don't think harassing prominent residents is part of that."

Sam raised a brow. "You mean Thorne? I was just going by procedure."

Dupont's eyes narrowed. "Surely you don't suspect Lucas Thorne. He's a valuable member of our society. He brings jobs to the area and new tourists as well. All of that is good for our economy."

"Oh, is that how you justify it?" Sam asked.

Dupont's eyes flicked to Jo and then back to Sam. Jo was sitting at her desk, her pencil tapping on a pile of papers she was pretending to study while making it look as if she weren't eavesdropping.

"What are you talking about?" Dupont asked.

"All these rezoning laws that always seem to turn in Thorne's favor even though plenty of the townspeople don't want the deforestation to keep happening. If I didn't know better, I'd think you and Thorne had some kind of a deal going."

"How dare you! I am just being a good mayor and trying to help the town."

Sam crossed his arms over his chest. "Really? In some of those meetings, it seems like the town's asking for no more commercial building, but then the rezoning happens anyway. I wouldn't want anyone to look into those meeting minutes too thoroughly--they might get the wrong idea about you."

"Look into them too thoroughly?" Dupont's smarmy smile faltered as if he were just realizing maybe he could get caught at whatever it was he was doing. "What do you mean?"

"There are a lot of environmentalists that don't like what's happening here. If someone goes over the minutes, what the townspeople are saying is all in there. They might wonder why the mayor is allowing all this farmland to be moved into commercial zoning, that's all." Sam said it as if he were doing Dupont a favor by enlightening him.

"Well, I don't see how that's a problem..."

"And then if they looked back and discovered you had some kind of relationship with Thorne..." Sam shrugged. "Well, I'm sure there's nothing like that going on. Especially not with all those expensive commercials you have going. You must be busy with that, and you wouldn't have time to be involved in Thorne's business."

Dupont patted Lucy's head absently. Sam could practically see the wheels inside his head spinning. Dupont didn't need to say anything--the look on his face told Sam everything. But he'd already known Dupont was in Thorne's pocket. Thorne had probably given him money for the commercials, and Dupont had been too stupid and excited about the money to even check if those payments could be tracked. If Thorne was smart, he'd probably left a trail so he could hold it over Dupont's head.

"I don't think anyone would check on anything like that." Dupont straightened and glanced back at Jo. "And, besides, I'm not doing anything wrong."

"Well, that's good to hear, Mayor Dupont. Then you have nothing to worry about, right?" Sam asked.

"Right. Nothing to worry about." Dupont started toward the door and then turned back to Sam. "Just stay away from Thorne. Unless you have solid proof or evidence to accuse him of something, he can make your life miserable."

JO LOOKED out the window and watched Dupont walk back toward the town offices then spun around to look at Sam.

"What was that all about?" Jo asked.

"I might've pressed on Thorne a little hard. But I think he could have something to do with Mike's death." Sam glanced out the window.

"Dupont's little visit pretty much proves what we suspected all along. Dupont is in Thorne's pocket."

"You don't really think Thorne is a killer, do you? I mean, he might be behind the killing, but he's smarter than he looks. If he is involved, he's probably arranged it so that the evidence can't be linked to him."

"Probably, but we're still gonna follow it, anyway."

"Speaking of evidence, I got one of my contacts back in Boston to check on Tyler's bank account." Jo tapped the eraser end of her pencil on the pad on the desk in front of her. "Twenty thousand dollars was deposited in there the week before he died."

Sam frowned. "*Twenty thousand?*"

Jo nodded.

Sam let out a low whistle. "That's a lot of money." He paced around the squad room, running his fingers through his hair. Lucy sensed his agitation and trotted behind him. He bent down and scratched her behind the ears. "Do you think he was on the take?"

Jo pushed up from her chair and paced in the other direction. She didn't want to think that. She'd trusted Tyler. "I didn't see any signs of that. Though he was acting a little secretive the last month or so, but I mean, we *knew* Tyler. He was a good guy."

"Do you ever really know someone?" Sam asked.

Jo turned and looked at him. Even though they worked together and trusted each other and she considered them to be close friends, she didn't really *know* Sam. Not the deep-down-inside Sam. Sure, she knew a lot of things about him. Like that he'd been married twice and neither of the marriages had ended well. And that he loved his daughters more than anything. And he loved White Rock and hated the way it was being built up.

But she didn't really know what was going on inside Sam. Sometimes she sensed a deep, sad loneliness that made her want to reach out and connect with him on a deeper level. Other times she sensed a dark secret that she might be better off not knowing about.

Then again, Jo had her own secrets, and she wasn't exactly batting a thousand in the relationship department herself.

"Maybe not," she said cautiously.

"I suppose there's a lot of reasons why Tyler might've had that deposit. Maybe he had a retirement account or something and cashed it in for

Clarissa's treatment."

Knowing Tyler's self-sacrificing nature, Jo wouldn't have been surprised if he cashed in on his retirement income to help. "Maybe. I can have my contact check into that."

"If only we could find out what that key goes to, we might get some answers."

"I'm beginning to wonder if we want them," Jo said.

Sam pressed his lips together. "We might not like what we find."

"But I suppose we have to find it." Jo sighed. "We might need to widen the search area. If Tyler was trying to hide something, he could have driven miles away to open a safety deposit box, post office box, or whatever to hide it in."

"Right. Not a lot of time to get into that right now with this new investigation. I suppose that's all the more reason to get going on hiring someone new," Sam said.

"True." Jo seemed as enthused as Sam, and they both looked toward the corner where Tyler's old desk sat.

Sam's stomach growled. "I'm heading to Holy Spirits for a burger."

At the word burger, Lucy snapped her head up hopefully. Sam looked down and laughed. "Yes, I'll get you one too." Then he looked at Jo. "Do you want to join me?"

"Can't tonight," Jo said. "I promised Finn I'd go scout out new homes for him. But I gotta finish this paperwork first, so I'll stay and keep Lucy company for a while."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sam left Lucy at the police station in her big fluffy dog bed. Lucy looked disappointed that she couldn't go with him, but the promise of bringing back a burger seemed to mollify her, and she had Jo to keep her company at least for a little while.

Holy Spirits wasn't very crowded, and Sam took his usual seat at the bar. Billie slid a Mooseneck in front of him, and he put in his order for a plain burger for Lucy and an Old-Man-In-The-Mountain burger for himself. The burger, which consisted of bacon, caramelized onions, and some kind of secret sauce, had been named after the outcropping of rock in Franconia Notch that resembled a man's face. When Sam was a little kid, his parents had taken him countless times to marvel at the big rock that jutted out from the cliff and could be seen from the main road. It was a big tourist attraction until it crumbled and fell down in 2003. Now it was just a big rock.

"Hey, what's up?" Mick slapped him on the shoulder and slid into the seat beside him. Leaning his strong forearms on the bar, he waved two fingers at Billie. Billie must've seen him come in and was already pouring the Jack Daniel’s into the small tumbler.

"Oh, you know, same old stuff. Murder, corruption, idle threats from Thorne." Sam swigged his beer and watched Mick's blue eyes widen.

"Idle threats?" Mick asked.

"I don't know if you heard, but Mike Donnelly was shot. I think it was set up to look like a suicide, but it wasn't. Margie says Thorne was after him for his land."

"Doesn't mean he killed him," Mick said as Billie slid the burger in front of Sam. "Though I wouldn't put it past him."

"Right. Well, thing is, I went and talked to him, and he made a weird threat. He alluded to knowing what happened twenty years ago." Sam took the bun off the burger and spread the sauce around just the way he liked it, making sure the brown strings of onion were spread out to cover the whole top of the burger. Then he put the bun back on and took a bite. It was juicy, savory, and tangy.

"You mean with Gracie?" Mick asked.

"Uh-huh. What else could it be? He specifically mentioned twenty years ago, and he mentioned it had something to do with Dupont." Sam took another bite and chewed while they both thought about it. "How could either one of them possibly know anything?"

Mick stared into his drink as he swirled it around, the ice cubes clinking against the side of the glass. "I don't know. Dupont went to Harvard. Two of the rapists were from Harvard. But we looked into that. He didn't know them."

"Not that we could find," Sam said. "Maybe we overlooked something. We were younger, less experienced, and emotional about defending Gracie."

Mick's face softened. "How is Gracie?"

Sam's heart twisted. His cousin Gracie had been a promising singer down in Boston twenty years ago when she'd been brutally raped by four college students. Even though two decades had gone by, the effects still showed. She was a hermit that barely left her house. Her music career had ended that night. The girl was afraid of her own shadow now, and Sam couldn't do anything to help her.

"I haven't seen her in a while." He made a mental note to visit her the next day. Maybe Lucy would cheer her up. His cousin was skittish around people but hadn't lost her trust in animals.

Sam finished the rest of his burger in silence. What did Dupont know about what he and Mick had done to avenge Gracie? Gracie's memory about that day was fuzzy. She vaguely remembered what had happened to her when they'd found her unconscious next to the Charles River. She couldn't even name her assailants, only to tell them it was four boys and one had a crimson scarf.

They'd never uncovered any evidence that Dupont was even remotely involved. Could they have missed something?

"I don't know. Dupont is sleazy and all, but I don't think he's a rapist," Mick said as if reading Sam's mind.

"You never really know what people are capable of. Most of us are keeping secrets." Sam's thoughts turned to Tyler and the extra twenty grand in his bank account. "How are things going with Tyler's investigation?"

Mick shook his head. "I've been keeping an eye on the grandson while I've been doing other business. He's acting a little skittish and jiggy. I think something's about to break."

"We discovered that Tyler had twenty thousand deposited in his account two weeks before he died."

Mick's brows shot up. "Twenty thousand?"

Sam nodded.

"You think he was into something?"

"I've no idea. But it's looking more and more like his death wasn't just a coincidence. Someone had a specific reason for wanting Tyler dead."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The next morning, Sam was up early. The hunting camp he'd inherited from his grandfather felt quiet and empty without his daughters. But they had their own lives down in Massachusetts, and he had to respect that. Since he had no intention of inviting anyone to live with him, he'd mostly gotten used to the emptiness, except for the few days after his daughters visited. Now that he had Lucy, he didn't need much else.

He fiddled around in the kitchen, feeding Lucy and sipping coffee while he stared at the taxidermy that hung on the log walls. The deer-head mount and colorful lake trout brought back childhood memories. They had all been caught by his grandfather, who had taught him to fish and hunt.

The camp had creeped his last wife out, but to Sam it felt comfortable and homey. He hadn't done much to it, and it was still decorated much the way it had been in his grandmother's time, though she'd died over a decade ago. She'd been an outdoorswoman herself and favored a more camp-like decor. There were precious few feminine touches except for her favorite china teacups, her old batter bowls, and her own grandmother's flow blue china.

Not too many women would want to live in a camp like this, at least not according to Sam's second wife, who had refused to move there when he'd inherited it upon his grandfather's death. She'd insisted they buy a big old Victorian closer to town. He'd gotten rid of that Victorian shortly after getting rid of the wife. He'd never wanted to live there anyway.

He loved the cabin because it was stuffed with memories of his parents and grandparents, but most of all he liked the seclusion. The property was

situated on twenty acres and teeming with wildlife. Owls, woodpeckers, foxes, and even some bears whose claw marks could be seen at the stand of beech trees that sat a little further into the woods. His favorite, the deer, came to the edge of the pond across the street in the summer right at dusk.

The police radio he kept next to the birch-framed picture of his daughters on the bookshelf that divided the kitchen from the rest of the cabin squawked. The White Rock police department was too small to man the police station twenty-four, seven. They switched off with the state police and county sheriff at night and kept in communication by police band radio.

This morning, the radio was announcing a dispute over on Mooseridge Road. Sam answered the call then rinsed his coffee cup in the sink, whistled for Lucy, and headed out in the Tahoe.

The dispute was between longtime residents Ives Collier and Peter Demming. Peter complained that one of Ives's milking cows had trampled his fence. It took Sam twenty minutes and a couple of Bavarian cream donuts to get the two to shake hands and come to a friendly agreement over the fence. Peter even got a gallon of fresh milk out of the deal.

On the way back to the station, Sam decided to detour and visit his cousin Gracie. His conversation with Mick the night before had been a guilty reminder that he hadn't seen her in a while.

Gracie lived in an old Colonial with her parents. The house dated to the 1870s and had a large barn that still smelled of horses. Gracie loved the barn. It was her escape. She sat in there and played music. Even though she didn't have an audience anymore, she still loved playing.

Today, she wasn't playing music, though she was in the barn. She sat in an old chair in the corner, watching a small TV. Her face lit with a smile when she saw Sam, and for a moment he got a glimpse of the happy-go-lucky person she'd been before the attack.

Sam had the urge to hug her, but he knew Gracie couldn't stand to be touched anymore. Once, she'd been very affectionate, but the rapists had stolen that from her.

Her eyes fell on Lucy, and her smile widened. "I heard you got a K-9."

Lucy trotted over, and Gracie crouched down to pet her. She was cautious at first. Lucy leaned into her, nudging her gently, her tail swishing happily as if she sensed Gracie needed encouragement. Gracie hugged the

dog, and Sam saw a look of joy on his cousin's face, something he'd rarely seen in the past twenty years.

"How's the police business?" Gracie stood, reached into the college-sized fridge, and pulled out a soda. She held it toward him. "Soda?"

"No, thanks." Sam preferred coffee. "Police business is the same as usual. Busy, though, since we're down one guy."

Gracie nodded and watched Lucy as she made her way around the perimeter of the barn, sniffing every nook and cranny. She must've been having a field day, because Sam himself could smell the sweet scent of hay and old leather even though horses hadn't been kept in the barn for a hundred years. But the floors were worn from years of housing horses, and he could still see the chew marks on the low stall doors. Gracie motioned him toward the gable end of the barn, where there was a big window that overlooked the field.

They sat in the chairs and chatted. Gracie's attention span was short, her eyes always on the move, nervously darting toward the door and the dog. Her eyes lit on the TV behind him and widened. Her body stiffened. Sam turned around. Dupont's commercial was playing on TV.

"Mayor Dupont." He turned back to Gracie. "Do you know him?"

Gracie shook her head, her eyes still glued to the TV. "He's a bad man."

"Did you know him when you were down in Boston? He went to Harvard," Sam said.

At the mention of Harvard, Gracie's eyes jerked toward Sam, and his heart pinched. Of course the name of the college that the rapists had gone to would stir bad memories in her. He felt like a jerk for mentioning it.

Her brows mashed together. "I don't know. It's all such a blur from back then. I mean, I know him from White Rock, but I get a funny feeling when I see him." Her eyes flicked from the television to Sam. "Someone like him shouldn't be mayor."

"I couldn't agree more."

Sam watched his cousin cautiously. He wanted to delve deeper, ask more about Dupont and if she remembered him being around the boys that raped her. But thinking about that time was still painful for her, and she still couldn't even remember if she'd known the boys. Her testimony at the time was that she'd only seen them vaguely in the bar.

As if sensing Gracie's agitation, Lucy trotted over and stuck her head under Gracie's hand. Patting the dog seemed to calm her. Sam didn't want to

make her upset again.

Was it possible Dupont had somehow been involved back then? He hadn't been with the boys that had done that to Gracie--Sam was sure of it. But why would he keep taunting him about it, and why would he wait until now?

Dupont knew something, and judging by Gracie's reaction, Sam thought there might be more to his involvement. If anyone could find out, it was Mick, and Mick had a vested interest in discovering whatever Dupont had on Sam, because whatever he had on Sam was also going to be bad news for Mick.

Sam's phone pinged with a text, and he took it out of his pocket. It was Reese.

Come on back to the station. I have interesting news.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Twenty minutes later, Sam and Lucy were standing in front of the receptionist desk in the foyer of the police station. Jo and Reese were behind the desk, looking down at Reese's computer.

"I did a little digging around, looking into the Donnellys' finances like Jo asked me," Reese said.

"Good thinking." Sam hadn't asked Jo to do that, but it was something that needed to be done.

"Well, you never know what you might find. It's standard procedure, right?" Jo asked.

"Did you get a subpoena already?" Sam asked. If she had, she must've done it before Sam had threatened Thorne. Because Sam was sure Thorne would've gone to Dupont, and Dupont would've used his connections with the judge to stop any subpoenas if he was involved.

Reese plastered an innocent look on her face. "Of course. Well, I mean, one is coming, so I just expedited things."

Sam frowned. Reese was a whiz with computers, and she'd made a lot of contacts at the police academy who had a variety of useful skills. Sometimes cutting corners was necessary to get the job done quicker, but sometimes it bit you in the ass later on. Apparently it was too late now--they'd already found something, and judging by the looks on their faces, Sam knew it was something good.

Reese pushed a white donut bag out of the way and swung the computer around to face Sam. There were two windows up on her screen. She stood up and leaned over, her dark hair falling in front of her face as she pointed

at one of the windows. "This is Mike Donnelly's bank account. The one his wife knows about."

It looked like the online dashboard of a regular bank account, just like Sam's. There wasn't much money in it. There was a checking account and a savings account, but neither of them showed a large balance, and the checking account looked to have normal deposits and withdrawals.

His eyes drifted to the other window, where Reese was tapping a cherry-red-polished nail. "This is his other bank account. The one his family doesn't know about."

"What do you mean they don't know about it? How do you know that?"

"It was opened two months ago and only has cash deposits. And here is the documentation." Reese pulled up another window that showed the paperwork with only Mike's signature.

"Makes sense Mike would have to open it on his own. Margie was probably too sick to go down to the bank and open an account," Sam said.

"Sure. But why would Mike be opening one now? With his wife so sick, you'd think he'd have other concerns," Jo said. "And where is this cash coming from? With Margie's obvious bills, where would he be getting the extra money to deposit?"

Sam looked at the screen again. It wasn't a lot of money. A thousand here. Five hundred there. According to the list of transactions, he would make a few deposits then withdraw most of it. "What do you think he's doing with the withdrawals?"

Reese tapped on the first window again. "It doesn't appear in this bank account, so he's not depositing it."

"Which means he's not using it to pay any of the medical bills or household bills," Jo said.

"Well then, *what* is he doing with it?" Sam asked.

"That, I can't help you with," Reese said then looked out the door. "Oh, shoot."

The door opened, and a nervous-looking young man walked in.

"Can I help you?" Sam asked.

Reese had jumped up from her desk and grabbed a piece of paper from the printer. She shoved it into Sam's hand. It was a resume. "I forgot to tell you. This is Walker Johnson. His interview for the open position is scheduled right now."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Kevin had been out all day, taking one annoying call after another. First it was Mrs. Achison, who had a cat stuck in a tree. He was still picking splinters out of his palm from using her rickety old ladder that looked as if it dated to about 1910. The cat had been cute, though, a fluffy gray kitten with big round green eyes. And Mrs. Achison had been appreciative, but getting cats out of trees wasn't exactly the reason he'd gotten into police work.

He'd also sorted out a dispute involving Julian Martin, whose sheep had gotten loose and eaten Gloria Williams' daisies. They were prized daisies that she was cultivating for some sort of contest. He managed to smooth it over by getting Julian, a confirmed bachelor, to take Gloria, a widow, to dinner.

When he got back to the station, Sam was interviewing for Tyler's replacement. Kevin didn't know how he felt about that. He'd been offered the full-time job but had refused it, and now he was starting to wonder if he'd made the right decision.

As long as he was part time, he'd always be different from the others. But wasn't that good? If Sam and Jo were up to something shady, maybe he was better off to disassociate himself from their activities as much as he could.

"You save the cat?" Jo was tapping her pencil on her desk blotter, her feet up on the edge of the desk, leaning back, relaxed.

"Yep. Cute kitten." Kevin nodded toward Sam's office. "Another applicant?"

"Yep."

"What do you think?"

Jo shrugged. "Takes me a while to get warmed up to people."

That was no exaggeration. Kevin had been working with Jo for over a year now, and she was just barely starting to thaw out. He suspected she had some skeletons in her closet, but she wasn't the type to go blabbing about them. She was one of those people that kept things to themselves.

"Anything new on the Donnelly case?" Kevin asked. He'd already worked thirty hours this week and was feeling tired from it. He hoped that there was nothing new. He didn't want more work. But his contact had asked him to work closely with Sam and Jo so as to keep informed on this case.

"Seems the guy had a secret bank account," Jo said.

"Secret bank account? Why would someone have one of those?" Kevin asked.

"Apparently he's got a secret," Jo said. "Maybe a secret that got him killed."

"So what was he doing with the money?" Kevin asked.

"That's the thing. We don't know. We can see cash deposits, and then he makes withdrawals, but we don't know what he does with them. They don't go into his regular bank account."

Kevin frowned. One of the things his contact had asked him to do before was find out where Tyler was going after he made withdrawals. It had turned out Tyler was only going to the medical center, which ended up being something related to his sister's illness. But in order to find that out, Kevin had used a method suggested by his contact. Something that he'd seen on a television show, of all places.

"How does he withdraw the money from the bank?"

Jo frowned down at the paper on her desk. "Looks like he uses the ATM on the corner of Main and Berkeley."

"Hold on." Kevin sat at his computer and typed on the keyboard. Most ATM machines had a camera that took video of transactions. He pulled up the document he had stored that showed which ATMs in town had that capability. If he was lucky, the one on the corner of Main and Berkeley had one. He was lucky.

"Check this out." Kevin swiveled the screen toward Jo, and she got up from her desk and came over. "This shows the ATM machines with video

capability. I don't know how often they record over the videos, and it only turns on to record the transaction and shuts off pretty quickly, but I was thinking if Mike had someone with him when he made these withdrawals, then it might be on video."

Jo leaned over to get a better look at the screen. "Can we get the video from that machine? Because if there was someone with Mike, that means they knew about this money, and *that* means that we need to talk to them."

SAM LEANED back in his chair as he smiled at the nervous applicant, Walker Johnson, sitting across from him. He went through the motions of the interview, asking where he had worked, what kind of work he liked to do best, what his biggest case was. But the whole time, Sam's mind was on his cousin Gracie's reaction to Dupont and the fact that Mike had a bank account with suspicious activity.

He wouldn't have been so suspicious of the bank account if it hadn't just been opened two months before. Lots of people had bank accounts separate from their spouse, but with Margie being so ill, it didn't sit right with Sam. Why open a bank account like that when she was going to be gone soon, anyway? The only reason he would be doing it now was he was doing something he didn't want Margie--or his kids--to know about.

Was it possible he was taking money from Thorne somehow? But why? Maybe he had promised the land to Thorne but didn't want to actually go through with the deal until Margie was gone. It would make sense that he wouldn't want to upset her in her condition. And maybe someone was giving him money in advance to seal the deal and give Mike something to pay off those medical bills. But if that were the case, how come the money never made it into the account from which they paid those bills, and why were the amounts so small?

"And I'm a crackerjack at filing," the eager kid said, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down.

Sam's attention jerked back to the interview. "Have you ever been out in the field on a case?" Sam asked.

Walker twisted his hands nervously. "I pulled over a couple of speeders, and I helped settle a dispute down at the Piggly Wiggly."

"A dispute?"

"Yes, sir. It seemed Mrs. Winters walked out with a ham she didn't pay for. Mr. Peabody chased her right into the parking lot. But Mrs. Winters, well, she was getting on in years, and her memory wasn't so good. She thought she paid for it."

"I see. So you didn't have to draw your weapon?" Sam joked.

Walker scowled and looked at Sam. "Weapon? I wouldn't pull my weapon on Mrs. Winters."

Obviously, Walker was inexperienced and didn't have a sense of humor. Sam didn't see how the poor guy would fit in, but it was his second interviewee. How many would he have to go through before he would find one that was suitable? Maybe he should reconsider the first guy. He was better than this one.

Sam leaned back and steepled his fingers while Walker rambled on about his exploits at the Piggly Wiggly. Seemed they had a lot going on down in Lewis at that store. Sam's mind wandered to more interesting things like what everyone else was doing out in the squad room. Probably researching something much more interesting than what he was doing in here.

Finally, Walker stopped, and Sam leaned forward in his chair. "Well, I think that about does it."

Sam stood even though the kid had a confused look on his face.

"Don't you want to hear about my filing system? The chief in Lewis says it's one of the best. That place was a mess when I came, and I really revolutionized the files."

"Maybe on the next interview," Sam said. Walker's face turned hopeful at the prospect of a second interview, and a pang of guilt shot through Sam. There wasn't going to be any second interview. Sam put a guiding hand on Walker's shoulder and led him toward the door. "Thank you for your time. We'll be in touch."

"Thank *you*," Walker said enthusiastically then turned to Kevin, Jo, and Reese, who were hunched over Kevin's computer, gave them an awkward salute, and left. Lucy, who was lying in her comfortable dog bed in the corner of the room, barely raised an eyebrow.

"How did that go?" Jo looked up from the computer. "Are you bringing him back to have me talk to him?"

Her words sounded sincere, but the look on her face told Sam she didn't want to talk to the guy. He thought about toying with her but had mercy.

"Not unless you want to hear about how he almost arrested a forgetful senior citizen who walked out with a ham at the Piggly Wiggly," Sam said. "I don't think he's gonna be a good fit."

But they'd already turned back to the computer. Reese was seated at Kevin's desk, her fingertips clacking on the keys while Kevin and Jo stared over her shoulder.

"What are you guys doing?"

"Kevin had a great idea," Jo shot over her shoulder. At her compliment, Kevin's cheeks turned crimson. "I printed out the bank statements of Mike's secret bank account. He made his withdrawals from the ATM on the corner of Main and Berkeley Street. Always the same ATM."

"That's interesting," Sam had come over to stand next to them and was looking down at the computer, where he could see a video running with an odd fishbowl-like view of the street. "Is that some kind of surveillance video?"

"Yep. It's from the ATM. Kevin thought of it. And Reese..." Jo's voice drifted off. "Well, let's just say she talked to one of her friends and was able to expedite getting the video."

Sam simply sighed. Normally, getting a video like that would take time, but they didn't have time, so he wasn't going to argue. "So what's on it?"

"Check it out. We got lucky. Usually, they record over the video in a loop, but Mike made a withdrawal the day he was killed, and they hadn't looped over it yet."

Sam bent down to look at the screen. In the distorted video, he could clearly see Mike collect his money and turn away then walk across the street. "That's Mike withdrawing the money?"

"Yeah." Kevin sighed and leaned back in his chair. "We were hoping that someone might be with him and it would give us a lead, but he came alone, so it was a waste of time."

Sam's eyes were still on the screen. Mike's car--the brown Ford Taurus--sat on the side street north of the ATM, but Mike was heading in the other direction. "Wait a minute, maybe he didn't have anyone with him at the ATM, but..."

Sam watched as Mike crossed the street and headed toward another car parked on the side street next to the bakery. For a second, he veered out of

the line of vision of the ATM, but then he reappeared and got into the passenger seat of the car.

"We didn't watch it long enough," Reese said. "He was meeting someone, and they're in a white Jetta!"

The video flicked off, and then the next person was at the ATM. Reese rewound and stopped on the part where Mike got into the car.

Kevin crouched forward, squinting at the screen. "But we can't see who's driving."

Reese tried enlarging the screen, but it was no dice. They couldn't see inside, especially with the angle and the bad quality of the video.

"Maybe I can have one of the guys I know at school try to enhance this?" Reese said.

"I don't think that'll be necessary." Sam leaned over and fiddled with the arrows until the screen was focused on the front of the car.

"There's the plate number plain as day. Run that number, and we may be one step closer to the killer."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The car belonged to a Judy Kendler, who lived on Lower Quail Road just out of town. Too bad Judy died six months ago. Could whoever was using her car be involved with Thorne?

Sam and Jo drove out to the house as a thunderstorm came through. They could see the dark clouds rolling in as they drove up Wolf Hill, and the landscape dropped away to give them a view of the valley with the river below. The sound of thunder echoed across like a giant drumming on a kettledrum. Fat raindrops splatted onto the windshield.

Jo had put her sunglasses on the dashboard, and she held the yellow smiley mug in her lap. Her green eyes appeared luminous in the dark light of the storm. Sam could smell the ozone in the air. A bolt of lightning zigzagged to the ground in the distance, lighting up the sky for a split second. Then another crash of thunder echoed.

"I think we should leave Lucy in the car." Jo glanced back at the dog, who was crouched on the floor in front of the backseat. "I don't think she likes thunderstorms."

"Apparently not," Sam said. There hadn't been a thunderstorm since they'd adopted Lucy as part of the K-9 unit, but the dog looked completely terrified. "It might get dangerous in there anyway." Sam automatically glanced to make sure Jo had her gun belt. "I wouldn't want Lucy to get hurt."

Jo glanced toward their cargo container in back where they kept the police-issue bulletproof vests. "You think we should suit up?"

"No. Bulletproof vests might spook him. We can just go in and act friendly. I figure if it's one of Thorne's thugs, he'll run out the back doors as soon as he sees us. Usually they're not brave enough to be confrontational and prefer to run away," Sam said. Hopefully this one wouldn't be one of the few that preferred a fight.

Judy Kendler's house was a small 1960s ranch style with a porch running along the front that looked as if it had once been lovingly cared for but had recently fallen into neglect. The paint still looked fresh, and someone had made an attempt to mow the lawn, but the lines made by the mower were uneven. The flower beds had weeds sprouting up in between last year's mulch. The white Jetta was in the driveway.

Sam and Jo ran from the car to the porch. At least that provided some shelter from the rain, though they got soaked in the process. Sam knocked on the door. They heard a rustle inside, and he tensed, his hand hovering over his gun.

A young man of about seventeen answered the door. His eyes flicked from Sam to the police car and reflected fear masked by hostility. "Can I help you?"

"Is this the residence of Judy Kendler?" Sam asked.

The kid crossed his arms across his chest, his face hardening. "What of it?"

The kid was acting brave, but Sam sensed fear rippling underneath.

"Are you a relative?" Sam asked.

"I'm her son."

"What's your name?"

"Tommy. I haven't done anything wrong. The payment is in the mail. So I'm not sure why you're here."

He tried to shut the door, but Sam stuck his foot in it.

The boy scowled as he looked down.

Behind them, the rain pelted on the driveway. Hail had started and was pinging off the white Jetta.

"That's your mom's car, right?" Sam asked.

"Yeah."

"Who's been driving it?"

Tommy's eyes narrowed. "What business is it of yours? I have the right to drive it. Mom made up a will before she died."

Tommy's words had a hardness to them that didn't match the look in his eye. The kid wasn't as tough as he was putting out.

"Look, son, you can answer our questions here, or I can take you down to the police station. Which do you prefer?"

Tommy stepped back, and Sam and Jo went in. The inside matched the outside. The furniture was well kept but about a decade old. The living room had a bookcase on one wall, the shelves layered in dust. The television was on, and a puffy comforter lay on the couch. A box of cereal stood open on the coffee table. Next to it, a spoon sat in a bowl. The bowl had a shallow pool of milk on the bottom with some soggy cereal floating in it.

From what they'd found out back at the police station, Judy Kendler had been unmarried. Sam couldn't tell if Tommy was enjoying his new non-parental life, or if Judy had done everything for him and he was just now trying to figure out how to get along on his own.

Tommy didn't invite them in farther, so the three of them stood just inside the door. "What are your questions? I can live here. I have a job. I can pay the bills."

"Who has been driving the white Jetta?" Jo asked.

Tommy swiveled his head toward her. "No one but me. What's that got to do with anything?"

"You haven't loaned the car to anyone? A family member, maybe?" Sam asked.

"No." Now Tommy was starting to get that look on his face. That look that told Sam he was lying. The same look that told Sam to be cautious because from here on out anything could happen. He knew from many interrogations that once the suspect was caught lying, their anger could turn on a dime. He glanced over at Jo and knew she was thinking exactly the same thing.

"Then if you haven't loaned the car to anyone, maybe you'd like to explain why it was at Mike Donnelly's camp and why he was seen handing over money to you on Main Street."

Uncertainty flickered in Tommy's eyes. "What do you mean?"

Sam stepped a little closer, and Tommy backed up. Not so cocky now that Sam had discovered that he was at the Donnellys' camp. "So you were there? And he did meet you in town to give you money? Were you blackmailing him?"

The boy stepped back, holding his hands up. "No. I wasn't doing that."

Sam took another step toward him. "Or maybe you were selling him drugs for his wife's cancer? I hear pot can help with symptoms, and maybe you got your supply from Thorne and passed some along."

Tommy looked scared now. "What? I'm not a drug dealer!"

"But you do work for Thorne, right? That's why you were at Mike's camp?"

"What?" Was Tommy playing dumb? He looked genuinely confused.

"You need money." Sam gestured to the house. "Your mom left a bunch of bills. You need to pay the mortgage. The car loan."

Tommy nodded. "But I have two jobs. I can pay the bills. Plus, I have some money from..."

His voice drifted off. Sam moved in for the kill, stepping even closer so now he was in Tommy's face. Tommy had nowhere to go. The backs of his legs were already against the sofa.

"That's right. You have money from Thorne. You were desperate. With your mom gone and no money, you'd be out on the street. Thorne offered you money to do his dirty work. So you went to Mike Donnelly's camp and killed him."

Tommy collapsed back onto the sofa. His wide eyes darted from Sam to Jo. "Is that why you're here? You think I killed Mike Donnelly?"

"Exactly. He was seen getting into your car last week, and your car was at his camp the very night he died. If you confess now and tell us who was behind it, we'll go easy on you. Maybe you won't get the death penalty."

Tommy burst into tears, his hands covering his face. Sam had never seen a killer cry quite so emotionally before. He glanced at Jo, who had a funny look on her face. She gave a half shrug. Apparently, Tommy's behavior was a new one on her, too.

Sam looked down at him, his voice gentle now. "It's going to be okay. Just tell us what you know about why Thorne wanted you to kill Mike Donnelly."

Tommy shook his head violently. In between sobs, he blurted out, "I didn't kill him. Why would I? I loved him. Mike Donnelly was my father."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

All the cockiness had gone out of Tommy, and now Sam thought he looked more like a lost little boy than a murder suspect. Jo had taken pity on him and sat him in the kitchen while she rummaged in the cabinet for tea.

Sam had never seen Jo do any mothering before. He'd always thought of her more as the type that liked to shoot first and be comforting later, but this nurturing role kind of suited her. Not for the first time he reflected on how different Jo was from any of his ex-wives. They'd been more... girly. Something Sam knew nothing about. Jo wasn't girly at all, yet she exuded an attractiveness that men seemed to like. Jo seemed to be oblivious to the fact that she turned men's heads. Maybe that was part of what made her so appealing.

Watching her, Sam felt a strange spark that he hadn't felt in a long time. A spark he didn't want to feel. Especially not about Jo. Sam and Jo's relationship wasn't along those lines, and he wanted to keep it that way. They were friends and worked together. They trusted each other. In fact, he trusted her almost as much as he trusted Mick. But that was as far as it went. Sam didn't have room in his life for a serious relationship, and he liked Jo too much to take it any further when he knew it wasn't anything that would last.

Tommy stopped crying, and they sat around the small kitchen table while he wrapped his hands around the comforting mug of tea. Outside, the rain tapped a steady rhythm on the windows as Tommy sniffled into a tissue.

"Mom always said my father took off. I never knew until she died. She got cancer. Went quick." More sniffles. "She left me a note telling me that Mr. Donnelly was my father and I should contact him. She didn't leave any money, and she was worried about me. Maybe she thought Mr. Donnelly would support me. I don't know."

"And what happened when you contacted him?" Jo asked.

"At first he didn't believe me. But he'd had an affair with my mom, I guess, and he did the math. My mom moved away when she first got pregnant with me and didn't come back for five years. Apparently, he never guessed he was my father. She never told him because he was married at the time."

"So you kind of had a secret relationship with him?" Sam asked.

Tommy shrugged. "We got a DNA test to prove it. He was a nice guy. He wanted to tell his family, but his wife was so sick, he didn't think it was the right time. He was waiting for her to go, and then he would tell the other kids gently. My half brother and sister, I guess." Fresh tears formed in his eyes as he looked around the house. "I was looking forward to that because I don't have anyone else. It was just me and Mom. So, you see, I wouldn't have killed my dad because now I have no one."

Sam wondered about that. He did seem sincere, but Tommy could always try to connect with his half brother and sister. If he did have a DNA test, he could prove they were related. But something gnawed at him. Obviously, Tommy needed money. Sam wondered if Tommy would benefit financially from Mike's death. "When we first came, you thought we were here to repossess the house or the car, didn’t you?"

Tommy nodded. "My mom didn't have any life insurance, and there were a lot of bills left over to pay. What little she had only covered that. I have a little, but she couldn't work that last month. She was behind on the mortgage. I have a job at Charlie's Restaurant and a second job at the hardware store, and I'm working to pay off what we owe. But I was afraid I would get it all taken away. And the money from Mike was helping."

Sam had seen the withdrawals from Mike's account, and they didn't add up to a lot. If Tommy's mom was behind and there had been medical bills, that wouldn't be nearly enough. "Where did he get this money?"

"I don't know. He said something about selling things off. I didn't want to take the money, but when he saw my bills piling up, he wanted to help. He couldn't let his family know, so sometimes we would meet at his cabin.

He gave me a key for the gate in the road. And sometimes he would meet me at the ATM."

"How long had this been going on?"

Tommy shrugged. "About three months. I went to him a month or so after my mom died, but at first he didn't believe me. I wasn't gonna keep bugging him if he didn't want me. But then I guess he thought about it, did the math, and came to me."

"So you *were* there the day he died?" Jo asked. "Witnesses saw a white Jetta."

Tommy sucked in a stuttered breath. "I was there. I just wish I'd stayed longer. Then I might've been able to stop someone from killing him."

"So you're saying he was alive when you left?" Sam asked. "And what time was that?"

"Just after supper. Mike got me a ham salad sandwich from the deli. It's my favorite. Mom used to make a really good ham salad." Tommy's voice cracked, and he paused for a second then continued. "But I had to get to my second job at the hardware store and be there by six p.m."

That would be easy enough to check. "Was anyone else there at the cabin? Did you see anyone when you were leaving?"

Tommy shook his head. "I wish I had. Then I could help find my dad's killer. But when I left, he was there all alone."

"Was he upset or depressed?" Jo asked.

"No way. He was sad about his wife but had come to accept that. If you're asking about him killing himself like they said in the papers, I didn't see any sign of it."

"Did he ever talk to you about his will or anything?" Sam asked. If Tommy's alibi checked out, then he could rule him out as the killer, but if it didn't, money was a big motivator, and since Mike had known about Tommy for several months, he might have put something in his will already.

Tommy's eyes narrowed. "Oh yeah, I know all about wills now since Mom died. He did talk about it, and if you're thinking that he might've changed it so that I inherited something, he didn't. He knew his wife was dying, and he didn't want his kids somehow finding out that he changed the will until we had a chance to tell them about me. So, you see, I would've had no financial motive to kill him, either." Tommy turned pleading eyes on Sam. "Please promise me you won't tell his family about me. He didn't want them to worry, not right now. I know how it is when someone is sick

because of my mom, and they don't need any added problems. I'd like to honor my dad's wishes on that. Besides, now that he's gone, I doubt his kids would want to have anything to do with me. Maybe it's for the best if they don't know at all."

Sam left it at that. It would be easy enough to check Tommy's alibi and to check the will. But if Tommy was telling the truth, that opened up another pool of suspects, especially if Mike wasn't the only one that knew about Tommy. Sam had to wonder if it was possible one of Mike's kids already knew they had a half brother. That would give him a new motive to explore in Mike's death. Because both Melody and Brian Donnelly would lose out if part of their inheritance went to Tommy.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The thunderstorm had passed by the time they were done talking to Tommy, and Lucy was sitting on the front seat, staring out the window at the door, waiting for them. She stood and wagged her tail happily as she watched them walk back to the car. Sam had cracked the window for Lucy--too bad he'd cracked the window on the passenger side, and Jo's seat was now soaking wet.

"You could've cracked one of the back windows." She opened the door and leaned in, taking some napkins out of the console and using them to sop up the seat. Good thing the Tahoe had leather seats--cloth seats would've been a mess.

"Do you think Tommy was telling the truth?" Jo asked after they were on the road again.

"Easy enough to check out. If he was at the hardware store working that night, then we'll know he couldn't have killed Mike," Sam said. "But I believe him, don't you?"

"Yeah. I could tell at first he was nervous about something, but then once the truth came out, his whole demeanor changed. He was telling the truth." Jo pointed at the giant coffee cup sign for Brewed Awakening. "Can we stop for coffee?"

Sam had already put his blinker on. Jo got a bag of jelly donuts, and they both got coffees. At the drive-through, the girl gave them a treat for Lucy. Jo tossed into the backseat, and Lucy caught it and swallowed it whole.

"That's for being a good girl and staying in the truck." Jo settled into her seat and flipped the plastic lid on the Styrofoam cup. "Reese already requested a copy of Mike's will the other day. Hopefully, it's been faxed over. We'll see if he changed it. If not, then Tommy had no financial motive."

"But Melody or Brian might have," Sam said.

"Right. I thought of that too. But that means one of them must have known about Tommy. Do you really think they would be so cold blooded as to kill their father over that?"

Sam's gut tightened. "I hate to think it, but maybe it was more than just money. If one of them found out their dad had cheated all those years ago, the death might have had more to do with anger. And Brian did act a little off, don't you think?"

"Yep... But to kill his own father? Seems like it would make more sense that he would kill Tommy."

"You got a point there. Maybe he didn't intend on killing anyone. Maybe he confronted Mike with the fact that he found out he had a half brother and things escalated out of control," Sam said.

"Maybe. But how can we find out if Brian or Melody knew about Tommy? Tommy asked us to keep it a secret, and I feel like it's not up to us to let the cat out of the bag if they really didn't know," Jo said.

Sam pulled into the parking spot in front of the police station. "Maybe we won't have to let the cat out of the bag. Maybe there's another way for us to figure out if Mike's kids were involved. But first let's at least get a look at his will. If he did already change it, then that rules out the motive of these kids killing him for money."

"But not for passion." Jo hopped out of the truck then opened the side door to let Lucy out. "And if he did change it, then killing him might get Tommy a lot more money than those withdrawals Mike was making from that secret account."

"LEARN ANYTHING NEW?" Reese looked up from her computer, her fingers still typing on the keyboard as she looked up at Sam and Jo.

"We learned that Lucy is afraid of thunderstorms," Sam said.

Reese bent down and opened her arms, and the dog rushed over to her. "Oh, you poor thing." She rubbed Lucy's neck and then looked up at Sam. "Did the mean chief of police make you go outside in a thunderstorm?"

Lucy's tail swished back and forth as she settled into Reese's embrace, looking back at Sam and Jo reproachfully.

"At least we didn't make her go outside and get wet," Jo said, glancing at the back of her jeans, which were still wet from the seat.

"That nice man that sent you the postcard stopped by," Reese said.

Sam rolled his eyes. There was only one man she could be referring to. "Harry Woolston? He's no nice man. Don't hang around with him, and don't encourage him to come here."

Harry had been the chief of police in White Rock when Sam was a kid. He was retired now. Problem was, Harry got bored easily. If Reese encouraged him to drop by the station, the next thing they knew, he'd be insinuating himself into all of their cases and giving unwanted advice.

Reese frowned. "Well, he seemed nice."

"Oh yeah, he seems that way. Don't let that old guy fool you," Sam said. "Anyway, we were wondering if Mike's will came in. It turns out there's an interesting turn in the case."

Reese raised a brow. "The will did come in." She spun around and plucked something off the printer. "Here it is. Wife's will is there, too. What's the turn?"

No one else was in the station to overhear, so Sam told her. "Turns out Mike had an illegitimate son."

"Get out." Reese's eyes widened. "This is like a soap opera."

"Yeah, except it's real life. So don't let it get out. We don't want the family to get hurt. But the new revelation certainly adds a twist into our suspect list."

"You don't think this illegitimate son killed him, do you?" Reese asked.

"I'm not sure. He wouldn't benefit unless he's in the will, but it might've been the motivation for the kids. With Margie about to die and Thorne offering a lot of money for the land, it's starting to sound a little sticky. I'm not sure where to look." Sam held the papers up as he slipped around the post office box divider into the squad room. "Maybe there's something in here that will point us in the right direction."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kevin pulled his Isuzu into a parking spot just a few down from the police station. Sam's Tahoe was back, so Sam and Jo must have already interviewed the suspect. Interviewing the suspect sounded a lot more interesting than the call Kevin had been on. Settling these minor disputes with the townies got old after a while.

He reached into his pocket, his fingers brushing against the plastic thumb drive. The drive had been empty according to his computer, but Reese had contacts, people with skills who might be able to find something hidden, and Kevin had a sneaking suspicion that something important might be hidden on there.

He knew he should hand it over to his contact. It had been found in Tyler's things, and they'd specifically said they were looking for data. But if Sam and Jo were on his side, shouldn't he hand it over to them? It might have to do with police work.

Never mind that they didn't have any unsolved cases or any information that was missing. Never mind that he didn't get to go and interrogate the suspect. He understood why Sam brought Jo. She was a sergeant. Kevin was just an officer. If anyone would do the detective work, it would be the highest-ranking officers, and it was Kevin's own fault that he hadn't gone up in rank because he'd chosen to work part time.

The money from his contact gave him enough that he didn't have to work full time, but Kevin was discovering it wasn't that satisfying to just take that money. He was starting to feel dirty. At first, they convinced him

he would be helping to keep the police department free of corruption. Now, he wasn't so sure.

And today, he'd received a new note from his contact wanting more information. Kevin wasn't sure he wanted to give it.

Sam and Jo had started to include him, and it felt good. Sam had even said he'd done a good job.

But still Kevin suspected there might be some things Sam and Jo were doing that weren't exactly according to police procedure. Like, for example, the offhand remark he'd gotten when he went to his safety deposit box at his bank out in Colebrook earlier that morning. Maybe he was just being paranoid. The only way to find out was to ask Sam and Jo, and maybe he could use the thumb drive as sort of a way to prove to them that he was on their side, to become part of their inner circle.

Lucy trotted over to greet him as he opened the door, and his heart expanded. He had to admit he'd been wary of the large German shepherd mix at first, but he'd soon learned Lucy was a gentle creature, and since he connected better with animals than people, seeing Lucy was something he now looked forward to every day.

He pulled the thumb drive out of his pocket. It was the right thing to do to give it to Sam and Jo. He placed it on top of the folder he was carrying with the paperwork he had from the calls he'd been out on.

Jo and Sam were back in the squad room, looking at a piece of paper with Reese.

Sam looked up as he entered. "Hey, Kevin, did everything go okay?"

"Yeah, how about you? Did you get a confession?"

Sam laughed. "No such luck. Turns out it's even more complicated than we thought."

The phone rang, and Reese went back to her desk in the reception area while Jo and Sam filled Kevin in on what had happened earlier.

They were talking to him just as they used to talk to Tyler. As if he was one of the gang. It made him feel confident, so he decided to ask them outright about the safety deposit box. "I was at the bank over in Colebrook this morning. I have an account there, and they told me to tell you that there was no safety deposit box? Is that something to do with this case? Did Mike have a safety deposit box you guys were looking into?"

Sam and Jo exchanged a sharp look that put Kevin's nerves on edge.

"No," Sam said. "Oh yeah. That's right." He looked at Jo. "Remember?"

"Right, we thought Mike might have a safety deposit box because he took that money out of the ATM and we didn't know what he did with all of it."

Kevin frowned. That couldn't be true. He'd been here the whole time when they'd looked at the ATM tape, and it was clear Mike had gotten into the white Jetta right afterward. Sam and Jo had interviewed Tommy right away, so they knew where the money was going. And even if they suspected Mike hadn't given it all to Tommy, Kevin doubted they would have had time to make their way to the bank in Colebrook, because they would have started looking at banks closer to home first. And, even if Mike *had* stashed more money, why would they care where it was after learning about Tommy?

But why would Sam and Jo lie about that? A chill came over him. His contact had been right--Sam and Jo were up to something, and it wasn't exactly legal.

He inconspicuously shoved the thumb drive into the pocket in the front of the folder.

"Was that something for me?" Sam nodded at the folder.

"Oh, this? No. Just the routine case stuff. I'm gonna go put it all into the computer now."

Kevin sat at his desk, glad that he hadn't told his contact he was done with spying. What had he been thinking, anyway? Of course Sam and Jo were including him in everything--they wanted to keep him from being suspicious. Because they were up to something shady on the side, just as Tyler had been.

Now he was glad he hadn't confided in them. He would've forfeited all that money and probably been taken down along with them in the process.

SAM WATCHED Kevin walk back to his desk. He could've sworn the officer was about to hand him something that was in his folder. Sam couldn't see much else but paperwork. Maybe it was his imagination, but Kevin's demeanor seemed to have changed while they were talking.

He glanced at Jo, and she was frowning at Kevin. It had been a big slipup that the person at the Colebrook bank had mentioned the safety

deposit box to Kevin. Sam hadn't even thought about that when he and Jo had gone around pretending they were on police business while trying to find the box that fit Tyler's key. They'd have to be more discreet in the future. Even though Sam thought they might be able to trust Kevin, the fewer people that knew a lot about what they were doing, the better, especially in light of Tyler's big bank deposit. They might be into something that could get dicey.

"Hey, Sam, almost forgot you got an interview in fifteen," Reese yelled across the partition. Sam grimaced. He wished the whole interviewing process were over. He looked at Jo. "Maybe you could take this one?"

Jo made a face. "Maybe. Let's figure out this will thing first."

"Well, unfortunately, it could go either way. Here's how it's worded. He bequeaths all his stuff to Margie. If Margie predeceases him, the estate is to be split equally among his issue. It doesn't specifically name anyone, and with the DNA test, Tommy would clearly have an argument that he was Mike's issue. If Mike died after Margie, Tommy would have claim to one-third of his estate," Sam said.

"Then Tommy was right. He wouldn't have a reason to kill Mike. Quite the opposite, because Mike was already giving him money, but now that Mike is dead, that money will dry up. I assume Margie's will leaves everything to Mike, right?"

"Right. Which means Mike's kids could have a motive to make sure that Mike died before Margie did."

"*If* they knew about Tommy," Jo said.

"Good point. How would one of them find out?" Sam asked. "Melody was taking care of the mail. What if the bill for the DNA test came to the house and she found it?"

"We need to double check where Melody was that night. And Brian too. There was something funny going on with their alibis. Brian said he lives at those apartments across from the pharmacy--the Bluebell Arms--and he was home alone. Melody said she saw him, but I'm not sure I trust her. How can we verify Brian was at home in the Bluebell Arms apartments?" Jo asked.

A voice rang out from near the post office box partition. "That's easy. My friend Charlie Hobbs manages the place, and he knows everything that goes on there day and night. Nothing that happens escapes him. If your man was home, he'll know."

The voice belonged to Harry Woolston. He was tall and wiry, with a head full of thick white hair. He stood beside the partition, his keen blue eyes taking in every detail of the room.

Harry was pushing eighty but had a brain as sharp as a teenager's. Unfortunately, that meant that retirement didn't suit him. Harry got bored sitting around playing golf and bridge, and now that he was home for the summer, he wanted to insinuate himself into Sam's investigations.

Then again, in this case, it might not be such a bad idea. Sam knew how the good-old-boy network worked, and he knew that most folks didn't want to get involved and tended to be closemouthed with the cops. If Sam talked to the apartment building owner himself, he might not get any information, but with Harry along, he'd get the truth.

"Okay, Harry. We'll let you come with us to talk to this Charlie Hobbs, but that's it. You're not getting in on the case," Sam said.

"We'll see." Harry smiled, took his phone out of his pocket, held it at arm's length, and squinted. "Now let me remember how to work this thing."

The front door opened, and a young man of medium build walked into the lobby. He stopped at Reese's desk. "I'm here for the interview. Wyatt Davis."

Harry's attention wavered from the phone, and he stepped to the side so he could look into the lobby. He glanced from Sam to Wyatt. "Well, you don't say. Come right in. We've been waiting to talk to you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

It turned out that Harry was pretty good at interviewing. He asked all kinds of questions that Sam wouldn't have thought of. Questions that went beyond general police procedure and into the psyche of the applicant. Sam felt like taking notes so he could ask the same kinds of questions on future interviews.

When they were done and Wyatt had left, Sam turned to Harry. "So what do you think?"

"All you young people depend too much on computers and technology. I think you need to get someone in here who knows how to figure out who the killer is with his mind." Harry tapped the side of his head and leaned back in his chair. "But I suppose this one seemed okay. He wasn't too green around the gills, but he wasn't the gung-ho type that'll drive you crazy, either. I haven't talked to the other applicants, though, so I can't measure him against them. You want me to talk to them?"

Sam got up from his chair. He didn't want Harry to get too comfortable hanging around at the police station. He did agree with Harry that Wyatt seemed like the most likely candidate, but he'd have Jo talk to him and maybe bring some of the others in again just to be sure.

Lucy barked out in the squad room, and Sam opened the door to see Dupont standing there with a dog treat in his hand and Lucy raising her paw up in the air on his command. Lucy was becoming more trustful of Dupont--either that, or she was willing to overlook his personality flaws to get the treats.

Dupont straightened his blue Armani suit when he saw Sam, and his eyes drifted over to Harry behind him. "What brings you here? Are you in some kind of trouble?" Dupont asked.

Harry laughed. "Don't you start on me, Harley Dupont. I wouldn't be casting any stones if I were you."

Dupont's beady eyes got even beadier. "You're no longer the chief here, Woolston. You do realize that, I hope."

"Oh, I know you're the big fancy mayor and everything." Harry's criticism of Dupont ratcheted up Sam's opinion of him. "But I gotta tell you there's a lot of us in town that don't like the way things are going here."

"What do you mean?" Dupont asked. "My popularity rating is higher than ever. People are seeing my commercials all over the county." He bent down to pet Lucy. "And with the addition of Lucy to the police force, the townspeople like me now more than ever."

"*Some* of the townspeople." Harry stepped closer to Dupont. "But there's some of us that see what you're doing. Some of us have noticed you're giving a little bit of extra favoritism to Thorne and his destructive building plans."

Dupont scowled. "I am not. I'm looking out for the economy of this town. Building restaurants and hotels brings in jobs."

"And it kills off wildlife and ruins the pristine landscape," Harry said.

"Some things must be sacrificed in the name of progress." Dupont turned to Sam. "Speaking of which, is there any progress on Mike Donnelly's case? I hope you aren't still going around harassing innocent citizens. Word is out that you are continuing to investigate, and people are getting nervous there is a murderer in our midst. Why aren't you ruling it a simple suicide?"

"We've got some things we need to look into before we can do that. The vultures did a job on the body, and we couldn't prove conclusively that Mike shot himself. We have to do our due diligence by law. Wouldn't want the taxpayers to think we did a shoddy job of investigating. So if you'll let us get back to it..." Sam's voice drifted off.

Dupont thought for a moment. It took a while for things to sink in with him. "Fine, I'll leave you to it. I just came to make sure that Lucy was being cared for properly by you people and that you weren't wasting taxpayer money on some kind of vendetta."

"You're one to talk about wasting taxpayer money." Harry stepped closer to Dupont. "Us senior citizens are watching you. We don't like the way all these new buildings are going up, and rumor has it Marnie Wilson is going to run against you, so you better watch it. She's got the senior vote, and up here, that counts for a lot. Us seniors don't want the woods all chopped up and newfangled hotels going up. We don't want anyone who is in bed with someone like Thorne running our town."

"I'm not in bed with anyone." Dupont became defensive. "I'm only looking out for the good of the town." And with that, he turned on his heel and left.

Harry smirked and turned to Sam. "I love getting his dander up. He was a jerk as a young man, and I see he hasn't changed much." Harry pulled out his phone and squinted at it again. "Now let me see if I can find Charlie's number. It's suppertime now, but I can see if I can get us an invite over to that apartment building so we can check out those alibis first thing tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Harry's phone pinged immediately after he hung up with Charlie Hobbs, causing him to shuffle and juggle the phone comically until he finally got it answered. It was his wife, Mabel, who demanded he come home. Harry left them with the threat that he'd be back the next morning. Jo guessed even an important ex-chief of police had to answer to someone.

Kevin had already left, and Reese was packing up her desk. "Do you need me to stay and watch Lucy if you're going out for something to eat?" Jo asked.

"I'm heading straight home, so I'll take her," Sam said.

Reese hovered in the opening beside the post office boxes. "Do you need me to do anything else?"

"No, take off," Sam said.

Reese left, and now that they were alone in the station, Sam turned to Jo. "I know we've been busy with this investigation, but I was wondering if you found out any more about that deposit and Tyler's bank account."

"Nothing. The deposit was cash, so it's not traceable," Jo said.

"Kinda like how Mike had cash deposits," Sam said.

"Yeah, but I don't think the two are related." Jo tapped the end of her pencil against her lip. "He didn't withdraw it, so we can't look at an ATM video. Maybe we could get the bank surveillance tapes, but I'm not sure what we'd learn from that."

Sam sighed. "That would take a court order. We don't want anyone to know we're investigating."

"Speaking of which, we need to be a little bit more careful."

"Right. We don't want another slipup like we had with Kevin finding out we were at his bank. It's a catch twenty-two. If we don't pull our badges, no one will give us the information, and if we don't get the information, we may never find the box that the key unlocks."

They both glanced toward Sam's office, where the key sat inside his drawer.

"What if someone else knows about the key?" Jo said. "Maybe someone else is looking for that key. Might be smart to hide it somewhere."

"Right. Now that we know about the cash deposit, we know he was up to something bigger than we thought before. In my drawer, though, I figure it's hidden in plain sight with all the other keys."

Jo glanced at the empty desk sitting in the corner. Tyler's desk. She thought Tyler had been like her and Sam. That he'd do anything for justice. But, as she'd discovered early on in her life, you never really knew what secrets someone else was keeping. "You're probably right."

"In the meantime, I have Mick trying to see if he can figure out what was going on with Tyler," Sam said.

"If anyone can figure it out, it'll be Mick," Jo said. "How is the interviewing going?"

Sam made a face. "Honestly, I don't really feel great about any of them. We worked so well together with Tyler, it's hard to think about anyone filling his shoes." Sam shrugged, glancing at the desk. "But now with what we're finding out, maybe we don't want someone to exactly *fill* them."

"What do you think about Kevin? He's been stepping it up lately, but then he acted kind of weird when he found out about that safety deposit box. I don't know if he would get on board with what we're doing. Should we let him in?" Jo asked.

Sam thought about that for a minute and then shook his head. "I don't know. I thought we could trust Tyler. I mean, we worked so closely with him, and look what we are finding out now. I don't get that same trust vibe from Kevin."

Jo nodded slowly. She felt the same way but didn't know if it was just her suspicious nature. "Best to keep things between ourselves for now and to apply more caution."

"Smart thinking."

Jo stood and started to gather her things. "I'm on call until eight o'clock tonight, so I'm gonna grab something from the diner and head home. You

gonna be okay?"

"Yep. I'm heading home with Lucy. Gotta rest up. I'm sure Harry will be here first thing tomorrow morning." Sam rolled his eyes.

Jo laughed. "Awww. Let the guy have his fun. Soon enough, he'll be back in Florida and out of your hair."

"Sure. For now, I guess he does have his uses. He can get Charlie to talk to us and tell us the truth a lot better than we could on our own." Sam snapped his fingers, and Lucy trotted over to his side. "All right, I'm heading out. I'll have the CB band on in case something bad goes down. Remember I got your back."

Jo's heart warmed. Even though she and Sam were just friends, there was no one else she would trust more to have her back. It meant even more to her now in light of what they were discovering about Tyler.

"Thanks." Their eyes locked for a second, and something passed between them. Something she didn't understand. A deeper meaning to their friendship. Jo tore her eyes away. She was closer to Sam than she'd been to anyone in her adult life, but she couldn't handle their friendship being anything more than what it was now.

She grabbed her stuff and headed for the door.

SAM WAS on his second beer when the knock came on the screen door. Mick didn't bother waiting for an answer. He breezed in and helped himself to a beer from the fridge, just as he did every time he came to visit.

"Seems empty without the girls here." Mick echoed Sam's thoughts. Mick was somewhat of a surrogate uncle to Sam's daughters. Sometimes Sam wondered which one of them the girls liked better. Of course, Mick had gotten to do all the fun parts without having to discipline them.

Mick squatted down to pat Lucy. "At least you got Lucy. You ever think about upgrading to something less hairy with two legs?"

"Only for a night or two. I'm not into long-term relationships anymore. What about you?"

Mick looked at him and winked and smiled the charming Mick Gervasi smile that had attracted all the girls during their younger years. Near as Sam could tell, it still worked, but Mick was a bit more selective now.

"Anyway, I assume you didn't come here just to talk about women," Sam said as Mick paced around the small cabin, looking at the pictures of Sam's family. Several generations were represented on the walls and in silver and birch-edged frames around the cabin. Mick paused in front of one that showed a fishing trip to Canada, just over the border. One of the many fishing trips Sam's dad and grandfather had taken him and Mick on when they were little boys. "How are your folks?"

Sam's folks were alive and doing well in Florida. They preferred the warmer climate to New England. Though sometimes they came back to visit in August--anything else was too cold for them. "Doing good. Dad's taking up golf. Mom's taking up painting."

"Sounds like my folks. You think we'll ever end up like that?" Mick sat down at the table and flicked the metal top from his beer so it spun like a coin on its side.

Sam made a face. "Nope."

Mick leaned back casually, but his face was serious. "I've been digging into that twenty grand. I don't know what Tyler was onto. My only lead is still the grandson of the woman whose car was stolen. I know he's got something to do with this."

Sam nodded. He felt the same. "It's just too much of a coincidence."

"But I can't get a handle on it. One thing is weird, though--he seems to be acting a little itchy, and from what I hear on the street, one of his friends has been missing for a while."

Sam's brow quirked up. "A while?"

Mick shrugged. "Honestly, I'm not making much headway on that." He reached into his back pocket and took out a piece of paper that had been folded a few times. He spread it flat on the table. It was a photocopy of an old newspaper picture. The debate team from Harvard. Mick tapped on one of the faces.

"Recognize this guy?"

"Dupont."

"And look who's here in this corner of the picture."

Sam's chest tightened. "Brendan Wright."

"Yep. Turns out Brendan and Dupont were on the debate team together back in college. None of the other guys involved in what happened to Gracie were on it. But this shows that Brendan knew Dupont, and even if it

was just casually, I don't think it's any coincidence that Thorne is now putting the screws to you about what happened."

"No such thing as coincidences." Sam's mouth tightened into a grim line. "Do you think he told Dupont something about what happened that night? The night we went down to persuade Todd to tell the truth? Why would he?"

"It's gotta be something like that. You know Dupont--he's always trying to get something that he can use to his advantage later on. He knew we were poking around in Gracie's case--maybe he had something on Brendan or promised him something for information."

Sam leaned back in his chair. "That *is* how he operates. Maybe he pulled some strings on their jail sentence. He was connected even back then."

"Right. But why would he wait twenty years to bring it up?" Mick asked.

"Maybe he was waiting for the right time. The whole time, he knew I was studying criminology. He knew I wanted to be chief of police here, and you know that even back then he was angling for a high political position either here in town or in the state Senate. I have been leaning on him about Thorne, so maybe he feels like now is the time to try to shut me up."

"He might look stupid, but he's pretty smart when it comes to saving his own skin," Mick said.

"Yeah, that's true, but it's a far cry from knowing something about someone and having evidence on someone. I doubt he'd have any actual evidence on us," Sam said.

Mick didn't look so convinced. "You know what they say--evidence can easily be fabricated. Maybe looking into this whole business with Tyler isn't such a smart idea. If Tyler was into something illegal and you get in the middle of it, it could implicate you somehow. If it has something to do with Dupont and Thorne, they could twist around anything you are doing to make it look like *you* are the one that is guilty. And with the way Dupont's acting, if I were you, I'd make sure I keep my nose clean from here on out."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Harry appeared at the police station the next morning with coffee and donuts for everyone. Reese gave Sam a look over Harry's shoulder as if to say, "See, he is a good guy." Sam just shook his head. Reese had a lot to learn.

Sam and Jo grabbed a coffee and hopped into the Tahoe with Harry and Lucy in back. Jo scarfed a jelly donut on the way, dropping a red blob on her shirt.

Charlie Hobbs was almost the exact opposite of Harry Woolston. Where Harry was tall and thin and gangly, Charlie was short and fat. The two men greeted each other with a slap on the back.

"I see the new police still need help from us old-timers, eh?" Charlie smiled at Harry and side-eyed Sam as if he wasn't sure he could trust him. "You won't find much better than Harry when it comes to investigating."

Sam played along. "You don't say."

"I don't know how we ever solved any cases without him," Jo said dryly as she dabbed at the blob of jelly that now stained her light-blue button-down shirt. The dabbing only smeared it and made the stain bigger.

Lucy wagged her tail, sidling up against Harry. She'd taken a liking to him as they'd driven over together in the backseat of the Tahoe. Jo suspected Harry had been feeding her something from his pocket.

Charlie looked at Lucy. "I hope you're not going to do any of that search-and-seizure type stuff. I know those dogs can smell drugs. But I assure you there's none of that going on in my building."

They glanced at the building. It was a two-story brick construction that had six apartments in it. It was on one of the busier streets that housed mostly commercial businesses and old Victorians converted into apartment buildings and sat across from a big pharmacy.

Jo figured if Brian was living there, he probably didn't have very much money. For a guy in his thirties, she thought he would've been doing better. She'd gotten the impression when they were at the Donnellys' house that he was hiding something. Maybe he'd just been embarrassed about his circumstances.

Whatever the case, Brian clearly needed money. His mother wouldn't be around for very long, but Mike had been in pretty good shape. Would Brian kill him so he could inherit his share of the estate? Thorne had mentioned one of the kids was champing at the bit to sell the farm. Had Brian been negotiating with Thorne on the side? And if so, maybe Mike's death had nothing at all to do with Tommy.

"So what do you need to know, Harry?" Charlie asked.

Harry looked at Sam.

Sam said, "We have a question about Brian Donnelly. We heard he lives here."

Charlie nodded and pointed to a window on the second floor. "Yep, right in Apartment 2b. I hope he's not in any trouble. He's a quiet lad."

"Don't know yet. We're trying to find out if he was here on Monday night, say around seven p.m.," Sam said. "Would you happen to know?"

"Of course I would," Charlie said. "I make it my business to know the comings and goings in my building. I run a clean shop here, and I need to keep tabs on things so they don't get out of hand. You know how young people are. They need constant supervision."

Harry nodded solemnly.

Charlie screwed up his face. "Monday night, you say. Yes, I remember that quite well because there was quite a ruckus going on up there."

"So he was home?" Jo asked.

Charlie shook his head. "No. That's the thing. He wasn't home. That was the problem--someone was knocking on his door and ringing the bell over and over, making a big racket for about ten minutes, but by the time I got up there to tell them he wasn't home, they had left."

"How did you know he wasn't home?"

"I'd seen him riding off on his bicycle about an hour before, and he didn't come back until after eight p.m."

"What time was this person knocking on his door?"

Charlie thought for a minute. "I'd say it must've been about six p.m. Wheel of Fortune was gonna be on in an hour, and I was getting my TV dinner ready so I could watch it. You know, I like the Salisbury steak--you know, the one with the corn and the little brownies."

Sam nodded. That was one of his favorites too. "And you're sure this was Monday night?"

"Oh sure, my memory's as good as gold." Charlie looked at Harry as if for confirmation, and Harry nodded.

"Charlie can still keep track of cards at poker night like nobody's business. And when we go to Vegas, well, you should see what happens. We come back with a lot of money."

Charlie smiled. Then the smile faltered, and he looked at Sam. "Not that I count cards or anything. That's illegal."

"Nothing illegal about having a good memory. And you're sure he didn't come back until eight p.m.?"

"Of course I'm sure. Didn't I say that?" Charlie seemed as if he was getting a little miffed.

"Do you know who was at his door?" Jo asked.

"That, I don't know. I didn't get up there right away because I was busy with my dinner. At first, I figured they'd go away when no one answered. But after a few minutes, I started up, but I was too late. They must have gone down the other stairway in back. I didn't see them, but whoever it was was knocking and ringing the bell as if they really wanted to get in and talk to him."

"And he was gone the whole time between six and eight?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir, Chief--I mean ex-Chief," Charlie said.

Harry looked at Sam. "Well, there you go. That settles it. Sounds like we better talk to Brian, because right now he's at the top of my suspect list--he had means, motive, and opportunity."

According to Charlie, Brian was at home, so they trudged up to the second floor and knocked on the door. Harry took the lead, pushing his way to the front, and Sam shot an amused look at Jo and shrugged. She knew what he was thinking--why not let the old guy have some fun.

Brian answered the door, gave Harry a confused look, and then saw Sam and Jo standing behind him. "Is there some news about my dad?"

Sam didn't think he looked guilty of trying to hide anything. He seemed genuinely concerned about his dad's case, but if that was true, why was he lying about where he'd been that night?

Sam's eyes drifted into the inside of the apartment. It was messy. An open pizza box on the table. Clothes strewn about. It smelled of dirty socks and stale food. Didn't Brian have a wife?

"May we come in?" Harry asked. "Is your wife home?" Apparently, Harry was thinking on the same lines as Sam.

Brian stepped back and opened the door. "My wife and I split up. That's why I'm living in the apartment. Who are you?"

Harry held out his hand. "Harry Woolston. Chief of police."

Brian frowned and looked at Sam.

"*Ex*-chief of police," Sam said. "Harry's helping us out."

"Okay. So what brings you guys here? I was just on my way to Mom's," Brian said.

"I think you might know why we're here," Sam said. "Do you know something about what happened to your dad?"

Brian's eyes darted around the room. "What do you mean? I told you I don't know anything."

"Really? Then why did you lie about being home the night he died?"

"I *was* home. Who said I wasn't?"

"Your landlord said you went out on your bike that night. You were gone for three hours. Long enough for you to cycle up to the cabin and back," Sam said. "Is that what you did?"

Brian sighed and sank into the sofa. "No. That's not where I was. But I did go out on my bike."

"Where did you go, and why on the bike?"

"I took my bike because I don't have a car. I got a DWI over in Pittsfield, and my license was yanked. But my family doesn't know. I didn't want to tell them and worry my mom. She's going through so much already. And my sister has everything on her shoulders, so I didn't want to add to that. I wasn't lying because I was at the cabin. I was lying because I was in an AA meeting mandated because of the drunk driving charge. I had to take my bike because I lost my license." Brian looked up at Sam. "You can check with my sponsor."

Sam frowned. It could easily be checked, and Brian seemed sincere, but something didn't add up. "Really? Then why did your sister say she saw you moving around in here? Does someone else live here?"

Brian shrugged. "No one else was here, so I have no idea why she said that. I was just as surprised as you are. But I just kind of went with it so I wouldn't have to explain where I was. I figured maybe she got the night wrong or something. She's been really stressed out about Mom and running herself ragged to help out."

"She seemed pretty certain about the night she saw you."

Brian sighed again. "I don't know--she's my big sister and has always tried to protect me since we were little kids." He glanced at his phone on the table. "She's even trying to protect me with Mom's condition. Sugarcoating how bad it is, but asking me to come soon. I know why. Mom's getting a lot worse. And maybe she knew I was lying and wanted to corroborate my story? I'm sure she had good reason."

Sam looked at Jo. Maybe Melody hadn't lied to protect Brian--maybe she'd lied to protect herself.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

As they left Brian's, Harry's phone blared with a loud foghorn sound, and he dug it out of his pocket. "Yes, Mabel. Right away, dear. I'll be right home." He looked at Sam and Jo sheepishly. "Happy wife, happy life. Dang it! I'm gonna miss out on the interrogation of the sister. Can you drop me at the station? Do you need me to write down some questions for you to ask her, Sammy?"

"Thanks, I'm all set," Sam said.

They dropped Harry off and headed to Melody's. Her house was a neat little Cape in one of the newer sections of town. It had been built about ten years ago and was nicely kept up with a freshly mowed lawn, flowers, and neatly trimmed shrubs. Melody answered the door, the strain of her mother's illness evident in the tight set of her jaw. Or was it the strain of lying about her father?

"Is it about Dad?" She stepped back to let them in then led them toward the kitchen. "I've been at Mom's all morning and just came home for the break. She's fading fast."

Melody looked close to tears, and Sam felt bad that he was about to accuse her of killing her father. He didn't want to tell her Brian's secret, didn't feel right about being the one to let that out. He also wanted to play dumb so he could test the waters and see if she would still lie even if she knew she had been caught in it.

"I'm sorry to hear that. This won't take long. We have just a few things we want to tighten up in relation to your father."

"Okay. I really want to help you find out what happened. I still can't believe someone would kill him. Are you sure about that?"

"We can't rule it out," Sam said. "But there seems to be some kind of a question about the night he died. Are you sure you saw your brother at his place?"

Melody stiffened and turned away, busying herself with the teapot. "Coffee or tea?"

"No. We're good," Jo said. "Are you sure you saw your brother that night? We know you've been under a lot of strain, and you might've gotten the nights confused with everything that's going on."

Melody chewed her bottom lip. "If Brian said he was home, then he was home. I'm sure it was that night because I refilled Mom's prescription for her." Her brows knit together. "Or was it the night before when Mom wasn't home... she rarely goes out anymore and doesn't really have the energy to go in and out of the stores. Why are you asking?"

"We were just trying to verify where everyone was," Sam said.

"Well, I hope you don't think Brian was involved. He's just going through a rough patch right now."

"Honey, I put your bike away on the racks in the--" A man appeared in the doorway and stopped. "Oh, I didn't realize anyone was here."

"This is my husband, Joel," Melody introduced them. "They were just asking some questions about Dad's case." She turned back to Sam and Jo. "Anyway. I know Brian needs money. His wife left him, and he's gotten into a little bit of a mess, but he's a good guy."

"Maybe if your dad wasn't so tight with the money, Brian wouldn't be having any troubles," Joel said.

Melody turned on Joel. "That's not quite fair. Dad isn't a cheapskate. He just thought Brian should have to work things out for himself. Besides, Dad had his own problems."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked. Did Melody know about Tommy? But why would Tommy be a problem? Maybe she *did* know about the DNA test and thought Tommy was a problem for her father.

"Oh, well, just that there was a lot of stuff with Mom's medical treatments and doctor's appointments. You know insurance doesn't cover everything, and I've had to sort out the bills for them. Mom and Dad aren't getting any younger and can't handle all that." She glanced at the clock. "Really, I should go back. I don't like to leave my mother at all, and Brian

was gonna meet me there. She was barely lucid when I left. The hospice nurse said there might not be much time, and I'd never forgive myself if I wasn't there when..."

Sam's heart pinched. This wasn't the time to be grilling Melody about her father's death, no matter what his suspicions were. The least he could do was let her tend to her mother's deathbed in peace.

"Of course." Sam started to the front door. "We'll be in touch if we have anything new."

"IT'S A TOUGH POSITION," Jo said when they were back in the car. "Emotions are running high in that family, and it doesn't seem right to be accusing them when their mom is so sick."

Sam nodded. "You're right. We need to back off and let them take care of their mother. In the meantime, maybe we can reconstruct Mike's last day and check Brian's alibi for that night. Maybe we're barking up the wrong tree and no one in his family had anything to do with it. Maybe it really did have to do with Thorne," Sam said.

"But there's one thing that's bothered me. Mike was killed with his own gun. Only Margie, Mike, and the kids would have access to it and know the code to the lockbox. Now, we've assumed that Mike took it with him because he knew there would be trouble. But one of the kids could have brought it and killed him, hoping it would look like a suicide. They'd know he was depressed. Maybe Mike *didn't* bring the gun because he was expecting trouble with Thorne."

"Thorne was obviously interested in their land, but it doesn't add up. Why would he be paying Mike money and then kill him?" Jo asked.

"That brings up a good question. If the money wasn't from Thorne, where was it from?"

"Maybe he was selling something off? Or maybe he borrowed the money, knowing that he'd get something from Margie's life insurance," Jo said.

"I had Reese check into those life insurances, and there wasn't very much. The money was all in the value of the land that the farm is on." Sam's eyes narrowed as he turned down Main Street to the police station. "You

might be on to something with him selling something off. At the Donnelly house, there was a china cabinet that was full of flow blue china. My grandma has some of that, and I know it can be worth a lot of money. And it seemed to me there were some empty spots in the Donnelly china cabinet."

Sam was really good at noticing details about various crime scenes. Jo didn't doubt he was right and his instincts were spot on about the china being missing. "But that doesn't really help us. If he was selling stuff off to give Tommy money, he was being sneaky about it so that the family wouldn't notice."

"Unless someone in the family *did* notice." Sam glanced over at her. "What if either Brian or Melody knew Mike was selling things off? What if they figured out he was up to something? What if they knew how the will was worded and realized that Mike had to die before Margie in order for them to be the only beneficiaries of the inheritance?"

"That's a great theory, but we need concrete evidence. Even if it was one of them, we're not about to go in and arrest them on Margie's deathbed," Jo said. "Maybe this would be a good time to slip in some footwork on Tyler's case." Jo tapped her finger against her mug. She thought it was a little strange that Sam hadn't mentioned much about Tyler's case since she'd found out about the twenty thousand, but maybe it was because they were busy working on Mike's.

Sam pulled into the parking spot in front of the police station. "We have to be careful about Tyler's case now, remember? Kevin mentioning the safety deposit box kinda spooked me."

Jo sensed him hesitate as he opened the car door. She got the impression that the post office box incident wasn't the only reason. Which was weird because Jo and Sam usually told each other everything... or so she thought.

But now, she had the distinct impression he was holding something back. Why did that feel like a betrayal?

Sam didn't owe her explanations for anything. They were colleagues, nothing more, and she knew from her own experience it was human nature for people to keep secrets from one another.

She hopped out and followed him into the police station. If Sam had something he wanted her to know, he'd tell her when he was ready.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

In the station lobby, Reese was busy handing out yard sale permits to two old ladies. The women were perpetual yard salers—people that had yard sales all the time, practically making a business out of it. They'd pick things up at one sale then raise the price and put it in their own sale. He'd mentioned the limits on yard sales to them before.

He gave them a pointed glance, and one of them piped up. "This is only the third yard sale this year, and we're allowed five."

Sam tipped his head toward him. "That's right, ma'am. Make sure you don't overdo it."

He could see by the board that Kevin was out on a call. He felt bad that Kevin got all the minor calls, and he knew it bothered Kevin, but the truth was that Sam and Jo were the senior officers. Once they hired the new person, maybe he would let Kevin come on a few of the more interesting calls. Thoughts of the new hire made him anxious. He really should get going on interviewing. Maybe he would bring that last candidate back in and see what Jo thought of him.

Sam headed to the K-Cup machine and put a little orange-lidded container into the top then slid his dark-blue mug under the spout.

He could hear Jo in the corner, tapping her pencil on her desk, and his heart twisted. He knew Jo had sensed he wasn't telling her everything, and he hated that. But he couldn't tell her how he suspected Dupont knew what had happened twenty years ago. It wasn't something he was proud of, and besides, Mick was just as involved as Sam, so it wasn't only his story to tell.

But he could tell by the way she'd breezed past him and plopped down at her desk to stare at paperwork that her feelings were hurt. And for some reason that made him hurt, too. Why was that? It wasn't as if it were his duty to tell her every little thing--they were only co-workers, even though they were closer than most.

Lucy had come to press against him, as if sensing his sadness. He reached down and scrubbed the fur on top of her head with his fingertips. The dog was big enough that he didn't even have to bend down to pet her.

Sam sauntered into the squad room and rested his hip on the desk next to Jo. "I guess we need to prove that Tommy, Melody, and Brian couldn't have killed Mike because they were somewhere else. Tommy and Brian should be easy to prove if what they told us is true, but Melody... Maybe that won't be so easy."

Lucy whined and looked up at Sam then stuck her nose in the trash barrel.

"Are you feeding her enough?" Jo asked. "She looks like she's hungry."

Lucy gave a little whine and pushed harder, knocking the trash barrel over.

"I feed her plenty. I think Kevin and Dupont are spoiling her with those treats." Sam bent over to pick up the trash that had spilled out onto the floor. Lucy was sniffing at the pile, and as he bent to pick up the coffee receipt that had fallen out of Jo's jelly donut bag, Lucy slammed her paw down on it.

"Looks like she wants a donut," Sam joked. But as he tried to pull the receipt away, Lucy held steady. She looked up at him with her whisky-brown eyes as if to say, "Don't you get it?"

Sam looked down at the receipt, and a light bulb turned on in his head. "Wait a minute. This receipt gives me an idea. In the last case, we verified that one of the suspects couldn't have been a killer because he'd paid with a credit card at the gas station, and that gave him an alibi for the time of the murder. Maybe we can use receipts to prove what time Melody was at the pharmacy that night."

Jo shook her head. "I thought about that, but the pharmacy doesn't have receipts like that. They don't list the credit card name on the receipt like the gas station does." Jo reached over and tapped her pencil on the Brewed Awakening receipt that Sam was holding. "It's like this one that just has the time. It doesn't have a credit card number or note that it's a cash transaction,

so we wouldn't be able to tell from the pharmacy receipt what time Melody picked up the prescription."

"That's only sort of true." Sam spun around to see Harry Woolston standing in the lobby. He didn't wait to be invited and just sauntered into the squad room as if they'd been expecting him. "You see, when you pick up pharmaceuticals, it's a whole different thing. There's privacy laws and HIPAA laws or whatever you call them. Anyway, whoever picks them up has to sign for it. So if your suspect was in the pharmacy picking up pills, then her signature would be recorded on the electronic signature gizmo, and I'm willing to bet it also records the time."

Sam didn't have much experience with the pharmacy, but it made sense. He pushed up from the desk and headed to the door. "Then I guess I better go make a visit over to the pharmacy right away."

"Don't worry. We'll wait here until you get back," Harry called after him as he rushed out the door.

THE PHARMACY WASN'T CROWDED, so Sam didn't have to wait in line. The pharmacist was Betsy Simmons, whom Sam had known since he was a kid. Her husband had left her two years ago, and she'd taken to flirting with Sam whenever they ran into each other. Sam wasn't in the mood for flirting, but if it helped him get the information he needed, then he'd play along.

Betsy looked up from under heavy black lashes. "Sam Mason, what can I do for you?"

Her tone and body language was suggestive, so Sam played into it. He leaned against the counter, rustling up the most charming smile he could muster.

"I was wondering if I could get some records about a prescription that was picked up here on Monday night." Normally, he'd have to get a court order for that, but maybe if he played his cards right, he could get the information he needed. If he needed the actual receipts, he'd go through the proper channels later, but for now it would help them to know exactly what time Melody picked up the prescription. That alone could knock her off the suspect list.

Betsy's eyes wavered uncertainly. "Well, I don't know..."

Sam leaned in closer and turned the charm up even higher. "I'd consider it a big personal favor."

"Well, I suppose it wouldn't hurt to say who came in that night. What exactly are you looking for?"

"You heard about Mike Donnelly..." Sam started.

Betsy's face turned sad. "Yes. Of course. Terrible thing."

"And you know Margie is very ill and gets a lot of prescriptions filled."

Betsy nodded. "She does. I feel terrible for their kids."

Sam nodded in sympathy. "On Monday night, Margie had a prescription filled by Melody, and I was just wondering if you could happen to look in there and see what time that was. I think it's all recorded in some database, right?"

Betsy perked up at the chance to show her knowledge. "Yes. It all has to be documented. When they come in to get the prescription, they have to sign for it. It's all recorded on the computer." She walked the length of the counter to a monitor and started typing. Her long fingernails clacked on the keys for a few seconds. Then she frowned. "Margie Donnelly, right?"

"That's right. But Melody came to get the prescription."

Betsy shook her head. "No, I don't think so."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

Betsy looked around the pharmacy to make sure no one else was near before she turned the screen so Sam could see it. She tapped a perfectly manicured nail on the signature. "Someone did pick up Margie's pills that night, but it wasn't Melody. It was Margie herself, and now I distinctly remember it because she was using that walker, and she could barely make it from the front door. It was sad because just a week earlier she didn't even need the walker."

Sam stared at the signature. If Margie had picked the pills up herself, then Melody had lied about being at the pharmacy the night her father was killed.

THEORIES CIRCLED like vultures in Sam's head as he drove back from the pharmacy. Either Melody had gotten her days mixed up, or she'd lied.

What if instead of saying she was at the pharmacy and had seen Brian at home to cover for Brian, she was really trying to cover for herself? What reason would there have been to lie other than not wanting Sam to know where she was? Could she have been at the cabin? Did she know about Tommy? But how? Images of her holding the mail came to mind, and he wondered again to what address those DNA results had been mailed.

As he drove down Main Street, he passed Weatherby's antique store, and it hit him. Why hadn't he thought of it before?

If Mike had been selling the family china, what better place to do it than Weatherby's, and if one of his kids suspected, they might have gone to the store to find out.

Mike could have easily taken a few flow blue pieces out of the china cabinet. Margie would've been too sick to even notice they were missing. But Melody might have noticed.

He pulled over in front of the antique store and headed in. The bells over the large oak door tinkled as he stepped inside. Clara Weatherby smiled at him from behind the counter. Her snow-white hair and wrinkled face gave her a grandmotherly look, but Sam knew underneath she was a shrewd businesswoman.

"You ready to start that collection now?" Clara asked. She encouraged everyone in town to collect something. It was good for business, but it was also a fun hobby. She loved scouting around various antique stores, auctions, and estate sales to find just that perfect piece that someone could add to their collection.

Sam wasn't the collecting type. He had a cabin full of antiques and family heirlooms from his grandparents, which he treasured, but he was more of a minimalist himself. He didn't need a lot to make him happy. And, besides, most of his time was spent on the job, not sitting at home looking at a bunch of fancy collectibles.

"Not this time. I'm actually here on police business."

A perfectly plucked gray brow slid upward. "Oh?"

"I've got a suspicion that Mike Donnelly might've been selling off some of his family belongings."

Clara's eyes darted to a display case in the back of the room, and Sam saw the flow blue china in it. "Flow blue china, right?"

Clara nodded. "The pieces he had weren't that outstanding, not like the ones your grandma always refused to sell me. But with Margie being sick

and all, I didn't have the heart to tell him, so I just paid him some money and let him bring them in. I figured he had bills. I know how expensive hospital stays and treatments can be."

"And was Mike the only one that knew about it?"

"I should say so. Margie would've been mad if she found out. The china had come down from her family. That's why I keep it back in there. I made the mistake of putting some in the window, and I nearly blew it."

"What do you mean?"

"It was about a month ago. Mike had been coming for about a month before that and bringing select pieces. Some of the flow blue, and he had some silver too." Clara glanced toward the big display window that looked out onto the main street. "I had put some of it in that window when I saw Margie and Melody pull up over across the way. That was back when Margie still got around pretty well. Anyway, I realized I made a big mistake. I didn't know Margie would be coming into town anymore, and if she saw that in the window, she'd flip. I didn't want to cause a problem with her and Mike, so I rushed over and took it out and put it in the case. I'd save it for her kids, but you know kids these days... they don't appreciate this old stuff. Better to sell it to someone who will be happy to own it."

"Did Margie or Melody see any of it that day?" Sam asked.

Clara sighed. "Thankfully not. I got it all out of the window before they came by, and they didn't come into the store, so I think I dodged a bullet there."

"And none of the family ever came in asking about it?"

"No. As far as I know, Mike's secret was safe from them."

Sam got back in the Tahoe and drove to the police station. What if Clara was wrong? What if Melody *had* seen the flow blue china and recognized it? On one of his visits to the Donnelly house, the china had been out on the dining room table, and Margie and Melody had been cleaning it. What if Melody recognized it in the store window from across the street and didn't want to upset her mother?

And what if she went to confront her father about it that night and discovered the truth?

CHAPTER THIRTY

Harry and Jo were still at the police station when Sam got back. Jo was filling out paperwork, and Harry was regaling Reese with tales of one of his investigative exploits.

Harry broke with Reese and trailed Sam back to the squad room area. "So what did you find out?"

Jo looked up, amused. "Yeah, what did you find out?"

Sam gave in. He needed to talk this out, and Harry wasn't going to leave. Besides, one more brain noodling on this might help.

"Melody lied. She didn't pick up the prescriptions from the pharmacy that night. Margie picked them up herself," Sam said.

Harry nodded sagely. "Interesting."

"Well, Brian and Tommy didn't lie." Jo leaned back in her chair and put her feet up on the desk. "Both of their alibis checked out. They couldn't have killed Mike."

"Do you think Melody did it?" Harry asked.

Sam went over the corkboard where they'd pinned up all the information on the case. Notes, pictures, everything they had. Lucy followed and sat at his heels.

"Everything I've got is circumstantial. Just because she didn't pick up the medication at the pharmacy doesn't prove she was at the camp."

"What's her motive?" Harry asked.

"Mike was selling off family heirlooms to provide money for Tommy. Melody might have caught on to that. When we were at the house, I noticed some empty spaces in the china cabinet, and later on, Margie and Melody

were cleaning that china. Melody might've noticed the pieces were missing."

"Her motive would be even stronger if she intercepted those DNA test results and knew she had a half brother that would inherit one-third of Mike's estate," Jo said.

"That would be motive enough given what was in the will," Harry said. "If Mike died before Margie, then only Melody and Brian would inherit. Mike's will gave everything to Margie, and Margie's will gave everything to her children, and Tommy wasn't one of her children."

"On the other hand, if Margie died first, which seemed inevitable, her wealth would go to Mike, but then when Mike died, everything would go to his issue. The three children. Melody and Brian would lose out on one-third of their inheritance," Jo said.

"But the Ritchies said they only ever saw the family cars at the camp that day. Mike's car was there, but maybe another family car was also there," Sam pointed out.

"Melody's car?" Harry asked.

"That's the thing. They didn't see Melody's car, just Mike and Margie Donnelly's cars. But their camp was past the Donnellys', so they wouldn't see everyone who visited the camp. They didn't even see the white Jetta, so we can't count that for anything."

Harry had taken a seat at the empty desk they had reserved for the new hire. He leaned back in his chair and looked up at Sam. "But Brian suggested Melody might've lied about going to the pharmacy to cover up for him. It seems plausible. And killing your dad because of an inheritance..." Harry shook his head. "I know that happens, but we're not talking that much money here, and it seems a little far-fetched given the case. Does she seem like the kind of crazy person that would do that?"

Sam shook his head and stared at the corkboard. "No. That's what's bugging me. It just doesn't add up."

Lucy whined and scratched at the wall underneath a picture of the Donnellys' driveway they'd taken the morning after the murder.

"The bicycle tracks!" Jo said. "When we were at Melody's, her husband said something about her bicycle."

Harry shook his head. "Why would Melody ride a bicycle all the way out there? Where does she live, and how long would it take her?"

"Well, she might've taken the bicycle so that nobody would see her car there. But she lives in the newer section of town, and that's a pretty far ride." Jo twisted her mouth and shook her head. "Maybe her husband did it. He didn't seem to like Mike very much."

"Or Brian. He rides a bicycle since he lost his license," Harry said.

Jo shook her head. "There wouldn't have been enough time to attend the AA meeting and cycle out to the camp."

Harry's eyes narrowed. "You think Melody knew about this other kid and told the husband, then he killed Mike so Melody wouldn't get gypped on her inheritance?"

"That doesn't seem likely. Sam's right. This doesn't add up. Even though she lied about being at the pharmacy, it might still have been to protect Brian. She's done that her whole life. And we don't know that she noticed the flow blue was gone or even found the DNA test results." Jo started digging through the pile of papers on her desk. "In fact, I have that DNA test right here. Maybe it says..." She whipped out a piece of paper with a red-and-gray logo. She frowned, then she held it up to Sam. "That letter didn't go to Mike's house. It went to Tommy, so if Melody knew about him, she didn't find out because of the bill."

Lucy whined and scratched again.

Sam looked closer at the picture, and suddenly, he knew what had been bugging him. "Shit. I don't think Melody was the killer. We've been barking up the wrong tree."

Harry leaned forward. "How so?"

"Look at this." Sam tapped on the picture. "I thought these bike tracks looked a little weird, but I assumed they were tracks that were coming and going. Now I see the spacing is too perfect. Too parallel. These aren't bike tracks--they're walker tracks."

Lucy's tail swished back and forth rapidly. "And now I remember, when we visited Margie those times, Lucy was very interested in sniffing the wheels on the walker. Lucy knew the whole time that it was Margie."

"So the tracks prove that Margie was there, but they don't prove that she killed Mike," Harry said. "She could have visited at any time. It was her camp, too."

"Not the tracks alone, but it all adds up," Sam said. "What if Margie knew Mike was selling off the flow blue and got suspicious? Mike had an affair with Tommy's mother seventeen years ago--do you think he could've

hidden that from Margie? Wives know these things. Maybe she suspected the affair, but when Tommy's mother left, she might have thought she'd been wrong. I mean, she had her own family to think about, and with Tommy's mother gone, why pursue it?"

"Wait a minute! When we looked at that ATM footage of Mike getting the money from the ATM, the brown Taurus was on a side street. We thought Mike had driven it there, but he always drove the black truck. What if it was Margie in that car, spying on Mike?" Jo said.

"She might've figured out something was going on with Mike, and if she followed him and saw him meeting Tommy, she would know exactly why," Sam said. "Maybe she went to the camp and confronted him. At first, we had assumed Mike took the gun with him because he was expecting a fight, but what if it was Margie that brought the gun?"

"And now Margie is lying on her deathbed." Jo's eyes were dark with sympathy. "How can we go in and accuse a dying woman of murdering her husband?"

Sam sat in the chair and scrubbed his hands through his hair. "Good question. This would've been so much easier if Thorne was the killer."

Harry stood and clapped Sam on the shoulder. "Well, son, police chiefing doesn't always come easy. And now it sounds like you guys got yourselves a dilemma. In my experience, sometimes you have to choose between justice and doing the right thing. So what are you going to choose?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sam and Jo stood at the Donnellys' front door with heavy hearts. He had a duty as chief of police to follow through on the investigation, but if his suspicions were correct, he didn't know what he was going to do about it. Still, he had to find out the truth. He had to hear from Margie's mouth if she was at the cabin that day. They still didn't have enough evidence to prove anything, but it all added up.

Melody answered the door, her eyes red and puffy.

"Come in." She sounded resigned as she held the door open.

"Mom's taken a drastic turn for the worse. The doctor said it won't be long now." She stood in the living room, her arms wrapped around her middle as she stared at Margie, lying in a hospital bed that had been set up near the window. Margie's breathing was shallow, her paper-thin skin as white as the sheets that were tucked around her.

Sam glanced at Jo. They wouldn't be getting a confession out of Margie now.

"I'm real sorry about that," Sam said.

Brian sat in the chair beside Margie, holding her frail hand. He nodded briefly at Sam and Jo and then moved his attention back to his mother.

Sam felt like an interloper. They had no business being there, even if it was part of their investigation.

"So have you found out what happened to my dad?" Melody asked.

"We're making progress. We just wanted to come and ask your mom a few questions, but..." Sam's voice drifted off. "We'll leave you alone now." He turned toward the door.

"Oh, wait..." Melody crossed the room to a small table and picked up a lilac-colored envelope. She handed it to Sam. His name was scrawled in shaky letters on the front.

"What's this?"

"Mom wrote it yesterday in one of her more lucid moments. She sealed it and made me swear not to look inside. Said if you came by to give it to you and for you to read it here."

Melody stepped back to her mother's side as Sam slid his finger under the flaps of the envelope. He pulled out a letter on matching lavender paper, written in the same shaky hand as his name on the envelope.

Jo looked over his shoulder as he read it.

CHIEF MASON,

YOU MIGHT HAVE ALREADY FIGURED *this out. If not, I fear you are close. I know my time is near, and it won't do any harm to tell the truth. I want you to know for sure so you don't blame either of my kids... but maybe you'll take heart on a dying woman and not tell them. I don't want them to remember me as a monster.*

I was the one that killed Mike. But the bastard deserved it. I knew about his affair with Judy Kendler all those years ago. But with two kids of my own, I chose to look the other way. And when she left town, I thought it was all in the past. Even when she returned a few years ago, I didn't catch on about her son.

But then shortly after she died, Mike started to act strange. Sneaking around. And that's when I noticed some of the family silver and flow blue china was missing. So I followed him one day and saw him meeting with that boy and giving him money. That's when I knew what he was up to.

I didn't have the time or energy to fight about it, but I figured Mike would try to include Tommy in everything, and I had to do something to protect my children's inheritance.

So I followed Mike to the cabin that night, and I shot the bastard with his own gun. Then I put the gun under him so it would look like he shot himself. Why couldn't you have just believed my suicide story? It would have been better for all if you had. But now that you seem hell bent on investigating, I'm afraid you might misinterpret the clues and accuse

Melody or Brian. So I leave you with this confession. It's up to you what you do with it.

SINCERELY,

MARGIE DONNELLY

SAM WAS HOLDING the confession for Mike Donnelly's murder in his hand, but it didn't make him feel as if justice had been served. What was he going to do now? Arrest a dying woman?

He glanced up at Melody and Brian, bending over their mother, their faces creased with grief. Neither one of them had had anything to do with this, and apparently, neither one of them knew about Tommy. What good would come of making it known that their mother had killed their father? It would only add to their despair. Harry's words about choosing between justice and doing the right thing came back to him. Mike's killer was getting a worse punishment than any normal course of justice would bring.

Melody looked up at him, her brows tugging together. "What was in the letter? Anything important?"

Sam tapped the letter against his leg. He glanced at Jo. They didn't need to exchange words. He knew she was totally on board with what he was about to do. "Kind of. It lays to rest some of the questions we had about your father's death."

Brian jerked his head up. "You know who did it?"

"Well, that's the thing. Turns out your mom was right in the first place. She said your dad was very upset about her prognosis. But because the vultures had contaminated the crime scene, we got some of the evidence wrong. Nobody killed your dad. He killed himself."

The looks of relief on their faces were worth it. They'd already come to terms with their father's death, and having it be ruled a suicide as opposed to murder was actually much easier for them to deal with now, especially when the murderer was their own mother. Sam didn't know what he was going to do to persuade the medical examiner to look at the evidence in such a way that it could be ruled a suicide. It wasn't as if they had evidence to the contrary--it was simply that the vulture damage had made it

impossible to get the evidence they needed to prove it was a suicide. Sam knew he could finagle things to get the verdict he needed.

Margie sighed. Her eyes fluttered but didn't open. It was as if it were a sign that Sam had done the right thing. Sam and Jo turned toward the door. "We'll leave you alone now. Sorry for your losses."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Three days later...

HOLY SPIRITS WAS CROWDED for a Monday night. Sam and Jo sat at the bar and ordered the usual.

"Here's to a job well done." Sam tipped his beer bottle toward Jo's, and they clanked the rims together.

Sam had managed to complete the investigation in a way that proved it was a suicide. He had the vultures to thank for that. They'd damaged the body in such a way that any of the usual indications that it was suicide, such as angle of entry and powder on the hands, were inconclusive. Since Sam's investigation hadn't turned up anyone that had means, motive, and opportunity, no one argued when the case was closed as a suicide.

Margie had died the day before, and Sam doubted anyone would have even believed she could have made it out to the cabin, much less shot her husband, even if he'd tried to bring a case against her.

"It's all working out for the best." Jo nodded toward the table in the corner where Tommy was hesitantly approaching Melody and Brian. There was a short, awkward conversation, and then Melody stood and pulled Tommy into a hug, Brian stood and shook his hand, then the three of them sat down at the table.

"They lost two parents so close, but they gained a brother," Sam said.

Kevin slid into a chair next to Sam. He was also watching the Donnelly table. "Isn't that the kid that Mike Donnelly was giving money to sitting

with his other kids?"

"Yep," Sam said.

"How did they know about him? I thought you weren't going to say anything," Kevin said.

"Didn't have to." Sam took a sip of beer and swung back around to face the bar. "Turns out Melody already knew about him. She'd seen the china at the antique store and knew her father was up to something. She followed him and saw him meeting Tommy. She knew who Tommy was. She was fifteen when Mike had the affair with Judy, and that was plenty old enough to know what was going on."

"Huh." Kevin looked over his shoulder, and Sam followed his gaze. The three of them were laughing, and the sight warmed Sam's heart.

Kevin frowned. "Wait a minute. Then she might have had a good reason to kill her father. And we know she lied about being at the pharmacy..."

"True," Sam said. He and Jo had burned Margie's confession letter after they'd left the Donnellys' that day. Neither of them had any intention of telling anyone else about it. "But it turns out she had an alibi. She was the one that was knocking on Brian's door the night Mike was shot. She'd just figured out what was going on with Tommy and went to Brian's to tell him. Turns out one of the nosey neighbors saw her and can verify."

"That's why she acted so funny when we asked about their whereabouts and Brian lied about being home. She knew he wasn't there because she'd been knocking on his door. She had no idea about the AA meeting, so she made up the story about seeing him from the pharmacy to protect him," Jo added.

"Wow, I guess sometimes family really does stick together." Kevin finished his beer and stood. "Well, gotta get home. See you guys tomorrow."

The sound of rustling paper came from Jo's direction as Sam watched Kevin walk away. He turned to see her staring at some kind of pamphlet. "What is that?"

She held the front up to reveal a black-and-white picture of a rectangular fish tank. "Finn's getting a little cramped in his fish bowl, and the guy at the pet store said that a regular tank with a filter would be much healthier for him, so I bought him this tank a few days ago. Gotta figure out how to set it up. Maybe I can even get him a few friends."

"So Finn's putting down roots. Gonna be staying a while?" Sam looked at Jo carefully. Though she'd been here for four years, he'd always sensed that she might pick up and leave at any time. The thought made him feel empty, and he realized for the first time how important she'd become to him. And not just at work, either.

"Yeah, well, if I can figure this out. There's a lot to it, with gravel and filters and some kind of water cycling thing you have to do." Jo flipped through the pages. The pamphlet was thick with instructions.

"Maybe I could come over and help you out. I could bring Lucy and introduce her to Finn." Sam said it casually, even though his pulse was racing. He and Jo didn't usually hang out at each other's houses. Their social activities were usually confined to having a beer after work at Holy Spirits. He sensed that going over to her house to help her set up the tank would be a step in another direction. Or was he making too much of it? It was just setting up a fish tank, for crying out loud.

Jo kept staring at the pamphlet. Was she avoiding eye contact?

"That would be great," she said.

She looked over the top of the pamphlet at the Donnelly table. The three of them were laughing and enjoying themselves. Jo smiled. "Sometimes something good can come from something bad."

Sam glanced over. "Yeah..." Something beyond the table caught Sam's eye. Someone walking into the bar with an arrogant swagger. Someone he didn't want to see. Thorne. "Oh shit."

"What?" Jo's eyes narrowed, then she made a face when she saw Thorne. "Oh."

Thorne came straight to the bar and pushed his way in between them, facing Sam and with his back to Jo. Sam imagined Jo was probably relieved not to have to talk to him. He was standing too close for comfort, and Sam could smell sickly spicy aftershave.

"I have something you might want to see, Mason," Thorne said in a low voice as he leaned even closer and pulled a plastic bag out of his front pocket.

Sam's eyes fell on the bag that Thorne was dangling in front of him. A jolt of shock nearly knocked him off his chair as the bar lighting glinted off the stainless-steel pocketknife. He recognized it as Mick's knife, one he'd lost a long time ago. But how had Thorne ended up with it, and what was that dark stain on the side?

His eyes flicked up to Thorne's. Dark and beady with a smug hint of superiority. Thorne had been shielding the knife from view of anyone else. "That's right. You recognize that, don't you? That's the knife you and your friend used years ago. The knife that might reopen a murder investigation. So, if I were you, I'd think twice about harassing me, and back off on Dupont while you're at it. He and I have big plans for this town."

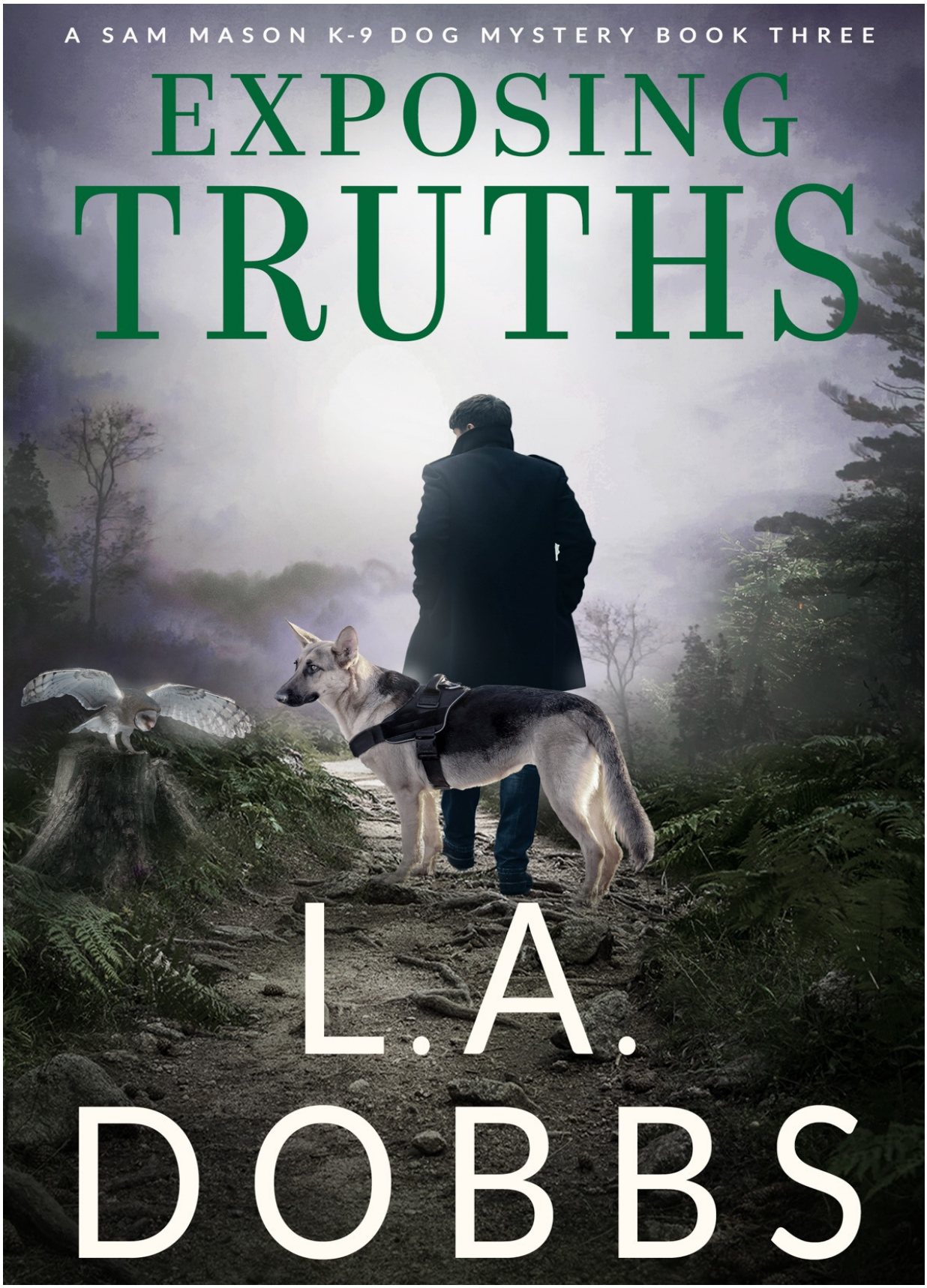
Thorne shoved the knife back into his pocket, spun, and walked out just as quickly as he'd come in, leaving Sam staring out into the bar with a sinking sensation in his stomach.

"What was that about?" Jo asked.

"Nothing, just Thorne and his usual hot air. Nothing to worry about." Sam faked a smile but avoided Jo's eyes. He was afraid that if he looked at her, she'd know he was lying. Because despite his dismissive words, deep down inside, Sam was very, very worried.

A SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERY BOOK THREE

EXPOSING TRUTHS



L.A. DOBBS

CHAPTER ONE

The body lay face-up, staring sightlessly through the canopy of lush summer leaves at the cloudless turquoise sky. The pale skin was marred by a stream of tiny black ants that marched from the woods in two thin lines — one coming and one going. But that wasn't the strangest thing about it. The strangest thing was the reason for the ants. A yellow goo that had run over the nose and down the cheeks, now caked dry and cracked.

The goo looked vaguely familiar, but in all his years as chief of police of the northern New Hampshire town of White Rock, Sam Mason hadn't seen a body with yellow, crusty ant-attracting goo on its face. He guessed there was a first time for everything.

He squatted down beside his K-9 German Shepherd mix, Lucy. The smell of wet leaves and mildew rose from the ground as he carefully brushed the ants from the face.

Lucy sniffed, then looked up at Sam with her whiskey-brown eyes.

"What do you think it is?" he asked her.

Lucy sniffed again and wagged her tail once, uncertainly.

Jody Harris, his sergeant and right-hand colleague, stood on the other side of him. She bent to peer over his shoulder at the body.

"Looks like egg," Jo said.

Sam frowned as twenty-two-year-old images of his daughters' egg-encrusted bibs floated to mind. Now he knew why the goo looked so familiar. It *was* egg.

Sam glanced up into the trees, where a few tufted titmice and blue jays flittered around. Those birds didn't have eggs big enough to produce what

was on the victim's face. But other birds nested in this area. Rare birds. Protected birds. And their eggs were big enough.

About a month ago, someone had discovered a colony of Great Bearded Owls in these woods. The discovery of the birds, which were thought extinct, had attracted all kinds of environmentalists, journalists and photographers to the area. They traipsed in and out of these woods now commonly referred to as "the owl zone." The influx of people had been a nuisance in the small town, especially with the police force understaffed after the mysterious death of Officer Tyler Richardson.

Sam again glanced up into the trees, but he knew he wouldn't see one of the owls. They were nocturnal.

"Owl eggs?" he asked.

"Not sure." Jo squinted at the face again, her wide gray eyes taking in every detail. "Who do you think he is? I don't know him from town. I guess that's his truck out on the road. Didn't recognize that either."

"Probably one of the environmentalists." Sam stood and walked slowly around the body. "I think I recognize him from Holy Spirits."

Holy Spirits, a bar in town, had been converted from a decommissioned church. A hangout for locals, tourists would often find their way there, as it boasted the best burger in Coos County.

It was hard to tell, what with the egg and the ants all over the face, and the bloating, but Sam thought he recognized the corpse as one of the newcomers who had turned up since the discovery of the owls. And if his memory served him correctly, this guy was one of the more boisterous who routinely got into fights.

Had one of those fights ended in murder? The environmentalists were at odds with some of the locals, and with good reason. But how did he get out here? Most of the fights were fueled by alcohol, and Sam thought that would have happened in town. There was no evidence of drinking near the body, no crushed beer cans, no half-empty bottles.

"Where are the shells?" Sam asked as he slowly made his way around the body.

Jo tilted her head to look at the ground. "Good question."

Sam looked up in the trees again. "It couldn't have just fallen out of a nest, right?"

"If it had, the shells would be here." Jo looked around the woods. "Unless an animal ate them or took them."

The sound of voices pulled their attention away, and they turned to see Officer Kevin Deckard trudging through the woods alongside the medical examiner, John Dudley.

"Could you get any further out?" John asked, an exasperated look on his face. He didn't like having to travel this far to examine the body.

"Sorry, John. This is where we found him," Sam said.

John grunted while squatting beside the body. Setting his black case on the ground beside him, he pulled on latex gloves and started his cursory examination.

Kevin started photographing. Jo had already set out the yellow police markers, and Kevin started there, progressing inward to take photos immediately around the body.

"Looks like he was bludgeoned to death," John said, pointing to what was left of the back of the victim's skull after turning the head by the chin with his gloved hand.

"And looks like this is the murder weapon." Kevin squatted near a thick branch about the size of a baseball bat that lay about ten feet from the body. "Killer didn't try very hard to hide it."

"Probably knew the bark was too rough and deeply grooved to hold a fingerprint," Jo said.

"Yeah, but I guess he didn't know we might be able to find some trace DNA on it," Kevin said as he snapped photos of the branch.

"Someone must've been mad at him to swing that hard enough to kill," Jo said.

"Or he came across something he shouldn't have seen and someone had to silence him," Sam suggested.

Kevin spread his arms. "What could he possibly have seen out here?"

"Who knows what goes on out in these woods." Sam gazed into the trees, looking for evidence of anything out of place. What could be going on out here?

He didn't see anything that indicated that it was a party spot or any other type of spot for the town teens, or any other type of spot for that matter. It was just woods. Empty woods that held endangered owls and were, therefore, now a protected area.

Sam's eyes scanned to the west, where he could barely make out the skeleton of the new nine-story hotel real estate developer Lucas Thorne was constructing. Thorne had come to town a few years earlier, and had

developed a second career as a thorn in Sam's side ever since. Not only did Sam dislike the fact that he was buying up parcels of land and ruining the pristine New Hampshire mountains and landscape with his hotels, golf courses and restaurants, but he also suspected Thorne might be responsible for the influx of drugs that had caused the crime rate to rise in town.

"Thorne's land abuts this parcel," Sam said.

Jo followed his gaze and nodded. "Yep. That's his big, ugly hotel." Jo shared Sam's dislike for the new construction.

"But this isn't his land here," Sam said.

"No." Jo flipped through her notepad. "This land belongs to Jackson Pressler. His son called in the body. Said he found it while he was out walking his coonhound."

Jackson Pressler, one of the town's old-timers, owned acres of land. Family land from back in the day when it was cheap to buy up here. Now the old-timers were dying off, and their heirs sold the acres to Thorne. Sam guessed in another ten years he might be chief of a small city.

"How does Jackson feel about this owl protection?" Sam asked.

Jo shrugged. "No idea."

"I do," Kevin said from his position squatting on the ground, where he was taking photos of the ants. "He actually likes it. He doesn't want his land developed. He'd never sell to Thorne, so he's all for it being protected."

"So he wouldn't kill environmentalists for trespassing on it?" Sam asked.

Kevin pressed his lips together. "I don't know about that. You know how ornery these old-timers can get."

"Yeah, but Jackson's the type who would own up to it," Sam said.

John snorted. "He might even be proud of it."

While they processed the body, Sam led Lucy around the crime scene. She didn't need to be on a leash. She knew to stay close to him. As they walked the perimeter, Sam thought about the egg.

Bobcat, lynx, raccoon, coyote, skunk, and bear all inhabited the northern New Hampshire forest. These predators ate all kinds of livestock. Many of them loved eggs, but Sam had never known them to eat the shells. Maybe the eggshells had been tossed away from the body. But what was an egg doing there in the first place?

As he walked with Lucy, his eyes scanned the ground looking for bits of shell, animal scat or anything that simply shouldn't be there.

“Find anything?” Jo had come to stand beside him.

Sam shook his head.

“What do you make of the egg?” Jo asked.

“I doubt it just fell out of a tree and smashed on his face. Did John find any shell under the body?”

Jo shook her head.

“So that leaves one explanation. The egg was cracked on his face on purpose. It’s a message,” Sam said.

They both looked toward the hotel skeleton in the distance.

Jo’s gray eyes assessed him over the tops of her polarized Oakley Standard Issue sunglasses. “You think it was Thorne? Why would he want to kill an environmentalist?”

Sam shrugged. “No one knows how many of these owls are really here or the range of their territory. And you know how these environmentalists are, always pushing to expand the protected area. Thorne’s land is close. Maybe he wanted to make sure the protected area didn’t get any closer.”

“And where is the egg shell?” Jo asked.

“Maybe the killer realized we could get a print off it,” Sam said. “Though I doubt Thorne has thugs that smart.”

Jo thought for a minute. “Maybe it was our graffiti artist.”

When the environmentalists had flocked to town several weeks earlier, someone had seen fit to spray-paint “Save the Owls” in fluorescent orange on the side of one of Thorne’s existing hotels. They were still looking for the painter.

Thorne had not been happy about the graffiti. Neither had Sam. Though he agreed about saving the owls, the three-foot-tall letters on the side of the hotel just outside of town gave off a city vibe he didn’t want to encourage.

“You mean you think Thorne took revenge for the vandalism?” Sam asked. “Nah, that’s not his style.”

“Are we going to talk to him?” Jo asked.

“I am. *You’re* going to go back to the station to find out who our victim is.” Sam whistled for Lucy, who trotted to his side, and headed down the path toward his truck, feeling the weight of Jo’s eyes on his back.

He knew she was disappointed that she wasn’t coming along. Sam and Jo had worked closely for four years, interviewing suspects together, talking over cases together, and solving cases together. But now things were different.

Sam’s stomach sank. He didn’t want to lose her trust. It made him feel empty and lonely. Even though their relationship was strictly business, Jo had become much more than a partner. But he couldn’t let her come along to talk to Thorne. Not now.

He didn’t trust Thorne not to spill what he’d discovered about Sam’s past, and he couldn’t burden Jo with it. Not yet, anyway.

CHAPTER TWO

Jo watched Sam and Lucy walk away, her eyes narrowed behind the dark lenses of her Oakleys. There was something off with Sam, and it had been that way for a while now.

Lucy turned to look at her as if asking if Jo was coming. Jo's heart tugged as she shook her head. Lucy turned around, trotting obediently beside Sam. Jo's stomach sank, and she realized she'd done the one thing she vowed she would never do. She'd gotten attached.

Whether the empty feeling was for Lucy or Sam she couldn't quite tell. She and Sam were friends, colleagues, and nothing more. But they'd shared so much on their cases it felt like a punch in the gut that he didn't include her now. She thought she had an idea why.

His distancing had started a month or so earlier, after they'd closed their last case. They'd been celebrating in Holy Spirits when Thorne had come in. That itself was unusual, because Thorne didn't usually deign to lower himself to hang around the local watering hole. He'd talked in hushed tones to Sam with his back to her, edging her out of the conversation, but Jo had caught enough to know that Thorne was discussing something serious. It almost seemed as if he had something in his pocket that he'd taken out and shown Sam. Jo had no idea what it was; she hadn't been able to see around his back, but Sam's attitude toward her had changed shortly after that.

What could Thorne possibly have that could make Sam act differently? If Jo had to guess she'd say Thorne had threatened him somehow, but Sam wasn't easily threatened. And, if Thorne did have something on him, why wouldn't Sam tell her about it?

Maybe Sam had a secret, the proverbial skeleton in the closet, but who didn't? Jo had her own skeletons. She should stick to her own problems rather than try to figure out Sam's. But the thing that hurt the most was that she thought Sam trusted her enough to tell her if Thorne was threatening to expose one of his secrets. Maybe she'd been wrong about that. Then again, she hadn't trusted Sam with her darkest secrets, so why should he trust her?

A dark shadow crossed the ground in front of her, causing her to look up. Turkey vultures. Didn't take them long to find a dead body, be it human or animal.

Jo walked back to the crime scene. The emergency medical technicians had arrived to take the body away. Kevin was just putting his camera equipment in the carry case.

He turned a quizzical look to her. "You're not going with Sam?"

Jo shrugged. "Nah, I'm going back to the station. Can you give me a ride?"

Kevin hefted the camera bag onto his shoulder. "Sure."

They walked the path together, waving away the bugs that were always present in the sticky humidity of summer. Jo pushed the bill of her navy ball cap with the white WRPD letters up and swiped sweat from her forehead. It was going to be a hot one today. She stuffed the hat back down and tucked in a few stray auburn curls that escaped from the sides.

"So what do you think?" Kevin asked as they approached the Crown Victoria. The car was one of two police cars the department owned. The other was an old Tahoe that Sam had bought cheap and had painted navy and white with the police insignia on the side. "You think the victim was one of those environmentalists?"

"Probably. He's not a townie," Jo said.

Kevin slung his camera equipment into the backseat, and they both got in the car. He started the engine and pulled out, casting sideways glances at Jo.

She caught him and turned to him. "What?"

"Nothing." Kevin turned his head quickly forward. "I mean … I was just wondering, you know, about Tyler."

Jo shifted in her seat, nervous at the question about her former colleague. "What about him?"

"Well, it's just that his case is still open and..." Kevin let his words drift.

Tyler Richardson, an officer in the White Rock Police Department, had been killed earlier in the summer. At first it appeared as if he'd been shot at a routine stop pulling over to help someone change a flat tire. But that was before things turned strange.

Tyler's murder gutted Jo. She'd worked closely with Tyler. He was a good man. Even though at the age of twenty-eight he was ten years her junior, they'd been good friends. And Tyler was a kind soul, putting most of his earnings toward his disabled sister's medical bills. He was a good guy. Or so she'd thought.

That was before they'd discovered a key under his desk and a large deposit in his bank account. Now she wasn't so sure about Tyler.

To make matters even more curious, the county sheriff and state police had taken over the investigation, claiming that Jo and Sam couldn't be objective. But they'd found nothing. Some of the reason for that might have been Jo's fault. She'd forged the entry in Tyler's log to record the stop. She'd done it so that it wouldn't appear as though Tyler had screwed up. She didn't want his name tarnished.

The rules were that they either called every stop in as soon as they stopped a car, or they recorded the stop in the log. Tyler's stop had been in the middle of the night. No one was manning the desk to take a call from him, so he was supposed to record the stop in the log. But it wasn't unusual to put off logging the stop until later, when they returned to the station. They all did it. But Tyler never got back to the station.

Jo didn't want it to look as if Tyler hadn't followed the rules. But maybe if she hadn't covered for him, the investigators might have found something.

Even though Sam and Jo weren't officially investigating Tyler's shooting, they'd still looked into it. One didn't just let the case of a fallen colleague drop. They hadn't found much either.

Jo looked out the side window at the passing scenery. Vibrant green fields dotted with colorful flowers gave way to layers of indigo mountains that reached into the azure sky in the distance.

"There have been no further clues," Jo said. The official clues were a stolen car left at the scene with a dusting of cocaine in the ashtray and a partial fingerprint that had never been matched. Jo and Sam had never told anyone about the key or the money.

Kevin stared at her for a few seconds before he turned his eyes back to the road. “Okay. Well, like I said, if you need any help, I’d be happy to.”

Kevin had offered to help them before, but Sam and Jo had figured it was best to keep things between the two of them. They weren’t supposed to be working the case at all, so the fewer people who knew, the better. Besides, neither one of them had clicked with Kevin like they had with each other and Tyler. Jo figured that had a lot to do with the fact that Kevin worked only part time, and as such took the minor calls, while Jo, Sam and Tyler investigated the larger crimes. But now that Sam seemed to be avoiding furthering the investigation, maybe she should ask Kevin for help.

Jo shifted in her seat to look at Kevin. There was something off about him. He seemed too eager to fit in. Or was it something else? And it was strange that he hadn’t accepted the full-time position when it had been offered to him. Who could afford to live on a part-time salary? There were so many unanswered questions in Tyler’s investigation that maybe it was best to keep things the way they were.

Jo shrugged. “Thanks. I’ll let you know if anything opens up that we can look into. Right now, I guess the case has gone cold.”

CHAPTER THREE

Sam pulled up in front of the construction trailer. Thorne's red Cadillac was parked off to the side. Thorne was here, and no better time than the present to talk to him. Sam would've liked nothing better than to pin this murder on Thorne, but somehow he doubted that would happen. It was too obvious. Still, he had to do his job and talk to him.

He killed the Tahoe's engine and pulled the keys from the ignition. In the passenger seat beside him Lucy's eyes flicked from the red Cadillac to the trailer.

She whined.

"Yeah, bad guy inside." Even a dog was smart enough to recognize that Thorne was bad news. Sam reached out and ruffled the fur on the back of her head. The soft silkiness on his fingertips comforted him. Lucy had been part of the police force for only a few months. They'd taken her on after she'd kept cropping up during another murder investigation. She'd been a stray then, with a keen nose for detective work. They'd finagled a K-9 grant and taken her on full time. She'd worked by Sam's side every day and gone home with him every night since. Now he couldn't imagine running the department without her.

"You stay here, girl." Sam opened the Tahoe door and stretched his long legs to the ground. His black police boots kicked up dirt as he stalked up to the trailer. Lucy watched him protectively as he climbed the rickety wooden steps.

Sam had avoided Thorne since the incident at Holy Spirits, when Thorne had let him know that he had something on him from his past. Sam

wasn't afraid of Thorne, not for himself. But he was afraid for his best friend, Mick Gervasi. The bloodstained knife that had somehow found its way into Thorne's possession had belonged to Mick, but Sam hadn't seen that knife in more than twenty years. And the last time he'd seen it was a time he preferred not to think about.

How had Thorne come to possess the knife? As far as Sam knew, Thorne had nothing to do with the incident twenty years ago. He wasn't even from the area. But Sam knew someone who might have had something to do with it: Mayor Harley Dupont. And the fact that Thorne now had the knife only confirmed Sam's suspicions that Thorne had Dupont in his pocket.

Dupont had monopolized every town meeting, swaying votes so as to help further Thorne's agenda. Despite the fact that most residents didn't want the construction to continue, somehow main areas of the town were being rezoned for commercial use. And whenever Sam needed a search warrant in conjunction with any of the drug running that he suspected happened under Thorne's command, Dupont managed to do something to stand in his way. Sam was sure Dupont was getting money from Thorne. How else would he be able to afford those expensive commercials he ran in advance of next year's mayoral election?

But now that Thorne had the knife, Sam had to tread carefully. He had no idea if Thorne or Dupont knew its significance, but he suspected they did. And if they knew the truth about what happened twenty years ago, it could mean a whole lot of serious trouble for both Mick and Sam.

Sam couldn't let his personal problems get in the way. He rapped hard on the thin metal door and then opened it without being invited in.

The inside of the trailer was more like a luxury suite at a four-star hotel than a utilitarian construction trailer. Thick, plush carpet in a rich jewel tone covered the floor. Mahogany bookcases lined one of the walls that were painted in a trendy muted gray. In the middle was a mammoth mahogany desk. Behind it sat Lucas Thorne, looking tanned and healthy. He wore a white button-down shirt and dress slacks. Odd attire for a construction site.

Thorne looked up sharply, and Sam thought he noticed a flicker of annoyance in his eyes, probably outraged that someone would dare enter the trailer without invitation. Then he recognized Sam, and his mouth quirked into an ugly smirk.

“What brings you here, Chief? Can’t be to harass me, as I’m sure you’re not that dumb,” Thorne said.

Sam took his time in answering. He sat in the chair across from Thorne and leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs. “I just have a few questions.”

Thorne leaned back, his chair creaking as he settled in, steepling his fingers over the ten pounds of extra padding on his belly. “Really? As far as I know, all my permits are in order.”

“It’s not about permits. It’s about murder.”

“Murder? I don’t know anything about any murder.” Thorne frowned.

“Just discovered this morning. Over in that land right next to yours.” Sam pointed in the direction of the protected area.

“On my land?” Thorne asked.

“Nope, over on Jackson Pressler’s land.”

“So, what’s it got to do with me?” Thorne asked.

“Maybe nothing. I was just wondering if you heard or saw anything, being so close to that land. You know it’s protected because of the owls, right?” Sam asked.

“Oh sure,” Thorne said. “Those cute little furry owls. I love their faces with their big eyes. Don’t you? Good thing they’re protected. I’m all for that.”

“You don’t say? I would have thought maybe it might make you a little nervous to have an endangered species so close to your property.”

“Why’s that?”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe you don’t want the protected area to be expanded and interrupt your building plans.”

Thorne tilted forward in his chair, his feet slapping onto the floor. He leaned his arms on his desk and played with the gold penholder that sat on the corner, turning it slowly clockwise as he spoke. “So you think I’d kill someone for that?”

“Well, I don’t think you’d actually do the killing,” Sam said.

Thorne laughed. “You think I’d have someone killed because my construction was threatened? I’ve got plenty of land. And connections. Do you really think I’m stupid?”

Actually Sam didn’t think Thorne was stupid at all. Ruthless. Greedy. Conniving. But not stupid.

“No, I suppose not. But if you hear anything about it or if any of your crew heard or saw anything, let me know.” Sam stood up.

Thorne's lips spread in a Cheshire cat smile. "Sure thing, Chief. Now that's what I like to hear from you. Cooperation. See, you and me could be on the same side someday."

Sam opened the door. Without looking back at Thorne he said, "I wouldn't hold my breath on that."

BECAUSE IT WAS on the way to the station, Sam decided to swing by Jackson Pressler's to see if he'd heard anything the night before. This time he let Lucy out of the Tahoe.

Jackson's place was a century-old house that had once been a cottage and now featured so many additions built on over the generations that it couldn't be classified as any particular style. It sat in a clearing, giant oaks shadowing the house and long driveway.

The random angles and jutting, mismatched additions weren't the only unusual quality about the property. Dotted along the driveway and all along the front of the house, sculptures derived from old boards, rusted metal, discarded tires and other junk dominated the property. Jackson couldn't stand to see anything go to waste, so he'd started collecting cast-off items and fashioning them into sculptures. Right now he was working on a giant horse made from old aluminum garbage cans, rusted rebar — some with globs of cement still clinging to them — and various odds and ends. Sam thought he saw an old fishing reel in the mix, and a muffler.

Jackson stopped his work, turning down the flame on the acetylene torch, and watched as Sam parked his Tahoe before getting out and approaching.

"Howdy." Jackson held his hand out for Lucy, who sniffed tentatively, then, upon deciding that Jackson was a friend, moved in closer. Jackson petted her head for a few minutes before slowly rising, his knees popping as he used the sculpture for leverage.

"Hey, Sam. Is something wrong?" A tinge of worry clouded his gray eyes.

"Nothing that affects you. But someone was murdered up near the owl zone last night, and I wondered if you'd heard anything."

Jackson's eyes widened. "Murdered? My boy said he found someone, but I didn't know it was murder. Who?"

"One of the environmental activists, I think."

Jackson nodded slowly, watching Lucy as she sniffed her way around the sculpture. "Well, that's a darn shame. I figured Thorne would do something."

"You think Thorne murdered him?"

"Well, he's building up there. His construction is impacting those owls, and you know the environmentalists have had it out with him a few times."

"Killing one guy won't help that," Sam pointed out. "It's not going to make the owls go away — or the environmentalists for that matter."

Jackson pressed his lips together. "I suppose not. I didn't hear anything, though. The zone is a bit far from my place, and I don't hear so well these days."

"Heard any rumors of trouble up there?" Sam asked.

"Trouble? Nah."

"You don't mind all those people traipsing around back there on your land?"

"Mind? No. I welcome it. Can't use that land myself, and I'm proud to host those owls. It's an honor to have something that the world thought was gone forever right in your back yard. In fact, that's why I'm applying for a grant. To protect those owls and make sure they're here for my grandchildren."

"A grant?" Sam asked.

"Yep. I'm going to make an owl sanctuary. Protect the lands for them and make sure they have what they need to flourish. Maybe I can even get Thorne shut down." Jackson winked at Sam. "You think that would work?"

Sam glanced north toward Thorne's hotel site. You couldn't see it from Jackson's house, but it loomed there in the distance. Sam wished an owl sanctuary would rid the town of Thorne, but he didn't think it would. "If only it could be that easy."

CHAPTER FOUR

Jo pushed one of the double oak doors open and held it for Kevin, who preceded her into the White Rock Police Station lobby.

As in most small towns, the White Rock Police Station didn't have the luxury of a fancy new building. The department was housed in the old post office. Apparently the U.S. Postal Service rated higher, because it got the new building.

The building dated to the 1930s and had somehow managed to retain all of its original charm, from the black-and-white marble floors to the original oak moldings with carved details. It still smelled of old paper and stamp glue, a welcome improvement over the musty basement of the town hall where the police station used to reside.

The postal workers had left behind their old furniture, which was just fine with Jo. She'd take the antique mission oak-style desks and chairs over the new plastic and metal crap any day.

The lobby was spacious, the only piece of furniture a large desk behind which sat their receptionist trainee, Reese Hordon. Still attending the police academy, Reese was a good kid who was a fast learner and not afraid to bend the rules when they needed bending. Jo liked her, especially when she brought jelly doughnuts from the local coffee shop, Brewed Awakening. She'd done that this morning, judging by the white bag that sat on the edge of her desk and the blob of jelly resting on the corner of her lips.

"Hey," Reese greeted them.

Jo pointed to the right corner of her lips. Reese gave her a funny look, then grabbed a napkin and swiped at the blob as realization dawned. Jo

nodded to indicate she'd gotten it all, but Reese's eyes still held a note of uncertainty. Reese knew they had gone out to investigate a body, but she didn't know whose body it was. Jo figured she'd worry it was someone from town and would want to know what they found.

"It wasn't natural causes." Jo reached into the white bag and took out a sugar-coated doughnut. "We think it was one of the environmentalists."

"Oh?" Reese's gaze drifted past Jo's shoulder out the door. "Where's Lucy?"

Jo started toward the K-cup coffee machine, doughnut in hand, and said over her shoulder, trying to sound casual, "Sam took her when he went to talk to Thorne."

She rounded the line of antique bronze post office boxes with the embossed eagle above the beveled glass windows and twin dials that divided the lobby from the squad room. Hopefully Reese hadn't caught on to the slightly hurt tone in her voice. It was silly to be hurt about Sam not taking her along. It made sense for them to split up, and she was probably reading too much into the way he'd been acting.

"Thorne had something to do with it?" Reese asked.

"Maybe. The body was found not far from the hotel he's building." Jo picked a K-cup and put it in the machine then closed the lid. She pressed the blinking button and listened to the machine gurgle as the coffee poured into her yellow smiley-face cup. "Did any calls come in while we were out?"

"Ruthie Draper claims Bullwinkle ate her prize zinnias and wants a restraining order," Reese said.

Jo snorted. The town moose even had his own Facebook page, where residents posted sightings of him. He was quite a celebrity around town, though Jo thought it was actually more than one moose. As long as the moose population was healthy enough to be seen around town, it was all good with her. Some of the residents weren't too keen on Bullwinkle. He'd even been implicated in a murder last month.

"I suppose I'll have to go out on that call," Kevin said. "But I don't know if I should do that or process these photos."

Jo looked at him over the rim of her cup. "I guess Ruthie can wait. Process the photos now. Murder is more important than flowers."

"We really do need to get that new hire," Kevin said.

Jo glanced at the empty desk in the corner. Tyler's desk. She knew why Sam had been dragging his feet on hiring someone new, but Kevin had a point. It had been several months and dozens of candidates.

"I think Sam has it narrowed down to a few. Maybe I can give him a nudge." Jo sat behind her desk and carefully set the mug on a napkin. Even though the desk was almost one hundred years old and scarred from generations of postal clerks, she didn't want to further the damage.

Jo glanced out the ten-foot-tall, round-topped window beside her. The squad room overlooked the town square. It was a typical northern New England town, most of the buildings dating to the early 20th century. The buildings had been kept up. The brickwork was still neat, the wood trim freshly painted. Some of the stores had been updated with awnings. A lush grass commons held the center of town, the site of municipal celebrations. It was cute. Quaint.

Jo tapped the eraser end of her pencil on her desk as she thought about the case.

"I hope John can figure out who the victim is pretty quick," she said.

"Hopefully there will be fingerprints in the system — or his dental work will tell us. Maybe someone will even come in after noticing that one of their friends is missing," Kevin replied, his eyes still on his computer screen, where he was processing the photos he'd taken at the crime scene.

"Until then, I'll just work up a list of things we should do. Sam's already talking to Thorne, so next I guess we need to talk to Jackson. The body was on his land."

"Ha! Serves you right!" Reese's voice drifted over the post office boxes from the reception area.

"Serves who right?" Jo asked.

"Dupont. Check this out. It's a video someone posted on YouTube about an hour ago." Reese came into the squad room with her laptop in one hand and the bag of doughnuts in the other. She put the bag on Jo's desk before perching in a chair with the laptop on her knees. She turned the screen to face Kevin and Jo.

Jo came out from behind her desk and sat on the edge of it. Kevin scooted his chair over so they could both look at the screen.

Their mayor, Harley Dupont, stood on the granite steps of the town offices with half a dozen microphones pointed at his face. He was becoming a common, if not revolting, sight on television. This time he was giving a

news conference, and Jo was glad it wasn't one of his incessant commercials. She considered Dupont a pompous ass, and the thought of his re-election made Jo grind her teeth. She suspected Thorne's money was backing Dupont, who was a likely shoo-in, especially with no one running against him.

"So what? Dupont's on TV again," Kevin said.

The news conference must have been about the murder. News sure did travel fast. But the town had been under a magnifying glass since the owls had been discovered, and Dupont liked to keep on top of things. Right now he droned on about how safe the town was and that the recent murder was an isolated case.

"Watch." Reese pointed to the screen as something flew from off-screen and landed just below Dupont's lapel.

Splat!

Jo watched as a yellow, gooey blob spread across his chest and dripped down his perfectly tailored charcoal suit coat.

"What was that?" Kevin asked.

"It was an egg." Jo's eyes met Kevin's. "And if we can find out who threw it, we might have our first suspect."

CHAPTER FIVE

Sam pulled up in front of the old brick-faced post office that now served as the police station. It sat in the middle of town, facing a side street that led to Main Street and the town commons. He got out of the Tahoe and opened the passenger door for Lucy, who bounded out toward the granite steps just as his phone chirped in his pocket.

He pulled it out and looked at the display. John Dudley.

"You have something for me already?" Sam asked.

"Yep. The victim was Ray Ingalls. Cause of death, blunt force trauma. Happened about two a.m. The branch we picked up at the scene was the murder weapon. The blood matches." John rattled off the details in the gruff staccato manner to which Sam had become accustomed.

"That was quick. How did you ID him?"

"Easy. Fingerprints were in the database. Turns out your victim was one of those environmental activists who have been hanging around town. His prints were on file from a previous arrest."

Sam paused in front of the large double doors, his hand on the knob, Lucy looking up at him expectantly. "Did that arrest have anything to do with violence?"

"Well, that would be your job to find out. I just figure out what kills them," John said.

Sam turned the knob, and Lucy nosed her way in ahead of him, heading for Reese's desk and stopping short upon finding it unoccupied. She pivoted and raced to the squad room. Sam followed more slowly. "Right. Let me know what else you find."

Sam came around the post office boxes into the squad room where Reese, Jo and Kevin huddled in a semicircle staring down at the screen of a laptop that Kevin had in his lap. Jo sat on the edge of her desk, and Lucy had pressed herself to her side, her head ducking under Jo's hand to demand pets. Jo looked more than happy to oblige.

"There *is* one more thing," John said just as Sam was about to hang up.

"What's that?"

"That goop on his face? Chicken egg."

"Chicken egg?" As Sam said the words into the phone, Reese, Kevin and Jo all jerked their heads in his direction.

"I guess it's a chicken egg. We're not really sure, but what else would it be?" Jo said, removing her hand from the top of Lucy's head and pointing to the laptop screen.

Lucy trotted over to Reese and did the same head-hand butting routine.

"What?" Sam was confused. How did she know he had just been talking to John about chicken eggs?

Jo leaned forward, shoving her finger toward the laptop. "Right here on this video. Isn't that what you were talking about?"

Sam stood behind Kevin's chair as Kevin slid the controls to replay the last part of the video. He was amused to see Mayor Dupont staring at a gooey mess dripping down on his suit coat.

"What's this?" Sam asked.

"Dupont called a news conference. Trying to do damage control about the murder, I guess." Kevin shrugged and dropped his hand from the computer to pet Lucy, who had decided to sit beside his chair. "Apparently not everyone in town is a fan of the mayor, and someone egged him."

"I found it on YouTube," Reese said.

"Isn't that what you were talking about when you came in?" Jo asked.

"No. That was John calling about the victim." Sam told them how the medical examiner had identified the victim, the murder weapon and the goo on his face, and brought them up to speed on his conversations with Thorne and Jackson Pressler.

"We're trying to figure out who threw the egg; figure that could be a lead," Jo said.

Kevin fiddled with the controls, sliding the screen in the direction from which the egg had been thrown, but they could only see the hand throwing the egg. "The rest of the person is off camera. All we've got is this hand."

Reese's pale-blue eyes narrowed, her dark hair slipping over her shoulder as she bent her face close to the screen. "Wait a minute! Zoom in on that." She pointed at the hand.

Kevin zoomed in on the wrist. There was a dark-green mark the size of a quarter on the inside of the wrist. He zoomed closer, and the mark revealed itself as a primitively drawn tattoo of a turtle.

"It's not much, but it could help us identify who threw the egg," Jo said.

"You think that's related to the murder?" Kevin asked.

"Maybe. Kind of a neat coincidence, I'd say. If nothing else, I bet this egg-thrower is one of the environmentalists, so he or she probably knew our victim."

"Speaking of which, we need to find out where this guy was staying. I know a lot of them are camping in the mountains. Wilderness types. Might be hard to find them or his site," Jo said.

"You never know what might be helpful." Sam slapped Kevin on the shoulder. "Can you enlarge that and print it? I think I know just the person who might be able to help us figure out where our victim was staying and who this egg-thrower is."

KEVIN ZOOMED IN EVEN FURTHER on the turtle tattoo. He pressed a button, and the printer whirred to life.

"Are you going to question these activists?" Kevin wondered if Sam would take Jo or maybe this time he'd ask Kevin to go. Kevin rarely got to go with them when they talked to suspects.

Sam nodded and turned toward the printer.

Kevin scooted his chair back to his desk, pulled one of the special dog treats that he drove all the way to the next town for out of his drawer and slipped it to Lucy.

"Ruthie Draper's expecting a visit. She has an issue with Bullwinkle," Reese said.

Sam grabbed the paper from the printer and turned around, his eyes falling on Kevin. "Kevin, your shift is almost over. You go deal with Ruthie and then head out. Jo and I will try to find out where our victim was staying

and who this turtle-tattoo person is. Reese, you see what you can dig up on Ray Ingalls and his associates."

Sam strode toward the door, snapping his fingers. Lucy looked at Kevin's drawer longingly then up at Kevin. When another treat didn't come, she trotted off after Sam.

Jo slid off the corner of her desk and followed Lucy, grabbing her mug and a doughnut out of the bag on her way. Kevin handed the laptop back to Reese. "Guess I better finish up and get out to Ruthie's."

Reese took the laptop and started back toward the lobby. "Yep. I'd better get busy."

Kevin finished uploading the photos he'd taken earlier in the morning. Figures he'd get stuck with all the shit jobs. To be fair, though, Sam couldn't ask him to come along because his shift was ending.

But was the reason he never got in on the bigger investigations because he was a part-timer, or was it because Sam and Jo were working on something on the side that they didn't want him to know about? And why was Sam hesitating on hiring someone new? Was it because he couldn't find the right person, or was it because Sam didn't want another cop around to see what he was up to?

Maybe Kevin's mysterious contact had been right about Sam and Jo all along.

When the uploads finished, Kevin grabbed the keys to his Isuzu from the middle desk drawer. He'd take his own car up to Ruthie Draper's. No sense in driving the Crown Vic if he was going off duty right after.

At least one thing was looking up. Without Tyler, Kevin got to drive the Crown Vic instead of his own car a lot more. When Tyler was around he usually drove it, while Sam and Jo usually took the Tahoe. Kevin had had to drive his personal car.

Kevin glanced at the empty desk in the corner that had been Tyler's. Why hadn't there been any progress in the investigation of his death? Kevin was sure there was something more to it than a random killing, because his mysterious contact had asked questions specifically about the case.

Thoughts of his contact made him uneasy. Just what did the person want? At first Kevin had thought it was some sort of secret Internal Affairs department. He'd felt proud to be asked, but a little suspicious of the secrecy.

The contact insisted he couldn't tell anyone, implying that there was some sort of nefarious activity going on in the department and they needed his help to ferret out the source. He felt good to be working for the good guys, but if that were the case, were Sam and Jo the bad guys?

Kevin said good-bye to Reese and headed out to the side parking lot, clicking his fob and listening to the chirp of his car as it unlocked. The harsh August sun had been beating on the car all day, and the interior was hot enough to bake a quiche.

He blasted the air conditioning, lowered the windows and pulled the visor down to keep the sun from shining through the windshield into his eyes. A tiny piece of paper fluttered out onto his lap.

Despite the heat in the car, Kevin's blood froze. He recognized the message, a cryptic code from his contact. But how had they gotten into the car? The doors were locked.

Kevin didn't know much about the contact. He always met with a different guy — someone he'd never seen before and never saw again. He got the impression the people he met were just messengers and someone big was behind them. Someone who had the capability of getting into a locked car and then re-locking it without the key, and who wasn't afraid to do that in the middle of the day in the police station parking lot.

Whoever it was — possibly the FBI, Kevin hoped — was not to be messed with, and this proved it. The message was not only a note to alert him to a meeting, it also sent another kind of message. One that told him they could get to him even in places where he thought they couldn't.

Did the FBI stick messages in people's locked cars and pay the excessive amounts of money that Kevin had been given to perform these tasks? Something in the dark recesses of Kevin's mind made him wonder if he had been a little too eager to accept these missions. And a little too naive. Then again, if Sam, Jo and Tyler were up to something illegal, shouldn't he do his part and get the information that would prove it?

On the other hand, if they weren't — and so far Kevin hadn't seen any concrete evidence that they were — just what, exactly, was his contact using the information he passed along for?

He stared down at the message. It looked like gibberish, but Kevin knew what it meant. He had to meet the contact behind Lago — an upscale restaurant downtown — at 4:30 p.m. The Dumpster behind the restaurant

was their usual meeting place. It was perfect, because it was at the end of an alley and further secluded by a fenced area.

No one except the kitchen staff went there, and because Kevin's cousin, who worked in the kitchen, was usually the one that went out to the Dumpster, the chances that anyone would see them was nil. Besides, the meetings lasted only long enough for the contact to pass a note and money. If anyone saw Kevin coming or going, he had the perfect excuse. He was visiting his cousin. He'd even had to use that excuse once when Jo had seen him.

Kevin shifted in his seat uneasily. Not for the first time he wondered if he was doing the right thing. Now that Tyler was gone and he'd been putting in some extra hours, he'd gotten new insight into Sam and Jo, and as far as he could tell they weren't doing anything nefarious. But they had been a little secretive, and they hadn't let him in on their investigation into Tyler's death that he knew they were doing on the side. He guessed there wasn't any harm in continuing. He only passed along little tidbits about some of the cases they were working. He'd wait to see what the contact wanted him to do. So far they'd only asked him to keep his eyes and ears open. To pass on bits of information about cases that seemed unimportant to Kevin. And to look for a few things in Tyler's belongings, one of those things he still had in his own possession as a sort of insurance policy in case things went wrong.

Kevin ripped the message into tiny pieces and put a few in the trash bag he kept in his car, stuffing the others in his pocket to throw away at a different location later. Even though no one else could decipher it, one could never be too careful. He started up the Isuzu and drove off toward Ruthie Draper's, a feeling of trepidation squeezing his chest.

CHAPTER SIX

Jo balanced her doughnut on top of her half-full coffee mug in her left hand and opened the door of the Tahoe with her right. Lucy jumped into the passenger seat and settled in.

Jo looked at the dog and jerked her head toward the back seat. "In back."

The sun slanting through the windshield highlighted the gold flecks in Lucy's eyes as they flicked hopefully from Jo to Sam. She didn't budge from the seat.

"Come on." Sam went around to the back and opened the tailgate. Lucy reluctantly jumped from the passenger seat and then into the back of the Tahoe.

Jo settled into the passenger seat and took a bite of the doughnut, a blob of jelly dropping onto her T-shirt as Sam came around to the driver's seat. He started the engine, glanced over and handed her a napkin.

"You thinking what I'm thinking?" Jo asked as she set her mug on the dashboard and swiped at the jelly blob, awkwardly trying to dab at her shirt while holding the doughnut.

Sam smiled that easygoing friendly smile that she recognized from working so many cases together. The smile highlighted his strong jaw and the lines that crinkled out from the corners of his hazel eyes. He wore a black T-shirt, the uniform they all usually wore in the summer, except instead of a jelly stain his showed a broad chest and thick biceps that proved he was still in pretty good shape even though he was pushing forty.

Jo's stomach did a little flip, and she felt the comfort of their close relationship returning. It felt like old times. Maybe she'd been imagining the gap she'd thought had grown between them these past few months.

"Yep," Sam said. "We should talk to Jesse."

That had been exactly what Jo was thinking. Jesse Cowly was a small-time drug dealer and amateur thief that Sam had been grooming as an informant. He'd caught Jesse with pot but hadn't prosecuted him, opting to get on his good side so he could glean information for more important crimes.

It had worked in their favor. Jesse now seemed fairly happy to talk to them whenever they came asking. The added benefit was that because Jesse ran in the fringes of the seedy underground of town, he knew a lot going on that Sam and Jo wouldn't otherwise be privy to. And because he hung around in the bars — especially Holy Spirits, where the environmentalists had made their quasi-headquarters — Jesse probably knew about the victim and his friends.

Jesse wasn't a bad guy. He was in his early twenties and liked to party. And to pay for his parties, he liked to dabble in stolen goods. Nothing too large, car radios, speakers. Nothing wrong with that as far as Jo was concerned. She didn't mind giving him a break on the minor charges because she felt deep down that Jesse was the type who would never turn into a *real* bad guy. He was more the type who liked to skirt the edges of the law. The type who made a great informant.

Jo settled back in her seat. She figured this was as good a time as any to bring up the new hire and Tyler's investigation. She stole a sideways glance at Sam.

"So nothing's come up about Tyler, huh?" She finished off the doughnut, ignored Lucy's whine for the last bite, and wiped the sugar off her fingers with the napkin.

Sam shook his head. "Nope. Were your contacts ever able to figure out where those deposits came from?"

Jo frowned. After Tyler's death, a large sum of money had been deposited into his bank account. Tyler's mother had assumed it was a payment from the police force. Of course, she might have made that assumption because Sam had told her there was a fallen officers fund. There was no such fund. Sam had taken it upon himself to cut Tyler's mother a

check from his own retirement savings. But the twenty-thousand-dollar deposit wasn't part of that.

Sam and Jo couldn't investigate that through official channels. They weren't supposed to be investigating at all. So Jo had a contact from her old job look into it. It had been an untraceable cash deposit. Had Sam been waiting for her to come up with more information on that all this time? Was that why he'd been acting so weird?

"No. They couldn't find anything because it was a cash deposit. It's a dead end for us."

Sam nodded. "Mick's still working the angle with the grandson."

Mick Gervasi, Sam's best friend and a private investigator, often performed some of the work they couldn't do officially. They'd hired Mick to look into a few things in Tyler's case, including the stolen car that had been abandoned at the scene. The car had belonged to an older woman named Barbara Bartles, and Mick had managed to discover that her grandson was a little on the shady side. They'd hoped to tie him to the stolen car, but so far they'd had no luck.

"I still feel like that kid might have something to do with it or know something," Jo said.

"Me too. And so does Mick. That's why he's still on it."

"Plus we haven't exactly had extra time to do any work on it ourselves."

"Yeah. I guess we should get serious about hiring someone to replace Tyler," Sam admitted, giving her the perfect segue into talking about the new hire.

"Yep. Guess so." Jo waited for Sam to continue, but after a few moments of silence she said, "So do you like any of the candidates so far?"

Sam sighed. "I guess there's one that could be a good fit."

"Maybe we should hire him. We might be looking for the perfect candidate that we'll never find, and meanwhile we're spread too thin."

Sam glanced over at her, a look of resignation crossing his face. "You might be right. I guess I've been putting things off because I sort of feel guilty about Tyler's death."

"What do you have to feel guilty about?" Jo asked.

Sam shrugged. "Nothing really. But everyone who works for me is my responsibility. Maybe I should have been the one on duty that night."

Jo's heart twisted. "You can't beat yourself up about that. Things happen. Then again, what happened to him might not have been so

random.”

They lapsed into silence. Jo sipped the rest of the now-lukewarm coffee from her mug as Sam headed toward the less-desirable part of town where Jesse shared a house with his partner in petty crime, Brian Carlson. Even though they rode in silence, it was the comfortable silence of partners who had worked together for years. Jo found herself wondering why she’d ever thought there was a rift between them.

Sam pulled into the driveway of a faded blue run-down 1950s ranch. A few tufts of green grass dotted the dirt patch that was the front yard. Weeds had taken over what once had been a flower bed along the front of the house. A section of screen flapped down from the top corner of the front door.

Jo put her coffee mug in the cup holder in the middle console. The mug was a little too big for the size of the holder, and it tipped to the side. Sam frowned down at it. Jo knew he was probably worried it would tip over. He was always getting on her about that.

“Don’t worry. It’s empty,” Jo said as she opened her door.

They let Lucy out of the back, and the three of them walked to the dirt-smudged front door immersed in the quiet stillness of a hot summer day. A cicada buzzed, bringing attention to the absence of the hard rock that usually blared from inside the house.

“I hope he’s home,” Sam said. “Maybe we should have checked the auto body shop first.”

“We’re here now, let’s see.” Jo knocked on the door, and they waited. After a few seconds the door cracked open and Jesse peeked out.

“Chief Mason.” Jesse opened the door, his concerned gaze flicking from Sam to Jo to Lucy. “Is something wrong?”

“No,” Sam said pleasantly. “We only wanted to ask some questions about those environmental activists in town. Nothing to do with you.”

Sam’s words seemed to set Jesse at ease, and he opened the door and stepped back for them to enter.

Lucy trotted inside and got busy sniffing the furniture, her nose zeroing in on a wooden box on top of the coffee table. Jesse glanced at the box nervously. Jo figured that was where he kept his stash. Maybe Lucy was going to be a good drug dog, too. But they weren’t here for Jesse’s drugs. Not today.

“Do you want to take a seat?” Jesse gestured toward a lumpy couch that had what looked like a pair of dirty socks on one end and a pile of clothes on the other.

“We won’t be staying that long,” Jo said.

Jesse nonchalantly took the box that Lucy still sniffed and tucked it inside one of the doors of the television stand. “What can I do for you?”

“There’s been a murder,” Sam said.

Jesse’s eyes widened. “I thought you said I wasn’t in trouble.”

“You’re not. The victim was one of the environmental activists, Ray Ingalls. I hear he hung around at Holy Spirits. Was wondering if you knew him.”

Jesse pressed his lips together. “Ray Ingalls. Is he that photographer dude? Always talking about the owls? Yeah. Now that I think about it, that was his name. Wow! Who killed him?”

“That’s what we’re trying to find out,” Jo said. “You have any ideas?”

“Me? No. Well, he was kind of abrasive …”

“Abrasive?” Sam asked.

“Yeah, you know, one of those loud and obnoxious guys. Type thinks his shit doesn’t stink. Real pompous. Self-important. He hung around with another guy and a girl mostly. Probably because he was such a dick he didn’t have any other friends.”

Sam took a piece of folded paper from his back pocket. “Did you ever notice anyone with a tattoo like this?”

“Yeah. In fact, one of that photographer dude’s friends has one. Derek something … or was it Dennis? Not exactly sure I remember his name, but I know he has the tattoo because he and Brian got into it a little bit at Holy Spirits the other night. I had to break up the fight.”

“What did they fight about?” Sam asked.

Jesse rolled his eyes. “Brian tossed something in the trash and missed. That guy started blabbing about the environment, and the next thing you know they’re swinging at each other. If you ask me, those environmentalists are strung way too tight.”

“What about Ray Ingalls? Did he ever get into fights?”

Jesse thought for a minute. “I don’t remember any.”

“You said he was a jerk. Did he have enemies?” Jo asked.

“Sure, who doesn’t?”

“What about the guy with the tattoo?”

“Nah, those two were always tight, like I said.”

“What about Thorne and his people? Was there any trouble between the activists and them?” Sam asked.

Jesse’s eyes narrowed. “Thorne? Why would I know about him?”

Sam stepped a little closer to Jesse, and Lucy’s ears perked to attention. She wedged herself between the two men and smiled up at Jesse. With her oversized canines, her smile could be a bit menacing. Jesse looked down at the dog nervously.

“Not Thorne so much, but, you know, his associates who run drugs,” Sam said.

“I don’t know much about the drug trade,” Jesse said.

“Come on, Jesse, we know that you deal sometimes. I only want to know if you heard anything from any of your contacts about Thorne getting nervous because of these activists. The owl protection area is near his construction site. Maybe all these people traipsing around in the woods is putting a damper on his side business.”

Jesse shrugged. “I haven’t heard anything. But now that you mention it, things do seem to be a little slow in that other … um … business.”

Sam stepped back, Lucy relaxed and Jo shifted on her feet.

“So you hadn’t heard anything about the murder?” Jo asked.

Jesse spread his hands. “No idea. Honest.”

“Do you happen to know where any of these people are staying?” Sam asked.

“As a matter of fact I do. Brian was so mad at that guy with the tattoo that he followed him when he left. He was really fuming. Anyway, they were camping near the old fairgrounds down by the fork in the river. There’s a little community of them sprung up down there. Lucky thing I talked Brian out of storming in and doing something. Who needs that trouble?”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Sam drove the Tahoe along the dirt road just off Watson Street, where he knew there was a path that led to the fork in the river. They found an old green Gremlin, a 1970s Dodge Dart, a Zephyr station wagon with woodgrain panels and a fairly new Volkswagen Beetle complete with a daisy in a vase in the console parked in a little pull-off area.

"Looks like they're here," Jo said as she snapped photos of the cars with her phone, angling it to catch the license plates. They got Lucy out of the back and started down the narrow path toward the river. The smell of woodsmoke hung in the air as they threaded their way through the trees. Sam saw colorful swatches of tents through the trunks of the pines and the thick leaves from the oak saplings that grew up through the carpet of pine needles. A black fly buzzed near his ear, and he swatted at it, his hand slapping hard against his sweaty neck.

The campsite looked like any normal campsite, with tents set up in a haphazard ring around a fire pit. Clothes hung on a makeshift clothesline, and coolers sat next to the tents. A portable shower had been set up beside a tree. The rock-ringed fire had a grate on top, a metal kettle sitting atop it. A few people stood around the fire. A few more stood down near the river, and two lounged on cheap plastic folding chairs that faced the mountain view.

When Sam, Jo and Lucy emerged from the woods, they all turned, their faces registering uncertainty and then suspicion.

One man who had been standing around the fire came forward. "We didn't see any 'No trespassing' signs."

“We’re not here about that,” Sam said.

“And we aren’t the ones who spray-painted the side of that hotel,” another man chimed in.

“Not here about that either,” Sam said. “We’re here about Ray Ingalls.”

A short, chubby guy got up from his lounge chair. “What about Ray?”

The man’s voice held a mixture of indignation and concern. His stance radiated confrontation. Sam’s eyes flicked to his wrist, where he saw the turtle tattoo. “You know him?”

“Yeah. So?” The man backed off a little, more uncertain than confrontational now.

“Do you know where he was last night?” Sam asked.

“What’s it to you?” The other campers had come forward to stand in a loose semicircle in front of Sam and Jo.

Lucy was on alert, her back stiff, the hairs along the ridge raised slightly. It was comforting to know Lucy would protect them, but Sam figured there wasn’t going to be any trouble. They were just putting on a show. He scanned the crowd, trying to pick out which one could be Ray’s killer.

Sam stood at ease, and Lucy relaxed slightly. He reached down to pat her head, a signal that all was well, and she trotted off to sniff her way around the site.

“Seems like your friend might have gotten in a little bit of trouble,” Jo said.

The first guy snorted. Sam turned to look at him. “Something you want to say?”

“Well, I’m not surprised. He gets into trouble a lot. He kind of has an attitude.”

“Yeah, he can get a little worked up,” a small blonde with big blue eyes said. “But that’s only because he cares about the cause.”

“He’s a good guy.” A tall woman in a long rainbow-colored skirt with hair to match stepped in front of Sam and Jo. “Ray didn’t do anything wrong. What is your business here?”

“My business?” Sam asked. “I’m the chief of police. Everything is my business.”

“Oh, that’s it, is it? Everything’s your business.” Rainbow Skirt gestured to indicate the entire landscape. “Even the chopping down of the trees and the killing of the birds.”

“Yeah, and the devastation of natural habitats,” someone yelled.

“And polluting the waters,” another chimed in.

Sam held his palms up in front of him. “Hold on, guys. I don’t like polluting waters or chopping down trees either.”

“Yeah, but you’re one of *them*,” the big-eyed girl said.

“One of who?” Sam asked.

“The establishment. The rich people. The people in power.” Rainbow Skirt crossed her arms over her chest and glared at Sam and Jo. “So what is it you want anyway?”

“We’re here to ask about Ray Ingalls. He was found dead this morning.”

Sam studied their reactions. They all seemed suitably shocked. “Dead?” The first guy who had greeted them looked at the others.

“No!” the big-eyed girl said.

“What do you mean dead? What happened to him?” the turtle tattoo guy demanded.

Lucy had completed her survey of the campsite and was now sniffing at a bag of trash.

“Did he have an accident?” Rainbow Skirt asked.

“No. I’m afraid he was murdered,” Sam said quietly.

Silence settled over the campers as the weight of Sam’s words sank in. He slid his eyes toward Jo. She watched them intently. Jo had graduated with a degree in psychology, and human behavior was her department. Sam was better at noticing the little details. Things that were out of place. Many times these little things provided big clues. He used the shocked silence to do that now, looking over the campsite for anything unusual or out of place.

Lucy was busy too. The trash must have been very interesting because she sniffed so hard it tipped over. Sam noticed an abundance of egg shells. These people must really like eggs. He glanced at Jo. She’d noticed too.

“So he was an associate of yours,” Sam said.

“Sure. Ray was a wildlife photographer. He specialized in endangered species,” Turtle Tattoo said.

“And he wrote lots of articles for magazines,” someone said. “He was scribbling notes all the time. But I don’t see what that has to do with him getting murdered.”

“Seems like you activists have caused a little stir in town. Maybe someone didn’t like what Ray was doing,” Sam said.

The first guy snorted. “Lots of people didn’t like what Ray did.”

“Including some of you?” Jo looked at him over the top of her Oakleys.

The guy frowned and shook his head. “No. I mean he could be abrasive sometimes, but none of us would kill Ray.”

“I’m going to need to get all your names,” Sam said.

The group looked around at each other uneasily.

“Just so I can contact you in case we have more questions,” Sam added.

They looked to the rainbow-skirt lady. She shrugged then nodded. She must have been the leader, because they all started giving their names after that.

Jesse Cowly’s memory wasn’t too far off. Turtle Tattoo’s name was Dennis Carter.

The last in line was Rainbow Skirt, who claimed her name was Summer Solstice.

“Summer Solstice?” Sam asked. “Is that your real name?”

Her back straightened, and her mouth pursed into a thin line. “It certainly is my real name.”

Sam glanced at Jo, and she raised a brow as she jotted in her notebook. Sam figured it was a note to look into Summer Solstice to verify it really was her name.

“You didn’t tell us what happened to him,” Dennis said.

“We found him in the woods near the protected area that’s set aside for the owls. Any idea why he’d be out there at night?” Sam asked.

“Of course. Owls are nocturnal. He went out to photograph them,” Summer said as if talking to a two-year-old.

Dennis ran his hands through his shaggy, dark curls. “No wonder he didn’t answer my texts.”

“But why would someone want to kill him?” the big-eyed girl, Sally, asked.

“That’s what I want to know,” Sam said. “Do you know if he had any enemies? How well did you know him?”

“Most of us didn’t know him that well,” Peter, the guy who first greeted them, said. “Dennis and Summer go way back with him, though.”

Sam turned to Dennis and Summer. “Either one of you know if he had a beef with anyone lately?”

They looked at each other, then Summer spoke. “No. I mean, he got into it with a few locals a few times, but so did Dennis.”

Dennis let out a strangled laugh. “Yeah, I hope the locals don’t go around killing everyone they get into an argument with. You got a bunch of litterbugs in this town, and I’ve argued plenty.”

“When did you last see him?” Sam asked.

“I saw him in the morning. We had a rally by the State House,” Sally said.

“I saw him at lunch,” Summer said.

“I might have been the last one to see him,” Peter said. “I saw him last night outside that bar that looks like a church.”

“Holy Spirits?” Jo asked.

“Yeah. He was meeting someone. It looked kind of shady.”

“Shady?” Sam asked.

Peter shrugged. “Well, it was kind of weird because they were off to the side in that alley next to the bar, and the guy was wearing a hoodie. It was almost ninety degrees out. Who wears a hoodie in that kind of heat?”

“Any idea what they were meeting about?” Sam asked.

Peter shook his head.

“You know, now that you mention it, I saw him meeting with someone weird, too,” Summer said.

“Really?”

“Yeah, but this guy wasn’t wearing a hoodie. He should have been with that haircut, though. All spiked up and orange at the tips.” Summer shook her head as if orange-tipped hair were more ridiculous than rainbow-colored hair.

“Why do you think the meeting was shady?” Jo asked.

“Well, they were all hunkered down in Ray’s truck like they were up to something, and when I asked him about it later, he acted all weird. Like he didn’t know what I was talking about. I haven’t seen that guy around, so I was curious.”

“Where were all of you last night around two a.m.?” Sam asked.

They looked at each other. “In our tents. We hit the hay around midnight,” Peter said.

Sam looked over at the tents. “So you were all here after midnight, and you can all vouch for each other?”

They looked around at each other again and nodded.

“Yeah. We’re always here every night,” Dennis said.

“But you didn’t actually all see each other all night because you were in your tents,” Jo said.

“Well, yeah,” Peter said. “But I think someone would have heard a tent unzip or a car start up. Gets pretty quiet out here at night.”

“Which tent is Ray’s?” Sam asked.

“Oh, Ray doesn’t stay in a tent,” Dennis said. “He doesn’t trust his expensive camera to the outdoors. Could get damaged.”

“Where was he staying, then?” Jo asked.

“At those cabins up on Route 5. The Balsams, I think it’s called,” Summer said.

“I still don’t get it,” Dennis said. “If he was out at the protected owl area, then somebody either purposely went up there to kill him or came across him in the woods and killed him.”

“Or he brought the killer with him,” Peter said.

“Well, I know exactly who would want him dead,” Summer said. “The same people who would like to get rid of all of us.”

“And who would that be?” Jo asked.

“The rich people. The greedy people. Why, there’s one right up next to that owl sanctuary where you say Ray was killed,” Summer said.

“Yeah, that’s right!” someone piped in. “That big hotel up there. What if Ray took a picture of some of those owls near that property line and threatened to have the protected area expanded? Don’t you think that could get him killed?”

Peter’s jaw tightened, and his voice tinged with anger. “I know all about that builder guy. He’s the type. Wouldn’t think twice about killing someone to put up another hotel or restaurant.”

“Possibly, but we don’t know that Ray found that, do we?” Jo said.

“He hadn’t said anything about it to me, but that builder guy feels threatened by the owls, I’m sure of it. And he hates us. Maybe he saw Ray out there and they had words. He’s no friend of the environment. We’ve got plenty of eggs slated for him,” Summer said proudly.

Sam looked at Dennis. “And you egged Mayor Dupont?”

Dennis became a little agitated. “Yeah! He wants to take all this pristine land away. He’s in cahoots with that builder.”

Sam couldn’t disagree.

“What’s the deal with the eggs anyway?” Jo asked.

“The eggs symbolize the owls. You know, the babies. Of course, we don’t use owl eggs. We use chicken eggs, but we use them against our enemies. Like that guy with the red Cadillac that’s always at the building site. We egged his car good,” Sally rejoiced, but then her smile faltered as she looked from Sam to Jo. “I hope that’s not against the law.”

“We’ll let that one slide.” Sam turned back toward the path. “Listen, if any of you remember anything or think of anything that could help us out, you let us know.”

“We will,” Dennis said.

“Will you keep us posted about what you find?” Summer asked.

“Yep.” Sam whistled for Lucy, and the three of them headed into the trees.

When they were out of earshot, Jo turned to Sam. “Do you think one of them is the killer?”

“Hard to tell. They were on the same side, but what if one of them had a personal beef … ?” Sam let his voice trail off.

“Right. We need to check into them and follow up on this mystery guy too,” Jo said. “But it’s strange these people like to egg things and the victim had egg on him. Makes it seem like one of them is the killer.”

“Or someone wants it to look that way,” Sam said.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Balsam Cabins weren't far from where the environmentalists were camped. Sam got the key to Ray's cabin from the owner and drove through the property, which was dotted with small white cabins nestled among the pine trees. Each cabin had a screened-in front porch just big enough for two chairs, with windows trimmed by Kelly-green shutters with pine-tree cutouts. There was a good amount of space between each cabin, and the abundance of trees secluded them from each other. Ray's was at the far end, and Sam and Jo parked in front. They let Lucy out of the back, and the three of them walked through the carpet of dry pine needles to the porch together.

The cabin was sparsely furnished with maple furniture that looked like it dated to the 1970s. Good old solid pieces that would stand the test of time and the wear and tear of multiple renters. The main room was an efficiency living room-kitchen combination. A hallway off the living room led to a bedroom and bathroom. The walls were knotty pine, the living room floor blue indoor-outdoor carpet. It smelled faintly musty, which didn't surprise Sam given that the small windows in back and covered porch in front kept the light from streaming in, and the place hadn't been updated in forty years.

"Looks like Ray was a messy housekeeper." Jo pushed her sunglasses on top of her head and stood in the middle of the living room, her hands on her hips as she surveyed the cabin.

The cabin was in disarray. A pile of unfolded laundry sat on the couch. Dirty dishes crusted over in the sink. A duffel bag slumped in the middle of

the living room floor, its contents spilling out.

"You think someone tossed the place?" Jo asked.

"It's hard to tell." Sam inspected the small space, cataloging everything with his memory. Something was missing, something that should have been here if what the other environmentalists had said was true.

Sam wasn't quick on the uptake or knowledgeable about human behavior like Jo was, but if there was one thing he was good at, it was remembering the fine details of a crime scene. Not that this was a crime scene — or was it?

"We don't know why Ray was killed. Maybe he had something someone wanted? Like that shady guy that the environmentalists said they saw Ray meeting with," Jo said.

Sam turned and looked at the front door. He held up the tarnished brass key with the large orange motel tag. "The door was locked, but I guess they could have gotten the key from Ray. Or Ray could have just been a slob. Seems strange to kill him out there and then come looking for something here. Why not just kill him here?"

"Maybe the killer wanted to throw us off track and make it look as if it had something to do with the owls, or didn't want us to know he was looking for something here."

"That would make sense with the egg and all, but if he was killed because he saw something going on at the protected area, what would make them come back here?" Sam asked. "Seems to me that if he got caught up in something out there, they'd kill him right away. No reason to look through his cabin."

"Right." Jo pressed her lips together. "Unless …"

"Unless?"

"What if Ray *did* see something out there, but not last night? What if he saw it before? And what if someone — maybe the person he's been meeting with — caught him? And what if Ray said he'd keep quiet for money?"

"You mean blackmail?" Sam opened the cabinets one by one, finding only a few chipped dishes and old jelly glasses.

"Yep."

"So Ray stumbles on some illegal activity and either gets caught or approaches the person and offers to keep quiet for money." Sam thought about that for a minute. "Maybe. People said he was ballsy and brash."

“If the thug was the orange-tipped hair guy, then the meetings make sense. He was paying Ray off.”

“But why pay him off and *then* kill him? Why not save the money and kill him first?”

“Maybe they didn’t mind making the original payment, but then Ray got greedy. That happens a lot once blackmailers realize they can get paid off. And then the killer would have reason to come back to Ray’s cabin and make sure there was no evidence.”

“We should look into his finances. Maybe Thorne is behind this after all.” Sam opened the ancient round-topped fridge. A gallon of milk, some lettuce and some beans. A jar of pickles sat in the door.

“Unless Jackson Pressler is doing something out there.”

“Nah. Jackson’s too old to be up to something out there. He can barely get past his own back porch.”

Lucy sniffed her way around the edge of the scuffed linoleum floor, stopping at a trash barrel. Sam looked inside. The trash was the neatest thing in the cabin. The bag was clean. At the bottom sat three soda cans marinating in a sauce of SpaghettiOs, with a few egg shells.

“It’s no secret Thorne would rather not have the activists up here. But it wouldn’t make sense to kill Ray for that reason. He’d have to get rid of all of them or he’d still have the original problem.” Jo picked the couch cushions up and looked under them. “So it has to be that Ray saw something.”

Sam moved from the cabinets to search the bathroom, yelling back down the hall to Jo. “I don’t imagine it has anything to do with the activists. Speaking of which, what did you think about the people at the camp?”

He knew Jo had been studying their body language and would have picked up on any cues or “tells” as she called them.

“They seem like passionate people.” Jo had moved to the bedroom across the hall and was looking through the bureau. “And you know, when passionate people get riled up, they can do things without thinking.”

“Like bash someone with a log?”

“Yeah, like that,” Jo said. “But that wouldn’t explain someone coming and looking through Ray’s cabin. I mean, if someone really *did* look through here. It’s hard to tell.”

Sam found a razor and toothbrush in the medicine cabinet in the tiny bathroom, a scrunched-up towel hanging on the bar next to the metal

shower stall and not much else. He turned to see Jo leaning against the doorframe, a black calendar in her hand and a smile on her face.

"Check it out. Ray's calendar," she said.

"Anything good in it?"

"Not much. The usual appointments … except for this one little thing." She opened the calendar and pointed at an entry for a week earlier. Scrawled in pen was a note: "$5k to Dennis."

"Dennis?" Sam asked. "Maybe your blackmail theory is right and we just had the wrong people."

"We need to get a warrant for Ray's finances."

"And have a heart-to-heart with Dennis."

They moved into the main area. Sam poked through the duffel bag. "Have you seen a computer or a camera?"

"No, now that you mention it, I haven't. There should be one."

"If it's not here and Ray was out photographing the owls like the other activists claim he was, why didn't we find a camera at the crime scene?"

CHAPTER NINE

When they got back to the station, Lucy rushed right over to Reese and settled in beside her desk.

"I have some information." Reese proudly held a stack of papers up in front of her.

"Great. Let's go over it in the squad room." Sam headed past the row of post office boxes, making a stop at the K-cup machine before proceeding to the area where the desks were set out.

Jo had already hopped up on the corner of hers, and Reese had wheeled a chair over from Tyler's empty desk. Kevin was gone for the day, so Sam pulled his chair out from under his desk, turned it around and sat facing Reese and Jo.

"I found out that the vic hangs around mostly with someone named Dennis Carter. They go way back, since college." Reese tapped the middle of the paper. "Looks like they got up to some shenanigans back then. That's how he got arrested and ended up with his fingerprints on file."

Sam smiled at the way Reese referred to Ray as "the vic." He was pretty sure they didn't use that terminology in the police academy classes, which meant she was picking up the informal lingo at the station. That was a good sign. She was into the job and she cared. Too bad he couldn't hire her now to replace Tyler. But, because she hadn't graduated, he couldn't.

"What did they do?" Jo asked.

"Got caught pouring sugar into the gas tanks at the construction site for a mall. Seems the mall was bulldozing over wetlands, and they took offense to that," Reese said.

“Can hardly blame them,” Sam said.

“Dennis Carter is the guy with the turtle tattoo who egged Dupont,” Jo explained to Reese.

“That’s another reason to suspect him as the killer.” Reese shuffled the papers. “That tattoo is a symbol for his company. Green Turtle.”

“He has a company?” Jo asked.

Reese nodded. “Yep. He wants to provide trash barrels in every public area across the country. Their mission statement is to make America trash-free. The tops of the barrels are molded in the shape of a turtle shell.”

“Huh, that’s interesting. Jesse said he freaked out when Brian threw something at the trash and missed. Guess he feels pretty strongly about trash,” Sam said.

“Did you run across anything on a Summer Solstice while you were looking?” Jo asked.

Reese frowned. “The summer solstice … wasn’t that back in June?”

“Yeah, except this one is a person.”

“I can look her up.” Reese scribbled on the papers. “Oh, and John faxed his report. I looked it over. There was nothing new except there was no trace DNA found on the murder weapon.”

“Good work.” Last month Sam had taught Reese to interpret the reports they received from the medical examiner. She’d been an eager learner and not at all squeamish about the gruesome photographs he sometimes sent along. Sam wasn’t sure if he should be worried about that part.

Jo jumped off the desk and took her phone from her back pocket. “I’m going to send you pictures of the cars we found where the environmentalists are camped out. Can you run the plates?”

“Sure thing,” Reese said. “Oh speaking of that, the truck up by the owl area did belong to Ray Ingalls. Did the other activists give you any clues?”

When Reese had first come to work for them, Sam didn’t share case specifics with her, but in the short time she’d been with them she’d proven that she could be trusted. She’d even used her off-the-record contacts to help them out a few times on Tyler’s case.

Reese listened attentively as they told her about their visit to the campsite and then to Ray’s cabin.

“That note doesn’t make any sense,” Reese said. “If Ray was blackmailing someone, why would he be paying money to Dennis?”

“Maybe Dennis was blackmailing Ray. Maybe things went bad — either Ray refused to pay up again or threatened to expose him so Dennis killed him,” Jo said.

“Blackmailing him about what?”

“Don’t know,” Sam said. “There’s lots of unanswered questions.”

“So you want me to write up the paperwork for a warrant for Ray’s finances and call this Dennis Carter in for an interview,” she said.

“You got it,” Sam said.

The front door to the lobby opened, and they swung around to see Harry Woolston, the former police chief, saunter in. Harry had retired decades ago but found retirement boring. Butting into Sam’s cases was much more exciting. Sam didn’t like it very much, but Harry had proven to be helpful in a few of them.

Lucy trotted to Harry, who produced a dog treat from his pocket and ran Lucy through a repertoire of tricks. “Hey gang, what’s going on? You guys talking about the murder?”

Sam grunted. It didn’t take long for news of a murder to travel through the White Rock grapevine. Harry probably knew more about it than he did. “That’s official police business. Unless you have something to tell us.”

Harry pulled a chair over and sat slowly, taking his time, savoring the moment. Sam figured he must have something pretty good.

“I heard the guy was killed up near that owl sanctuary,” Harry said.

“Yep. Seems like maybe he might have seen something or gotten someone angry,” Reese said. She had a soft spot for Harry because he plied her with baked goods and regaled her with exaggerated tales of his exploits when he was chief.

“What do you reckon he saw up there? You think maybe Thorne had something to do with it? The protected area is right next to that big hotel he’s building,” Harry said.

“I’d love to pin this on him,” Jo said. “But why would he kill just one of them? He wants to get rid of all the environmentalists. Killing one of them won’t solve that.”

“Maybe it isn’t about the owls,” Harry said.

Sam frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Jackson Pressler owns that land. His daddy owned it before him. And right at the edge of the property is the Hogback River.” Harry turned to Sam. “You know the one? It’s loaded with brook trout.”

“That’s right.” Sam used to take his twin daughters fishing there when they were little. He’d almost forgotten about that river. How long had it been since he’d taken a day off to go fishing?

“You know that river comes right out of Canada,” Harry said.

“Yep.” Sam leaned back in his chair.

“My daddy told me that back in the day they used that river during prohibition to bring hooch down from Canada.”

“You don’t say?” Sam said.

Harry nodded, a knowing look on his face.

“You’re saying Thorne might be using the river to bring drugs in from Canada?”

Harry shrugged. “Stranger things have happened.”

The river was not more than twenty feet across and probably not more than twenty feet at the deepest. You couldn’t have a big boat in there, but all you needed was a small skiff to move drugs. Even better, because a small boat wouldn’t be that noticeable. And the river emptied out into the Merrimack River way down in Manchester.

“If your vic was out there taking photos of the owls and happened across the boat going downriver at night … well, he might have gotten something in his pictures that a certain someone wouldn’t want anyone to see,” Harry said.

“And that would explain why there was no camera with the body,” Jo said.

Harry leaned forward. “So you didn’t find any camera? What other clues do you—”

The front door opened again, and they all looked toward the lobby. It was Harley Dupont, but instead of his usual impeccably arrogant demeanor, he seemed a bit frazzled and nervous. His tie was askew, and his suit coat had lint on it, along with the stain from the egg. His reddish-brown hair flopped over his forehead, revealing a slight bald spot.

He barely glanced in the direction of Reese’s desk, making a beeline toward Sam’s office, stopping short as soon as he saw them all sitting in the squad room.

Lucy ran to Dupont, and his eyes softened as he bent slightly to pet the dog. He pulled a treat out of his pocket, and Lucy accepted it gracefully. Lucy and Dupont had gotten off to a rocky start. They’d hated each other in the beginning, but Lucy had warmed to him during the summer. Sam

wondered if they were babying her too much. She was usually such a good judge of character, but if she sensed some redeeming quality in Dupont, it sure wasn't anything the rest of them had picked up on.

"Well, if it ain't our esteemed mayor." Harry's voice was tinged with sarcasm. It was no secret that there was no love lost between the two of them.

Dupont nodded. "Mr. Woolsey."

"How's the race going?" Harry taunted.

Dupont cleared his throat. "Not bad. Hard to tell this early."

Harry smirked. "Saw you on TV. Looked like you had a little incident with an egg."

Dupont's face turned red. "Rabble-rousers wreaking havoc in town since those owls were discovered. Egging things left and right … at least the perpetrator didn't trash the town office steps with the shells. Should have had him arrested. No respect for authority."

"Not your kind of authority," Harry said. "There're a lot of people who don't have respect for that. Especially with the way you've been finagling the zoning laws. And don't think us older folks haven't noticed. In fact, Charlie Berry is forming a committee to review the minutes from the meetings."

Dupont tugged at the collar of his shirt. "What do you mean?"

"Seems there's an awful lot of commercial building going on. More than there should be. This whole town is going to be built up like a city. Some of us won't stand for it, Harley."

"New construction means progress and progress brings jobs, but, er … um… I could see maybe things might be a little out of hand. Growth is good, but not too much." Dupont gave a pointed look at Sam and then turned toward the door.

"That's right," Harry persisted. "And Marnie Wilson will see it's stopped. Oh, you didn't hear? She's throwing her hat in the ring. Got the senior vote tied up already. I'd be worried if I were you."

Dupont looked hard at Harry, but his voice wavered. "I think I can hold my own against Wilson."

"Did you want something, Dupont?" Sam asked.

"I'll come back later when you aren't so busy." Dupont looked at Sam again and then stalked toward the door.

“Better look into those rezoning minute meetings,” Harry called after him, then turned sheepishly back to the group. “Sorry. Couldn’t resist messing with him. One good thing about old age is you get to say what you really feel.”

“What’s was up with him? He was acting weird,” Reese said.

“Got me. Seems like he wanted to talk to Sam about something,” Harry said.

“Yeah, any idea what that was about, Sam?” Jo asked.

“No idea.” It had seemed Dupont was trying to tell him something, but darned if he knew what it was. It was unsettling, though. Sam and Dupont got along like black flies and baby skin, and he couldn’t imagine what would cause the mayor to seek his counsel.

“Well, it’s been nice talking to you.” Harry got up from the chair. “Mabel’s expecting me at home for dinner. Gotta get going.”

“I’m going to get on the computer and dig into this Summer Solstice,” Reese said.

Sam and Jo were left alone in the room. It was supper time, but Sam wasn’t ready to call it quits. “Harry might have a point about that river. Didn’t Jesse say that the drug business had dried up?”

“Something like that.” Jo had put her phone away and had her small notebook on her lap. She tapped the eraser end of her pencil on it as she studied Sam. “Maybe we should ask him more about it. Maybe he knows the guy with the orange-tipped hair.”

“Yeah, and maybe we can catch him at his favorite watering hole. What do you say? You up for a drink?”

CHAPTER TEN

They left Lucy in the care of Reese, who was staying at the station to work late on homework. Lucy could have stayed there alone. She had all the comforts of home, including a giant fluffy dog bed and a basket full of toys, but Sam felt better knowing the dog had some company.

Holy Spirits was a decommissioned church turned into a bar, complete with the original pews and stained glass. The entry still resembled a church vestibule, and Jo wondered how many people looked for the holy water and made the sign of the cross out of rote reflex before they entered.

Four of the pews had been turned to face each other, with long tables in the middle near the entry. Round maple tables filled the rest of what had been the congregation seating. The odor of grilled meat and hops had long since replaced the smell of candle wax and incense.

The bar itself sat where the altar used to be, spanning the entire width of the room. Jo liked sitting at the bar because the mirrored wall above the rows of colorful liquor bottles offered a view of the entire room behind her. Above the mirror, a colorful stained glass window lighted the interior of the bar with a subtle ambiance.

Jo settled into the black leather cushioned wooden swivel stool and ordered a lite beer and a basket of curly fries with mayonnaise. Sam ordered a Mooseneck, his favorite local beer.

Jo tapped her fingertips lightly on the smooth wooden surface of the bar as they waited for their beers. She felt awkward. She and Sam often stopped into the bar to discuss cases, but that hadn't happened since the last murder case. Not since Thorne had come in and had the mysterious conversation

with Sam. Jo just couldn't figure out why that conversation would have changed things between them. A jolt of panic ran through her — was it possible that Thorne knew about her family's past and had told Sam?

She had no idea what Thorne would gain from that, but it would explain the strange distance she'd felt between them ever since. And here she'd been hurt thinking Sam was keeping something from her. Maybe Sam's feelings were hurt because *she* was keeping a secret from him.

Or maybe she was imagining the whole thing, because now, sitting here with Sam, it felt as if nothing was different. As if there hadn't been an odd discord between them. It was like old times.

"So where do you think the camera is?" Jo asked Sam as Billie slid their beers in front of them.

"The other environmentalists said that the camera was so expensive he didn't even want to stay in a tent for fear that the weather would ruin it. Seems he would have taken good care of it, put it someplace special or taken it with him all the time," Sam said.

"If it was expensive, maybe someone else came along after the murder and took it?" Jo suggested.

"Like who? How many people do you think are running around in the woods in the middle of the night?" Sam asked.

"If what Harry said about the river being used to run drugs is true, maybe there're more people out there than we thought." Jo picked at the corner of her beer label with her thumbnail. The condensation on the bottle moistened the label, making it peel up easily, and she furrowed a line down the edge with her nail, the soggy paper plopping onto the bar. "Not to mention all those environmentalists. There could be dozens of people running around out there watching those owls."

"Except that they all said they were in their tents," Sam said.

"Only the ones he was camping with. Plenty of others in town, and besides, people lie." Jo slid her eyes over to Sam, wondering if he caught her double meaning. If he did, he didn't show it. He merely sipped his beer.

"True. I'm sure Ray must have also had a computer. If he was a photographer, he would have had to use programs to manipulate the photographs. And someone mentioned he wrote articles." Sam's phone dinged, and he pulled it from his pocket. "It's Mick. Maybe he's got something new on Tyler's case."

Sam put his phone to his ear as Jo started on the fries that had appeared in front of her and listened to his end of the conversation. Mick was back in town and wanted to meet at Sam's place later. It sounded like he didn't have anything new to report but was zeroing in on something concerning the grandson.

Jo's stomach sank. Tyler's case had been open too long. Not only had the murder investigation been dropped, it seemed the stolen car investigation had been too, which made her wonder if someone higher up was pulling some strings.

Sam disconnected. "Mick doesn't have anything new."

"Maybe we should start looking further out for the safety deposit box," Jo said. They'd tried all the banks, gym lockers and post offices in the county. They hadn't been successful in finding the box that fit the key found under Tyler's desk. It was time to to widen their search.

"Yeah, we probably should." Sam swigged his beer.

"Speaking of Tyler, what about the new hire?" Jo slid the fries in front of Sam and gestured for him to have one. He shook his head, and she picked one out and dragged it through the mayonnaise before popping it into her mouth. Before moving to White Rock four years ago, Jo had been a ketchup girl, but up here mayonnaise on fries was a thing. It had taken her a long time to try it, and she'd been surprised at how the tangy mayo complemented the fries — especially if they were crunchy.

"Yeah, I know. I was too busy today to pull out those resumes, but I'll get on it." Sam's voice held a hint of resignation. Jo felt the same way, but they needed to hire someone. And no more applications had come in, so they had to work with what they'd received. But maybe the guy that Sam had at the top of the list would turn out to be a good guy, someone as good as Tyler.

As they sat in the bar in the same stools they always had, Jo couldn't stop remembering how Thorne had come in and pushed his way between them, talking in hushed tones with Sam. Thoughts of Thorne turned to thoughts of Dupont and his strange visit to the police station earlier.

"What do you think Dupont wanted to talk to you about today? Maybe it has to do with Thorne. You know how he always sticks up for him. And you were out at the construction site questioning Thorne the morning of the murder, so maybe you ruffled some feathers." Jo was still put out that Sam

had excluded her from talking to Thorne. Had that had anything to do with what transpired in the bar between Sam and Thorne?

Sam kept his eyes on the mirror, watching the crowd behind them as he spoke. “I don’t think it had anything to do with Thorne. It seemed like Dupont had something on his mind. He was acting nervous, like maybe he realizes now that he’s gotten in a bit too far with catering to Thorne.”

“That night in here after we closed the Donnelly case, Thorne came in and talked to you. What did he say?” Jo blurted it out before she could stop herself.

Sam turned sad hazel eyes on her, and her mouth dried up. She could see that he wanted to tell her. His mouth opened slightly, and then like a shutter, his eyes went dark. He looked away from her and picked up his beer and took a swig. “Nothing. What would I talk to Thorne about?”

“I’m not sure,” Jo said. Shit! Maybe Thorne *had* told him about her sister. If so, should she come clean now? Was Sam disappointed in her? But if she told Sam about her sister, she’d have to admit the real reason she’d come to White Rock, and then things could get complicated. Better to stay silent.

“Hey, listen. About looking into Ray Ingalls’ bank activity; you know how long it takes to get a warrant, right? So I was thinking you have that contact who looked into Tyler’s bank account. Maybe you could have him do the same for Ingalls. I mean just to speed things up while Reese is getting a real warrant. Might give us a clue which direction to look in.”

“Of course. I’d be happy to.” Jo swigged her beer. At least Sam didn’t seem angry that she’d asked about Thorne.

She swung around on her stool, putting her elbows on the bar and looking out into the room. At one of the round tables sat the environmentalists from the campground they’d visited earlier that morning. One of the girls — Jo remembered her name was Sally — got up from the table and headed toward the bathroom.

“The environmentalists we talked to this morning are here,” Jo said to Sam. “I’m going to cut one from the herd to see what I can find out.”

Jo slipped off her stool and headed down the hall behind Sally. In her experience there was a weak link in every crowd, and she figured Sally was it. She waited a few seconds and then followed her into the bathroom, pretending to primp in front of the mirror, which only managed to look contrived because Jo never primped.

As she waited for Sally to finish her business, she tried to smooth down her unruly curls, noticing a silver streak at the temple. When had that shown up?

Sally came out of the stall, her eyes widening in surprise when she recognized Jo. “Oh! Hi. You’re that cop from this morning.”

“Yep. Cops drink too.” Jo tried to act friendly.

“I hope you guys find out what happened to Ray. He was a nice guy.” Sally turned on the faucet and started washing her hands in the sink next to Jo.

“Did you know him well?”

Sally looked up, their eyes meeting in the mirror. “Not very well. I mean, I’ve seen him at a few rallies, but I didn’t know him that well.”

The quiver in Sally’s voice made Jo think maybe Sally had known Ray a little better than she was letting on. Or at least Sally wished she had. The girl finished washing her hands, turned off the water and then looked around the bathroom as if to make sure no one no one else was with them. She turned away from the mirror to face Jo. “You know this morning when you guys asked where everyone was?”

Jo nodded.

“Well, Peter and I were in our tent all night. That part’s true. But I think I heard someone unzip their tent in the middle of the night.”

“Who?”

“I can’t say for sure. But it came from the other side of the campfire. If you ask me, it was probably Summer.”

“Summer Solstice?” Jo asked.

Sally nodded, her big eyes growing even bigger. “It makes sense she’d be sneaking out, because I think she has a sugar daddy. I saw her going to meet him at that fancy hotel downtown one day. The Carrington House.”

“How do you know she was meeting someone? She could’ve been going to the hotel for any number of reasons, couldn’t she?” Jo asked.

Sally grabbed a paper towel from the dispenser and started drying her hands.

“Sure, she could have, but you know how she is. She rails against anything that has to do with money. She’s built her whole career on ragging on the rich, and you know, she’s kind of famous. She’s been on TV and everything. But if you ask me, she’s a big fake. Some of us really do spend all our time and money on our environmental passions. We don’t have

expensive cars, fancy clothes or the latest gadgets. We live frugally, preferring to spend money on saving the earth. She *acts* like she does, but did you see that expensive phone she has?" Sally threw her paper towel into the trash barrel forcefully and started toward the door. She paused with her hand on the handle to look back over her shoulder at Jo. "But don't tell anyone I told you."

Jo waited a few seconds and exited the bathroom, heading back to her spot at the bar next to Sam.

"Find out anything good?" Sam asked.

"Sally said she thinks she heard someone getting out of a tent in the middle of the night. She thinks it was Summer."

Sam's left brow ticked up. He raised the bottle to his lips and took a thoughtful swig. "Summer. Now how do you think she figures into this?"

"Sally said she thinks Summer has a sugar daddy shacked up at the Carrington House. But she doesn't seem the sugar daddy type to me."

Sam snorted. "Me either. Maybe Reese will dig up something interesting on her. Maybe she had a beef with Ray? Maybe she does have a rich sugar daddy and Ray found out? We could ask around." Sam's gaze flicked up to the mirror behind the bar. "Looks like Jesse's here."

Jesse had come into the bar with Brian and two other guys. Their heads turned toward the table of environmentalists as they passed. The environmentalists stopped talking and returned their glares. Jo hoped there wouldn't be a fight. But Jesse's crowd turned to the right and took a table as far from the others as possible.

Sam caught Jesse's eye and gestured for him to come over. Jesse nodded subtly, said something to his friends, and came up to the bar, pushing between Jo and Sam and leaning across the bar to order drinks.

"Hey, guys. I'm out with my friends. You know I don't want to be seen talking to the cops too much. I have a reputation to uphold," Jesse said. Jo figured he was only half joking.

"You can just tell them you're trying to foster good relations with the local law enforcement," Sam said. "I'll even buy your drinks."

Sam slid a twenty over the bar, and Jesse nodded.

"Okay. I guess that gets you a few answers," Jesse said. "Shoot."

"Did you hear anything about Thorne using the Hogback River to run drugs?" Sam asked.

“Honestly, man, I told you I don’t know anything about that part of the business. I just smoke a little weed, and sometimes I get a little bit extra for my friends. I swear I don’t know how it’s transported or where it even comes from. All I know is it’s hard to get lately.” Jesse leaned closer to Sam. “Word is once this owl thing blows over, the supply lines will loosen up again.”

Billie put four beers on the bar, pushed them toward Jesse, and slid Sam’s money into the front pocket of her ketchup-smudged apron.

“You must have to deal with some of the people who sell the drugs, right?” Jo asked.

“Well, sure. I’ve dealt with a few. Most of the ones in this area probably,” Jesse said.

“Would you recognize them?”

“Hey, man, if you want me to pick someone out of a lineup or rat on someone, I’m not going to do that.” Jesse sneered. He gathered the beers together, the glass clinking as he picked them up off the bar and turned to leave. “That could be dangerous to my health.”

“We don’t want you to do anything like that. In fact, it’s in our best interest to keep you safe. But could you tell us if one of them has spiked hair with orange tips?” Sam asked.

Jesse laughed. “Are you kidding me? There’s no one around here with spiked hair with orange tips.”

“You sure?” Jo asked.

“Positive. You guys have a good night now.” Jesse turned and made his way back to his table.

“That wasn’t super helpful,” Jo said.

“No, but Jesse does have a point. Once this whole owl thing blows over, the environmentalists will go off to the next cause-of-the-day. So if Thorne’s business has anything to do with the river, he just needs to wait them out, and he can pick up business again.”

“True. And if the guy with the orange-tipped hair isn’t one of Thorne’s guys, then who in the world is he? And why was Ray meeting with him?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Kevin watched his contact disappear through the gap in the fence behind the Dumpster.

Well, that was an odd meeting.

He made his way down the alley toward the street. Looking both ways, he stepped onto the sidewalk.

Crap!

Sam and Jo were just emerging from Holy Spirits. Kevin shrank back into the alley, hoping they hadn't seen him. He chanced a peek around the corner. All clear — neither of them were looking in his direction.

Jo had already caught Kevin coming out from behind the restaurant earlier in the summer, and when she'd asked him about it, he'd panicked and flubbed the answer. He thought he'd covered his tracks by saying he'd been visiting his cousin who worked at the restaurant, but he could tell that Jo was still suspicious. Better not to let her see him coming out of the alley again.

He leaned his back against the wall, the bricks still warm from the sun, and thought about the request from his contact. He wanted Kevin to pass along what he knew about the murder of that environmentalist. What did that have to do with Tyler's case?

Kevin had been under the impression that the FBI — or whoever was paying him for information — was interested in Tyler because Tyler had been up to something shady. But Tyler had been dead for two months, so how could he have been involved in this latest murder?

Was his contact really interested in Sam and Jo? Or were the inquiries about something else entirely?

Kevin's father had always taught him to look out for himself. He'd said you had to pick and choose who you trusted very carefully. And though Kevin longed to trust Sam and Jo, he had to wonder why they were obviously keeping certain pieces of information to themselves. Why did they never include him in the important parts of the cases? Was it just because he was a part-timer, or was it because they were involved in something they didn't want him to know about?

Deep down he wanted to believe that Sam and Jo were good cops, but he feared that might just be wishful thinking. If they *were* good cops, wouldn't they enlist his aid instead of shutting him out?

And why had his contact warned — more like *threatened* — him that he might end up being taken down with Sam and Jo if he didn't pass along all the information? He'd gotten the impression that the contact thought Kevin might be holding back information. He'd have to play it very carefully from here on out.

Kevin peeked back around the corner. Sam was coming out of the police station with Lucy. Jo's car was already gone. He waited for Sam to drive off and then exited the alley.

He didn't want to throw Sam and Jo under the bus, and he didn't want to feed the FBI information about them that could be misconstrued. Kevin wasn't sure what was going on, so he had no idea what to pass on to his contact.

There *was* one thing he was sure of. *He* was in control of the flow of information, and he could use that to his advantage, because there could only be two things going on. Either Sam and Jo were up to something shady or his contact was. Kevin had no intention of getting caught in the middle and becoming the fall guy.

He walked across the street, his car beeping as he clicked the fob to unlock it. He'd get the information his contact wanted, but he'd choose what pieces he would feed him. The money he was getting was nothing to sneeze at, and he'd be able to maintain control of the situation. He could pick the parts that he wanted to pass along. The rest of it he'd keep as a little insurance policy, just like that flash drive he'd taken from Tyler's belongings. That way, no matter who the bad guys were, Kevin would come out on top.

AFTER LEAVING HOLY SPIRITS, Sam collected Lucy and drove home, the stress draining out of him the closer he got to the cabin he'd inherited from his grandfather. The cabin had been his grandparents' hunting camp and held many fond childhood memories.

It was a manly place, made of cedar logs, with a few feminine touches from his grandmother. The overstuffed furniture, taxidermy fish and deer mounts, and rustic accents reminded him of the outdoors. Sam hadn't updated it much since his grandfather had died. He liked it the way it was. It was a place not many women would feel comfortable living in, which suited Sam just fine. After two failed marriages he had no intention of moving a woman in.

He fed Lucy, grabbed a beer from the refrigerator, and then went out onto the front porch to wait out the 40 minutes before Mick was due to arrive. The porch was his favorite part of the cabin, because it overlooked the property that he owned on the other side of the street. The landscape swooped downward to show a small pond where deer often came to feed at dusk, and it was just about dusk right now. Though the sun was setting, the heat of the day hadn't dissipated. Sam held the cold beer to his forehead while Lucy settled in beside him, resting her chin on her front paws.

The cabin was Sam's heaven on Earth, and not just because of fond childhood memories. It sat in the middle of twenty acres of pristine northern New Hampshire forest, lush with pines, oaks, maples and birches. Birds of all types flitted about the trees. Fox, raccoons, coyotes and even bears made their home in these woods. Sam loved all of it. For a second the image of a strip mall across the street flashed through his mind. If Thorne had his way that's what would happen. The twenty acres that Sam owned was prime real estate, and he knew Thorne was salivating to get his hands on it. He'd get it over Sam's dead body.

Sam took another swig of beer. A puff of dust further down the dirt road caught his attention. Someone was coming. Couldn't be Mick; he wasn't due for another half hour. In the thirty years Sam had known Mick, he'd never once been early. As the car came into view, Sam recognized it as the navy-blue Buick that belonged to Harley Dupont.

Why in the world was Dupont coming here? Did this have something to do with the visit he'd made to the police station earlier? It was highly

unusual that Dupont would seek him out at home after work, but maybe what the man wanted wasn't official police business.

Dupont pulled up, and Lucy — the traitor — rushed down the steps before the man could even get out of the car. She wagged and wiggled around him, demanding his attention. He bent to pat her, and Sam felt his attitude softening a bit at the obvious affection the man had for the dog. If Dupont loved Lucy that much, he couldn't be too bad, could he?

Dupont straightened and made his way to the porch. Sam noticed he wasn't wearing the usual suit. It somehow made him look vulnerable. The chinos and pink Izod shirt looked ridiculous. Lucy didn't seem to mind, though, as she trotted along beside him.

Sam didn't get up to greet him. So what if Dupont was kind to dogs, he still didn't deserve that much respect. "Harley. Can I get you a beer?" Sam tilted his bottle toward Dupont.

"No thanks. I can't stay long." Dupont looked around as if to make sure no one could see him slumming down here at Sam's cabin.

"What can't wait until tomorrow?" Sam asked.

"This is more personal."

Dupont came up onto the porch and sat in the chair beside Sam. He leaned over, his arms on his thighs, his keys jangling between his knees as he fiddled with them. Sam patiently waited for him to get to the point.

"You know, I've been thinking about what Harry said in the station the other day. He's right. You've been right too. I have been catering to Thorne. I guess I got my priorities a little screwed up."

"Yup." Sam agreed, but he didn't see what that had to do with him.

"I know you don't like Thorne."

Sam snorted. "What's to like? He's ruining our town, and it's not just the construction I'm talking about."

Dupont nodded, his eyes drifting over the field. "You know the only thing I wanted was to do good for this town. When I was younger it seemed so simple. So easy. But as I got older I found things aren't always as easy as they seem." Dupont shrugged and jangled the keys again. "Well, I think I lost sight of my initial goal."

"Yeah. I think you said that already. So what is it that you want from me?" Sam asked.

Dupont leaned closer to Sam, his chair squeaking. "What if I could help you get rid of Thorne?"

That caught Sam's attention. He put his beer down and looked at Dupont. "What do you mean '*get rid of'* him?"

"What if I told you I had certain information. Proof that he was behind the drugs that have come into town. Would you be able to arrest him and put him away forever?"

"Do you actually have such proof?" Sam asked. "Because if you do, you'd better give it to me right now. Otherwise you're an accomplice and I can arrest you for obstructing justice."

Dupont's eyes flittered around nervously. He licked his lips. "I didn't say I had proof. I said what if. What if I did? Would he go away forever?"

Sam picked up his beer and took a swig. What was Dupont saying? Did he have proof about Thorne? And how could Sam get that proof? "Yeah, I guess he would probably go away forever, especially if he's the head of the drug ring up here. But I'm not gonna make a deal with you, if that's what you think. If you know something, tell me now or you're going down with him."

Dupont looked hard at Sam, his mouth turning into a grim line, the friendliness going out of him. "Is that so? What if I sweeten the pot by telling you I know something about what happened to Tyler Richardson?"

Sam snapped forward in his chair. "What do you mean you know something about what happened to Tyler?"

Dupont's face turned smug. "That's right. I might know a little something about your star deputy. You thought his death was an accident, didn't you? I happen to know there was more to it than you think, and if you get rid of Thorne I'll tell you everything."

Sam blinked in disbelief. Was Dupont pulling his leg? Did he really know something? Sam's fist tightened around his beer as he focused on the cold bottle to hold back from punching Dupont in the face and beating the information out of him. He knew that wouldn't work in his favor. And he could tell by the look on the mayor's face that he wasn't going to give up. Sam would have to make a deal.

"So that's it. You give me information on Thorne. I make sure he gets arrested, and you tell me what happened to Tyler. Is that the deal?" Sam asked.

"Not quite. I want you to keep my name out of it. I don't want to be tied to Thorne in any way. And I don't want any of what happens to him to fall

on me. I want to come out of this squeaky clean, and I want you to support me for mayor."

Bile burned Sam's throat. Support Dupont for mayor? But duty to his colleague overruled his personal feelings about Dupont. Tyler had worked for him, and his death was Sam's responsibility. He owed it to Tyler's family to find out what had really happened on that road that night. Getting evidence to put Thorne away would stop the drug trade and the construction. Supporting Dupont for mayor was a small price to pay, no matter how much the thought rankled him. Sam studied Dupont for a few seconds. The smaller man's gaze was unwavering. He wouldn't back down. "Okay. Deal."

"Good." Dupont stood. "It's gonna take me a while to get this information together. Thorne's drug business is suffering a slowdown, and he needs an influx of cash. He's putting together a special delivery, and I'll be able to get the specifics. I'll contact you as to where and when it's going to be as soon as I know."

"Okay." Sam stood. "One more thing, though." He was a little taller than Dupont, and now he looked down on the mayor. Sam figured he was the only one who could help Dupont, and he wanted to leverage that for as much as he could. He knew Dupont had given Thorne the bloody knife that Thorne had threatened Sam with in the bar. He also knew Dupont had some knowledge of his cousin Gracie's rape twenty years ago.

Sam couldn't let this opportunity pass. While he was the only one who could help Dupont now, he was going to wring him for all the information he could get. "There's one more thing I want. About a month ago Thorne showed me something. Something that I think you had a role in supplying to him."

Dupont's eyes flickered with recognition, and he gave a slight nod. "Yeah. I know what you're talking about. Thorne pressured me to get *something* on you to keep you under control. All the more reason for you to work with me and put him away."

Sam nodded slowly. "I understand that. But what I want to know is how you got it and what your involvement with Gracie was twenty years ago."

Dupont's eyes softened. "It's not what you think. I had nothing to do with what happened to Gracie. I might have strayed a little bit in my role as mayor, but I'm no rapist. Certain information fell into my lap. But that's a

discussion for another day, and if you come through with arresting Thorne, maybe we'll have that discussion."

Dupont turned and marched off the porch to his car. He drove off without a backward glance.

Sam watched Dupont drive off when Mick approached from the other direction. He got out of his car, the black T-shirt stretched tight over his bulky frame, and came up the steps toward Sam. His light-blue eyes were trained on the cloud of dirt behind Dupont's receding car.

Mick shook Sam's hand. "Visitor?"

"Grab me another beer from the fridge, will you? You're not going to believe this." Sam waited for Mick to return with their beers and then told him about Dupont's visit.

"So you think he's the one that gave the knife to Thorne? But how did Dupont get it in the first place?" The knife had been Mick's. Sam had no idea how it had fallen into Dupont's lap, but the fact that Thorne had it now was bad. Very bad.

The last thing either of them needed was for that knife — or the story of what they did the night they tried to make things right for Gracie — to get out. It would be disastrous for both of them. That's why Sam couldn't tell Jo what Thorne had said to him that night in Holy Spirits. It wasn't his story to tell. He had Mick to consider. Except now he was going to need Jo's help to take Thorne down.

"I'm gonna need Jo to be in on all this. Maybe Kevin too."

Mick leaned back in the chair and sucked on his beer. "Of course. No, wait. You're not gonna tell her about the knife and what we did for Gracie?"

"I think I have to. That's part of the deal with Dupont. I want him to tell me everything."

"But Jo doesn't need to know about the knife. You can tell her everything about the information Dupont gives you about Thorne and the drug deal. In the end, when Dupont tells you about Gracie's case, Jo doesn't need to know the specifics. That was a long time ago." Mick leaned forward, his eyes drilling into Sam's. "If anyone finds out what really happened, we could be in deep shit. This is for Jo's protection as well as ours. I say we keep the information about the knife mum unless we absolutely have to tell her."

Sam pressed his lips together. He wanted to tell Jo because he felt it was causing a rift between them. When she brought it up earlier at Holy Spirits,

he'd almost told her, but he knew he had to get Mick's permission first. Maybe what Mick had suggested could work. He didn't necessarily have to tell Jo about the knife ahead of time. The main focus was finding out about Thorne's drug delivery. The part about Gracie and the knife was just an added bonus. "Okay, I guess that could work. But if I feel like I need to make a snap decision and fill Jo in on everything, can I tell her?"

Mick thought for a minute and then nodded. "Only if it's absolutely necessary. So what are you going to do about Thorne?"

Sam shrugged. "I guess I'm just going to wait for Dupont to bring me this information."

Mick shook his head. "I don't know about this. Dupont is sleazy. Do you really trust him?"

"Not really, but I guess it can't hurt to wait around. If he doesn't hold up his end of the deal, it's no skin off of my back. Thorne has him in deep, and now he's running scared. He stuck his neck out too far for Thorne, and now he needs to get this fixed. He's afraid for his job, so I think he'll come through with the information. He wants Thorne out of the way now as much as I do. The only thing I can do is sit back and wait." Sam leaned back in his chair. "How did things go down in Mass? Anything new in Tyler's case?"

Mick rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I followed a few leads, but they ended up dead ends. Nothing's popping, but I've got a sneaky suspicion that pretty soon something's going to break."

JO HADN'T INTENDED on staying in White Rock so long, but somewhere along the line it had become home. She loved the small cottage in the woods that she rented. It was secluded, but cheery. Nestled in a forest of pine trees, it was somewhat remote, the only sounds twittering birds, the hollow echo of woodpeckers, the rustle of chipmunks and the babble of the brook at the edge of the property to keep her company. Jo was a loner, and that suited her just fine.

The only other living thing inside the house was her goldfish, Fin, who swam lazily in his new rectangular fish tank, his golden-orange scales and the blue stones at the bottom of the tank adding a splash of color to the

muted tones of the chipped white-painted furniture she'd bought secondhand to furnish the cottage.

Warmth swelled in her chest as she remembered how Sam had helped her set the tank up for Fin when she'd upgraded him from the round bowl. She never had many people at her place, but it had felt natural and comforting to have Sam and Lucy there that afternoon. Switching Fin from the bowl to a bigger, more suitable tank had been symbolic of her upgrading from thinking that she would move on from White Rock at any time to knowing that she would stay for the foreseeable future.

Jo unscrewed the cap on the yellow fish food container, took a small green flake out and held it over the top of the water. Fin swam up eagerly, his lips kissing the surface of the water as Jo hand-fed him the flake. She'd been perfecting this hand-feeding since she got him, and he was getting pretty good at it. Maybe it was time to start teaching him some tricks. Fin grabbed the flake, sucked it in whole and then zoomed down to resume his position under the little ceramic bridge she'd set up as a decoration in the bottom of the tank.

"I've got work to do too, Fin. Catch you later."

Jo went to her bedroom. Flipping over the corner of the rose-decorated rug and picking up a small silver skeleton key, she went to the powder-blue armoire and fitted the key into the right door.

The armoire didn't contain clothing, jewelry or any of the other things that most women kept in an armoire. This one contained photographs, case work, paperwork. It wasn't a closet, it was Jo's home office.

On the right side hung old photographs and yellowed newspaper clippings. The familiar sinking feeling came over her as she glanced at the handwritten case notes she'd taken, some as recently as last month, others from decades ago.

Her heart twisted as unwanted childhood memories flooded back. Images of her sister, only a child the last time she'd seen her, laughing and smiling. Images of her sister's toys sitting unused and gathering dust for more than a year. Her mother's sallow face as she sank further into depression as months went by with no news from her sister.

The day her sister disappeared, Jo hadn't lost only her sister. She'd lost her mother too. And since then she'd also lost her father and her other sister. Jo was compelled to find out what had really happened. Maybe it was finally time to put that to rest. Time to focus on seeking out the one sister

who was still alive and help her kick the addiction that had become a crutch after their family had fallen apart. And maybe it was time to pay another visit to a certain person at the women's prison. Maybe now that person would want to talk, and Jo could finally find out what really happened to her sister.

But tonight she had another job. Tonight she needed to find out if Ray Ingalls had been receiving blackmail payoffs. She opened the other side of the armoire, this one similar to the right, but with photos, notes and files on Tyler. She ignored those and pulled out the drawer and logged into her computer.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sam had a lot to think about, and his favorite place to think was his office at the police station. So the next morning he got in early. He sat in his metal-and-Naugahyde chair, reveling in the quietness of the empty building, while the morning sun filtered golden rays through the triple floor-to-ceiling atrium windows. Lucy had found a spot in the sun and was snoozing peacefully in a puddle of sunshine on the golden hardwood floor.

Sam stared at the pile of manila folders on his desk. Aside from the folders, the desk's surface was clean, a honey-golden oak marred by decades of blue postal stamp ink and staples. Even though the desk wasn't perfect, Sam liked it. It was big, and he liked to spread his notes on the surface, though this morning he wasn't spreading his notes out. He was spreading out the resumes.

He placed them all in a row, studying each one, mulling the candidates. There was only one that was sufficient: Wyatt Davis. Sam shuffled that one to the top just as a knock came on the beveled glass section of his thick oak door.

"Come in."

The door cracked open, and Jo peeked her head in. "Hey, I saw the Tahoe was here. You're in early."

"So are you," Sam said.

"I have some news."

"Me too."

"Okay, you go first."

Sam motioned for her to come in, and she shut the door then pulled a chair to the other side of his desk. She sat there silently, tapping the eraser end of her pencil on her notebook as he told her about Dupont's visit the previous night.

"That would be great if it really happened, but do you trust him?" Jo asked.

Sam's chair creaked as he leaned back and swiveled toward the windows. He looked out over the commons to the town offices, where Dupont probably was right now, sitting there hatching another scheme. His gaze drifted to the layers of blue mountains in the distance, the sun cresting over the top, sending golden rays through the tree leaves and lighting everything with a magical glow. Could he trust Dupont? Sam didn't honestly know.

"Maybe not. Maybe this is some kind of setup to implicate us in the drug business. We'll have to proceed with caution. It could be a clever plan between Thorne and Dupont to get rid of us and put their own people in place here."

"I don't think they're that clever." Jo studied Sam, and her pencil tapping sped up. "But you're right. We'll proceed with caution."

"Anyway, he might not even come through, and for now we have a murder to investigate," Sam said.

"Speaking of which, I got the info on Ray Ingalls' finances. He withdrew five grand last week."

"Cash?"

"Yep. Even more interesting, he got a deposit of fifteen grand three weeks ago."

Sam whistled and leaned back in his chair. "Cash?"

"No. This one was a check deposited from TLP Company."

Sam pressed his lips together. "Do you think that was a blackmail check? Who pays blackmail with a company check?"

Jo shrugged. "It could be one of Thorne's shell companies. Maybe they're trying to make the blackmail look legitimate somehow?"

"Or maybe he was getting paid off for some other reason." Sam rocked forward in his chair. "We'll have Reese look into it. Meanwhile, we need to talk to Dennis Carter to find out what this money is about. That, combined with his temper, makes him a pretty good suspect."

“Not to mention that Sally said someone left the tent. She thought it was Summer, but what if it was really Dennis?”

They stood, and Lucy jumped up and ran to the door ahead of them.

In the squad room, Kevin was just pulling his coffee mug from under the brewer. He glanced over at them. “Morning. Got anything for me this morning, chief?”

Before Sam could answer, Reese rushed in the front door with her phone to her ear. “Yes, Mrs. Deerdorff. I know eggs are very expensive. No, I don’t think goats eat eggs. Yes, I’ll send someone.” She shot Sam a raised brow, who in turn shot one at Kevin.

Kevin rolled his eyes and headed for the door. “I’ll get right out there.”

Nettie Deerdorff and Rita Hoelscher had been next-door neighbors for more than fifty years. The two widows delighted in complaining about each other. Last month Rita had complained that Nettie’s chicken pecked a hole in her fence. Apparently it was Nettie’s turn to complain about Rita’s goat Bitsy.

Reese ended the call, grabbed a paper off her desk, and handed it to Jo. “Here are the registrations for those cars. And I found out something about Summer Solstice. Turns out it’s not her real name.”

“What is her real name?” Sam asked.

“That, I cannot tell you. Not yet. But Summer Solstice appeared only once in any database anywhere 12 years ago. Before that, nothing. So she must have changed her name. I have to do a little more digging to find out what it was before.”

Reese raised a brow at Sam, and he nodded. Reese had made quite a few unusual friends at the academy and had access to things they couldn’t use officially. That came in handy, and Sam wasn’t above pushing the limits of the law if it helped catch killers.

“Oh, and I conducted some more research. It turns out this Dennis Carter has a few more arrest warrants. Guess he has a bit of a temper.” She handed some papers to Sam.

Sam scanned the warrants. “Disorderly conduct.”

“Yes, and they all involved altercations with litterbugs.”

“Can’t say I blame him there. I don’t like litterbugs either. But this does prove he has a hair-trigger temper.” Sam looked at Jo. “I think Dennis just moved up to the top of the list. Let’s go see if he’s at the camp.”

“He’s probably not there,” Reese said.

Sam turned around and gave her a questioning look.

Reese smiled. “If I were you, I’d go straight to the owl zone. News 9 had a segment this morning about something going on up there, and it sounded like all the environmentalists were there.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The owl zone teemed with people. Even Dupont was there with his lackey, Vice Mayor Henley Jamison. Dupont gave a curt nod to Sam, and then avoided eye contact as he made his way through the crowd. Jamison glowered at Sam and Jo, trailing behind Dupont like an obedient puppy.

Kate Sullivan from News Nine was standing in the middle of a small open area with a fat microphone in her hand, interviewing Jackson Pressler. She'd conveniently located the interview so that the yellow crime scene tape that was still up from where Ingalls had been found was in the background.

"… and that construction over they-ya"— Jackson swiveled toward the hotel, which could just be seen between the leaves, and bunched his bushy gray brows together— "... is causing erosion of the land. And erosion kills trees. The owls need the trees. The federal grant money will help me stop that. So write to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife …"

"Oh, here's Mayor Dupont." Kate cut into Jackson's monologue and ran to Dupont, shoving her microphone in his face. "What are your thoughts on the owls, Mayor?"

Dupont cleared his throat and straightened his tie. Behind him, Jamison moved so that he could be on camera, plastering a politician's smile on his face.

"I'm very proud to be able to help save the owls. I plan to use the town resources in any way we can to accomplish that," Dupont said.

“Really? What about the construction and all the rezoning?” Kate’s voice turned hard. “Don’t you think that’s going to harm the owls and other species up here?”

Dupont’s smile faltered, and his eyes locked with Sam’s. “I have no intention of letting that happen. Plans are in place to scale down the construction, but construction brings growth and jobs. I do what the people of the town want … now if you’ll excuse me.” He pushed away, and Kate zoomed back to Jackson Pressler.

Sam zoned out Jackson’s monologue. There was a hidden meaning behind Dupont’s words, and the pointed look he’d given him indicated to Sam that he really was serious about getting rid of Thorne. Right now he had more important things to think about, though. He scanned the crowd for Dennis, stopping at a small group standing in a close circle near a stand of white pine and beech trees.

In the center of the group someone was speaking. Sam recognized him as one of the environmentalists, Peter.

“I witnessed a parliament of owls three nights ago. They must roost here often because you can see the droppings about three-quarters up the trunks.” Peter pointed to the tops of the trees.

Everyone looked up.

“But we don’t know how long they will stay in this area. They could be in danger of being forced to move. Owls have highly developed hearing, and construction noise might drive them away. Not to mention the construction is decimating the habitats of the mice, rabbits and other creatures they feed on, so the food supply is dwindling.”

The group shot looks of suspicion at Sam and Jo as they approached. A few of them came forward to pat Lucy, who wagged her tail, but the others sidled away slowly. Soon the entire group had dispersed, and Sam took Peter aside.

“Have you seen Dennis Carter?” Sam asked.

Peter glanced over Sam’s shoulder at the crowd. “Dennis? He should be here. We all decided to come out. Can’t pass up the opportunity to make the news for our cause.”

“I guess not.” Sam looked at the tops of the trees where Peter had said he’d seen the owls. “So you come out here at night?”

Peter nodded. “Yep. No, wait. Not the night Ray was killed.”

“You sure?”

Peter's eyes narrowed. "Yes. But we did end up out here together a few nights. Ray was always out here taking photos."

"Must have gotten some good ones," Jo said.

"Yeah, he got some really nice ones." Peter didn't sound impressed.

Sally came up to join them, and Peter slipped his arm around her shoulders in a possessive manner.

"He was a talented photographer," Sally said.

Peter pursed his lips "Yep. At least he had that going for him."

"Just because the two of you didn't get along doesn't mean he didn't have a lot going for him," Sally said.

The look on Peter's face indicated he didn't appreciate his girl rising to Ray's defense. "Whatever."

Sam looked at Jo. Peter and Ray didn't get along? He remembered Jo relaying the conversation she'd had with Sally at Holy Spirits. Sally had made it sound as if maybe she'd had a thing for Ray. Maybe Ray's death had more to do with jealousy than it had to do with the owls? But Sally had claimed Peter was in the tent all night with her and that she heard someone else get out of a different tent. Was she covering for Peter?

"Ray must have had a good camera to get those photos," Sam said.

"Yeah. A Canon EOS. Very pricey," Peter said.

"Any idea where that camera is?"

Peter frowned. "I hadn't thought about it. He always had it with him, so I assume he had it there that night. He was taking photos, wasn't he?"

"Yeah. I guess he wouldn't want to risk losing that and having to buy another."

Peter snorted. "By the way he was bragging about coming into money, he could have bought a store full of them."

"He was bragging about coming into money?" Jo asked.

"Yep. Well, not to everyone," Peter said.

Sally cut in. "That was in the heat of the moment. When you two were arguing ..." Sally's words trailed off. "I don't think he wanted it spread around."

"Did he say how he was going to come into money?" Jo asked.

"Not exactly." Sally gnawed her bottom lip. "But I got the impression it had something to do with his writing or his photography. You know he did take award-winning photos, and some of his articles were sought after. He

freelanced them, so maybe he was expecting a good payment for an article on the owls."

Jo turned to Peter. "What were you and Ray arguing about?"

"Ray was argumentative, and more so lately. Would pick a fight with anyone. Even Dennis."

"You saw Ray and Dennis fighting?" Sam asked.

"Not fighting, but they had words at the campsite by the river the other day," Peter said.

"Any idea what that was about?" Sam asked.

Peter shook his head. "Guess it was personal. They clammed up when they saw me coming."

"And you're sure you weren't out here that night?" Sam asked. "Maybe you got your nights mixed up."

Peter scowled and tightened his hold on Sally. "I'm positive. We were in the tent like we said." Peter glanced over Sam's shoulder and thrust his chin in that direction. "Here comes Dennis if you want to talk to him. I gotta take off."

Sam turned to see Dennis approaching through the woods.

Sam and Jo started toward him. Dennis looked up, spotted them and stopped. Then he turned almost as if to run. Sam was just about to pick up the pace when someone grabbed his arm and spun him around.

"Chief Mason! I'm so glad I caught you." Netty Deerdorff held his elbow in a vise-like grip with her right hand and Jo's elbow in her left. She had amazing strength for someone pushing eighty. Her face was pinched, her dark eyes narrowed. "Now I know you sent that nice Officer Kevin out to settle the dispute, but what are you going to do about the missing eggs?"

"Eggs?"

"Yes, from my hen, Henrietta," Nettie said.

Sam frowned, trying to extract his elbow as he craned his neck to keep his eye on Dennis. Where had he gone? He glanced at Jo, who was also scanning the crowd.

Nettie turned to Jo, pulling her in closer with her grip on her elbow. "You know how lovely fresh eggs are. Why, there's nothing like them. And Henrietta had laid two of them just that morning. Bitsy was the only one in there."

Sam managed to shake loose. "Nettie, goats don't eat eggs. A fox might have gotten in and eaten them. Have you secured the hen house properly?"

“Well, I ... I just let her run around in the yard, and she sleeps in Bruiser’s old dog house.” Nettie looked contrite.

“Then I suggest you get some chicken wire. It wasn’t Bitsy that ate those eggs, but if it makes you feel better I’ll bring some eggs over to your place tonight from Grover’s.”

“Well, I, I don’t want you to go to any trouble,” Nettie said.

“No problem.” Sam spun around. “We gotta run. Official police business,” he called over his shoulder as he and Jo rushed in the direction they’d last seen Dennis.

“Do you see him?” Jo asked as they trotted toward the woods.

“No. Damn!”

“Yeah. As soon as he saw us. He looked panicked.”

“Right. And why would he run unless he was guilty?”

“We need to get out to that campsite pronto. He might be pulling up stakes right now and getting ready to skip town.” Jo broke into a jog toward the Tahoe.

Just before they reached the vehicle, Summer Solstice stepped into their path.

“Hey, can I talk to you?” she said in a low voice as if she didn’t want anyone to overhear.

“We’re kind of in a hurry right now,” Sam said.

She remained in their path, crossing her arms over her chest and looking around furtively. “This is important. It’s about the night Ray died.”

Sam stopped trying to get around her. “Oh?”

“Yeah. You know how you asked if anyone heard anyone leaving?”

“Yep.”

“Well, I did hear something. I wasn’t one hundred percent sure when you asked before, and I didn’t want to say anything in front of everyone else, but now that I’ve thought about it I’m almost certain someone did leave in the middle of the night. I heard a tent zipper being unzipped very slowly and then a car start up.”

“You’re sure?” Sam asked. “Do you have any idea who it was? Or what direction the sound came from?”

Summer pressed her lips together. “I’ve been thinking about that. The way that spot is, the sounds echo off the river, so I really can’t say for sure whose tent it was.”

“But you’re sure you heard someone?” Sam asked.

“Yes. I’m positive about that.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

While Sam sped toward the campground, Jo double-checked the paper Reese had given her with the names of the owners of the cars that had been parked at the campsite by the river. "Dennis drives a green Gremlin."

"My bet is he's still at the camp. It takes time to pack a tent, so if we hurry we'll catch him." Sam accelerated, much to the delight of Lucy, whose head hung out the back window, enjoying the breeze.

Jo looked out the side window at the passing scenery of dense forest, which dropped off to an expansive view of mountains with puddles of cornflower-blue lakes at their feet. Her thoughts turned to Dupont's request for their help. "Dupont seemed as if he was trying to send you a message back there at the owl zone. How long do you think it will take before he gives us any information?"

"Don't know."

"We could run surveillance on the river," Jo suggested.

"We don't have the manpower for that," Sam said.

"Yeah, I guess that's another reason to get that new hire on board."

"I went over the resumes again this morning. His is on the corner of my desk. I'll call him when I get a chance."

As the Tahoe lurched and jolted down the dirt road, Jo debated asking about what Thorne had told Sam that night in Holy Spirits. Was it about her? It seemed as if Thorne had given Sam something. Could it have been an old article about her sister's disappearance?

Sam no longer acted aloof. Perhaps he figured she would tell him when she was ready. At any rate, things seemed good between them again, so

maybe it was best to leave it alone.

Jo's stomach swooped as they pulled up to the campsite. The green Gremlin was gone.

"He's not here. You think he's already gone?" she asked.

"Doesn't seem like there'd be time." Sam shut off the engine and jumped out. "Let's check."

Jo and Lucy piled out behind him and traversed the short path to the site.

"All the tents are here," Sam said.

"Which is his?"

"No idea. But he wouldn't have left without all his stuff."

Jo glanced around. Everything seemed as it had when they'd visited the day before. Lounge chairs circled the fire, clothing hung on the line, the trash picked up neatly. If anyone here was guilty of murder, they weren't in any hurry to leave.

"Funny thing how everyone claimed they were all in their tents when we talked to them yesterday, and now two people have privately said otherwise," Jo said.

Sam nodded. "Either they don't want to squeal in front of their friends or they're covering up."

"What do you think of Peter? He seemed awfully protective of Sally and not so keen on Ray."

"Jealous lover?"

"Can't rule that out," Jo said. "But both Peter and Summer said they saw Ray meeting with that mysterious guy."

"And something isn't right about Summer, either," Sam said. "Didn't Sally say she thought Summer was the one who left that night?"

"Right, but Summer just told us that *she* heard someone leaving." Jo gnawed her bottom lip. "Of course, she could have been making that up to cover for the fact that it was her."

"Or Sally and Peter could have been making things up to cover for the fact it was Peter."

By the fire, Lucy clawed and sniffed at something. She looked back and barked at them, her tail wagging rapidly.

Jo squatted beside her. The object of interest was a small piece of blackened metal with molded plastic gooped at one end. She pushed it out of the ashes and onto one of the rocks with a stick.

“Check this out. It’s a flash drive,” she said. “You think someone dropped it in the fire accidentally, or on purpose because they didn’t want anyone to see what was on it?”

“My bet is the latter. Better take it.”

Jo pulled an evidence envelope from her pocket, turned it inside out and stuck her hand in to pick up the drive without touching it.

“Good job, Lucy.” She patted the top of Lucy’s head and was rewarded with a Lucy smile. The dog’s smile froze, and her tail stopped in mid-wag. She let out a bark and then bounded off toward the tree line. Jo jerked her head in that direction. Dennis stood at the edge of the trees, a look of panic on his face.

“Stop right there!” Sam yelled.

Dennis turned and ran, Lucy at his heels.

Before Jo and Sam got to the tree line, Lucy had tackled Dennis. He went down with a loud “Oof!”

“Hey, get this thing off me!” He thrashed and tried to roll, but Lucy had his arm in a tight grip, her teeth just short of breaking the skin, exactly as she’d been trained.

“I’ll sue for police brutality!” Dennis yelled.

Sam snapped his fingers, and Lucy let go and trotted obediently to Sam’s side.

Dennis sat up, inspecting his arm. There was barely even a red mark.

“Police brutality doesn’t hold up if the police are trying to catch a criminal,” Sam said.

“I’m not a criminal!”

“Then why were you running from the police?”

“I ... I just got freaked out when I saw you poking through our things.” Dennis bristled, now becoming indignant. “You don’t have any right to …”

“Yes, we do,” Sam cut him off. “You’re camping here illegally on town property. But never mind that.” Sam reached over and hauled Dennis to his feet. “You’re wanted for questioning. So are you going to come to the station voluntarily, or do we have to cuff you and drag you there?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Sam sat Dennis in the interrogation chair in his office. It was a straight-backed wooden chair that Sam had taken a quarter inch off one leg so that the chair rocked. The off-kilter motion made suspects nervous, and the more nervous they got, the more they fidgeted. The more they fidgeted, the more the chair rocked, ratcheting up their anxiety and making confessions come more easily.

Sam sat behind his desk, Jo in a chair off to the side. Lucy warmed herself in a puddle of sunshine that spilled in from the tall windows.

"I don't understand why you need these high-handed tactics." Dennis leaned forward, the chair rocked and he sat back again. "I haven't done anything wrong."

"We just have some things we want to clear up," Sam said.

Dennis spread his hands. "Okay. Shoot."

"You and Ray were good friends, right?" Sam asked.

"Yeah. For a long time."

"Then why were you seen arguing the other day?"

Dennis rocked forward in the chair again, his eyes darting to the window. "We didn't argue."

"I have a witness."

"Okay, well, Ray was on edge and arguing a lot. I wasn't the only one he argued with. It was nothing. Didn't you ever argue with a friend?"

Point taken. Sam and Mick had argued plenty over the years yet remained close as brothers.

"What about the five thousand dollars?" Sam asked.

“What five thousand dollars?” Dennis tried to sound as if he had no idea about the five grand, but the way he shifted his eyes to the left told Sam he knew exactly what he was talking about.

Sam showed him the note, and Dennis sighed. “Oh, that. He invested in my company.”

“The trash-barrel company?”

Dennis straightened in the chair, reaching awkwardly into his back pocket for his cell phone. The chair rocked, and he looked exasperated. “Don’t you have a better chair?”

“Just answer the questions.”

“I’ll show you.” Dennis gestured to his cell phone, which Sam had confiscated and put on the corner of his desk. Sam nodded, and Dennis picked it up. He typed something in and then turned it to Sam. “He invested in Green Turtle — my company. There’s so much litter, and I want to clean it up. Is that a crime?”

Sam looked at the screen, which showed a bank account for the Green Turtle Company and a $5,000 deposit that coincided with the timeframe Ray had left the note.

“So he was an investor?”

“Of course. We’re friends. He’s a proponent of cleaning up the environment, too,” Dennis said. “So you see, we didn’t argue about anything important. Why would he have invested otherwise?”

Sam’s eyes narrowed. “Where did he get that kind of money?”

Dennis shrugged. “How would I know? He gets paid well sometimes for his photos.”

“Ever since you activists came to town, things have been a little heated. What do you know about that? Was Ray involved in any of the fights or graffiti? Was there anyone else he argued with? Anyone who would want him out of the way for anything?”

Dennis rocked in the chair again. “I have no idea what Ray does … did … when I wasn’t with him or who would want him out of the way. Lots of people here are hot-headed, and graffiti gets sprayed at every single one of these things.”

“What about egg throwing?”

“That’s unique to here because of the owls, but what’s that got to do with anything?”

“We saw you throw the egg at Dupont. Maybe egg-throwing is the least of your crimes.”

“Are you going to arrest me for that?”

“Not for that, but if you come clean with everything else, maybe we’ll go easy on you.” Sam usually tried this tactic, but it hardly ever worked. Dennis was no different.

“Like I said, I haven’t done anything worse.”

Sam leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “Then why did you run from us?”

Dennis looked down at the floor. His chair rocked. “You surprised me.”

“I’m not buying that. You ran at the owl zone when you saw us there, and then again at the camp. You’re avoiding us because you’re guilty. It’s only a matter of time before we find out the truth.”

Dennis’ eyes jerked back and forth between Jo and Sam, his face contorting in anguish. The chair rocked unsteadily, in tempo with Jo’s eraser tapping on her notepad. Sam and Jo remained quiet. Experience had taught them that sometimes saying nothing was the best way to get someone to say something.

“Okay. I confess. It was me.”

Sam shot Jo a look. That was too easy. Something wasn’t right. “You mean you confess that you murdered Ray Ingalls?”

“Murder? No. I confess that I was the one who sprayed graffiti on the side of the hotel. I didn’t kill anyone!”

“SO ANOTHER PERSON claims someone left their tent that night,” Jo said as they watched Dennis drive off with Kevin. They’d brought him in in the police car, so someone had to take him back. Kevin seemed the likely candidate.

Upon further interrogation, Dennis had reiterated that he was in his tent all night, but also claimed to have heard someone leave. He also denied knowing anything about the secret meetings with the orange-tipped hair guy. Now they were back at square one.

“It’s getting mucky,” Sam said.

“Yeah. Seems weird that Ray wouldn’t have told Dennis about meeting that guy. I mean, if they were close enough for him to invest five grand.” Jo shrugged.

“I’m still not sure we can bank on anything he says, but for now we’ve got nothing on him. All we can do is issue a fine for the graffiti,” Sam said.

“At least we cleared up the mystery of the five grand.” Jo went to the coffee machine, stuck in a K-cup, shoved her mug under the spout and pressed the button. “That explains the five grand that Ray deducted, but what about the fifteen grand that was deposited?”

“Guess we need to research that further.”

“Maybe not,” Reese cut in. “I looked into TLP like you asked. Turns out it’s a publishing company.”

“A publishing company?” Jo looked at her over the rim of her yellow smiley-face mug. “Maybe that makes sense. Ingalls sold photographs and wrote articles, right? It’s probably his publisher or something.”

Reese made a face. “Fifteen grand? For an article? I don’t know. One of my college friends writes freelance, and she gets about two hundred an article.”

“Maybe the payment was for a bunch of them?” Sam suggested.

Reese pursed her lips. “That’s a lot of articles.”

“So that’s not really good news. I mean, if the payment was legit, then we’re no further ahead than we were before.” Jo reached into the white bag on Reese’s desk and pulled out a jelly doughnut. The sound of the bag crinkling summoned Lucy from her plush dog bed. She trotted over to sit in front of Jo, her hopeful eyes trained on the doughnut.

“Well, we’ve ruled out Dennis. Now we have Summer and her mysterious sugar daddy, Peter and his jealousy, and this hooded guy who may or may not actually exist. Guess we need to do some old-fashioned detective work.”

Jo squeezed the sides of the doughnut and licked the blob of jelly out of it. “Dennis did say he heard someone leaving the campsite. So now three people have told us someone left. We need to figure out who that is. We need to check alibis.”

“Too bad everyone claims to have been in their tent asleep.”

“Maybe we need to figure out who else could have seen someone going up to the owl zone,” Jo suggested.

“The only one in the area is Jackson, and he wouldn’t have seen anyone. His house isn’t near the access road.”

“They drove in and out in their cars. Maybe we’ll get lucky and someone stopped for gas at the Quick Mart.”

“Suppose it can’t hurt to ask.” Sam bent down to pet Lucy. The dog tore her attention from the doughnut for a second to give him a quick glance. “And where is his camera?” Sam turned to Reese. “Put a watch on all the pawn shops and look on Craigslist and eBay to see if anyone is trying to unload that camera. It’s a pretty expensive model. A Canon EOS.”

“Will do.” Reese slipped back behind her desk and started tapping on her keyboard.

“This still could have something to do with Thorne. He seems most likely to have a hooded guy doing his dirty work,” Jo said.

“Right. But we don’t really have a good motive and no reason to question him. If he’s involved, something will come up. In the meantime let’s do some more checking on our suspects.”

“Where do we start?” Jo mumbled as she shoved the last bite of doughnut into her mouth.

“We know Summer Solstice isn’t using her real name. It could be she just wanted a wacky name or could be she has something to hide. Her visits to the hotel are suspicious, so I say we make a visit to The Carrington House and find out exactly what Summer’s up to.”

KEVIN GLANCED in the rearview mirror through the mesh divider at Dennis, who slunk low in the backseat of the Crown Vic, staring out the side window. He tapped his fingers on the armrest nervously but appeared happy to be sprung.

“Bet you’re glad to be going back to the campground,” Kevin said. He was still feeling a little put out that Sam hadn’t had him in on the interrogation, but that was okay. He needed to conduct his own little interrogation, to figure out what exactly his contact’s involvement in this whole thing was. Something didn’t add up, and Kevin needed to get to the bottom of it.

Dennis raked his hands through his hair. “I’ll say. Feels weird to ride in the backseat like this, though.”

“Sorry, man. It’s the only other car we have. So what’s the big deal with this owl zone anyway? Is it worth killing over?”

Dennis’ eyes jerked from the passing rural landscape to meet Kevin’s in the mirror. “Killing? Is that why you think Ray was killed?”

“Sure. I mean, it’s no coincidence he was out there, right?”

“I guess not. The owl zone is pretty controversial.” Dennis frowned. “Now that I think about it, there have been deaths at other protected areas.”

Kevin’s eyebrows ticked up. “Really? Does that happen a lot?”

“Nah, but a few times over the past decades.”

“What was the motive?”

“Anger mostly. Someone didn’t like that the protected areas were restricted. One time two guys came to blows about it in a bar. Another time it was more like this, where the guy ended up dead in an alley.”

“Don’t see much point in that,” Kevin said. “Killing someone isn’t going to stop the area from being protected.”

“Yeah, people are dumb,” Dennis agreed. “But when big money is involved, people get crazy.”

“Big money?”

“Like that hotel being built next to the area. Those owls could be a real hindrance to that guy’s expansion plans. What if they find owls breeding on his land, too? Maybe he’d get shut down.”

“I see what you mean.” Kevin hit the blinker and turned onto the dirt road to the campsite, the Crown Vic taking the bumps smoothly. “But how would killing Ray solve that problem?”

“You got me.” Dennis shrugged.

Kevin focused his attention on navigating the narrow road. Did his contact’s request for information have anything to do with Thorne? The guy must have millions tied up in that project.

Maybe his contact wanted to find out if there was something about to happen with the protected owl zone to take some sort of preemptive action. But if that were true, then the contact wouldn’t be with the FBI or the state police. And if it wasn’t the police who wanted information, then maybe that meant that Sam and Jo weren’t doing anything wrong.

Kevin remembered his contact’s warning that he could be “taken down” along with Sam and Jo. He’d assumed that meant losing his badge, maybe

even prosecution or jail time, but if the contact wasn't gathering information for some kind of police case, and Sam and Jo weren't doing anything wrong, then what exactly had he meant by "taken down"?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Carrington House was three stories of concrete and brick, complete with fancy cast embellishments and crosshatched windows that made it look like a 1600s castle rather than a modern hotel.

Lucy waited in the car as Sam and Jo pushed through the glass doors into the air-conditioned lobby. Decorated in light blue and brown, with a tufted velvet sofa on one side and three chairs clustered around a danish-modern coffee table, the room was anchored by a blue-and-brown rug in modern geometrics.

The lobby was calmingly quiet, and Sam wondered how they managed that. Maybe they had piped in white noise, along with the soothing smell of crisply laundered bedding that seemed to hang in the air.

In front of them, a half-round blond wooden reception desk gleamed with a thick layer of shellac. Behind the desk stood a twenty-something with large, dark-framed glasses and ruby-red lips that parted to show her sparkling white teeth.

"Help you?" Her gaze flitted nervously over their attire — WRPD Police T-shirts over jeans.

Sam headed to the desk, his boots thumping on the shiny marble floor.

"We're looking for the room number of a guest," Sam said.

The girl's gaze narrowed. "I don't know. The manager isn't here, and I don't think I can just give out room numbers. Don't you need a warrant or something?"

Sam glanced at Jo. Everyone was an expert now thanks to all the cop shows on television. Put a damper on getting information quickly. They

didn't have a warrant, and it would take too long to get one. "Okay, how about you just tell us if the person is registered here? You can do that, right?"

She shuffled her feet uncertainly. "Okay, I guess so."

"Her name is Summer Solstice."

The girl gave them the side eye as if to test if he was joking, but Sam continued to look at her with a straight face. She went to a computer and started tapping keys. After a few seconds, she shook her head. "Nope. No Summer Solstice here."

"Maybe you've seen her," Jo said. "She might be staying here with someone else. She has a pretty unique look. She's got rainbow-colored hair."

"Rainbow hair? Um. No. Nope, I haven't seen anyone here like that."

"Are you sure?" Sam asked.

"Yes, but I only work part time. You want to talk to Mina, but she's off today. Fishing, I think."

Chirp!

Sam pulled his phone out, his heart kicking at the text from Reese.

Just got a call. Trouble at The Balsams. Break-in at Ray Ingalls' cabin.

SAM HIT the flashing lights and sped toward the Balsam Cabins. He didn't want to use the siren, because that might warn off the intruder.

"Ray's cabin? That can't be coincidence." Jo's mouth was tense, and her cheeks flushed with excitement. Even Lucy seemed excited, sitting straight in the back, her ears perked up and ready. The police hadn't released Ray's cabin yet. All of his items hadn't been claimed, and yellow police tape still draped across the door. Someone had been in there before looking for something. Apparently they hadn't found what they were looking for and had now returned to get it.

"Get the K-9 vest out. This guy could be our killer," Sam said, thinking more about Lucy's safety than his own.

Jo undid her seatbelt and hung over the back of the seat, rummaging in the big box they kept on the floor. She pulled out the Kevlar K-9 vest they'd had specially fitted for Lucy.

Sam pulled in to the Balsams, slowing the Tahoe. “Get ready. I’m going in slow so we can surprise him.”

Jo yanked the vest over Lucy and took two more, one for herself and one for Sam, as he coasted toward the cabin with the engine off.

Sam frowned at the front door. The cabin looked intact. He’d expected the door to be broken in, but that wasn’t the case. No windows smashed. Nothing. But a beat-up Dodge sat in front of the cabin.

“That look like a break-in to you?” he whispered.

“No.”

They got out of the Tahoe slowly, leaving the doors open. Jo handed Sam a vest as she wriggled into hers. They approached the cabin with their guns out, Lucy quietly trotting along beside them.

Jo jerked her head to the side of the cabin. Sam figured she must have seen something, so they made their way there, backs flattened against the cabin. No sound interrupted the twitter of birds and the buzz of insects.

A scurrying at his feet brought Sam’s attention to the base of the cabin. It didn’t have a basement, but rested on cinderblocks with a lattice skirting. The noise came from under the cabin. Probably a squirrel or chipmunk burying acorns for the winter.

When they got to the corner, Jo stuck her head around, then jumped out with her gun in front of her. Sam followed suit.

Someone squirmed out from under the cabin, took one look at them with surprised eyes and then turned and ran into the woods.

Lucy glanced up at Sam. He gave her the signal, and she took off, gaining on the man easily and then launching herself onto his back. He fell to the ground and flooded the air with cursing.

Sam and Jo were there in a second.

“Hey, get it off!” The man, who was on his stomach, tried to squirm away from Lucy. The dog glanced up at Sam, the man’s wrist in her mouth as he tried to shake loose.

Jo stepped in, shoving her knee into the perpetrator’s back and his face into the dirt as she whipped the flexi-cuffs out of her back pocket.

Lucy let go of his wrist and then sat on her haunches, eyeing the man warily.

“What the heck? This is police brutality. I didn’t do anything!” The man’s voice was muffled. Jo might have been pushing his face into the dirt a little too hard.

“You ran. That usually indicates that you did something.” Sam hauled him up and swiped off the hoodie to reveal orange-tipped hair. He was just a kid, maybe mid-twenties. His long, dark bangs partially covered scared eyes. And he had a look on his face that was a cross between indignation and terror.

“What were you doing under there?” Sam demanded.

“Nothing. I swear.”

“We got a call about a break-in,” Jo said, brushing off her jeans.

“I didn’t break in! I was outside.”

Sam jerked him forward, and he stumbled as they walked him to the police car.

“Yeah, yeah. You can tell us all about it at the station.” Sam stopped at the Tahoe and opened the rear door.

Lucy had followed along, standing right beside Sam. The cuffed man eyed her warily.

“And you get to sit in the back with Lucy. I don’t think she likes you, so I’d think twice about trying anything funny.”

AT THE STATION, they put the guy in the chair with the uneven leg. Jo thought he looked like a scared little kid, his eyes darting from Sam to Jo to Lucy, who lazed in the sun under the window, one eye trained on him. He had the orange-tipped hair and he’d run when he’d seen them, so he couldn’t be that innocent.

“So, John,” Sam started. He’d had a license on him showing his name as John Serrao. He was from out of town.

Sam had his butt resting on the edge of his desk in front of John, and he leaned forward right into John’s face. “What were you after at Ray’s? Why did you kill him? Who is behind this?”

John leaned away from Sam, the chair rocking back precariously. “Kill him? I didn’t kill him. What are you talking about?”

Jo sat next to John. She leaned over the arm of her chair, closer to him, trying to appear friendly. She softened her voice. “Look, we have witnesses who say you met with Ray the night he died. And they saw you meeting with him before that. Not to mention, you were clearly doing something

under his cabin. If you tell us who put you up to this, we'll try to keep you off death row."

John jerked terrified eyes from Jo to Sam, the chair thumping back and forth. "What the hell? I didn't have anything to do with killing him. I needed him. I'm screwed now that he's dead."

"How so?" Sam asked.

John let out a breath and sat back in the chair and closed his eyes. "I guess I can talk about it now. It doesn't matter now that he's dead. I was helping Ray write a book. No one was supposed to know. That's all."

"A book?"

"Yeah, he was writing a tell-all book about his life on the environmental fringe. It was a big deal, supposedly. Anyway, I'm just the ghost writer. You know, I take his ideas and put them into pretty words. But the book was supposed to be a secret. The publisher didn't want anyone to know it was coming out ahead of time. That's why we met in secret and why we had that crazy switch-off with the flash drive that he would put under the cabin so I could come get it when he wasn't there."

"Why didn't the publisher want anybody to know?" Jo asked. "Don't publishers usually like to create buzz ahead of a release?"

John shrugged. "I guess some of the stuff in the book might make some people angry."

"What stuff?" Sam asked.

"Darned if I know. So far it's all boring. Stuff about this extinct species here and that rare plant there. I don't know what in there would make anyone mad, but I think he was just working up to the good stuff."

Jo tapped her pencil on her pad and exchanged a glance with Sam. Could what this guy was saying be true? It made sense. The clandestine meetings, the reason for murder.

Jo wanted to believe the murder had something to do with Thorne and his activities at the river, but this made more sense.

John put his palms up. "Look, why would I kill him? I cut a deal for a royalty percentage, so I lose if this book doesn't get published. I've spent six weeks working on it. No book, no royalty payments. That's why I was looking for the flash drive. I was hoping he stashed one under there before he died and that there was enough on it to complete the book."

"But there was no flash drive?" Sam asked.

“Nope. It was a long shot anyway. He’d just given me one the other day, and usually it takes him a few days to plant another.” John’s shoulders slumped, and his gaze drifted from Sam to Jo, and back to Sam. “I just found out he was dead and thought I’d double-check. Look, you can verify this with my publisher. Trade Lake Press.”

TLP.

Sam frowned at John then looked at Jo and jerked his head toward the lobby, shouting over his shoulder at John: “Stay there.”

Sam stood just outside the door, arms crossed over his chest, and looked at Jo. “What do you think? I tend to believe him.”

Jo glanced back in through the cracked door. The kid sat in the chair, wringing his hands. “Yeah, he doesn’t seem like the killing type. And it makes sense, but this takes the case in a whole new direction.”

“I’ll say it does. I’m still hoping Thorne is tied into this somehow.”

“So that’s why someone was searching for something at Ray’s cabin. It wasn’t John. It was the killer. The killer knew he had something on his computer and wanted to find it before anyone else did.”

Sam nodded. “Remember that flash drive we found in the fire at the camp?”

Jo nodded. “Do you think that had the tell-all information on it?”

“Not sure, but whoever put it in that fire probably thought it did.”

Jo glanced back into the room at John. “Which means our killer *is* someone at that camp.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

By the time they were done with John it was almost 7 p.m. They'd checked out his credentials. He really was a writer as he'd said. The publisher verified he was working with Ray on a book. He wasn't even in town the night Ray was killed. They let John go. He had no motive anyway. In fact, he was worse off now that he would lose out financially unless he could get the notes that Jo assumed were on Ray's computer.

Jo sat at her desk, tapping the eraser end of her pencil and staring down at her notes. The smell of stale coffee wafted from her cup, and she glanced in to see a dark ring at the bottom. She really should wash that thing out. Her gaze drifted to the town offices. When was Dupont going to give them the information on the drug movement so they could bust Thorne? That bust seemed even more important now that it didn't look like he had anything to do with Ray's murder.

Sam stood in front of a corkboard, looking at the photos and notes they'd tacked up. Lucy snored in her dog bed.

"Now this case has another angle," Sam said.

"And now I guess someone really did break in and take the laptop from Ray's cabin," Jo said.

"Not break in. No doors or windows were busted, remember?" Sam said.

"Yeah, but the place had been tossed."

"Meaning someone must have had the key to the cabin, because it wasn't in Ray's pockets." Sam tapped a photo on the cork board, the one of

Ray's personal effects from the morgue. Wallet, car fob, press pass. No cabin key.

"By now I'm sure they've gotten rid of it, though," Sam said.

"At least we know the fifteen grand deposit was a book advance. TLP specializes in tell-all books. Whistleblower books and true stories of interest. Reese was right. That was too much money for a single article."

"So who wants to stop that book from being written?"

"It could be one of the other environmentalists. He would have plenty of information about them," Jo said.

"Or someone from his past. Someone who did something shady during another environmental protest," Kevin's voice drifted over from behind the post office boxes.

Sam turned, and Jo craned her neck to peer around Sam just in time to see Kevin step around the boxes and into the room.

Kevin paused, his gaze flicking from Sam to Jo. "Sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I just got back from settling an argument at the Cut and Curl." At their curious looks, Kevin held his palms up. "Don't even ask. Usual local stuff, and it's all taken care of. Anyway, that guy Dennis said that there had been other deaths at previous environmental rallies or whatever they call those things. Maybe Ray was going to expose some underground environmentalist killer or something."

Sam pressed his lips together. "I think it's someone closer. Someone here in town right now. Someone with a secret they don't want revealed."

"And I might know who that is." Reese appeared from behind the post office boxes with a piece of paper in her hand. She held it up to show them. "Summer Solstice. Turns out her true identity is Sandra Grenier. She's an oil heiress. And get this. Her father's company is responsible for a lot of the fracking in the Midwest."

Jo's brows shot up. "She certainly wouldn't want that to get out, would she?"

"Nope. She built her career railing against the rich and fighting oil companies. Being an heiress to one that does fracking isn't exactly environmentally responsible."

"But she said she heard someone leaving the camp that night," Jo said. "Unless she was making that up, lying to cover for the fact that *she* left."

"Could be," Sam said. "But we need to find out if Ray knew about her identity. And let's not forget about Peter or Sally. They might have

something to hide."

"Already looked into them," Reese said. "There was nothing much on either of them. Peter got into some trouble with a big construction conglomerate a while back, but that's par for the course for most of them. None of them like it when corporations decimate the woods to build a strip mall."

"Like Thorne," Sam said. "But whatever Ray had was secret. It wouldn't be anything that was in the public record."

"There's still another angle. What if Ray discovered Thorne was up to something? What if Thorne did something to the owls and Ray was going to expose it in a book? That would be big news, right? Take down the greedy corporate guy," Kevin suggested.

"Could be. We can sit around here guessing about it as long as we want, but until we know for sure it's not a solid lead. We need to find that computer." Sam turned to Reese and raised a brow.

"I'm on it. I got to call in to all the pawnshops in the area. I've already scoured Craigslist and eBay, but didn't find one of those cameras for sale," Reese said.

Sam glanced at the clock. "Okay. I guess we need some thinking time on this. It's late. I promised Netty Deerdorff some eggs, so I'd better get up to her place before sundown."

"Yeah. I got to run to class." Reese spun around and headed toward her desk in the lobby.

"I suppose I should go home and feed Fin." Jo opened her bottom desk drawer and pulled her backpack out, then glanced at the dirty coffee cup. Plenty of time to clean that tomorrow.

Sam whistled for Lucy, and she darted up from her bed and trotted to his side. He looked at Kevin. "You okay with the night shift?"

"Sure, boss." Kevin smiled and started the paperwork from his call.

Jo followed Sam and Lucy out. She caught up with them beside the Tahoe and stood close, leaning in toward Sam.

"Hey, Sam?"

He turned, and for a minute she got the impression he expected her to say something not work related. For a second she felt as if it might be okay to ask what Thorne had shown him that night in Holy Spirits a month ago. But then thoughts of Thorne reminded her of the real reason she'd followed Sam outside.

Jo lowered her voice and asked, “What about Dupont? Have you heard anything from him?”

Sam shook his head, looking over her shoulder toward the town offices, his gaze weary.

“I wonder what he’s up to?” Jo leaned her back against the side of the Tahoe, the warm metal of the car radiating through her T-shirt. “Why hasn’t he said anything further?”

“Maybe he’s waiting for the right opportunity to come up. Or maybe Thorne changed plans.” Sam shrugged. “I guess we’ll have to wait.”

“Well, I don’t trust him,” Jo said.

“Yeah, me either.”

Jo pushed off from the car. “We need to be extra cautious on this. Dupont may act like a bozo, but he’s dangerous.”

Sam opened the Tahoe door and glanced back at her. “I couldn’t agree more.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sam dropped the eggs off with an appreciative Nettie, but he didn't stay to chat. His mind was preoccupied.

Good thing he could trust the station to Kevin. He was proud of the way he'd been proactive in taking that call at The Cut 'N Curl and not bothering Sam with the details. Kevin was shaping up to be a fine officer, even if he didn't want to work full-time hours.

He couldn't stop thinking about the short conversation he'd had with Jo as he was leaving. He decided to take a swing by Jesse Cowley's. If anyone knew when Thorne would start moving drugs again, it was Jesse.

He pulled into the driveway of the dilapidated blue ranch and cut the engine. Lucy shifted in the passenger seat beside him, her nose out the window, sniffing furiously. There was definitely something funky in the air.

Sam heard laughter out back, so he went around the side of the house, weaving around a pile of discarded plastic planters, the plants they once contained long dead and dried.

In the back, Jesse and three of his friends stood around a fire pit of cinder blocks. One of them, Brian Carlson, noticed Sam first. He jerked around, throwing something on the ground and then covering it with the heel of his boot. The others whipped their heads in Sam's direction as attempts not to look nervous spread across their faces.

"Chief Mason, what brings you here?" Jesse tried to act casual, but Sam could tell by the way he licked his lips that he was anything but. His eyes flicked from Sam to Lucy, who trotted around the fire pit sniffing the ground.

“I was just driving by and thought I’d check in,” Sam replied, giving him his best official police stare. “What are you guys doing?”

“We’re just hanging around by the fire pit, you know, drinking a few beers.” One of the men raised his bottle. Lucy had sniffed her way around the crowd and was now digging in the ground where Brian had thrown something.

Sam wasn’t stupid. He figured Brian had tossed a joint. Even the wood smoke from the fire couldn’t hide the cloying smell of pot. But he didn’t need to make Jesse or any of the others too nervous. He wasn’t here to bust anyone. He wanted answers. He whistled for Lucy to come to his side.

“You want one?” Jesse fished a beer out of a white Styrofoam cooler and angled it toward Sam.

“Thanks, but I can’t stay. I just wanted to ask you a quick question.” Sam jerked his head toward the side of the house. He knew Jesse didn’t want his friends to think he was too friendly with the law, and Sam sure as hell didn’t want anyone else knowing that he was trying to figure out Thorne’s delivery schedule. Not to mention that Jesse wouldn’t want word getting back to Thorne that he gave this kind of information to Sam. It was better to keep Jesse’s friends guessing as to what they were talking about. He was sure Jesse would make up some crazy story that would satisfy their curiosity.

Jesse shrugged as if Sam’s request was no big deal and headed to the side of the house.

“What?” Jesse swigged his beer and glanced back in the direction of the fire pit.

“I was just wondering if you heard any news on when, uh, things might open up in your extracurricular business,” Sam said.

“Uh, not sure what you mean.”

Sam rolled his eyes. “I think you can cut the crap now. We both know about your side business. As long as we can help each other out, I’m not going to make any trouble for you. It would be mighty helpful to me if you could let me know when that business might open up again.”

Jesse stared at Sam for minute, then nodded. “I don’t know for sure, but I heard a rumor maybe this weekend.”

“How solid of a rumor?” Sam asked.

“Slightly solid.” Jesse shrugged. “They don’t exactly ask my opinion. I only know what I hear, and half the time that’s wrong. Like I told you

before, I'm low on the food chain."

Sam stared at him for a few minutes, then nodded. Jesse was telling him as much as he knew.

"Okay, thanks. You guys carry on." Sam turned and walked back to the car, Lucy following behind.

SAM GOT BACK in the car and sat for a minute, thinking. Lucy, in the passenger seat, must have sensed that he needed help. She put her big paw on his arm.

He turned to her. "The weekend is in four days. And which day on the weekend do you think he meant?"

Lucy stared at him.

"Maybe that's why Dupont hasn't said anything?"

Lucy flicked her eyes from his to the window.

"I suppose the smart thing to do would be to put surveillance on the river. If trade is opening up in four days, that might mean product is going to come down the river before that," Sam said.

Lucy took her paw away and settled back into the seat.

"You think that's a good idea?" Sam started the engine. "I don't know who we would put on surveillance. We're short-handed as it is."

Lucy glanced at him and whined.

"Yeah, I should've already made an offer to that Wyatt guy, huh?"

Lucy turned and looked back out the window.

"Maybe I'll have Reese start the paperwork."

Lucy continued to stare out the window.

"If only I could figure out a likely spot on the river. We couldn't possibly surveil the entire river." Sam pushed the button to slide down Lucy's window, and put the car in gear. "Maybe Jackson knows something. Thorne would need boat access or a spot where they could get the product out to a boat. Jackson might know the most likely spots for that sort of thing."

Woof!

Sam headed toward Jackson Pressler's place, driving past the rolling hills and enjoying the view of the orange sun setting behind blue layers of

mountains in the distance. Lucy enjoyed the view too, sticking her head out the window, her tongue hanging out and the wind in her fur.

When he got to Jackson's, the old man was in the driveway, wedged halfway under a new sculpture.

Sam approached and knelt on the other side of the sculpture. Jackson looked up at him through pieces of twisted metal. On the grass beside him lay piles of assorted metal, plastic and rubber parts.

"Hey, Sam. What's up?" Jackson scuttled out from under the sculpture, rubbed his hands, and then used the sculpture for leverage to stand.

"Hey, Jackson." Sam shook his hand and remained quiet while Jackson bent to pet Lucy.

"I got a question about the Hogback River," Sam started. "You know a good spot to put a boat in?"

Jackson glanced in the direction of the river and shook his head. "It's all overgrown in there. I haven't been there since I was a little kid. But there is a spot down by Old Parade Road. You planning on doing some fishin'?"

"Something like that. What you got going on here?" Sam pointed at the junk in the grass.

Jackson looked down at the various parts spread on the grass. "Building a new sculpture. Can you believe people would throw away good parts like this?"

Sam looked down at the jumble of parts at Jackson's feet. He didn't particularly see anything good. Some old wheels from a baby carriage, a fancy silver-plate creamer with the plating rubbed off, some pieces of tires and … wait a minute, was that busted-up black thing a camera?

Sam squatted and picked it up, his heart thudding when he saw the make: Canon EOS.

Ray Ingalls' camera.

He squinted up at Jackson. "This is an expensive camera. Where did you get this?"

"Down at the dump. Why?"

Sam didn't answer. He was busy looking over the camera. There was a slot for a memory card, but it was empty. Isn't that where all the photos would be? "That guy who was killed on your property, he had a camera like this, and it seems to be missing."

"Well I sure as hell didn't take it." Jackson looked miffed.

Sam held his palms up. “I didn’t think you did. The killer took it. He must’ve thrown it away to get rid of it. Did you find a memory card with it?”

Jackson looked at the camera and made a face. “What’s a memory card? This is what I found. You’ve got it all here.” He spread his hands over the pile on the ground. “This is all the stuff I got from the dump.”

Sam sorted through the pile again while Lucy squatted beside him, sniffing every object. No memory card.

“You mind if I take this?” Sam held up the camera. It *had* to be Ray Ingalls’ camera, but it was pretty beaten up. Maybe it had internal memory and Reese could get something off it.

Jackson shrugged. “If you want to. It’s all just junk to me.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Jackson Pressler was incorporating this into a sculpture?" Jo asked when Sam showed her the camera the next day at the station. They stood in front of Reese's desk in the lobby and, because they were the only ones in, Sam had just filled her in on what he'd learned from Jesse about the possibility of a weekend drug run on the river.

"Yep. Good thing I came along when I did."

"And he found it in the trash? Smart killer. If Jackson wasn't such a scavenger, that thing would be miles away in a landfill somewhere and you'd have never found it," Jo said.

"Yep. I called Thaddeus Murloch over at the dump last night. He said the truck rolled out already, so if there was a card in the camera and it fell out in the truck, it's gone. We'll never find it."

"That's probably where Ray's laptop is," Jo said.

"Unless the killer still has it."

"Why would he?"

"I think the killer is smart enough to know a laptop would have data on it. Even if you erase the hard drive, you can recover that data in a good forensics lab. He might not have realized the camera could have internal memory that would possibly allow us to recover the photos. A laptop is too big to burn, like the flash drive. Electronics are not supposed to go in the trash like that. Thaddeus was pretty upset that the camera was in there, so I think someone would have noticed a laptop and pulled it out. It wouldn't be smart for the killer to toss it in there."

The lobby door opened, and Reese came in lugging a backpack, a Styrofoam cup in one hand and white doughnut bag in the other.

Jo relieved her of the bag, peered in and picked out a jelly-filled.

Sam held up the mangled camera. “Can you get any photos off this thing?”

Reese put her backpack down and held out her hand. She made a face while turning the camera over and over. “What happened to it?”

“Jackson Pressler found it in a Dumpster, then was fixing to use it in one of his sculptures.”

“Where’s the memory card? I don’t think this model of camera has any internal memory. If you don’t have the memory card, we can’t get the photos.”

“Well, that sucks, because the killer obviously took this for a reason. Ray must have snapped some shots of him before he killed him,” Sam said.

“So we might not ever find the laptop, and the camera is no good,” Jo said. “That’s no help.”

“Maybe we don’t need the camera,” Sam offered. “We already have a pretty good suspect in Summer Solstice. She changed her name and would have a reason to want to stop Ray from revealing who she really is.”

“And she’s also up to something at that hotel,” Reese said.

“Looks like we know what the next step is: Talk to Summer to find out exactly what she’s up to.”

SAM LIKED ORDER AND PRECISION, so he sent Kevin back to the hotel to see if Mina was on duty. Maybe she’d remember Summer with her rainbow hair or, better yet, Summer would be registered there under her former name. In the meantime, he and Jo drove to the owl zone to see if they could find Summer and pull her in for questioning.

A few cars, including Summer’s Volkswagen, sat along the dirt road.

“Now we know how she can afford a fairly new car.” Jo nodded her chin toward the Beetle as they started down the path.

“I hear she makes a pretty good living giving speeches, too. We don’t know that she even uses her family money,” Sam said.

Jo raised a brow. “Uh-huh.”

The owl zone was nearly empty. Two people crouched beside a tree studying moss, and another tight group convened under a pine listening to Summer preach about something.

Sam walked toward Summer's group. Out of habit, his eyes scanned the area for anything amiss. There was still no sign of the egg shells from the crime scene. The absence of them niggled the back of his mind.

The tall pines and oaks shaded the lush green grass of the clearing. In the distance an owl hooted — a rarity for daytime. Sam knew they could normally only be heard after sunset. A slight breeze rustled the leaves, carrying with it the muted sounds of Thorne's heavy machinery working on the hotel site.

The people gathered around Summer were what Sam would call earthy types. They wore practical cotton clothing in muted tones, Birkenstock sandals and long hair. Summer's narrowed gaze tracked Sam as he walked toward her, but she didn't miss a beat in her lecture about owl mating habits.

"And until *the establishment* stops ruining the environment, the numbers of these owls and other animals will continue to dwindle," she said to the group, her eyes never leaving Sam and Jo.

"That's true. It's a damn shame too," Sam said. It pissed him off that Summer assumed he didn't care about the environment because he was in law enforcement. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The group turned around and scowled at Sam and Jo, their eyes softening when they noticed Lucy. She dogtrotted over to them. She was a good ice breaker, and soon none of them could resist petting her.

Summer stood with her arms crossed over her chest. "What are you doing here? Are we breaking some law? This is a peaceful gathering."

"We just have a few questions. *Important* questions."

Summer's scowl deepened. "I don't have to answer your questions."

"Maybe not, but I'm going to ask them, and I'm betting you don't want me to do that with all these people around."

Summer chewed her bottom lip while she thought about it. Apparently she got the hint of the threat in Sam's tone and realized it was a smart idea to talk to Sam and Jo alone. She addressed her little group. "I think that's all for today. Tomorrow I'll talk more about owl feeding habits if anyone is interested."

The group broke up and walked off, stealing curious backward glances at them.

"What is this about?" Summer demanded.

"The murder," Jo said.

"I told you everything I know already," Summer insisted.

"Right. You said that you heard someone leave the campsite that night."

"Yeah."

"So you were there all night?"

Summer scrunched her face. "Of course I was. How else would I hear someone leave?"

Jo showed her a photo of the mangled flash drive. "Does this look familiar?"

"No."

"And you're sure you don't know why someone would want Ray Ingalls dead?"

"No. I already told you. This is harassment. I don't have to stand for this." Summer tried to push past them, but Sam pulled out the copy of the license issued under her former name that Reese had given him and shoved it toward her.

"I think you do have to stand for this. In fact, now that you insist on lying to us, I think we might have to bring you into the station."

Summer stared at the paper, her neck flushing red in anger. She shoved it back at Sam. "So I changed my name. So what? That's not against the law. It was all done legally. I wanted to disassociate from my family. I don't stand for the same things they do."

"Right. And it would be a shame if your followers found out who you really were, wouldn't it?"

Fear flickered in Summer's eyes as they jerked from Sam to Jo.

"Don't you make a lot of money with those little articles you write and your speaking engagements?" Jo asked.

"So what if I do?" Summer's voice was tight.

"I'm sure you didn't want that to all go away when Ray published his book."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ray was writing a book. A book that would expose all kinds of secrets in the environmentalist movement. Secrets like yours," Jo said.

Sam tensed, ready to grab Summer if she tried to bolt. He didn't want Lucy to have to chase her down. He had enough to bring her in, but she didn't react like a guilty killer. He glanced at Jo, and the look on her face told him that she didn't think Summer acted guilty either. And Jo's instincts in that area were usually spot on.

Summer shook her head. "No. I didn't —"

"Are you sure?" Jo cut in. "Because right now we have the rest of the White Rock Police Department checking your alibis. One of them is at The Carrington House looking to prove you lied about your whereabouts the night Ray was murdered."

"What do you mean?" Summer asked, her back straightening.

"You weren't at the campsite that night, were you?" Sam pressed.

Summer held Sam's gaze for a few defiant seconds, then deflated a bit. "Okay, fine. I wasn't at the campsite all night. Camping sucks. So whenever we go on these little junkets, I rent a nice hotel room and I sneak to the hotel after everyone is asleep. Nice showers, comfy bed and a continental breakfast. You gonna arrest me for that?"

"No but we *will* arrest you for murder."

"You can't prove that."

"Not yet, but right now we're getting a search warrant to search the hotel for the laptop."

"What laptop?"

"The one Ray was writing his book on."

"Why would I have that?" Summer seemed genuinely perplexed.

"Because you didn't want anyone to see his notes revealing who you really are."

Summer relaxed, a smile quirking her lips. "Well, that's where you're wrong. Ray didn't know who I really am. I met him long after I changed my name."

Sam leaned forward into her face. "Maybe he found out just like we did."

"It's not that easy to find out. You guys probably discovered that yourself, right? With my family's money I can hide a lot of things. I bet it took quite a bit of digging to figure out who I really am."

It was true. It had taken Reese quite a while to come up with Summer's real name. And if Sam had to guess, he figured Reese had probably pulled

in a few favors and maybe had done some things not quite by the book. Things that normal civilians like Ray wouldn't have access to.

"You can search my room if you don't believe me." Summer pulled a key card from her purple suede fringed purse and handed it to them. "I've got nothing to hide. Anyway, I was in my hotel room that whole night. Don't they have computer programs that will tell you when the key card was used and when the doors were opened?"

Sam glanced at Jo. They did have those. "Call Kevin and see if he's still at the hotel. Tell him to act like a warrant is on the way." Sam shrugged his shoulder at Jo. A warrant really wasn't on the way, but sometimes you could get people to pass along information by pretending it was.

Jo moved off to the side, her phone to her ear.

"So, are you gonna arrest me or let me go?" Summer asked.

"Depends," Sam said.

"On what?"

"On what the hotel says."

Jo snapped her phone shut. "She might be telling the truth. The card key access says she went in her room at 1 a.m. and there was no other entry."

Sam narrowed his gaze at Summer, who looked a little too smug. He didn't want to let her go. She was his best suspect, but he had nothing to hold her on. Finally he stepped back and gestured toward the parking lot. "You can go."

Sam and Jo watched her rainbow skirt swirl around her ankles as she rushed away.

"You think she could've done it?"

"Doesn't sound like it. Not if she was in her room," Jo said.

Sam shook his head. "Is there a way she could've gotten out of that room without using the door? A window? Maybe she had someone else use the key card and go into her room while she was out murdering Ray. Call Kevin back and see if there's surveillance footage of the parking lot. If there is, have him get those tapes to find out what Summer really did that night."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Jo's gut told her that Summer might actually be telling the truth. She didn't exhibit any of the telltale signs of a liar. Fidgeting. Looking to the left. Nervousness. Summer hadn't exhibited any of them, and she'd readily volunteered her room key.

Jo's mind cranked along, running through the other suspects and trying to place one as the most likely to kill as she trudged back to the Tahoe.

"Now what?" Jo asked, looking at Sam over the top of her sunglasses.

"We see if we can stir things up." Sam let Lucy in the back of the Tahoe, and he and Jo got in the front. He started the engine and pulled out, traveling back down the dirt road.

Jo glanced out the back window at the dust kicked up by their tires. They'd already talked to Dennis, and now it appeared Summer had an alibi. Could Peter or Sally be the killer? Or maybe it was someone not part of Ray's group. There were plenty of environmentalists in the area, and Ray had been doing this for a long time. He probably had dirt on several of them. Sam was right, though, a little stirring up might shake the killer loose.

"How you gonna stir things up?" Jo asked.

"I think we should go to the camp and give them something to think about. The killer might do something rash if he thinks we can get photos off that camera," Sam said.

"Great. Can we stop at Brewed Awakening on the way? I need a coffee."

Sam smiled, and Jo felt her tension ease. He had an easy way about him that raised her confidence in their odds of catching the killer.

He pulled into the drive-through and ordered a coffee and doughnut for Jo, a coffee for himself and a doughnut hole for Lucy.

He tossed the nugget of fried dough to Lucy. “You only get one, girl. They aren’t good for you, and I don’t want you to gain weight.” Sam glanced down at Jo’s stomach.

“What?” Jo looked down. Her stomach was still flat. Okay, maybe there was a bit of a pooch, but she *was* almost forty. “Maybe I should cut down to two doughnuts a day.”

Sam laughed. “Nah, you still look pretty good.”

The compliment warmed her, but she still ate only half the doughnut before shoving the other half into the bag and locking the bag in the glove compartment. Lucy had a clever way of finding food in the truck and devouring it when they weren’t looking.

“I don’t know if they’ll fall for the camera routine,” Jo said, licking a blob of jelly from her thumb. “The killer burned the flash drive in the fire pit. And there’s no internal memory on that camera. The killer probably knows that.”

“Yeah, but the flash drive could have been the one John was looking for under the cottage. Maybe the killer found it in the cabin that day when he took the laptop.”

Jo sat back in her seat. That was right. The laptop was still missing, so the killer did find something in the cabin that day. “So the camera memory card could still be out there? It’s probably lost at the dump.”

“Right, but the killer doesn’t need to know it could be at the dump. We can fake him out. Maybe we could tell him forensics can pull photos from the camera. And if the flash drive from the fire pit was from the laptop, maybe he’ll think the drive is still out there and go looking.”

Jo’s phone dinged, and she pulled it from her back pocket. “It’s a text from Kevin. He’s looked at the surveillance video from the hotel, and guess what?”

Sam looked over at her, his eyebrows rising slightly over his aviator sunglasses. “What?”

“Summer can’t be the killer. The camera recorded her going into her room. She didn’t come out until later that morning. There’s no other way out of the hotel.”

THE CAMPSITE HADN'T CHANGED MUCH since the last time Sam had been there. The tents still stood in the clearing, and he recognized the same people from his first visit. None of them had left town, which made him wonder if any of them could really be the killer. Why would Ray's killer stick around?

The only reason he could think of was because it would be too suspicious if they left. That confirmed his hunch that the murderer was probably one of the people they'd already questioned. But which one?

Summer wasn't here, so unless she'd already told them about Ray's book, Sam would be able to surprise them with that bit of information. Jo would be able to judge their reactions to determine if any of them already knew that Ray had been planning on exposing secrets.

They approached the campsite, and Lucy went into her sniffing routine. Peter and Sally stopped hanging clothes on the line and approached Sam and Jo. Dennis finished putting trash in a barrel and looked up at them with a scowl. The chubby guy Sam remembered was named Ian got up out of a lounge chair and glanced at Sally and Peter uncertainly.

Sam scanned their faces, trying to detect any undue fear. There wasn't any. Maybe after he told them about the camera that would change.

"Here to harass us again?" Dennis asked. "I already told you everything."

"Sure, but some new information has come to light," Sam said.

"New information?" Peter looked at him dubiously. "Did you find Ray's killer?"

"Not exactly. But we do have a good lead."

"So why are you here, then?" a man in a tie-dyed T-shirt that Sam recalled from his initial visit as Frank asked.

"Just thought you people would want to know that we found Ray's camera. It turns out the killer had tossed it at the dump, which might have been a smart move if he didn't know that Jackson Pressler makes sculptures out of junk that he finds at the dump." Sam glanced at Jo. Even with her sunglasses on he knew she was busy scanning their faces, taking note of every twitch and facial expression.

"So he used the camera in a sculpture? Couldn't he see it was an expensive camera?" Dennis made a face and looked at the rest of the campers. "See how these rich people are?Though I guess I should be happy the guy is making sculptures instead of filling up the landfill."

“Well, it was kind of mangled in the dump, so Jackson didn’t see it had any value,” Jo said.

“What’s so important about finding the camera anyway?” Sally asked, her arms indignantly crossed over her chest.

“We think Ray took a photo of his killer. We know he had his camera at the owl zone that night. The camera wasn’t on him when we found his body, so the killer must have taken it.”

“So why not just look on the camera?” Sally asked.

“We didn’t find the memory card. Accessing the hidden internal memory on that camera isn’t easy. We need forensics, and that’s going to take a while,” Sam lied.

“You’re here because you think it was one of us, don’t you?” Peter asked. “Because we said someone left here that night. You’re trying to stir the pot in the hope the killer will do something stupid.”

Apparently Peter wasn’t as stupid as Sam thought. “Well, he knew you all best, right?”

Frank scowled. “He knew lots of people. Some of us aren’t even good friends. We’re just camping out here to save money on the campground fee. What does it matter if he knew us best, anyway? I thought his death had something to do with the owls.”

“Not directly,” Sam said. “We think he was killed because he was writing a book.”

“A book?” Sally asked. “Why would someone kill him over that?”

“Not just any book. The kind that tells secrets. And we think Ray had a whopper of a secret about the killer,” Jo said.

“What about that hooded guy he kept meeting?” Sally asked. “He seemed shady. I bet he has lots of secrets.”

“That was the writer he was working with,” Sam said.

“Well, if you know the guy who was helping him write it, you must know all the folks that Ray had the goods on.” Dennis looked at him skeptically. “Why don’t you just ask any of those people?”

“Yeah, if you know who it was, why are you bugging us? Why not pull him in for questioning?” Ian argued.

“That’s the thing. They hadn’t gotten that far in the book yet,” Sam said. “I was hoping one of you might know who Ray might have had information on. It could be something that happened recently or maybe something that

goes way back into the past. But whatever it is, it must be something pretty bad."

Everyone glanced around at each other and shook their heads. "Not me," Sally said before glancing at Peter and looking down.

Sam looked at Jo, who shrugged. Nothing more to be gained here. They'd planted the seed and would have to wait to see if it took root.

"Okay." Sam turned to leave, then said over his shoulder: "If any of you think of anything that Ray might have known that was worth killing him for, please let me know."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kevin and Reese were in the squad room looking over Kevin's reports when Sam, Jo and Lucy returned.

Sam headed for the coffee machine. He needed a jolt of caffeine to power the thought process, and the one he'd gotten from Brewed Awakening hadn't been enough. He tossed the Styrofoam cup in the trash, the action making him think about Dennis and his trash obsession. Something about that guy bugged him.

He put his dark-blue WRPD mug under the spout, grabbed an orange K-cup of Gorilla Organic, popped it into the receptacle and pressed the brew button. The smell of coffee wafted up.

Jo tossed her bagged doughnut half on her desk. Sam picked up her smiley mug, caught her eye and held up the mug. She nodded, and he picked out the dark roast she liked and waited for his to be finished before brewing a cup for her.

"I got the paperwork for the new guy prepared, Sam." Reese walked past him toward her desk in the lobby. "You want to look it over?" she asked over her shoulder.

"New guy?" Kevin frowned.

Sam turned around, two mugs in hand. "Yeah, I decided to make an offer to one of the people we interviewed. Wyatt Davis. He seems the most qualified candidate." Sam shrugged and put Jo's mug on her desk in front of her. She didn't look too excited about hiring Wyatt. Neither one of them was really that keen on filling Tyler's spot, but what could he do? They needed the help.

“Oh. That’s great. We need help,” Kevin said. Judging by the look on his face, he was about as enthused as Jo.

Reese came back with the paperwork and handed it to Sam, who passed it to Kevin. Might as well let Kevin see who they were hiring. He needed to trust Kevin more, make him more a member of the team.

Kevin glanced at the paper before handing it back to Sam. “If he’s good enough for you, he’s good enough for me.”

“So what did you guys find out from Summer?” Reese perched on the corner of Jo’s desk and dug into the doughnut bag, frowning at the contents. She rolled it back up and put it back on the desk. The sound of the crunching bag attracted Lucy, who squatted in front of Reese, thumping her tail excitedly.

“Sorry, girl, nothing in there but leftovers.”

As if understanding, Lucy’s shoulders sagged, and she trotted back to her dog bed in the corner.

“We’ve ruled out Summer,” Sam said.

“The video surveillance at the hotel proves that she couldn’t have left. It’s indisputable. I saw the video and double-checked to make sure there was no other way she could have snuck out. And her car never moved. She was in her room at time of the murder,” Kevin said.

“Too bad. I would have bet on her, with her name change and family connection,” Reese said.

“So then we went out to the camp and planted the seed about the camera. I’m not sure that was very effective, though. None of them seemed startled or upset when I told them we thought Ray took a photo of his killer.” Sam looked to Jo for confirmation.

“Most of them were a bit nervous, but I guess that’s understandable given the circumstances. Sally did look away when we asked if they knew of anyone who had a beef with Ray.” Jo leaned back in her chair, tapping the eraser end of her pencil softly on her desktop. “And now that I think about it, she did seem kind of sketchy about him when I talked to her in the ladies’ room at Holy Spirits.”

“But why would that make them nervous? There’s no way to pull photos from that camera.” Reese looked at Sam. “It has no internal memory.”

“I know that, but they don’t need to know,” Sam said.

“Ahh, I see.” Reese smiled.

Sam walked to the corkboard to look at the photos and notes posted there.

"Why are you so sure it's someone from that camp?" Kevin asked.

"We found the melted flash drive in the campfire there." Sam pointed at the photo of the melted drive.

"How do you know that flash drive had something incriminating on it?" Reese asked.

"Why else would someone burn it?" Sam asked. He supposed it could have fallen in the fire, but that seemed unlikely.

"So you're guessing?" Reese asked.

"Hypothesizing," Sam corrected. This whole case was based on guesswork, but then again most of them were until you got solid proof. You had to follow every lead until something concrete developed. But was he following every lead?

Sam's gaze narrowed on the photo of Ray Ingalls' body at the murder scene with the egg crusted on his face. Why was the egg there? The environmentalists expressed their anger by throwing eggs. They'd egged various places around town, not to mention Mayor Dupont and Thorne's car. At first he'd thought Thorne had killed Ray because he saw something he shouldn't have, and then used the egg to make them think it was one of the environmentalists. But maybe they'd been thinking about it the wrong way.

Sam snapped his fingers and turned around. "Maybe we've been looking at the wrong angle. What if the killer put the egg on Ray's face to frame *Thorne*?"

"Why would they want to do that?" Jo asked.

"Could be to throw off suspicion, or to get us off track. It's no secret the owl zone could mess up Thorne's construction plans, and I did suspect him at first. Seems it would be just his style to give them a dose of their own egg-throwing medicine. And maybe if someone hated Thorne enough — and who doesn't? — they might want to kill two birds with one stone," Sam said.

"Get rid of Ray so he couldn't tell their secret and frame Thorne for the murder," Jo added.

"Well, Peter has been actively opposed to big companies building resorts, and he was arrested once during a protest. The company building at that time was Mervale International, a Thorne subsidiary."

"I think we'd better —"

"Excuse me?"

The timid voice interrupted Sam, and they all turned to see Sally next to the post office boxes. She looked as if she might bolt at any second, her hand fiddling with the strap of the campy purse slung over her shoulder.

"Yes?" Sam asked.

"I have something to confess."

"LET'S GO INTO MY OFFICE." Sam held his arm out to indicate the direction for Sally, then looked at Jo and tilted his head toward his office. She was already at her desk picking up her notepad and pencil and the little recorder they used to tape confessions.

Sally walked into the office with slow, uncertain steps, and Sam pulled out the wobbly chair for her.

Lucy trotted over and sat beside her, and Sally petted the top of the dog's head while Lucy shot adoring looks up at her.

Jo took her seat, her notebook poised in her lap and recorder switched on. Sam walked around behind his desk, the old steel chair creaking as he sat.

"So, why don't you begin by telling us what you've come here to confess?" Sam said.

"Well, I … " Sally started, her voice shaky. "I just wanted to come in and let you know that I knew Ray Ingalls before."

"Before? You mean before meeting him here at the owl zone?"

"Yes."

"You already told us that. What was the nature of your relationship?"

Sally's cheeks turned pink. "We were very good friends."

"Okay." Sam leaned forwarded in his chair, his forearms on his thighs. "Why don't you tell us how that pertains to this case."

Sally shifted in her seat, the chair rocking. "Well, it was about two years ago. I had just started dating Peter, but I had known Ray from before." Sally looked down at the floor.

"Okay," Sam drew out the end of the word.

“Well, we had a little fling. I never told Peter. It didn’t amount to much.”

Jo glanced at Sam, a slight crease between her brows. She was thinking the same thing he was. This confession wasn’t going exactly the way he’d wanted.

“So you had history,” Jo said, the eraser end of her pencil slowly marking the seconds as it tapped on her notepad. “Did it end badly? Were there bad feelings? Did it hurt when you saw him again up here?”

Sally shook her head. “No, nothing like that.”

Maybe the hurt feelings weren’t on Sally’s end. Maybe it had been Ray. “So Ray didn’t react well to seeing you. Did he get violent?” Sam asked. Self defense?

“What? No. I mean, it was a little awkward because I was still with Peter, but luckily he didn’t say anything.” Sally looked up at Sam, her blue eyes clear and innocent. “I wanted to come and tell you because I don’t want Peter to find out. He has a little bit of a jealous streak, and he didn’t like Ray very much to begin with. He’d be really mad if he knew I had cheated on him with Ray.”

“So you killed Ray so Peter wouldn’t find out you had an affair two years ago?”

“Killed him?” Sally looked at Sam incredulously. “No! I didn’t kill him. I just came here to tell you because I figured you’d be digging into who Ray knew in the past. If my name came up, I didn’t want you to think I’d lied. I only lied because I didn’t want to tell you in front of Peter.”

Sam glanced at Jo. She shrugged. Seemed like she was telling the truth. What other reason would she have to come here? This confession certainly didn’t clear her of the murder.

“You weren’t worried that Ray would write about your affair in his book?”

Sally snorted. “Hardly. It was short and sweet. Nothing to write about. And even if he did, I doubt Peter would read the book. As I said, he didn’t like Ray. Besides, I didn’t even know he was writing a book.”

“And that’s all you have to tell us?”

Sally nodded. “You won’t say anything in front of Peter, will you?” Her hopeful eyes flicked from Sam to Jo.

Sam sank back in his chair. “So you had nothing to do with Ray’s death? Do you have any idea who did? Did he ever mention that he knew

something about someone else when you were intimate?”

Sally shook her head. “No, and I can prove that I couldn’t be the killer, because—”

The sound of yelling came from the lobby. Sam was at the door in two strides.

Jackson Pressler stood over Kevin’s desk, his white hair sticking up as though he’d been rubbing his hands through it. He whirled around when he saw Sam.

“What in the heck are you all doing lounging around the police station when I need help?” Jackson bellowed.

Sam approached, his palms up. “Calm down, Jackson. What’s the problem?”

“Those damn environmentalists, I know it was them!”

“What was them?”

“The person who ransacked my new sculpture. I came back from the farmer’s market not an hour ago and found it in pieces all over my lawn.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"So your plan of flushing out the killer by telling him Pressler had incorporated the camera into his latest sculpture worked," Jo said.

The Tahoe sped toward the campsite. Once they'd found out about the sculpture from Pressler, they'd let Sally go and headed straight out.

"Had to be the killer. He must have thought the memory card was still in the sculpture. No one else would vandalize Jackson's junk sculptures."

"Jackson said it was dismantled as if someone was looking for something. Big difference between that and vandalism," Jo agreed.

"Yep. And it *has* to be someone from the camp. Those are the only people we've told."

"We can rule out Sally. She was with us at the time the sculpture was vandalized."

Sam nodded. "Peter is at the top of my list. Sally said he has a jealous streak. Maybe he found out about the affair with Ray, or maybe he saw her paying a little bit too much attention to him and killed him out of jealousy."

Jo chewed her bottom lip. "Or he could have another reason. He had an adversarial relationship with that big conglomerate associated with Thorne. Maybe he was trying to frame Thorne or thought somehow it would stop the construction near the owl zone."

"Either way, we need to talk to him."

Dust kicked up around the Tahoe, and the chassis jolted and bumped as Sam took the dirt road at about twenty miles per hour faster than he should. Good thing he was the chief of police. Anyone else driving this fast would get one whopper of a ticket.

The campsite was empty except for Peter, who was rummaging in his tent, tossing things out, apparently looking for something.

Sam, Jo and Lucy approached cautiously. Sam's hand hovered around the gun on his hip. Lucy read the situation perfectly and stood by his side, muscles tense and ready to pursue Peter should he run.

Peter turned as they approached, his T-shirt damp with sweat. He looked annoyed. He ran his hands through his hair. "What are you doing here again? Didn't you bother us enough earlier?"

"We came to talk to you, actually," Sam said.

Peter planted his scuffed hiking boots shoulder width apart and crossed his arms over his chest. "Really? What about?"

"Are you looking for something?" Jo peered cautiously into his tent.

"Yeah, my raincoat. Forecast says rain. Is that what you wanted to talk about?" Peter bent down and rummaged through a duffel bag.

"Something new came up," Jo said.

"So? Why are you telling me?"

"Where were you about an hour ago?" Sam asked.

Peter dropped the duffel bag and threw his hands up in exasperation, looking around the campground. "I've been right here since you guys left."

"Can anyone verify that?" Sam asked.

"No, but Sally took the car and ran off somewhere and everyone else was gone, so how could I have left?" Peter asked.

Sam glanced at Jo. Were they wrong about Peter?

He stepped closer to them, and Lucy let out a slight growl. Peter's eyes flicked to the dog.

"Yeah, don't think about running. Now, I'll give you a chance to do this the easy way. Were you at Jackson Pressler's earlier today?" Sam asked.

Peter took a half step back, uncertainty and alarm in his eyes. "No. I told you, I've been here."

Sam stepped closer. "Are you sure? Are you sure you didn't go looking for the memory card?"

Jo also stepped closer, and Peter's head turned in her direction. "And what are you really looking for? Or maybe it's more evidence you're trying to get rid of?"

"Evidence of what?"

"Why did you kill him?" Sam asked. "Was it jealousy, or did you want to stop the construction?"

“I didn’t kill Ray. Is that what you guys are getting so worked up about?” Peter sighed, and his shoulders relaxed. He glanced around the campsite as if to make sure no one else returned. “And I can prove it.”

“How?”

“Hold on. I can show you, but it’s in my tent, okay?”

Sam nodded, and Peter ducked into the tent. Sam kept his eye on him through the opening. Did he have a gun in there? Both Sam and Jo tensed. But when Peter backed out, he didn’t have a gun. He had a laptop.

“Is that Ray’s laptop?” Jo asked.

“No. It’s mine.” He flipped the laptop open, holding it against his chest with his left hand and typing on the keyboard awkwardly with his right. “I couldn’t say this before in front of everyone. Word’s not supposed to get out, but I’m doing a documentary on the inner workings of the whole environmental movement. You know, like a down-and-dirty behind-the-scenes kind of thing.”

“Kind of like Ray’s book?”

Peter shrugged. “Maybe. I didn’t know anything about Ray’s book. That’s a whole different thing. This is for TV.”

Sensing the emergency was over and her services wouldn’t be needed, Lucy relaxed and trotted off to sniff around.

“Okay,” Sam said. “How does this prove that you didn’t kill Ray?”

“Well, remember you came and asked if anyone left that night?” Peter asked.

“Yep. You said you were asleep in your tent and didn’t hear anyone leave.”

“Right, but we weren’t really asleep. We were up recording a video.”

“You mean you weren’t even in your tent?” Jo asked.

“No. We *were* in the tent, just not asleep. We do our filming at night after everyone else is asleep inside the tent with no lighting. It’s all hush hush,” Peter said. “It makes it more dramatic.”

Jo scrunched up her face as if she didn’t believe him. “Seriously? And no one ever saw or heard you?”

“Nah, it’s only a half hour, and we whisper.” Peter gestured toward the campsite, and Sam saw Lucy paying particular attention to the trash. Must be something good in there. “Why do you think we set our tent away from everyone else?”

Peter shifted position so they could see the screen. On it was a video of Peter and Sally huddled together inside their tent, their faces taking up the whole screen, the light from the laptop giving them a ghostly appearance.

"This doesn't prove that you were here when Ray was killed," Sam said.

"Sure it does. We upload them to a private account on YouTube. The videos won't go public for another few weeks until we have enough of them to make a series." Peter pointed to the timestamp on the videos. "Look at the upload date and time of this one — 2 a.m., right when you said Ray was killed. There's no way I could have killed him out at the owl zone and gotten back to the tent in time to record this."

Sam glanced at Jo. "Can't the stuff be faked?"

"It can't. This is on YouTube. This isn't on a private server. You can't mess with these dates. Double-check if you don't believe me," Peter said.

"I'll have Reese check that." Jo pulled out her phone to text Reese.

Sam backed away. Did Peter really have an alibi? This must have been the proof Sally was starting to talk about at the police station when Jackson Pressler had interrupted them. But then *who* was the killer? Someone else that they'd already talked to and ruled out? Someone who faked an alibi or ...

Sam caught a movement at the edge of the woods.

Peter snapped his laptop shut and spun around. Lucy knocked over the trash, eggshells spilling out onto the ground.

Dennis had arrived at the camp site. His face twisted in a scowl as he stomped toward the eggshells, not even glancing in their direction. "How many times do I have to tell you people? This trash needs to be picked up. We can't have trash lying around. Doesn't look good for my business," Dennis ranted.

The laptop stashed in the tent, Peter stood with his hands in pockets. "Dude, come on, they're biodegradable. They're eggshells."

"I don't care. They're trash, and we can't leave any trash around." Dennis jerked to a stop, apparently just noticing Sam and Jo.

Sam's eyes flicked to the eggshells, something clicking in his brain. A vision of Ray Ingalls' body, the egg crusted on his face. At the murder scene, there had been egg but no eggshells. He'd thought the shells were taken because the killer didn't want them to find fingerprints.

Suddenly he realized he'd made a huge mistake. He took a step toward Dennis. "Where did you just come from?"

Dennis looked at him. Their eyes locked. Dennis' were filled with guilt.

Dennis turned and ran.

Lucy chased after him, Sam and Jo in pursuit behind her. Sam had a feeling of déjà vu as he watched Lucy leap through the air to tackle Dennis in almost the exact same place she had before.

He fell with a loud "Ooomph."

Sam looked down at him. Lucy glanced up as if to ask if she'd done a good job.

"Good job. You can let go."

Lucy let go and sat back on her haunches while Sam hauled Dennis to his feet.

"This is harassment. I want a lawyer." Dennis brushed leaves and pine needles from his clothes.

"You ran from the law. Besides, I already told you, it's not harassment when you're guilty."

Sam had made a mistake in letting Dennis go when he confessed to painting the graffiti. He should have paid more attention to his inner instincts. All the clues had pointed to Dennis, but when he'd confessed to the graffiti Sam had thought his apparent guilt was because of that. Sure, he was guilty of that crime, too, but that wasn't the worst thing Dennis had done while in town.

Lucy whined, and Sam looked down to see her scratching in the dirt, her paws raking a row of furrows in the pine needles. Something caught the light and shimmered gold. Sam bent down and picked it up. A key.

He straightened and held it in front of Dennis. "Looks like you might have lost something."

Dennis' eyes widened. He looked away. "That's not mine."

"Really? This looks like the key to Ray's cabin at the Balsams. Now why would you have that?"

"I didn't. It must have been there on the ground already." Dennis still didn't look at him.

"Uh-huh." Easy enough to tell if it fit the lock of the cabin, and if Sam were a betting man, he'd bet it did. He'd also bet it just now fell out of Dennis' pocket.

Dennis jerked his arm away. "I've had enough of you. You don't have any evidence to detain me like this."

“We do, and we plan to bring you downtown.” Jo pulled the flexi cuffs from her belt and dangled them in front of Dennis’ face. “Now, I can use these on you or you can come in easy.”

Dennis looked at her for a moment, then his eyes slid away.

“I’ll come in easy,” he said. “But I’m not saying another word until I get a lawyer.”

“Fine.” Sam grabbed his elbow and jerked him toward the Tahoe.

Jo’s phone pinged, signaling a text. She pulled it from her back pocket, glanced at it and smiled. She turned to Dennis.

“Looks like you’re going to need that lawyer. They lifted some fingerprints from the sculpture that was ransacked at Jackson Pressler’s, and they don’t belong to Jackson. My bet is they belong to you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Dennis was silent on the trip back to the station. Let him get his lawyer, Sam thought. He was certain that Dennis was the killer, and he had a good idea how to prove it. The eggshells cinched it. With Dennis' compulsive behavior when it came to trash, he would have never left eggshells sitting beside Ray's body. Even Dupont had mentioned that he'd picked up the shells after egging him. And because the two of them went way back, it wasn't a stretch that Ray might know something Dennis didn't want made public. Especially if it was something that he didn't want the investors in his new company to learn.

Sam pulled up in front of the station, wondering how he could wrangle a confession out of Dennis. He opened the door and grabbed Dennis by the arm in case he got ideas about running.

Lucy bounded out of the Tahoe, but instead of heading straight into the station, she careened around the side of the building.

"Woof!"

What the heck? Sam glanced at Jo, and the two of them craned their necks to see Harley Dupont standing in the shadows of the building, looking at them. He jerked his head to indicate he wanted Sam to come to him.

Sam handed Dennis to Jo. "Can you handle him?"

"Of course. Be my pleasure." Jo yanked Dennis roughly toward the station, and he stumbled and cursed under his breath. Sam smiled.

Dupont petted Lucy, her tail wagging furiously as she looked up at the corrupt mayor happily. Maybe they were being too soft on Lucy. Feeding

her too many treats or letting her sleep too much in that soft dog bed. She was losing her edge. She'd been such a good judge of character, but now she was treating Dupont like an old friend.

"Where have you been?" Dupont glanced around.

"Catching a criminal," Sam said. "Do you need something?"

Sam knew by the furtive glances and the fact that Dupont was lurking between the shrubs and the side of the building, not to mention the way he leaned closer to Sam as if he were about to whisper something he didn't want anyone to overhear, why Dupont was there. A tingle of excitement laced with caution ran through him.

This was it. Dupont was going to tell him about the drug drop. He was finally going to be able to get what he needed on Thorne.

"Meet me tonight. Six p.m. Reeds Ferry Mill. You know it?" Dupont whispered.

"Of course." The abandoned mill had stood decaying outside town for decades.

"I have something you'll be interested in, and you'll find out what you want to know then. Don't be late." Dupont disappeared into the bushes. Sam's heart knocked against his chest as he walked back into the station.

Six p.m. — only two hours from now — and he still had Dennis to process. Never mind that arresting Dennis didn't seem nearly as important now, he had to find a way to pull them both off. And besides, there were some things he needed to put into place beforehand.

Jo had put Dennis in his office. He went in and closed the door then pulled Jo out of earshot and filled her in on what Dupont had said.

"Tonight?" Alarm darkened her gray eyes. "But we don't have time. We have Dennis here. We need to scope out the area and figure out a plan in case we're ambushed."

"I know," Sam said in hushed tones. "You go do that, and I'll take care of Dennis. I think I have a plan as to how I can expedite the process."

"Okay." She didn't look convinced, but turned to leave anyway.

Once she got halfway to the door, Sam said, "Jo?"

She turned back, and Sam's heart did a slow roll. Scoping out the ambush could be dangerous. He didn't know what he'd do without her as a partner and a friend. A strange flurry of emotions tangled his words, so he simply said, "Be careful."

She smiled. "Okay, Chief." She opened the door and left.

Sam poked his head out of his office. Kevin sat at his desk.

"Hey, Kevin. We pulled the guy in that we think is the owl zone killer. You want to be in charge of the arrest?"

Kevin straightened in his seat, looking at Sam with surprise. "Sure!"

Sam nodded and gestured for Kevin to join him in his office. It was about time he started trusting Kevin more, especially with the new hire coming in. He wanted his team to be tight, and he didn't want Kevin feeling left out just because he was a part-timer.

Dennis got his one phone call and then sat in the chair silently, his arms crossed over his chest. If that didn't indicate guilt Sam didn't know what did. He and Kevin attempted to talk to him, but Dennis remained silent.

It didn't take long for the fingerprint to be matched to him, though, and after that the floodgates opened. Sam let Kevin take the lead on some of the questions, and before Dennis' lawyer even showed up, they had a full confession.

It turned out Ray did have something on Dennis. Years ago, when they were first starting out, they had dumped trash into the Merrimack River in Lowell in order to make it look like one of the mills upstream was polluting. Ray was going to expose that, and it would have ruined Dennis' standing with his company. Everything he had worked for would evaporate. Sam figured the five-thousand-dollar investment must have been either out of guilt or so that Dennis wouldn't suspect if he found out about the book.

"So when he told you about that, you killed him," Sam said.

"I tried to talk him out of it. I mean, he was my friend." All the fight had gone out of Dennis, and now he fought back tears, no longer belligerent. "He even invested in my company. But he said the book would make him famous."

"All because of some trash dumping a long time ago?" Sam wasn't buying it.

"No, that was the thing. That one little incident was minor compared to the other things he was going to expose." Dennis shook his head. "He didn't even need it."

"What other things?" Kevin asked.

Sam approved of the measured tone in Kevin's voice and the way he took notes even though he'd switched the recorder on when Dennis had first broken down. He should have given Kevin more responsibility before, let him prove himself.

“I have no idea, but he said they were big.”

“Let’s go back to the night you killed Ray. What happened?”

“He’d told me the day before about the book. I tossed and turned all night. I knew I had to talk him out of it, to make him see things my way. So I followed him to the owl zone. I knew no one else would be there. I didn’t want anyone to hear.”

“But you couldn’t talk him out of it,” Kevin said.

Dennis shook his head. “Things got heated. He refused, and the argument escalated. Before I knew what I was doing I’d hit him over the head with a branch.” Dennis choked on the last word and covered his face with his hands. “I didn’t mean to kill him.”

Kevin looked up at Sam with raised brows as if to ask, “Isn’t that what they all say?”

Sam shrugged. “And then what happened.”

“I panicked. I realized that I had to cover my tracks, to try to make it look like he was killed for some other reason.”

“And that’s where the egg came in?” Kevin asked.

“I thought I could frame that builder guy. I had eggs in my car. You never know when the chance to egg someone or something might come up. Gotta be prepared. Anyway, I figured if I put the egg on his face, people would think it was the builder sending a message because we egged his car.”

“But you couldn’t leave the shells out of habit,” Sam said.

Dennis shook his head slowly. “I’m so used to picking up trash, I didn’t even think about it.”

“And the camera?” Kevin asked.

“He snapped off a photo before I hit him. He caught me on it, I’m sure. So I had to take it.”

“And you broke into his cabin?”

“Yes. I was looking for the laptop. I needed to destroy any notes he had about the river incident.”

“Where is the laptop now?”

“I smashed it with a rock, but I still wasn’t sure if anyone could get data off it so I stashed it in my trunk. It’s in a few pieces,” Dennis said. “There was a flash drive with it, so I burned it in the campfire.”

Sam glanced at the photo of the melted flash drive among the photos on his wall, duplicates of those on the corkboard in the squad room.

“Why did you keep the key to the cabin?”

“I knew Ray was working with someone on the book, but I didn’t know if that person would come back and leave a note or something in the cabin. So I had to go back and check.”

“And did you find notes?”

“No. Nothing new ever showed up, and I couldn’t track that guy down. I know it was the guy with the funky hair, but I don’t know who he is or if he knew about the incidents Ray planned to put in the book.”

“So back to the camera,” Sam said. “You tossed it in the dump. Must have been a shock to find out Jackson Pressler nabbed it for one of his sculptures.”

“For sure. But I should have known. I tried to dump the laptop at the dump too, thinking it would be buried in trash, but some guy freaked out about it. Screamed ‘That can’t go in the dump,’ and started mouthing off about recycling. As if he needed to educate *me* on that. That’s why I put it in my trunk. I thought about tossing it in the river but couldn’t bring myself to do it.”

“And once you heard that the camera got pulled out of the dump, you thought the memory card might have been with it and was in the sculpture. Why didn’t you take the card out of the camera?”

“I didn’t even see one in there. I was kind of in a panic, but I didn’t find it in the sculpture.”

“That’s because it wasn’t there,” Sam said. “I spread that rumor to flush out the killer.”

Dennis jerked his head up at Sam. “What? So I went out there for nothing?”

Sam shrugged. Where was the card? Had it fallen out during the murder? Sam was sure he would have found it at the scene. It definitely wasn’t in the smashed-up camera. Maybe it would turn up, but Sam doubted they’d need it to prove Dennis’ guilt.

Dennis sighed and put his head back down. “Doesn’t matter. You would eventually have gotten the photos from the forensics on the camera.”

Sam shook his head. “Sorry, but I lied about that too. There’s no way to pull photos from that camera without a memory card.”

Dennis jerked his head up again, shock spreading over his face. “You mean I told you all this and you don’t have anything on me? Isn’t that entrapment? Where’s my lawyer?”

Sam shook his head. “Don’t think that will work. We have enough now from what you’ve told us to prove it. Especially after we get that laptop out of your trunk. But don’t worry, your lawyer will be here soon enough.”

Sam had heard enough. He looked at Kevin. “You think you can take it from here?”

“Yes, sir.”

Sam nodded and left. On the way out, he texted Mick about the meeting with Dupont. It was always good to have backup. Then he raced home to drop off Lucy. He didn’t want to put her in danger. He had only half an hour before they were to meet with Dupont.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Reeds Ferry Mill sat crumbling on an isolated piece of land paralleling the river. Abandoned more than forty years ago, the mill saw woods grown up around it so that the towering trees, grasses and shrubs dimmed the sunlight, providing the ambiance of twilight even though the sun had not yet set.

Jo had already checked the building for exits earlier in the day. She knew how to get out if things turned bad, but that didn't make her feel any better. Having Sam by her side did.

Sam had told her about Dennis' confession on the way. She wasn't sure if putting Kevin in charge was a good idea, but what other option did they have? It was fitting, however, that Dennis' downfall was brought on by his own obsession with picking up trash.

They'd passed Mick's car parked on the old access road on their way in. He wasn't in the car, but knowing he was out here somewhere watching and ready to jump to their aid if they needed him made her feel better.

The mill parking lot was now an overgrown patch of weeds and tall grass. Dupont's car sat at the far end, near the side of the building.

It was that silent time late in the afternoon, just before dusk. A few tweets and twitters of birds and the buzzing of insects in the grass combined with the sound of the gurgling river. The mill, with its dirty brick and graffiti-scarred boarded windows, cast a long shadow over the parking lot.

Jo knew from her earlier surveillance that the rusted steel service door near the river was unlocked. She led Sam toward it, and he motioned her aside while he opened it, the hinges groaning as he swung it wide.

Inside, it was almost pitch black. The only light filtered in from cracks in the plywood that covered the two windows in the small room. Jo figured it had once been some sort of storeroom, though now it had other uses.

The smell of sweat and something earthy cloyed the air, and they paused, letting their eyes get used to the dark. Jo scanned the small room to make sure nothing was out of place from her earlier visit. Now that her eyes were becoming accustomed to the dim light she could make out shapes. One of those shapes was the dirty mattress in the corner she'd seen earlier. Empty bags of chips and soda cans lay beside it. Kids partying or maybe vagrants. Possibly even addicts hooked on the drugs from Thorne's supply. The thought steeled her resolve, and she continued on. Hopefully Dupont would give them the information they needed to finally nail Thorne.

"Dupont? It's Sam."

The mill remained quiet.

They shared an uneasy glance. Jo could feel the tension rolling off Sam. Where was Dupont?

"The main mill is through there." Jo pointed toward a doorway, and they moved to it, the floorboards creaking under their feet. A few paces from the door, Sam motioned for Jo to stop.

"Dupont? Are you in there?"

No answer. Was this a trap?

Sam moved to the side of the doorway, pulling his gun from its holster and gesturing for Jo to get behind him. They'd worked together so long she knew what he was thinking. If someone was waiting in the room, they couldn't very well waltz right in. Better to follow police procedure and make sure they weren't ambushed.

Sam tapped her arm, and then in one swift movement he lunged through the doorway, his gun held steady in front of him.

Squawk!

Flap!

Jo jumped into the doorway too, her heart racing, her equilibrium thrown off by a whirlwind of activity directly in front of them. Her finger tightened on the trigger then eased off as she realized what the commotion was. Pigeons. Flapping up from the floor to roost in the rafters.

She took a quick inventory of the room, her trained eye looking for movement or unusual shapes that signaled someone might attack.

“Shit!” Sam rushed toward something in the center of the room, and Jo’s heart plummeted. It was Dupont.

He lay on his side, a dark puddle under his head, his open eyes staring toward the door they’d just come in. A bullet hole in his skull told Jo they wouldn’t be getting any information from him. A gun lay in front of him.

“Jesus Christ!” Sam knelt near Dupont, pressing his fingers to his carotid artery even though it was obvious Dupont was dead.

“What the hell happened?” Jo asked, her voice low.

“Someone shot him.” Sam glanced around the room. “Happened a while ago, the blood is already starting to congeal. I’m sure they’re long gone, otherwise the pigeons wouldn’t have been settled on the floor.”

Jo’s mind raced. Dupont had been about to give them information on Thorne, and now he was dead.

“Damn it! Now we’re not going to find out what he knew about Tyler,” she said, speaking in the same hushed tone as Sam even though no one was there to hear them.

“Or when Thorne is going to make his drug run.” Sam pointed to Dupont’s right hand, curled in a fist, cradling a piece of crumpled paper. “What’s that?”

Jo took the pencil out of her pocket and worked the paper out of Dupont’s fist. It had been torn from a bigger piece, a photocopy barely legible. On the top right was a logo. Jo’s heart froze as she recognized it. “This is the logo from the DNA testing lab. I recognize it from the Donnelly case.”

Sam frowned. “Why would Dupont have a scrap of paper from the DNA testing lab?”

“Must have been part of what he was going to show us.” Jo took the scrap to the window so she could see better, her mind whirling.

They needed to get out of here. No. They couldn’t leave the body, and there was too much evidence they’d been here. They needed to think up a reason they had come in the first place. There would be no record of anyone calling anything into the station.

She was so busy thinking about how to avoid having to tell anyone the real reason they were there that it took her brain a few seconds to register what her eyes saw on the paper. Her mouth dropped open.

“Umm … Sam, you’d better look at this.” She held the paper out, and Sam came to stand beside her. “This is DNA testing. A 95 percent match on

Thorne and Richardson."

"What the … ." Sam squinted at the paper and held it to the light.

Sam's eyes met Jo's. "You mean Tyler Richardson was related to Thorne?"

Jo nodded slowly.

This put Tyler's death, the mysterious key under his desk and the twenty-five grand that appeared in his bank account in a whole new light. Had Tyler been a mole in the police department, giving Thorne — his relative — insider information? That would explain some of the instances when Thorne had narrowly escaped being caught. He'd been tipped and was able to move his operation at the last minute.

A movement caught Jo's eye. Someone in the doorway. Sam saw it at the same time, and they both spun around with their guns up.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

"Are you guys okay?" Mick stood in the doorway, his eyes widening as they drifted from Sam and Jo to Dupont's body. "You shot him?"

"Found him that way." Sam holstered his gun. "What are you doing in here? I didn't give the signal."

"I heard you call out for Dupont, then nothing. Thought I better make sure you were okay." Mick walked further into the room, taking care to avoid the blood that had spread around Dupont. "You think Thorne had someone do this?"

"Probably. Must have found out he was going to tip us off. Now we'll never know what he was going to tell us. Except maybe what's on this paper."

Jo looked at the paper in her hand.

"What's that?" Mick asked.

"DNA test. Looks like Tyler might have been related to Thorne."

"What? Whoa, wait a minute. You mean Tyler was working for Thorne?"

Sam shrugged. "No idea. It doesn't make sense. Tyler was one of the best. I can't imagine him being a mole for Thorne."

"It would explain some of the botched arrests that seemed as if someone had tipped Thorne off," Jo said.

"You sure he didn't kill himself?" Mick pointed to the gun.

Sam shook his head. "The position of the gun isn't right. The body fell to the left, but the gun is in front of him. He would have died instantly, so it should have fallen to his side and be behind him."

“What the heck? Why did they leave it?”

Sam looked around. “I don’t know. This whole thing stinks. We need to call this in right away. Anyone could have seen us driving here. I wasn’t thinking we might need to watch out for that. It will look suspicious if we were just hanging around in here before we call the medical examiner and ambulance.”

Jo whipped out her phone. “I think Kevin is still on duty. Wait. What about the paper? How do we explain that? How do we even explain being here?”

“We don’t explain the paper. We tell the truth. Well, mostly. That Dupont wanted to meet secretly to pass along information on Thorne.”

Mick knelt beside Dupont on the non-bloody side and patted down his pockets.

“What the hell are you doing?” Sam asked.

Mick kept patting without even looking up at Sam. “Looking for the knife. We need to get that. Now we’ll never know what Thorne knows about us or what Dupont knew about Gracie.”

Knife? Jo’s gaze jerked from Mick to Sam.

Sam glanced at Mick and then locked eyes with Jo. “Umm … twenty years ago my cousin Gracie was raped. Dupont knows something about it.” He glanced at Mick. “I think we should tell Jo all about it. We can trust her.”

Jo’s heart flipped. That whole thing with Thorne wasn’t about her? It had something to do with Sam’s cousin, and now Sam was going to take her into his confidence?

Sam focused on the crime scene as he talked. The medical examiner and Kevin would arrive soon. They’d need to make it look as if they’d been here officially. Which they had … sort of.

“Gracie was a young singer in Boston about twenty years ago. She was raped, but couldn’t give details of her rapists. She shut it out of her memory. When it looked like the guys would get away, Mick and I stepped in.” Sam glanced up at Jo, and she nodded. She had a pretty good idea what that meant. “Anyway, somehow Dupont knew something about it. He wasn’t one of the rapists, but he had some insider knowledge. Unfortunately, Mick got a little overzealous with the knife.”

“And now Thorne has it,” Mick said. “Along with the information on where Thorne’s drop point is and what he knew about Tyler, Dupont was

going to tell us what he'd passed on to Thorne so we could do damage control."

So *that's* what Thorne had threatened Sam with in the bar that night. It was never about her. Jo took a breath. It was now or never, Sam had just told her his secret. Now she needed to do the same, or it would always hang between them. But before she could say anything, a siren split the air.

Sam jerked his head toward Mick. "You'd better get out of here. We can't explain you being here. Take the back road so they don't meet you going out."

Mick slipped out, and Sam turned his attention to the crime scene. "Quick. Let's make sure there isn't something here we don't want on record."

Jo glanced at Dupont's curled hand. Nothing they could do about that now. She shoved the paper in her pocket as Sam carefully moved the gun to a more suicide-appropriate position.

"What are you doing?" Jo asked.

"Just giving us some options. Maybe we want this to look like a suicide just in case. What if the person who killed Dupont staged this somehow to frame us? We can't be too careful."

"Right. How do we explain being here?" Jo asked.

"Tell the truth. Dupont was going to give us a tip about the drugs. It's easier that way; less chance of screwing up. We'll keep the rest of it to ourselves until we're sure about Tyler." Sam gave Jo a knowing look, and she nodded.

Wouldn't do to reveal the DNA paper now. For all they knew, Tyler was gathering information on them for Thorne so he could get them fired and put his own people in place.

Jo heard a car pull in and shoved the paper deeper in her pocket. A second later she heard the door squeak open.

"In here," Sam called.

Kevin appeared in the door first, his face turning white as he took in the scene. "Holy crap! What happened?"

"Found him here like this," Sam said as two emergency medical technicians bent over the body, then glanced up at Sam and shook their heads — as if he didn't already know there was no hope.

"So what have you got?" Kevin eyed the scene then glanced up at Sam and Jo. "What were you guys doing here?"

Sam pulled Kevin out of earshot and motioned for Jo to follow. “You know how we suspected that Dupont was tight with Thorne?”

Kevin nodded and glanced back at the body.

“Turns out we were right. But Dupont got in too deep and wanted out. He came to me earlier in the week and said he had information on Thorne’s next drug drop.”

“So Thorne really is the one responsible for the influx of drugs,” Kevin said.

“Yeah. We were supposed to meet here, and he was going to pass on the information. But when we showed up he was dead,” Sam said.

Kevin glanced back at the body. “Suicide? Why would he ask to meet with you and then kill himself here? Does that make sense?”

“Good question,” Sam said. “I think it’s best for now that we keep the fact that Dupont was going to tell us about Thorne’s drug shipment location between the three of us. You never know who Thorne has on the payroll. We’ll say he called us here to expose some sort of corruption.”

Kevin nodded, and they returned to the body.

“I’ll get photos before John comes.” Kevin angled his head to look at the body. “Hey, check out his hand. Looks like he was holding something.”

Jo’s stomach lurched. “Maybe. Perhaps the killer took it?”

“Unless it was a suicide, if it was then …”

Jo pointed to the pigeon droppings piled under the rafters. “Pigeons? We scared a flock of them when we came in.”

Kevin frowned. “Huh. Maybe.”

Kevin left to get the camera from the car, and Jo pulled out her notebook.

“Better make sure we process this one thoroughly,” Sam said. “We want to be sure we know every little detail.”

KEVIN’S MIND whirled as he snapped photos of Mayor Dupont’s body. The sting of not being let in on the meeting with Dupont had been salved by the fact that Sam had taken him into his confidence just now. The three of them would share the secret of Dupont’s real reason for being here.

Something didn't seem right about the body. There was a smudge of blood near the gun, which seemed impossible unless it had been moved. But it couldn't have been moved by Dupont. A shot to the head like that would have killed instantly. The killer maybe? He glanced up at Sam and Jo. Could one of them have moved it?

He purposely stepped on the smudge, obliterating it before he snapped the photo.

"Hey, Kev, looks like we got a high-profile one here, eh?" John squatted next to the body.

"Yep. Gonna be a big case," Kevin said.

John frowned at Dupont's hand. "Did you get a picture of this? What was in it?"

"Yes. Nothing was in it," Kevin said.

"Huh, looks like he was clutching something when he died. Judging by the coagulation, he's been dead over an hour." John squinted and looked closer at the congealing puddle. "What's that? Take some shots here."

John pointed at scratch marks in the blood, and Kevin snapped some shots. "Looks like pigeon feet. Jo said they rousted pigeons when they discovered him." Kevin pointed at the pigeon droppings, and John looked from the piles up into the rafters where several pigeons huddled. One of them cooed softly.

"Yeah, guess so."

John got busy with his examination while Kevin watched cautiously. Protectiveness for Sam and Jo and whatever it was they were hiding washed over him.

He knew they were hiding something about this crime scene. But it didn't matter. Sam had pulled him into the team, first by putting him in charge of Dennis' arrest and now by sharing their reason for the meeting with him. He wanted to make sure John didn't find anything he shouldn't.

A knot of worry started to unfurl in his chest. Sam had said that Dupont was going to reveal the location of a drug drop on the river. Clearly someone had not wanted that to happen — unless Dupont actually had killed himself, something Kevin started to doubt more and more.

His contact had seemed eager to learn about any stakeouts. Did he want advance notice so they could avoid being caught?

Kevin knew how tenacious Sam was. He'd probably want to stake out the entire river. Thorne might not know that Dupont hadn't had the chance

to provide Sam any information. Thorne seemed the kind of guy who might set up an ambush.

If Sam brought Kevin in on the stakeout, what if his contact was there? What if his contact wanted him to act in some manner, like turn his gun on Sam and Jo? Even though he still had no idea who the contact worked for — Thorne, the FBI, someone else — Kevin couldn't risk that. Best to tell the contact the plans as he was supposed to and hope that made Thorne change the drop date. But if he did that, they couldn't catch Thorne, or his associates, in the act. Doubt mingled with remorse in his gut.

Stopping this one shipment wouldn't put Thorne out of business, so it really wouldn't be that big a deal if he informed his contact. And if they changed the date, the surveillance would be for nothing, but at least no one would get hurt. And if Sam didn't plan to stake out the site, then he'd just tell his contact that the plans had changed.

Yep, that's what he needed to do. It would buy him time. Now that Sam was taking him into his confidence and he was seeing more and more of what Sam and Jo were about, he was becoming more certain that his contact was not in law enforcement.

Sam and Jo were not bad cops, even though he felt they were hiding something about this crime scene from him. His eyes flicked to Dupont's curled hand. He was sure they had a good reason.

His decision was made. If Sam intended to stake out the river, he'd pass that information along. This would solve two problems. It would keep his contact from getting antsy that he hadn't provided any solid information lately, and it would keep Sam and Jo — and especially Lucy — safe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Sam, Jo and Kevin had stayed late into the night processing the Dupont crime scene. Even on just three hours of sleep, Sam was in early enough the next morning to talk to the district attorney and the head of the state police, both of whom impressed on him how important this high-profile case was. As if Sam didn't know.

Dennis had been handed over to the sheriff and jailed. There wasn't much left for Sam to do in that case. He had a confession and sound evidence. It was all up to the district attorney now. At least that was one thing off his plate.

He leaned back in his chair, feet up on his desk, eyes closed, thumb and forefinger pinching his nose to ward off the start of a headache when he heard the last voice he wanted to hear demanding to see him. Vice Mayor — Sam supposed now acting mayor — Henley Jamison.

Sam opened his eyes and slapped his feet onto the floor, the chair emitting a high-pitched squeak as it came forward. Any good feelings about not having to deal with Dupont dissipated. Jamison was just as bad. Lucy stood from where she'd been lying in the puddle of sunlight and let out a low growl.

Jamison appeared in the doorway, tall and perfectly groomed in his Armani suit, a scowl on his face. "What are you doing sitting around, Mason? I need you on the case. We need to arrest the mayor's killer post haste."

"Is that because you're acting mayor and you're afraid he might strike again?"

Jamison's scowl deepened. "I beg your pardon."

"I said we're working it. Takes time to gather evidence, find witnesses and suspects."

"Well, I want a full report by the end of day. I want to know exactly what's happening, and I want this wrapped up quickly."

"Goes without saying."

"And I don't want you getting off-track with any other cases. You let me know if something else comes up."

Sam sighed. "Okay."

Not for the first time Sam wished the police department didn't report to the mayor, but this was a small town, and they were municipal employees. Jamison could make their lives miserable, even have him fired, if he didn't cooperate.

"Good then." Jamison glanced at Lucy. "And make sure you put that K-9 to good use." Then he turned and left.

Sam pushed up from his desk. He didn't need Henley Jamison to tell him that the case needed attention, but he had something else to do. And even though he'd promised to spend all his resources on the Dupont case, this was more important. Jamison didn't need to know.

In the squad room, Jo sat at her desk, poring over reports, as Kevin printed the photos he'd taken the previous night. Later on that day they'd tack them up on the corkboard and try to make some sense of it.

A twinge of guilt pinched Sam's gut, and he wondered if he should tell Kevin about the paper he and Jo had found in Dupont's hand or that he'd moved the gun. Maybe it was better for Kevin if he didn't know. The information could get him into trouble. This way he could legitimately deny he was involved.

The corkboard could wait. It was Friday, and if the information he'd gotten from Jesse was correct, Thorne would be making his move this weekend. The timing of Dupont wanting to meet the night before seemed to indicate the information *was* correct. Sam needed to ask Jo and Kevin if they would rotate on a stakeout at the river. He'd studied Google satellite maps, and as far as he could tell, the spot Jackson Pressler had told him about was the most likely location. They'd set up there and see what happened.

As he started toward Jo's desk, he heard the lobby door open.

"Hey, Sam! I got someone I want you to meet!"

Sam turned to see Harry Woolston with a woman about Sam's age in tow. She was attractive, but not in a glamorous way, more in an interesting, no-nonsense fashion. Her nose was a little too big and her face a little too round, but her green eyes pulled attention from those small flaws. Her hair, cut shoulder length, was honey blond. She walked with an air of authority despite her faded blue jeans and plain white T-shirt.

"This here's Marnie Wilson." Harry shoved her toward Sam. "She's running for mayor. Unopposed now, I guess."

Sam shook her hand. It was soft and friendly, and a warm tingle of interest that he hadn't felt in years unfurled in his gut. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." she smiled, revealing perfect white teeth. Sam tried to remember if he'd even brushed his.

"Anyway, now that Marnie is a shoo-in, I figured I'd bring her by. Gonna be a big improvement. I think you'll see her values align with yours much better than Dupont." Harry looked down at the ground and muttered, "God rest his soul."

"I would like to convey my condolences," Marnie said. "Such a terrible tragedy. And I hate to win the position like this."

"Someone could still run for mayor." Reese had come to stand beside Harry. By the way she was eying Marnie, Sam guessed she didn't have the same positive impression of the woman that he did.

"Yes, very true," Harry said. "We'll see what we see. Anyway, wanted to come by and introduce Marnie and congratulate you on the owl zone killer collar. That case stunk like rotten eggs."

Sam raised a brow. "Ugh, thanks. It was a team effort."

"Yeah, well, guess you got your hands full here. I'm on my way to the senior center. Marnie is giving a talk on the new city-funded senior programs she wants to institute. Had a few minutes to kill and figured we'd stop by."

Sam watched them leave. Marnie Wilson sure didn't seem like a politician. Didn't dress like one, didn't talk like one and sure didn't smell like one. And that was exactly what they needed. Maybe things were looking up.

"Hey, Jo and Kev, can I see you in my office?"

Kevin and Jo looked up at him. "Sure."

Sam nodded and walked toward his door.

JO WATCHED Marnie and Harry exit before following Sam into his office. Something about Marnie rubbed her the wrong way, and it had nothing to do with the obvious spark between Marnie and Sam. Reese must have noticed it too. It was almost as if there was something "too genuine" about Marnie.

But that wan't her concern. Okay, maybe it would be if Marnie became mayor, but anyone had to be better than Dupont.

Sam settled behind his desk, and Jo and Kevin pulled up chairs. Jo pulled out her notebook. This case was going to be a doozy.

"I still want to try to get the drop on Thorne," Sam said.

His words surprised Jo. She figured they'd be spending all their manpower on finding Dupont's killer. "Dupont never gave us any specifics."

"I know, but Jesse said he'd heard rumblings about something this weekend, and the timing is right. I've pinpointed one spot that seems ideal. I figure if you two are up for it, we could rotate a stakeout with two of us on at all times."

Jo glanced at Kevin. His face showed no emotion. He was only part time and, as far as she knew, had minimal experience. She wondered if it was smart to have him on a stakeout, but they didn't have much choice. The new hire didn't start for two weeks.

"I'm in," Kevin said, earning points with Jo.

"Me too, of course," Jo said.

"Good. I don't want to pass up this chance to catch him," Sam said. "But we need to keep it on the down-low. Henley Jamison wants our full focus on the Dupont case."

"Oh yeah. I guess he's acting mayor now," Kevin said.

"Yep. How many hours can you spare?" Sam asked Kevin.

Kevin shrugged. "As many as you need."

"Okay. We'll put down that we're working the Dupont case. Obviously we'll still be sorting through things on that as well. Gonna be a lot of OT."

"No problem," Kevin and Jo replied.

They spent the next two hours going over the plan for the stakeout. They'd focus on one specific spot that Sam had determined would be the most likely and keep the surveillance to nighttime only. Thorne wasn't

likely to move the drugs in daylight. Jo's nerves tingled with the excitement of the possibility of catching Thorne as they worked out a rotation. But the excitement was tinged with regret. Sam had confided in her that he hadn't told Kevin about the knife or Gracie or the DNA results Dupont had clutched in his hand. He'd only taken her into his confidence, and while she should have felt privileged that he'd trusted her with the skeletons in his closet, she actually felt guilty because she hadn't told Sam about hers.

She'd wanted to tell him about her sister — even started a few times — but it never seemed like the right moment. Maybe it was best if she didn't tell him. In fact, it might be best to leave the whole thing alone and forget about her investigation. What good could come of it?

After they completed their plans, Jo returned to the squad room and started putting the photos and notes relating to the Dupont case on the corkboard. As she sorted them, she hoped they would make sense, that she would find something that would reveal the identity of the killer.

Of course it had to be Thorne, or at least done on his orders. Who else would want Dupont dead?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Sam swatted a mosquito on his neck and cursed under his breath. They'd been at the river for two nights, but no action. It was humid, buggy and uncomfortable. The high-powered binoculars he'd been squinting through gave him a headache and grew heavy in his sweaty hands.

Sam lowered the binoculars and looked up at the brightening sky. The sun was creeping up. He doubted Thorne would make the drug run in daylight. Besides, it was Monday morning, and he had to get to the station and the case he was supposed to be working.

"I guess we should pack it in. Looks like Thorne isn't going to do anything this weekend." Sam glanced at Kevin. They'd rotated shifts with two of them on at all times. Sam was impressed with the way Kevin had handled himself.

Kevin didn't have much experience, especially with this sort of thing. He'd warned Kevin that things could get dicey. They had no idea how many people they'd have to confront. He'd expected him to be nervous, but Kevin had been calm and collected.

"Guess so." Kevin ripped off his Kevlar vest. "Glad to get out of this thing."

"Copy that." Sam glanced back at the river as they battled through the brush to the car. "I guess Thorne must have been warned off. Probably figured Dupont already tipped us off."

"Yeah, I guess."

Kevin's voice had an odd timbre to it, and for a second Sam got the impression Kevin knew something he didn't. Nah, probably just relieved

they hadn't ended up in the middle of a shootout, but didn't want Sam to know that he'd been worried.

Sam opened the back of the Tahoe for Lucy and threw his vest in. "You might as well go home and get some rest. You've clocked enough hours this weekend. We need to get cracking on the Dupont investigation, and I need you fresh for tomorrow."

"Yeah. What do you think happened there?" Kevin glanced sideways at Sam. "One of Thorne's guys?"

"Not sure." They got into the Tahoe, and Sam started the engine. "Could have been suicide."

"You think so?" Kevin studied him, and Sam felt a prickle of unease.

Kevin wasn't going to buy into a suicide easily, but Sam had had plenty of time to think about the Dupont investigation during his midnight surveillance shifts at the river. Dupont hadn't shot himself, but maybe that was the best way for Sam to play it. He had no idea what Dupont had been up to. Or what Tyler had been up to, for that matter. Too much digging might uncover things best left buried.

Sam put the car in gear and started down the narrow dirt road. "Maybe. But why would the killer leave the gun?"

"Who knows? Maybe to stage it as suicide for some reason. Maybe he didn't want a big investigation. You said he was going to rat out Thorne, so he knew more about Thorne's business than just this drug drop."

"I'm sure he did. And maybe he knew things about people other than Thorne."

"And all of that could come out in an investigation."

"Right."

Kevin stared out the side window for a few seconds, then said softly, "Then maybe proving Dupont did shoot himself is best for everyone."

SAM SHOWERED AND SHAVED, took a one-hour nap and was at the station by eight-thirty. He would have been there earlier, but he stopped at Brewed Awakening for a coffee and picked up one for Jo, along with a jelly doughnut.

The lobby was empty. Reese had an appointment and wouldn't be in until later. Jo had already tacked photos and notes on the corkboard in the squad room and stood in front of it, her head tilted to the side.

She turned as they entered and smiled at Lucy, who trotted to her side and stuck her head under Jo's hand for her morning petting. Sam handed Jo the coffee and set the doughnut bag on her desk.

"Thanks," Jo flipped the plastic lid of the coffee cup. Sam raised a brow at the unopened bag, and Jo said, "Trying to cut down."

"So what have you got?" Sam nodded to the board.

"Not much. If the killer is as tricky as Tyler's killer, this isn't going to be easy."

"I've been thinking maybe we don't want to dig too deep into it."

Jo shot him a look. "You mean rule it a suicide? Depends on John's findings. And now we have Kevin to convince, too."

"Kevin might not be a problem, but there's the new guy. He's starting in two weeks."

Jo sighed. "Right. Forgot about him. But with Jamison breathing down our necks, we have to be careful. This is high profile. Plus he's put his hat in the ring to run for mayor, so he'll be even more attentive."

Jo pointed to the early edition of the White Rock Tribune, where the banner headline announced Jamison's intent to run for mayor. Sam's gut clenched. Jamison was almost as bad as Dupont.

"I can't wait until that election is over. You think Jamison has a chance against Marnie Wilson?" Sam asked.

Jo's eyes darkened, and she looked away.

Sam got the impression that Jo wasn't too keen on Marnie Wilson. He couldn't figure out why. Marnie appeared to be on their side. She didn't like the construction, and Sam was sure she wouldn't impede their getting warrants as Dupont had. She'd be good for the town, maybe even help them get rid of Thorne.

"Remains to be seen." Jo's tone was noncommittal as she continued to study the corkboard.

"Is there something on your mind?" Sam had sensed that Jo had been trying to tell him something for a few days now. Was it about Marnie? Or maybe she was nervous about the information he and Mick had shared with her in the mill. Maybe she didn't want to know their dirty secrets. Maybe she didn't want to help him and Mick cover up their past.

She looked at him, her eyes softening. “No. Just this whole thing with Tyler and Thorne. It’s upsetting. What do you think Tyler was up to?”

Sam glanced at Tyler’s empty desk at the other end of the room. Soon it would be occupied by someone else, but the mystery of Tyler remained unsolved. He sighed and leaned his butt on the edge of Jo’s desk. “I don’t know. If he was working for Thorne, he sure had me fooled.”

“Me too, but that would explain that large deposit in his bank account.”

“And how some of our surprise drug busts ended up being a bust. I always thought someone was tipping Thorne off.”

Jo scrunched up her face. “But Tyler was one of us. He seemed just as passionate as we were about stopping Thorne.”

“He *seemed* that way. Apparently, he was a good actor.”

“It doesn’t make sense. If he was tipping off Thorne, why would Thorne kill him?”

“Maybe it wasn’t Thorne who killed him. Maybe Thorne has a rival who didn’t want Thorne to have an informant in the police department,” Sam mused. “Or maybe Tyler got greedy and threatened Thorne. That money could have been blackmail.”

“A rival?” Jo looked out the window, and Sam followed her gaze. The town was just starting to wake up. Tourists strolled along the streets in front of the shops. A group of kids tossed a Frisbee on the town commons. There was no sign of a drug problem simmering under the bucolic scene. “You mean someone else wants to control the drug trade here? That’s all we need.”

Sam continued to watch the kids play in the park. Still young and carefree, with no idea how rough life could get. “Yeah, well, who knows what the real story is?”

“If Tyler was blackmailing Thorne, he might have found we could use that to put him away,” Jo said.

“Yeah, that’s why it’s a good thing Wyatt Davis accepted the offer. We’re going to need the extra help so we can step up our unofficial investigation into what really happened to Tyler.”

Jo turned away from the window. “We need to figure out what the key we found under his desk unlocks. It’s obvious Tyler was gathering some kind of evidence, and that key fits where he stashed it.”

Sam’s gaze shifted from the window, and he locked eyes with Jo. “And we need to get to it first. Because the question remains, was Tyler gathering

evidence for *us* to use against Thorne or for Thorne to use against *us*?”

A SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERY BOOK FOUR

BETRAYING TRUST

L.A. DOBBS

CHAPTER ONE

Sam Mason stared at the photos of the bloody crime scene lining the corkboard in his office and reminded himself that sometimes, serving justice didn't always mean doing things by the book. Especially when you were the chief of police of a small northern New Hampshire town loaded with corruption.

He scrubbed his hand over his face, the rasping sound of the rough stubble on his chin reminding him that he was operating on only a few hours of sleep. He still wasn't caught up from the weekend stakeout that had turned out to be a waste of time.

"We can stare at these all we want, but they're not going to tell us who killed him." Sergeant Jody Harris stood beside him. Coppery curls sprang from under her navy-blue police cap, her gray eyes studying the photos intently. She had a yellow legal-sized notepad in one hand and a number-two pencil in the other.

"I know, but I keep hoping I'll see something that will give us a lead."

"We already know Thorne's behind this. And we have to prove it and take him down before he takes us down."

Jo was right. The crime scene had a lot of potential for things to go sideways for Sam and Jo. The victim, Mayor Harley Dupont, had requested a secret meeting with them the night he was killed. He'd promised to turn over information that would help incriminate Lucas Thorne. Sam desperately needed such information. He'd been trying to get something on the real estate developer, whom they suspected was responsible for the influx of drugs into White Rock for years now.

Trouble was, every time Sam thought he had a good sting in place, someone tipped off Thorne. Which brought him to the second piece of information Dupont had promised: something on fellow officer Tyler Richardson.

Earlier that summer, Tyler had been gunned down at what appeared to be a routine stop. It appeared as if he'd pulled over to help someone with a flat tire. But the case had turned strange. The facts didn't add up. The killer and the driver of the car were never found. The only solid clue was a lone fingerprint that didn't match any in the Automated Fingerprint Identification System database.

Dupont had claimed he had information about Tyler's death, which, as it turned out, could be another big problem for them.

Sam glanced back at the photos taken inside the abandoned mill where Dupont had requested the meeting. Dupont lay on the dusty, wide pine floorboards. Blood pooled under his head, and a gun lay at his side. Pigeon droppings splattered the scene as if someone had taken a brush and flung paint around.

Sam could still smell the dry wood of the old mill and hear the pigeons flapping in the odd hushed silence that always seemed to surround the dead. His eyes focused on one photo. Dupont's empty hand lay palm up, half curled. Dupont had been dead when they arrived, their only information on a small scrap of paper in the dead mayor's hand.

Had anyone noticed that paper was missing?

"I still can't believe that Tyler was tipping off Thorne," Jo said, as if reading Sam's thoughts about the missing piece of paper.

The paper, a scrap from a DNA test, indicated that their fellow officer and trusted friend Tyler was related to Lucas Thorne. The paper wasn't in the crime scene photos because Sam and Jo had taken it. And that wasn't the only thing they'd tampered with before the rest of the police arrived, which was why this investigation could become an even bigger problem.

Sam glanced back at the door to his office. Shadows moving beyond the smoked glass window set in the top portion of the antique golden-oak door indicated activity in the squad room.

Sam lowered his voice. "Maybe he wasn't."

"But those DNA results. There's no denying those," Jo whispered. "I would've bet my paycheck that Tyler was one of the good guys too."

Sam looked down at her and nodded. After Tyler had died, they'd done everything to protect his memory. They'd investigated the case in their spare time even though the state police had taken over and forbidden them from taking part in the investigation. Jo had even forged an entry in Tyler's logbook to make it appear as though he'd done everything by the book. But still, from the very beginning, something had been off. "It kind of makes sense now. We knew someone was feeding information to Thorne. That's why all our surprise busts didn't pan out."

"Especially the last one at the river. But Tyler was already dead. Who was feeding him information then?"

Sam shrugged. "I suspect Thorne simply felt things were too hot around here with the mayor's death just days before and called off the drop." They'd been tipped that Thorne was moving drugs out of state using a small river in a remote location. But a two-day stakeout at the most likely spot had yielded nothing. Sam figured Thorne had realized it was too risky to make a move so close to Dupont's murder.

"Probably. So how do we catch him? We've been over the crime scene countless times. We've scoured Dupont's house and his office."

Sam walked to the tall windows in his office and looked out at the quaint New England town, past the green of the commons and toward the brick building where Harley Dupont used to preside as mayor. Lucy, the German shepherd mix police dog, lay in a pool of early-morning sunshine on the honey-gold oak floor. She glanced up with one whiskey-brown eye then, upon deciding there was nothing of interest going on, snapped it shut and went back to sleep. "I just hope we're doing the right thing."

"We haven't done anything yet." Jo tapped the end of her pencil on her notepad. "Well, hardly anything. I mean, we did what we did for the right reasons."

The tense tone of her voice indicated she felt the same apprehension that Sam did about tampering with crime scenes. He reminded himself they were doing this for the right reasons. *They* were the good guys. But the way things had gone down with Dupont made Sam think Thorne might have seen an opportunity to silence the mayor and frame Sam for it.

Sam walked back to the corkboard, keeping his voice low. Only he and Jo knew what the crime scene had really looked like in that mill, and he wanted to keep it that way. "We have our work cut out for us, but finding the killer could lead us to Thorne."

“Whoever did this must be a close associate of Thorne’s. If we can nail him for the murder, maybe we can convince him to give us evidence on Thorne’s other activities.” Jo glanced up at him. “I just hope a full investigation won’t uncover some things better left covered.”

“That’s why I did a little rearranging.” Sam cocked his head and looked at the photo of the gun next to the mayor, almost exactly as it would be positioned if he’d shot himself. *Almost.* “Gives us the opportunity to rule it a suicide.” Sam didn’t like the idea of not conducting the full investigation. He was all about justice. But in this case, what could come out in the investigation might not serve justice. Maybe Thorne had rigged things this way on purpose.

Still, he was having regrets about moving the gun. Tampering with crime scenes wasn’t the norm for him. He had integrity. Principles. But sometimes you had to do what you had to do in order to get to the truth.

“Seems risky. What about the medical examiner and Kevin? We won’t be the only ones looking at this case.”

“John hasn’t written up his report yet. He hasn’t said one way or the other whether he thinks it’s suicide or homicide. And Kevin, well, I think he seems on board with ruling it a suicide.”

“How do you know that?”

“He indicated that when we were on the stakeout.” Sam had been surprised that their part-time officer, Kevin Deckard, had apparently been well aware that Thorne might be setting them up. Kevin had come a long way in the few months since Tyler’s death. Sam hadn’t been so sure of his loyalties earlier in the summer, but he’d stepped up big time and gone above and beyond on the stakeout. Sam hadn’t taken him into his confidence about what he’d done at the crime scene, though. The only one he trusted with that was Jo.

A knock sounded on the door. Sam shot a warning look at Jo, not that it was necessary.

“Come in,” Sam said.

The door opened, and Kevin Deckard and Wyatt Davis came in. Kevin clutched a white bag of doughnuts from the local coffee shop, Brewed Awakening, in his hand.

“Hey, Chief. I’ve shown Wyatt the ropes.” Kevin raised the bag. “Including the important parts, like where Brewed Awakening is.”

“Thanks for coming in early, Wyatt.” Wyatt wasn’t supposed to start for two weeks, but given everything taking place with the investigation, they’d called him in to start that morning.

“No problem,” Wyatt said. He looked at ease in his uniform. Proud to wear it. Maybe a little too proud. If he had an overly developed sense of his own authority, Sam would have to deal with that later. It wasn’t as if applicants for this police job way up in the middle of nowhere were knocking down his door. Wyatt’s had been the most qualified of the few resumes that had crossed his desk.

Kevin gave the bag to Jo. She peered inside and pulled out a jelly doughnut then passed the bag to Sam.

The crinkling of the bag woke Lucy. She trotted over next to Sam and gazed up at him with hopeful eyes.

“Not today, buddy. These aren’t good for you.” Sam bit into a cruller and passed the bag to Wyatt.

“Any new ideas?” Kevin’s eyes drifted to the corkboard. “I brought Wyatt up to speed on what we have so far.”

Wyatt stepped in front of the board. “I hear the mayor wasn’t well liked around here,” he said without turning to face them, still studying the gruesome photos.

“Not really,” Sam said. “He made upholding the law difficult for us.”

“There was a reason. He was in deep with Thorne.” Jo wiped a blob of jelly off her shirt.

“He wasn’t a nice guy, either.” Kevin put the doughnut bag on Sam’s desk and bent down to pet Lucy. “If he had his way, we wouldn’t have Lucy here as our K-9.”

Wyatt turned, his dark eyes narrowed on the dog. “Animal hater?”

“Yep,” Jo said.

“Probably made a lot of enemies,” Wyatt said.

“No doubt.” Sam leaned a hip against his desk and looked back at the photos. “Dupont had set up a meeting with Jo and me that night. He was going to hand us evidence we could use against Lucas Thorne. But when we got there, he was already dead. Dupont must have been getting nervous about what he had gotten himself into. Either he couldn’t see any way out and took his own life, or Thorne got wind he was going to talk and took it for him.”

Wyatt’s eyes flicked to the photos. “You think it could be suicide?”

“Possibly. The gun was at the scene and in the right position,” Sam said.

Wyatt cocked his head to look at a photo from a different angle, doubt seeping into his expression.

“If he was murdered, leaving the gun doesn’t make any sense,” Jo said. “Unless the killer had a reason.”

“Like what?” Wyatt asked.

“To frame Sam or Jo.” Kevin’s words surprised Sam. Apparently, Kevin was much more insightful than Sam had thought.

“That would serve two purposes,” Jo said. “Avoid being prosecuted himself and put someone in place here at the police station that he can control.”

Wyatt nodded and reached down to pet Lucy, his face relaxing into a smile as his hands touched her tan-and-black fur. Her tail swished on the floor. Sam’s estimation of Wyatt went up a notch. Anyone who liked dogs was okay in his book.

Wyatt looked back up at them. “So, how do we prove it was him?”

CHAPTER TWO

Jody Harris sat in the hard oak chair that Sam liked to use when questioning suspects. He'd sawn a quarter inch off of one leg so that it tipped back and forth. Came in handy for throwing suspects off balance during interrogations. Not so handy for taking notes in a police investigation, as Jo was trying to do right now.

Sam was in front of his desk, one hip leaned against the edge. Kevin and Wyatt took up the other two oak chairs. Lucy was back in her spot in the sun.

It had been almost a week since the murder. They'd done a fairly thorough job of looking for evidence at Dupont's and had also interviewed all of his contacts. They'd been busy on the stakeout at the river where they thought Thorne would be making a drug drop, and that had eaten into time they could have spent investigating Dupont's death.

Jody glanced at the new guy, Wyatt. He seemed competent. She supposed he was good-looking, tall with a trim-cut beard. Not as tall as Sam or as broad, but he had a certain boyish appeal. Not that Jo was looking; Wyatt was ten years her junior, and she wasn't in the market for a man anyway. She appreciated that Sam had given her a chance to look at his resume and talk to Wyatt before making the final decision on hiring him. It made her feel like her input was important.

It was early yet, but Jo doubted she'd develop the same bond with Wyatt that she had with Sam and Tyler. Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing considering that Tyler had ended up being a traitor. Wyatt seemed competent, and they desperately needed the help. Hopefully, they'd click

over time. And now that Kevin seemed to be coming around, they might have a pretty tight team in place.

Her gaze drifted back to Sam as he went over the specifics of the case. His navy-blue T-shirt was a bit rumpled, but he radiated an exciting energy even though the salt-and-pepper stubble that covered his chin and the lines etched into his face betrayed the fact that he must be as tired as she felt. Sam was a good cop, a loyal cop, a trustworthy cop, and Jo was proud to work under him, even if he pushed them, no matter how exhausted they were, to solve this case.

She glanced nervously again at the photos. Had it been a mistake to move the gun? There was no telling what Thorne had planned, and while neither of them wanted to obscure justice, they'd try to work the case so that the outcome was the same even if they had to take a circular route. If they thought it best to try to get a ruling of suicide, they'd continue their efforts to go after Thorne. Either way, Thorne would pay.

Whichever way Sam wanted to play it, Jo would go along, because she trusted him. Especially because he'd trusted her with his secret that night at the mill. A pang of guilt picked at her stomach. Problem was, she hadn't trusted Sam with *her* secret yet, and until she did, things wouldn't be open between them.

"So you don't mind doing that, Jo?" Sam's question pulled her out of her thoughts.

Jo's head shot up. "What?" The pencil tapping on her notepad increased.

"Making a few calls to some of the people Dupont met with the day before he died. Maybe one of them can give us some insight as to his frame of mind."

"Oh, yeah. Sure. I have a list from his assistant. Of course, most of his meetings were with Jamison."

Henley Jamison had been Dupont's vice mayor. He was now acting mayor and was almost as antagonistic as Dupont but maybe not quite as cautious. He'd already started to put pressure on them, just as Dupont had. Whether or not he would try to impede investigations that involved Thorne remained to be seen. Jamison was ambitious, but was he ambitious enough to get into bed with Thorne as Dupont had? It hadn't worked out very well for his predecessor.

“Okay, I’m going to go get together with John and go over his report,” Sam said, referring to John Dudley, the county medical examiner. “Kevin, I want you and Wyatt to go over the crime scene at Reed’s Ferry Mill again. But this time, search farther away from the building. I know it’s contaminated there because it’s been a week. I know the drug addicts are going back in, but maybe there’s something out there. The killer might have parked on the access road and walked in. There’re some narrow trails. Take Lucy. If something is there, she’ll sniff it out.”

At the sound of her name, Lucy lifted her head and gave Sam a questioning look, the fur on her forehead wrinkling above curious eyes.

Kevin sat up a little straighter in his chair and nodded. As a part-timer and low man on the pole, Kevin was usually relegated to grunt work. After Tyler’s death, they’d been shorthanded, and he’d had to step it up. At first, Jo hadn’t been so sure about trusting him with extra responsibilities. She thought she’d even caught him lying once when she’d seen him come out of the alley near a restaurant. But he’d proved himself these last few weeks, and she was happy he was getting better assignments, even if she was a bit jealous that Kevin was getting to do fun field work while she was stuck making phone calls on this one. Sam always had a reason for everything, and she suspected that Sam was giving this job to Kevin and Wyatt so it wouldn’t seem as if she and Sam were collecting all the physical evidence.

A knock sounded on the door, and the receptionist, Reese Hordon, poked her head in.

“Sorry, Sam. I got a call from Nettie Deardorff about Bitsy again. Seems the goat chewed up the hem of her new housedress that was drying on the clothesline.”

Reese’s expression was apologetic. Her long dark hair was pulled into ponytails that cascaded down the sides of her face. Her blue eyes looked at them keenly. Jo liked the young woman, who was a cadet at the police academy and had a good instinct for police work. Not to mention that her contacts at the academy sometimes allowed them to expedite things as well as glean sensitive information off the record. What Jo liked most about her was that Reese didn’t flinch when they had to push the envelope a bit in order to expedite justice.

Lucy swiveled her head and wagged her tail furiously at the sight of Reese.

“Goat?” Wyatt asked.

“Nettie Deardorff is one of our senior residents. She’s had a feud going on with her neighbor, Rita Hoelscher, as long as I can remember,” Sam said. “They’ve fought over many things over the years, but ever since Rita got Bitsy—that’s her goat—Nettie has really stepped up her complaints. Thing is, Bitsy does get out and chew on things. Sometimes I wonder if Rita lets her out on purpose. A few months ago, Nettie got a chicken, and now they take turns calling in complaints on the other’s pets. It always ends amicably. I think they just want attention.”

Kevin rose from his chair. “I’ll take care of it.”

Sam held his hand out. “You sit back down. This will be good experience for Wyatt. Get him used to the local folks and all.”

Kevin beamed.

“Sure. I can handle that,” Wyatt said.

“I have the address right here.” Reese held a pink Post-it note out toward Wyatt.

Sam’s gaze drifted out the window. “Crap.”

Henley Jamison was walking down the sidewalk. It was a hot summer day, but he wore his charcoal-gray Armani suit coat, his crimson tie making a statement against his white shirt. Every single hair was perfectly in place as he strutted down the street in his shiny Ferragamo shoes toward the police station.

Sam pulled open his drawer and grabbed his keys. “Okay, let’s wrap this up quick and get out of here before Jamison comes in and makes a pain in the butt of himself.”

The office filled with the sounds of chairs scraping as they all jumped up and ran for the door. Sam’s voice stopped them as Jo was reaching for the old brass doorknob.

“Let’s do our best work today. We need to wrap this one up quick. I have a feeling Jamison might be ready to call in reinforcements, and I don’t think any of us wants another police department getting into our business.”

CHAPTER THREE

As Kevin turned into the parking area of the Reed's Ferry Mill, Sam's words echoed in his head. He sure as hell didn't want another department looking into this case. That might lead to investigating each of *them*, and that was the last thing he wanted. Especially considering what he'd been up to.

In the passenger seat of the police-issue Crown Victoria, Lucy stared out the window intently, her gaze focused on the abandoned brick building. Kevin chose his parking spot carefully. The parking lot had been claimed by tall grass, scrawny shrubs, and thick weeds. He didn't want the Crown Vic to get scratched, because it was a privilege to be allowed to drive it.

The police department had only two vehicles; the other was the Tahoe that Sam usually drove. When Tyler had been alive, he'd driven the Crown Vic, and Kevin had to drive his own car. But once Tyler was gone, Kevin graduated to the Crown Vic.

Now that Wyatt had been hired on full-time, would Sam let him drive the official car and bust Kevin back down to his personal vehicle? Kevin didn't think so. He had seniority, and Sam respected that sort of thing. But he still didn't want to risk his privileges by getting the car all dirty and scratched.

Kevin pulled to a stop and took his keys out of the ignition before reaching into his pocket for one of the special treats for which he drove two towns over to purchase for Lucy. They were her favorite. The smell of bacon permeated the car, drawing Lucy's gaze to the treat in his hand. He

fed her the treat and then patted her, taking comfort in the softness of her fur on his fingertips.

"You remember this place, right, girl?"

Lucy tilted her head. She'd been over the crime scene several times with Sam and Jo.

"Of course, you do. Let's give it another look. I know you can find something." Kevin got out of the car and came around to the passenger side to let Lucy out. Pride swelled in his chest. Lucy usually stayed with Sam or Jo, but today Sam had trusted him with the dog. He was making progress, becoming part of Sam and Jo's inner circle.

Kevin had gotten attached to Lucy. He enjoyed her company, and she seemed to understand him. Dogs just took you at face value; they never complained. Didn't stab you in the back either. You could trust a dog. People, not so much. Before Lucy had come to the department, Kevin had felt isolated. As a part-timer, he worked odd hours, and it always seemed as if Sam, Jo, and Tyler were in a special group and he was the outsider. Once Lucy came on the scene, he felt he had a friend. And now things were really looking up. His relationship with Sam and Jo was strengthening. Sam had been giving him more responsibility and had shown in several ways that he trusted Kevin.

There was no way he would betray that trust. He couldn't undo what he'd already done, but at least he could try to make up for his mistakes.

His thoughts turned to the mysterious contact who had asked him to relay information about what was going on in the station. It had started almost a year ago. He found notes in his mailbox and his car. He met with people in shadowy alleys. He'd almost been caught at it once and was forced to lie to Jo, making up a story about meeting his cousin who worked at the restaurant next to the alley when she'd seen him coming out of the alley after meeting his contact.

Sure, he felt guilty about that now, but he'd done all that before he knew the truth. He'd thought he was doing the right thing. At first, Kevin hadn't understood who was behind the requests. He thought the FBI was investigating Sam and Jo. Kevin knew the agency didn't always go by the book, so he assumed they were up to something shady and he was helping the authorities catch them.

Once he started to work with Sam more closely, he began to realize that was not the case. Whoever was pressuring him for information about Sam

and Jo was up to something else entirely. He was sure Sam and Jo weren't doing anything underhanded. Sure, they used some unconventional methods, but sometimes that was what you had to do in order to get justice. Especially in a town like White Rock, where corruption reached as high as the mayor himself. And after what happened at the stakeout, Kevin had a sneaking suspicion the orders from his contact were coming directly from Lucas Thorne. It was no coincidence that the drug drop at the river never happened after Kevin leaked information about the stakeout to his contact.

They waded through the knee-high grass. He'd have to check Lucy for ticks thoroughly later. He didn't bother going into the building; they'd been over it many times already, and by now, the crime scene had been contaminated by the lowlifes who hung out inside the mill. The only things to be seen in there were dirty mattresses, used needles, and crumpled junk food wrappers. He could do without the stink of vomit, urine, and sweat. He figured Lucy could too.

Not to mention the piles of pigeon droppings and those noisy birds cooing and their claws scraping the rafters as Kevin tried to work the scene. One of them had expressed its displeasure at his presence by splattering a fresh drop on his black police boots. That stuff was caustic; it had taken the shine right off that quarter-shaped spot. Nothing Kevin tried could restore the luster.

Kevin walked slowly, his eyes scanning the ground. Lucy ran ahead, sniffing every tree and acorn and scaring off a few squirrels, which chattered at her angrily from the branches they'd taken cover in.

It was hot, one of those sticky end-of-summer days. A bead of sweat trickled down the back of Kevin's neck as he swung his head back and forth, searching for anything that looked out of place.

He wondered if Sam would try to rule the investigation a suicide. He thought Sam might have a few reasons to do so. When Kevin had gotten to the crime scene, he'd noticed some discrepancies, like the smudge near the gun. He was pretty sure someone had moved it, and the only people who had been there were Sam and Jo … and the killer. But why would the killer move the gun? Just in case, Kevin had obliterated the telltale smudge with the toe of his boot when no one was looking. He didn't want Sam to get into trouble.

The other discrepancy Kevin had noticed was the way Dupont's hand had been curled, as if he'd been clutching something. Kevin had to wonder

if Sam knew more about that than he let on. But Kevin had his own reasons for wanting Dupont's death to be ruled a suicide. An investigation might uncover some of the things he'd been up to, like tipping Thorne off to police activity.

Passing information along wasn't the only thing he'd done. His contact had asked him to look through Tyler Richardson's belongings after his death. Kevin hadn't found anything except a thumb drive. Now he was glad he hadn't passed that drive along. Even though he hadn't found any files on it, special forensics might be able to recover previously erased data. He'd kept it as an insurance policy in case things went south.

But what was on it? Could it be something that incriminated Thorne or something that incriminated Sam and Jo? Or it could be nothing. Better to keep it safely hidden away until his hand was forced.

He would never have to use it unless the investigation dug too deep. Yep, a suicide ruling was probably best. But Kevin had a funny feeling that not everyone might be willing to let it go as a suicide. The way Wyatt had been looking at those photos in Sam's office told Kevin he might not go along so easily. And he'd asked a lot of questions about Sam earlier that morning when Kevin had been showing him the ropes. He'd also indicated he didn't think that Dupont fit the suicide profile. Would he push back if Sam tried to press for a suicide conclusion?

Maybe that was just normal curiosity and Kevin was being paranoid. Still, there was something about Wyatt that tweaked Kevin's alarm bells. He couldn't quite put his finger on it. Maybe he was simply jealous that a new person was coming in just when he was finally making headway into Sam and Jo's confidence.

No, that was stupid. Sam had been giving him more responsibility. He'd let him handle the arrest of that environmentalist guy, and they'd bonded at the stakeout. Plus, Sam had picked him to take Lucy to the crime scene and sent Wyatt to deal with a local dispute. They were building trust, and a new guy wasn't going to jeopardize that.

Whether Dupont's death ended up a suicide or not, Kevin needed to find a clue that would lead them to Thorne. Once Thorne was out of the picture, Kevin wouldn't have to worry about his contact. And he was sure Thorne was the main source of the drug supply, judging by the generous amounts of money he was paid to tip him off about the police station happenings. Kevin

was determined to make up for all the information he'd passed along, and the best way he could think to do that was to help nail Thorne.

Kevin whirled at the crunch of gravel to his left, his hand going automatically to the gun on his hip.

A thin old man with a smattering of gray hair crowning a shiny bald spot stood twenty feet away. A mixture of surprise and fear spread on his face as his eyes flicked from Kevin's face to the hand hovering above his gun. Kevin relaxed. It was just a civilian dressed in a yellow T-shirt and grass-stained tan chinos. He'd probably been mowing his lawn, judging by the clumps of grass on his sneakers.

"Boy, you cops sure take an active interest in this old mill," the man said.

"We're investigating," Kevin said. He was sure the man knew the mayor had been found dead inside the mill less than a week ago. It had been all over the news. "You live over there?" Kevin jutted his chin toward the neighborhood that he knew to be beyond the woods. If he lived there, how had the man seen him here?

The man shook his head and held out his hand. "Harvey Noonan. I live down the access road that way." The man pointed toward the dirt entrance road to the mill. "House is kind of secluded. Saw the police car drive by and wondered what was going on. Neighborhood's gone to shit with the drug addicts that come and go. And now a death."

Kevin walked closer and shook Harvey's hand. "You saw me drive by. You kind of watching the place?"

"Could say that. Can't be too careful." The man glanced warily at the mill.

"Did you see anything the other night or maybe that day?" Kevin asked. Sam, Jo, and Kevin had talked to all the neighbors, but Kevin hadn't talked to this one. He was probably one of the people Sam or Jo had talked to, but it didn't hurt to ask again. Sometimes people clammed up when they were being asked officially, or they simply didn't remember things until later.

"Lots of cops coming and going."

"You mean after we found the body?"

The man shook his head. "No. Not then, before."

"Before? How long before?"

"Earlier that afternoon."

Sam and Jo had had a meeting with Dupont that night, so they'd been here before all the sirens, but of course this neighbor didn't know that. "You mean right before you heard the sirens."

The man screwed up his face. "Are you daft? No wonder this town's gone to shit with you protecting it. I said earlier in the afternoon. I wouldn't bother to mention if it was *right* before. Of course the cops had to come here on some sort of call. This was *hours* before. I saw a car drive by and figured there were some goings on, but when I came down, it was just that lady cop. She was going in the building. I don't want to go anywhere near there, so I turned around and went back home."

Kevin frowned. Jo? Why had she been here earlier in the afternoon? He guessed it made sense. She'd probably come to scope the place out so that they'd have an exit strategy in case Dupont's meeting was an ambush. Yep, that made perfect sense. But if that was the case, why hadn't Sam or Jo mentioned that in the reports?

"Right. Well, the police are watching this place. Like you said, there's a lot of drug activity, and we want to keep the neighborhood safe, so we check in every so often," Kevin lied. He wanted to make an excuse for Jo, because if Sam and Jo hadn't mentioned her being here earlier, he was sure there was good reason for it.

The man screwed up his face and thought a minute. "Yeah. Right. That makes sense. That what you doing now?"

"That and looking for clues." Kevin pointed to Lucy.

The man nodded. "Okay, then. Hope you catch the guy that did it."

Kevin watched the man leave until he disappeared around the corner.

Kevin hoped Harvey wouldn't make an official report about what he'd just said. No one needed to know that Sam and Jo had omitted the part about her being there earlier in the day. It might have been an honest mistake, but official investigations could get sticky, and honest mistakes could get twisted out of context. Kevin would keep that information to himself.

Lucy's excited bark brought his attention back to the task at hand. She stood at the edge of the woods where a narrow trail started. She looked back at Kevin and then at an oak sapling in front of her. Her nose was high in the air, a position that Kevin had come to recognize as a sign that she'd sniffed out something of interest. Kevin knew that dogs had a strong sense of smell,

but in the short time he'd worked with Lucy, he'd noticed that hers seemed almost as if it had been developed to an extraordinary level.

Kevin jogged over. "What did you find?"

Lucy pointed her ears forward and looked up at a leaf at about waist height. Kevin's eyes followed her gaze. The sapling had bright-green leaves, but the one Lucy looked at was stained with a rusty-brown smudge. He bent closer, his heartbeat picking up a notch. The smudge was the color of dried blood. A fingerprint? He couldn't see any whorls, but it was the right size.

Was that Dupont's blood? Was it from the killer? And if so, should he bag it as evidence, because if they were going to close this as a suicide, how could there be a fingerprint from the killer on a leaf? Maybe he should destroy it.

But if for some reason Sam decided to investigate, this fingerprint could come in handy, and he couldn't guarantee that he would come back to find it washed off by rain or devoured by bugs. He could put it in his evidence bag and hold it just in case, but then how would he explain coming back here to find it?

He took the evidence bag from his pocket and turned it inside out. It was better to turn the print in. It might help them find the person doing Thorne's dirty work. If Sam decided to go the suicide route, they could always use it to prove that one of Thorne's minions had been here after the mayor killed himself. And that proof might be the thing that could help them build a case against Thorne, no matter what route they decided to take in the investigation of Dupont's death.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sam didn't like the way things were going with John Dudley, the medical examiner. They stood side by side in the basement morgue. The temperature was set on chill, the room all stainless steel and gleaming white tile. The caustic smell of antiseptic and death permeated the air. Sam would never get used to that smell. Apparently, it didn't bother John. He seemed downright gleeful as he pointed to an x-ray of Dupont's head on the lighted display box.

"The bullet came in at this angle." John tapped on the x-ray then pointed to a photo of the crime scene that sat inside an open manila folder. "The angle just doesn't coincide with the way the gun fell. I had those fancy CSI yahoos up at the county crime lab reenact it. You know they have all kinds of gadgets to do that with. 'Course, there wasn't even a hint of a fingerprint on the gun."

"I know," Sam said. Sam should've known that John would consult with the county lab. He kicked himself for moving the gun in the first place. What had he been thinking?

"Right. Well, I have to admit I'm baffled as to why the gun was there. Dupont didn't do it, so it must have been the killer. But why?" John asked. "Another thing was the way Dupont's pocket was half out. Like he'd been handing something to the killer. Or the killer took it."

Sam gritted his teeth. This could be a complication. They'd searched Dupont at the mill hastily before anyone else had arrived. He hadn't mentioned that in his report.

“Maybe the killer was looking for cash, got scared off when he heard us coming in, and dropped the gun,” Sam suggested.

John shrugged. “Maybe. Seems more like he planted it there.”

Sam raised a brow. “Planted?”

“Yeah. Maybe he wanted the scene to look like a suicide, or maybe he wanted to set someone else up for it.”

“Yeah, that thought did cross my mind.” Great, now he’d lied to John. Technically, it wasn’t a lie. Sam did think he was being set up, and maybe that was the reason the killer had left the gun. He never should have moved the gun. But John had one thing right: it was odd the gun had been left behind. There was only one reason—to frame someone. Sam feared that *someone* was him.

Sam took the autopsy file from John and drove back to the police station. There was no question now. He’d be investigating Dupont’s death as a murder.

Worried about what might be uncovered officially once he followed the case through properly, Sam trudged up the granite steps to the brick police building and pushed the double doors open. Reese scowled at him from behind an old metal teacher’s desk they’d appropriated when the junior high had been renovated.

“I’m going to get back at you all for leaving me here with Jamison,” the receptionist warned.

Sam shrugged, sheepish. “Sorry about that. But that guy can really impede things. I didn’t want to get caught up in an argument with him. We have work to do.”

“He was asking all kinds of questions. Digging into the specifics of what you guys were up to. Asking about private conversations. As if I’d tell.” Reese rolled her eyes.

Sam smiled. “Thanks.” He trusted Reese. She wouldn’t let Jamison or anyone else know the details they wanted to keep secret.

“But I *am* going to get back at you.” Reese’s gaze drifted over Sam’s shoulder. “In fact, that’s going to happen any minute. Harry called, and I told him you’d love to see him.”

“What? Please tell me you’re joking.” Sam spun around to see Harry Woolston walking up the steps. His sharp blue eyes sparkled under bushy white eyebrows that matched the thick shock of hair on his head.

Harry had been police chief when Sam was just a boy. He had to be pushing eighty. He liked to come in and relive his glory days. Usually, that consisted of meddling in Sam's investigations, though sometimes he did help out. But right now the last thing Sam wanted was Harry's help.

Too late for that. The door swung open, and Harry stepped in. "Sam! How's it going? You making headway in the Dupont case?"

"A bit," Sam said.

Harry smiled at Reese and handed over a box of chocolates. Sam's frown deepened. The last thing he needed was Reese falling under Harry's spell. Even at his age, he was a charmer. Sam didn't need Reese making it inviting for Harry to stop in every day.

"You ask me, the town is well rid of that Dupont character. Never liked that guy. Marnie Wilson's the one we need for mayor. And she's taken a shine to you." Harry winked at Sam and then took a chocolate from the box Reese had opened and bit into it. He frowned. "But we might've gone from the frying pan into the fire with that Henley Jamison in charge now. I only wish the election was sooner. The sooner we have it, the sooner we can get rid of the current riffraff."

"Can't argue with you there," Sam said.

The door opened again, and Wyatt stepped in. He looked surprised to see them all standing in the lobby.

"Hey. What's going on?"

"Nothing," Sam shifted to the left to accommodate the newcomer. The lobby was getting a little crowded. "We all just got here at the same time."

Harry stuck his hand out. "You must be the new guy. I'm Harry Woolston, chief of police."

Wyatt's questioning eyes flicked from Harry to Sam.

"Former chief," Sam said. "Did you take care of Nettie and Rita?"

"Yeah. They're very interesting."

"You must've made quite an impression on Rita," Reese said. "She called the station to put in a good word for the 'nice young man' who came out. Said something about bringing you fruitcake?"

Wyatt turned red. "Yeah. In order to get them to reconcile, I had to sit down with them for a slice of fruitcake."

Harry laughed. "You actually like that stuff?"

Wyatt grimaced. "No, but you gotta do what you gotta do to keep the peace."

They all laughed as the door opened again. Kevin and Lucy came in, and Sam shuffled another foot to the left.

Kevin stopped at the door. Lucy inched her way around the room, sniffing everyone's shoes.

"Hey, Harry, What's going on?" Kevin asked.

"We're just catching up on the case," Harry said. "Got any suspects?"

"We're not catching up on the case," Sam said. "At least *you're* not."

"I might have some ideas that could help you out." Harry leaned in closer. "You ask me, that Lucas Thorne is behind it."

"Why do you say that?"

"Come on, Sam. Everyone knows he's a bad seed. The way he's putting up all those buildings. Ripping down trees. Ruining our pristine town. And we all know Dupont was in his pocket. Why else would all those zoning laws be changed when no one in town wanted them changed? Dupont probably saw he was getting in too deep and wanted out, so Thorne removed him. Marnie Wilson will rein Thorne right in, though. He'll be as afraid of her as he is his wife."

Kevin's eyes narrowed. "He's afraid of his wife? Somehow I don't picture that."

Harry snorted. "I know, right? But that Beryl, she's a hard woman. Known her family for decades. That's how Thorne found our town; she brought him here. Beautiful woman but hard. Rich too." Harry's face turned thoughtful. "That's probably why he married her. For the money. Her family funded all his real estate development. Good match, though. She's the only woman devious enough to handle him. Smart—well, other than marrying Thorne. That's why she made him sign the prenup. She wears the pants in the family."

Sam exchanged a glance with Kevin. He couldn't picture Thorne yielding to a woman, but he'd never met Beryl. Sam tried to avoid Thorne whenever possible. He was a bit happy, though, to know there was someone who intimidated Thorne. Maybe Sam would take the wife out to lunch to show his approval.

The door opened again, and they all shuffled sideways to accommodate Alvin Ray, the mailman. He was dressed in his usual meticulously pressed blue-and-gray uniform and carrying the white plastic box that he used to deliver bulk mail.

He stopped just inside the door, his brows raised. “Well, good morning. I’m not used to such a reception.”

“Morning, Alvin,” Harry said. “You’re looking fine today.”

Alvin smiled proudly. He was known for taking pride in his appearance. “Thank you!”

Alvin hefted the box onto Reese’s desk, almost knocking the chocolates off. Harry pushed in between Wyatt and Alvin to catch them.

“*Hachoo!*” Harry sneezed.

Reese glanced up at Harry, her eyes wide with concern. “Harry, you coming down with something?”

“Nah,” Harry scoffed, whipping out a white linen handkerchief and blowing his nose. “I never get sick. Allergies. Pet dander. Cats usually, maybe dogs too.” He looked down at Lucy. “You been hanging around with any cats?”

Lucy narrowed her eyes and curled the left side of her lip as if the very idea of hanging around with cats was repugnant.

Harry grabbed another chocolate and sniffled. “Guess I better be moseying off. Wife wants me to pick up some lady stuff at the pharmacy.”

Kevin turned sideways to let Harry get to the door, and they all watched him leave.

“Nice man,” Alvin said as he sorted the mail onto Reese’s desk.

“He is,” Reese said.

“Coming in here always brings back fond memories.” Alvin finished his sorting and looked around the lobby.

It had been only a few years since the post office moved to a new modern building and the police station was upgraded from the basement of the town hall to the old post office building. The building still had all the original trappings, from the marble floors to the wainscoting to the oak doors with their etched-glass windows. They even made use of the mission-style furniture that had been in the building since 1930. It still smelled of years of lemon pledge and stamp glue. Some might have been put out by having to make do with the post office castoffs, but Sam thought the building and furnishings had character.

“Don’t know why they put all that modern stuff in the new post office building. It just doesn’t have the charm.” Alvin waved toward the wall of post office boxes that divided the room. The antiques were constructed of solid brass, with black dials and eagles emblazoned below the small etched-

glass windows. “Like these boxes. The new ones are just plain steel. So boring.” Alvin squinted over the tops of the boxes into the squad room, his eyes darting to the corkboard where photos of the Dupont crime scene were tacked up.

He averted his gaze quickly. “Guess you guys are busy, what with what happened to the mayor and all.” He pushed his black-framed glasses up on his nose.

“Sure are,” Sam said.

Alvin turned toward the door, his face thoughtful. “Funny thing, though. What was the mayor doing in the mill? It’s not really a place where someone like him should be.”

“He might have been lured there or had a meeting. We’re not sure yet.” Sam had no intention of letting it get out that the mayor was meeting with them to provide information on Thorne.

Alvin shrugged. “Could have been a setup. You know, like on TV. There’s rumors. But then I also heard rumors the only people seen there that day were the cops.”

“We patrol that area from time to time,” Sam said.

Alvin pushed his glasses up again. “Yeah, guess that makes sense. Anyway, rumors are just that—rumors. Well, have a nice day.”

The lobby was silent as they watched Alvin leave, his white sneakers squeaking on the polished marble floor as he swung open the door and exited into the sunlight.

As Sam watched him amble down the granite steps, Jo’s voice rang out from the squad room.

“Are you guys going to sit out there, chatting like old ladies, all day, or you gonna come in here and help me solve the case?”

THE SQUAD ROOM wasn’t big, but it was enough for the three desks that the department needed. Jo sat at hers next to the window, her laptop open, yellow smiley face coffee mug perched beside it.

As they filed into the room, she stood and came around to sit on the front of her desk, which faced into the middle of the room.

Kevin's desk was on the opposite wall. He pulled the chair out from under it and spun it around. Sam went to the coffee machine, popped an orange K-Cup of Gorilla Organic into the top, and started the machine. "Anybody want a coffee?"

"I'll take one," said Wyatt, standing beside him. "I like the strong stuff."

Sam nodded approvingly and made the two coffees, putting them in navy-blue White Rock Police Department mugs.

"That was kind of weird what the mailman said about a setup." Wyatt took his mug and looked at Sam. "You think this could be some kind of setup?"

"You never know. With Thorne, it's likely."

"You really think it's this developer guy?"

"Yep." Sam walked the few steps into the squad room. "You stick around long enough, you'll see why."

"So what'd you find out from John?" Jo's legs dangled in front of her desk, and she tapped her heels impatiently against the solid oak front. Their eyes met, and Sam could tell what she was thinking. She was wondering if John had evidence that indicated it wasn't a suicide. Might as well give her the bad news right away.

"John doesn't think it was a suicide. The placement of the gun isn't conducive to that." Sam hitched his hip on the corner of Kevin's desk and sipped his coffee.

Wyatt stood awkwardly in the center of the room. Sam hadn't yet assigned him a desk. The other desk was the one Tyler Richardson had occupied.

Sam nodded at Wyatt and gestured toward Tyler's desk. "You can take that desk." A pang of sadness speared him, but he'd have to get used to someone else sitting at Tyler's desk. Besides, as they'd recently learned, maybe Tyler wasn't as worthy of Sam's feelings as he'd once thought.

Wyatt looked at the desk uncertainly then sat behind it, facing them.

Lucy trotted over and sat in front of Jo's desk, looking up at the doughnut bag perched on the corner. Jo opened the bag and tilted it toward the dog. "Sorry, it's empty." She crumpled the bag and tossed it into the trash can next to the coffee maker.

"I'm not surprised. I didn't think it was suicide. Didn't look like it." Wyatt's voice was neutral, but the flicker of suspicion in his eyes put Sam

on alert. Sam made a mental note to be cautious around Wyatt until he had him figured out.

"There were some discrepancies at the crime scene. But we have to do our due diligence and consider all the angles," Sam said.

Wyatt nodded.

Sam turned to Jo. "Did you get anything from his contacts?"

Jo shook her head. "I hightailed it out the back door when we saw Jamison coming. I figured it was a perfect opportunity to talk to Dupont's assistant without Jamison getting in the way. But she didn't have anything new to add, so I skedaddled out of there before Jamison returned. I came back here, and I've been calling the people on his calendar. We already talked to most of them, but I figure sometimes people think things over and remember something new. A few said he seemed a little nervous, but that makes sense given that he was having that secret meeting with us. Other than that, I didn't come up with anything new."

"I might have something." Kevin pulled an evidence bag from his pocket and held it up. Inside was a green leaf.

Sam squinted at the bag. "You found that at the mill?"

"Lucy found it, actually. Looks like there might be a blood smear on the leaf." Kevin handed it over to Sam, who held it up to the light.

"Could be unrelated to the murder. Lots of lowlifes hang out there, and who knows what kinds of things they get up to. Fights, maybe. But we'll see if the lab can get a print off it." Sam turned and called for Reese, who appeared around the side of the post office boxes. He handed her the evidence bag. "Can you get this to the lab and see if they can get a fingerprint or something off of it and test to see if it's blood? If it is, have them check to see if it's Dupont's."

Reese took the bag and held it close to her face, squinting. "I don't see any fingerprint, but it's the right shape. We learned about this last semester. I have a friend from school who is interning at the lab. I'll see if I can put a rush on it." She disappeared back out into the lobby, and Sam turned back to the others.

"Okay, you guys know the drill. We're treating this like any other homicide now. Everything by the book. We'll be under extraordinary scrutiny. Kevin and Wyatt, I want you to question the druggies who hang out at that mill building. There was no one there when we found Dupont,

but maybe they were there before. Whoever killed Dupont might have been waiting for him, and someone may have heard or seen something."

Kevin stood and grabbed his keys. "We're on it."

"Jo, I want you to keep on that list. Go back to last week. Check out Dupont's neighbors. Maybe somebody saw someone coming to the house or something suspicious that day."

Jo slid off the desk. "Will do."

Sam started toward his office, catching Jo's eye on the way. Now that there was no question about the direction of the investigation, they would have to be careful, especially given what they'd learned about Tyler. What they'd done to protect his name could come back to bite them.

Hopefully, they could keep anything about Tyler from coming out in the investigation. For some reason, Sam still didn't want his betrayal revealed. For one, he didn't want Tyler's memory spoiled for his elderly mother and disabled sister, Clarissa. Tyler had been a hero in their eyes, even moving in with his mother so he could use his check to pay for Clarissa's expensive treatments.

Jo fished her keys out of her desk and followed Sam to the office. "Now what? We need a plan."

Sam nodded. "I'm hoping we can play it by the book. We know who's behind this."

Jo lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. "And if certain things come to light in the investigation?"

"Maybe it's good if we go over things and think them through from all angles. Not here, though." Sam glanced at his door. He couldn't risk anyone overhearing them. "Tonight. My house."

Jo nodded and turned toward the door.

"And Jo," Sam called to her as she got to the door.

She turned back to look at him. "Yeah?"

"You bring the beer."

CHAPTER FIVE

The day had yielded a big fat nothing. Sam had spent the afternoon trying to call in favors from his contacts in an attempt to figure out who Thorne would have ordered to kill Dupont. His contacts either didn't know, or weren't saying. Sam couldn't blame them. No one wanted to cross Thorne. He was a cold-hearted killer.

When he drove home that night, all he had was a smoking gun and a smudged leaf. But he had an idea about someone else he could press for information, an informant he'd been grooming for a while now. That person probably wouldn't know who was closest to Thorne in his chain of command, but he'd know the lowest link in that chain. Sam would have to start at the bottom.

Sam lived in an old log hunting cabin deep in the woods. His grandfather had built it, and the sight of the golden logs and wide front porch nestled between pines, birch, and oaks always brought him comfort.

He pulled into the driveway, and Lucy bounded out of the Tahoe and onto the porch. The green wooden rocking chair—his grandfather's favorite—rocked slightly as she sped past. She waited at the door, glancing back at Sam impatiently.

"You want dinner?"

Lucy wagged her tail furiously and gave him a look as if to say, "Duh."

Sam opened the door, and Lucy rushed to her stainless-steel bowl in the kitchen. Sam tossed his keys on the cedar log table beside the door and let the day's stress roll off. The cabin was still decorated exactly as it had been

when his grandparents lived there: rustic, comfortable furniture, happy childhood memories, and the scent of cedar.

Sam poured the dry dog food the vet had recommended into Lucy's bowl then looked around the cabin. Grandma hadn't been much for decorating. She'd hunted and fished right alongside Sam's grandfather. In fact, one of the big taxidermy bass hanging on the wall was one she'd caught in the Sacagewassett here in town.

The warm log walls were dotted with other taxidermy and paintings of lakes and mountains in sunset pink, orange, and blue. The furniture was mostly hickory or birch. An oak china cabinet housed about the only items that couldn't be described as rustic: some of Grandma's old blue china. The cabin might not make *Architectural Digest*, but to Sam, it was perfect. It was home. Though it was a little messy right now. He supposed he should pick his socks up from under the coffee table and put away the T-shirt draped over the kitchen chair. Sam didn't socialize much with Jo outside of work and unwinding at Holy Spirits, the downtown bar built from a decommissioned church. Heck, he didn't socialize much at all, which was why the place was a mess. He never really had to pick up for anyone.

He'd just finished sprucing up and pouring some chips into a bowl when a soft tap at the open screen door brought his attention to the front of the house. Jo stood tentatively outside the door, holding a six-pack of Sam's favorite Mooseneck beer.

The fading sunlight made her copper curls shine. Sam felt a rush of emotion. He was a solitary guy and didn't have many friends. Jo was one of the few people he trusted. One of the few people he could share things with. And now that they were in this mess together, it solidified that bond even more. He felt closer to Jo than he had to either of his two wives. That was probably because their relationship was purely platonic. Once you got romantic, things turned squirrelly. Luckily, that would never happen with Jo. For one, it wouldn't be appropriate because she was his second-in-command. Two, he couldn't risk losing her.

"Come on in," Sam said. Jo swung the door open and strode into the cabin, a smile flitting on her lips as she looked around.

"I always liked this place." Jo handed the six-pack to Sam, pulling one of the tall green bottles out for herself. "I think your grandma had style. It's comfortable."

Sam glanced around. Most women thought the cabin was a man cave. His ex-wife had refused to come here at all after Sam had inherited it. She preferred to stay in a fancy Victorian closer to town. As soon as the divorce was final, he'd sold that place and moved to the cabin. But it figured Jo would like it. She wasn't like most women. She was practical and earthy.

"Thanks. I like it." Sam gestured toward the couch, and Jo sat. Sam took the chair beside the couch and popped the top off his beer before handing the opener to Jo. Lucy trotted to Jo and sniffed and wagged her tail as Jo ruffled her behind the ears.

"So, I guess we'll need to conduct a full investigation after all," Jo probed.

Sam leaned forward, resting his arms on his thighs, the beer clasped in both hands. "Yeah. I guess we should have known that suicide thing wouldn't fly. Probably never should have moved the gun."

"I don't think that will be too much of a problem. Who's to know that the killer didn't put it there?" Jo took a sip of beer. "What I don't get is why the killer left the gun in the first place."

"I think Thorne is up to something. Maybe there is something on the gun and he's trying to frame someone."

"Yeah, like us."

"The gun is still at the crime lab. Ballistics reported it was the weapon that killed Dupont. So far, there's nothing else. But we don't know what else Thorne has in store."

"That's why we need to solve this fast. We need to be able to maintain control of the investigation."

Sam picked at the label on his beer. "Might be hard with Kevin and Wyatt. We have to be careful about which aspects we investigate and which they investigate."

Jo sighed and pushed up from the couch, running her hand through her mass of curly hair. "You know, it shouldn't be this hard. We didn't do anything wrong. We were only trying to protect Tyler's reputation."

"I know. And then to find out he's related to Thorne ..."

"Did you ever get the report on the DNA from the lab? Could we be wrong about that?" Jo asked.

"Funny thing. There is no report. I talked to someone I know at the lab, but they couldn't find anything. Somehow, it seems to have disappeared."

"Thorne."

“He has people everywhere.” The thought made Sam nervous. Where else had Thorne placed his people? “Look, I wouldn’t worry too much. I won’t let you get into trouble. You haven’t done anything.”

Jo turned, her face screwed up in a frown. “Well, I did forge the logbook so it would look like Tyler had written in that stop. And I don’t need anyone covering for me. I take responsibility for my actions.”

Sam should have known better than to expect Jo to let him take the blame. “What I meant is that no one is going to know you wrote in the logbook. I don’t think that will even come into the picture, and if it does, he did make the stop. His body was found there. No one will scrutinize that logbook.”

“Yeah. He made the stop, but apparently not for the reasons we thought.”

When Tyler’s body had been found, they’d thought he’d pulled over to help someone change a tire and stumbled across a drug deal. The car with the flat tire was still at the side of the road. They’d found drug residue in the ashtray and a partial fingerprint. They’d never been able to trace that fingerprint to anyone. Now it looked as if Tyler had been up to something else entirely, although Sam had no idea what.

“What do you think he was doing out there that night?” Jo asked.

“Who knows? Maybe meeting with his contact.”

“But then why was he killed? Why was the car left there with a flat tire? Sounds like a setup to me. Do you think maybe he knew too much and Thorne wanted to get rid of him? His own son?”

“Good question. Maybe there’s a rival drug gang, and that’s who killed Tyler. If Tyler was working with Thorne, a rival gang might have wanted to get rid of him.”

Jo plopped down on the couch again and grabbed her beer. “Well, either way, it doesn’t bode well for us. Especially for *you,* with that donation from the Fallen Officers Fund you gave to his mother.”

Sam grimaced. Tyler had supported his mother and his disabled sister. When Tyler had died, Sam had written a check out of his retirement plan to Tyler’s mother, pretending that it was a donation from the Fallen Officers Fund. Of course, that was before Sam and Jo had discovered a large deposit in Tyler’s bank account. His mother had thought that deposit was back pay, but now Sam knew better. Either way, if people started looking into Tyler and discovered Sam had written a check to his mother, it could be trouble.

“What’s done is done. We can’t go back and change it. All we can do is damage control now,” Sam said. “I wonder about Tyler’s mother and Thorne, though. I can’t quite picture that.”

Jo raised a brow. “I know, right? You never know. That was a long time ago. Maybe Thorne was nicer then. I wonder if Tyler knew that Thorne was his real father all along or how he even found out. Seems like Thorne must have doubted it if they needed DNA testing.” She shrugged and took another swig. “So how do you propose we do damage control?”

“First, we want to make sure we control the aspects of the investigation that might expose anything that could be misunderstood as wrongdoing on our part.”

“Like moving the gun at the crime scene?”

“Yeah. That wasn’t good judgment, but I don’t think anyone needs to know I moved it. Like you said, the killer could have done it.”

“I think we can probably get Kevin and Wyatt on board with keeping quiet about anything that sheds a negative light on Tyler’s reputation. As long as it’s not pivotal to the investigation of Dupont’s murder, I think we may be okay.”

“Right. And how could it be pivotal? Tyler’s been dead for months. The two are unrelated.”

Jo looked thoughtful. “But we never did find out what that key locks.”

They’d found a key taped under Tyler’s desk after his death. They’d suspected Tyler had been up to something, though they thought he was conducting some sort of investigation on his own, never realizing that the investigation included spying on *them* for his father. They’d looked at all the safe deposit boxes and gym lockers in the area to see if the key fit but never found a match. Back then, they were hoping to get evidence on Thorne. Now, they needed to find what the key unlocked for another reason: whatever it was might contain evidence on *them*.

But what evidence? They hadn’t really done anything wrong. Cut a few corners here and there. Sam didn’t trust Thorne, though. For all he knew, Thorne had Tyler set things up so it looked as if they’d been doing something wrong.

“Yeah. We need to keep looking even more now. I always thought it was odd that Tyler wouldn’t have included us in any off-the-book investigating he was doing. Now we know why.”

“There’s another wrinkle that we need to watch out for,” Jo said. “Mick was at the crime scene that night. What if someone saw him leaving?”

“I thought about that. Let’s hope no one saw him. If it comes up, we’ll have to handle it.”

Mick Gervasi was Sam’s best friend, his buddy since grade school, and a private investigator that he often hired to look into things when Sam couldn’t do it officially. They’d had Mick investigating Tyler when they’d been told it was a conflict for them to investigate. He’d made little headway other than to discover that the car that had been left at the crime scene had been stolen. Mick suspected the grandson of the car’s owner had something to do with that theft.

Sam drained his beer. “You want another?”

Jo held hers up to the light, barely a half inch of liquid swirling in the bottom of the bottle. “Why not? It’s not like I’ll get pulled over on the way home.”

Sam got up to grab the beer from the refrigerator. Jo walked around the cabin, stopping in front of a birch-framed photo of Sam’s twin daughters, Hayley and Marla. Sam remembered taking that photo on a ski trip a few years ago.

“How are the girls?”

Sam’s heart swelled with thoughts of his daughters. They were the only good things that had come of his first marriage. They were both in college, pursuing careers in Massachusetts. Sam missed them. He wanted them to come back to White Rock, but they claimed there were no opportunities up here near the Canadian border for ambitious young women.

Still, he harbored a glimmer of hope that someday, when they were older, they’d realize nothing compared to the beauty of the mountains and the laid-back lifestyle. If Thorne didn’t ruin it before then.

“They’re doing pretty well.” Sam popped the tops off both beers and handed one to Jo. “Marla is doing an internship at Woods Hole, and Hayley is taking some summer classes to try to speed up that pharmacology degree.”

“Nice girls,” Jo said. When Jo had first come on board, the girls had been in high school. Sam was under no illusions that his girls were angels. He knew they got into the same sort of trouble he had as a teen. Nothing big. Drinking. Boys. He also knew that Jo had cut them some slack on a

few occasions, even though she and the twins thought they were keeping it from him.

Jo sipped her beer and looked at him hesitantly. Sam wondered why. She could tell him anything. “Something on your mind?”

“The knife. We never found it.”

Sam sighed. The knife had been on his mind too. It all went back to Sam’s cousin, Gracie. She’d been raped in Boston decades ago. Sam and Mick had been young then, Sam just starting out in law enforcement. The rapists were from wealthy families, and not all of them got the punishment they deserved. Sam and Mick had taken matters into their own hands to try to force the truth to come out so there could be justice for Gracie. Things hadn’t worked out exactly as they’d planned.

Somehow, Dupont knew something about what had happened back then. He hadn’t been involved in the rape, but he must have known the players. And Dupont had never been one to pass up an opportunity to get something to hold over someone else’s head. He’d come into possession of Mick’s pocketknife, which had been left in a place it shouldn’t have. He’d passed it along to Thorne. And now Thorne was using it to threaten Sam. If that knife made its way to the police, things might not look too good for Mick.

Sam and Mick had shared some of this with Jo the night they’d found Dupont. In a way, it had felt good telling her. Keeping the secret had weighed heavily on Sam, as if it were something between them. But now it burdened Jo just as much. He almost wished he’d never told her.

“Let’s not worry about that now. That problem will be solved once we prove that Thorne is behind this murder and we put him away.”

“I guess you’re right.” Jo didn’t seem convinced, and Sam had the feeling there was something more she wanted to say. He could see indecision in her face, but then she smiled, and Sam thought maybe he’d imagined it. “Don’t worry. We’ll nail him, and everything will work out, especially now that we have another cop to help out.”

“What do you think of the new guy?” Sam asked. They stood in the kitchen now. Sam glanced out at the backyard and the cedar doghouse he’d built for Lucy a few weeks ago. She never used it because she was always by his side, but he felt better knowing she had shelter if she wanted to go outside. Sam leaned his hip against the counter, and Jo leaned her shoulder

against the large cedar log that anchored the built-in bookshelves between the kitchen and the living room.

Her forehead creased slightly. “I’m not sure what to make of him yet. I haven’t worked with him very much. He seems a little cautious.”

Sam nodded. He hadn’t really formed an opinion of Wyatt yet, either, but he sensed there was more to the guy. He had the disconcerting feeling that Wyatt was watching him, as if waiting for something to happen. Maybe he was only trying to figure out where he stood in the department and what Sam was about. It would take a while for him to get a good bead on Wyatt.

“So, what do we do next?” Jo asked.

Sam swigged his beer. “Run it like any other homicide. This one’s actually easier. We already know who’s at the bottom of it. We just need to get the facts to prove it.”

CHAPTER SIX

The stress rolled off of Jo's shoulders as soon as she pulled up in front of the small cottage in the woods that she called home. She loved the remote location, away from the hustle and bustle—not that White Rock had much hustle or bustle, for that matter. Jo liked the seclusion, liked not being able to see her neighbors, the serenity of being in the woods with nothing but birds and the brook beyond the cottage to interrupt her thoughts.

The sun had set, and she could hear the cicadas buzzing as she headed up the steps of the front porch. Beyond the cottage, the flickering of fireflies at the edge of the dark woods gave the scene a magical feel.

On the porch, she stuck her finger into one of the railing boxes overflowing with bright-red petunias. They were looking a little wilted. Yep, the soil was dry. She'd been putting in so many hours on the Dupont case and the stakeout she'd neglected her flowers. She made a mental note to water them early the next morning.

She glanced down at the empty bowl beside the door. She'd seen an orange cat out back a few times and had been putting food out for him. She didn't know if he had a home or not, but he looked pretty thin. Maybe eventually she'd make friends with him. Maybe even adopt him. Was she ready for that kind of commitment?

The interior of the cottage was cozy. Jo liked the freshness of the off-white and pale florals she decorated in. The chippy paint she'd applied to update her furniture had turned her shabby yard sale finds into chic retro pieces. The cottage was small, but her needs were simple.

She had never planned to stay in White Rock. She'd come for a specific reason. But now that reason didn't seem so important. She loved her job, and she loved working with Sam. And much to her dismay, she discovered that she wanted to stay in White Rock.

At first when she'd come, she hadn't put any time into decorating the cottage because she thought she wouldn't stay. But it had been a few years, and things had crept in. Yard sale finds, flea market treasures. Now she had it exactly as she wanted, comfortable and cozy. The cottage had become the home she never knew she wanted.

She'd even gotten a pet. Finn wasn't a furry, cuddly pet like Lucy; he was a goldfish. A fish had been about all she could handle in the way of commitment.

Her eyes darted to the aquarium in the corner. Finn swam around, his orange-gold scales shimmering in the fluorescent tank lighting as he darted under the ceramic bridge then past the treasure chest that opened, sending bubbles rising to the top, before weaving around several aquatic plants in the corner.

She carefully plucked one large flake of food from the fish food container. She'd been training Finn to take food from her hand. She opened the lid and poised the flake just above the surface of the water. Finn swam up. His golden eyes looked up at her, his lips broke the surface, and he grabbed the flake before swimming down under his bridge. Odd—he usually stayed at the surface longer.

"What's the matter, guy?"

Maybe he was lonely. Jo was a little lonely too. Maybe she should get a bigger pet, something that could sit in her lap. The few times Sam had come over with Lucy, it had felt good to have a dog in her cottage. It had seemed right. Now that she was sure she was staying, a pet could be the thing. The next step on the road to commitment. Not a dog, though. That was too big a step. Maybe a cat, like the stray out back. But she couldn't have a pet in her cottage. She was just renting. Perhaps now was the time to buy a place.

With Finn fed, her eyes turned to the bedroom, and a familiar ominous feeling settled in. The room was decorated like the rest of the house. White chenille bedspread on a queen-sized bed, the headboard of which was an old fireplace mantel painted off-white. In the corner, a gigantic robin's-egg blue armoire sat, the sight of which speared Jo with a pang of guilt.

Inside the armoire was the real reason she'd come to White Rock. A reason she'd never told Sam about. And now that Sam had shared his secret about his cousin and the knife, Jo felt that she should share hers. But the time had never been right, and now she thought that perhaps it was time to give up on the investigation that had haunted her most of her life. Somehow, it didn't seem important to her anymore. It was time to move on.

She lifted the corner of the rug at the foot of her bed and grabbed the brass skeleton key that opened the armoire. The armoire was her workstation. Inside, her laptop sat on a shelf in the middle. The insides of the doors were covered with notes and photos on the two cases she was working.

One of those cases was Tyler's. The other—the one that had been her obsession—was the case of her sister. Looking at the yellowed photos tacked inside the armoire door twisted Jo's heart. She still mourned Tammy, who had been abducted when they were children thirty years ago. She'd never been found, and it had ripped Jo's family apart. No wonder she had commitment problems.

The police had stopped looking after the case grew cold. Years later, when a female serial killer had been caught, the cops thought she'd been the one behind Jo's sister's disappearance. But the killer denied it. Jo had at least hoped she could tell her where her sister's body was. The finality of a body would be difficult, but it would bring closure.

The cops said the killer might be holding back to use those last unclosed cases as leverage somehow. Jo wasn't so sure. And that was why she'd become a cop and had been looking into the case herself all these years. She'd been led to White Rock when she'd heard rumors of a copycat killer in the area. But those rumors had been unfounded, and no killer ever surfaced.

Her sister's disappearance had eaten away at her for years, but somehow, coming to White Rock had been cathartic. She'd found herself thinking less and less about solving her sister's case and more about solving the cases that affected her new town.

Maybe now, after all these years, it was time to put her sister's case to rest. Time to heal her old wounds and move on. And if she let go of her sister's case, she wouldn't have that secret. She'd never have to tell Sam about the real reason she'd hired on here.

Jo's focus turned to the right side of the armoire, where she kept her notes and research on Tyler's case. Here she had been trying to find Tyler's killer, and it turned out he had been screwing them over. She stifled the urge to rip all the notes and photos down and tear them to pieces. They still needed to find the box that key opened, and her notes might help. Now more than ever, she was afraid of what might be inside.

She turned back to the left side and carefully removed the photos, some of them brittle and yellow with age. Over the years, she'd collected whatever she could from the detectives who had originally investigated the case. She had notebooks filled with notes, all of which led nowhere.

She placed the photographs in a manila envelope, her gaze falling on one black and white of several shallow graves. That photo had haunted her dreams almost every night. Her sister was in a grave just like that, still waiting to be discovered and brought back home.

The graves all had something in common. They were all near beech trees that had some of the lower branches broken. When Jo had pointed this out to the officers who had investigated, they shrugged it off. They said she was trying to read things into the case that weren't there. The case had been twenty years old by then. The original investigators had retired. No one really cared about an old cold case in which they thought they'd already incarcerated the killer.

Maybe they were right. Maybe, in her desperation to solve the case, she had been reading too much into the trees. It wasn't uncommon for branches to break, especially with the harsh New England winters. Besides, she'd been all over the woods here in White Rock and never found any indication of unmarked graves near beech trees.

She slowly put the rest of the photographs in the folder then piled it on top of the notebooks. She opened the bottom drawer, took out several layers of folded jeans, and placed the folder and notebooks on the bottom before putting the jeans on top.

It was time to move on. It was time to start anew and focus on putting Thorne away so that she could clean up the town she intended to call her home for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I've got good news and bad news," Reese said the next morning as she came around the post office boxes into the squad room where Sam, Jo, Kevin, and Wyatt were going over the case. She held up a white bag from Brewed Awakening. "And doughnuts. Harry dropped them off."

As she handed the bag to Jo, Sam glanced toward the lobby, expecting to see Harry, but he wasn't there. Apparently, he'd dropped off the treats and left. Maybe he wasn't so annoying after all.

"What's the good news?" Sam asked as Jo passed him the bag of doughnuts. At his feet, Lucy's ears whipped to attention at the sound of the bag opening.

"We've got a partial on that fingerprint from the leaf that Kevin bagged," Reese said. "Turns out it is a print."

Kevin pulled a cruller from the bag. "Really? Did you get a match?"

"No match."

"So, that's the bad news, then," Jo said.

"Not quite." The bag came back around to Reese. She ripped off a tiny piece of a glazed doughnut and chewed it thoughtfully. "This might be good news or bad news, I'm not sure, but that partial print did match something."

"What?"

"Matches the one found in the car that was left at the scene when Tyler was shot," she mumbled while munching.

Sam exchanged a glance with Jo. This was a new wrinkle, but what did it mean?

"That's your officer who was killed earlier this summer?" Wyatt asked.

Sam nodded.

Wyatt leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest. “Well, what do you make of that? What do you know about the car or the circumstances? Could this have something to do with the mayor?”

“We don’t know much. The state police took over the investigation pretty quickly, so we didn’t get a chance to look into too much.” Sam looked down at his doughnut. It was only sort of a lie. The state police *had* taken over. Sam had just left out the part about how he and Jo continued investigating on the side.

“So, his death *could* be tied to the murder of the mayor,” Wyatt said.

“We think Tyler stumbled onto some drug activity the night he was killed,” Kevin said.

Sam nodded. The car contained drug residue, and that was as good a theory as any, given what Kevin and Wyatt knew about Tyler. But from what Sam and Jo knew about him, his death could have been for another reason entirely. Sam decided to change the subject and keep the focus on the Dupont investigation. “Did you guys get any information from anyone who frequents the mill?”

Wyatt shrugged. “Not much. One of them did see a unicorn that night.”

“And another swears angels are flying around in the rafters,” Kevin said.

“Probably the pigeons,” Jo said.

“Right. I’m afraid we won’t get much from any of them. Not only are they hard to find because most of them seem to be homeless or get shuffled between friends and relatives, but anything they say isn’t really that reliable,” Wyatt said.

“I didn’t figure we’d get much, but we have to follow every lead. I was hoping one of them might lead us to whoever sold them drugs. Then we could find out where he gets them. Eventually, that chain leads to Thorne’s most trusted minion, and *that’s* the person who can give us the information to put Thorne away.” Sam glanced at the investigation photos tacked to the corkboard identical to the one in his office. “I have a few other ideas on how we can get that information.”

“I know you guys are focusing on the Dupont case, but I did get some other calls this morning,” Reese said. “Wyatt must have made an impression on Rita. She’s requesting he come out and solve a dispute. Nettie has retaliated with a claim that Rita’s chicken flew over the fence and

ate all Bitsy's food. And Hank O'Brien claims Bullwinkle ate his wife's petunias and she's running around in their backyard in her bathrobe with a shotgun, ready to shoot him."

Sam blew out a breath. "We'd better get on that one. Her aim isn't too good. Might hit the neighbor."

White Rock and the surrounding region hosted a healthy population of moose, some of which occasionally strolled into town. The locals thought it was one moose in particular that they'd named Bullwinkle. He even had a Facebook page where residents posted sightings.

Now Sam was glad they'd hired Wyatt. They couldn't ignore the local calls even with the ongoing murder investigation. Having another cop would help Sam and Jo to maintain focus on the murder.

"Okay, Kevin, you take Hank, and then clock out when you're done." Kevin was still part-time and had come in early to read water meters on South Main Street. In a small town, the police were called upon for other duties, and in White Rock, that meant reading meters. "Wyatt, looks like you're up for Rita."

Wyatt and Kevin got up to leave just as the lobby door swung open. Everyone turned toward the post office boxes. Sam figured Harry was making his return. Maybe he'd gone back to Brewed Awakening to get coffee for everyone. Sam certainly hoped so; the shop's coffee was a lot better than the K-Cups. But Sam was disappointed.

It wasn't Harry with coffee. It was Henley Jamison with a load of arrogance.

Jamison had a scowl on his pretty-boy face that made Sam want to punch him. "Good to see White Rock's finest at work."

Lucy let out a soft growl, and Sam tossed her part of a doughnut. She wolfed it down as she continued to eye Jamison warily.

Jamison didn't wait for a reply. "I just got off the phone with John Dudley. He's sure Dupont was murdered. I want this solved pronto. We can't have a killer running around White Rock. When word gets out the mayor was murdered, people will be nervous. That's bad for tourism dollars, and that might not bode well for me getting elected mayor. We need a quick conviction."

In Sam's opinion, making things look good for Jamison was a reason to *not* solve the murder quickly. He was the last person Sam wanted as mayor. But he wouldn't stall the case because of that.

Sam gestured to the corkboard. “We’re working on it.”

Jamison straightened his red silk tie. “That’s all well and good, but I’m not sure you can solve this on your own.”

Jo scoffed. “Sure we can. We’ve solved three homicides already this summer.”

Jamison frowned as if he wasn’t used to people talking back to him. “This is a high-profile case, and there are only two seasoned full-time officers here. One is part-time, and another is new. I don’t want it to look as if I shirked my duties in providing the best resources. There’s a killer running loose.”

So that was what it was about: Jamison’s reputation with the voters. Not about finding the killer. Sam wasn’t surprised.

“I think we can do the job,” Sam said. He didn’t want to argue too forcefully about keeping the investigation to themselves because that might look suspicious. Better to play along and be wary of whoever Jamison sent in to help. “We appreciate the offer, but we don’t need the help.”

“I’m afraid it’s not negotiable.”

The doughnut bag crinkled loudly as Jo’s fist crushed it into a ball. Sam tensed, fearing she was about to throw it at Jamison.

Lucy looked up at her hopefully.

Jamison frowned at her fist. “I’m bringing in the county sheriff, Bev Hatch. She’ll be here this afternoon for a briefing.”

Jamison pivoted on his heel and strode out.

Sam glanced at the others. Wyatt looked mildly amused. Jo looked pissed. Kevin looked thoughtful.

“Damn, I hate it when outsiders come in,” Kevin said.

“I know Bev,” Sam said. “She’s a straight shooter, and I don’t think she’s corrupt. Maybe this will be a good thing. We really could use the extra help.”

“I don’t see how. Whenever someone new comes in, they mess things up,” Jo said.

“All the more reason to get this solved quickly. I have an idea where to start,” Sam said. “We need to find whoever is working closest with Thorne, and because there’re very few clues to go on at the crime scene, I’m going to start working my way up the ladder. I have an informant I’ve been cultivating just for this. I think it’s time to pay him a visit.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kevin and Wyatt took off, Kevin using the Crown Vic, Wyatt using his own car. Sam and Jo hopped into the Tahoe with Lucy in back.

"So what do you make of this fingerprint?" Jo asked as Sam pulled away from the curb and headed down Main Street toward the rolling layers of blue mountains in the distance.

"Not sure. We already know Tyler was mixed up with Thorne, so his death probably was the result of a drug deal gone bad. And the fingerprint belongs to someone within Thorne's drug organization."

"But who? If Tyler was *with* the bad guys on the side of the road that night, who shot him?"

Sam shrugged. "More bad guys?"

It was a puzzle. If Tyler had been working with Thorne and the blown tire was a setup, who set him up? Did Thorne have enemies Sam didn't know about? And if so, did they have something to do with Dupont's death? Sam wasn't keen on the thought that he might get rid of Thorne only to have someone worse take his place.

"You don't think Thorne wanted to get rid of Tyler, do you?" Jo asked.

"His own son?" The thought was abhorrent to Sam. He would jump in front of a bullet for his daughters, but Thorne was a different kind of man. "I guess he doesn't seem to be much of a family man."

"Yeah, he's mean. Doesn't seem to care much about anyone but himself. Though I find it funny that he's afraid of his wife, at least according to Harry," Jo said.

“This fingerprint could be a bonus for us. If we find who the print belongs to, we might be able to solve both Tyler’s case and Dupont’s case and get what we need on Thorne.”

“*If*.” Jo pressed her lips together and looked out the passenger window. “So I take it we’re going to visit Jesse.”

“Yep.” Sam hadn’t had to name his informant. She knew it was Jesse Cowly, a small-time pot dealer who sold mostly to his friends and used the money to finance his own supply. Sam had been cultivating him for a while, overlooking minor infractions and looking the other way when he caught Jesse with pot. He’d been trying to build a relationship, gain his confidence, and get into a position in which Jesse owed him some favors. Now it was time to collect.

“Good, then we can stop at Brewed Awakening.” Jo pointed toward the gigantic coffee cup sign of their favorite drive-through.

“Glad you said that.” Sam pulled in. “The coffee at the station is okay, but I need something stronger today.”

“So you’re thinking we’ll find out who Jesse gets his drugs from, then find out where that guy gets his drugs from, and eventually that leads us to the top of the chain,” Jo said after Sam ordered the coffees and a doughnut hole for Lucy.

“I don’t think we’re going to have to go too far up. This isn’t New York City, so Thorne probably has only one or two guys between him and the dirty work. Whoever is closest to Thorne probably knows who killed Dupont. Might even be the killer. Either way, the higher-ups will know enough about Thorne’s operation to put him in jail.” Sam took the order, flipped Lucy a small bite of doughnut, and handed Jo her coffee.

Jo flipped the lid on her coffee and took a sip. “That Jamison really is a piece of work, huh?”

“Yeah, I would have thought with Dupont gone, things would get easier, but it turns out Jamison might be even worse. Thankfully, we only have to suffer with him until next fall.”

“What do you think of Marnie Wilson?” Jo’s voice had an odd tone, and Sam looked over to see her peering at him over the top of her police-issue Oakleys. He got the weird feeling the question had a double meaning, but darned if he could figure out what it was.

“Well, anyone’s better than Jamison or Dupont,” Sam said.

Marnie Wilson was running for mayor. She had the vote of most of the seniors in town, who were sick of all the building Thorne was doing. He'd been systematically buying out farms when the elderly owners died off, and now, instead of rolling fields and mountain views, the town was turning into hotels and parking lots.

"Harry seems to think she's taken a shine to you." Jo sipped her coffee with a smirk. "Just sayin'."

Sam looked at her out of the corner of his eye. Was she joking? Sam vaguely remembered Harry saying something like that, but he hadn't thought of Marnie in that way. Heck, he'd met her only once. Though he supposed she was attractive in an authoritative sort of way, Sam had more important things on his mind.

"What do you think about Jamison bringing in the sheriff? This could be bad for us, you know, considering everything with Tyler."

"Might not be. I know Bev a little. She's a straight shooter, like I said, and we're not doing anything wrong. We're working this just like a homicide."

"I know, but what if …"

"Nothing's gonna happen. I'm sure Bev is busy with her own cases. She probably doesn't have much time to spend on this. And she doesn't answer to Jamison, so she can tell him to shove it if he tries to impede progress as Dupont used to do. That could work in our favor."

"I suppose." Jo shifted in her seat to look out the passenger window. "Hey, there's Bullwinkle. Or one of them." Jo pointed down a side street where a giant bull moose meandered toward the wooded area at the end. Someone was snapping off a photo with their cell phone.

"That'll be up on the Facebook page later today," Sam said. "I'm just glad Mrs. O'Brien isn't running after him in her bathrobe with a shotgun."

Jo snorted as Sam turned onto the dirt road that led to Jesse's small ranch house near the town line. A few minutes later, they pulled up to the house. The grass—or at least the patches of grass that could be seen in the predominantly dirt front yard—had been mowed. The torn edge of the screen on the door that had flapped open the last time he'd been there had been repaired. Maybe Jesse was cleaning up his act. Sam hoped not; he was useful as an informant.

They got out, and Lucy trotted ahead of them to the door, her nose in the air. She'd been here with them more than once, and the place usually

smelled like pot. She was probably already sniffing it out.

Jesse answered the door, a wary look on his face. He held up his hands. “I don’t know anything about the mayor.”

“Can we come in?” Sam asked.

Jesse glanced out into the street nervously. Even though the road didn’t have any traffic and the next neighbor was a good distance away, Sam knew he didn’t want to be seen inviting the cops into his house.

Apparently satisfied no one was looking, Jesse opened the screen door and gestured for them to enter the living room.

Lucy’s nose twitched rapidly at the smorgasbord of smells inside the house. A pizza box lay open on the coffee table, and the smell of stale cheese and marinara still hung in the air. Dirty socks were strewn about the floor.

“Where’s your roommate?” Jesse lived with his cousin Brian. Sam hoped that Brian was at work. He wanted the conversation to be private.

“At work.” Jesse stood off to the side, his arms across his chest. Sam sauntered to the coffee table, where Lucy had honed in on a black-lacquer-lidded box that sat in the middle. Sam guessed the box housed Jesse’s latest stash.

“We know you didn’t have anything to do with the mayor,” Sam said as he tilted his head to look at the box from an angle. “But we’re hoping you might be able to help us figure out who did.”

“How?” Jesse sidled over to the coffee table and nonchalantly picked up the box and then placed it on top of the entertainment center, out of Lucy’s reach.

“We need to know who you get your drugs from.”

“What?” Jesse scrubbed twitchy hands through his hair. “I can’t tell you that.”

“Sure you can.” Sam stepped closer to Jesse. “Because if you don’t, you might end up in jail, and then there might be a rumor that you did tell me whether you did or not.”

Sam held Jesse’s gaze long enough to see the fear and anger cross his eyes before Jesse’s gaze dropped to the floor. He sighed. “Okay. Well, I don’t know the top guy who reports to Thorne. It’s a chain of command.”

“I know,” Sam said. “I only want to know the next guy up the chain. I’ll figure it out from there. Normally, I wouldn’t do this, Jesse, but it could help us solve two murders. I know you don’t want your drug supply to dry

up, but I need to know who you get it from. I'm gonna find out one way or the other."

Jesse crossed his arms over his chest. "I don't know the top dog. There're layers."

"Yeah, I get that. Just spill it. We won't let on that it came from you."

Jesse looked at them uncertainly, but he must have realized Sam wasn't messing around. And because Sam hadn't busted him before, they had a bit of trust between them. Finally, he relented.

"Okay, fine. It's Scott Elliott. I get my stuff from him," Jesse said.

"You know where he lives?" Sam asked.

"Over near that new pharmacy, I think. He keeps the business away from his house."

"Smart," Jo said as they turned to leave.

"Come to think of it, I did hear something that might help you."

Sam turned back, his brows raised.

"Like I said, Scott doesn't do any deals at his house. We meet here and there. Sometimes it's hard to find a place."

"I imagine," Jo said.

"But Scott once said something about the guy he gets the stuff from having the perfect day job for delivering drugs."

"What do you mean, like a UPS guy or something?" Jo asked.

Jesse pressed his lips together. "Maybe, but I got the impression it was someone with ties to the government."

"You mean someone who works at the town hall here?" Sam frowned, conjuring up the faces and roles of the people who worked in the brick building that served as town hall. The only sketchy one he could come up with was Jamison.

"More like someone who would have an excuse to be seen all around town." Jesse raised his brows. "You know, like a cop."

CHAPTER NINE

Back in the Tahoe, Jo looked up Scott Elliott on her iPad. "Elliott lives on Hawthorne Street. We should get over there right away before he skips town."

"Can't." Sam pointed at the digital clock on the dash. "Bev Hatch is due at the station any minute."

Jo sighed, sank back in her seat, and pushed her Oakleys up on her nose. She wasn't sure what to think about Bev Hatch. She glanced at Sam. He didn't seem nervous at all. After working with him for so long, she knew the telltale signs—the tightening of his jaw, the tic in his cheek. If Sam wasn't nervous about Bev, maybe she shouldn't be either.

But there was one thing that did make her nervous, and she was pretty sure it made Sam nervous, too. "What did Jesse mean that the distributor could be a cop?" she asked. "Do you think that's part of Thorne's plan to frame us?"

"Maybe. That would get us out of the way. He could put in his own people."

"He already had his own person in there: Tyler."

"Yeah, and Tyler's not there anymore. Maybe he needs to get someone new into place, and in order to do that, he'd have to get rid of me."

Jo frowned. She didn't like the idea of anyone getting rid of Sam. "Well, I won't let that happen."

Sam smiled but kept his eyes on the road.

"But it could be any government employee. Might not be a cop. We might just be paranoid. Jesse probably just said 'cops' to get us riled up."

“Yeah, it could be any government employee, like Jamison.” Jo tapped her finger on her thigh as she thought the idea through. “You know, he’s been dying to get the mayor position. I heard rumors he was thinking of running against Dupont. Now, Dupont’s gone, and nothing stands in his way.”

“Not exactly. He has the position until the election, but he has to beat Marnie Wilson to keep it.” Sam pressed his lips together. “But now that you mention it, no one else has thrown their hat in the ring. I can’t picture Jamison getting his Ferragamo shoes dirty with murder, though.”

“It doesn’t necessarily have to be someone who works here in town. It could be someone who works for the county,” Jo said. “Like, maybe Bev Hatch. Jamison seemed pretty keen to bring her in on this. Maybe they’re in on it together.”

Sam thought for a minute and then shook his head. “I don’t think so. Bev’s been sheriff for a long time, and I’ve never heard of her being corrupt. My grandpa knew her family.” He shrugged as he pulled onto Main Street. “Then again, you never know who you can trust.”

“Well, we know we can trust ourselves.” Jo glanced into the backseat, where Lucy sat happily looking out the window. “And Lucy.”

They pulled up in front of the police station to see the Coos County Sheriff car parked in front.

“At least Hatch is on time. I hate when these sheriffs get on a power trip and purposely show up late so you have to wait for them,” Jo said as they piled out of the SUV and followed Lucy into the station.

Bev Hatch was short and in her midfifties, with shoulder-length salt-and-pepper hair pulled back in a simple ponytail. Her piercing gray eyes read “no nonsense,” and Jo got the impression that Bev had sized her up in the first two seconds she’d laid eyes on her. Jo wasn’t sure what her conclusions were, but when Bev’s eyes fell on Lucy, a smile lit her face, and she earned a few points with Jo.

Bev pulled a dog treat from her pocket and squatted to Lucy’s eye level. “Heard about you, Miss Lucy. You’re quite the K-9 cop.”

Lucy sniffed Bev’s hand, swished her tail back and forth, and took the treat.

Bev stood and introduced herself to Jo, shaking her hand, and then shook Sam’s. “Nice to see you again, Sam.”

“Same here.”

Bev looked around and nodded. “Nice place you got here. I like an old-fashioned police station. So, why don’t you fill me in on what you’ve got so far?”

The three of them stood in front of the corkboard as Sam told Bev everything they knew about the investigation. Bev had already seen the crime scene photos, and they discussed a few of the details. They brought her up to speed on the fingerprint Kevin found and what they’d learned from Jesse.

Bev’s eyes narrowed when Sam told her the fingerprint matched the one found on the car at Tyler’s shooting.

“That’s an odd coincidence. By the way, I’m really sorry about your loss.” Bev’s eyes drifted to the desk in the corner. Wyatt hadn’t yet had a chance to clutter it up, and it was still so empty that it obviously used to be Tyler’s. “Weird they never caught the guy and now the matching print turns up. I don’t think that’s any coincidence, do you?”

“Probably not,” Sam said.

“Was Tyler investigating anything to do with the mayor?” Bev asked.

“Not that I’m aware of, but he might have stumbled onto something that night. I was going on the idea that it was some kind of drug deal.”

Bev’s gaze returned to the corkboard. “Why do you think the killer ran out through the woods? Do you think he could have been one of the vagrants squatting in the mill? Maybe Dupont’s arrival surprised them. You know, if they were high, anything could happen.”

“That’s a thought, but how do you explain the gun? Most of these vagrants don’t carry guns.”

Bev nodded. “*Most* of them don’t. Some do. The serial number was filed off. Sent it up to the big lab in Concord. They can do more forensics on it than we can at the county lab.” Bev’s clipped tone showed that she was fast and efficient.

“But why *leave* the gun?”

Bev shrugged. “Ya got me. Why do *you* think they left it? And why did the person who killed Dupont wear gloves, but the person who ran through the woods didn’t?”

“Maybe the person who ran through the woods had nothing to do with the murder. Maybe they happened across the scene after, got scared, and ran,” Sam suggested.

Bev pressed her lips together. “You know, that would explain something. John Dudley told me it looked as though the mayor had been patted down—as if somebody was looking for something.”

Jo’s gut clenched, and she kept her eyes trained on the photos, trying not to show any emotion. Mick had patted Dupont down, looking for the knife. Unfortunately, they hadn’t found it.

“Possibly one of the vagrants or drug users looking for money,” Sam said. “Dupont must have gotten there early, because when we got to the mill, the blood was already starting to dry. He’d been killed about a half hour before we got there.”

Bev frowned. “Now, why do you think he got there early?”

“Maybe he wanted to scout out the mill and make sure we were coming alone.” Sam shrugged. “Maybe he was meeting with someone else before us. Who knows?”

Bev crossed her arms over her chest and leaned a hip against the desk. “Now tell me about this meeting. Dupont was supposed to give you incriminating information on the drug situation here in town. Is that right?”

Sam nodded. “Dupont was going to give us evidence on Lucas Thorne.”

Bev’s left brow ticked up. “The real estate developer? Interesting. I’d heard rumors he was into something shady. Never liked that guy. Bit of a pompous ass.”

“You can say that again,” Jo said, earning a slight smile from Bev.

“We never got the evidence because Dupont was dead when we got there,” Sam said.

“Seems like Thorne would have good motive to kill him,” Bev said. She seemed to consider this hunch carefully. And Jo’s confidence grew. She got the impression that Bev was sharp, and she didn’t seem to be pushing the investigation in any one direction. She was taking the information at face value. Maybe Sam was right and things wouldn’t be so bad.

“One possibility is that someone left the gun to frame someone else,” Jo said.

“Who?” Bev asked.

“Possibly us,” Sam said. “My contact, Jesse, told us that the rumor was that the head of drug distribution was some sort of municipal employee. He specifically mentioned it could be a cop.”

“And you think Thorne is arranging to frame you to get you out of the way.”

Sam nodded.

“Lucky I can tell the difference between planted evidence and real evidence,” Bev said.

Somehow, Bev’s words didn’t make Jo feel better. It would be great if she wasn’t fooled by anything that Thorne had planted, but that also meant she might be able to smell a rat about some of the things that Sam and she had done.

“So, you have two other officers working on this, but one is only part-time.” Bev looked around the squad room at the three desks.

“That’s correct,” Sam said.

“That’s not much manpower. Unfortunately, I don’t have a lot of extra manpower myself. But we’ll try to do what we can. That Jamison is no prize to deal with, either, but the murder of a mayor is serious. If your hunch about Thorne is correct, this is a big case. It needs to be done right.”

“I agree,” Sam said, “especially if one of us is being framed.”

Bev pursed her lips and nodded solemnly just as the door to the lobby opened and Wyatt entered.

Sam introduced Wyatt to Bev.

“Did you settle things down with Rita and Nettie?” Sam asked Wyatt before turning to Bev and explaining, “Bit of a local dispute this morning. Still have to handle those too.”

Bev nodded as if she was all too familiar with having to juggle petty disputes and bigger investigations.

“I got things settled.” Wyatt held up a loaf-shaped package wrapped in pink cellophane. “Rita sent you a fruitcake.”

Sam took the fruitcake, a frown on his face. He looked down at Lucy. Lucy sniffed the air, disinterested, apparently deciding she wasn’t a fan of fruitcake. She turned and trotted to her plush dog bed and flopped down.

“I might have gotten a tip on the Dupont case from Rita,” Wyatt said.

“Really?”

“She said she was walking Bitsy down the access road to the mill. I guess there’s a path that intersects with it in the woods near her house. She can see the access road from the path. Anyway, she said she saw an SUV racing out of there right after she heard the police sirens.”

Jo’s gut clenched. An SUV? That would have been Mick’s.

Bev’s interest was piqued. ”What kind of SUV? Could she identify it?”

“She just said it was a black SUV. With roof racks.” Wyatt grimaced. “I tried to get her to be more specific, but she said she can’t see that well and she doesn’t know the makes.”

Bev looked at Sam. “We should have her in. Maybe we can show her photos of black SUVs to help her identify the model. I want to interview her.”

“Yes, we should do that,” Sam said. “But Rita’s elderly and a local. I want to be there because she’ll get nervous. I don’t want her to be afraid.”

“I understand that. I have locals in my county too.” Bev pressed her lips together and looked out the window. “But one thing’s odd. If the killer drove away in an SUV, how could he leave a fingerprint while running through the woods?”

“And why would Rita have seen the SUV after hearing the sirens?” Wyatt turned to Sam and Jo. “Dupont had already been dead for a while when you got to the mill, right? I assume the killer would have been long gone.”

“Would seem that way,” Sam said. “But maybe he wasn’t. Maybe he was in there, doing something, and we scared him off. John did say it looked as if someone had gone through Dupont’s pockets. If this was Thorne’s doing, he might have instructed the killer to look for incriminating evidence.”

“We called it in right away, so the timeline would make sense,” Jo added.

“Didn’t you hear a vehicle driving off?” Bev asked.

Jo exchanged a glance with Sam. “No. Well, tell the truth, it was kind of loud with all the pigeons flapping around in there. And we didn’t see an SUV, but if it was parked down the road in the woods, we wouldn’t have seen it, and the sound of the engine would have been barely audible inside the mill.” Great, now she was thinking up lies off the cuff and telling them to the county sheriff.

Wyatt glanced at the corkboard. “So the SUV that Rita saw could be the killer’s?”

“Most likely.” Bev looked at Sam. “Is there any other reason someone would be out there? Another building or someone’s home?”

“There’re walking trails out there. Someone could have parked to use the trails and just happened to be leaving at that time,” Sam said.

“Either way, it would be good to find this person. If not the killer, they might have seen something.”

“I’ll do a search of all the black SUVs in the area,” Wyatt said.

“Good idea. I’ll shoot back to my office and follow up with the lab on the gun. See if they found anything else,” Bev said.

“Jo and I will check out the lead we got from Jesse,” Sam said. “And I’ll get Reese to call Rita to see if she can come in later this afternoon.”

“Let me know what time, and I’ll swing by and sit in.” Bev glanced at the package wrapped in pink cellophane on Sam’s desk, her nose wrinkling. “Let’s just hope she doesn’t bring more fruitcake.”

CHAPTER TEN

Kevin arrived home from the morning shift to find a note from his contact under the mat at his back door. Damn, he was hoping the contact might have lost interest, because he hadn't heard from him in a while. No such luck.

He brought the note inside and fixed a cup of tea. His hands shook as he opened it. What would they want now? With the ongoing investigation of the mayor's murder, Kevin didn't have a good feeling about what the contact was going to ask him to do.

The words were scrawled, as if someone was trying to hide their handwriting. But the message was clear. Steer the investigation toward Sam Mason's cabin. Critical evidence under the doghouse.

Kevin burned the note and then sat contemplating what to do. Someone was trying to frame Sam. Now he knew for sure that Sam and Jo weren't doing anything wrong. His contact had been the one working for the wrong side all along. Probably working for Thorne.

There was no way Kevin would let Sam go down for this murder. For once in his life, he had to go out on a limb and do something. He had to make up for the information he'd passed along this past year.

Kevin had an idea, but he'd have to be careful. It would mean crossing Thorne, which might result in Kevin ending up dead in a pool of blood just like Dupont. But if he played his cards right, maybe he could pull it off.

He was in a good position because he could pass information that would put off discovering whatever was under the dog house back to his contact. He could make it seem as though he was setting things up so the evidence

stuck. Meanwhile, he had an idea of how he could get both him and Sam out of this and possibly get something they could use against Thorne.

He got in his car and drove to the woods near Sam's cabin. He knew Sam was at work and no one was home, but he didn't want his car seen at Sam's house. He parked on another street and took a trail through the woods that brought him near the back of Sam's property.

He stuck to the edge of the woods, following it to Sam's backyard. The doghouse that Sam had built for Lucy was at the very edge of the woods, under a stand of pine trees.

It wasn't hard to figure out where they'd buried something. Kevin got on his hands and knees and carefully scraped away the dirt from under the northwest corner of the doghouse like an archaeologist uncovering a precious artifact. But it wasn't an artifact. It was a bloody glove. Presumably one of the gloves that Dupont's killer had worn.

Kevin put on his own gloves to transfer the bloody one into an evidence bag. He didn't want any of his DNA on there. Then he filled the hole, covering it to make sure that no one could tell the ground had been disturbed.

As he drove back home, he passed the new Thorne construction site at the top of the hill. The view was astounding, rolling mountains that gave way to the clear blue lake. It had been a farm once, and now Thorne was turning it into a hotel.

A construction site was the perfect place to hide the glove. Thorne thought he was so clever, planting it to frame Sam. Now Kevin was going to turn the tables. He would sneak back late at night and bury it at the construction site, then at the right moment, when they were about to close in on Thorne, he'd tell Sam and Jo where to find it.

It was a good plan but risky. He'd have to time it perfectly. That glove could not be discovered until the very last minute, when they were about to lock Thorne away. Because Thorne would know who'd planted it, and once it came in as evidence, Kevin's life would be in danger unless Thorne wasn't in a position to order retaliation.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Sam wasn't surprised that no one was home at Scott Elliott's. Judging by the newspapers piled on the cement steps of the modest split-level ranch, it looked like no one had been there for almost a week. Since Dupont's murder.

"Nothing to see out back," Jo said as she trotted around from the back of the house, Lucy on her heels. "I looked in the windows. There's no sign of struggle."

Sam flipped up the top of the mailbox attached to the side of the house. Empty. "If Elliott hasn't been here, where's his mail?" Sam pointed to the pile of papers on the stoop. "The newspapers have piled up, but no mail."

Jo came to stand beside him and looked over his shoulder into the mailbox. "You think someone took it?"

"No idea."

"You suppose he could've planned to go away, knowing he would be involved in Dupont's murder?"

"I don't think so. The meeting with Dupont wasn't planned. At least not that I know of. Dupont set the time and date, and that was only a few hours before we met." Sam turned to look at Jo. "How could Elliott have known in advance?"

"I remember last time I went on vacation, it took at least a week to stop the mail. I guess he really could be on vacation."

"You mean he might not even be involved. I suppose that's possible." Sam turned and looked over the suburban neighborhood. It had been

developed about forty years ago, and the houses were spaced far apart with thick, mature landscaping between them.

It wasn't an upscale neighborhood. It was more the kind of neighborhood with elderly residents just hanging on to the homes they'd lived in all their lives. Maybe some of those neighbors were nosey. Sam made a mental note to canvass the neighborhood and ask the neighbors if they'd seen anything, even though he doubted they would have. With no signs of struggle and the fact that Jesse said that Scott never did business from home, he figured there would be little information to glean from the neighbors. Hell, Elliott really could just be on vacation.

Jo chewed her bottom lip as they walked down the steps together. "I don't know. This is all getting kind of weird. I'm nervous about Rita mentioning that SUV. I'm sure it was Mick's."

Sam nodded. He was sure it was Mick's too. "But Rita doesn't see very well, and she probably doesn't know what make or model she saw. How many SUVs do you think there are? Hopefully, she won't remember more about it." He took his phone from his pocket and texted Mick. "I'm giving Mick a heads-up. Plus, we need him to step up that investigation into the grandson. Now that we know that fingerprint links Tyler's and Dupont's cases, we need to continue to pursue that angle hard." He looked up at Jo. "I'm gonna meet him at Holy Spirits tonight. You in?"

"Definitely."

"Too bad Elliott's prints weren't in the database. He could be the killer, and he could know about Tyler's murder. We need to find him." Sam watched Lucy. She was homed in on a trash can, her nose working overtime.

"Maybe we could get a warrant and see if we can lift any fingerprints from inside the house," Jo suggested. "That would tell us if Elliott left the fingerprints."

"Might be hard to convince a judge that we have probable cause, but we can try." Sam headed to Lucy and lifted the lid on the trash barrel. The stench of sour milk and rotten vegetables stung his nose. He made a face and slammed the lid quickly. "Maybe we'll include the trash on the warrant. You never know what Scott Elliott might have thrown away. Lucy seems to have a keen nose."

"Right. I agree. Maybe Wyatt can look through the trash." Jo stepped back from the trash, her fingers pinching her nose.

“Yeah, and we don’t want to have to keep lying to the sheriff.” Sam slid a glance at her, and Jo grimaced. Sam had been surprised when she’d come up with the lie about the pigeons masking the noise of the SUV. He’d never known she was such a good liar. Made him wonder if she lied about anything else.

“I know. Sorry. I panicked. Tell the truth, even I was surprised that I could come up with a lie so quickly. It wasn’t really a lie, though. I mean, those pigeons were loud, and anyway, it won’t affect the outcome of the case because we know Mick didn’t kill Dupont. In fact, my lie probably helped us. Having Mick as a suspect would only muddy the waters. It would take from resources looking for the actual killer.” Jo glanced up at Sam from under her lashes, her gray eyes turning serious. “I wouldn’t ever lie about anything big.”

Something passed between them. Sam wasn’t sure exactly what it was. Trust. Friendship. Something more? Sam nodded. “I know. I trust you. You did the right thing.”

A look of relief spread across Jo’s face, and Sam’s gaze drifted to Lucy, now sitting by the truck. “Come on. We’d better get back to the station and get this warrant in process. I don’t know if Judge Firth will grant it. We don’t really have any evidence except Jesse telling us that Scott Elliott was his drug contact, and I’d kind of like to keep Jesse out of it. Plus, we don’t want to tip our hand to Firth that we suspect Thorne in case he’s in his pocket.”

“It’s worth a try. What else can we do?” Jo asked.

Sam opened the door to the truck and glanced back at the house. “I don’t have a good feeling. If Elliott is involved, he would have information on Thorne. But where is Elliott? His disappearance is setting off alarm bells for me. He could be in danger. We need to bring him in alive so we can find out what he knows about Thorne.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jo went straight to her desk when they got back to the station. Sam had gone into his office with a stack of mail after instructing Reese on how to fill out the request for the warrant they needed to gain access to Scott Elliott's place. Jo didn't envy him the job of sorting through the mail. Judging by the way it was piling up on the corner of his desk, she knew that Sam didn't like the job any more than she did. He could have delegated it to one of them, but that was just like Sam to do the crap jobs himself instead of making someone else suffer.

A note from Wyatt sat on her desk. On it were the results of his research into the black SUV seen the night of Dupont's murder. Apparently, there were more than two thousand black SUVs registered in a thirty-mile radius. Good. That would make it nearly impossible to trace the vehicle to Mick.

Lucy had her nose in the trash can beside Jo's desk. She was sniffing hard enough to make the discarded doughnut bag crinkle. Jo leaned over and nudged the bag open.

"There's nothing in here but crumbs," she said to Lucy.

Lucy wagged her tail and cocked her head to the side.

"No, you eat enough treats. We don't want you to get fat."

The fur on Lucy's brow crinkled into a frown. She cast a longing glance at the bag then glared at Jo before trotting to her dog bed and pulling it into the pool of sunlight that streamed in from one of the large windows.

The dog really did have a good nose. Had Lucy smelled something important in the trash at Scott Elliott's, or had all that spoiled food drawn

her interest? In previous cases, Lucy had proved that she'd had a nose for clues and not just food.

"What are you thinking?" Sam stood beside her desk, looking down at her.

"Just about Lucy sniffing the trash at Elliott's. Could be a clue in there."

"Or food. But anyway, Reese is putting the warrants together today. I'm going to have Kevin see if Scott Elliott was planning a trip."

Reese appeared in the squad room. "I've got that paperwork all set for the judge. Wyatt's out on a call, and Rita is coming in twenty minutes. Sheriff Hatch is on her way."

As if she'd been summoned by her words, they heard the lobby door open, and Bev Hatch came into the squad room. Reese went back to her desk after the two women exchanged greetings.

"Any luck with that contact?" Bev asked.

"Wasn't home. Looked like he'd been gone a while," Sam said.

Bev's left brow quirked up. "Left in a hurry?"

"Maybe."

"Interesting. Well, I have a couple of new things to report. The blood on the leaf matches Dupont's, so if we can match the fingerprint, we can tie that person to the crime scene."

"That will come in handy if we pull in some viable suspects," Sam said. "What's the other thing?"

"The lab found a small fragment of black hair in the chamber of the gun."

"A hair?" Sam asked, his eyes flicking to Jo. "Great! Then we can get DNA from it. Narrow down the suspects by hair color."

Bev shook her head. "Not human. It was an animal hair."

Jo glanced at Lucy. Lucy hadn't been with them.

"Not sure the hair will help much. It was in the chamber, so it got in when the gun was loaded unless the chamber was opened after. There could have been animals in the mill, but I have no idea why the killer would open the chamber again. The presence of animals might explain some of the odd smudges the guys at the lab noticed when they blew up the photographs to do some mockups of the murder." Bev slid a suspicious side-eyed look at Sam and Jo. "Did you guys notice that?"

"We suspected the killer had moved stuff around the scene. So smudges didn't seem out of place," Sam said.

Bev nodded slowly, apparently satisfied with his explanation.

“I guess that makes sense.”

The lobby door opened again, and Jo heard Reese greet Rita Hoelscher and direct her to the squad room. A few seconds later, Rita shuffled around the post office boxes, her hands full of miniature fruitcakes wrapped in colorful cellophane. Rita was a short, thin woman with a wild shock of white hair and wrinkles on her wrinkles. Her eyes flitted from Sam to Bev to Jo. Then she looked at the empty desks. “Where’s that nice Officer Wyatt?”

“He’s out at a fender bender,” Sam said.

Rita’s face collapsed in disappointment as Sam accepted the fruitcakes.

“But it’s nice of you to come by, Rita,” Sam said. ”We’ll see that he gets these.”

Rita looked down at the fruitcakes. “Oh these are for all of you, not just Officer Wyatt.”

Sam feigned excitement. “Oh, really? I get one too? That’s awfully nice of you. Thank you so much.”

Rita eyed them suspiciously, especially Bev. “Well, did you want something? Reese told me to come down.”

Bev stepped forward, holding out her hand. “I’m Bev Hatch, the county sheriff. It’s nice to meet you.”

“Rita Hoelscher. Nice to meet you too.” Her eyes slid to Sam. “Am I in trouble?”

Sam pulled out a chair and gestured for Rita to sit. “No, not at all, Rita. Wyatt told us that you saw a vehicle the night that Mayor Dupont was ... well, the other night.”

Rita slowly crumpled into the chair. “I did. That’s true.”

“Could you tell us about it?” Bev asked.

Rita sat straighter. “Why, yes, I’d be happy to. I was walking Bitsy because she likes to walk in the woods. She loves to munch on those curly fiddlehead ferns.” Rita stopped, slapping her hands to her cheeks and looking at Bev and Sam. “Oh dear, I hope those aren’t endangered or anything. Is that why you called me in here?”

Sam smiled and patted Rita’s hand. “No, not at all. We just want to hear about the vehicle.”

“Oh, right. Well, we were walking along, and I heard the siren in the distance. It’s always disturbing, you know.” She glanced up at Sam and

Bev. “So anyway, the walking trail that Bitsy likes is parallel to that old road that leads to the mill. I guess people use it as a shortcut, though I hardly ever see any cars except the UPS truck, the mailman, and of course, the garbageman.”

Bev glanced at Jo and raised a brow. Sometimes it took witnesses a while to get to the point.

“I know the road,” Sam said. “Now, do you remember what kind of vehicle it was? Did you see the driver?”

Rita scrunched up her face, causing her wrinkles to battle with each other for surface space. “No, I didn’t see who was driving. The leaves were in the way, and it was going too fast. These young folks these days, they really need to slow down. Maybe you should put a speed trap up on that road,” Rita suggested.

“We’ll take that under advisement,” Sam said.

Bev laid out photos of different SUVs on the desk in front of Rita. “Do you recognize what kind of SUV it was?” She pointed to a large photo of a Tahoe. “Was it a big one like this or a smaller one like this?” Bev’s finger moved to a Kia Soul.

Rita put a forefinger to her lips. “I’m sorry. I’m not sure. They all look the same to me. I don’t see how anyone can drive these big things. I can barely handle my Dodge Dart.” Rita paused for a moment and looked thoughtful. “I do remember one thing, though. It had those big racks on the roof. You know, for luggage and stuff.”

Bev nodded. “And you’re sure you saw it when you heard the sirens.”

“Yes, ma’am. The sirens were loud, and Bitsy doesn’t like loud noises or fast cars. She was spooked, so we had to turn around and go right home.”

“Did you see where it came from or which way it went?” Bev asked.

Rita looked at Sam as if Bev had just asked the stupidest question. “Only one place it could come from: that old mill. Reed’s Ferry. And only one place it could go to: Foster Street.”

Sam looked at Bev. “Foster Street leads out to the main road. Could’ve been headed anywhere.”

Sam turned his attention back to Rita, crouching down to talk to her at eye level. “Okay, Rita, you did good. Now I want you to go home and think about this and let us know if you remember anything more.”

“Okay.” Rita got up. “I can go now?”

“Yep. You have a nice day.”

“Nice to meet you,” Bev said.

“You too. Enjoy the fruitcake.”

Rita shuffled off, and Bev turned back to Sam and Jo.

“Well, that wasn’t much help. There have to be thousands of black SUVs around.” Bev picked up the photos of the SUVs and sighed.

Jo held up the note from Wyatt. “Two-thousand-three-hundred and forty-one, to be exact. At least that’s how many have been registered in a thirty-mile radius, according to Wyatt’s research.”

“Let’s not forget the SUV might not be one registered around here,” Sam said.

“Yeah, it’s not much of a lead,” Bev said.

“So we’re not much more ahead of where we were yesterday,” Sam said.

“What about the hair?” Jo asked. “Can we get anything off of that?”

Bev shook her head. “There’s not much to go on with that. We already know the killer moved stuff around. Until we have some suspects, the hair is meaningless. Looks like our best hope is to locate this Scott Elliott.”

The lobby door opened, and Harry rushed in. “Hey, I ran into Rita Hoelscher, and she said she left some fruitcake ...” His eyes fell on the packages on the desk. “Oh, there it is. Do you mind if I cut myself a piece? I do love her fruitcake, and she doesn’t bake it often.”

Bev, Jo, and Sam exchanged a glance.

“Not at all,” Bev said.

“Take as much as you want,” Sam added.

“You can have all of mine.” Jo gestured toward one of the loaves.

Bev nodded. “Mine too. In fact, take it all with you.”

“You sure? I wouldn’t want to deprive you …” Harry glanced from Bev to Sam to Jo, who all nodded enthusiastically.

“Please help yourself.”

Harry’s eyes lit up, and he grabbed one of the packages and opened it. He turned to Bev as he popped a piece in his mouth. “Hey, kid, what brings you down here again?”

“Helping out with the Dupont case.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed as he nibbled the fruitcake. Lucy came to sit beside him, turning pleading eyes up to him. “Oh, nasty business, that.”

“Indeed.”

“Though I think we can do better for mayor.” Harry tossed a little piece of fruitcake to Lucy then bent down to her level. Lucy put her paw up, and Harry shook it before giving her another piece, standing, and brushing crumbs from his tan chinos. “Well, I better get going. The missus will be looking for me. Thanks for the fruitcake.”

“I’ll walk you out. It’s almost quitting time,” Bev said. “How is Mabel, anyway?”

“Fine, fine. Getting ready to go to Florida already. See you later, Sam.”

Bev turned and gave them a two-finger wave. “Let me know if you locate that lead.”

Jo looked out the window as they disappeared around the edge of the post office boxes. The sun was low in the sky, casting long shadows from the oak trees in the town common.

“Quitting sounds good,” Sam said. “You ready to head to Holy Spirits? Reese is working late; she can stay with Lucy.”

“I sure am. And I could really use a drink.”

“I DON’T THINK we have to worry about Mick’s SUV being identified at the mill,” Sam said to Jo when they were seated at the bar in Holy Spirits.

“Hopefully not.” Jo took a pull on her beer. She seemed a bit down, and Sam wondered if the case was getting to her. Heck, it was getting to him.

“Rita won’t remember, and no one else has come forward, so we can put that worry behind us.” Sam glanced up at the mirror behind the bar, where he saw the simple round tables and maple chairs behind him. Patches of red, blue, and green spilled in from the stained-glass windows above the mirror. Toward the door, two of the original long oak pews sat near the door, a table between them. Sam liked to watch the surprised looks on tourists’ faces as they entered. Many of them mistook the bar for an actual church because the vestibule looked exactly as it had when Holy Spirits was a church. It wasn’t until you opened those big oak double doors that you realized that instead of an altar with a cross and candles, there was a bar with liquor bottles and bar stools.

It didn’t take long to figure out there wasn’t any preaching going on in here unless your idea of preaching included yelling at whatever sports team

on the television was losing.

Sam turned his attention back to his beer on the polished wood of the bar and let the din of conversation behind him fade as he took a swig. The smell of burgers and fries permeated the room, reminding his stomach that it was suppertime.

"What do you think of the hair?" Jo asked.

"Grasping at straws." Sam spied the owner of Holy Spirits, Billie Hanson, at the end of the bar. Her lavender-tinged spiked hair bobbed up and down as she juggled pulling a beer with serving a burger. He caught her eye and tapped his bottle to indicate he was ready for another.

"That's what I thought too, but still, maybe Scott Elliott has a pet or ... I don't know." Jo swung her bar stool around to face away from the bar. Sam could see the wheels in her head turning as she tried to figure out how they could use the hair. Could they? Bev had said it was in the chamber, which indicated the hair was in there when the killer loaded the gun. But how would an animal hair help them? It certainly wasn't going to help them *find* the killer, but maybe once they did, it could help them prove he'd done it.

Or had the hair been planted? If someone was trying to frame him, it wouldn't be hard to get one of Lucy's hairs and plant it in the gun.

"Here comes Mick." Jo inclined her head toward the door.

Sam glanced in the mirror to see his best friend walk into the bar. Mick was tall and broad. The black T-shirt stretched across his chest made it obvious that he still spent a lot of time working out, even though he was pushing forty. Apparently, it was too hot for his usual black leather jacket. His light-blue eyes scanned the bar, falling on Sam and Jo. He took the stool next to Sam, leaning across him to greet Jo.

Billie slid Sam's beer across the bar and looked at Mick. "Usual?"

Mick nodded.

Billie pulled out a tumbler, threw in some ice, and splashed it full of whiskey before setting it in front of Mick.

Mick took a swig, let out a breath, and turned to Sam and Jo. "So what's up? Fill me in."

They ordered a basket of sweet potato fries and shared it as they brought Mick up to speed. Sam and Jo took turns telling him how Rita had seen his SUV, how Jamison had pulled Bev Hatch onto the case, how Jesse had given them the name of his supplier, and how the fingerprint was tied to both Tyler's and Dupont's murder scenes.

“So you don’t think Rita will be able to identify my vehicle?” Mick asked.

“Nah.” Sam swigged his beer.

“Good. Damn, that’s interesting about the fingerprint. I know that old lady’s grandson has something to do with the stolen car.” Mick swirled his glass, the ice cubes clinking. He swigged the rest of it down and chomped on a cube. “Makes me nervous with Bev Hatch on the case, though.”

“Yeah, she’s pretty sharp,” Jo said.

“And honest,” Sam said.

“We’re honest, too,” Jo said.

Mick raised a brow. “Yeah, but in a roundabout way. Doesn’t Bev know your dad or something, Sam?”

“My grandpa helped her mom out a bit, but I doubt that’ll hold much weight if she thinks we’ve done something wrong.”

“You don’t expect me to believe that she’s never done anything wrong?” Mick nodded for a refill as Billie swooped by with the whiskey bottle. “Anyone who has been in law enforcement for a while has done something that ain’t quite on the up-and-up. Don’t expect me to believe she never pushed the envelope, never had to do something a little bit outside of the law to make sure a killer didn’t go free.”

“I don’t know if she did or not,” Sam said.

“Count on it. Any sheriff worth his or her salt is forced to, but that’s beside the point. We’ll just make sure she doesn’t catch wind of anything you guys might have done wrong.” Mick raised his brows and took a gulp of his drink.

“I don’t know about that, but I know one thing: the sooner we get rid of Thorne, the better. For all of us.”

“You can say that again.” Mick’s expression turned somber, and Sam thought about the knife. Thorne still had it, so Mick had as much at stake as anyone to get rid of him.

“Sounds like things hinge on that fingerprint, and the only lead we have on that is the grandson and possibly this Scott Elliott,” Sam said. “We need to talk to these people alone first. One of them might know where Tyler kept that box. There’s no telling what’s in there. We might not want anyone else to get a look at it.”

“Right. So you guys work on Elliott, and I’ll work on the grandson.” Mick took another sip of his whiskey, his face thoughtful. “Something

doesn't add up, though."

"Lots of things don't add up," Jo said.

Mick swung his stool to face them and put his elbow on the bar, leaning in closer to Sam and Jo. "You said that the fingerprint found in the car when Tyler was killed matched the one on the leaf near the mill. The same person was at both places."

"Yeah, but we don't know who that is. The fingerprint didn't match anyone in the database."

"Right. But we do know that *Tyler* knew that person. And if that person was at the roadside when Tyler was killed, he is probably tight with Thorne. If that's the case, then that person likely broke some laws somewhere along the way."

Realization dawned on Sam. That was what he loved about Mick. He could always count on him to come up with a logical solution. "And if he did break some laws, Tyler might have covered for him."

Mick smiled and nodded.

"But where does this Scott Elliott fit in? He's never been fingerprinted."

"Could be the person who was with Tyler was higher up. Elliott is low on the pole, right?"

"Yep," Sam agreed. "We're trying for a warrant to lift a print from his house."

"This could be another lead," Jo said. "We can look through Tyler's calls to see if there was anyone he might have let off the hook."

Sam glanced at her. "That's a great idea. See? This case is starting to open up."

Jo tilted her beer bottle and clinked it with Mick's and Sam's. "Great. I'll get on that first thing in the morning."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Jo got in early the next day. She wanted to research Tyler's arrest records without everyone else in the office figuring out what she was doing. Too bad everyone else had the same idea about coming in early.

Sam was already in his office with Lucy, the door slightly ajar. Reese was at the reception desk, handing out permits for yard sales. Kevin was typing a report. Jo noticed he seemed a little jittery, glancing up as if she'd caught him at something whenever she walked past his desk. She guessed the case was getting to everyone. Especially her. But that might be good, because it was taking up all her thinking time, and for the first time in years, she hadn't thought about her sister's case. That was a good sign, a sign that it really was time to put her sister's case behind her.

She didn't want anyone to know what she was doing, so she sat at her desk, typing on her laptop. The squad room was quiet, the sound of laptop keys clacking and the smell of coffee permeating the air. At the front desk, Reese was trying to referee an argument between Joan Cummings and Myrtle Winters. Both Joan and Myrtle wanted to have yard sales at the weekend, but they each felt the other's sale would take traffic away from their sale and were trying to convince Reese to deny the permit to the other.

Jo let the squabble become background noise and focused on her work. Tyler had gone on a lot of calls this past year, and some of them were a little odd.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" Wyatt's question startled her. He leaned over to look at her screen.

Jo closed her laptop. "No, thanks."

Wyatt gave her a funny look and then turned to go back to his desk. “Okay. Let me know if you do. I finished up my paperwork.”

As Wyatt walked back to his desk, Kevin spun around in his chair and handed him some papers. “Here. You can type these up if you’re looking for something to do.”

Wyatt took them silently and got to work.

Jo reopened her computer, her pulse quickening when she noticed a few discrepancies. There was one person Tyler had noted in a few calls, but he never brought that person in. Forest Duncan. It could be a coincidence. She needed to dig deeper to see if there was any pattern.

“Holy crap!” Reese’s excited voice carried over the post office boxes, and Jo glanced up. Apparently, the yard sale arguers were gone, because the only sound that came from over the wall of post office boxes was the rustling of papers. Lucy must have heard, too, because she trotted out, followed closely by Sam. Reese appeared around the post office boxes, a piece of paper in her hand.

“What is it?” Kevin asked.

“I got an ID on that fingerprint. The one from the crime scene. I had a flag in the system for them to fax it to me if anyone got a hit. And someone got a hit.”

“Really?” Wyatt stood up at his desk. “That’s great. We got a break in the case.”

“Yeah, part of it’s great,” Reese said. “The print did belong to that guy you were looking for yesterday—Scott Elliott.”

Jo’s spirits picked up. “I knew he was involved.” Apparently, all that work Sam had done to groom Jesse had paid off.

“Let’s go pick him up.” Sam pulled his keys from his pocket. “Where did the hit come from? I assume he was arrested and printed.”

“Figured it was only a matter of time before he’d be arrested.” Jo jumped up from her chair to join Sam.

“Yeah, that’s the part that isn’t so great,” Reese said, stopping Jo in her tracks. “You can’t pick him up.”

“Why not?”

“He’s dead.”

Sam pressed his lips together and glanced at Jo. They needed Elliott alive to find the person further up the chain. Jo glanced back at her laptop. Unless ... This Forest Duncan guy might be closer to the top. If he had been

involved with Tyler and Tyler was Thorne's son, Tyler must have been pretty close to the top, and it made sense the top minions would work together.

Maybe if they pulled Forest in, they'd get all the information they needed. Maybe it didn't matter that Elliott was dead. But Jo couldn't mention that in front of anyone else. If she did, she'd have to explain why they were looking into Tyler, and then they'd have to explain about the DNA paper they'd taken off of Dupont's body. Bringing up the fact that she was looking into a pattern on whom Tyler had arrested and released would mean that they'd have to admit they'd been holding back evidence on his case.

"Dead? How?" Kevin asked.

The lobby door opened, and Bev Hatch came around the post office boxes with a white doughnut bag from Brewed Awakening in her hand. She took one look at their faces and said, "I see you've heard the news."

Sam turned to her. "You mean that the print from the leaf got a hit but the suspect is dead?"

Bev nodded once. "Yeah, found in a shallow grave down in Belknap County."

"Murdered. So he killed Dupont, and then someone killed him to cover it up." Sam brushed his hands through his short hair. "We just lost our best lead."

"He might not be the killer." Bev passed Sam the bag.

"What?" Sam passed the bag along to Jo without taking a doughnut.

"It's still early, and I didn't get the full report, but I talked to Dean Adams, the medical examiner handling the autopsy. He said there was no gunpowder residue on Elliott's hands."

"Well, it's been more than a week since Dupont was killed. I'm sure it would be gone by now," Sam said.

"No. Elliott's been dead for a week at least, he thinks. If he died right after the murder and he pulled the trigger, he'd likely still have residue. Look, we already knew more than one person was at the scene where Dupont was murdered. This Elliott guy was probably killed because he witnessed it. Maybe he wasn't even working with the killer. Maybe he just stumbled on it." Bev shrugged. "I have no idea. But we'll work closely with the investigation into his death. Maybe we can get some leads."

"Let's hope so," Sam said.

“I’m in touch with the sheriff in Belknap County, but now that we have a solid link between Tyler and Dupont, I think we need to start going over Tyler’s case again.” Bev looked at Sam out of the corner of her eye, and Jo’s heart clenched as she picked out a jelly doughnut and passed the bag to Kevin. The narrow-eyed look told her that Bev suspected something might not be on the up-and-up.

“Sure,” Sam said. “But we need to find out more about Elliott and his death and —”

Bev held up a hand. “Yes. I’m on that. But I’m going to use Kevin and Wyatt while you, Jo, and I go over Tyler’s case.”

Sam frowned, but Jo figured he knew better than to argue with Bev; arguing might make her suspicious. “Okay.”

Jo sat at her desk, her gaze flicking from Sam to Bev, watching the conversation and trying not to open her big mouth lest she say something incriminating.

Bev looked at Kevin. “Kevin, you go to the medical examiner’s office and wait for that autopsy report. Hurry him along. He’s supposed to fax it here, but I know he works faster when someone’s there, putting the pressure on.” She turned to Wyatt and handed him a yellow sticky note. “Wyatt, you go down and talk to Bobby Sampson. He’s in charge of the scene where they found the body. Tell him that you want all the photos of the crime scene. Maybe we can see something that jogs a memory that links it to the Dupont killing.”

Kevin and Wyatt cast questioning glances at Sam.

Sam nodded, and they left.

“I guess we don’t need that search warrant after all,” Sam said.

“That’s good ’cause it got rejected,” Reese said before turning to go back to the lobby. “I’ll be at my desk if you guys need me to look anything up.”

“Okay. I want to look at everything you have from Tyler’s case,” Bev said.

“The state police took over the case early on, so we don’t have much,” Sam said.

“Don’t give me that crap. Any good cop would investigate a fallen officer’s death on the side. And I think you’re a good cop, Sam. I’m trusting you because your grandpa was a good man and helped my mom out, so I

kind of owe you one." Bev crossed her arms over her chest and looked at Sam hard for a few seconds before adding, "Don't make me regret it."

"WHAT DO you think that was all about?" Wyatt asked as he and Kevin jogged down the front steps of the police station.

Kevin glanced over at him. The question had a suspicious undertone that Kevin didn't like. In fact, Kevin was starting not to like Wyatt at all. There was something predatory about him, as though he were watching and waiting for something to go down so he could pounce. What that was, Kevin had no idea.

Maybe it was Kevin's own guilt that was making him suspicious. He really had no right to suspect Wyatt. The guy hadn't done anything wrong, at least not that Kevin knew about.

Kevin shrugged, acting casual. "You know how the higher-ups are. They probably wanted to strategize or something. Let us do the grunt work."

Wyatt glanced back at the station. "Huh. Seems kind of like important grunt work. But I'm happy to be doing it."

Kevin stopped at the Crown Vic, and Wyatt hesitated then looked toward the small parking lot beside the building.

"I'll take my car. It's good on gas," Wyatt offered.

Kevin opened the door of the Crown Vic. Damn straight he'd take his personal vehicle. Kevin didn't like that Wyatt was insinuating that maybe it would be his place to take the Crown Vic. Kevin had been there longer; he should drive it. But Kevin didn't want to say any of that out loud. There was no sense starting something with the guy. And ultimately, it was up to Sam who drove the car, so he simply said, "Okay. See you later."

Kevin watched Wyatt trot off and then slid into the car, the soft seats and smell of sunbaked leather surrounding him as he started the engine.

He really should give Wyatt a break. As near as he could tell, Wyatt was only trying to be helpful. The weird vibe he picked up was probably just because Wyatt was new and trying to fit in. Kevin was out of sorts with all the strange things about this case—and his own secrets were grating on him.

Kevin had a bad feeling about what Bev Hatch might find when they looked into Tyler's case. He'd suspected Tyler was up to something before he was even killed. Of course, back then, he'd thought Tyler was doing something against the law, that his contact worked in law enforcement and was trying to get evidence on him.

Now Kevin wasn't so sure. He was sure that his contact worked for Thorne. His contact had wanted Kevin to search Tyler's belongings for electronic data, so it stood to reason that Tyler was one of the good guys. He was working against Thorne. Or was he working with him, and Thorne wanted to make sure he didn't turn on him? Maybe Thorne had been looking for leverage.

Kevin's thoughts turned to the thumb drive tucked away in his kitchen. If Bev found something that got Sam and Jo into trouble, Kevin would hand the drive over to Sam. There could be something on it that got Sam and Jo out of trouble—or there could be something that got them in deeper. Either way, Sam could do what he wanted with it. But he would only turn the drive over if it was necessary. He didn't want Sam to know he'd betrayed them by taking the drive in the first place.

He waved to Wyatt as he drove past, the funny feeling coming over him again. Earlier that morning, before anyone else had come in, Wyatt had mentioned that he'd seen Sam talking to a guy standing next to a black SUV with a roof rack similar to the vehicle Rita had said she'd seen driving away from the mill. By the description of the man and the fact that Wyatt had seen them outside Holy Spirits, Kevin figured it was Mick Gervasi, Sam's best friend. Kevin seemed to recall that Mick drove a black SUV.

Had Mick been at Reed's Ferry Mill the night Dupont was killed? It was possible. Kevin knew that Sam used Mick for some of his investigations. But what did it matter? If Mick was there, Kevin figured Sam had good reason.

He'd brushed off Wyatt's question by pointing out there were thousands of black SUVs. Maybe he could do something more to deflect suspicion. He'd have to think on that. What if the SUV really belonged to someone else and it was a good lead? He wouldn't want to try to cover that up. But no, he was sure that it was Mick, because if Sam didn't already know who it was, he would have jumped on the lead a little harder.

Kevin knew that Sam and Jo kept some secrets about that crime scene. The lawn-mowing neighbor had said Jo had been there earlier in the

afternoon, but Sam and Jo never put that in the report. Sure, it was a minor thing and even understandable that Jo might come to scout things out earlier, but the fact that they never mentioned it made Kevin think there might be more going on.

Kevin didn't care. Guilt over what he'd previously done made him more determined to make sure that Sam and Jo came out on the clean end of this and that Thorne went away for good. And not only because his own life was in jeopardy if he continued to feed fake information to his contact, but because it was the right thing to do.

Kevin drove off, his plan firmly in place. He'd keep an eye on Wyatt. And he still had his ace in the hole—the glove. He just hoped that by using it, he wouldn't be signing his own death warrant.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sam walked Bev through everything they had on Tyler's case. Well, at least, everything he wanted her to know. He didn't want to let on too much of what they'd been investigating on the side, and he certainly wasn't going to tell her about the DNA test or the mysterious key.

The whole time they reviewed the case with Bev, Jo had acted odd. She was quieter than usual, tapping her pencil on her notepad faster than usual. She'd scarfed down two of the jelly doughnuts that Bev had brought, and Sam got the impression she was bursting to tell him something.

"So that's it?" Bev asked. "Not much to go on."

"We didn't have much time to investigate," Sam said. "With Tyler gone, we were short-handed, and another murder happened right away. Actually, there have been a couple of murders to investigate, so …" Sam shrugged and let his sentence trail off.

"And you found his log in his car, denoting that he was stopping to help a car in distress?" Bev pointed to the log, and Sam's heart hitched. Would she notice the difference in writing Jo had entered for Tyler?

"Yeah. Looks like that last entry was made quickly." Sam paused and tilted his head to look at the log. "I don't know if maybe he suspected something at that stop, and that's why he scribbled in just the bare minimum."

"But he never called in anything suspicious," Bev said.

"We don't have a dispatcher that time of night. He could have called me if he needed backup."

Bev nodded. "Guess he didn't think he needed it."

Sam rubbed his chin. “Truth is, I feel responsible for what happened to Tyler. It happened under my watch. Maybe I should have been the one out there that night.”

“Nah. You can’t feel that way, Sam,” Bev said. “It’s part of the job. It’s what we sign on for. Tyler knew that.”

Bev’s phone dinged. She pulled it from her back pocket and looked at the display. “Okay. Gotta run. I’ll let you know if anything else comes up. We’ll meet back here in a few hours to see what Kevin and Wyatt found out.”

“Okay,” Sam said.

Sam waited for the lobby door to close and then turned to Jo. “Okay, what is it? I know you’ve been dying to tell me something.”

“Yeah, I wasn’t sure if I should say it in front of Bev, but I think I have a good lead.” Jo rushed to her desk and opened her computer. “I’ve been going over Tyler’s arrests, and I think I’m on to something here.”

She turned the display toward Sam, and he bent closer.

“Check out this guy. Forest Duncan. It looks like Tyler went on a few calls associated with his name, but he never brought him in.”

Sam was dubious. “That doesn’t necessarily mean anything. But I guess it’s *something*. What kind of calls? Was he the one calling in or the one being called *on*?”

“He was the one doing something wrong. Minor stuff, though, so stands to reason he wouldn’t be arrested. But wait until you see this.” Jo turned the computer back toward her, typed something in, and then angled the display back toward Sam. “Guess what Forest Duncan does for a living.”

Sam leaned closer. Duncan worked for the sanitation department. He was the garbageman.

“The garbageman,” Sam said. “I thought the name looked familiar. That would give him an excuse to drive all around town and stop at houses, just as Jesse said.”

“Remember how Lucy was sniffing the garbage cans at Scott Elliott’s house? Maybe she smelled something from the crime scene or a connection between Elliott and Duncan.” Jo leaned back in her chair. “But I suppose we can’t tell Bev that we’re talking to a lead based on Lucy smelling garbage.”

“Maybe not, but Bev actually gave us the perfect reason to find this lead.”

“She did?”

Sam nodded. “By her request to look deeper into Tyler’s case, we now have a reason to research the calls he went on. And as such, we noticed the name Forest Duncan came up a few times and remembered he was a municipal employee.”

“Combined with what Jesse told us about Thorne’s distributor being a government employee whose job allowed him to be all around town and at various houses, I’d say that’s a good reason to question him.”

Sam pulled the keys to the Tahoe from his pocket. “Exactly. And I can’t think of a better time to do that than right now.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Forest Duncan lived in a duplex clad in dirt-smudged aluminum siding on the outskirts of town. It was late afternoon when Jo and Sam arrived. Sam knew the garbage was collected early in the morning, so he figured Forest would be home. The rusted-out red Hyundai in the driveway told him he'd figured right.

Jo looked at the house skeptically. "This doesn't look like the type of place one of Thorne's distributors would live in. Wouldn't they be able to afford something better than this?"

"Maybe it's a front. It would seem pretty suspicious if the town garbageman lived in a mansion."

"Good point. He might spend his money on expensive toys and interior upgrades." Jo got out of the passenger side and let Lucy out of the back, and they all walked to the front door.

A short, pudgy guy in his midthirties with large, round black-framed glasses that magnified his blue eyes to comical proportions answered the knock. His eyes widened nervously when they fell on Lucy and enlarged even further when Sam and Jo showed their badges.

"Can I help you?" He cracked the door only a few inches. Sam wondered if he'd refuse to talk to them and slam the door in their faces.

"We just have a few questions," Sam said.

"About what?"

Sam craned his neck to look inside. The living room was furnished with yard sale furniture in vintage 1970s plaid. A cheap particleboard coffee table covered in dings and with chipped corners sat in front of the couch.

There was a decent-sized TV on the wall. If Forest Duncan had a lot of money, he sure wasn't spending it on his décor. Maybe he was socking it away for retirement. Sam made a mental note to check into his finances.

"The mayor's murder," Jo piped in. Sam noticed her eyes trained on Forest. She was studying his reaction to her words. That was what Jo did best. She had a degree in criminal psychology and was always looking for some sort of tell or sign people were lying. She was good at that sort of thing. Sam, not so much. He was better at putting together the physical evidence. But together, they made a pretty tight team.

Forest backed up a step, pulling the door tighter. "I don't know anything about a murder."

"You're not a suspect. We just think you might have seen something because of your job with the sanitation department." Sam's assurance seemed to work. Duncan's shoulders relaxed, and he opened the door wider.

"Can we come in?" Sam asked.

Duncan thought for a few seconds and then nodded, glancing at Lucy. "The dog too? I don't much like dogs."

"She's harmless," Jo said. As if to reassure him, Lucy cocked her head to the side and gave a friendly whine.

"Okay. I guess so." Duncan opened the door wider, and they entered.

Duncan shuffled backward to give Lucy a wide berth as the three of them spilled into the living room. The place was small. A gold-shag-carpeted living room opened to a kitchen, where dirty dishes mounded in the sink. It smelled like macaroni and cheese and hot dogs.

Lucy must have approved of the odor, considering the way her nose twitched high in the air. Sam scanned the dishes on the counter, and something caught his eye. A navy-blue coffee mug with large white letters. From the way the mug was turned, he could only make out two of the letters, a *W* and an *R*.

"I think you knew Officer Richardson, didn't you?" Sam asked.

Forest blinked his owlish eyes and looked down at the floor. "Richardson? Maybe. I know a few officers because of my job. Was he the one who got killed?"

"Yes." Sam glanced at Jo, who raised her left brow a barely noticeable amount.

"Sorry about that." Forest looked back up at him. "So is that what you came to ask?"

“No. I just thought you were friends, for some reason.”

Forest shrugged and stared blankly at Sam.

“So, back to the business at hand. Were you working the day of the mayor’s murder?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. I work every day except Monday and Tuesday,” Duncan answered Sam, but his eyes were fixed on Lucy, who sniffed around the coffee table.

“Your route takes you past Reed’s Ferry Mill, right?” Jo asked.

“Well, I don’t actually go to the mill. There’s no one living there, so no garbage.” Forest was distracted by Lucy, who had trotted into the kitchen and was sniffing in the direction of the counter. “What is she doing?”

“Nothing.” Jo snapped her fingers. “Lucy, heel!”

Lucy obediently came to Jo’s side, and Forest focused his attention back on Sam.

“But your truck was seen on the dirt road near the mill that day,” Sam said. He wasn’t actually sure if the truck was seen there *that* day. Rita had only said she saw it there sometimes. But he figured it might rile Forest up a bit to tell him that someone had seen him at the murder scene.

But Forest didn’t seem riled. He seemed thoughtful. “Okay, I do cut through there. Otherwise, I’d have to go all the way back out Bartlett Street and then onto Cherryvale and then to Forester. I’d have to backtrack the streets I’d already been on. I figure I’m saving the town gas money to cut through that road.”

“We do appreciate that,” Sam said.

“Besides, the day the mayor was killed, my route was on the other side of town. I do different sections each day so that everyone gets pickup once a week. And wasn’t he killed at night, anyway?”

“Yep, ’round suppertime,” Sam said.

“Well, then I wouldn’t have seen anything because my route ends at two p.m. So by suppertime, I’m at home, playing video games.” Forest gestured toward the TV, where Sam saw a video game in pause mode. “So I wouldn’t have been anywhere near the mill when the mayor was killed.”

Sam exchanged a glance with Jo. He couldn’t sense if Forest was lying or not. The guy seemed the type to get nervous if he was guilty, but if he was one of Thorne’s distributors, he might be good at acting.

What Forest had told them made sense, though. Sam was going to have to do his due diligence and check it out. In the meantime, they had no

reason to pull him in. “Okay, well, thank you. If you do think of anything or hear anything, would you please let us know?”

Forest nodded. “Of course.”

Jo and Sam said goodbye and headed back to the Tahoe.

“So what do you think about that?” Sam asked as he pulled out of the driveway.

“He seemed nervous at first and when you asked about Tyler, but when I asked about Dupont’s murder, he didn’t appear unduly shocked. I didn’t see any of the usual tells,” Jo said. “But he could be an accomplished liar. I think we need to keep investigating.”

“Me too. I have a funny feeling that Forest Duncan is involved. I’m pretty sure he was lying. And he knew Tyler better than he lets on,” Sam said.

Jo glanced over. “Why’s that?”

“He had a White Rock Police Department mug on his counter. Now where do you think he got that if he wasn’t in cahoots with someone in the department?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Wyatt, Kevin, and Bev were back in the squad room by the time Jo and Sam returned to the station. Wyatt had gotten the crime scene photos as Bev had requested, and they'd tacked them on the corkboard.

The photos were about what Sam had expected. A dirty shallow grave covered with leaves. A pale body with a gunshot wound in the head. Sam's stomach churned. He'd seen worse, but it never ceased to amaze him to see the violence people could inflict on one another.

Lucy trotted over and sat down next to Bev, staring up at the photos as if going over the case along with them.

Bev turned. "Glad you guys are back. We got the crime scene photos, and we're going over what the investigating detective told me."

"Anything new?" Sam asked.

"Afraid not." Bev consulted the notes on her cell phone as she paced around the squad room, spewing information. "Victim was buried in a shallow grave, single gunshot to the head. Forty-five caliber bullet. No gun found. So far, no idea who did it."

"According to the medical examiner down there, Elliott can't be the killer," Kevin said. "Turns out Scott Elliott was killed not long after Dupont, and he had no gunpowder residue on his hands."

"So maybe that fingerprint on the leaf was Elliott running away from Dupont's killer?" Jo asked.

"Who knows? Do you think he was just an innocent witness?" Sam asked. "Jesse said he was a cog in Thorne's drug dealing, so I doubt he was very innocent."

“True, but it’s a big leap from being a small-time drug dealer to a murderer,” Jo pointed out. “He might have become frightened and bolted.”

Bev pursed her lips. “If so, how do you explain his fingerprint at the crime scene of Officer Richardson’s death? Seems he’d be used to murder after being involved in a cop killing.”

“Elliott might not have been in the car when Richardson was killed. The fingerprint could have been left earlier,” Wyatt said.

Bev turned toward Wyatt. “Good point. But let’s say he was with Dupont’s killer. Why would he have been outside the mill?”

“Making sure they didn’t leave any evidence?” Wyatt suggested.

“Why would they worry about that? They wouldn’t have been near the spot where Kevin found the leaf.” Sam turned to Kevin. “You said you found it behind the mill?”

“Yep. Near the walking path.”

“The killer would have parked in front. That’s where the parking lot is.”

“Might have parked on side roads so the vehicles wouldn’t be seen,” Kevin offered. “The neighbors around there keep a close eye on comings and goings.”

“It’s all a mystery, and that’s what we need to dig into.” Bev looked thoughtful as she continued to pace, her eyes on the floor. “My question is, what is the tie-in with this Elliott guy and Officer Richardson? Do you think Richardson was investigating Elliott?”

“If he was, I didn’t know about it. Seems to me, though, that Elliott is connected with Thorne.” Sam pointed to the photo of the shallow grave. “This looks like Thorne’s work. We already know Elliott was at the mill, and it’s no coincidence he ended up dead hours later.”

“Maybe he freaked out and they were afraid he would get a case of nerves and tell the cops,” Jo said.

“I still have a feeling this whole thing is somehow tied into Tyler Richardson’s murder. And there’s no physical evidence that leads to Thorne.” Bev glanced at Sam. “Not that I don’t think the guy is capable, but you have to bring me more to go on. Meanwhile, don’t let your vendetta against him color the way you see the case.”

Was that what he was doing? Misinterpreting the clues? But that piece of paper in Dupont’s hand, linking Tyler and Thorne, was physical proof. Too bad he couldn’t tell anyone about it. Not to mention the reason for meeting with Dupont in the mill in the first place. “Don’t forget that Dupont

was going to give us information that could nail Thorne. Who would have a better motive? That's the main reason Thorne is number one on my list."

Bev pressed her lips together, still pacing. "Point taken. I checked ballistics. Richardson, Elliott, and Dupont weren't killed with the same gun."

"They never did find the gun that killed Tyler," Kevin said.

"Yeah, well, criminals have a way of making guns disappear," Jo said.

"Or rendering them untraceable, like the one that killed Dupont," Bev added.

"You might be on to something with your idea that Tyler was investigating on his own," Sam said. "After we went over Tyler's case with you, we decided to dig a little further into his calls. I might have a viable suspect."

Bev turned from her pacing, her brows notched up. "Really?"

Sam told Bev, Kevin, and Wyatt how they'd stumbled across Forest Duncan's name and about their visit to his home. Sam played up the idea that Tyler was investigating Forest in connection with Thorne, maybe even grooming him as an informant as Sam had done with Jesse. It wasn't so much that he was protecting Tyler, but he couldn't give away what he knew about Tyler's connection to Thorne without making himself and Jo look bad.

"That does sound promising," Bev said. "But now we need to find something to tie him to this case. Did he have any pets?"

"I didn't see any," Jo said. "He was afraid of Lucy, though, so I'm pretty sure he doesn't have a dog."

"You're thinking about the hair found in the gun?" Sam looked at Bev.

Bev nodded.

"Forest didn't seem keen on dogs, but maybe the hair isn't from a dog," Sam said. "Do you know what species of animal it was from?"

"I can find out." Bev continued talking as she typed a text on her phone. "So what priors does this Forest Duncan have?"

"Uh, well, none. We just noticed he was mentioned in some of the police calls Tyler went out on."

Bev looked up from her phone, her brows knitting. "But he was never arrested?"

"Nope."

Bev's frown deepened. "If he's a drug dealer, you'd think he would have been in trouble or arrested."

"You'd think," Sam said.

"And Officer Richardson never brought him in, even though he was implicated in these calls. What were they?" Bev's voice was tinged with skepticism, and that made Sam's gut tighten. He could tell she was growing suspicious of Tyler. She wouldn't be a good cop if she weren't feeling some of the same suspicions he was.

"Mostly minor stuff. Disturbing the peace. One count of lurking. If he was grooming him, he'd have let him off." *Or if he was protecting him.*

"Okay, well, this Forest Duncan is definitely a person of interest," Bev said.

"I'm gonna look into his finances. His house was a dump, but I figure if he's running drugs for Thorne, he's gotta have a stash somewhere. Maybe he's investing it or something." Sam shrugged. "His bank account might give us something to go on. You know how it is. We have to build the case one clue at a time."

"And Elliott's trash wasn't picked up," Jo said. "I'm gonna check what day he has pickup. It just might be another thing we can use to prove that Forest Duncan had ties to Scott Elliott."

"How so?" Wyatt asked.

"Well, if Forest already knew that Scott Elliott was dead, why would he pick up the trash?"

"Huh. Okay, that's stretching it a little, but everything we can look into counts," Bev said.

"What about an alibi?" Bev asked.

"He says he was at home, playing video games, when Dupont died."

The lobby door opened, and they fell silent. Sam figured it was probably one of the locals, wanting a yard sale permit or to pay the water bill. He didn't want whoever it was to overhear gruesome murder talk. He paused, expecting to hear an elderly woman's voice waft over the post office boxes. He was surprised by a male voice. His surprise grew at what the voice said.

"Hi. Agent Holden Joyce. FBI. Looking for Chief Sam Mason."

Sam's eyes met Bev's, and he saw his own question mirrored in hers.

The FBI? This couldn't possibly be good.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Holden Joyce's polished black dress shoes squeaked on the marble floor as he rounded the post office boxes. He was in his midfifties, about Bev's age, with salt-and-pepper hair. Tall but fit in his blue suit. Sam could tell right away he was the kind of guy who liked his job enough to be an asshole about it.

Holden glanced around, a smirk on his face. "Quaint little place you've got here."

The sarcastic tone in his voice was duly noted.

Lucy must have caught the tone too, because she eyed him skeptically from her spot under the window, her lip curled in a slight snarl. She didn't even bother to get up to greet him, as if he weren't worth the effort.

"Can I help you?" Sam asked.

"Holden Joyce. FBI." The man extended his hand and they suffered through a round of tense introductions.

When he got to Bev, he said, "Nice to see you again, Sheriff Hatch." But the tone of his voice didn't sound as though it was nice to see her again.

"So what brings you here, Joyce?" Bev asked. By the tone of her voice, it wasn't nice to see him again either. Sam guessed Bev had had dealings with this Joyce and they hadn't been particularly pleasant.

"Murder," Holden said. "We've got a dead officer and a dead mayor tied together by a fingerprint from a dead body."

Bev folded her arms over her chest. "So, what's the FBI's interest?"

Joyce glanced out the window. "Murder across state lines."

Sam frowned. Holden was lying. The FBI was usually into bigger things. But considering that this all had to do with a drug-dealing ring, Sam shouldn't be surprised the FBI had come. But shouldn't it be the Drug Enforcement Agency that descended on them? The way Holden was looking around the squad room made him think there was much more to this.

Sam glanced at Tyler's old desk, now Wyatt's desk. Now that the FBI was involved, everything about Tyler would come out. As far as Tyler's reputation, let the chips fall where they might. Sam was more worried about what else the FBI agent would dig up.

"I've never known you to be interested in that," Bev said.

Joyce simply raised a brow at her. "We're interested in lots of things. Speaking of which, I need everything you have on the Tyler Richardson case."

Sam locked eyes with Jo. Things were getting worse fast. Sam had just started building a rapport with Bev, and he hoped she might understand why Sam and Jo would want to protect Tyler if certain things came to light. Sam doubted Holden Joyce would be as understanding.

"I've got that case covered," Bev said.

"Not anymore."

Bev frowned. "What do you mean? Are you taking over the Dupont case? Is that why you're interested in Richardson?"

"No." Holden said. "My interest is in the Scott Elliott murder. But I'm authorized to collect any information that might be pertinent to it. I think that because Scott Elliott's fingerprint was found at the murder scene of Officer Tyler Richardson and Mayor Dupont, I might need to look over your notes on those two cases."

Sam could tell that Bev was pissed. She glared at Holden. "I have the Richardson stuff back at the sheriff's office. Like I said, I've been looking into it."

Holden frowned at Sam. "You don't have anything here?"

Sam shook his head. "No. I gave it to Sheriff Hatch."

Holden looked dubious. "Everything? Maybe you're holding out on Sheriff Hatch."

Bev quirked a brow at Sam.

"What do you mean?" Sam asked. But had a sinking feeling that he knew what Holden Joyce meant.

“Let’s just say I think you might have messed with the outcome of a case before. You know the one I mean. Your cousin Gracie.”

“That was almost twenty years ago.” Sam said. “I was a rookie then. Protecting my cousin.”

“Yes, but there’re a lot of unanswered questions about what happened to the suspects in that case,” Joyce said.

Sam guessed Holden Joyce was old enough to have been in the FBI when his cousin’s case came to trial. But the FBI hadn’t been involved, so what did Holden know about it? Maybe he was bluffing.

“Wait a minute. What does this have to do with the case we’re investigating now?” Bev cut in.

“I’m simply pointing out that Chief Mason’s methods of investigation might be a little, shall we say, unorthodox.”

Bev held up her hands. “Well, now hold on a minute. I’m investigating too. And as far as I can see, Chief Mason hasn’t done anything ... unorthodox. In fact, we’re narrowing in on a suspect right now.”

Holden cocked a skeptical brow. “Oh? Who? Tell me more about it.”

“Well, because you already seem to know everything, you must be aware that Chief Mason was meeting with Mayor Dupont the night of his death because Dupont claimed to have information linking Lucas Thorne to the influx of drugs flooding the county,” Bev said.

“So he says,” Holden said.

Bev ignored him and continued. “Sam’s been building up contacts in the area. One of them told him that drugs are being distributed by a municipal employee. Someone who wouldn’t be questioned if they were going to various houses to make drops.”

“You mean like a cop?” Holden asked Bev the question, but his eyes remained trained on Sam.

Bev’s eyes flicked from Holden to Sam. “Or a garbageman.”

“Is that your suspect? A garbageman?”

“Forest Duncan. We have him tied to the case through arrest reports from Tyler Richardson,” Sam said.

“So this Forest Duncan, does he drive a black SUV with a roof rack? Because one of your locals saw a truck like that leave the scene, I’m told,” Holden said.

How did he know that? Clearly, Holden Joyce already knew more about the case than he let on.

“Well, no. He had a red Pinto in his driveway,” Sam said. “But we don’t know what other vehicles he has. Maybe he has a black SUV stored away. His house didn’t reflect the kind of money that would be coming in for a drug dealer, so we think he’s hiding funds somewhere.”

Hopefully, that would satisfy Holden Joyce as far as the black truck went.

“So then the only person tied to this case who drives a black SUV with a roof rack is your friend Mick Gervasi.”

It felt like a punch in the gut. Crap. How much did this Holden know about him anyway? It was almost as if he were here to nail Sam, using the case as an excuse. Thorne had probably planted people in law enforcement. If Holden Joyce was here on Thorne’s request, trying to frame Sam, this didn’t bode well.

“Oh, you didn’t think we knew about Mr. Gervasi, huh?” Holden looked smug. “In fact, we know a lot. Especially in connection with what happened during the trial for your cousin.”

“I don’t see how that’s pertinent to the current case,” Sam said.

“It is when it indicates how you might handle things that aren’t going your way.”

Kevin piped in. “Gervasi isn’t the only one that drives a black SUV with a roof rack. I’ve been researching, and I’ve narrowed it down, but there’re more than one thousand SUVs in the area with roof racks. And it could be someone who isn’t even from the area.”

Was Kevin stalling for time, protecting Mick? Sam’s estimation of the officer rose a few notches.

“I’m getting a little confused here,” Bev said. “Are you accusing Chief Mason of something?”

Holden looked contrite. “No, of course not. I’m simply stating the facts.”

Holden held Sam’s gaze for a few tense seconds before turning to Bev. “If you’re almost done here, I’ll follow you to your office and pick up what you have on the Richardson case.”

Bev scowled. Sam could tell she didn’t really want Holden Joyce following her to her office, but what choice did she have?

“Fine. We’re done here.” They walked off, Bev giving Sam a glance on her way out.

Sam could tell that Bev didn't like Holden Joyce. At least that was one saving grace. Bev would be on his side. But he also knew he'd better prove who the killer was fast, because Bev wouldn't remain on his side if she discovered he'd been lying.

BY THE TIME Kevin clocked out of work that day, he had a major tension headache. The visit from the FBI agent had been disturbing, especially the allegations he'd tossed around about Sam. Kevin was under no illusion that Sam was some angel, but what had he done in the past? Judging by the FBI agent's threat, he knew it had been something bad.

It didn't matter what Sam had done in the past. Kevin knew he was the kind of guy who did the right thing *now*. And besides, Sam had said something about protecting his cousin. Protecting family was the right thing to do. That FBI guy was working some angle, and Kevin wasn't going to stand by and let him railroad Sam.

That was why he'd spoken up about the black SUVs. He figured it probably was Mick's truck that Rita had seen, but he wanted to do his part and throw the FBI guy off track. He'd been nervous that Wyatt would throw his two cents in, but he'd kept his mouth shut. Kevin might have to reevaluate his impression of the guy. At least Wyatt had his loyalties in the right place and sided with his own team instead of blabbing to the FBI.

It almost seemed as though the FBI guy was trying to pin the murder on Sam. Had Sam really done something questionable twenty years ago? Did Sam really kill Dupont? But if he had, why would Kevin's contact be trying to get him to lead the investigation to the glove planted on Sam's property? Seemed like they could come up with easier evidence if Sam was the killer.

Kevin's gut churned. When they'd gotten word about Scott Elliott, he'd half hoped Elliott was his contact. But even if he was, Kevin knew the notes wouldn't stop. A new person would take his place. The photo of the guy in the shallow grave cinched it—Elliott wasn't any of the guys that Kevin had met before.

To top it all off, his contact had left another note the night before. Kevin had had a hell of a time wording the reply to persuade them that it wasn't the right time to lead them toward the glove.

And now, if the FBI guy was in cahoots with Thorne, Kevin would have to be extra careful about how he proceeded.

He picked up some aspirin at the convenience store and then drove past the new construction area, keeping his eye on the spot where he'd buried the glove. They were pouring concrete now right next to it. Hopefully, the glove would still be discoverable when he needed it to be, and hopefully, no one else would find it beforehand.

Kevin didn't know how much longer his contact was going to believe his lame excuses. Too bad they were nowhere near locking Thorne up. Maybe this new lead with the garbageman would speed things up.

His thoughts turned to the thumb drive hidden in his kitchen. Was it time to take that out and give it to Sam? What if there was something hidden on it that could help them put Thorne away faster?

He had to be really careful about how he proceeded with that thumb drive, too. How would he explain it being in his possession? He didn't want to ruin his reputation in the police department, nor did he want to lose Sam's trust.

His job was becoming important to him. It had felt good to be trusted to go to the medical examiner and bring back the results of the Elliott autopsy. Maybe he would think about coming on full-time once this case was over. Now he regretted turning down the full-time position that had been offered to him before they'd hired Wyatt.

Not wanting to attract attention, he continued past the construction site to his house, dread gnawing at him. Hopefully, there wouldn't be another note from his contact—or something worse—waiting when he got there.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jo arrived home later than usual that night. The day hadn't gone very well at all. The appearance of Holden Joyce had been a complete surprise and not a pleasant one. The only saving grace was that Bev seemed to be on their side. For now.

As she pulled into her crushed-stone driveway, she spotted a ball of orange fur on her porch. The cat hunched over the dish, eating the food she'd put out before she'd left that morning. Finally, a bright spot in the day.

She got out of the car and approached slowly, not wanting to scare the small cat off. Golden eyes regarded her warily as she sat on the porch step and held her hand out toward the cat, making cooing noises.

The cat's eyes flicked from her hand to the food then to the safety of the woods. It crouched further, ears flattening, ringed tail twitching as if the cat was deciding whether to trust Jo or make a break for it. Was it a boy or a girl? Jo had no idea how to tell the gender of a cat, but she got a sense it was female. Jo sat patiently until, finally, the cat made a cautious move toward her.

"There you go. I won't hurt you."

The cat came closer.

"I'm the one putting the food out. Maybe when winter comes, you'll want someplace warm. You'd better make friends with me," Jo said, already picturing how she might put a cat bed on the porch, maybe even inside when the temperatures dipped below freezing.

Mew.

The cat sniffed her fingers, and Jo tentatively reached out an index finger to lightly scratch its head. The cat stiffened but didn't run away. Her fur was soft and silky.

She'd finally worked her way around to scratching the cat's neck, and the cat had even rubbed her face against Jo's knee a few times when the crunch of tires on crushed stone interrupted them. She looked up to see the White Rock Police Station Tahoe pulling in with Sam behind the wheel, Lucy staring out the front window.

The cat stiffened.

As Sam came to a stop, the cat pulled away and raced into the woods.

"You got a new friend?" Sam asked, his eyes following the path of the cat as it bounded past Jo's picnic table.

Jo stood, brushing off her jeans. Orange fur clung to her knee where the cat had rubbed against it. "Stray cat I've been feeding."

Lucy trotted over, wagging her tail, happy to see Jo, then stopped short at sniffing her knee where the cat had been rubbing. She looked up at Jo, her forehead wrinkled and her upper lip curled.

"I guess Lucy doesn't like cats," Jo said.

"Probably jealous," Sam answered.

Jo bent down and scratched behind Lucy's ears. "Don't worry. You're still my favorite." She tilted her head to look up at Sam. "So what brings you by? Break in the case?"

Sam shook his head. "Nah, I just wanted to get your take on Holden Joyce."

Jo sighed and stood. "For that, I think we're going to need some beer."

Sam followed her to the door. Lucy had beat them to it and was standing at the door, tail wagging, casting disapproving glances at the empty cat bowl. She didn't stray over to the bowl, though. Most likely, she was anticipating the bacon-flavored dog treats that Jo kept in her cupboard.

As they passed through the living room, Jo gestured toward the couch. "Have a seat. I'll get the beer." She proceeded to the kitchen, pulled two beers from the refrigerator, and tossed two treats to Lucy, who caught them in midair.

When she returned to the living room, Jo found Sam perched uncomfortably on the edge of her white-and-pink floral sofa, looking like a child in his Aunt May's fancy living room. Jo almost laughed. Sam definitely looked out of place amidst the shabby-chic muted-florals-and-

white-paint decor. He was more of a camouflage-pattern-and-natural-wood-stain kind of guy.

"So, Holden Joyce. What do you think?" Sam asked.

"Hate him. You?"

"Yeah, pretty much." Sam swigged his beer.

Jo leaned back in her chair. "I don't think he likes you very much either. Do you think he really has something on you? I mean, I know about the knife, but Thorne has that, so …" Jo let her voice trail off. She'd never asked the details about what had happened back then, and Sam had never volunteered. Was that why Sam had come over? He didn't usually just drop by. Maybe he wanted to give her the full story, seeing as Joyce might try to use it against him.

Her eyes drifted toward the bedroom, thoughts of the notes of her sister's disappearance crowding her mind. If Sam was taking her further into his confidence, should she do the same? She could show it all to Sam right now. He might even have some ideas.

She knew Sam would try to help, but she didn't want to distract from the case they were working on. Besides, she was letting her past go. She'd buried her notes at the bottom of a drawer, and that was where they were going to stay. They had more important things to work on.

Sam took a swig of his beer and sat back, his thumbnail scratching at the label as he talked. "Back when that happened to my cousin, she didn't exactly get the justice we were hoping. It was rich kids who did it. Not just one, a bunch of them." Sam paused and looked out the window, the pain he felt for his cousin flickering in his eyes. "Anyway, those kids had parents with deep pockets and attitudes that they could get away with anything. Some of the ringleaders were gonna get off. We went down to try to talk to the weakest link to make sure that the right people were getting punished."

Jo leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. What, exactly, had Sam and Mick done? "And what happened?"

"Nothing. We talked to him. He was scared."

"So how does that translate to the FBI threatening you today?"

"Next day, the kid turned up dead."

Jo relaxed back in her chair. "But the last time you saw him, he was alive?"

Sam nodded and reached down to bury his fingers in Lucy's fur. "He was gonna tell the truth about who the ringleader was. He ended up taking

the brunt of the blame, even though he was dead."

Jo pressed her lips together. "That sucks." Now she could see how Sam would have been driven to try to make sure the truth came out, even if it might have taken unorthodox means. He was all about justice, and she knew sometimes following the law didn't result in justice. She couldn't blame him.

"Anyway, seems like Holden Joyce has some assumptions about what went on back then."

"And Thorne has a knife with blood on it that might be misinterpreted as a murder weapon."

Sam nodded. "But there's nothing we can do about that now. We need to wrap up this case quick, before Holden Joyce has an excuse to dig deeper."

"Do you think Joyce could be working with Thorne?" Jo asked.

"I don't know. Either he's got it in for me, or he's working with Thorne or he has another agenda we don't know about."

Jo looked out the window. The cat lurked at the edge of the woods, crouched down, peering through the trees toward the house. Maybe she would put another bowl of food out for it after Lucy left. She hoped Lucy didn't really hate cats that much because if she adopted it, she didn't want it to be problematic for Lucy to visit.

"What about the FBI looking into Tyler's case?" Jo asked.

Sam blew out a breath. "Yeah, that could get dicey. But once we find Dupont's killer, they'll probably back off on that."

"Okay, we just need to up our game. What else can we do to prove that Forest Duncan is the distributor?" Jo asked.

"I've got Mick looking into the grandson. If he's involved, he probably knew the players. I figure if the grandson can place Duncan with Scott Elliott, then maybe we can get probable cause to do more searching." Sam sipped his beer. "And Bev is looking into his finances. If we find something shady in there, then we can look further."

"Yeah. Luckily, Bev seems to be on our side," Jo said.

"She is now. Mostly, I think she's on the side of justice. I get the impression she doesn't like Holden Joyce very much, but if she suspects what Holden is saying about me is true, she'll switch sides pretty quick."

Sam was right. Jo got the impression Bev didn't put up with anyone trying to con her. Hopefully, she wouldn't find out what they'd done for Tyler, or they might end up with a powerful enemy who could make future

investigations difficult. So, they had Holden Joyce against them and Bev tentatively on their side. “What do you think about Kevin and Wyatt? Should we bring them in on everything we know?”

“Maybe Kevin. I got the impression he was stalling for us with that comment he made about Mick’s truck.”

Jo nodded. She’d thought the same thing. Kevin was turning out to be a valuable ally.

“But I still don’t want to include them. Wyatt’s too new. I don’t have a good feel for him yet, and Kevin, well, sometimes the less you know, the better.” Sam chugged down more beer. “Maybe in time, we can let Kevin know what we know, but this could get dicey, and it doesn’t seem fair to get him in too deep.”

“Hopefully, after this case is over, there won’t be anything to let him in on. All this Tyler stuff will be behind us.”

“One can only hope,” Sam said. “In the meantime, we need to speed things up. We don’t want to give Holden Joyce any extra time to dig something up.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The next day, Sam found himself alone in his office as he contemplated the case. His cell phone, set to vibrate, sat on the desk, awaiting Mick's text. Mick had told Sam he was going to work on Barbara Bartles's grandson. He was positive the guy knew something about who had stolen the car that was at the scene of Tyler's death. Sam suspected Mick's idea of work included a bottle of whiskey. He probably wouldn't be up this early.

Sam eyed the stack of mail on the corner of his desk. He'd been too busy to sort through it. There was usually nothing important in the stack anyway.

Wyatt and Kevin had both gone out on local calls. Even with the murder investigation, the misdemeanors and neighbor disputes still needed tending. Jo was taking care of a fender bender by the Sacagewassett River. Sam was enjoying the peace and quiet—until a shadow in the form of Holden Joyce appeared at his door.

Sam's day was already starting to go downhill.

Sam motioned him in and slid the phone off his desk. He knew people like Holden. They stuck their noses into everything. He didn't need Holden seeing the text from Mick.

He put the phone in his pocket as Holden strutted in, a manila folder in his hand and an arrogant look on his face.

"Have a seat." Sam gestured to the oak chair with the shortened leg. Holden sat, and the chair tipped forward. Holden's brows mashed together. Sam bit back a smile.

“What’s the status of this suspect you mentioned yesterday?” Holden leaned back, and the chair tipped again. Again, Sam refrained from smiling.

“I don’t have anything new to report so far. It’s still early in the day,” Sam said.

“Oh, you can’t manufacture something?” Holden asked.

Sam leveled a look at the FBI agent. He leaned forward and tapped his index finger on the smooth top of his oak desk to punctuate his words. “We don’t work that way around here. Maybe you do that in the FBI, but here, we collect real evidence.”

Holden leaned forward too, except when he did, the chair tipped and threw him off balance. A look of anger crossed his face. “What the hell is wrong with this chair?”

Sam sat back, innocence plastered all over his face. “Sorry, it’s a little uneven. We got the castoff furniture here. It’s all old and broken,” Sam said.

“Really? Or is this another example of your unorthodox methods?” Holden tipped the chair back and forth. “Makes the suspect uneasy, doesn’t it?”

Sam was just about to reply with a sarcastic remark when Bev Hatch appeared in the doorway.

“I’ve seen you do worse, Agent Joyce,” Bev said.

Holden turned to Bev. “Sheriff Hatch, do you have any light to shed on the case this morning?”

“Not much. Just following up on a few things.” Bev came into the room.

Holden stood, hefting the manila envelope in his hand. “Me too.”

He flipped open the folder and tossed a few photos on Sam’s desk. They were of Sam and Jesse. One of them showed the two meeting behind the auto body shop where Jesse worked earlier this summer. Another was of them meeting in the woods near the campground. Holden tapped Jesse’s face with his index finger.

“This guy here is a drug dealer. And this meeting here behind this building looks suspiciously to me like a drug deal.” Holden’s smug gaze flicked from Sam to Bev, who was frowning at the photos.

“Is that your contact?” Bev asked.

“Yeah. Jesse Cowly. He’s a small-time dealer. I’ve been grooming him so I can get at the bigger fish up the chain.” Sam looked at Holden. “You guys do that all the time, right? Pass over the little guy so you can get

information. He feeds you what you want to know, and you get a bigger catch."

Bev turned to Holden. "We all do it. I think you're making a big assumption with these photos. Do you have any proof to back it up?"

Holden remained silent.

"He doesn't, because it's not true," Sam said.

"So you say," Holden said. "To me, this looks like a drug deal. And since we got a tip that a municipal employee is dealing drugs, you have the perfect cover. You pass it on to this Cowly guy, and he distributes it."

"Nah. That's not the way it played out, and I think you know it," Sam said.

"We don't know any such thing. How do we know you didn't kill both Mayor Dupont and Officer Richardson? Our records indicate Richardson might have been into something that has to do with these drug dealings."

Sam was surprised the FBI had such information, but they didn't know the half of it. Richardson had something to do with the drugs, all right. He was in the middle of the whole ring. Sam didn't enlighten him, though. The less Holden Joyce knew, the better.

"Oh, so you've got nothing to say now, huh? And it's no surprise. You've gone rogue before. You and your friend Gervasi. Now it seems you'd have reason to go rogue again, especially if your department is corrupt."

"Now wait a minute." Bev held up her hands. "This is all conjecture and assumption. We're cops. We work with clues and logic." She leveled Holden Joyce with an angry look. "And you know how I hate unfounded assumptions."

"Assumptions are simply theories that need to be proven," Holden said. "Maybe Chief Mason here is trying to frame this garbageman. What kind of a garbageman deals drugs? And the guy lives in a dump. Mason probably has a whole array of people he can use as fall guys here. Maybe Dupont was onto *Mason* and that was what the meeting was about."

Bev's face turned red. "Listen, Joyce. When you have some physical evidence that proves your accusations, then you come here and give it to us. Until then, this is all just guesswork. I don't think Sam would be working this case like he is if he were the drug dealer."

"We do have one piece of physical evidence," Holden said.

"What's that?" Bev asked.

“The hair that was found inside the chamber of the gun. The only way it could have gotten in there was when the killer was loading the bullets.” Holden pointed to Lucy, who lolled in the sunshine, glaring at him. Her ears were straight up on high alert. Her body appeared to be relaxed, but Sam knew she was ready to jump at Holden if he even looked at Sam crossways.

Bev snorted. “Nice try, but that hair won’t help you in this case.”

Holden scowled. “Why not?”

“It’s feline hair. From a cat.”

Holden’s glare drifted from Bev to Sam to Lucy. He grabbed the photos off Sam’s desk and shoved them in the manila envelope. “Be that as it may, don’t forget we’re working this case hard.” He turned to Sam and jabbed his index finger in Sam’s direction to punctuate his next words. “And we will get to the real truth.”

He turned and stalked out without another word.

Bev stared after him, her arms folded across her chest. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think he’s trying to frame you.” She turned to Sam, her eyes still narrowed. “Unless his accusations have some foundation in truth?”

Sam shook his head. “No. You already knew I had been grooming Jesse as a contact. That’s him in the photos, and the meetings were when he gave me information on drug drops during the summer. You don’t think I’m really involved in this, do you?”

Bev studied him hard before she spoke. “Not sure. I know I think Holden Joyce is a blowhard. I’ve run up against him before. He makes a lot of assumptions. I can’t stand the guy.”

“That makes two of us.”

Bev turned narrowed eyes on Sam again, her voice low and serious. “But that doesn’t mean he’s always wrong. We’ll follow the clues and play it by the book. On this case, we have to do things the right way.”

“I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Sam said, ignoring the vibration of the phone in his pocket. It was probably Mick texting about the grandson, something he didn’t want Bev to know about, especially because he agreed to go by the book.

Jo appeared in the doorway, looking over her shoulder to the squad room behind her. “I just passed Holden Joyce rushing out of here. What’s up with him?”

“He’s got a hair up his ass,” Bev said.

Sam's phone vibrated again as Kevin, Wyatt, and Reese all crowded into the doorway. Great. Just when he wanted to get out of here and read Mick's text, the whole crew was in his office. At least Reese hadn't brought doughnuts. Doughnuts would cause people to linger, and he wanted to get rid of them as soon as possible.

"I don't like that guy," Reese said. "He gave a talk in one of our classes at the academy. What a jerk."

"Yeah, he likes to push his weight around. I know the type," Wyatt said.

"Don't like him either," Kevin added.

It was getting crowded in the office. Sam tried to inch his way toward the door. "It's unanimous none of us like him. But one thing's for sure. He's getting hot on this case."

"Yeah, well, we just have to solve it quickly so we can get him off our backs," Kevin said.

"The key is Forest Duncan. I just know in my gut that he's got something to do with this. All we need is one little incriminating piece of evidence to allow us to uncover the truth about him," Sam said.

"What about his alibi?" Wyatt said. "You said he was at home, gaming. I have an idea how we might be able to prove otherwise by checking the servers."

Sam's brows rose. "Really? Go for it."

"I'm on my way to Judge Firth with a warrant for his finances," Bev said. "I'm going to personally walk it over and make sure we get it right away. I'm also having my crime scene investigators go over the crime scene photos again to look for physical evidence. I know we've been over it a million times, but you never know what a set of fresh eyes might find."

"Here's his photo that you wanted me to print." Reese handed Sam an eight-by-eleven piece of paper along with the mail, which he added to the growing stack on his desk.

Bev looked over her shoulder. "What's that?"

"A photo of Forest Duncan. It's a long shot, but I just might have a lead that can connect him to Scott Elliott. And if we can do that, then maybe then we can use that connection to get him to talk."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"And just how did Mick get this information?" Jo asked a couple of hours later as they headed toward Nashua in the Tahoe. Jo was a little leery of Mick's methods of extracting information. Beating information out of a suspect wasn't exactly admissible in court, but then again, they probably wouldn't have wanted to admit that they'd used Mick to get to the grandson anyway.

Sam glanced over at her. "Not what you think. Single-malt scotch."

Jo sat back in the seat, relieved, "Oh. That's good. So he admitted to stealing the car?"

"No, not him. He said he helped out his friend."

"And we think this friend was Scott Elliott."

"Right. And now we need to show Danny Bartles the photos of Elliott and Duncan. Maybe if he thinks he's being linked with a drug ring, he'll be scared into telling us something more."

"Unless he's the leader."

"Nah. Mick said the kid was green. He might be on the fringes, but he's not into anything deep enough."

"So scaring him will get him to tell us what he knows."

"That's the plan."

Jo opened the bag they'd gotten from Brewed Awakening on the way out of town and pulled out a jelly doughnut. "Want one?"

"No."

From the backseat, Lucy whined, and Jo twisted around to look at her. "Not you. These aren't good for you."

“They aren’t good for you either,” Sam said.

Jo looked down at the doughnut. He had a point. Maybe she’d eat only half. She ripped it in half and took the big section with the jelly and shoved a piece in her mouth.

“How are we gonna tell Bev we came by this information?” she mumbled around the treat.

“We’ll leave Mick out of it. We’ll say we tied Danny Bartles to the stolen car. It was his grandmother’s car, so it’s not a stretch, and besides, the suspicion of him having something to do with it being stolen is in our notes from Tyler’s initial investigation.”

“Yeah, but no one ever followed up on that.”

“That’s not our fault. We were removed from the investigation. We were told not to look any further, so we didn’t. Can’t help it if the Staties didn’t follow up properly.”

“But what if this Bartles guy knows more about Tyler?”

“What if he does?” Sam asked. “We can’t stop that now. Tyler was into something bad, and it’s probably going to come out.”

Jo settled back in her seat, flipped up the plastic tab on the lid of her coffee cup, and took a sip as she looked out the passenger window. The scenery had changed from the mountains and fields of northern New Hampshire to the strip malls and suburban developments of southern New Hampshire.

“Hopefully, we can contain the damage,” Sam said.

“I’m really worried about what’s in that box.”

“If Tyler was working with Thorne, what could possibly be in there?” Sam asked. “Maybe he kept drug-deal records or something. Maybe there’s some evidence that can help us put Thorne away.”

“Or maybe there’s some evidence that makes us look bad. Why would Tyler keep evidence against his own father? Makes more sense that he was building up something against us just in case we discovered what he was up to.”

“I guess there’s no sense in worrying about it. We still haven’t discovered where the box is, and we’re the only ones who know about the key. Who needs to even know there was a box?”

“True, but I’d still feel better if we could get to it first. You never know who’s going to remember Tyler opening a safe deposit box somewhere. Or the two of us asking about one. It just makes me nervous,” Jo said.

Sam didn't respond, but the way his jaw tightened told Jo that he felt the same way.

"What if Bartles won't talk?" Jo asked.

"Don't worry," Sam said, patting his pocket. "I have an ace up my sleeve."

DANNY BARTLES LIVED in a run-down apartment building that smelled of cheap curry, bad body odor, and stale beer. Even Lucy wrinkled her nose as Sam and Jo navigated the corridor to his apartment.

They knocked, and after a few minutes, a guy in his mid-twenties with scraggly hair and bloodshot eyes who was holding a bag of frozen corn to his head answered.

"You Danny Bartles?" Sam asked.

"Huh?"

He stared at them through blurry eyes. It must've taken him a second to realize that Sam and Jo weren't his drinking buddies, and once he did, his eyes darkened with suspicion. "Who are you?"

"We have some questions," Sam said.

Bartles started to shut the door. "I don't think so."

Sam put his foot in the door, and Lucy rushed in while Sam pushed the door open. Bartles stumbled back. "Hey, you can't —!"

Sam put his arm out to steady the man, a smile on his face. "Oh, I'm sorry about that. Didn't mean to push you. Lucy here gets a little excited whenever we bring her to visit someone." Sam gestured toward the dog. "Don't you, girl?"

Lucy practically smiled. Her whole body wagged as if she knew what Sam was up to and she was playing along to put the guy at ease.

"She likes you." Jo smiled at Bartles, also playing along.

Bartles relaxed. Apparently, he wasn't one of their smarter suspects. That was good. It would make it easier to get information out of him.

Then his eyes narrowed. "Wait, who are you people?"

"Chief Sam Mason." Sam showed his badge, and Bartles stiffened. "Don't worry. You're not in trouble. We heard you might have important

information on a case we're working up north. We're not even local, so we have no jurisdiction for anything you might be into down here," Sam said.

"Um, I don't really know anything. You're wasting your time." Bartles started backing up toward the door, reaching for the knob.

"We'd really appreciate the help. And there's a substantial reward if it leads to an arrest."

Bartles stopped at the mention of the reward. Jo glanced at Sam. As far as she knew, there was no reward. But then again, judging by the mismatched furniture, the particleboard bookcase with one shelf hanging down, and the dilapidated state of his apartment, she knew that one hundred bucks would probably be a big reward to this guy. Sam would be happy to pay that out of his pocket if he provided good information.

"Reward?"

"Yup. It's a bundle too."

"What do you want to know?"

"Earlier this summer, your grandmother's car was stolen. You know anything about that?"

Bartles's eyes darted from Sam to Jo to Lucy, a nervous reaction that Jo took to mean he did know something despite the word that came out of his mouth.

"No."

"We hear that Scott Elliott had something to do with it," Sam said.

"Who?"

"I think you know Scott, don't you?"

Bartles shrugged. Apparently, he was either too hung over, or just plain old not smart enough to come up with a lie. "Okay, maybe I know him, but I didn't have anything to do with any car stealing."

"We know that, son," Sam said in his friendliest voice. "Now, I'd like to show you some photos just to make sure we're talking about the same person."

Sam gestured toward the dirty brown-plaid sofa, and Bartles slumped on it while Sam and Jo each took a chair. Lucy sat on the floor between them. Sam tossed a photo of Scott Elliott on the coffee table. It was a nice photo of him with his hair combed back and a smile on his face. Jo didn't know where Sam had gotten it, but it looked like a photo for a work badge.

"Is that the guy?" Sam asked.

"And you say there's a reward for this information?" Bartles asked.

“Yep.”

“Yes, that’s Scott Elliott. But like I told you, I wasn’t involved in anything illegal with him.”

Bartles stared down at the photo. He adjusted the package of frozen corn on his head. “Hey, wait a minute. Some guy was asking about the stolen car and Elliott last night in the bar.”

“Oh really?” Sam asked.

Bartles frowned. “I’m not getting in the middle of anything bad, am I?”

“Nope, not at all. No one will know you spoke to us.”

Bartles’s frown deepened. “Well, if no one knows I talked to you, how can I collect the reward?”

“It’s all done anonymously,” Sam assured him.

“Okay. Well, I haven’t seen Scott in a while anyway.”

Sam glanced at Jo. No surprise there. Scott was dead. Apparently, Bartles didn’t know that.

“Did he mention anything about the car? Or where he was going with it?” Sam asked.

Bartles adjusted the bag of corn again and looked down at his bare feet. “Nope.”

It didn’t take a degree in psychology to know that Bartles was lying. Even Lucy could tell, as evidenced by the way she glanced up at Jo.

Sam took out another photo, this one of Forest Duncan, and placed it on the coffee table. “Do you know him?”

“No, man. Why are you asking about all this?”

“And you don’t know about anything else that Scott Elliott was into?”

“No. Like I said, I only told him where Gram kept the keys. It’s not like I went with him or was into anything that he was into.”

“Well, you must have known him pretty well to tell him where your grandmother kept the keys,” Sam prodded.

Bartles’s eyes darted from Sam to Jo as he realized he’d messed up. He jiggled his leg nervously, the frozen-corn package crunching as his hand tensed on it. “No, I didn’t know anything.”

“Really? Because if you don’t tell us what you know, you could be in deep trouble, and I don’t mean with the cops.” Bartles’s eyes jerked from the photos on the table to Sam.

“Huh?”

Sam tossed another photo on the table, this one of Scott Elliott in the shallow grave.

Bartles's eyes widened. He jumped up from the chair, the freezer pack thudding to the floor. "Shit! What happened to him?"

"Someone killed him. Guess he knew too much. Now, don't you want to make sure we find the person who did this and put him away before he thinks *you* might have known too much?" Sam asked.

"Okay. Shit." Bartles paced the room nervously, the freezer pack thawing on the floor, forgotten. "Okay. I did some stuff with Scott. We hotwired a few cars. But I swear I didn't get into anything that would get anyone killed. And I swear I don't know that guy in the other picture."

"But you must've known something about what Scott Elliott had going on?" Sam leaned back in the chair, as patient as ever. "Come on, Danny, we know you guys all talk."

"I don't know anything. I swear." Bartles continued pacing before he stopped in front of the coffee table. "Well, he did have something going on up north. I have no idea what, but by the way he talked, it was something big. I was trying to cut my association with him because ..." He pointed at the photo of Elliott in the shallow grave. "Well, you know, because I didn't want to end up like that."

"Drugs?" Jo asked.

Bartles shrugged. "He didn't talk much about it, but probably."

"So how do you know it was someone up north?" Sam glanced at Jo.

"One day, we were driving around, looking to score some pot, and he got a weird call."

"From who?"

"No idea, but he U-turned and got all serious about following some guy. Said he was a cop from up north." Jo straightened in her seat. Even Lucy came to attention, sensing that this was important.

"A cop? What was his name?" Sam asked.

"I don't know."

"When was this?"

"I don't know. Beginning of summer."

"Well, what did you do? Did you meet up with him?" Had Tyler been distributing drugs down here?

"No, it was weird. We followed him, but it must have been a wild goose chase because all he did was go into Penny's Peak Ski Area."

“Why? Did he drop something off or meet someone? Why were you following him?”

Bartles shrugged. “I guess he just wanted to see what he was up to.”

Jo glanced at Sam. This didn’t make much sense. If Tyler was working with Scott Elliott, why would he have been secretly following him?

“What did you see?”

“Nothing. That’s why it was weird. The ski area’s closed. It’s summer. But I guess the cop must’ve just been hungry, because he got out and went to the vending machines.”

“Was the cop tall with dark curly hair cut just below his ears?” Jo asked.

“Yeah, that’s the guy!”

She locked eyes with Sam. She’d just described Tyler Richardson.

“Scott seemed really disappointed that the cop hadn’t done anything more than get a candy bar. I wasn’t sure exactly what he was expecting, but by that time, I knew he was into some weird shit, and I didn’t want to get into it. I figured the less I knew, the better,” Bartles slumped back down on the couch. “You don’t think the people who killed him are going to come after me, do you?”

“Nah, I don’t think so. We’ll make sure they don’t,” Sam said. “Can you tell me where the ski area is?”

“Yeah.” Bartles seemed more than eager to help them now, probably wanting the cops to put the bad guys away before he ended up in a shallow grave. “It’s right off of exit eight, about two miles to the east. You can’t miss the signs.”

“Okay, thanks.” Sam got up, and Jo and Lucy followed him to the door.

Just before they stepped out into the hallway, Bartles yelled, “Hey, what about my reward?”

Sam turned around and looked at him. “Don’t worry. We’ll mail it to you.”

They stepped into the hall and made a beeline for the Tahoe.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The ski hill wasn't hard to find. The dirt parking lot was empty. The tall metal terminals and cables of the chairlift cut a path up the hill. Sam figured they put the chairs away at the end of the season. In the winter, the place would bustle with skiers in colorful snow gear, but now it was so quiet you could practically hear the grass grow.

The mountain was simply an overgrown hill compared to what Sam was used to up north, but for skiers who didn't want to drive the extra few hours to the Canadian border, this was a fairly popular place to ski. There was a nice lodge at the top, also closed for the season. Here at the bottom was a building that sheltered vending machines. "This must be where Tyler stopped," Jo said.

"We don't know for sure that it was Tyler." Sam followed her to the building. The vending machines were set under a roof with the sides open. A few machines were visible from the parking lot, but as they got closer, Sam saw the row extended out of sight to the corner of the building.

"No, but it's a pretty big coincidence he fit Tyler's description. And he was from up north."

"What do you think he'd be doing here at the vending machines?" Sam asked. "And do you really think Bartles was telling us the truth?"

Jo nodded. "I didn't see any indication he was lying. He seemed too scared. And besides, it was pretty clear he's small time. He wouldn't have any reason to lie because he wasn't into anything too big."

Sam had thought the same, but it was nice to know Jo agreed. He looked behind the vending machines while Lucy sniffed around the sides.

Nothing looked out of place. Just normal everyday vending machines. Jo stood in front of them, looking at the selections.

"It looks like they have Mounds bars. Those are my favorite," she said.

"I'm an Almond Joy man, myself." Sam turned and glanced back at the empty parking lot as Jo fed in money for the candy bar. "Doesn't look like this place gets a lot of use in summer."

Jo reached in and pulled out the candy bar, unwrapped it, tore off the end, and handed Sam half. "I hope it isn't stale."

Lucy, who had made her way around the corner, trotted back, tail wagging.

"Chocolate is bad for dogs," Jo said, her mouth stuffed full.

But Lucy wasn't begging for food. She nudged Jo's hand and then trotted back to the other side of the building, past the last vending machine.

"Wonder what she wants," Sam said as he followed her.

Bathrooms were on the other side of the building, one door for men and one for women.

Jo cracked the ladies' room door. "I'm surprised they don't lock these in the off-season."

Lucy trotted toward the men's room, and Sam followed. Sam opened the door, and Lucy pushed her way inside as he fumbled for a light switch.

The bathroom was done in plain white tile. It smelled a little musty but was fairly clean, which surprised Sam. He would have thought that people would come here to party in the summer and leave a mess. Sure, there was some graffiti on the steel-gray stall dividers, and one of the shower curtains in the stalls at the end had been ripped halfway down, but otherwise, it wasn't too bad.

Lucy had trotted past the showers, and Sam's eyes followed her, his heart skipping when he saw what was next to the shower stalls. Four rows of small lockers, all with their doors open … except one.

"Are you seeing what I'm seeing?" It was so quiet that Jo's muffled voice could be heard even in the next bathroom.

Sam nodded. "Yeah. Lockers. And one of them has a lock on it."

The door opened, and Jo came in beside him. "These bathrooms aren't in full view of the parking lot. Someone following Tyler here might not have known he came in the bathroom. If they stayed in their car and watched him from a distance, they might have thought he was just getting something from the vending machines."

Sam already had the padlock in his hand and the key out of his pocket. He met Jo's eyes.

"Here goes." Sam put the key in and turned it. The lock slid open with a click.

He removed the lock, pulled the door open, and reached inside, his fingertips brushing against a cold metal box. He pulled it out. It was a lockbox about the size of a notebook and four inches thick.

"Guess we're finally going to get to see what Tyler had hidden away."

JO WATCHED as Sam balanced the box on the sink and unsnapped the metal latch then lifted the lid. "Hopefully, there's something in here that links Forest Duncan to Thorne."

Inside sat a spiral notebook and some photographs. Sam picked up the notebook, and Jo took the photos.

On the second photograph, she hit pay dirt. It was Forest Duncan. "Here's one of Duncan." Her pulse picked up speed as she studied the image, but something wasn't right. The photo wasn't of Forest doing anything illegal, unless you considered crouching in the woods with binoculars illegal. It had a time stamp on the corner, and she shuffled through the others and came to another photo with the same time stamp, but this one was of Scott Elliott unloading boxes from the back of a truck. Drugs?

She put the two photos side by side. They were grainy, and it was hard to make out, but it looked as if the two had been taken in the same spot, just from different vantage points. Had Forest Duncan been spying on Scott Elliott? And why take a photo?

Presumably, Tyler had put the photo in the box. Why would he want a photo of Forest Duncan spying on Thorne's henchman? Was Tyler trying to prove to Thorne that Duncan was trying to get evidence against him? Why keep it in the box? Why not show Thorne right away? And if Tyler had let Thorne go on all those police calls, didn't that mean they were working together?

"Something doesn't add up." Sam frowned down at the notebook.

“Yeah. Tell me about it. Look at these photos. It’s almost as if Tyler was spying on Forest Duncan. Or Thorne.” Jo showed Sam the images.

“Yeah. This notebook is in some kind of shorthand or code, but there’s definitely dates, and I think the coded parts are locations.”

Jo studied the notebook over his shoulder. “Some of those dates are days that Tyler let Forest off on some of those police calls.”

“No kidding. I’m getting a funny feeling about this.”

“Me too.” As Jo looked further into the pile of photos, her unease grew. And then she spotted something shockingly familiar. Beech trees with the lower branches broken, just like those she’d seen near the graves linked to her sister’s case.

She struggled to breathe as she stared at the photo. It couldn’t be. After years of looking, was this finally the spot? Had Tyler captured this inadvertently while spying on Thorne? But where exactly was it?

She looked for landmarks. Nothing. It was just another photo of Scott Elliott. This time, he was carrying a crate in the woods. The more she looked at it, the less sure she was that the beech trees were even marked in the same style. Maybe it was just wishful thinking. Maybe it was —

“What the heck?” Sam’s voice interrupted her thoughts. He’d grabbed some papers from the bottom of the box, and he handed them to Jo. She dropped the photo back into the box before taking the papers.

Her heart twisted as she read them. They were blackmail letters demanding money. She glanced up at Sam. “Tyler was blackmailing someone?”

“Yeah. Thorne. And I think I know why.” Sam handed her another piece of paper—DNA test results. Jo couldn’t believe her eyes. The scrap that Dupont had clutched in his dying hand hadn’t told the whole story. Yes, Thorne was the father of a Richardson, but not *Tyler* Richardson. Thorne was the father of Tyler’s sister, Clarissa.

They’d had it all wrong.

“The blackmail was for her treatments. That’s where the large deposit of money in his bank account came from.”

“And earlier deposits, I suspect. We never looked any further into his account,” Sam said. “I always wondered how he afforded those expensive treatments for Clarissa, even after moving in and consolidating bills with his mother. Cops don’t make very much.”

“But what about all these photos and the dates and locations recorded in the notebook?” Jo asked. “Why would any of this intimidate Thorne? Why would he care if anyone knew he was Clarissa’s father?”

“Well, Harry did say that Thorne’s wife was a force to be reckoned with, and her family is quite wealthy. That’s how Thorne was financed.” Sam thought for a minute. “Clarissa was much younger than Tyler. Thorne would have been married when she was born, so he must have had an affair with Mrs. Richardson.”

“Seriously?” Jo made a face. “You expect me to believe Thorne would be afraid to let his wife find out he had an affair that resulted in a child?”

“Maybe not so much the wife, but the wife’s family money. Didn’t Harry say something about a prenup?”

“But wouldn’t Thorne make plenty with his drug trade? Why would he care about the wife’s money?”

“Maybe he launders the drug money through the properties he’s building. If the wife’s family financed it, they could pull the rug out from under him. Without that, he’d have no way to launder the drug money,” Sam said. “You have to admit this explains a lot. It’s all here. And Thorne did give Tyler money.”

“I suppose so. Tyler must have been trying to get something else besides Clarissa to hold over Thorne as extra insurance. That’s why he has all these photos and records.”

Jo’s mind drifted to the photo of the beech trees. It was probably just a coincidence. Maybe the branches weren’t cut the same way. She’d have to compare them to the photos she had in the bottom drawer of her armoire later. But even if they were, she had no way to figure out where the area was … unless Forest Duncan remembered. She took a deep breath and pushed the thoughts to the back of her mind. She had put her sister’s case away for good, and what they were working on now was more important. It deserved her full attention.

“But why didn’t Tyler tell us?” Jo asked.

“How could he? Blackmailing the resident drug lord isn’t exactly something you tell your fellow cops,” Sam said. “You know how important his family was to him. His sister always came first. And even though he wouldn’t have wanted to go behind our backs like this, he did it for her.”

It was true. Tyler had thought the world of his sister. Jo probably would have thought the world of hers.

“And I don’t think he ever would have told us, because he wouldn’t want Thorne to be put away,” Sam said. “If Thorne went to jail, the blackmail money would dry up.”

“But what about all these photos and notes? It looks like he was gathering evidence.”

“I think he needed to get as much as he could on Thorne to keep blackmailing him in case the threat of telling his wife wasn’t viable anymore.” Sam picked up the photo of Forest. “And these photos served another purpose. They protect Forest Duncan. Tyler must have had Forest informing on him. That’s what all the calls about Forest being let go were about. He had to make it look like he was arresting Forest so Thorne wouldn’t think they were working together. He probably had Forest doing odd jobs for Thorne, maybe even dealing drugs, but these photos prove that Forest was working with Tyler.” Sam looked at Jo. “Tyler did this to protect Forest.”

Jo had mixed feelings. She could understand why Tyler had done what he’d done, but she wasn’t sure she could justify him letting Thorne continue his dirty business.

“That would be just like Tyler to make sure Forest didn’t get caught up in this whole thing.” Jo looked down at the photo then back up at Sam. “But if Forest Duncan isn’t the distributor or the one who killed Dupont, who is?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sam and Jo stopped at Jo's long enough to drop off the box and for Jo to put out more food for the orange cat, which was waiting on her porch again. Lucy didn't seem keen on the cat's presence, so they left her in the Tahoe.

There was no benefit in telling anyone else about the box. None of the photos showed Thorne in a compromising position, and they already knew Scott Elliott was involved. Having to explain how they'd had possession of the key and knew Tyler had hidden a box would be problematic. Besides, now that they'd discovered Tyler wasn't working with Thorne, they were reluctant to blame him. Who could fault him for taking care of his sister?

It was late afternoon by the time they got back to the station. Bev, Wyatt, and Kevin were all there. Sam had barely had time to process the ramifications of what they'd found in Tyler's box. All this time, Tyler had been gathering his own evidence against Thorne. They were enemies, not allies. It was doubtful he'd been tipping Thorne off to their stakeouts. But then how had Thorne always known what they were up to? Was there someone else in the department that had been ratting them out?

Bev looked at Sam, suspicion flickering in her eyes. "Where have you been?"

"Following a lead that had to do with Tyler's stolen car."

"Connected to this case?" Bev's eyes flicked from Sam to Jo. "Did it pan out?"

"Unfortunately, no," Sam said. "What about you?"

“I didn’t find anything suspicious in Forest Duncan’s finances.” Bev seemed a bit less friendly, uneasy. Was it because Forest Duncan was turning into a dead end, or had she discovered something else?

Sam glanced at Jo. Now that they knew Forest Duncan probably wasn’t working with Thorne, he realized it had been a mistake to build him up as their prime suspect. They needed to figure out another angle and get Bev off Duncan’s trail fast. Who knew what she would turn up about him and Tyler?

“I’m not surprised you didn’t find anything,” Wyatt said. “I checked out Duncan’s alibi. He was at home, playing video games, when Dupont was murdered, just like he said.”

“Really? Is that irrefutable?” Bev asked.

“He plays a group game. You know, the kind where you can play with other people online. A server keeps track of when they’re on. According to his server, he played for four hours that night. He couldn’t have killed Dupont.”

Kevin frowned. “Couldn’t that be faked? He could have had a friend play for him.”

“He could have, I suppose,” Wyatt said.

Sam seized the opportunity. “We haven’t found anything else linking him. Maybe Duncan isn’t our guy.”

“Sure, maybe. But who else do we have to go with?” Bev asked.

“Maybe we should be looking a little closer to home.” Holden Joyce came around the post office boxes, his fist clenched around some papers. Sam wished he’d stopped to take an aspirin. Holden Joyce was the last thing he needed right now.

Joyce folded his arms over his chest, the papers crinkling as he stared at Sam. “Let me guess: your lead didn’t pan out.”

“No.”

“I’m not surprised. I think maybe there’s more to this than you’re telling us. I dug up a witness who says he saw Officer Harris at the mill long before your official report states.”

“Of course I was there,” Jo said. “We needed to go there beforehand to make sure we weren’t being set up.”

“Well, your report doesn’t state that.”

“An oversight,” Jo said. “We were treating it very carefully in case things didn’t pan out. We didn’t want Thorne to find out the mayor had

ratted him out. Could be dangerous for him."

"Yeah, turns out it was dangerous for him anyway," Holden snarled.

"This might be my fault," Kevin volunteered. "I talked to the neighbor who saw Jo, but I didn't report it. I just figured it had already made its way into the report. Sorry."

Sam studied Kevin. Was he telling the truth? If so, why didn't he mention it before? Either way, one thing was clear: Kevin was covering for them.

"Just what are you getting at, Joyce?" Bev demanded.

"A lot of things don't add up about this case," Holden said. "Reports that aren't filled out correctly. Sam's buddy happening to have an SUV exactly like the one a witness saw speeding away from the murder site. Oh, and the handwriting expert says Tyler Richardson didn't write that last entry in his log." Holden stepped closer to Sam. "So tell me, Chief Mason, what exactly are you up to?"

Sam's fist tightened, and he stepped away from Holden, mentally counting to three before he answered.

"He's not up to anything," Jo said before Sam reached two. "You know as well as we all do that reports don't always get filled out correctly. Sometimes we have to fill in logbooks for each other."

"Yes, but not after one of us is dead." Holden Joyce turned to Sam. "If you confess now, we can cut you a deal. Tell us everything—what you've been up to and why you've been fixing these cases."

"I haven't been up to anything, Agent Joyce."

"Really? There're a lot of inconsistencies, not to mention the little matter of some extra money that showed up in Tyler Richardson's account."

Sam pressed his lips together. When he had thought that Tyler was working with Thorne, he was willing to let the chips fall as they might. Tyler had made a deal with the enemy, and if his reputation was tarnished because of it, then so be it. Now that he knew the extra money was to pay for Clarissa's treatments, he wanted to defend Tyler. But how?

"Yeah, that's right. Your suspect didn't have any extra money, but your cop did. Could that be drug money?" Holden asked.

"I don't see what this has to do with Chief Mason," Bev said. "If Officer Richardson was on the take, you can hardly blame the other cops in the squad."

“Except Chief Mason has been doing things on the side to obscure the facts in the Richardson case, haven’t you?”

“No. Our fellow officer was murdered. Of course we’re going to look into who did it and try to bring them to justice.”

“Still not willing to talk? Then let’s not forget about the matter of the money you tried to launder.”

Sam’s brows creased. “What?”

Holden held the papers up like a trophy. “Through your own slain officer’s mother. You should be ashamed.”

“No, it wasn’t like that,” Jo came to his defense.

“So it’s no coincidence that Tyler Richardson’s mother got the exact same sum of money from the Fallen Officers Fund that mysteriously appeared and then disappeared from Mason’s bank account?” Holden Joyce pointed to a copy of a deposit slip on one of the papers. “Funny thing is, there is no Fallen Officers Fund.”

Bev’s scowl deepened the more Holden talked. She squinted at the evidence, suspicion darkening her eyes. “Now, wait a minute. This doesn’t exactly make sense. He wouldn’t launder money through his own bank account.”

“Maybe. But you have to admit Chief Mason is up to something shady.”

Bev pursed her lips, looking from Holden to the evidence to Sam. Sam could tell he was losing her support, but he had no way to clear himself.

“I think it’s best that the FBI takes over everything involved in this case,” Holden said.

Bev whirled on him. “Now, you wait a minute, Joyce. I’m in charge of the Dupont case. It’s a local case. You can butt out. I don’t like anyone horning in on my cases.”

Holden scowled down at her. “You always were hard to work with, Hatch. If you align yourself with Mason, you might end up getting burned too. Just think about that before you decide whose side you’re on.”

With that, he pivoted on his heel and stormed out of the squad room.

Sam turned to Bev. “Thanks a lot, Bev. I really appreciate —”

Bev held up her hand. “Shut it, Mason. I just couldn’t let that smug asshole take the case. But I’ll tell you one thing: everything he’s saying doesn’t look very good for you.”

“I know, but there’s an explanation.”

"Explanation or not, there have been a lot of inconsistencies, and I think you might have pushed the envelope a few times on this case. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt just this once because somehow, I still think you're a good guy. Not to mention I owe your granddad."

"Appreciate that."

"I'm not sure what Joyce is up to. I don't trust him. This business about giving money to Officer Richardson's mother doesn't make any sense to me. Otherwise, I'd cut my losses and ban you from investigating this case right now." Bev looked around at Jo, Kevin, and Wyatt. "Your people seem to like you and stick up for you. That says a lot about a person. But I'm not stupid, and I don't like having the wool pulled over my eyes. So you've got twenty-four hours to come up with a real suspect in this case before I turn the spotlight on you."

KEVIN SAT at his granite breakfast bar, fiddling with the thumb drive he'd taken from Tyler Richardson's belongings as he considered his options. He didn't like the way things had gone down at the police station earlier that afternoon. He'd wanted to stay and help with the investigation, but Sam had sent him home. He said he'd already logged enough time, and the weary look on Sam's face had told him not to argue.

But now, sitting at home, Kevin worried. It appeared that Holden Joyce really had it in for Sam. And Kevin knew that Sam hadn't gone exactly by the book on a few things. If Joyce wanted to nail him, he probably could. Kevin couldn't let that happen. Especially because some things might be his fault.

If he gave the thumb drive to Sam, it would be an admission that he'd gone against him. That he'd sold out the department for money. Kevin didn't even know if anything could be recovered from the thumb drive, but what if some data on it could help Sam? It might be the only way Kevin could make things right. That and the bloody glove.

He'd have to figure out a way to give it to Sam when no one else was around, because whatever was on it might as easily get Sam into trouble as it could get him out of it. He wouldn't be surprised if Sam was still at the

station, puzzling over the case. He could take a ride by and see if the lights were on. But if he did hand it over, he'd risk losing Sam's trust.

Maybe if he told Sam about the bloody glove, that could somehow make up for the way he'd been going behind his back. He'd protected Sam by digging up the glove and putting it somewhere that might incriminate Thorne. Sam could hardly blame him for that, could he? Especially when Sam didn't go by the book all the time himself.

It didn't matter. It was the right thing to do. Kevin shoved the thumb drive in his pocket and headed out to his car. Hopefully, he could catch Sam at the station alone and finally get this off his conscience.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sam and Jo stood looking at the corkboard in his office, the smell of the greasy takeout burgers they'd had for supper cloying the air. It was dark. Lights from the shops sprinkled around the common glittered outside the windows. A few tourists and locals leisurely strolled the sidewalks. Inside, the atmosphere was tense.

"We must be missing something," Sam said.

"What about the cat hair?" Jo said. "It's the only physical evidence we have. Maybe we should get a list of everyone who got rabies shots for their cats."

"It's something to try, but I imagine a lot of people have cats, and not all of them keep them up-to-date on their shots. Won't narrow it down much. I think we need to talk to Forest Duncan again. We'll have to tip our hand and let him know that we know he was working with Tyler. That'll put us on the same side. He won't be as nervous, and he might have some information we can use."

"Or he might be afraid the same thing that happened to Tyler will happen to him."

"I still can't believe Tyler was blackmailing Thorne all along," Sam said. "I feel bad that we assumed the worst of him." Sam pushed the stack of mail aside and leaned his hip on the corner of his desk.

"Who could blame us?" Jo asked. "Of course, now Bev Hatch will assume the worst of us."

"Not us," Sam said. "Me."

“But Holden Joyce was onto that log forgery. So I’m in this as deep as you are.”

“No. I’ll say I forged it.”

Jo scowled at him. “I’m not letting you get in trouble for me. I forged the logbook, and I’ll own up to it —”

Jo broke off at the sound of the lobby door opening. “Please tell me that’s not Holden Joyce coming back,” she muttered.

“Hey, Sam.” Kevin’s voice drifted in from the lobby a few seconds before his face appeared in the doorway. His eyes flicked from Sam to Jo, showing his surprise to find them both there. He shoved something back into his pocket. His keys, Sam assumed. “I saw the light on and thought I’d stop in. Thought maybe you could use some help. You going over the case?”

“Yeah. Thanks for stopping in. I guess we might have to pull an all-nighter.”

Sam was impressed that Kevin had taken the initiative to stop in. It seemed he really wanted to help with the case. He’d changed a lot from the lazy officer who only wanted to work the minimum hours he’d been assigned at the start of the summer. Sam wondered if they should share more of the details with him. But not now. Maybe later, after the case was solved. Right now, he didn’t want Kevin’s mind clouded by all the subterfuge that had gone on behind the scenes.

“So what have you got? We need to get this FBI guy off our backs.” Kevin stared at the corkboard.

“You can say that again,” Sam said.

“I wonder about Scott Elliott’s friends,” Jo said. “Maybe we should tackle it from that angle. If he was involved in the drug ring and the murders, maybe one of his friends was too.”

“Well, we do need a new angle and new lead,” Sam agreed.

Kevin’s hand hovered over his pocket. He seemed hesitant. “Yeah, maybe —”

“Hello? Anyone home?”

Harry Woolston appeared in the doorway. “I saw the light on and thought I’d come in and see what you were up to. Figured you might be going over the case.”

“Yeah. Come on in.” Sam motioned Harry into the office. Lucy broke from her spot in the corner and trotted over to Harry. He bent down to pet

her. “Late night, huh, girl?”

Lucy wagged her tail in response.

Harry looked at Sam and Jo. “So what have you got? Maybe I can help. You know, I was a pretty good detective in my time.”

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance. “We’re not coming up with anything on our own, so maybe you can.”

“Great!” Harry stood next to Jo. “So I see you … ahhh ... ahhh ... *achoo!*”

Harry doubled over with the force of his sneeze, grabbing onto the desk and knocking the pile of mail onto the floor.

“So you *are* allergic to Lucy,” Sam said.

“No. He didn’t sneeze when he was near Lucy.” Jo pointed to the orange hairs on her jeans. “It must be the cat hair from the cat from my porch. She was rubbing against my leg earlier.”

Harry pulled a linen hanky from his breast pocket and blew his nose loudly. “That’s right. Doc says I’m pretty allergic to cat dander. Glad I’m not allergic to Lucy, though.”

Sam bent to pick up the mail.

Harry knelt to help him, his knees creaking and popping. “Dang stuff piles up when you don’t tend to it. Why, when me and the missus go to Florida, sometimes they don’t stop the mail in time. When we get home, we have a whole pile of it. Never gets to us in Florida.”

Sam stood, looking at the letter in his hand. “Wait a minute. The mail.” He spun around to face Harry. “You sneezed in here the other day.”

“Yeah, so?”

Sam closed his eyes, picturing who had been in the lobby that morning. Wyatt, Reese, Harry, Kevin, and Alvin Ray, the postman. Harry had come in between Wyatt and Alvin. “Does Wyatt have a cat?”

They all looked at each other. Kevin spoke first. “I’m not sure, but I don’t think so. He mentioned he liked having Lucy around and was thinking it might be nice to have a pet. The way he was talking, it sounded as if he didn’t have any type of pet.”

“I thought so,” Sam said. “What about Alvin Ray, the postman? Anyone know about him? Harry?”

Harry shook his head. “I don’t know. Why are you asking?”

“You sneezed the other day when you were next to Alvin and Wyatt. Lucy was there too. I thought it was because you were allergic to her. But

you never sneezed around her before, and you didn't sneeze around her just now."

"I'm fine around dogs. I'm allergic to cat dander," Harry said. "But Jo has a cat. That's why I just sneezed. What's my sneezing got to do with anything?"

Jo shook her head. "I wasn't in the lobby with you guys. I was in the squad room. I remember hearing you all blabbing while I was waiting for you to come in so we could get to work. Besides, the stray cat didn't rub against me that day. He only started coming up on the porch a couple of days ago."

"Reese doesn't have a cat. Sam doesn't have a cat. So if it's not Lucy or Wyatt, then it has to be Alvin Ray who made you sneeze. He must have a cat."

Harry knit his brow. "Okay. Still don't see why that's important, but I don't know about that. That guy is so meticulous about his uniforms. Did you ever notice they are always perfectly pressed? He takes great pride in the way he looks."

"Why does he wear those grungy old sneakers, then?" Kevin asked.

"Sneakers? He usually wears dress shoes. They're always polished to a spit shine," Harry said.

"Not the other day. His sneakers squeaked on the marble in the lobby. That noise sets my teeth on edge." Kevin looked down at his own feet, and his eyes narrowed. "Unless something was wrong with his regular shoes. Mine were ruined from the pigeon droppings in the mill where we found Dupont's body. That stuff doesn't come off, and it eats away at the shine."

Sam held up the mail. "And Alvin Ray delivers mail to every house in town. That explains why Scott Elliott didn't have mail at his house."

"I'm not following you on that one," Jo said.

"We thought maybe the fact that the trash hadn't been picked up at Elliott's house pointed to Forest Duncan because he didn't bother to pick up the trash. But that wasn't it at all. If Alvin Ray is the killer, he'd have known there was no reason to deliver mail to Scott Elliott's place because he was already dead."

"Well, it does seem like a lot of things point to Alvin," Harry said. "But what's this business about a cat?"

"Forensics found a cat hair in the gun used to kill Dupont." Sam grabbed his keys. "We need to get over to Alvin Ray's to see if he has a cat.

If he does, we need a sample of the hair."

They followed Sam out of the office, Sam giving instructions as they walked toward the front door. "Kevin, you take a separate car. Jo and I will go in and talk to Alvin. You wait around back in case he makes a run for it."

"What about me?" Harry asked. Sam turned to face him. "Harry, I need you to stay here and watch Lucy. This could get dangerous. And Lucy hates cats. I don't want her running around and getting hurt out there."

Harry's face fell in disappointment. "What? I can help."

"Not this time, Harry," Sam called over his shoulder as he rushed out the door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

"Now remember, whatever happens, we need this guy alive so he can testify against Thorne if he's involved," Sam said as they pulled up in front of Alvin Ray's modest Cape Cod.

Jo had looked up the address en route. Kevin had parked on the street behind the house so Alvin wouldn't get spooked by two cars. The plan was for Kevin to cut through the yard of the adjacent house to provide backup if needed. They hoped to verify Alvin had a cat and secure a hair sample as unobtrusively as possible. Sam figured that would be easy. Cats shed all the time. All he had to do was pet the damn thing, and he'd have a sample. Then if it matched the one found in the gun, they'd pull Alvin into the station, hopefully for good.

"It doesn't look like he has much drug money," Jo said. The white house and black shutters were freshly painted. Colorful flowers spilled out of flower beds along the front. Not a blade of grass was out of place. It was kept nice but still didn't have anything that exuded money.

"Looks can be deceiving. Let's pretend this is a friendly call and hope he falls for it. We only need to see if he has a cat. If we can match the hair to the one found inside the gun, we'll have substantial proof to pull him in."

Sam grabbed the brass door knocker and tapped it against the red front door. After a few seconds, the door cracked, and Alvin Ray peered out.

He frowned when he recognized who was standing on his doorstep. "What is it?"

"We just have a few questions," Sam said.

Alvin looked uncertain. "It's kind of late."

“I apologize for that, but we’re working overtime on the Dupont case. It’s pretty important that we find the mayor’s killer,” Sam said.

“And you think I can help with that?”

“Why don’t you let us in, and we’ll talk about it?” Sam didn’t like the way Alvin was acting. Was it because he was guilty, or was he just nervous about the cops showing up at his door? Whatever the reason, it made Sam tense.

“I was just on my way out,” Alvin said.

“Really? Where to?” Jo asked.

“Dinner. So if you can come back tomorrow ...”

“It will only take a minute,” Sam persisted. Alvin stared at them for a few beats then opened the door. “Fine. Come in.”

Alvin’s place was decked out with the finest furnishings. Granite counters, a huge flat-screen television, and leather furniture.

“Nice place. I didn’t realize the postmaster’s salary was so high,” Sam said.

“I save. I don’t spend much.” Alvin sidled toward an oak sideboard.

“I see ...”

Meow.

Sam’s heart skipped as a long black cat slunk into the room and curled against Alvin’s leg. Sam glanced at Jo, and they both tensed, their hands hovering around the guns at their hips. “That your cat?” Sam asked.

Alvin’s eyes narrowed. “Yeah. So?”

Sam’s eyes drifted to the coffee table, where a new shoebox sat. “Something happen to your shoes?”

Alvin didn’t answer. Instead, he whipped open the drawer of the sideboard, pulled out a gun, and jabbed it in Jo’s direction. “Why did you people have to come here and be so nosy? Now I have to change my plan.”

“Plan?” Sam’s hand hovered near his gun, but he couldn’t draw. Alvin was already pointing his gun at Jo. If he made a move for his gun, Alvin would shoot her.

“Don’t you even think about it,” Alvin warned, his eyes narrowing on Sam’s hand.

Sam moved his hand away. Better keep Alvin talking. “Why’d you kill Dupont?”

“I had my orders.” Alvin laughed. “That’s right. We’re one step ahead of you and about to take you down.”

“But why leave the gun at the scene?” Sam asked.

“I knew you wouldn’t be able to stop yourself from tampering with the crime scene.” Alvin’s eyes glinted. The man was clearly unhinged. “Were you trying to make it look like a suicide? Yeah, I figured you’d try to obscure evidence and eventually dig your own grave by creating evidence against yourself.”

Sam caught a movement out of the corner of his eye. It was Kevin outside the window. Hopefully, he’d seen the situation they were in. If it were Sam out there, he’d go around back, pray that the back door was unlocked, and sneak up behind Alvin, whose back was to the kitchen. Hopefully, Kevin would do the same.

“And what about Scott Elliott?” Sam needed to keep Alvin talking, distracting him in case Kevin did sneak in the back as he hoped.

Alvin scoffed. “That candy ass? He got nervous, and I had to stop him from talking.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked. “Did he run when you shot Dupont? We found his print in the woods.”

“Nah, he didn’t run. We came to the mill in separate cars in case any of those busybody neighbors saw anything. We figured the more cars, the better to make it more confusing. His car was parked down the dirt road at the end of the path. Mine was on Bartlett Street. We came in through the woods and snuck out the same way.”

“So you pulled the trigger and took the evidence on Thorne that Dupont had,” Sam said.

“Then I left the gun to frame you. I saw you moved it when I noticed the photos at the police station. I figured you would. How stupid.”

“What about Tyler Richardson? Did you kill him too?”

“Yeah, that stupid Scott Elliott got real nervous about that one too.” Alvin was almost boasting now. “But Richardson had to be dealt with. He was causing a problem for the big guy.”

“Thorne?” Sam asked.

“Maybe. Maybe *I’m* the big guy. Enough talk. Now I need to figure out how to stage this.”

“Stage?”

“Yeah. You guys were trying to frame me for Dupont’s murder. See, you and Sergeant Harris here killed him. You were all dealing drugs together,

along with Tyler Richardson. Corruption in the police ranks. Wouldn't be the first time."

The back door cracked open silently. Kevin slipped inside and tiptoed toward Alvin, his gun leveled at the postmaster's head.

Sam held up his hands. "Now hold on. You don't have to do this. If you tell us everything you know about Thorne, we'll see that you get protection. New name. New job. And you'll go free."

Alvin laughed. "You think I'm going to fall for that? Nope. I have to shoot Officer Harris here and then shoot you with her gun. Make it look like there was some kind of a disagreement between the two of you when you came over to frame me. She shot at you, and I had to shoot her to protect you. Too bad her shot was fatal."

"I don't think so, Alvin. Put the gun down."

Alvin Ray barely flinched when Kevin spoke behind him. He turned just enough to see Kevin holding a gun pointed straight at his head.

"Oh, a third one. Perfect. Now what if you two were in cahoots and the third one found out? Yep. And what if there was a shootout but not because of me? Because one of you found out the other two were working for the bad guys. He'd have to be silenced, right? It wouldn't be too bad if you all ended up dead, especially with each other's guns. Then there'd be no story to believe but mine."

Sam's gut churned. Alvin was crazy if he thought he could pull that off. But the look in his eye told Sam he just might be crazy. "No one will believe that."

"Oh no?" Alvin scoffed. "Just ask Detective Deckard here."

The statement surprised Sam, and he glanced at Kevin. What was Alvin talking about? He was probably trying to confuse him.

"Yeah, that's right. Well, enough talk. Time for Officer Harris to die." Alvin jabbed the gun straight toward Jo, aiming high at the center of her forehead. Sam's heart skipped, his eyes focusing on Alvin's trigger finger.

Sam reached for his own gun. He had no choice. He couldn't let Alvin shoot Jo.

Behind Sam, something crashed through the window. Glass rained down on the floor as a blur of black and brown catapulted between Jo and the gun.

"No!" Kevin lunged between Lucy and Alvin.

Sam's eyes were still glued to Alvin's finger as he brought his own gun up.

Alvin squeezed the trigger as Sam fired at Alvin.

The two gunshots exploded at almost exactly the same time.

THE IMPACT KNOCKED Jo to the floor. Time seemed to both slow down and speed up. Her ears rang from the blasts, deafening her to everything else. The air was spiced with the heavy scent of gunpowder and the coppery smell of blood.

Was she hit? No. She felt no pain, but something heavy lay on her.

She reached down, and her hands sank into soft fur.

Lucy!

The last thing she remembered was Lucy jumping in front of the barrel of Alvin Ray's gun. Was Lucy hit?

The dog scrambled off her, and Jo looked her over quickly. She appeared to be fine. Then her eyes fell on what lay beyond Lucy. Kevin lay unmoving, a pool of blood spreading beneath him.

"Shit!" Jo raced to Kevin's side and looked for the wound.

Her eyes darted around the room, catching Sam's. He crouched in front of Alvin, his fingertips pressed to the postman's throat. Their eyes locked. Sam shook his head slowly and reached for his phone.

Jo focused on Kevin as she heard Sam call 911. Kevin didn't move. She pressed on the wound in his neck to stop the blood flow.

"Stay with me, buddy," Jo said.

Kevin's eyes fluttered, and his mouth moved as if he wanted to say something, but no words came out. His hand faltered toward his pocket. "Don't move. Just focus on staying alive." Jo pressed on the wound harder, and Kevin's eyes stopped fluttering.

How had he gotten hit? A whine from Lucy brought her memory back. Lucy had crashed through the window between Jo and Alvin. Kevin had jumped in front of the gun to save her and Lucy from getting hit.

As the ambulance sirens split the air, Sam rushed to Jo's side, feeling for Kevin's pulse. "It's faint."

"Oh no." Harry stood above them.

Sam looked at him sharply. “I told you to stay at the station with Lucy.”

“I’m sorry, Sam. I just thought maybe I could help out. And now look what’s happened. I’ve ruined everything.”

Harry fell to his knees to help with the compression. He nudged Jo gently out of the way. “Press like this. I learned it while I was in the Marines.”

While they waited for the ambulance to arrive, Jo felt the weight of all that had happened. Everything they’d worked for had been for nothing. Alvin wouldn’t be able to tell them anything about Thorne, and if her guess was right, Thorne had been smart enough to not have any links linking him to the murder or to Alvin. They’d look, but she doubted they’d find anything.

Kevin was bleeding too rapidly.

As if sensing the gravity of the situation, Lucy had remained off to the side. She inched forward, resting her head on Kevin’s thigh, careful to stay out of their way. She whined and looked up at Kevin, her whiskey-brown eyes darting from his face to Jo’s.

Jo hoped Kevin wasn’t beyond feeling the comfort of Lucy’s head on his leg.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Three days later…

"I'M TRULY sorry about Officer Deckard." Bev Hatch's face was creased with genuine concern. "How's his outlook?"

"Not good, I'm afraid." Sam's voice was scratchy. Jo glanced up at his haggard face. She guessed she didn't look much better. Between processing paperwork, searching Alvin Ray's place for evidence against Thorne, and late-night vigils at the hospital, neither of them had gotten much sleep.

"He's still in a coma. Doctor said he lost a lot of blood and has minimal brain function."

"You guys could have called me in," Wyatt said from his desk at the other end of the room. He'd been standoffish since that night at Alvin Ray's. Jo wasn't exactly sure why.

"We didn't think there would be any reason for backup. We were just going to talk to him," Sam said.

"Yeah, I get that. But I keep thinking maybe having an extra officer would have prevented one of them from getting shot." Wyatt glanced from Sam to Jo then sighed. "Can't change that now, I guess."

Jo got the impression he was studying them, trying to figure something out. She was overtired and probably reading more into it, but it almost seemed as if he sensed there was more to these cases than they were letting on. Rightly so, because there *was* more. Maybe Wyatt was more perceptive than she had originally thought.

Jo felt huge relief that they'd tied up both Tyler's and Dupont's murders. That meant they wouldn't have to keep covering for the things they'd done. Even though those things were done with good intent, she still didn't like hiding them.

Now there'd be nothing to keep secret. Well, except for Tyler's box, but no one needed to know about that. They could keep that secret safe and still close his case now that everything had come out about Scott Elliott. His fingerprints in the car at Tyler's murder scene and Alvin Ray's confession of how they'd killed Tyler would allow them to close the case.

Everyone was silent for a moment before Bev spoke again. "At least we were able to get the evidence on Alvin. The cat hair was a match. We got it off one of the cat beds. Never did find the cat."

"Probably got spooked by the gunshots and ran off. It's a hollow victory, because I'm sure Ray could have given up more information on Thorne. At least we can prove he was delivering drugs, especially with these mail bins." Sam gestured toward the plastic mail delivery bins they'd discovered in Ray's basement. All of them had false bottoms. That was how he'd been delivering the drugs—a little bit of mail on the top, drugs on the bottom. It was quite ingenious. Ray was the only full-time postal employee, so there was no one to discover he'd doctored the bins.

"But we didn't find anything that led to Thorne," Jo said. After everything that had gone down, not one shred of evidence had surfaced.

"Thorne might be a lot of things, but he's not stupid," Sam said.

"I know you guys think he's linked to this," Bev said. "And I have my suspicions as well. But all the evidence we've collected leads me to believe that it was Alvin Ray and Scott Elliott alone."

"Of course it does," Sam said.

"And now they're both dead and can't talk," Jo added.

"Well, at least we figured out who killed Dupont and Richardson. And I have to say it's been great working with you guys. I knew you were a good guy, Sam. I'm glad I was proved right." Bev shook hands with all of them.

"Congratulating yourselves, I see," Holden Joyce said as he strolled around the row of post office boxes.

"We caught the killer, so congratulations are in order," Bev said.

"I heard. But what about this big drug ring? Was it just two guys?" Holden taunted them.

Sam leveled a look at him. “I think you know it was more than two guys.”

“So where’s all the evidence?” Holden asked.

“Unfortunately, our biggest lead is dead, and the head honcho is smarter than we thought,” Bev said.

Holden’s eyes narrowed at Sam. “Maybe. Or maybe the police helped obscure some of the evidence. My gut still tells me there’s more going on in this police station than meets the eye.” He glanced around at all of them, his eyes stopping when they came to Jo. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of looking away, but she sensed some sort of meaning behind his look. Was it a threat? He moved on to Wyatt, and she let out a breath. “But I’ll give you this: you did catch the killer.”

“And Tyler Richardson’s killer,” Bev added.

“Yeah, about the Richardson case. There’re still a few discrepancies. Like the fake Fallen Officers Fund.” Holden quirked a brow at Sam.

“Oh no. You can’t go there,” Bev said. “I investigated that, and my forensic accountants determined that Chief Mason gave that money to Tyler’s mother out of the kindness of his heart. We followed the money trail. He took it from his retirement fund. Nothing nefarious there. She’d have been too proud to accept it otherwise.”

Holden made a face. “That may be so, but there’s also the matter of the forged logbook. Our handwriting expert analyzed it. We knew it wasn’t Tyler’s from the start, but now we know whose it was.”

“Who?” Bev asked.

“Officer Harris.” Holden turned to Jo again. “You know you can get suspended for that.”

“No,” Sam cut in. “She did that on my orders, so I’ll be the one suspended.”

Jo shot up from her desk. “I did that on my own because I didn’t want Tyler to have a black mark against his name.”

“Surely you can understand that,” Bev said. “Or have you never cared about any of your fellow officers’ reputations?”

Holden shrugged. “Sure, but where do you draw the line? It’s kind of like harassing people who aren’t suspects—like Forest Duncan.”

Sam stared at him. “We weren’t harassing. We’ve got to follow every lead. It turns out Duncan didn’t have a thing to do with Dupont’s murder.”

Jo and Sam had talked to Forest Duncan the day after the shooting. They pretended Tyler had told them about how he was working with him to set him at ease. After assuring him that anything he told them wouldn't leave their confidence and Thorne would never find out Forest had admitted that he'd been conducting surveillance on Thorne for Tyler. Unfortunately, he didn't have any evidence against Thorne, only against Scott Elliott.

But Sam and Jo had learned that Tyler hadn't betrayed their trust after all. He'd done what he had to do for his sister. Funny thing was, he wasn't the one tipping off Thorne either. Of course, they couldn't tell Holden or Bev or even Wyatt any of this.

"Don't be such a tight-ass, Holden. Let it go," Bev said.

Holden stared at her, his jaw tight. His eyes drifted to Jo again. "Maybe I will let this one go. I have bigger fish. Don't get too comfortable; you haven't seen the last of me." He gave them one last pointed glare and left.

"Ominous," Wyatt said.

"Overly dramatic," Sam added.

"Can't say I'd be sorry to see the last of him. I hope it's an idle threat." Bev stuffed her wide-brimmed hat on her head. "And on that note, I'll be on my way. It's been great working with you folks, but let's hope a case like this one doesn't necessitate working together again anytime soon."

As Bev walked around the post office boxes, Harry entered.

"Harry, good seeing you again," Bev said.

"You too, Sheriff." Harry smiled at Bev then stepped aside for her to pass. As she continued toward the front door, Harry turned toward them, his smile fading. "I came to apologize again. I really messed up."

"Don't be too hard on yourself, Harry," Sam said. "The EMTs said the compression technique you used on Kevin helped save his life."

"Wouldn't have needed saving if I hadn't messed up and gone there in the first place," Harry muttered. "How is Kevin? Will he ...?" Harry let his voice trail off.

"Don't know. He's unresponsive right now, but we're hoping for the best."

Harry bent down to pet Lucy. "I'm glad you're okay, girl."

"Yep. She escaped with only a few scratches on her nose," Jo said. "Her thick fur protected her."

"Did you get the evidence you needed against Thorne?" Harry asked.

"Didn't get that. But we'll keep trying. Kevin would want us to."

Harry nodded solemnly. “I came with an invitation for you, Sam.”

Sam’s left brow ticked up.

“Marnie Wilson wants to take you to lunch and congratulate you on arresting Dupont’s killer. She said she feels safer now knowing that when she becomes mayor, she’ll have a good man like you watching her back.”

Sam shook his head. “I didn’t do it by myself. Heck, I hardly did anything. It’s my team that deserves recognition.”

“Oh, well, I’m sure Marnie wouldn’t mind taking everyone to lunch.”

Wyatt stood from his desk. “You guys go ahead. I have to run out to Rita Hoelscher’s. Something about an altercation between Bitsy and Bullwinkle. You know how she is.” Wyatt rolled his eyes and headed toward the door.

“See if you can bring back some of that fruitcake!” Harry yelled after him. He turned to Jo. “Jo, what about you?”

The last thing she wanted to do was suffer through a lunch with Marnie Wilson. “No, you two go ahead. I’ll stay here and man the fort. Reese is in class all day, and Lucy would be lonely with no one here.”

“Well, Sam, I guess that leaves you and me.” Harry clapped Sam on the back.

Sam frowned at Jo, looking uncertain. Jo waved him on. “Go. Bring me back a burger or something.”

“Okay. Ketchup and mayo?” Sam asked.

“Yep.”

“Good. I have to make the most of this lunch,” Harry said as he walked with Sam toward the front door. “The wife has me on a short leash. She thinks I’m only having lunch with Marnie. She doesn’t want me hanging around here and getting into shootouts. Now she’s talking about going to Florida early this year, probably to get me away from here. It’s boring. Nothing but Rite Aids and grocery stores. Sitting on the beach all day, a man could grow old before his time down there.”

Jo watched them leave then turned to Lucy. “I guess it’s just you and me, girl.”

Lucy wagged her tail happily.

Jo glanced toward the town offices. Henley Jamison had been thrilled that they’d nailed Alvin Ray. Maybe too thrilled. He’d asked several times if they’d found evidence of any others in the drug ring and seemed quite pleased they hadn’t. Could he be working with Thorne, just as Dupont had?

If he was, Jo had a feeling that Jamison would know exactly what he was getting into, unlike Dupont, who had gotten in over his head and been killed for it. Jamison would be in the thick of things. Or maybe he was just a pompous ass.

Either way, it might not be so bad having Marnie Wilson in the mayor's office.

Still, there was something about Wilson that set Jo's nerves on edge. And it wasn't the gleam in her eye when she looked at Sam or the way that look made Jo's heart tug uncomfortably. Jo and Sam were just friends; she had no stake there. Why would she care if Marnie was interested in Sam?

Of course, Jo and Sam would still go after Thorne, no matter what. Thorne still had Mick's knife, and even though Alvin was dead, Jo doubted that would slow the drug trade in Coos County long. Sam had already said that if Thorne thought that threatening him with that knife would keep Sam from trying to nail him, he had another think coming. Sam and Mick hadn't done anything wrong twenty years ago, but Thorne had people in high places, and Jo wondered how he could twist the facts to make it look as though they had.

Jo's thoughts turned to Tyler's box, hidden at her house. The contents had answered a lot of their questions. But she couldn't stop thinking about the photo of the beech trees. She'd compared them to the ones from her sister's case, and they were a match. The police didn't think the trees were any indication of where the serial killer had buried his victims, but Jo had other thoughts. And the breaks on the branches of these trees looked fairly fresh, not nearly thirty years old.

Even so, she had no idea where those trees were. Maybe Forest Duncan would be able to shed some light on that, but she'd have to make a special trip to his place to ask him without Sam knowing.

No, that wasn't right. If she was going to investigate her sister's case again, she'd have to come clean with Sam. She'd have to tell him everything, because he'd told her everything about the knife and what had happened with his cousin. She owed it to him. If she didn't, it would drive a wedge between them, and their friendship would never recover. But that was only *if* she pursued the case.

She still wasn't sure. Maybe dredging up those memories of her sister and her relentless, obsessive pursuit of that case wasn't for the best. Sometimes you had to let things go.

Lucy trotted to the back door and sniffed vigorously at the crack in the bottom. She turned and looked at Jo, her lip curled.

"What is it? Is something out there?" Jo asked. She'd only seen Lucy curl her lip when there was a cat around.

Jo opened the door.

Meow.

A large, fluffy black cat, just like the one she'd seen at Alvin Ray's house, peered inside, its luminescent green eyes full of hope. It looked ragged and hungry and reminded Jo of the way Lucy used to look before they'd taken her in.

Lucy growled and looked up at Jo as if to say, "Get rid of it."

"Oh, come on, Lucy, can't you see he's hungry?" Now that Jo looked at the cat, she realized it probably was Alvin Ray's. They'd never seen the cat after that night, even though they'd been back to the house several times.

She'd been worried and had even left a dish of food out for it, but the food had never been eaten. If this was Alvin's cat, it was now homeless. Shouldn't she take it in and feed it and at least get it to the animal shelter? Living outdoors in northern New Hampshire was a hard life for a domestic cat, and any number of wild predators would make a meal of this guy.

Lucy pushed against the door with her nose, trying to shut it.

"Just one little snack?" Jo petted Lucy on the top of her head. "What would have happened if we didn't let you in?"

Lucy sighed and trotted to the opposite end of the squad room, where she plopped down, placed her head on her paws, and glared at them.

Jo felt guilty about the cat. It had been living a nice life until they'd shot up its living room and killed its owner. It was her responsibility to make sure the cat got to the animal shelter.

"Come on in." The cat tentatively stuck a few whiskers over the threshold of the door, and Jo glanced back at Lucy. She didn't look happy, but at least she was grudgingly accepting Jo's efforts to welcome the cat. "I think we have room for another furry friend in here … at least for a little while."

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This is a work of fiction.

None of it is real. All names, places, and events are products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real names, places, or events are purely coincidental, and should not be construed as being real.

BETRAYING TRUST

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A SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERY BOOK FIVE

KILLING DREAMS

L.A. DOBBS

CHAPTER ONE

Sam Mason's phone pinged for the third time as he pulled the White Rock Police Department Tahoe into the dirt driveway that led to the ramshackle farmhouse where Frank Buckner had lived for most of his eighty-five years.

He glanced down at the phone display as he slowed at the beginning of the long driveway, a knot forming between his shoulder blades as he read the texts. Two were from Harry Woolston, who wanted to stop by the station. The third was from his dispatcher, Reese Hordon, informing him that the brother of one of his officers was coming to drop off some things he'd found that might belong to the police.

At least Reese had used the phone instead of that dispatch system she'd talked him into installing in the car. Sam glanced down at the mic hanging under the dash. Most police departments had used these for years, but in a town as small as White Rock a computerized dispatch system was hardly necessary. Still, Reese had somehow gotten funding for one, and she claimed it would be easier and more efficient because he could answer while driving instead of having to pull his phone out. Sam hated the thing. All it did was squawk static. Plus, it was a change from their normal routine, and Sam was finding that the older he got, the less he liked change.

Sam coasted to a stop and picked up the phone to reply to both. Harry Woolston had once been chief of police of their small northern New Hampshire town, the same position Sam now held. Though Harry's tenure had ended decades ago, that didn't stop him from popping into the station and trying to insinuate himself into Sam's cases.

Sam understood that Harry was bored with retirement and wanted to reminisce about his glory days. That part Sam didn't mind, but Harry's insistence at getting involved was getting out of hand. In fact, one could argue that Harry's involvement and not listening to Sam's orders was what had caused officer Kevin Deckard's near-fatal shooting.

Harry was in a bad place right now. He blamed himself for the shooting that had resulted in Kevin's coma. Unfortunately, that meant Harry felt compelled to come to the station even more often in an attempt to assuage his guilt. Sam knew he should tell Harry to stay away, but he didn't have the heart.

It had been two weeks since the incident, and Kevin's prognosis was uncertain. The doctors said time would tell. Kevin's brother had flown in from California, and Sam wanted to make sure they gave that the importance it was due. Kevin was a good cop, and he wanted his family to have some peace while they were hoping for him to recover.

So many things to do already and it was only ten past eight in the morning. Sam should have passed this quirky call off to a junior officer, but Frank Buckner had been a friend of his grandfather's and he felt duty-bound to take care of this personally—even if Frank's claim of his dog finding a dinosaur bone was a bit preposterous.

A whine from the back seat caught his attention, and Sam turned to see his German shepherd mix police K9, Lucy, lying down, her chin on her paws as if she felt the same way Sam did.

"I know, girl, it's crazy right?"

Lucy's brows lifted over golden-brown eyes as if in agreement.

"We'll just go see what Frank has. Let him down easy." Sam took his foot off the brake and drove the rest of the way down the driveway.

The late summer nights were starting to get cooler, but the mornings were still glorious, with sunshine warming the air and sparkling off the dew on the grass. Birds flew between tree branches, and squirrels were busy gathering acorns to store for winter.

Frank sat in a wooden rocking chair on his porch, wearing a blue flannel shirt. Steam rose from a mug cupped in his weathered hands. Sam's heart squeezed with a pang of loneliness for his grandfather. They'd been close, and Gramps had been gone only a few years. He missed him still. All the more reason to treat Frank with personal attention and respect.

Frank's face cracked into a welcome smile as he recognized the Tahoe. He put the mug down and slowly rose from the chair. Sam could practically hear his bones creaking.

They met halfway between the car and the porch and shook hands. Frank's grip was as strong as a 25-year-old's. His blue eyes danced with excitement.

"It's the darnedest thing, Sam. I never seen nothing like it." Frank ran a hand through his thick white hair. "I think it might be from some kind of dinosaur. Maybe it will even get in the museum."

"Maybe." Sam hated to dash the old guy's hopes, but he didn't want to encourage him either. As far as he knew, no dinosaur bones had been found this far north. Most likely it was a bone from a moose.

Frank's knees popped as he crouched down to pet Lucy. "Nothing like that's been found up here before, right?"

"I don't recall any dinosaur bones being found here, but let's not get too excited until we figure out what it really is." Sam looked over Frank's shoulder toward the porch. "So where is it?"

Frank stood, some of his excitement fading. "Well now, that's the thing. I haven't been able to get it away from Ranger. He must realize it's a rare find and doesn't want to part with it." Frank jerked his head toward the side of the house. "He's out back guarding it like it's a brick of gold."

Lucy glanced toward the side of the house and whined, then looked up at Sam.

"So, you haven't really seen all of this bone yet?" Sam asked.

"Well, not the whole thing, but it's got a big knobby end." Frank held his hands about a foot apart, then moved them a little closer, his expression now uncertain. "At least it seems big. I mean, it's bigger than the bones Ranger usually finds. Looks long, too. Much bigger than the meat bones I get from the butcher."

Sam nodded. "Okay, let's go take a look."

Frank led the way to the backyard, Lucy trotting at his heels and glancing up at Sam to make sure he followed. As they rounded the corner of the house, Sam scanned the yard. He spotted Ranger, Frank's oversized Rottweiler, lying next to the back steps, the unmistakable ivory color of a bone cradled in his paws. Most of the bone was hidden because his chin rested on it. The hairs on the back of Sam's neck tingled. It didn't look like a dinosaur bone, but it didn't look like a moose bone, either.

Lucy stopped a few feet from Ranger, her ears straight up, her gaze riveted on the other dog. Ranger looked at Lucy warily. His lip curled, and he let out a low growl. Lucy looked at Sam, and Sam shook his head. No sense in getting into a dogfight over a bone.

Frank sidled over to Ranger, who glanced up at him with an apologetic look, as if he knew he was doing something wrong but wasn't about to give up the bone. "You're a good boy, Ranger. Now show your treasure to the nice policeman here."

Ranger's eyes flicked to Sam, and he nuzzled the bone deeper under his chest.

Lucy moved closer, getting between Sam and the dog and earning another growl from Ranger.

Frank cast Sam a sheepish look. "I'm sorry, Sam. He's usually very obedient." More knee popping as Frank squatted next to his dog. "Come on, buddy, we want to get a look at this bone. Could make us famous, you know."

Ranger looked as if he was considering his options. Frank extended his hand, and the Rottweiler eyed it dubiously.

Frank pushed further. "Come on, boy, you know you can trust me."

Ranger sighed, cast Lucy a suspicious look, and then turned loving, trustful eyes on Frank as he lifted his head off the bone.

"Good boy." Frank scratched Ranger's chest, then reached in and pulled the bone from between his paws.

He stood holding the bone out to Sam. "See, what did I tell you? That ain't no deer bone. Too big and not shaped right." His gaze narrowed with uncertainty. "It's a lot smaller than I thought it was. Maybe a small dinosaur? What do you think, Sam? Maybe there're some tar pits up there or something. We should look for the rest of the bones."

Sam stared at the bone. Frank was right about one thing; it wasn't an animal bone. Frank was probably too invested in his earlier hopes that he'd made a rare discovery to realize the bone was a femur. From a *human*. And Frank was right about another thing, too. The rest of the bones were out there somewhere, and now Sam had the unenviable task of not only finding them but also figuring out who they'd belonged to and how they'd ended up here.

CHAPTER TWO

"I've already checked all the files. A hiker was reported missing a few years back up on Dixon Notch." Wyatt Davis rattled off the details of the missing hiker as he followed Sam through the old-fashioned lobby of the police station into his office.

Sam had called back to the station as soon as he'd gotten back in the Tahoe with news of the bone, and his small team had sprung into action. Wyatt was fairly new to the department, but Sam liked the way he took initiative. He was going to be a good addition to the team and much needed, especially because they were down one officer with Kevin still in the hospital.

Sam put the bone, which he'd wrapped in a towel, on his desk. He'd have to call John Dudley, the county medical examiner, and have him take it to the morgue. But right now he had a search to organize.

Wyatt eyed the towel. "The hiker was reported missing two years ago. How long do you think that bone has been out there?"

"Hard to tell. If animals got at it, they would have picked it clean and left the bone to the elements…" Sam let his voice trail off at the gruesome thought. He'd seen some chew marks on the bone. There'd been no meat left on the bone, and he wasn't exactly an expert on dating old bones.

Lucy, who had lingered at the reception desk to score a treat from Reese, padded in and scanned the office warily. Probably looking for the stray cat that had shown up at the back door a few weeks ago. Sam suspected the cat had belonged to their latest offender, a cold-blooded murderer who had been killed when he'd pulled a gun on them during his

arrest. If the cat was his, then it was now homeless, and Sam didn't have the heart to kick it out even though the cat and Lucy seemed to be at odds.

"Don't worry, she's not in here," Wyatt assured Lucy.

Lucy cast one look at the towel on Sam's desk, then flopped down in a patch of sunlight beneath the tall arched windows that overlooked Main Street.

Stately oaks and maples lined Main Street, and the morning sun beamed through their thick leaves, causing dapples of sunlight to dance on the sidewalks. People strolled the street where the shops were just starting to open. Kids tossed a Frisbee on the grass in the commons. Just like any other day in a peaceful New England town, people went about their business not knowing that the remains of a body long lost lay hidden in the woods. Somewhere a family was waiting for this person to come home. It was Sam's job to do that, a job he took very seriously.

"Any runaways or other missing persons in the area?" Sam asked.

"I only searched a few years back and in this county. I'll expand the search. Would help if we could narrow down a timeline."

"Hopefully John can help with that. In the meantime we need to get out there and start searching. I can call in the Staties. Maybe Bev Hatch has some people she can lend, but I don't want to wait. Where's Jo?" Sam glanced back through the door into the bullpen of the police station for his second in command, Jody Harris.

"She went up to Nettie Deardorff's. Apparently Bitsy ate her petunias."

Sam smiled. There had been an ongoing feud between Nettie Deardorff and Rita Hoelscher. Most of the complaints came from Nettie, who claimed Rita's goat, Bitsy, was damaging her property. Recently Nettie had adopted a chicken, and Sam thought it was mostly to get back at Rita. The two elderly women had been feuding as far back as Sam could remember, and he suspected their differences went much deeper than the goat.

Even though their calls usually amounted to nothing, it was important in a small town like White Rock to go out and smooth things over. He wondered how long Jo would be out there. Jo was his most trusted officer, and the two had forged a bond that went beyond working together as cops. Jo knew Sam's secrets. He knew she had his back. And he had hers, though sometimes he wondered if she was as forthcoming with her secrets as he had been with his. But today they had an important search to conduct, and while he wanted Jo's input on organizing it, he wasn't going to wait.

“She can join us later. I want to get out to the woods as soon as possible. Frank said he’d take Ranger out. Thinks the dog can lead us to the spot.” Sam opened the paneled oak door to the small closet in his office.

The police station occupied the old post office and hadn’t been updated since the 1930s. Not that Sam minded. He much preferred the honey-golden oak doors and scarred wide pine flooring to the newer building’s indoor-outdoor carpet, beige walls, and steel desks. This place had character from the floor-to-ceiling windows with their intricately carved moldings to the antique brass post office boxes with their beveled glass panels and eagle motif that now served as a divider between the reception area and the squad room.

He grabbed a lime-green police vest and tossed it to Wyatt, then pulled one out for himself.

“Harry’s on his way here.” Sam turned to see Reese standing in the doorway. Her brows were raised over wide blue eyes as if questioning whether or not she should let Harry in. “And Kevin’s brother will be here in thirty minutes.”

Damn! Sam had been so focused on the bone recovery he’d forgotten all about Harry and Kevin’s brother. He didn’t want to put Kevin’s brother off. He knew how important it was for the family members to get answers when an officer had been shot in the line of duty. But the responsibility of finding the rest of the bones and discovering the identity of the person weighed on him. He’d have to leave word for Jo to meet with Kevin’s brother. Jo had worked closely with Kevin and knew him as well as Sam.

“Thanks. I want to get on this search as quickly as possible. When Jo comes back can you have her wait for Kevin’s brother and then join us at the search site as soon as she’s done?”

“No problem.”

Sam bent down and grabbed a pair of hiking boots from the closet, speaking over his shoulder to Reese. “And tell Harry that…”

“Tell Harry what?” Harry Woolston appeared in the doorway beside Reese, looking at them curiously with intelligent blue eyes. He was thin and spry, his white cotton puff of hair contrasting with Reese’s jet black locks as the two of them stood side by side. “Is something going on?”

Sam sat in his chair, toed his black shoes off, and started tugging the boots on. “Sorry, Harry. Frank Buckner found some bones out in the woods behind his place.”

“Human bones?”

“Yep. We’re going to find the rest of them.”

“Oh, I see.” Harry scratched his chin. “Old Bucky, huh? You sure you can trust what he says? He can be a little fanciful.”

“Went out there and took a look myself.” Sam gestured to the lump under the towel, and Harry’s eyes widened.

“Ahh, that seems important. I just came by to see if you wouldn’t mind a late lunch with Marnie Wilson.”

“I think I’ll be kind of busy today, Harry.”

“Yeah, yeah. I see that. But you know Marnie really wants to help out and wants to get your take on a few things.” Marnie Wilson was Harry’s favorite candidate for mayor. Sam didn’t really know her well, but Harry had been pushing hard for his approval. Not that he had to push that hard; the current mayor was no prize and pretty much anyone would be better.

“Maybe some other time.”

“Yeah, see, her schedule is real busy and it would be a big personal favor. She has an opening later this afternoon and…”

Sam was barely listening as he laced his boot and mentally went over the list of things he’d need for the search. Orange vest for Lucy. Bug spray. Evidence bags and gloves. Flashlight. Lucy’s leash… now where was that?

Sam pulled his bottom desk drawer open. Not in there. He opened the one above. He hardly ever used Lucy’s leash because she was trained to stay by his side, but he wanted it just in case they ran into anything she shouldn’t get into out in the woods.

“It would mean a lot to me, I’d consider it a big personal favor, but if you’re busy…”

Sam’s heart hitched at the dejection in Harry’s voice. Even though Harry could be a pain, the truth was he had helped in several investigations. Sam didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but the search was a priority.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be searching,” Sam said. The leash was in the middle desk drawer. He pulled it out and looked toward Lucy. Wyatt had found her vest and was putting it on her.

“Good. Then you might still be able to go. I mean, if you find what you’re looking for. I’m sure she won’t mind if you’re busy. I’ll let her know what’s going on and she can swing by. If you’re here, good; if not, no big deal.”

“Okay, fine.” Sam was pretty sure he wouldn’t be there. If Marnie Wilson wanted to waste her time swinging by an empty police station, that wasn’t his problem.

“Good.” Harry turned to leave. “Good luck out there. I’d offer to help but…”

“Don’t worry. We have Lucy. She’ll find what we’re looking for.”

Lucy’s ears perked up as if she’d understood his words.

“Then I’ll see you later.” Harry left.

Sam pulled his flashlight from the drawer, stood and shrugged into his vest. “Reese, can you call Bev Hatch and find out if she can join us? I’ll let her know the location when we get there.”

“Will do.” Reese turned and headed back to her desk.

Sam looked at Wyatt. “Ready?”

“Yep.”

“We’ll take the Tahoe.” Sam had a supply of gloves and evidence bags in the vehicle.

Lucy trotted to the door and waited for them.

Out in the bullpen, the cat sat on top of a filing cabinet, its paws tucked underneath, jet black fluffy hair puffed out all around it. It stared at them with ominous green eyes. Lucy gave the cabinet a wide berth, but that didn’t stop the cat from hissing.

As they jumped in the Tahoe and drove back toward Frank’s, Sam couldn’t shake the feeling that what he was about to find in the woods would not be what he expected.

CHAPTER THREE

Sergeant Jody Harris eyed the white bakery bag on Reese's desk in the station's reception area. She could really go for a jelly doughnut right now, but the snug fit of the belt around her normally slim hips gave her pause. Maybe she should lay off the sweets for a while. She was pushing forty now and couldn't pack them away like she used to.

"Sam and Wyatt took off to search the woods to find the rest of the bones." Reese barely looked up from her typing.

Jo tore her eyes from the bag and frowned at Reese. "Bones?"

Jo had just returned to the station after a grueling hour of trying to settle the latest argument between Rita and Nettie. She'd finally gotten them to shake hands when Rita promised to buy a new flat of petunias and plant them. When she'd left, Rita was breaking out the fruitcake, and they were sitting down to tea.

She hadn't heard anything about any bones. What was Reese talking about?

Reese stopped typing, leaned her elbows on the desk, and looked at Jo. "Yeah, if you turned on your police radio you might have heard about it."

Oh, that. Jo wasn't used to having a dispatch radio installed in the Crown Vic—one of two official police cars the town owned. She kept forgetting to turn it on.

"Anyway," Reese sighed and pushed the bag of doughnuts toward Jo. "Turns out Frank Buckner's dog dug up a bone in the woods. A human bone."

Something in the back of Jo's mind stood at attention; her frown deepened. "A human bone?"

"Yep. A femur. You just missed them. They took Lucy to try to locate more bones." Reese nudged the white bag closer and Jo shook her head. Reese lifted her brow and shrugged before pulling a chocolate cruller from the bag. "He's going to text me the coordinates so you can join them. Bev Hatch is on her way. She mentioned something about notifying the state police."

Jo's mind reeled. Human bones in the woods were bad enough, but Jo had a personal reason to be concerned — the *real* reason she'd come to White Rock in the first place.

Images of her kid sister, Tammy, flashed in her head. She didn't have many, because her sister had been abducted when she was eight years old. Jo had been ten, but memories of that time cut deep.

Her family had been torn apart by the subsequent futile search for the person who had taken her. The police assumed it was a serial killer. They'd captured someone who they *thought* had done it, but they'd never recovered any trace of her sister, and he'd never admitted to taking Tammy. Jo had been haunted by not knowing.

That haunting was what had sent her into law enforcement and what had eventually brought her to White Rock. After decades of investigating privately, she'd been led to this area when she'd gotten a tip that trees with certain markings—signs she suspected were connected to Tammy's killer—had been found in this area. She'd never found those trees, though, other than in a few grainy photographs connected to another case and whose locations were unidentifiable. After five years here, she'd finally decided to let go of the investigation, put it away, and move on with her life.

And now this? Could this be what she'd been looking for the whole time?

"Earth to Jo…" Reese was staring at her. She tipped the open bakery bag in her direction. "You spaced out. I think you need a doughnut to keep your blood sugar up."

Jo peered in. No jelly? Darn it. She picked a honey-dipped doughnut and absently tore off a small bite. Of course Reese would have no idea why she was acting so weird. She'd never told anyone about her sister, not even Sam. That could present a big problem now if this bone was connected.

Jo stuffed another bite in her mouth and talked around it. “Any idea how old the person was or how long the bone had been there?”

Reese shrugged and munched the cruller. “John just came and got it. Said it’s probably an adult and has been out there maybe a few years. He’ll have to examine it closer. Wyatt thinks it might be a hiker who got lost two years ago.”

The tension in Jo’s shoulders eased. She glanced out the window toward the rolling blue mountains in the distance. That could be it. Simply a hiker who got lost. This northern town near the border of Canada with its unspoiled forests, pristine lakes, and ranges of mountains was a mecca for hikers. But the forests could turn unfriendly in an instant. Hikers got lost, and once you were in deep, those lacking the proper equipment could find it nearly impossible to get out.

“What did Sam say? Does he think the bone is that old?”

Jo swallowed, the doughnut tasting like sawdust at the thought of Sam. He’d become more than just a partner over the years. They had built up a bond. Sam had shared his secrets with her; why hadn’t she shared hers with him?

She’d wanted to, but it seemed there had never been the right time. She felt guilty that her whole reason for hiring on here had been to further her personal investigation into her sister’s disappearance. At first that hadn’t mattered, but that was before she had gotten to know her squad mates.

The longer she’d worked here, the more the place had grown on her. And Sam, too. Their friendship meant a lot to her, and she didn’t want to risk it for anything. Even though they were *just* friends, she couldn’t bear the thought of not working with him every day. Sam would be hurt if he knew she’d been holding back on her sister’s case. She needed to tell him soon, even if this bone wasn’t related.

Jo shoved the rest of the doughnut in her mouth and brushed the crumbs from her hands. “I need to get out there.”

“Not right now. If you’d had your radio on, you’d know that you have to meet with Kevin’s brother in ten minutes.”

“Kevin’s brother is coming here?” She really needed to get in the habit of turning on that radio.

“Yeah. He wants to talk about what happened and drop off a few things. Some thumb drive and Kevin’s badge.”

Darn! Jo couldn't put it off, especially because Kevin had taken the bullet meant for Lucy. The bones would have to wait.

"Sam will let me know the coordinates and you can join them when you are done." Reese went back to her typing.

"Okay, thanks."

Jo headed to the coffee machine and grabbed a K-cup and her yellow smiley face mug. At least this would give her a chance to load up on caffeine. She'd need it if she was going to help search for bones in the woods.

With the mug full, she headed toward her desk when…

Hiss!

Something sharp snagged the collar of her shirt.

"Ouch!" She turned to find the fluffy black cat sitting atop the filing cabinet, looking at her with faux innocence in its alien-like green eyes.

"Cut that out!" The filing cabinet was as tall as Jo, so the cat was positioned above her, staring down with a look of superiority. "You know, I'm beginning to regret fighting to keep you here at the station instead of taking you to the animal shelter."

The cat's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Is Major bothering you?" Reese appeared at her side, a noxious smelling nugget in her hand.

Jo turned to Reese. "Major?"

"Yeah. Major Payne. Major for short. That's what I'm calling him."

"Him?"

Reese nodded and held the treat out to the cat, making soft cooing and clucking noises. Major regarded her with suspicion.

"Yeah, it's a him. Eric gave him a wellness check and all his shots. He needs to be neutered, by the way." Eric, Reese's boyfriend, was going to veterinary school.

Major's paw shot out, slapping the treat from Reese's hand.

"Guess he doesn't like the idea of being neutered." Reese picked the treat up and plopped it on the filing cabinet in front of the cat. He simply glared at it.

"Lucy might get a kick out of it, though." Jo took her coffee to her desk and left Major glaring at the treat.

The cat had shown up at the back door a few weeks ago, and the two animals had been at odds ever since. The cat kept stealing food from Lucy's

bowl. Lucy hid the cat's toys. It was like having two children. But Jo liked having animals, and she had a feeling Sam did too.

Jo opened her laptop, her gaze sneaking to the icon for her personal files in the corner of the screen. Most of the information on her sister's case was on her other laptop at home, but this file had some general information on White Rock geography. She'd felt it was safe to keep it on her work laptop as there was really no indication it was part of her secret investigation. She opened the file, searching Google Images for the beech trees that she suspected marked the areas of shallow graves for victims similar to her sister. There were no beech trees on Frank Buckner's land.

Good. Wyatt was probably right. It was just a lost hiker. If Frank's dog had come home with the bone, it had likely been lying out in the woods, not buried in a shallow grave. She'd been in a panic for nothing. But now that those old feelings had surfaced, a new seed took root. Had she abandoned her sister's case prematurely?

CHAPTER FOUR

Lucy and Ranger hadn't gotten any friendlier since their standoff in Frank's backyard, but both must have sensed there was an important task at hand. They kept their distance from each other, trotting slightly ahead of everyone else into the woods.

Sam had notified the county sheriff, Bev Hatch, and she volunteered a few men for the search, but Sam had told her to give them a few hours. She wouldn't be able to mobilize that quickly anyway, and he held out hope that they would be able to find the bones easily. If it was a hiker who died of exposure, the rest of the bones should be close, unless animals had dragged some away. Sam hoped that wasn't the case. He wanted to save the county the trouble of a big search.

The mid-morning sun had warmed the air, and even deep in the shadow of the woods it was hot and sticky. Sam lifted the rim of his baseball cap to brush the sweat from his forehead and then swatted a gnat with the cap before placing it back on his head.

Their presence had scared away most of the wildlife except for a few blue jays that watched them from the tops of tall pines and one brave squirrel that clung to the side of a tree about ten feet up, chattering at them noisily as they passed. Sam figured she was probably protecting a nest or a stash of acorns.

Beside Sam, Frank, who had his white socks pulled up over the cuffs of his pants to prevent ticks from climbing his legs, huffed and puffed to keep pace. He'd insisted on coming, pointing out that they needed Ranger to lead them to the area and he was the one who could best control the dog.

“Come on, boy, lead us to the spot.” Frank wheezed.

Sam and Wyatt exchanged a look. They’d been following the dog for ten minutes, and he seemed more interested in sniffing rocks and logs than leading them to where he’d found the bone. Truth be told, Ranger seemed kind of goofy, and Sam was questioning whether he had the wherewithal to find the spot again. Even Lucy seemed dubious, judging by the uncertain glances she kept casting back at Sam. But Lucy had sniffed the bone earlier in the car, and she was smart enough to know what they were looking for. She had a keen sense of smell. If more bones were around, she’d find them.

If animals had gotten to the bones, they could be spread about the forest, so Wyatt and Sam spaced themselves fifteen feet apart, each scanning the ground in front of them as they walked. A search would typically have more people spread out to cover a wider area, but at least this gave them a head start.

Up ahead, Lucy barked.

“They must have something,” Frank surged forward with a burst of energy that belied his age.

They crested a small hill to find the two dogs on opposite sides of a tree. Lucy stood stock still, her ears straight, her tail hanging motionless, her gaze riveted on a patch of earth. Everything in her stance indicated that this was something important. Ranger wagged his tail, lunging back and forth. He ran to Frank, then back to the tree excitedly.

Sam stopped beside Lucy and gave her a pat on the head to let her know she’d done a good job. He scanned the area in front of them.

“I don’t see any bones.”

Lucy whined and pawed at the dirt. Maybe Lucy had just stumbled on a chipmunk’s acorn stash or something else of canine interest. No, she wouldn’t act so seriously if it was just that. But if she’d found the bones, where were they?

Sam didn’t have a good feeling, and judging by the deep crease between Wyatt’s brows, neither did he.

“Is this where you found that bone, boy?” Frank asked his dog. “Show us where the rest of them are.”

Ranger barked and chased his tail in a circle. Lucy glanced over at him. Sam got the impression that if a dog could roll its eyes Lucy would’ve done so.

Sam studied the ground. If Ranger had found the femur here, other bones might be visible——unless he'd been finding the bones and dragging them off for a while. Maybe the femur was the last of them and the only one he decided to bring back home. Or maybe other animals had dragged off the rest of the bones. Still, the smaller bones from the hands and feet … those should be here somewhere.

Sam kicked away a pile of wet leaves with his boot, disturbing a fire newt that wriggled off, seeking refuge under a rotted log. Instead of hard earth, the ground was soft. It had been disturbed, and claw marks ringed a shallow depression. Had Ranger dug the bone from here? It wasn't deep enough for the size of the bone, but something had clearly been digging. And Lucy stared at the hole.

Sam crouched down and gently brushed away more leaves. He didn't want to disturb the scene just in case. The moldy smell of wet leaves and the tang of damp earth wafted up as he worked, carefully brushing away clumps of earth as dark as coffee grounds and just as moist.

Ranger wasn't quite so gentle. He trotted to the other side of Sam and started clawing at the dirt.

"Whoa there boy, hold on!"

Lucy growled her disapproval of Ranger's actions, which only made him dig harder.

Rip!

Ranger jerked back his paw. A scrap of blue material was caught in his claw. Sam looked into the hole where he'd been digging. A tattered piece of shiny blue fabric reached up through the dirt. A tarp? His stomach plummeted.

Sam tugged on the scrap. It was stuck. Judging by the condition, it had been buried for quite some time. This corner must have worked its way up over time, but a larger section was buried deeper.

Ranger had worked the piece of tarp off his claw and resumed digging.

Sam shot his hand out to grab Ranger's collar.

"Hold up, boy." Sam glanced back at Frank. "Can you call him back?"

Frank craned his neck to look into the hole. "Sure. What do you think that is? Some kind of dump?"

Sam didn't think so, but he remained silent and focused on scooping out more dirt ever more carefully now so as not to disturb what they might find.

Wyatt crouched down beside him to help. Lucy sat on the other side of the hole, her eyes flicking from the scrap of blue tarp to Sam and then to Wyatt.

About six inches down they hit a bigger section of tarp. Sam tugged on the edge. Even though it was full of small holes, it didn't budge. The material sure was strong. He cleared away enough to lift the corner. Underneath was a scrap of red plaid flannel and the unmistakable thin white shards of metatarsal bones. Human foot bones.

"Crap." Wyatt voiced what Sam was thinking and then took out his phone and started taking photos.

"Frank, you'd better take Ranger back to your house now." Sam glanced over his shoulder at the old man.

"What is it?" Frank strained to see what they'd uncovered. His eyes grew wide. "That ain't no old dinosaur, is it?"

"I'm afraid not." Sam stood and clapped Frank on the shoulder, studying him to make sure the realization of what they'd found wasn't too much for him. He saw steel in the old man's eyes. Frank was a tough old bird, like Sam's grandfather. He could handle it. "That bone you found wasn't a dinosaur bone, but it was something important. You need to let us take over now. Can you make it home okay by yourself?"

Frank tore his eyes from the shallow grave and looked at Sam. "Yeah. Sure, Sam." He turned reluctantly and started down the path, whistling for Ranger, who, fortunately, trotted obediently to his side. Even Lucy seemed relieved that the other dog was gone.

Sam turned back to the grave and studied what they'd uncovered, forming a plan of action in his mind. Wyatt was already taking photographs from all angles. That was good. Next they'd need to carefully uncover the rest.

He'd need crime scene markers and more evidence bags. He'd have to notify Bev Hatch right away and get John Dudley out here to look things over before they were disturbed. He had no idea how long this body had been buried or if any evidence had been preserved. But he knew one thing: Killers always leave clues. Sam's job was to find them.

Instead of uncovering the body of a missing hiker, now they were knee-deep in a crime scene. Sam wanted to make sure they processed it the right way. Someone was clearly inside that tarp, and finding out who, and what had happened to him or her, was even more important now.

“Guess this person just didn’t wander off and get lost hiking,” Wyatt said.

“Nope. Someone definitely put him or her in there, and we’re gonna have to find out who.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Jo tapped the eraser end of her pencil on her desk blotter and returned Major's glare as she waited for Kevin's brother. She couldn't wait to join Sam and Wyatt in the field to search for the bones of the lost hiker—and to clear her conscience by telling Sam about the private investigation she'd been conducting into her sister's disappearance.

Not telling him in the first place seemed so stupid now, but when she'd first arrived in town she had no intention of staying and no intention of opening up about her life. But she'd grown attached to the town. Attached to Sam. They'd formed a solid working relationship and friendship based on trust, and the more that trust grew, the more she felt like a traitor. It just became harder and harder to tell the truth, which was a shame because now that she knew Sam, she knew he'd be on board with doing everything he could to help her. He probably still would… once he forgave her.

"I'm here to see Detective Jody Harris," a male voice wafted from the reception area.

Kevin's brother. Right on time. Jo put the pencil down and stood as Reese led a tall, slightly nervous, dark-haired man around the post office boxes into the bullpen.

Reese gestured toward Jo. "Sgt. Jody Harris."

Jo stepped forward and held her hand out as Reese retreated back to the reception desk. The man switched a white plastic bag from his right hand to his left and clasped her hand. His handshake was warm and firm. His eyes held a hint of pain mixed with curiosity. "Brian Deckard. Kevin's brother."

“Thanks for coming. I’m sorry about your brother.” Jo was sincere. She wondered if Kevin had been close with his brother. He’d never mentioned him, and Brian looked much older. She saw a slight family resemblance around the chin, but where Kevin was blond with light eyes, his brother was dark-haired with brown eyes. Half-brothers, maybe? Or maybe they didn’t look much alike. Jo didn’t look much like her sister, Bridget, but that was probably due to Bridget’s haggard appearance from poor lifestyle choices. Still, she knew there were many siblings who bore no resemblance to one another.

Brian dropped her hand and glanced around the room. “Thanks. Me, too.”

“Have you been to the hospital? I visited him a couple days ago. I wasn’t sure if there was an update.” Jo hoped Brian would have optimistic news. The last time she’d visited Kevin the doctors had seen no change, but she was still hoping for him to pull through. Although they hadn’t actually bonded from the start, Kevin had been a great officer. After all, he had taken a bullet for Lucy.

“Not really, but the doctor said there is some brain activity. I guess that’s a good sign, but he also said it could be a long road.” Brian scrubbed his hand through his cropped brown hair. “I think he was bracing me to not get my hopes up.”

Jo scowled. “Don’t think that way. Kevin is strong. He’ll pull through.”

“I hope so.” They were silent for a few seconds as Brian’s gaze flicked around the room. Then he held up a bag as if he just remembered he was holding it. “Oh, I brought these things. Some of his belongings that he had when he was admitted to the hospital. Seems like they should be at the police station. His badge. Computer stuff. Police T-shirt. It’s all laundered.”

Jo accepted the bag with a heavy heart. “Thanks. We’ll keep these for when he comes back. And he will be back. Kevin’s a hero in our eyes.”

“So I heard. What exactly happened?”

Jo didn’t see the harm in telling him what went down that night. The investigation was closed, the events a matter of public record. No sense in revealing the gory details, but she’d tell him enough to give him some closure on the events that put his brother in that hospital bed. “We were confronting a murderer, about to arrest him, when things went sideways. Our K-9 dog, Lucy, was in danger and Kevin jumped in front of her. He put himself in harm’s way to save that dog.”

“And the guy who shot Kevin is dead.”

“Yep.” Brian didn’t look like the vigilante type, but maybe it was a good thing he didn’t have someone to focus his anger on. Or maybe not. Would she feel better if she knew her sister’s abductor was dead?

Brian gave a wan smile. “Kevin and I weren’t that close. He didn’t talk about his work much, but he did mention Lucy. He really liked her. I hope she wasn’t harmed.”

“She’s fine. We love having her here at the station.” A hissing came from the direction of the filing cabinets, and Jo glanced over. Major turned in a circle, fluffing his tail at her before curling in a ball. He tucked his face under his tail but left one watchful eye slit open, aimed in Jo’s direction.

Brian didn’t seem to notice. He was looking around the room again, his gaze stopping at each desk. Probably trying to picture his brother seated at one of them.

Jo pointed to Kevin’s desk in the corner. “That one is your brother’s.”

Brian walked to Kevin’s desk. Pens were scattered on the desktop. A keyboard sat in the middle, with a lined legal pad next to it. No one had the heart to remove anything from the desk, so the pad still had notes Kevin had taken to be typed into the system. Brian traced the writing with his forefinger then looked up at Jo.

“Was my brother working on any undercover investigations?”

Why would he ask that? A police force as small as White Rock’s didn’t conduct undercover operations. Those would be done by the county sheriff —unless it was personal, like Jo’s investigation into her sister’s disappearance. Or the off-record investigation she and Sam conducted into the death of their fellow officer, Tyler Richardson.

She was sure Kevin wasn’t investigating anything. Not for the department, anyway. Sam would have told her. But there had been a time when she’d suspected Kevin was up to something. And just before the shooting, the killer had said something about Kevin working for the wrong side. But that had just been crazy talk by a cornered suspect, hadn’t it? Of course it had. Kevin had jumped in the path of the bullet to save Lucy. And the last few months before that Kevin had proved himself more than trustworthy and loyal. “We don’t really have much call for undercover work here. Why do you ask?”

Brian shrugged. “It’s just that he seemed a little vague when I talked to him. Like he was working on something secret that he couldn’t tell anyone

about. It was probably nothing."

Yeah. Probably nothing. Because if Kevin *had* been working on some secret investigation, surely Sam would've told her, right? And besides what would he have been investigating? They didn't have much call for undercover work up here in northern New Hampshire. Kevin probably didn't want to spill any specifics to his brother, and he took that as being secretive.

"Well, I guess I should be going. Thanks for taking the time to talk with me." Brian shook her hand again and exited, leaving Jo clutching Kevin's bag.

She hurried to Sam's office to put the bag in Sam's closet so that it would be ready for Kevin's return.

She shoved the bag on the top shelf and grabbed a lime-green vest from the rack. With that task out of the way, her thoughts turned to assisting in the search and seeing with her own eyes that the bones were those of a lost hiker and had nothing to do with the monster who had taken her sister.

CHAPTER SIX

Jo coasted past the medical examiner's van and parked in front of the WRPD Tahoe on the dirt road near Frank Buckner's house. Sam had summoned John already? That meant they'd found the rest of the bones.

Sam had relayed the coordinates of the search site to Reese, and Jo had plugged them into a navigational app on her cell phone. The app was like a GPS that would direct her toward the coordinates. Now all she had to do was follow its directions through the woods.

The going wasn't easy. The site was on conservation land composed of acres of undeveloped forest that abutted Frank Buckner's property. She wasn't following a groomed trail, so she found herself navigating boulders, stumps and tree roots. At least the woods weren't dense, so she didn't have to battle too many low-hanging branches or bushes. It was only midmorning, but the nylon police vest didn't allow for circulation and sweat trickled down her back. The exertion from walking and the nerves that made her heart race didn't help. She probably shouldn't have had that third cup of coffee, either.

What would she find when she caught up with Sam? The remains of a hiker or something worse?

The humidity made her thick copper curls frizz. She got sick of pushing them out of her face, so she grabbed a band from her pocket and tamed them into a tight ponytail at the base of her neck.

As she came up a hill, she spotted Sam's tall frame first. He stood with his hands on his hips, looking down. Below him John crouched, working at something. Wyatt had his phone out, taking photos. This must be where

they found the rest of the hiker's bones. But why did it look like John was a few inches below ground level? Had the hiker fallen into a ravine and been injured? Jo repressed a shudder at the thought of becoming injured during a hike and then slowly starving to death, delirious, in pain, and unable to fend off animals and bugs.

Sam glanced up at her approach. Her chest tightened at the grim look on his face. "How did things go with Kevin's brother?"

"Good…" Jo's voice trailed off as her eyes fell on what John was doing. It wasn't just a pile of bones lying on the forest floor. John was leaning into a six-inch-deep depression, meticulously scraping dirt like an archaeologist uncovering a rare find. Ivory-colored bones lay amidst scraps of red flannel. Only part of the skeleton was uncovered; the rest was still hidden under stringy remnants of bright blue tarp. This was no hiking accident. As Jo had feared, this was murder.

Jo stared at the bones. Though most of the skeleton was still covered by the tarp, she could clearly see the knee bone, femur and foot bones. She could also see that these were not the bones of a child. It wasn't her sister.

Relief washed over her, followed immediately by a wave of guilt. Even though it wasn't her sister, it was likely *someone's* sister. Some family had been missing this child for years. She knew how that hurt and it could tear a family apart. Her heart ached for them.

"Kevin's brother?" Sam asked.

Jo tore her eyes from the bones to find Sam looking at her funny.

"Oh. Sorry. It went well. He just wanted to know what had happened and to drop off some clothes from the hospital and his badge." Jo's gaze flicked back down to the shallow grave. "So clearly this isn't a lost hiker."

"No. Didn't Reese tell you?" Sam brushed his hand through his short-cropped dark hair that had recently become peppered with gray. Jo had a few gray hairs creeping in herself, but where hers made her look old, Sam's made him look distinguished. "I guess maybe I didn't tell her. Been kinda busy here. Thanks for talking to Kevin's brother."

"No problem." Jo watched as John peeled back more of the tarp. "Any idea how old the victim was? Gender?"

"Hard to tell. I need to get the rest of the bones back to the lab to know for sure, but my guess is female, young adult." John gestured toward the top of the tarp. "You guys got enough photos of this? I want to push back more of the tarp."

“Yep,” Wyatt said.

John slowly lifted another section of the tarp, careful not to dislodge what was beneath. It was important for them to see exactly how things were laid out.

“Where’s Lucy?” Jo had thought something was missing. Now she realized it was the dog.

“She’s off sniffing,” Wyatt said as he crouched to take some close-ups.

“How long has she been here?” Jo gestured toward the grave. She used the pronoun “she,” but John had said he didn’t know for sure whether the skeleton was male or female. Something intuitively told her it was a female. Perhaps it was the delicate look of the bones or maybe the scraps of clothing or maybe just because she had thought of her sister.

“Hard to tell till I get things back to the lab, but I’m gonna guess maybe not less than three years, not more than ten. They weren’t wrapped tight and the tarp didn’t do much to preserve them. My guess is its main purpose was to move the body.” John pointed to a clawed-up section of tarp. “See here? Looks like an animal dug here long ago and it got filled back in over time. Might not have the full remains underneath. The bugs have gotten in, and this earth is a little damp. As you know, the conditions of the ground have a lot to do with bone preservation. I’ll take some soil samples back to the lab.”

“Not much left for identification. Hopefully we’ll be able to find out who it is from their dental records,” Sam said.

“Hopefully.”

Lucy barked from somewhere behind them, and they turned to see the wide brown brim of a Coos County sheriff’s hat crest the hill. Bev Hatch was in her mid-fifties with shoulder-length salt and pepper hair and a don’t-mess-with-me attitude. Her shrewd gray eyes took in the scene, sizing it up in seconds.

“So it’s true. Not a hiker, a victim?” Bev glanced down at the grave and Jo knew she was cataloging it in her mind. Jo had worked with Bev before and liked the woman.

“Unfortunately, it is,” John said.

John kept working the site, pulling the tarp away little by little, while Wyatt took photos.

Jo glanced across the grave, and her eyes met Sam’s. His reflected empathy for the family and something else. Puzzlement? She guessed the

puzzlement was for her. He was probably wondering why she looked so relieved. She never was good at masking her emotions. More guilt stabbed her. She needed to tell Sam about Tammy right away. But not here. She didn't want anyone but him to know about her sister. She'd tell him later back at the office when she could catch him alone.

"Huh, that's odd," John's voice jerked her attention back to the shallow grave. He'd peeled away most of the tarp and was looking down at the bones.

"What is?" Bev asked.

"I don't think this is the body you guys were looking for."

"How do you figure that?" Bev asked.

John gestured toward the tangle of bones near the feet.

"This one has both femurs. If I had to hazard a guess, this isn't the only shallow grave in the area."

WOOF!

Sam jerked his eyes away from the pair of femurs in the shallow grave to Lucy even as he was still trying to process John's revelation. More graves?

"So that's why she's been so busy sniffing." Wyatt was halfway toward Lucy. The dog stood stock still, her ears at attention, her tail motionless, eyes riveted on a patch of earth. "She must have smelled the other graves."

Lucy stood next to a fallen log. The log was rotted on the inside and mushrooms grew on the outside, but what was under it was of interest. Something had been digging, and Sam saw the unmistakable ivory-colored bumps of vertebrae.

"This must be where Ranger got the femur," Wyatt said. "Looks like it's all been dug up."

John pointed to the log. "This tree fell on top. It's a spruce, so it would decompose faster than most, but it's only partially rotted. I'd say that dates the graves to five years, give or take. 'Course the log could have rolled here." He squatted down and started brushing away dirt.

Wyatt started taking photos.

Bev squatted beside John.

Sam glanced around the woods. If there were two graves, could there be more? This *had* to be the grave with the missing femur, but still it didn't lessen the horror he felt. Some sicko had murdered people and buried them out here.

His gaze came to rest on Jo. She stood across from him, her eyes riveted on John's work. She was acting kind of odd. What was wrong with her? Had something happened with Kevin's brother that she didn't want to relate in front of everyone? Maybe he was just imagining it. He was a bit rattled after all. He hoped nothing else was going on. Two graves in one day was plenty.

"Looks like this might be another young female adult judging by the size of the pelvis. Possibly a teen." John gestured to a blank stretch of dirt between the thigh bone and the few small foot bones that were left. "Looks like someone grabbed the femur. This one is the body you were looking for."

"This grave is different," Bev said. "The bones are on top, not inside the tarp."

Sam squatted and brushed away some dirt to reveal the blue beneath. "But there is a tarp here. Maybe John was right about it being used to move the bodies and not so much to cover them. Either way, looks like we have our work cut out for us."

"We need to cordon off this area and search it thoroughly." Bev waved her left hand at the area between the two graves and pressed her phone to her ear with her right. "I'm calling Bill McGovern at the Staties. We need backup. I don't think we have enough people to process this in a timely manner. We don't know how many graves are out here."

Sam nodded. He didn't relish the idea of a crowd with its hands in his investigation. More people meant more opportunities for screw-ups. But Bev was right. He, Jo, and Wyatt couldn't work this case on their own. It was too big. And it was too important to find out who these people were and notify their family members. And they'd need all the manpower they could muster to catch the killer.

His thoughts flitted briefly to his twin daughters. He couldn't imagine the anguish he'd feel if one of them disappeared. God forbid something like this happened to one of them. He wouldn't rest until he'd gotten justice. He was determined to do that for the family of the victims in these graves.

John had uncovered a skull. It lay apart from the rest of the bones. The earth dipped down into a depression, so it must have rolled away. It had come to rest in a pocket of reddish-brown clay-like dirt.

"Good. There's a jaw bone here." John bent further to inspect the bone, which was half buried in the clay. "No obvious dental work on this part." He brushed away more dirt to reveal the rest of the jaw. As Sam watched, a familiar pattern caught his eye.

"Hold on," Sam said.

John paused and glanced up at him. Sam leaned in. "That pattern of holes in the clay—it's the same pattern I noticed on the tarp in the other grave. Maybe it's preserved in the clay. I wonder if we can get this clump out in one piece. What do you think, Jo?"

Sam glanced up at his partner. Usually he and Jo operated on the same wavelength, but today she seemed distracted. She stared at the skull as if it would give her answers. "Jo?"

She jerked into motion. "Oh sure." Jo pulled latex gloves from her back pocket and got to work gently coaxing the lump of earth from the depression.

"That ties the two grave sites together," Bev had gone back to the first site to look at the holes. "If there was any doubt that two shallow graves in close proximity were tied together, the pattern of holes shows that the same person did this."

"What do you think it is?" Wyatt snapped a photo of the clay before Jo put it in a bag. "What made these holes?"

Sam shrugged. "I don't know. Some kind of aeration machine? You know, the kind that punches holes in lawns so the water can get deep into the roots."

"An aerator. But why would the killer use an aerator?" Jo glanced back at the bones. Had he been doing something creepy with the bodies?

"Maybe to irrigate the earth? To dampen it so the bodies would decompose faster," Wyatt suggested.

John glanced up at Bev. "Have the Staties bring some body bags. I'm going back to the first gravesite and finish that first. It's better preserved and we might have a better chance of finding evidence. This one's been ripped through by animals."

Sam followed John back to the first grave.

Wyatt joined them, zooming in on the pattern of holes that had been punctured through the blue tarp. “I didn’t make anything of these at first, but you can see there’s a pattern. Rows of holes and then there is a missing one every so often, as if the machine had something wrong with it.”

“That’s good. I guess that might be a way to identify it.” Sam watched as John picked up little pieces of fabric and twigs with tweezers and deposited them in bags.

“We’ll need more bags,” John said.

“I’m on it.” Bev still had her phone to her ear.

John tweezed a dried-out round leaf with serrated edges and held it up in the air. “That’s odd.”

“Is that a bog birch leaf?” Even in its desiccated state, Sam recognized the shape of the leaf. The rare shrub grew in only a few places in New Hampshire, and as far as he knew, this wasn’t one of those places. The bog birch needed swampy ground to grow, and the forest they were in didn’t fit the bill.

“I do believe it is.” John glanced around. “I don’t see any bog birches around here, though.”

“Me, either.”

“What are you thinking?” Bev had come to stand at his elbow.

“The bodies were moved here.” Sam said simply. “John was right. The tarps were used for dragging.”

There was a commotion on the hill behind them, and Sam turned to see three green-uniformed state police officers cresting the hill along with someone he’d hoped he’d never see again: Holden Joyce from the FBI.

“Dammit.” Bev muttered under her breath.

“My thoughts exactly,” Sam said.

“What is *he* doing here?” Jo asked.

“Word must have gotten to them,” Bev said. “More than one body. Shallow graves. That’s serial killer territory. The FBI loves that shit.”

The three of them stood and watched as Joyce approached. He was in his mid-fifties but tall and fit. He wore a tailored blue suit and a smirk on his face. They’d worked with Joyce before, and it had been less than pleasant. For some reason Holden Joyce had it out for Sam. He’d even accused him of being the killer in the last case he’d inserted himself into.

At least Holden couldn’t accuse Sam this time. Unfortunately, Sam would have to play nice. He wouldn’t do anything to impede the case, but

he would do his damnedest to avoid any possibility of having to work directly with Holden.

He was thinking of an excuse to go back to the office early when his thoughts were interrupted by Lucy's sharp bark.

He pivoted to see her standing about fifty feet away. Her ears were straight up, her tail motionless. She peered at the ground with great intent, the same way she'd stood when she found the first two graves.

CHAPTER SEVEN

By the time they uncovered the third grave an hour later, the woods had become crowded with law enforcement. Deputies, state police, FBI. Jo counted twenty people combing the woods for more graves.

Jo searched with Lucy, helped John and the assistant medical examiners who had arrived on the scene with the remains in grave three, and avoided Holden Joyce.

She was dirty, hot, and slathered in noxious-smelling bug spray.

After they placed the final bone from grave three into the black plastic body bag, she stood and wiped her hands on her jeans. Scanning the area, she caught Holden Joyce staring at her.

The last case they'd worked had been a high-profile murder in which Holden Joyce had insinuated himself. She still wasn't exactly sure what the FBI interest in that case had been other than the fact that the victim had been a government official. Unlike Bev Hatch, Holden Joyce had been less than helpful. In fact, he tried to blame the murder on Sam. And he'd apparently had it out for Jo, as well. Joyce was not high on her list of allies even though he seemed to be processing this scene with care and compassion.

She'd caught Holden looking at her a few times during the morning, but instead of the accusatory glances he'd given her before these looks conveyed something different. Curiosity? Hope? It was almost as if he were sizing her up for some reason. Whatever it was, she could do without it.

Jo couldn't wait to get back to the station. She'd been relegated to the background now that the state police, sheriff's department, and FBI were

here, and she was itching to do something productive. Even Lucy seemed bored. She'd stopped her meticulous sniffing half an hour ago and now just stood idly watching the team.

Jo made her way toward Sam, intending to ask if she could leave, but he spoke before she could reach him.

"It looks like the scene here is pretty much covered. I want to get back and start laying out some of this evidence and get going on a search for missing persons to see who these remains might belong to." Sam looked at her. "Will you stay until the search is completed?"

Damn! Sam had stolen her chance to escape. But her police training was such that she wouldn't argue or shirk her duties. Sam could count on her. So, she simply nodded and said, "Of course."

Sam rewarded her with one of his broad smiles. "Great. Thanks."

Holden glanced over from an area that he was searching with his team. "We can handle it, Mason. Bobby here is a trained K9 officer."

"I'm sure you can, but I'd like my sergeant to stay until we're done with the dog."

Holden shrugged and turned back to his search.

Bev had come to stand beside Jo, and they both watched Sam leave.

"How do you like that?" Bev asked, taking her Smokey Bear hat off and brushing the pollen off the brim. "Looks like Sam can't stand being around Holden Joyce either."

Jo crossed her arms over her chest. "Yeah, can't say I blame him."

"Me either," Bev turned to scowl in the direction of Holden. "I say this search is almost over anyway. Least I hope so. Hate to think of finding any more bodies."

"Me either." Jo turned to look at Lucy, who sat near the last grave. "I don't think we will. If there were more Lucy would still be sniffing."

"Yep. That's one smart canine. But of course Holden will want to see that for himself. He wouldn't want to admit that he's not as smart as a dog."

"What is that guy's deal, anyway?" Jo asked. Bev and Holden were around the same age, and she knew there had been bad blood between them before. She didn't want to pry, but any insight into Holden's odd behavior would be beneficial, especially if they had to work together on this case.

"He's got a hair up his ass," Bev said. "Case went bad on him early on and he's never gotten over it. It's a shame, too, because he'd actually be a

good investigator if he didn't have such a chip on his shoulder. His ego won't let him get over that case."

"Too bad he keeps ending up on our cases."

"He likes these serial killer cases. I think it was this kind of case that broke him."

Jo remained silent. Something about the fact that Holden Joyce had messed up on a serial killer case pinged her radar. She stared at the large white FBI letters on the back of Holden's navy windbreaker.

Bev plopped her hat back on her head. "Well, better get to work. The sooner we finish combing the cordoned area, the better."

Jo wandered over to Lucy. She was certain there were no more graves. But she knew the rest of the team members would want to search to their own satisfaction. She snapped her fingers.

"Come on, girl. Let's get over to that last quadrant and see if we can dig anything up." They trotted behind the searchers who had spread out equidistantly in a line, their heads swiveling back and forth as their eyes combed the ground for signs of shallow graves.

Lucy stayed beside her, her head up in the air, sniffing the breeze and not at all concerned with the ground as she had been before the third grave was discovered. This behavior was further proof to Jo that there were no more graves to find.

Jo's mind wandered back to her sister Tammy. Had she been buried in a shallow grave like these? Her mind conjured images of tiny dirt-encrusted bones lying on a tattered blue tarp.

Thinking about Tammy spawned worries about her remaining sister, Bridget. Tammy's disappearance had ripped her family apart. Her mother had become consumed in grief, barely able to function. She died five years later. Her father had become a stranger. Jo hadn't seen him in a decade.

Bridget had only been twelve when it happened, but by the time she was sixteen she was experimenting with drugs. Now she was forty-two, and those years of drugs and living on the street had taken their toll. Jo had tried to help her get clean more times than she could count, but it never stuck. It was frustrating to keep trying, but she kept trying anyway.

She hadn't heard from Bridget in six months, which wasn't unusual. Bridget had no way to communicate other than the prepaid cell phones that Jo sent her, which were quickly "stolen" or "lost." But seeing these graves panicked Jo. If the victims were young as John had said, they wouldn't be

her Tammy, but Bridget was just as vulnerable as these victims. She'd have to make a better attempt at contacting her.

Her mind back on the case, Jo thought about the photos she'd found inside the box that had belonged to fallen officer Tyler Richardson. Those photos had shown stripped beech tree branches. She'd once gotten a tip that the person who took her sister marked the graves by stripping the bark from the branches of the beech trees under which they were buried.

Those photos in Tyler's box had been taken here in White Rock. But there were no beech trees in the area they were searching. And these graves were too new to belong to the same person who had taken Tammy. Or were they? Tammy had been taken thirty years ago, but Jo supposed her abductor could still be alive.

"Looks like you got yourself a pretty smart canine." Jo jumped at the voice. Holden Joyce had snuck up behind her while her thoughts had been on her sisters.

"We're lucky to have her." Jo wished Holden would go away, but he kept up with her.

"Serial killer cases can be nasty to work," he said.

"No doubt. Especially when it involves young women."

"Or children," Holden said softly.

Jo jerked her head to look at him. Something in his tone set her nerves on edge. "But these weren't children."

"No. Young adults. My guess is teen runaways. They're vulnerable and easy prey for sickos. There're no unsolved kidnappings reported in this area from the time that would coincide with these deaths." Again the tone, but Jo didn't look at him this time.

Jo shrugged. "Runaways or kidnap victims, either way the families will be devastated."

Holden was silent for a moment, then said in a low voice almost as if to himself, "True. But don't you worry, we're gonna get the killer this time."

Holden's pace slowed, and he fell back a bit.

The tension in Jo's shoulders eased. There was an undertone to the conversation that she didn't understand. She wouldn't put it past Holden to have a hidden agenda, and she wanted no part of it.

"I think we're pretty much done with the search now. I don't think we'll find any graves further out from here. Lucy has good instincts. I'm calling it a day. You're free to go back to the station with her."

Jo snapped her fingers for Lucy and turned in the direction of the car, her eyes on Holden Joyce's retreating back. What was with all that serial killer talk? Was it just because of the current case, or did he know something?

Jo pulled out her cell phone and activated the GPS app to follow the trail back to where she'd parked. She needed to get back to the station and tell Sam everything about her sister's case as soon as possible.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sam rummaged in the top filing cabinet drawer for push pins when he felt something staring at him. He looked up into a pair of green eyes made even more brilliant by the jet black fur surrounding them. It was disturbing the way the cat stared at him, as if it knew something he didn't. It also disturbed him that the cat had crept closer to him while he'd been rummaging. He slowly extracted his hand with the box of pins and backed away.

"Don't worry, Major won't hurt you. He's just curious." Reese stood beside him, an array of papers clutched in her hand. "I've already done some research on missing persons over the last twenty years. John wasn't sure how long the bones had been there, so I figured I'd go wide. I've come up with a bunch of young adult females. Mostly runaways."

Sam took the papers and closed the filing cabinet gently. The cat still stared at him. It was unnerving. "I didn't realize the cat had a name."

Reese nodded. "We can't keep just calling him 'the cat,' so I figured I'd name him something police-like. Major Payne. It's a police rank and kind of fits his personality. He's had all his shots and everything. I mean, I assume we're keeping him, right?"

Sam glanced from her hopeful baby blues back to the cat. Major narrowed his eyes as if telling Sam they'd better keep him… or else.

"Yeah I guess we're keeping him." Sam knew the cat's previous owner was dead. He'd shot him. Sam felt responsible for the cat's homelessness, and he didn't have the heart to send him to the animal shelter.

Sam glanced down at the papers. So many runaways. They'd found three bodies, and he hadn't gotten a call about additional graves being discovered. Because of the way Lucy had acted he didn't think any more would be discovered. He wouldn't have left the scene if he did. He knew it would take the Staties and the FBI a while to figure that out on their own. Why subject himself to Holden Joyce's scrutiny any longer than he had to?

He felt bad about leaving Jo there, though. Jo had been acting a little off herself, and he'd wanted to swing by the Brewed Awakening drive-through to get her some jelly doughnuts. By the time he reached the store, they'd sold out of Jo's favorites.

Sam had bigger problems than jelly doughnuts and Holden Joyce. He had a killer on his hands. The fact that the graves were several years old didn't lessen the urgency for Sam. The killer might still be out there. He could've moved onto a different area, or he could be lying low until his next killing spree.

Sam had read that serial killers sometimes went dormant for years before starting up again. That wasn't going to happen on Sam's watch. He felt guilty enough that these crimes had likely happened during his tenure as chief. How had he not known that these brutal murders were taking place right under his nose? He owed it to the families and the victims to catch the killer.

This case took his mind off Lucas Thorne. The drug dealer who everyone accepted as a prominent real estate developer had been on Sam's radar for years. But Thorne was elusive, always getting someone else to do the dirty work, always a step ahead of the police. Sam had never been able to nail him for anything, and he'd tried hard.

Sam took the papers and push pins to the cork board on the back wall of the squad room. Reese, who had gone back to the lobby, appeared at his side, more papers in her hand. "Wyatt emailed these photos of the crime scene. I thought you might want them for the board, so I printed them."

"Thanks." Reese was turning out to be a great dispatcher and a big help around the station. She was still attending the police academy, so he couldn't make her an officer yet, but he hoped they would have an opening when she graduated. She'd already been vital in solving a few cases, and her contacts at the academy sure came in handy. Plus, she knew the routine. Like with the cork board. Maybe some would think it old fashioned, but Reese knew it was part of Sam's process and respected that.

Reese went back to the front desk, and Sam got to work laying the photos out in an order that made sense to him. When he was done, he stood back so he could take them all in at once.

Dirt-smudged bones, snatches of bright blue tarp, the weird pattern of holes, the bog birch leaf. The leaf was the big lead as far as he was concerned. These girls had been killed at a different location, and Sam needed to figure out exactly where that location was.

"The search is breaking up." Wyatt had come in and was now standing beside him studying the photos. "No other graves found."

"Well that's a relief. Kind of figured when Lucy stopped sniffing."

"Me too."

Sam turned around and frowned. "Where are Jo and Lucy?"

"She was talking to Holden Joyce when I left. Bill McGovern gave me a ride back."

Sam turned back to the photos. He tapped the one of the leaf and scrolled to the information page on his cell phone where he'd looked up the bog birch earlier just to be sure. He held the phone up to the photo. "I think this is a big clue. The bog birch is incredibly rare in New Hampshire. We need to figure out if it grows anywhere near here."

"I'm on it." Wyatt quickly headed to his desk.

Wyatt was eager to help. Sam couldn't blame him. He was new in the department, and they hadn't exactly included him in the last takedown mostly because they hadn't worked with him much and Sam wanted him to have more experience before they had to rely on each other in a dangerous situation. But Wyatt was turning out to be a smart cop. Sam was confident that he would be a valuable addition to the team.

The lobby door opened, and Lucy bounded into the squad room. She stopped beside Sam, who bent to pet her. Atop the filing cabinet, Major hissed, and Lucy side-stepped to the other side of Sam. Jo followed closely behind. Dirt smudged her nose, and a strand of her coppery hair had escaped the confines of her ponytail to coil around her face.

"They're done. Only three graves. Lucy did a great job." She went over to her desk and reached into the drawer, pulling out a treat that she tossed in the air. Lucy jumped up and caught it in her mouth. Major did more hissing.

Jo turned to him. "You haven't done anything, so I'm not giving you a treat."

“Don’t be mean to him, he’s very sensitive,” Reese yelled from the lobby.

Jo turned to Sam, her hands on her hips. “Thanks for leaving me stuck with Holden Joyce.”

Sam cringed. A jelly doughnut peace offering would really come in handy right now. “Hey, that’s a benefit to being the boss.”

Jo rolled her eyes, but she was smiling. Sam felt relieved. Jo was just teasing. And now she didn’t seem as distracted as she had when they were out in the woods, but her eyes kept darting toward his office.

Maybe something had happened out there that she wanted to tell him about privately. Did it have to do with her meeting with Kevin’s brother? That would explain her odd behavior at the crime scene. Or maybe something had happened with Holden Joyce. He wouldn’t be surprised if the guy had somehow concocted some twisted reasoning that made Sam the perpetrator in these killings. He should probably make up an excuse to get in the office and hear her out, but he didn’t want Wyatt to think something weird was going on between them. Maybe he could think up a—

“Hey, Sam, you ready for a lunch date?”

Lunch date? Crap. Sam had forgotten all about that.

Marnie Wilson came around the post office boxes, Reese following behind her with a sour look on her face. Marnie had probably breezed right past the dispatcher, who liked to protect them from unannounced visitors.

Sam glanced back at the cork board. He didn’t have time for lunch. He was in the middle of an important investigation.

“Sorry, Marnie, I forgot all about it. I don’t think I have time. We just discovered…” He didn’t really want to tell Marnie Wilson the details. They would be all over the news shortly, but he didn’t think it was a good idea to be telling the general public about the case. Even though Marnie was running for mayor, she was still just a civilian.

“Oh,” Marnie’s face fell, her eyes drifting to the cork board. “I’m sorry. Harry said that I should come by and I just…”

Darn it. Harry had said this would be a personal favor to him. Guilt crushed Sam’s resolve. He’d given Harry his word, and Marnie had made a special stop.

He supposed it was his duty as chief of police to find out what Marnie was about. With the former mayor dead and the acting mayor someone Sam

definitely did not want in office, he needed to figure out who he should put his vote behind.

He didn't know much about Marnie. What were her causes? Would she give the police department the necessary funding? Harry liked her because she was for senior citizens' programs. But what else was she for? Or against, for that matter?

This investigation could go on for a long time. If ever there was a time to take a break, it was now because they only had one lead and Wyatt was working on it. Until he discovered where the bog birch shrub grew, Sam didn't have much to do but think. And he could think over lunch as well as anywhere else.

"Why not go, Sam?" Wyatt asked. "We still need more information from John, and I'm following up that lead. I think we've got it covered, right, Jo?"

Jo, now seated at her desk, the eraser end of her pencil tap-tap-tapping on the wooden surface, her face expressionless, muttered, "Yeah, of course we've got it covered. Go ahead." Did he detect a hint of annoyance?

Sam glanced back at the cork board, then at scowling Reese. He had the distinct impression that Reese did not like Marnie Wilson, but he had no idea why.

He could never figure women out. Was it jealousy? Marnie was a handsome woman in a no-nonsense kind of way. She was about the same age as Sam, maybe a little older, but well preserved. Attractive. Not that Sam was looking. After two failed marriages he didn't want to go down that road again, especially not with someone running for mayor. But he was getting hungry, and he supposed he should hear her out. And it would appease Harry.

"Okay. But I can't take a long time. You know, public servant and all."

"Of course not. I totally understand," Marnie hooked her arm through his. "I already have a reservation at Silo's."

Sam looked back over his shoulder as Marnie propelled him toward the lobby. "Wyatt, text me the minute you find anything."

CHAPTER NINE

Jo's gaze drifted to Reese as Sam and Marnie disappeared around the bank of brass post office boxes. Judging by the look on the dispatcher's face, she didn't like Marnie Wilson any more than Jo did.

Jo wasn't even sure what she didn't like about the woman. It was just a gut feeling. She hadn't talked to her much, but Jo felt as though Marnie was one of those who told you what you wanted to hear. She was a politician, after all, and wasn't that the way with all politicians?

Maybe it was just Jo's aversion to politics that made her feel Marnie couldn't be trusted. It certainly didn't have anything to do with the way she was obviously flirting with Sam. Sam and Jo were friends, nothing more, though she didn't want to see her *friend* get caught up with someone untrustworthy. She thought Sam had better instincts.

What was this business about a date, anyway? In the middle of the day? In the middle of a case? Sam had looked surprised when Marnie came waltzing in. More than likely it wasn't a date but something arranged by Harry Woolston. Harry had been trying to get Sam to talk to Marnie for months now. This was pretty bad timing, but better now before they got involved in chasing down leads.

Jo pushed away her disappointment. She'd wanted to tell Sam about her sister before things really started to heat up. She'd have to wait for another opportunity. Maybe Sam wouldn't even want to be bothered about her old case with this mess on his hands. Still, she should tell him. Even though it had nothing to do with the current case, it was the right thing to do, if only to stop the guilt of not being totally straight with Sam.

As if sensing Jo's conflicting thoughts, Lucy came over and put her head in Jo's lap, looking up at her with warm brown eyes. The dog had an uncanny knack of knowing when someone needed a little comfort.

"You did a good job today." Jo stroked the soft fur on Lucy's forehead.

"It's a lot of work running around in the woods. She's probably hungry." Reese reached into the cabinet above the coffeemaker for Lucy's bowl and food. The sound of kibble clanking on stainless steel caught Lucy's attention. And Major's, too, judging by the way he stood and stretched his long legs in front of him, his eyes glued to the bowl.

Reese placed the bowl in the corner where they usually fed Lucy.

Meow!

Major leapt from the filing cabinet, raced to the bowl and immediately started chowing down.

"Hey, that's Lucy's food! You have your own." Reese pulled a smaller bowl out of the cabinet along with a can of cat food. The metallic sound of the pop tab top caught the attention of Lucy, who had been standing a few feet away from Major as if afraid to approach him. Lucy had already suffered a bloodied nose from Major's razor-sharp claws, and apparently even defending her dinner wasn't enough to make her want to repeat the experience. Major kept eating, unfazed by the opening of the can. Apparently he preferred dog food.

Lucy flicked pleading eyes at them.

"I'll distract him for you, Lucy." Wyatt opened his drawer and took out a mouse-shaped toy. He approached Major cautiously, dangling the toy by its tail in front of him. At the sight of the mouse, Major lifted his head, and his tail swished back and forth. Suddenly his paw shot out. He skewered the mouse, knocking it out of Wyatt's hand. The mouse flew through the air. Major scampered after it, catching it and rolling to the ground.

Lucy approached her bowl with one eye on Major.

Reese added some more food to make up for what the cat had stolen.

"Looks like you have Major's number," Jo said.

Wyatt shrugged. "I think he likes me. Maybe because I wasn't there when everything went down with his owner. You gotta feel sorry for him. Everything he knew has been uprooted and he's in unfamiliar territory. He's probably just trying to figure out how he fits in."

Jo's estimation of Wyatt ticked up a notch. Anyone who was an animal lover couldn't be half bad.

Wyatt was right about the cat. The poor thing was in unfamiliar territory, probably uncertain of its fate. She felt sorry for Major and vowed to be kinder toward him, to let him know he was among friends. Her thoughts drifted to the cat that had been appearing on the porch of her small cottage. That cat wasn't overly friendly either. She'd been trying to earn its trust by putting out treats and not trying to pressure it too much. Maybe the same tactics would work with Major.

"Well, you sure know how to distract him." Reese pointed toward the cat, now flopped in the corner and rolling around with the mouse, ignoring Lucy's food.

"It could be the catnip I put inside the toy." Wyatt smiled and waggled his brows. It was the first time she'd seen him joke, and Jo noticed that he was really kind of cute when he smiled. He was too young for her by about ten years, but it was nice to know he had a sense of humor and was starting to feel comfortable enough around them to show it.

"Hey, whatever works." Jo watched the cat as he padded to the plush cat bed in the corner with the toy in his mouth. He circled the inside of the bed, then plopped down. He looked comfortable. "Maybe we should get catnip toys for all of us. They seem to have a calming effect and this case is going to be a doozy."

Wyatt's gaze drifted from the cat to Jo. She saw a determined, steely look in his green eyes. Was he studying her a little too closely? No. She was getting paranoid after all the questions Holden Joyce had asked.

"You can say that again. Don't worry, though, we'll find out who did this. We have to."

WYATT COULD TELL he was earning points with his colleagues by the way he'd handled Major. The cat hadn't exactly been the friendliest creature he'd ever seen, but he figured it was with good reason. He was adjusting, just as Wyatt was.

Wyatt was starting to feel more comfortable in White Rock. He could tell that Sam and Jo were starting to trust him. But he also sensed a weird undercurrent between them. Mostly with Jo. She'd acted off at the search site this morning, and then when she'd returned to the station he got the

distinct impression that she was jittery about something. Maybe she had a secret too.

But even if she did have a secret, he felt confident that she and Sam really cared about this case. They were good cops. Cops with compassion. Cops who cared about justice. Not all cops felt that way, as Wyatt had discovered early in his career.

A surge of pride bubbled up inside him. Looking into where the bog birch shrubs grew was the first important task Sam had entrusted to him. That was a sign that Sam saw him as an important part of the team.

As disturbing as this case was, he wanted to be a big part of investigating it. That might help him atone for things and prove that he wasn't a product of his lineage.

That atonement was important to him because when it came right down to it, that was why he'd come to the small northern New Hampshire town—to right wrongs. In a small-town department he'd get a chance to do real investigative work. Not be relegated to traffic duty as he had been in the city.

Plus, the pace and laid-back lifestyle in White Rock suited him. The people were nice. Friendlier than in the city, for sure. The rolling mountains, lush valleys, and sparkling lakes and streams were a welcome break from expressways and skyscrapers.

And working with Lucy was an added perk. He'd become quite attached to the dog in the short time he'd been here. He even liked having Major at the station, even though the cat was less than companionable. You'd never see a cat in a big city police force, but everyone knew animals helped with stress. Right now the tension between Lucy and Major was *causing* a little stress. Wyatt was sure it would all smooth over eventually.

Wyatt had been disappointed not to be included when they tracked down the mayor's killer. If Sam had included him, things might've gone differently. Maybe Kevin Deckard would be sitting at his desk right now instead of lying in a hospital bed.

But he understood why Sam hadn't included him. He was new, and Sam was still feeling him out. In intense situations like that, it worked best to have fellow officers whose actions and motivations you were familiar with because often one had to react on instinct and had to be able to anticipate the other officers' reactions.

He'd gained some level of acceptance now, which was good. He wasn't going to sit back and relax, though. He had to do good work and to earn his keep, as his mother had always told him.

Lucy finished her meal without incident. Major was zonked out in his bed, the catnip mouse between his paws. Lucy cast him a wary glance before trotting into Sam's office, no doubt to seek out the patch of afternoon sun that slanted through the large windows.

Major let out a snore. It looked like the cat was feeling more at home, just as Wyatt was. The two of them were on the same track.

Wyatt turned back to his computer. He didn't want to waste any time. Finding the location of the bog birch might reveal where the victims were killed. And if they could discover where the victims had been killed, they might find clues that would lead them to the killer. This might be the most important task of the case and perhaps the most important of his entire career thus far.

CHAPTER TEN

Sam fiddled with his fork and silently cursed Harry. He'd rather be back at the station or out fishing or just about anywhere but sitting with Marnie Wilson in a fancy restaurant. Never mind that he had an important case; he wasn't exactly the fancy restaurant type. Give him a burger and a beer at the local watering hole and he was happy. But he'd promised Harry, and Sam kept his promises. At least he was getting this over with.

Marnie paused from her monologue on how she'd come to settle in White Rock as the waitress deposited a basket of bread on the table and refilled their tall thin tumblers with water.

"So what about you? How did you end up here?" Marnie asked after the waitress departed.

"Born here." Sam sipped his water and scanned the restaurant with a cop's eye, looking for potential trouble. Not that he expected any, it was just habit. Years of training had wired him to always be vigilant.

The restaurant was one of those upscale rustic places. It was in an old mill, some walls with original brick, the others covered in old barn board right up to the twenty-foot-high ceilings, which had exposed ductwork and plumbing painted black so it all blended.

The booths were large and comfortable, faux leather and blue, green and brown patterned fabric. Sam supposed the fabric was trendy, but to him the colors didn't match. His tastes ran more to plain brown and green. The tables were all draped in white linen, silverware gleamed, and crystal wine glasses sparkled.

It was mid-afternoon, so the restaurant was nearly empty. One couple sat a few tables away, speaking in hushed tones. Five men were seated at a round table in the corner, several drinks in front of them. The conversation was boisterous. Sam figured them for salesmen having a long lunch, possibly celebrating a big sale.

"That's nice. I imagine being a local is a big advantage for the chief of police," Marnie said.

Sam's gaze drifted back to Marnie. He supposed she was pretty, but not in an obvious way. Her nose was a little too big, her face a little too round, and her eyes a little too green. She had her shoulder-length honey-blond hair pulled back in a ponytail that was a little too casual.

He liked that she dressed in jeans and T-shirts. It made her seem less stuffy. Then again, she was running for mayor. The casual hair and outfits might be strategic to appeal to the common man. She seemed nice enough, though, and Sam might have fostered the dull spark he felt in her presence if she'd been anyone else but a candidate for mayor.

"I suppose it is an advantage. I do know a lot of folks." Sam had never thought about it as an advantage. He loved White Rock and had always wanted to be chief so he could help the town.

Knowing a large percentage of the population meant he could give them personal attention. They were nice folks. Except for the person who had put those girls in the graves. Was that person still in town? It didn't matter. Sam would find him no matter where he was and bring him in.

In fact, he should be back at the station right now figuring out just how to do that. He glanced down at the phone he'd put on the seat of the booth beside him. No text from Wyatt yet. He supposed he could suffer here a few more minutes, at least until he finished his lunch.

The waitress came and slid their meals onto the table. A burger for him; some salad concoction for Marnie. Rabbit food. Sam lifted the top of the brioche bun and cut into the burger. Medium rare, just the way he liked it. The smell of charred beef wafted up and his stomach grumbled. He had to admit, the overpriced burger did smell good.

"This looks delicious." Marnie picked through her salad with a fork like an old lady picking through a box of chocolates for her favorites.

"Sure does." Well, at least the burger did. Sam frowned at the side of coleslaw he'd ordered because the restaurant didn't serve french fries.

Marnie nibbled a piece of lettuce. “I’m sure Harry told you that even though I’m not originally from town I *am* dedicated to helping White Rock and its people. Especially the seniors.”

“Yeah, Harry is excited about the senior citizen programs that you support.” Sam took a bite of the burger. It was juicy, and the horseradish sauce provided a perfect tangy complement to the cheese. Maybe this place wasn’t so bad after all.

“Not just seniors. I want to help everyone in town.” Marnie speared a grape tomato and popped it in her mouth.

Sam cut to the chase. There were only a few things he was interested in when it came to the town, and she might as well know what they were right away. “What about the construction that’s going on in town? Do you plan to do anything about that?”

“You mean Thorne Enterprises and Mervale?” Marnie asked.

“You must have seen new hotels and strip malls sprouting up. This is a small town. It should retain the small-town charm.”

“I agree.” She focused on her salad. Afraid to look him in the eye or just picking out the good stuff?

“So, if you were mayor you’d make sure that permits for new construction were issued with more restraint?”

“Well, *some* new construction is good for the town. It provides jobs. And hotels will bring in more tourists, and that helps local business.”

“It’s becoming overdeveloped. Not only that, but their tactics are underhanded. They wait for the old folks who owned the farms to die off and then try to steal the land right out from under their heirs, often offering way below market price.”

Marnie frowned. “I don’t condone underhanded tactics. I’m sure Beryl would not approve of that. Are you sure that’s what Thorne is doing?”

“Beryl? Oh, you mean Thorne’s wife?”

Marnie nodded. “She’s a lovely woman.”

Sam doubted anyone married to Thorne would be lovely. Hadn’t Harry said that Thorne’s wife wore the pants in the family? Now that he recalled, it was the wife who had all the money. Her family wealth had funded Thorne’s construction business. “Surely his wife must know about his nasty tactics. I heard his business is funded by her family money. She must know what’s going on.”

“Not necessarily. It’s true Beryl’s family is loaded with old money. They were real estate developers for generations. When she met Lucas, they brought him into the business, and when they married they helped him go out on his own. But that doesn’t mean she knows everything that’s going on. She actually works for her family business still, not with her husband.” Marnie chuckled. “You know how it is; sometimes working together and being married just doesn’t work out. Anyway, she’s much too interested in her environmental causes to keep such a close eye on her husband.”

“Environmental causes?”

“Yes. She’s taken quite an interest in those Great Bearded Owls.”

“No kidding.” Earlier that summer, a species of owls previously believed to be extinct had been discovered in White Rock. Their nesting place was adjacent to a new hotel that Thorne was building.

Experts had worried that the construction would disturb the owls. They’d tried to get the project shut down, but somehow Thorne had finagled things to continue.

Marnie nibbled more lettuce. “While I do approve of some new construction in the name of progress, I am dedicated to keeping the town as pristine as possible.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed. Political doublespeak. Marnie was only telling him what he wanted to hear. “That’s not the only problem the town has with Thorne. I’m sure you are aware of the drug problem.”

Something flickered in her eyes. She knew. Anyone running for mayor would be up on that.

Sam continued, “It’s a big concern of mine. And I’d be likely to throw my support behind the candidate who was going to help put the leader of the drug ring away and not hinder our investigations by blocking search warrants.”

“Of course I wouldn’t hinder that. What mayor would?”

Sam snorted. “You’d be surprised.”

Marnie looked at him curiously, then leaned across the table. Sam got a whiff of flowery perfume. His nose twitched, and he suppressed a sneeze. “I’m sure you’ve heard of the Convale project.”

Was she changing the subject? Of course he’d heard of it. Convale was a big power company out of Canada trying to make inroads to supply power to the upper states. The only problem with that was they had to go through New Hampshire with their gigantic unsightly power lines to get there. Sam

had heard that White Rock was in the proposed path. That wasn't something Sam would ever get on board with, but the project was still in its infancy. Everything was hush-hush, with very little information available.

"I have. They want to litter the White Rock scenery with power lines." Sam took another bite of burger. He glanced down at his phone again. No text. He would have to make an excuse to leave. The investigation was much more important than listening to Marnie Wilson's rhetoric. And if she was trying to persuade him to get on board with the Convale project, their friendship was about to come to an abrupt end.

"No, it's not like that. It would only be in remote sections that no one could even see, deep in the forest. It would bring a lot of money to the town. And there may be other ways than having tall towers."

"So you're not opposed to it?" She wouldn't get his support, then. But who did that leave? Jamison, the acting mayor? Henley Jamison probably wasn't opposed to it either.

Marnie sat back in her seat. "Well, I *am* opposed to ruining the pristine landscape."

"That we can agree on." Sam took the last of his burger. There was something to be said for fancy beef. It was probably the best burger he'd ever had.

As he chewed, Marnie picked at her salad and babbled about how she had formed this committee and that committee in her efforts to preserve wildlife and land.

Sam's thoughts drifted back to the case. He didn't really care what Marnie had done. He was more interested in what she was *going* to do and what she stood for. Judging by this conversation, he was doubtful as to whether they aligned with the things he stood for.

"… I couldn't help but notice the photos in the police station. And Frank Buckner was downtown talking about some bone his dog found. I saw the state police and county sheriff driving out toward his place. I assume a big case is in the works."

When had the conversation turned to that? Sam wanted to contain the details of the case as long as possible, but in a small town like White Rock word got around fast. "Sadly, some remains were found in the woods."

"Some?"

Sam nodded grimly. She'd already seen the photos, and he was sure word was out about more than one grave, especially with the amount of

manpower they'd had out searching. "Unfortunately, more than one. It looks like I'm going to have my work cut out for me, which is why—"

Ding!

Sam's eyes jerked to his phone. Wyatt had located the bog area in a small town an hour away.

He pushed up from the table, pulled out his wallet, and threw some cash down. "Sorry. I hate to cut things short, but we have a break in the case and I need to get back to the station."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"I see the Tahoe parked up ahead."

Sam lurched sideways as Bev hit another pothole on the barely navigable path that passed for a dirt road. He was starting to regret agreeing to let her pick him up so Wyatt and Jo could head out ahead in the Tahoe. Bev was about the worst driver he'd ever ridden with.

He peered through the bug splatter on the windshield, barely making out the back end of the Tahoe through the thick foliage ahead.

The Tahoe was pulled to the side as much as possible. To the east was a swampy area. Lucy, Wyatt, and Jo were outside, inspecting the vegetation. Sam recognized several swamp-loving plant varieties, including the bog birch.

This had to be where the killer had claimed his victims.

Lucy trotted over as Sam got out of the SUV. Somewhere a frog croaked, providing the perfect accompaniment to the rank smell of the swamp and the staccato buzz of the insects. Out here, the foliage was dense, and the woods had a yellowish-green cast as the afternoon sun struggled to filter through a dense canopy.

"You think this is the place?" Bev asked.

"This is the only known area with this species of bog birch within driving distance of where we found the bodies," Wyatt said.

"Has to be it." Sam said. "The kill site would have to be within driving distance of White Rock. The killer would want to be able to transport the bodies easily and quickly."

“Why even bother? This place is remote enough. He could just bury them here.” Bev gestured toward the wetlands a few feet beyond the parked Tahoe. “Or throw them in the swamp. No one would come digging around here.”

“But why here? I mean it is remote, but is there some special association for the killer? We need to figure out who owns this.” Sam pulled his phone out and zipped off a text instructing Reese to look up the property records.

“I think I might know why.” Jo pointed to a break in the tall grasses that surrounded them. A trail? It was so narrow it could have been a deer trail, or maybe it had once been wider and had grown in because it hadn’t been used in a long time. Lucy started up the trail, and the rest of them followed. As they got farther into the woods the trail widened. Definitely bigger than a deer trail.

They walked silently, accompanied by the sucking sounds of the mud trying to pull off their boots and the incessant buzzing of insects. Lucy trotted ahead, leaving paw prints in the thick mud.

After about five minutes, Bev slowed, her gray eyes zeroing in on something. “Hold up.” She squinted ahead. “What’s that through the trees?”

The woods were dense, but Sam made out a square shape through the trunks and leaves. A small cabin. Sam’s heartbeat kicked up a notch, and he pulled out his gun.

“We need to approach cautiously.”

They walked slowly, careful not to step on any twigs, their guns out and ready. As they got closer, Sam noted the dilapidated cabin sat on top of a small knoll about twenty feet from a marsh. The brown siding was falling off near the back. A mattress and other debris littered the outside near a rusty propane cylinder. The yard was overgrown with grass and shrubs. A trumpet vine wound its way around the chimney, thick with green leaves and orange flowers. The screens on the porch were all ripped. If anyone was living in there, they sure weren’t living the high life.

“You think anyone’s in there?” Bev asked.

“I hope not.” Wyatt eyed the cabin cautiously.

As they approached, Sam tensed, ready to spring should anyone rush out at them.

Lucy kept her distance. Did she sense someone inside? Sam’s eyes darted from one window to the other, looking for any movement that would

indicate someone was inside.

The screen door hung open, half off one hinge. It squeaked eerily as a slight breeze moved it, but that was the only movement or sound that came from the cabin.

Wyatt was the first to reach the porch steps. He looked at them over his shoulder as he raised his gun straight in front of him. “Cover me.”

The first step squeaked, and everyone tensed, but no one came rushing out. Wyatt made it up onto the porch without incident, and they all relaxed.

“You guys gotta see this.” Wyatt was on the porch looking in through one of the windows. Sam stepped up beside him, peering through a layer of dirt.

The interior of the cabin was a wreck. Stained mattresses littered the floor. Junk food wrappers battled dirty pieces of clothing for floor space. Wallpaper hung from water-stained walls. In one room—the living room, Sam guessed—the ceiling had collapsed into the room. In the corner a vine grew down into the room. Thick dust covered every surface.

Sam relaxed. It was obvious that no one was inside.

Jo’s hand was on the door knob. “It’s open.”

“Let’s go in.” Sam holstered his gun and pulled out some latex gloves. “But be careful about touching or moving anything. If this cabin belonged to the killer, this could be a crime scene.”

The cabin smelled musty, and there was a sour ammonia-like tang in the air. Urine? Sam glanced over his shoulder. Lucy stood in the doorway, her nose twitching.

“You stay out there, Lucy.” She backed up and sat, her head swiveling between the yard and them.

Wyatt started taking photos. Sam scanned the mess for evidence that the killings had taken place there. Hard to tell with all the debris.

“I don’t see any blood or obvious signs of murder, but we don’t know how the victims died. He could have strangled them. Or killed them outside. Or maybe this isn’t even where they were killed,” Bev said.

“This clothing, maybe some of it belonged to them. There wasn’t much in those graves,” Sam said. “Let’s make sure we get photos that family members might be able to identify.”

“I don’t see any signs of this place being recently inhabited,” Wyatt said.

“Who could live like this?” Jo asked as she made her way into the hallway.

“A serial killer?” Bev suggested.

“If he was here, he’s long gone.” Wyatt said.

“Maybe not *just* a serial killer…” Jo stood just down the hallway, in the doorway to another room, her back to them as she spoke.

Sam walked over and looked into the room over her shoulder. The kitchen hadn’t been used much for cooking… at least not for cooking food.

The counters were strewn with rubber hosing. Empty rolls of duct tape lay on the floor. Glass containers sat on the rusted-out stove. Dozens of empty foil pill packets were piled in the corner.

Sam’s gaze met Jo’s. “An abandoned meth lab?”

JO EYED the debris in the kitchen. It clearly hadn’t been used in years but had all the markings of the remains of a meth lab. The beakers, chemicals and funnels were gone, but what had been left behind were the scraps of what one would find. The old Sudafed containers in the corner were a dead giveaway. And that explained the slight smell of ammonia she’d noticed when they’d entered.

She looked at Sam. “Why do you think it was abandoned?”

“Hard telling. They didn’t get busted, that’s for sure. Everything would have been taken for evidence. Maybe they went out of business or just picked up stakes and moved on.”

“You think it’s Thorne?”

“Could be. It’s pretty far from his territory, but I guess it makes sense not to have something like this in his own backyard,” Sam said.

“He might’ve ceased operation when things heated up with the Dupont investigation.” Bev had come to stand between them and was eyeing the debris in the kitchen.

Jo squinted at the thick layer of dust on the scarred counters and the cobwebs that hung in every corner. “I don’t know. That was just a few months ago. This place looks like it hasn’t been touched in years.”

“You think it has something to do with the bodies?” Bev asked.

Sam ventured into the kitchen and started opening the cabinets. “Could be. The timeline could be right. But a serial killer who cooks meth?”

Wyatt had come to stand behind Bev. He let out a low whistle. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Yep. Better get some photos before the feds come in and mess everything up. There could be something here that links to Thorne or to those bodies.” Sam turned around and looked at the room. “We need to do this by the book. There will be all kinds of police units with their fingers in this pie. This will be a high-profile case, but it could finally be our chance to get Thorne, and we don’t want him to get off on a technicality because some evidence wasn’t handled properly.”

Wyatt stepped into the room, squatting to get close-ups of the debris on the floor.

“Be careful, though,” Bev cautioned. “We don’t know what kind of chemical substances are lingering in here.”

Sam glanced at the door. “Good point. Where’s Lucy?”

“She’s outside guarding the front steps,” Wyatt said.

“Good. Let’s make sure she doesn’t come in.”

Jo followed Sam and Bev back to the living room, her eyes scanning the debris.

“The only missing persons we have are runaways. I assume that’s who were in those graves. Runaways often fall victim to drugs and prostitution.” Bev’s gray eyes flashed with anger. “Some sick predator could’ve taken advantage of that.”

“You think we might find some clothing from the victims here?” Jo asked.

“It’s a long shot, but we don’t want to overlook anything that can tie those bodies to the meth lab.”

Jo’s heart squeezed. Thorne *had* to be behind this. But was he a drug dealer *and* a serial killer? Somehow it didn’t make sense. Because of the investigation she’d been conducting into her sister’s disappearance, she’d been tuned into serial killer activity for years. Never once had Thorne pinged on her radar. She’d not seen any evidence of it in anything he’d done the five years she’d worked here. Then again, her investigation had brought her to White Rock while following leads the police didn’t deem important enough to follow. Was it possible there was a connection to Thorne?

“We’d better clear out.” Bev took out her phone. “I’m going to notify the state police and get their hazmat unit up here.”

“Wait until Holden Joyce hears about this one.” Sam came in from the kitchen and stripped off his gloves. “We’ll never get rid of him now.”

Bev rolled her eyes and scrolled through her contacts. “This certainly is a unique case. I’m sure the FBI will be interested.”

“Yeah, maybe we can kill two birds with one stone here. Take down one bad guy doing multiple things. What are the odds that a serial killer and a meth lab in the same spot are not connected?” Wyatt asked.

“I suppose it’s possible,” Jo said.

“Possible.” Sam’s face was grim. “But not likely.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Jo spent the rest of the day in a whirlwind of police activity. Between the state police, the sheriff and her deputies, and the FBI, Jo found herself fading into the background. Fine with her. She hated being in the limelight.

Somehow the White Rock Police Station had become operation central. The squad room as well as Sam's office were crammed with cops. Jo felt claustrophobic, and Major seemed to like it even less. He hid in Sam's closet. The only one who didn't seem to mind was Lucy, and that was probably because the commotion had driven Major into hiding.

She never got a chance to talk to Sam about her sister. Probably just as well; now wasn't the right time. They should be focusing on bringing justice to the girls in those graves; Jo felt selfish making it about her. She didn't want her sister's case to be a distraction. There would be plenty of time for that after.

She did, however manage to text Bridget. She had no idea if her sister was still in possession of the phone she'd given her six months ago. Her last five texts had gone unanswered, so probably not. Still, it was worth a try. If there was no reply she'd have to start a search among the homeless population. Not what she needed right now with this big case, but she was desperate to reassure herself that Bridget was at least alive.

When Jo finally arrived home at nine p.m., she was tired, hungry and drained. The sight of her little cottage nestled in a grove of pine trees cheered her. She liked its remote location, no neighbors to be seen for miles. There was plenty of wildlife. Turkeys, foxes, and even the occasional deer frequented her backyard. It was peaceful. Without the hum of traffic

and din of people she could even hear the brook chattering at the edge of the property from her porch.

Initially, she'd had no intention of staying in White Rock. She'd rented the cottage just as a place to sleep while she worked at the police department during the day and on her sister's case nights and weekends. But over the years she'd come to love the town and the cottage, so much so that she'd been trying to convince her elderly landlord to sell it to her.

At first she'd only intended to furnish it with the bare minimum. A bed, a kitchen table, maybe a few chairs. Little by little, she'd found herself hauling home flea market and yard sale finds and fixing them up. Now the interior of the cottage had an eclectic shabby chic feel that rivaled cottages in the decorating magazines her mother used to read.

Even the exterior was magazine-worthy: crisp white paint with red pine-tree cutout shutters. A porch ran along the front, window boxes overflowing with colorful pansies balanced the length of the porch railing. They were getting a little leggy now at the end of the season. This case was going to take up most of her free time now, but if she got a spare minute she'd pull them and plant mums that would last well into fall.

Movement at the edge of the yard caught her eye. The little orange feral cat that Jo had been feeding during the summer. The cat had appeared a few months ago, scrawny and starving. She knew it was a stray and was skittish around people. Jo had been leaving food out every day, trying to coax it onto the porch. It had let her get close a few times, but always ran back to the woods at any sudden movement or loud noise.

She hoped the cat would eventually get used to her and come inside the house. Though her lease stipulated no pets, it was getting rather lonely with just her goldfish, Finn, for company. If she was able to buy the place she'd be able to have any pet she wanted. Maybe even a dog like Lucy.

As Jo unlocked the screen door with its thick layers of green paint, she glanced at the small saucer on the porch. It was empty.

The little cat was at the bottom of the steps eyeing her cautiously.

"So you ate it all? Good kitty!"

The cat let out a soft mew. At least this one was appreciative of her handouts and didn't subject Jo to the clawing and malevolent, angry glares she got from Major at the police station.

Inside the cottage, the bubbling of the aquarium caught her attention. Finn, her goldfish, hovered at the top of the tank, his orange scales

gleaming in the fluorescent light as he waited for his dinner. Earlier that summer, she'd upgraded his home from a fishbowl to a three-foot-long tank complete with gravel, plants, and a bubbling treasure chest. Finn was thriving in his new environment. She'd even been able to train him to take food from her hand.

She unscrewed the top of the yellow plastic fish flake container, pulled out a large green flake, and held it just over the surface of the water. Finn zoomed up, his lips breaching the surface of the water as he sucked the flake right out of her fingers before zooming back down under the ceramic bridge with his treasure.

"That's enough for you. Don't want you to get fat."

In the kitchen she pulled a can of cat food out of one of the cabinets and glommed some into a little saucer and placed it on the porch. Normally she would sit a bit away from the saucer, waiting for the cat to venture up, trying to get the cat used to her. But tonight she had something more important to do.

She fixed a cheese sandwich and grabbed a beer from the fridge, then sat at the vintage Formica table, barely tasting the food. Out the kitchen window, she saw the cat trotting back to the woods. It cast one longing glance back at the cottage before disappearing into the thick pines. Ideally, come winter the cat would trust her enough to at least sleep on the porch, if not inside the cabin. Jo hated to think of the little thing trying to survive the harsh New Hampshire winter outdoors.

As she watched the cat disappear her mind returned to the case. Was the old meth lab connected to the skeletons in the shallow graves? The bog birch leaf seemed to prove that the bodies had come from somewhere near the cabin. But the question was *when?* Just because the two criminal activities were from the same location didn't mean they had happened at the same time.

They needed to find out who owned the cabin. Reese had performed a property search and discovered the owner was a trust with an obscure name —Sundown Realty Trust. Reese had connections with lots of people from the police academy. People who were free to do things that Sam and Jo might not be able to do officially without wasting time trying to get a warrant. One of those contacts was digging into the trust right now to see if he could uncover the name behind the trust.

Jo put her plate in the sink, tossed her beer bottle in the trash, and headed to the bedroom. She pulled back the corner of the rug at the foot of her bed and grabbed the skeleton key that unlocked the powder-blue armoire she used as a desk.

While most armoires held clothes, hers held notes and photos of the "unofficial" cases she was working. She swung open the doors to reveal scraps of tape and tacks. Earlier that summer photos had lined the insides of the doors. The photos had been from the Tyler Richardson case—a fallen officer whose case she and Sam had been secretly working.

The case was closed now, but she still had one thing of Tyler's tucked away: an old box that he'd hidden in a locker.

The box held mysterious photos that Tyler had taken presumably while he was performing an unofficial surveillance of Lucas Thorne. Sam and Jo had deemed it unnecessary to officially turn them in. The photos didn't show anything that could incriminate Thorne, but Sam and Jo were afraid they could be used against Tyler. They didn't want anything to mar the reputation of their dead colleague, especially since Holden Joyce had shown interest in the case. Jo wouldn't put it past him to use those photos against them somehow.

But there was something else in those photos, one in particular that had significance for Jo. She dug that photo out of the box and placed it on the vintage chenille bedspread. Then she opened the bottom drawer of the armoire, moving aside layers of faded jeans to uncover the old scrapbooks that held the notes on her sister's case.

She'd put those notes away not even a month ago, vowing to forget about the case and move on with her life. But this new case had dredged up old feelings and made her wonder if she should continue with her sister's investigation after all.

Even though she'd been led to White Rock initially with underground tips about a serial killer who had operated in the area, there was too much time between her sister's disappearance and when the girls in the shallow graves were killed for them to be related.

Decades had passed, so unless this killer had been dormant it was probably a different person.

Jo frowned at the scrapbook. Each page had paragraphs of handwritten notes, the ink now fading. The case had consumed most of her life—an unhealthy obsession? Maybe now, after having made the decision to let it

go, she could pick it up again but with a better balance between working on the case and actually living her life.

She stopped at a well-worn page. It held one yellowed photo, curled at the edges. The image was of beech trees with the bottom branches stripped of bark.

The photo had come from a retired cop, Ed O'Reilly, who had been conducting his own investigation chasing after a serial killer. Ed thought this killer buried all his victims near beech trees and subtly marked the graves by stripping the bark from some of the branches on the bottom row. One of his early cases had these markings. The killer had never been caught.

No one had ever given Ed's theory merit, though, because other graves with these markings had been attributed to killers now incarcerated. Some of those killers denied guilt; a few confessed to the crimes. Ed maintained that those who confessed were either lying or taking the blame for some reason.

Jo wasn't sure why, but she believed Ed's theory. Maybe it was because the police stopped investigating her sister's case when they apprehended a suspect they thought was the culprit. That suspect denied killing anyone, but the police insisted. They had evidence that linked him to several murders of children. The case was closed, but Jo's sister's body was never found, and the evidence linking the killer to her sister was circumstantial. She wasn't convinced he was the one.

She'd been desperate to latch onto something when she'd heard Ed's story, and when her trail eventually led her to White Rock she'd searched everywhere for beech trees with those markings, but never found any—until she'd seen the photos in Tyler's box.

She picked Tyler's photo up off the bed and laid it on the page next to the one she'd gotten from Ed. The markings left by the way the bark was stripped from the branches looked exactly the same.

Why did Tyler have that photo? He had been collecting evidence against Thorne, and the other photos in the box seemed to point to Thorne's extracurricular activities as a drug distributor. But this one was simply a random photo of the woods. Had Tyler been collecting evidence against Thorne that had to do with more than selling drugs? And *where* had the photo been taken?

She logged into the police database from the laptop she kept on a shelf in the armoire. Wyatt had uploaded the photos he'd taken at the graves earlier that morning. She zoomed in on them. There were no beech trees anywhere near the site and no trees that had the lower branches stripped of their bark, like the ones in the other photos.

Her old beech tree lead had nothing to do with the killer who had dug the shallow graves they'd discovered that morning. But did the shallow graves have anything to do with her sister?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The station was blissfully quiet when Sam arrived early the next morning. He was the first one in, and he hoped the other cops would stick to their own stations today. The White Rock P. D. was too small to serve as a war room for a big case like this.

Not only were the feds, Staties, and sheriff's department investigating, the Colebrook Police chief—the town where the cabin was located—had an interest too. Sam had to wonder how effective the investigation would be with so many people having input, but there was nothing he could do about that.

Sam stuck his dark blue WRPD coffee mug under the spout of the Keurig, pulled an orange Gorilla Organic K-cup out of the rack, and put it in the machine. Lucy stood next to him, surveying the room, her tail swishing uncertainly.

Sam frowned at Lucy. "What's wrong?" Wait… something was wrong. His gaze drifted to the top of the filing cabinet. No cat. "You're afraid he's lying in wait to attack you?"

Lucy swished her tail.

Probably still spooked from yesterday. Sam couldn't say he blamed her. That cat had razor-sharp claws.

"Okay, let's go see where he is."

Lucy looked at him skeptically.

A quick survey of the squad room didn't reveal any cat, not even curled up under a desk. No sign in Sam's office either. Ahh, the closet. The door was cracked, and Sam pulled it all the way open. Major was curled in a

plush cat bed in the corner. Sam remembered the cat had been spooked by all the commotion the day before. Someone must have put his cat bed in there. Probably Reese.

Major slit one eye open and glared at them.

Lucy poked her nose in, then backed out and nudged the door shut.

"I don't think we can lock him in there." Sam cracked the door so the cat wouldn't be trapped. Reese had put a litter box in the old storage closet. Sam wanted to make sure he could get to it.

"Morning!" Reese poked her head in Sam's office, and Lucy rushed over to be petted.

"I'm expecting a call from my contact on the land ownership for that cabin this morning. He's an intern at a law firm that specializes in trusts."

"Great. Good job."

Jo appeared in the doorway with a white bakery bag in one hand and a Styrofoam coffee cup in the other. She stopped for the really strong stuff at Brewed Awakening whenever she anticipated a long day, and Sam guessed today was going to be a long one.

Jo held up the bag. "Hey, I brought some doughnuts."

The crinkling of the bag piqued Lucy's interest, and she trotted over to sit in front of Jo and stare up at her. Lucy was trained not to beg, so she sat calmly, but she was smart enough to know that no one could resist her soulful pleading eyes. Jo pulled a tiny piece of doughnut out of the bag and tossed it to her.

Jo smiled as she watched Lucy, then her eyes flicked to something behind Sam and her smile evaporated.

Sam turned to see Major standing in the closet doorway. He gave them a bored look and then stretched, humping his back and yawning as if to show off his long sharp teeth.

"Here, kitty." Reese squatted and put her hand out toward the cat, which ignored her and walked in the other direction. "I guess I should feed you."

"What's going on?" Wyatt appeared behind Jo. She handed him the doughnut bag.

"They're still out of jelly." Her voice was thick with disappointment.

Wyatt raised a brow at Sam, then looked into the bag and pulled out a chocolate glazed before passing the bag to Sam.

"So any word on the land?" Wyatt asked with his mouth full.

"Reese is on it."

“What I don’t get is why he moved the bodies? Why put them on *Frank’s* land? You think the killer had a grudge?” Wyatt asked.

“Actually, it’s not Frank’s land. That area where the bodies were found is on conservation property,” Jo said.

“Ahh … That makes sense.” Wyatt took another bite. Lucy focused her concentration on Wyatt, waiting for a crumb to fall. Judging by the way he was chowing down, crumbs were likely. “Conservation land would never be built on.”

“A perfect place to stash bodies you didn’t want dug up,” Sam said.

Jo twisted her mouth. “But why move them in the first place? That land by the cabin is remote and swampy. I doubt anyone would build there.”

“You never know. Some of the places Thorne has built on have been suspect. We know he’s paying people off to get what he wants.” Sam’s phone dinged with a text. “That’s Bev, wondering if we’ve got anything new on the owners of that property.”

“Got it!” Reese called in from the reception area. They hurried to the squad room as Reese came around the corner with a paper in her hand. She handed it to Sam. “Traced that trust to a corporation—Mervale International.”

Sam’s brows shot up. “Mervale? That’s Thorne’s wife’s family company.”

Jo smiled. “The plot thickens.”

“That’s a great lead,” Sam said. “Marnie said she was good friends with Thorne’s wife. Maybe I can get some information from her.”

Reese made a face. “I wouldn’t put too much stock in what Marnie Wilson says.” Sam frowned, wondering why, and Reese added, “Just saying she might not be all she seems.”

Sam trusted Reese’s judgement, yet he didn’t want to write Marnie off until she’d actually done something to make them not trust her. “She still might be better than Jamison.”

“Sometimes the devil you know is better than the one you don’t know,” Wyatt said.

“Speaking of the devil,” Jo nodded toward the window. Henley Jamison walked down the sidewalk in his charcoal designer suit, red tie flapping over his shoulder. He was headed in their direction, and he looked like a man on a mission. “Let’s make sure he doesn’t stay long.” Sam glanced

over at the filing cabinet. “Where’s Major? Maybe he’ll hiss at Jamison enough to make him leave.”

Mew! The cat looked at them suspiciously from where he’d been lurking near his now-empty food bowl.

“Hey, kitty. Want a treat?” Reese crinkled the cat treat bag, and Major showed a little interest. She made a big show of putting treats on the top of the filing cabinet. Major hopped up, casting them a malevolent glance, before sniffing the treats as if he expected them to be laced with poison.

The door flew open, and Jamison’s voice bellowed over the post office boxes. “Where is everyone? There’s a big investigation going on, you know!”

“In here investigating,” Sam shouted back.

Jamison came around the corner scowling. His eyes flicked to the photos on the cork board, then around the room at all of them. Apparently satisfied that they were indeed investigating, his scowl lightened.

“Can we help you?” Jo asked.

“I’m on my way to a news conference about those bodies you found. I don’t have much time for chit-chat. Just stopped in to see if there was anything new I could reveal to the media. The public likes to think we are making progress.”

Sam was always cautious about what to reveal to the media. It was never a good idea to reveal your findings and give the killer opportunities to cover his tracks. “There’s nothing definitive. We’re tracking down some leads, but don’t have any answers.”

“Huh. Well, this case is a big deal. The feds want in and are already out at that cabin. Have you proven the two cases are connected?”

“Not yet.”

“But you think they are?”

“Yep.”

“Based on a leaf?” Jamison looked skeptical.

“A rare leaf found in only a few areas in New England. The cabin site just happens to be one of those areas.”

Jamison considered that and then nodded. “Sheriff’s office says the bodies could be runaways that got mixed up in drugs. I suppose that would be another thread that connects them.”

Jamison had been shifting position as he talked, and now he stood a few inches from the filing cabinet with his back to it. He was surprised at how

adeptly Jamison connected the pieces that tied the cases together. Maybe he wasn't as dumb as he looked.

Hiss!

Major's paw shot out, his claw raking Jamison's shoulder and snagging a thread in the fabric, leaving a pull in his expensive suit.

"What the—!" Jamison spun around, and for a second Sam feared what he might do to the cat. But Jamison was full of surprises today. He stopped, his face softened, and he cautiously held out his hand for Major to sniff.

Major craned his neck forward, sniffed and then looked up at Jamison.

Mew.

Surprisingly, Jamison scratched the top of Major's head. Even more surprising, Major let him. Sam thought he might have even heard a purr.

"Nice cat." Jamison gave Major's head one last pat, picked at the pull Major had made in the shoulder of his suitcoat, and then turned back to Sam. "I gotta run. Keep me apprised of any new developments."

He turned on his heel and left them all staring after him.

"Nice kitty?" Jo's tone was incredulous.

"Who knew Jamison was a cat lover?" Wyatt asked.

"Or that Major was a mayor lover," Reese quipped.

"Maybe we should send Major over to his office as a gift. He seems to hate us," Sam said.

"No way!" Reese put her hands on her hips and addressed the cat. "Nice going, traitor. Maybe you should appreciate your cushy digs here or you might end up bunking with Jamison. I bet he won't feed you the expensive food with the gravy you like."

Major tucked his front paws underneath him and stared at Reese.

"Maybe Jamison isn't as bad as we thought, if he's an animal lover," Jo said.

"Maybe, but I know one thing: He's going to be a pain about this case until it's solved. And because that land has a direct connection to Thorne, I guess our next move is to pay a visit to the corporate offices of Mervale International."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The corporate offices of Mervale International were in the next town. They were housed in a long, concrete one-story building about a quarter mile down an old logging road that had been paved. The parking lot was freshly paved with sharp white lines and pockets of landscaping. Shiny metal storage buildings in the back were hidden by tall Lombardy poplars. Next to the building, perfectly-trimmed shrubs grew from a bed of bark mulch. Apparently Mervale International was doing very well.

The plate glass doors opened to a large reception area with a marble tile floor, mahogany walls, and a semicircular reception desk with a young blonde sitting behind it. She smiled as they approached, but concern flickered in her eyes when she noticed the badge on Sam's hip.

"Can I help you?" she asked tentatively.

"We'd like to speak to Robert Summers, please." In her usual efficient manner, Reese had provided Sam with information on Mervale International and its officers and Board of Directors. Thorne wasn't involved with the company, but it looked as though the CEO was his brother-in-law Robert Summers.

She pressed her lips together and looked down at something on her desk. "I'm sorry, but Mr. Summers isn't in."

Was she putting him off? He hoped they wouldn't get the runaround.

"We can wait. When will he be back?"

The girl glanced around the lobby as if she didn't know what to say. Sam was sure they didn't want the police lounging around in their upscale

lobby. Finally, she said, “I’m afraid you may have a long wait. He’s on an extended leave.”

Interesting. Why the secrecy? Probably just the usual corporate paranoia. Whatever the reason for his extended absence, Sam doubted it had anything to do with his case.

“Then could we speak to whoever is in charge?” Sam asked.

“That would be Beryl Thorne.”

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance. Beryl Thorne was second-in-command of her family’s company? This provided an even greater connection between the cabin and Thorne himself.

“Then we’d like to see her,” Sam said.

The receptionist picked the phone receiver off her desk, held it to her ear, and glanced at Sam. “And what should I tell her this pertains to.”

“Police business.”

The girl’s gaze drifted to Jo, who nodded in agreement. She dialed a number and announced their presence. Sam and Jo wandered over to the large plate glass windows looking out at the parking lot. It was filled with cars. It took only a few minutes before the clicking of heels on marble announced Beryl Thorne’s arrival.

She was a petite woman in her late forties. She looked young for her age, which surprised Sam, who thought being married to Thorne would be stressful enough to make his wife look like a crone. But her mink-brown hair was free of gray, and her easy smile appeared to be genuine. She stuck out her hand. “I’m Beryl Thorne. How can I help you?”

“Chief Sam Mason.” Sam gestured toward Jo. “This is Sgt. Jody Harris.”

They shook hands. Beryl had the strong, firm handshake of someone who had been wielding business deals for a long time.

“Perhaps we should go to your office.” Sam didn’t think she would want them talking about meth labs and dead bodies in the corporate lobby.

Concern flashed in her doe-brown eyes, but she simply nodded and turned. “This way, then.”

Beryl’s office was in the back corner of the building with a view of the forest. It was nicely decorated, all cherry wood and trendy blue-gray walls. She didn’t display many personal photographs or mementos. Just a series of framed photos of owls arranged on one wall. Sam remembered Marnie

Wilson telling him Beryl favored environmental causes and had taken an interest in the rare bearded owls.

Beryl gestured to two black leather chairs that sat across from her desk. “Have a seat.”

She settled into the chair behind her desk. “Now what is this about? I can assure you all of our permits are in order.”

“This isn’t about permits. It’s about a piece of land that was traced to your company.”

Beryl frowned. “*Traced* to my company? What exactly does that mean? It sounds rather ominous.”

“It’s a property of interest in Colebrook. The deed shows it is in a trust, and investigators have discovered that the trustee is Mervale International.”

Beryl shrugged. “We own lots of land. We are a real estate development company. That hardly warrants a visit from the police.”

“And having some of that land in trusts is not unusual?”

“Not at all. We have holdings for current development as well as future development. We split things up into various trusts almost like subsidiaries of the company.” She slid her keyboard in front of her. “And what parcel of land is this?”

“It’s out in Colebrook, was owned by the Sundown Realty Trust.”

Beryl focused on the computer monitor on the corner of her desk, her fingernails clacking on the keys. She hit the return button, then sat back. “Ahh. Yes, I seem to recall that was a more recent acquisition.”

Sam leaned forward in his chair. A recent acquisition? It was impossible to tell how long the meth lab had been abandoned, but John Dudley had been fairly confident those bodies had been in the ground for at least five years. If Mervale had recently acquired the land, then maybe he couldn’t link it to Thorne after all. “How recent?”

Beryl chewed her bottom lip. “I think probably within the last decade. I’m actually really not up to speed here. I’ve been in the background for years, but my brother’s illness has forced me to take the helm.” She glanced at the computer screen again, then narrowed her eyes at Sam. “Colebrook? Isn’t that a little out of your jurisdiction, Chief Mason? I thought you were chief in White Rock. My husband has spoken of you. Just what is your interest in this land?”

“It’s pertaining to a case in my jurisdiction.” Thorne couldn’t have said anything good about Sam to Beryl. Would she kick him out?

Beryl leaned back in her chair. “Then maybe I should get my attorney involved. If this has something to do with police business I might not want to say any more.”

Sam wondered how many people misjudged Beryl Thorne by her petite stature and soft brown eyes. There was a steely glint inside those eyes. She was a hardened businesswoman. And she wasn’t naïve. She knew she had no legal responsibility to talk to him.

Sam didn’t want to have to get a search warrant. That would take time, and if Jamison was as protective of Thorne and his family as DuPont had been, he might not even get one. He needed to make Beryl think they were on the same side. The side of the victim. He had to appeal to her humanity. Even though she was married to Thorne, he hoped she still had some.

“Look. I’m not supposed to give up specifics, but your company isn’t in any trouble. It’s clear that land has not been used. We’d just like to get some specifics on its ownership. It could help bring closure to quite a few families that are missing loved ones.”

Something flashed in Beryl’s eyes. Compassion? Sam hoped so. After a few seconds she turned back to her computer. “This has something to do with the bodies found out by Frank Buckner’s, doesn’t it?”

Sam nodded.

“But this property is in Colebrook. What’s the link?”

“There was a cabin on the property and we found evidence that might link it to what we found near Frank’s,” said Jo, using her soft woman-to-woman tone. Sam was glad he brought her along. She always clicked better with the women they questioned. Plus, Jo was an expert in human psychology. She was good at judging when people were lying. He knew she’d be studying Beryl to see if she knew more about the cabin or her husband than she let on.

“A cabin?” Beryl started typing again. “We don’t usually buy structures, just land.”

“This cabin was well hidden in the woods.”

“There’s no mention of any structure in the computer files. Typically we buy large parcels of land only. But there have been a few cases where someone built a cabin that wasn’t officially on the records. You know those old-timers didn’t want to pay the increase in property taxes.”

“What is the land for if not the cabin?” Jo asked.

Beryl tapped the computer screen with a neatly trimmed but unpolished nail. Despite her perfectly tailored blue suit and high heels, Beryl Thorne was no girly-girl. “This land is for future development.”

“Development? Why would you want to develop something there? It’s in the middle of nowhere.”

Beryl leaned back in her chair again. “It’s in the middle of nowhere *now*, but we’re securing it for the future. As you know, population pushes out and rural areas become more populated. We always keep an eye out for good deals.” She squinted at the screen. “This lot was purchased at a *very* good price, though there’s no specifics as to why. Sometimes people inherit land they have no interest in and let it go cheaply.”

“So you scoop it up, then just hold onto it and build later,” Jo persisted.

Beryl nodded. “We always have an eye out for land that we think will become prime properties. We buy them and hold them for future generations. For my nieces and nephews. It is a family business, after all.”

“Is that similar to what your husband’s company does?” Sam asked.

Beryl’s eyes slid to Sam. “No. He builds commercial development in the present. He doesn’t have an eye toward the future.”

“Do you work for that company too? I mean, the two businesses are similar, so is it an offshoot of Mervale?” Sam asked.

Beryl laughed and shook her head. “I don’t get involved in his business. I found out long ago that business and pleasure don’t mix. His business is totally separate from Mervale.” She turned back to the computer and continued typing. “Unfortunately, this file is incomplete. We recently changed over our computer system and not everything has been entered. I can get my assistant on it and let you know more about when the land was purchased.”

“We’d really appreciate it.” Sam stood, and Jo followed his lead. “Thanks for talking to us.”

As they turned toward the door, Beryl said. “No problem. My pleasure.” It might have been Sam’s imagination, but her tone seemed to indicate that she might have gotten more out of the conversation than they had.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Jo watched Mervale International grow smaller in the side mirror as they drove away. “You think she’s gonna be cooperative?”

“Seems that way. At least until she finds out her husband is our main suspect,” Sam said.

Jo snorted and turned to look at Lucy, who was lying in the back. They’d left her in the car with the windows cracked, and she looked bored. “I can’t picture her being married to Thorne. She seemed kind of nice and smart.”

“Well, they do say love is blind.” Sam’s voice carried a tinge of irony.

Jo glanced sideways at Sam. He’d been married twice. Had he gone into those marriages blind? He didn’t seem like the type of guy to be taken in easily by women, but then again he had gone to lunch with Marnie Wilson. Did Marnie have ulterior motives aside from wanting his support as chief of police?

“So you don’t think she was lying to us or trying to cover for her husband?” Sam asked.

Jo’s area of expertise was reading people, and she’d been looking for the signs. “I don’t think so. Seemed like she was being straight with us.”

The giant doughnut sign for Brewed Awakening snagged her attention. “Hey, let’s hit up Brewed Awakening. I need a stronger coffee. And a doughnut.”

Sam pulled up to the drive-through, and a bright-eyed teen poked her head out. “The usual, Chief Mason?”

“Please. And a plain doughnut, a maple glazed and a few jellies.”

Jo pushed her blue-mirrored police-issue Oakleys on top of her head and leaned forward to look across Sam at the girl in the window. “Make that a half-dozen jellies.”

The girl glanced behind her and frowned. “We’re out of jelly. How about lemon or Boston cream?”

Jo let out an exasperated sigh and sat back in the seat. “Fine. Lemon then.”

The girl handed over the coffees and the white bag full of doughnuts, and Sam pulled away. Jo was quiet as she opened the lid and sipped her coffee, welcoming the bitter taste.

“Is something wrong besides the lack of jelly doughnuts?” Sam asked.

Jo glanced at him out of the corner of her eye. He had his eyes on the road, and she could see the deep creases of worry at the corners of his eyes. His lightly-stubbled jaw was tight with the tension of the case.

Sam felt deeply about seeking justice, especially for families who had lost loved ones. She knew how hard he was working on this case. She didn’t want to add to his burden. It wouldn’t be fair to dump on him about her sister right now just so *she* could feel better. She looked back out her window. “No. Just this case.”

Lucy poked her head between the seats and Jo grabbed the bag, twisting in her seat to look at the German shepherd. “Just one little crumb. These aren’t good for you.”

Lucy panted happily and scarfed up the minuscule fragment.

The silence in the car grew heavy. Jo needed to stop tormenting herself about whether or not she should tell Sam about her sister. She was clearly giving off vibes that something was amiss. She *would* tell him, just not now.

The police radio chirped, and Reese’s voice boomed out, surrounded by static. “Got a call out on Highland Road. Apparently Bullwinkle knocked down Mrs. Peterson’s fence again. Over.”

More static and then Wyatt’s voice. “I’ll take it. I’m in the area.”

Bullwinkle was what the townspeople called any moose that happened to be in the area. Jo wasn’t sure, but she thought maybe they believed there was only one moose in town. There were many moose in the area, so Jo doubted that it was the same one each time one of the animals was spotted wandering through the yards and streets.

Sam looked down at the police radio. “I guess maybe this thing really will work better than using our phones.”

"If we remember to turn it on."

Sam laughed. "Good point."

He smiled at her, and Jo felt the tension between them dissipate. They'd always had an easy working relationship and trust that helped them work together. Jo was relieved that she hadn't ruined it. Despite the heavy burden of the case that lay in front of them, things were looking up.

As they neared the police station, Jo saw a familiar car that dashed her good mood.

"Crap. It's Holden Joyce." Sam voiced her thoughts.

As he parked behind Holden's Toyota 4Runner, Jo grabbed the bag and slid out of the passenger door. "Look on the bright side. Maybe he has good news."

HOLDEN JOYCE WAS WAITING for them in the squad room, but he didn't have good news.

"I hope you aren't holding anything back," he said after Sam told him about the visit to Mervale.

"Look, I want this case closed as badly as you do. Especially if it involves Lucas Thorne," Sam said.

Holden's eyes narrowed. "Lucas Thorne? You really have a bug up your ass about him, don't you? What makes you think this case has anything to do with him?"

"The cabin is owned by his wife's family company."

"That's a stretch, don't you think?"

Sam's jaw tightened. "We suspect he's a drug dealer. We found remnants of a meth lab on the property. *And* that property is tied to a relative. Doesn't sound like a stretch to me."

Holden's expression turned dubious. "That meth lab was no longer in operation. And it's more than an hour from here. If Thorne wanted to add meth to his distribution channel he might pick someplace closer to set up shop. I just hope your zest to nail Lucas Thorne for something won't cloud your judgment."

Jo could practically feel the tension rising between the two men. Though she shared Sam's dislike of Holden Joyce, they'd solve the case

much easier with cooperation. She held up the bag between them. “Doughnut?”

Holden turned to her. He was still scowling, but in his eyes she saw something softer. “Thanks.”

He reached for the bag, and then she saw him do something she’d never seen him do before. He actually broke into a real smile. For some reason it put her on edge. He seemed almost as if he wanted to make friends.

Or did he? Maybe it was all an act because he knew that he could get more information from them if he befriended them. But the way he’d acted when Sam mentioned Thorne made her wonder if he was going to give him a hard time about chasing down leads to prove Thorne was involved. Was that the reason he kept insinuating himself in their cases? Was it possible Holden Joyce was on Thorne’s payroll?

Holden talked around a mouthful of doughnut. “John Dudley managed to match the dental records of one of the victims. She was identified as Arlene Cross, a runaway from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. But her parents hadn’t heard anything from her in more than ten years. She was gone a lot longer than her body was in that grave. We were hoping they might be able to tell us what kind of clothing she had in case we find anything that matched it in the debris we found in the cabin.”

“They couldn’t?” Jo asked.

“Nope. She’d been gone for so many years they had no idea about her wardrobe.”

“Will you be able to get any DNA from the clothing in the cabin?” Sam asked. “Maybe we’ll be able to match that to DNA of the skeletal remains.”

“The lab’s working on that. So far it’s not promising,” Holden said. “I wouldn’t hold out hope on pinning anything on Thorne, and I don’t want to focus on him so much that we disregard other suspects. Whoever was running the meth lab is likely a different person than whoever killed those girls.”

“I agree,” Sam said. “But that doesn’t mean I’m going to let Thorne off the hook. He could very well be involved, especially with that meth lab.”

“Seems to me if he really was the drug dealer here you guys would’ve nailed him by now.”

“Our late mayor blocked most of the search warrants we tried to get to gather evidence. And we suspect there might’ve been a mole somewhere in

the system that got wind of our plans to catch him in the act and alerted Thorne."

Holden's eyes flicked to a desk in the corner. "You mean Richardson?"

"No. Not Richardson," Sam said. "He was a good cop. We think it might've been someone else who perhaps had access to the police department."

"Like maybe one of the other federal workers," Jo said. "Not one of us."

"You mean Dupont's killer?" Holden asked.

"Maybe. We'll never know if it was." Jo glanced at the filing cabinet where Major usually presided. The cat wasn't there, but Jo thought if only the cat could talk he'd be able to tell them if his former owner had been a mole. But how would he have known about their plans? Sure, he had occasion to be at the station a lot, but it wasn't as though they talked about covert operations in the lobby for everyone to hear.

Holden chewed his doughnut for a few seconds. "A drug dealer is one thing, a serial killer quite another. Their modus operandi usually isn't the same." He glanced at Jo. "I just hope you keep that in mind. We don't want those victims to have to wait any longer for justice."

"Agreed." Sam said. "We have the same goal. To catch whoever did that to those girls and find out who was running the meth lab. How about we try to work together better on this one?" Sam held out his hand.

Jo nibbled the corner of her doughnut. The air was thick with tension as Holden Joyce hesitated, staring at Sam's outstretched hand for a few beats before shoving the rest of his pastry in his mouth and clasping Sam's hand. "Agreed."

Holden picked another doughnut from the bag before turning to leave. "You let me know if anything new comes up. I'll do the same." Then he looked directly at Jo and said, "It'll be nice working with you."

A funny feeling gnawed at Jo's gut as she watched him leave. What was up with that weird look? Had Sam noticed the strange undertone? It was almost as if he was trying to give her some subliminal message. But what, exactly? The last case they'd worked with him he'd wanted to make sure Jo was disciplined for a minor slip-up. So why was he acting so friendly now?

"That was weird," Sam said after they heard the door shut.

"I'll say."

"What do you think he's up to?"

“No idea. We’ll just have to be cautious around him. If he’s gonna share information with us, I guess it can’t hurt.”

“I guess you’re right. *If* he actually shares everything.” Sam walked over to the cork board where they’d tacked up printouts of the images Wyatt had taken at the shallow graves. He leaned his butt against the edge of Jo’s desk and set his coffee cup down. “So I guess it’s up to us to prove that Thorne is the perpetrator behind at least one of these crimes.”

“Do you really think he had anything to do with these girls?” Jo scanned the images, her eyes coming to rest on one of the bog birch leaves lying on the blue tarp with the odd pattern of holes. Could the leaf really connect the graves to the cabin? Even if it did, they needed much more.

“I have no idea, but I don’t think the other police agencies are going to put in quite as much effort in looking into Thorne as we are,” Sam said.

“We need to find something to tie him to that meth lab. What about the duct tape and hoses left in the kitchen? Is that something he would use at his construction site?” Jo eyed the bottom row of photographs.

”Maybe. But they’re also common construction materials. The meth lab is older. Anything purchased for his construction site would have been purchased recently, so there might not be any way to prove a connection.”

“What about something in his past? If he killed those girls, he’s probably exhibited some odd behavior previously. Serial killers usually ramp up.” Jo knew a lot about that. In her research of serial killers she discovered all kinds of things about them, but she didn’t want to go into too many details or Sam might question why she knew so much.

“Good thinking.” Sam pulled out his phone and thumbed in a text. “I’ll get Mick on that. We don’t want to ruffle any feathers with Holden Joyce or the state police or any of the others if they think we’re paying too much attention to Thorne. Problem is we might not be able to tie him to the meth lab. He usually has minions do his dirty work. But if he is the killer I’m sure he would’ve done that work himself.”

“Maybe we should talk to Jesse. He might know something about the meth lab.” Jesse Cowley was a small-time drug dealer in town Sam had been grooming as an informant. He’d made a point to catch Jesse with a little bit of pot now and then and let him go so that Jesse owed him. Now might be a good time to collect.

“Can’t hurt, though he doesn’t seem to know very much about the higher-ups on the chain. I suppose any information would be good. I’ll have

Mick meet us at Holy Spirits tonight. We'll probably run into Jesse there."

Woof!

Lucy raised her head from where she'd been lying in a patch of sunlight and looked toward the lobby.

"What is it?" Sam asked just as the lobby door opened and they heard Harry Woolston greeting Reese. A few seconds later he came around the corner of the post office boxes wearing blue, green, and pink plaid Bermuda shorts and a pink polo shirt.

Lucy rushed to him, sniffing the hem of the shorts with suspicion. This wasn't Harry's usual type of outfit.

"What's with the get-up, Harry?" Sam was amused.

"Darn wife. Wants me to take up a hobby. Painting. Golfing. Bridge. She says hanging around at the police station is dangerous." Harry pressed his lips together. "Then again, I guess she might have a point. I did almost get shot last time."

"Yeah, your wife might be onto something. Hobbies could be good at your age," Jo said.

"Bah! Hobbies are boring." Harry bent down to pet the top of Lucy's head. "I need action!"

Lucy's tail wagging stopped abruptly, and she jerked her head toward Sam's office. Major sauntered through the partially open doorway as if he owned the place. He stopped and the two of them glared at each other for a tense second before Major continued to the filing cabinet, leaping up to the top in one fluid motion.

Achoo! Harry looked at the filing cabinet. "Are you keeping that darn thing? I'm allergic." He moved as far from the cabinet as he could get, Lucy following at his heels.

"Yes, we're keeping him, Harry!" Reese called in from the reception area.

Harry made a face. "Anyway, I just stopped by to see how you got on with Marnie Wilson."

"We got on fine." Sam sounded noncommittal.

"Well, I hope so. You know us seniors really like her for mayor, and I'm hoping you can put your support behind her."

"She seems like she's planning some good things," Sam said. "I highly doubt my support will be a deciding factor in the election."

Harry waved his hand dismissively. “Of course it will. You know the people look up to the police chief in this town. Why when I was chief —.”

Fortunately, Harry’s diatribe about the good old days was interrupted by his phone clanging. He dug it out of his pocket and squinted at the display. “Darn. It’s the wife. I gotta run. See you guys later.”

Jo bit back a smile as he turned and ran out. For all of Harry’s bluster, Jo knew who really wore the pants in that family. She clearly picked out his outfits.

Sam’s phone pinged. “Okay, Mick is on the case. He’ll meet us at Holy Spirits tonight.” He glanced up at the clock, then back at Jo. “That gives me just enough time to talk to our number-one suspect, Lucas Thorne.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sam's thoughts were on Jo as he pulled into Thorne's construction site. He didn't think her odd behavior had anything to do with jelly doughnuts. Did it have something to do with his lunch with Marnie? Maybe Sam was reading too much into the way she'd been acting, but he'd worked closely with Jo for several years now, and he thought he knew all her moods. Then again, he'd never been very good at understanding women, at least according to his ex-wives.

"It's probably just nothing. I should let it go, right?" Sam asked Lucy as he let her out of the back of the Tahoe.

Lucy wagged her tail in agreement.

"Okay, good call."

The construction site was busy. Thorne was building a five-story hotel on an old farm site. It had great views of the mountains and the lake, but Sam would've rather seen it remain farmland. He couldn't wait to put Thorne out of business.

Sam headed across the dirt lot toward the construction trailer amidst the clanging of machinery and shouting of workmen. The exterior of the aluminum trailer was thick with dirt and rust, but Sam knew its shabby appearance didn't extend past the outer walls. Inside, it was about as opulent as a construction trailer could be.

Just before he got to the makeshift wooden steps, Lucy veered to the right, trotting toward the building.

"Lucy!" Sam snapped his fingers.

The dog hesitated, glanced back at him, and then swung her head back toward the construction site and continued on.

Sam shrugged and followed. If Lucy was disobeying a command he was sure she had good reason.

She stopped at the corner of the building. There was no construction going on at this end, so there was minimal risk of Lucy getting hurt. Sam scanned the piles of building materials just to make sure. Was this why Lucy had led him here? He catalogued it in his mind: rebar, lumber, concrete. No duct tape or rubber hoses as he'd seen in the cabin.

Lucy was busily sniffing the corner of the building. Sam didn't see anything there either.

But something else was odd. The ground next to the building was freshly covered, as if plans to build there had been changed. Wasn't the lobby supposed to go here? He shaded his eyes and looked toward the other end, where the construction was focused. It looked as if they'd moved the lobby area down there.

He looked behind him to the land that belonged to Jackson Pressler and was the nesting site of the Great Bearded Owls. Had Thorne moved the lobby to the other side so that the building wouldn't disturb the owls? Had it been at his wife's insistance?

Sam whistled for Lucy. "Okay, I see what you wanted me to see. Come on. We have to talk to Thorne."

Lucy tore herself away from her sniffing and trotted back to the trailer at Sam's side.

Sam opened the flimsy aluminum screen door and knocked on the hollow plywood door behind it.

"Come in." Thorne bellowed from inside.

Sam opened the door, and a cool wave of spicy aftershave wafted out. Inside, the hum of the air-conditioner in one of the windows masked the sounds of construction. The office was as plush as he remembered. Thick carpeting. Rich dark paneled walnut walls. Shelves lined with trophies. Golf, tennis, softball. Apparently Thorne had lots of leisure time.

"Shut the door. I'm not air-conditioning White Rock."

Thorne sat in a big black leather chair behind an ornate mahogany desk. The sleeves of his light blue button-down shirt were rolled up to reveal forearms that were tanned and muscular for a man of his age. Though in his late forties he still looked youthful. Probably all that golf and tennis.

“Mason. What a pleasant surprise.” The sarcasm in his voice indicated it was anything but. “I hear you have a big case. Surprised you have time to visit little old me.”

“I’m here following leads on a case.”

Thorne leaned back in his chair, steepling his fingers over his stomach. “Really? Is that the one out by Frank Buckner’s? Surely you don’t think I had anything to do with that?”

“Maybe.”

Thorne laughed. “Have you been drinking? What evidence do you have to even insinuate that I would have something to do with that mess?”

“I have evidence that links those shallow graves to a meth lab. And then I have further evidence that links you to the meth lab.”

Thorne snorted. “Seriously? I’m a real estate developer. What would I want with a meth lab?”

“To increase profitability of your drug business,” Sam said. Thorne was acting pretty confident that he couldn’t be linked to the meth lab or the girls. Was it because he was innocent or just too cocky to believe that Sam would find solid evidence against him? Or maybe he’d paid off so many people that he figured the police would never be able to make a case without being blocked at every turn.

Thorne gestured toward the small window in the side of the trailer. “Are you kidding me? I’m pretty busy with all of this. But I’ll humor you. What exactly is this evidence linking me to a meth lab?”

“The land the abandoned meth lab operated on is owned by your wife’s company.”

At the mention of his wife, Thorne’s eyes narrowed slightly. Trouble in paradise? Sam wondered if Beryl Thorne knew more about her husband’s activities than she let on. Or maybe she was just becoming aware of his drug activities. Sam doubted she would approve. If they were having marital problems and she didn’t approve of his extracurricular activities, Sam might be able to get her on his side. She could provide him with valuable information against her husband.

“Then I guess you don’t have much. My company has nothing to do with Mervale, so you really have no connection at all.” He stood up behind his desk, and Lucy let out a low growl. His eyes flicked to the dog. “Get out and take your dog before I slap you with a harassment suit.”

Sam stared at him for a few seconds. Thorne was guilty, at least of dealing drugs. Now Sam just had to prove it. “No problem. But I’ll be looking at you very closely.”

Sam left the wooden door open. Halfway to the Tahoe, he turned to see Thorne staring after him. He got in the vehicle wondering if he’d done the right thing.

Had he just given Thorne enough warning to cover his tracks or had he rattled him enough that he’d make a stupid mistake?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Almost everyone had gone home for the night by the time Sam got back to the station. He found Jo waiting for him, seated at her desk wearing a gray T-shirt and jeans, plugging away on her laptop.

She looked up from her computer. “How did it go?”

“The usual. He denied everything.”

“Big surprise there.”

Lucy trotted over to say hello to Jo as Sam went into his office, talking to her through the open door as he changed his shirt. “I did discover that they moved the lobby of the hotel so it was farther from the bearded owls.”

“Really? You think the wife had anything to do with that?” Jo asked.

“Possibly.”

“Did you notice any rubber hosing or building materials, like we saw in that cottage?”

“No. But I didn’t get to inspect the entire property.” Sam came out of the office. He’d changed out of his WRPD T-shirt into plain black. People tended to avoid him in Holy Spirits when he was wearing the one with the giant white police letters on the back. “You ready?”

Jo closed the laptop and stood. “Yeah. I could use a beer.”

“Me too.”

Lucy whined and wagged her tail.

“Not you.” Sam took her bowl out of the cupboard, filled it and put it on the floor. Lucy’s attention pivoted from Sam to the food.

The food caught Major’s attention too, and he started in the direction of the bowl. Lucy’s bared teeth and low growl made the cat veer away quickly

toward the lobby, acting as if that had been his destination the whole time.

Sam raised a brow at Jo, and she laughed. Just like old times. He'd been imagining the rift between them the whole time, just as he thought.

Holy Spirits was a decommissioned church turned into a bar. The giant oak double doors opened into a vestibule that was largely the same as it had been when the church was in operation. This fooled the occasional tourist, who then opened the inner doors, surprised to find a bar in action.

Inside, the cavernous twenty-foot-high ceilings gave it a spacious feel. The dark wooden floors were scarred and scraped with over a century of use. Giant field stones held in place by chipped mortar made up the bottom half of the walls.

Some of the original pews had been recycled as seating for long tables in the back. Round tables had been scattered throughout the rest of the interior. The bar resided where the altar had once been. The stained-glass windows above cast dim shadows of jewel-toned light into the room. Beneath the windows rows of colorful liquor bottles stood beneath a mirror that ran the length of the bar.

The favorite watering hole had a casual feeling despite its formal beginnings. Billie Hanson, the owner, kept the lights low and the beer flowing.

The bar was fairly crowded, and the chatter of patrons melded with the smell of burgers and hops.

"At least Holden Joyce isn't here," Jo said as they slid onto their usual barstools.

"Yeah, what is up with him? And what was with that weird look he gave you earlier at the station?" Sam leaned over the polished wooden surface of the bar and signaled Billie, who was serving a group of customers at the other corner of the bar. She turned and gave a slight nod, the seven diamond studs in her ears winking in the light. Her spiked hair was tipped with blue tonight. A white dishtowel was tossed over her shoulder.

"Yeah, I'm not sure what's up with him," Jo watched Billie hustle, grabbing two plates of burgers from the little opening into the kitchen and sliding them in front of two customers before opening the cooler and grabbing their usual beers—a local beer called Moosenose for Sam and a Boston Lager for Jo.

"Seems like he's up to something. Do you think he could still have a hair up his butt about Tyler's log book?"

Earlier that summer Jo had forged an entry in the log of fallen officer Tyler Richardson. She'd done it to protect Tyler, and Sam stood by that. Tyler had failed to log the call, which was against procedure but was common practice in their town. They often filled in the log when they got back to the station. Except Tyler never came back to the station. During a related investigation, Holden Joyce had found out about the log book and pressed for disciplinary action against Jo. He didn't win that battle. Maybe he was still angry about it and planning to make her pay some other way.

"Maybe. It could be something else."

They sipped their beers. The coldness of the earthy brew felt good going down. Sam turned to Jo, expecting her to explain what she thought Holden's problem could be. She silently picked at her beer label with her thumbnail.

"Something else?" he prompted.

"Well, a long time ago—"

"Hey, Sam!" a woman's voice yelled out, interrupting Jo.

Sam turned to see Marnie Wilson waving to him from across the room.

JO'S GAZE skimmed over Sam's shoulder. Marnie Wilson stood at a table, waving at Sam as if they were long-lost friends. What was she doing in a place like Holy Spirits? Trying to get the vote of the common people?

"Oh, it's Marnie. I have to go ask her something. Hold on." Sam pushed away from the bar and Jo turned back to her label, sliding her thumbnail up through the part that had become wet with condensation and watching it accordion off into a little strip.

It had seemed like the right moment to mention her sister's case, but maybe this was a sign that she shouldn't tell Sam at all. Their relationship seemed as though it was getting back to the way it had been. Why rock the boat now? Sam thought that the weird way Holden was acting had to do with the log book. Maybe he was right. Maybe it was just guilt that made her think that Holden Joyce knew about her lifelong research into serial killers.

Jo glanced up into the mirror behind the bar to see Jesse Cowley approaching. Perfect. Now she could ask him if he knew anything about

that meth lab.

Jesse leaned across the bar next to her. “Hey, Officer Harris.”

“Sergeant.” Jo corrected.

“Yeah. Right. Sorry.” Billie came to take his order. Two Bud Lights and a Moosenose.

“I’ll take care of it.” Jo pushed some bills across the bar and glanced at Jesse. “I have a few questions.”

Jesse looked back over his shoulder nervously. He didn’t like his friends to see him talking to the police. He didn’t want them to think he was some kind of informant. Sam and Jo always tried to keep it light and informal, taking pains to meet in places where his friends wouldn’t see them.

“What?” His voice was wary.

“You know anything about a meth lab in the area?”

“Meth? No. I don’t do that stuff. I stick to pot. But I haven’t heard of anyone cooking in White Rock.”

“Not White Rock. Colebrook.”

Jesse tapped his fingers on the bar, his eyes darting the length to see how Billie was progressing with his beers. “Colebrook? That wouldn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Never said it did. I’m just asking if you’ve heard anything.”

Billie placed the beers in front of Jesse. He collected them and then stood there for a few seconds. Jo glanced over at Sam. Looked like he and Marnie were standing pretty close. Just what was it that Sam was in such a hurry to ask her about anyway?

“Okay, I have heard about meth labs in the area. I don’t know exactly where, but I hear they move around.”

“Do you think the people you get your pot from also distribute meth?”

“I’ve heard they do, but I honestly don’t know any specifics. Like I said, I stick to pot.”

“Know anyone who might know more?”

“No. Sorry.” Jesse stepped away from the bar. “Look, I gotta run.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Jo turned back to her beer. She hadn’t counted on Jesse having much information anyway. They knew from previous interrogations that he didn’t know much about what happened above his contact in the supply chain. Thorne had things locked down pretty tight, making sure each cog in his

machine had only enough information to do their job. She guessed it was safer that way.

She hoped Sam's talk with Marnie would be more helpful.

THE LAST PERSON Sam had expected to see at Holy Spirits was Marnie Wilson. Not that he minded. It would be a great opportunity to dig up information on Beryl Thorne.

"Good to see you, Sam. I hope you've been thinking about the talk we had at lunch." Marnie had a beer bottle in one hand. Some kind of light beer. She put the bottle to her lips, but the volume didn't decrease much.

"Of course. Harry wouldn't let me *not* think about it," Sam said. "But I don't really think anyone cares who I support."

"Not so! As you can see, we have common goals and ideas." Marnie gestured around the bar as if they now had something in common. She lowered her voice, and Sam had to lean far closer to her than was comfortable to hear what she said. "Besides, I know we will be on the same side with the Convale project."

Right. Same side. Sam wasn't exactly sure about that because she'd been so vague earlier. But he had more pressing problems. "Speaking of ecology-minded things, you mentioned you were friends with Beryl Thorne. What do you know about her company, Mervale?"

Marnie frowned. "Her family company? Not much. I know they have real estate holdings. Commercial, I think. She never talked much about it, but then her brother has been running it. She only took over because he was sick."

"Yeah, I heard."

"Why do you ask?"

"The company owns some land that came up in a case."

Marnie's frown deepened. "The skeletal remains? I thought that land was conservation land."

"It is. This was something else." Sam didn't want to lie, but he also didn't want to give away too much. Especially to a politician. You never knew how they'd use information.

Marnie took another miniature swig of her beer. Sam glanced at the bar. Jo was talking to Jesse. Good, maybe she was getting something useful, because this conversation was getting him nowhere.

"I'm sure Mervale hasn't done anything illegal." Marnie's face filled with concern. "Beryl wouldn't stand for it. She plays by the rules. I think I told you how ecology-minded she is, right? She's not like her husband."

"You did tell me." But Sam had to wonder if Beryl really did play by the rules or was her company a convenient front that did things on the up and up so that they could use Thorne's business to bend the rules?

When he'd talked to Beryl Thorne he'd gotten the sense that she didn't know about her husband's extracurricular activities, but still Sam couldn't be sure she wasn't in on it. He couldn't imagine that Thorne could hide the fact that he was one of the biggest drug dealers in the county from his wife.

Sam had never been successful hiding anything from his wives, and Beryl seemed much sharper than either of the women he'd married.

Marnie continued, "I mean, she even got her husband to stop building near those owls. You know she goes up every Thursday morning to birdwatch and take photographs of them?"

Sam remembered the photographs in Beryl's office. Had she taken them? They were pretty good. "Did she ever mention anything about acquiring land and holding onto it as a business model?"

"Of course. That's part of what they do. Her grandfather started that company ages ago. In fact, he bought land up here in White Rock cheap as dirt about sixty years ago when the family lived down in Massachusetts. They relocated up here about thirty years ago and they're just starting to develop that land now."

"Don't you think it's odd that her family company does work similar to what her husband's company does? I mean, why not just have one company?"

Marnie scowled. "Yeah. But my guess is they financed Lucas and taught him the ropes, probably for Beryl's sake. Maybe they didn't want him involved in their company."

Now things were getting interesting. "Why wouldn't they want that?"

Marnie shrugged. "I assume the corporate positions would go to blood family members. Maybe there was no room for Thorne at the top. He can be a hard man."

Sam raised his brows, but when Marnie didn't comment further he prompted, "Yeah, families can be supportive like that. If the two of them have a good marriage, the businesses could be complementary even."

Maybe he could get a hint from Marnie about the Thornes' marital situation. If Beryl wasn't very happy with her husband, it might not be very hard to persuade her to give up information that could be used as evidence against him.

"I guess it could be." Marnie started looking around the bar. Was she looking for the next victim that she could try to persuade to vote for her, or were Sam's questions making her nervous?

"I guess it's already working if she convinced Thorne to move the focus of the construction so as not to affect the owls," Sam said.

"Let's just say she does have certain leverage over him as his wife. And it *is* her family money after all." Marnie took another swig. "So why all the questions. Is she in trouble?"

"No. Not at all. We're satisfied that Mervale has nothing to do with what we're investigating," Sam lied. "I just remembered that you knew her and thought I'd ask a few unofficial questions."

Marnie smiled but continued gazing around the room. He wasn't going to get any more information from her, so there was no sense in continuing the conversation. "Well, nice running into you."

"You too." Sam started back to the bar. Jesse was just leaving. He hoped Jo's conversation had been more enlightening.

JO WAS FINISHING her beer when Sam slid onto the barstool next to her.

"You find out anything good from Jesse?" he asked.

Jo shook her head. "Same old, same old. He doesn't know anything that's going on in the chain above him. He did say he'd heard of meth labs in the area and they moved around, but I don't think we'll get anything specific from him." Jo glanced at him from under her lashes. "What about Marnie?"

"She'd mentioned before that she was friends with Beryl Thorne. So I asked her a few questions about Mervale and the Thornes."

That's what they'd been talking about? Work stuff? For some reason Jo had thought maybe his chat with Marnie was personal. She didn't know why, but something about Marnie set her alarm off, and she didn't want to see Sam getting mixed up with her. "Why would you want to ask about that?"

"I suspect Beryl Thorne might not know exactly what her husband is up to. She didn't seem stupid, but I bet she must be starting to wonder about some of his behavior."

"Or she's in on it with him."

Sam studied her. "Do you really think so?"

Jo thought about it for a minute. "No. I actually got the impression that they might not be that close."

"Me too. That's why I was asking. I'm figuring if we can take some evidence of Thorne's activities to her, we can get her to give us something that incriminates him. I'm sure she wouldn't want her good family name to get caught up in a scandal."

Jo peeled another strip from the label. "Good point."

Mick Gervasi slid onto the barstool next to Sam. The jet black curly hair he wore just below the ears set off his ice-blue eyes. His navy blue T-shirt was tight against the muscles of his arms and chest. If Jo didn't know better, she'd peg Mick for ten years younger than his forty years. The private investigator liked to keep in shape. You never knew when you'd find yourself on the defensive.

"Hey, buddy." Mick clapped Sam on the back. The two had been friends since kindergarten, and Jo envied the relationship. She didn't have anyone she was that close to unless you counted her goldfish, Finn, and she'd only had him less than a year. Even Bridget was nearly a stranger. Jo resisted the urge to take her phone out. Bridget still hadn't replied to her text.

Billie rushed over. Mick was one of her favorite customers, and she already had a crystal tumbler filled with ice cubes in hand before Mick could order his usual whiskey on the rocks.

"I did a little research after you texted." Mick pulled out a piece of paper and unfolded it on the bar in front of them. "Do you have any new leads?"

Sam shook his head. They often used Mick to track leads that they couldn't follow through official channels. As a result, he was privy to a lot

of their investigations. Because they'd been friends since kindergarten, Mick had Sam's full trust and, by extension, also Jo's.

"What did you find out?" Jo asked.

Mick turned his drink between his hands, the amber liquid swirling. "Serial killers are an interesting breed. Most of them have no remorse. And sometimes it can start young."

"Did you find anything that might indicate Thorne could be one of these killers?" Sam asked. "I mean, he's been living here for a while and we haven't had any other killings here, unless there are more bodies we haven't found. If it is Thorne, what has he been doing all this time?"

"Sometimes they can be dormant for years and then all of a sudden they start another killing spree," Mick said. "Maybe Thorne has been dormant. He hasn't lived here his whole life, right?"

"I think he moved here when he married Beryl. Did you find anything unsettling in his background? Maybe some unsolved murders where he lived before he met Beryl?"

"No, but I'll dig into his childhood. Serial killers often manifest killing behavior when they are young. They start with torturing animals or act out in other ways." Mick said. "This was only preliminary research. Don't worry, I'll dig deeper."

"Great. See if he had any ties to the runaways. One of them has been identified. Her name was Arlene Cross. She was from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania."

Mick wrote the name on the paper. "Let me know when they identify the others. I can cross-reference locations to see if Thorne was in any of those towns."

"Can't hurt, but if this is tied into the abandoned cabin, my bet is that Thorne, or whoever the serial killer is, preyed on the runaways after they'd been on the street for a while," Jo said.

Sam took a swig of beer. "Probably. But no harm in checking everything. I don't dare focus on him too much through police channels. Holden Joyce is already on our case about it."

Mick made a face. "You mean that FBI guy that was such a pain before?"

"That's the one."

"He's involved in this too? Don't you think it's weird that he keeps showing up on your cases?" Mick chugged his drink, sending the ice cubes

clinking together.

“I’ll say.” Sam glanced in Jo’s direction, making her feel uneasy.

Did he think Holden Joyce’s presence had something to do with her? She doubted that. She had no link to him, so there was no reason for Sam to think so.

She sipped her beer as Mick told them what he’d learned about serial killer behavior. Jo already knew everything he told them and more, but she didn’t want to show off her knowledge. She didn’t want anyone to question why she’d become such an expert.

Not that she intended to hide it when it came to investigating. She’d make sure she applied everything she knew to help with the case, just not in an obvious way. Maybe she hadn’t been able to use that knowledge to get justice for her sister, but she sure as hell was going to use it to get justice for the victims in the shallow graves.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The little orange cat was on Jo's porch when she got home around eight that night. The sun had just set, causing the late-summer blooms to release their perfume and turning everything shades of blue and gray. The full moon peeked over the tops of the pines, crickets chirped loudly, and fireflies danced at the edge of the forest.

The cat didn't run away as she walked up the steps. It just sat there, its gaze shifting pointedly from Jo to the food bowl and then back again. Progress.

Jo crouched down, holding her hand out toward the cat. "Hi, kitty." The cat sniffed in her direction and looked at the bowl again, but kept far enough away so Jo couldn't pet it. Its orange-ringed tail swished uneasily in the air.

"Okay, I guess you're trying to send me the message that you want some food huh?"

Jo brought the dirty cat bowl inside to the sink and took out another small bowl. It was from a set of little antique dessert bowls she'd bought at a flea market. She'd thought the opalescent ringed bowls were pretty, but when would she ever use them? They were the perfect size for the cat, and she might as well put them to good use. She filled it with Fancy Feast and brought it outside to the porch, sat in the rocker and waited.

The cat approached and sniffed cautiously for a few seconds before digging in.

Jo sat for a while, letting the cat eat. She didn't want to be too aggressive. After a few minutes the cat came over, sniffed her hand, and let

Jo scratch it behind the ears. It still seemed skittish, as if any sudden movement or loud noise would make it bolt.

"Good kitty. Hopefully by winter you'll at least be ready to sleep on the porch."

The cat's ears shot up seconds before Jo heard the crunch of tires coming down the road. Who was coming way out here? Sam?

The cat bolted to the woods as a black Toyota 4Runner pulled into her driveway.

Holden Joyce?

Jo stood up, warning bells going off in her head. What was the FBI agent doing at her house? How had he even known where she lived?

Jo moved to the top of the steps as Joyce approached.

"Agent Joyce, what brings you here?" Jo snugged her hoodie around her middle. She didn't have a good feeling about this.

"I came to apologize," Holden stopped at the bottom of the steps, looking about as uneasy as Jo felt.

Apologize? Jo wasn't buying it. Holden Joyce was up to something.

"For what?"

"Seems we got off to a bad start," Holden eyed the porch as if Jo was going to invite him up. She wasn't. She snugged the hoodie tighter and waited for him to say more.

He twirled his keys on his finger, looking down at the ground. "I admit I came off a little strong on that other case. But I'd been given certain information about people in your department. Information that I now realize might have been wrong, especially after digging into your background a bit more."

He'd been digging into her background? "What, exactly, do you mean?"

"Well, let's just say that I know that your motives are probably solid. In fact, I know a little bit more about your motives than you might think." Holden looked up, and the look in his eye made her wonder if his words had some sort of veiled meaning. "Anyway, I was wrong to want you to have been punished for filling in the logbook for your fellow officer."

Well, now that was a surprise; not at all what Jo had been expecting. Her guilty conscience had her thinking that Holden Joyce knew something about her off-the-record investigation of her sister's case when, in fact, he'd come to apologize about Tyler.

“Why the change of heart? You seemed pretty gung-ho about it when we last met, and now you’ve come all the way out here to apologize.” Jo was skeptical.

Holden gazed off into the distance. “Those girls in the shallow graves is why I’m here. We have a much better chance of solving this case and seeking justice for those victims if we work together. And, like I said, after doing my research I realized what I’d been told was wrong.” Holden kicked a pebble with his black shiny FBI shoes. “And I think you bring a level of expertise to the situation that could be particularly helpful.”

Holden’s gaze drifted back to hers, and their eyes locked. She’d never noticed that his were brown. Hadn’t looked at him closely enough. And now they were brimming with hidden meaning. But she could see that his words about the victims were sincere. Still, she had to wonder what he meant when he said she had a level of expertise.

Was it possible that Holden Joyce knew about her sister? Had he been in on her sister’s case? She did the math in her head. He looked to be around 50-ish. He would’ve only been in his early 20s when her sister had been abducted, but it was possible he’d worked for the Bureau then.

Hadn’t Bev Hatch mentioned something about a bungled case that had haunted him? Was it possible it was her sister’s case? If it had, he would’ve connected the last names, but Harris wasn’t exactly unique. But if he had, that might explain all the strange looks he’d been giving her.

“Anyway, I just wanted to come out and apologize in the hope that we can start fresh. You helped out a fellow officer and spared his family undue pain. That was the right thing to do. I hope to come together to solve this case.” He gave her one last long look, then turned and got back in his car, leaving Jo staring after him.

Just as his taillights vanished, her phone pinged. She pulled it out. It was Bridget! Relief flooded through her, overshadowing her concerns about the odd conversation with Holden. The text contained two words.

Doing okay.

Jo hadn’t been close with her sister in years, but she still loved her desperately. Sure, Jo had tried to help her many times. Rehab. Counseling. Taking her into her own home. But Bridget always fell back into drugs. It was frustrating, but Jo had had to make her peace with it or it would’ve driven her crazy.

She thumbed back a quick text.

Good to hear that. Hope things are looking up.

Jo still hoped one day Bridget would go straight. At least she was still alive.

Doing good. Staying in a halfway house now.

Jo let a reluctant seed of hope sprout. Bridget could be just telling her what she wanted to hear, but a halfway house was better than the campsites and dingy abandoned buildings her sister had lived in before. Was it possible she really was trying to clean up her act this time?

That's wonderful! Can I do anything to help?

No answer came for a few minutes. Had she pushed too far? Then another text.

Not yet. Trying to get clean this time for real. Will let you know. I heard about your case.

She had? Jo hadn't even realized her sister read papers or was aware of anything going on outside of her little drug circle, but maybe she really was at a halfway house and getting back into society. Her heart warmed that her sister might be interested in finding out what was going on in her life.

Was it possible her sister knew anything that could help in the case? Might as well ask.

We think the victims were involved with drugs. Have you heard anything?

Jo didn't want to pump her sister for information. She was truly happy and relieved and hopeful that her sister was trying to get clean, but Bridget had opened the door by mentioning the case. Maybe it was because she knew something.

A friend of mine went missing five years ago. It always haunted me. She could be one of the bodies that you found.

Adrenalin spiked through Jo.

What was her name? What can you tell me about her?

She said her name was Amber Desrocher and she was from Ohio. Thing was, she'd hooked up with a guy from up north. Older guy. Went off with him one day and never came back.

An older guy? Thorne? She needed to talk to her sister right away.

Would you recognize him? I want to meet and talk to you. Make sure you're doing okay.

Jo didn't want her sister to think she only wanted to meet with her to talk about the case, because that wasn't true. She truly wanted to assure

herself her sister was okay.

Jo stared at the phone for a few minutes, but no text came. Dammit! She'd pushed too far again. It had always been a problem trying to force things instead of letting Bridget do things in her own time.

Then, finally.

Not now. Can't see you until I make sure I'm really going to do it this time. So many failures…

Jo wasn't going to push this time. Her sister's recovery was more important than this case. If she truly was going to go straight this time it was more important than anything. But she had one tidbit of information that could be incredibly helpful. If Amber was one of the victims, and the man from up north was Thorne, and her sister could recognize him, that could break the case wide open.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sam had a set of the crime scene photos tacked up to the cork board in his office. He ran his fingers through his hair as he studied each one, looking for a link between the shallow graves and the abandoned cabin. The two cases were related. He felt it in his gut.

Two light taps on his office door broke his concentration. He turned to see Jo standing in the doorway. “I might have a lead.”

Sam spun around and gave his full attention to his sergeant. “Really? Spill.”

Jo came in and stood on the other side of his desk. She had a notebook in her left hand and her number two pencil in her right. She was tapping the eraser end of the pencil on the pad in her usual nervous habit.

“I contacted my sister last night,” Jo said.

Jo didn’t talk about her sister much. Sam only knew that she’d gotten involved in drugs at a young age and was living in the drug community somewhere up in the area. In fact, it was one of the reasons Jo had come to White Rock.

Now the odd way Jo had been acting lately made sense. Of course, finding the skeletal remains and realizing they were linked to drugs probably terrified her. She must have been sick with worry over her sister.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t even think about your sister. You must’ve been worried.” How could he have been so insensitive? Being wrapped up in the case was no excuse. “Is she okay?”

“No need to apologize. My sister isn’t your problem.” Jo sat down in the guest chair, and it rocked forward because one front leg was shorter than

the other. Great for throwing suspects off kilter. Not so great for guests. “She says she’s trying to get clean, but who knows. Anyway, she had heard about the case and gave me the name of a young girl she befriended who disappeared right around the time the victims would’ve been murdered.”

“Really? What’s her name?” They hadn’t been able to identify all the remains yet, and it had weighed heavily on Sam. He desperately wanted to bring closure to the families who were missing children. Though considering what had happened to them, maybe it was kinder if the families just thought they were out there alive somewhere.

“Amber Desrocher. She said she was from Ohio.” Jo shrugged. “Here’s the kicker. She said Amber got involved with an older man from up north. She took off with the guy one day and never came back.”

“Thorne?” Sam said hopefully.

Jo shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe if one of those skeletons does belong to Amber then we could bring a photo of Thorne down to see if my sister recognizes him.”

“Would she do that?”

“I’m not sure. You know it’s been up and down with her. She might disappear off the radar.” Jo glanced down at her phone.

“I understand. Let’s take it one step at a time.” Sam’s pulse skipped with a spark of hope. Maybe this case was coming together after all.

Another tap at the door, and Reese poked her head in. “I have some new information, and I don’t think you’re gonna like it.”

THEY ALL FILED BACK in the squad room. Reese had a pile of papers and her iPad in her hand. She handed the papers to Sam and talked while her fingers typed on the screen keyboard. “Medical examiner’s report on the skeletal remains. John was able to determine for sure that they’ve been there for at least five years.”

“So we need to figure out what Thorne was up to five years ago.” Before discovering that Thorne was behind the drug problem in White Rock, Sam had thought he was merely a belligerent pompous asshole ruining the town with all his construction.

How long ago had that been? Sam had been more focused on figuring out how Thorne was getting permission to turn all their rural zoning into commercial than observing him for behavior that indicated he was a deranged killer. But why had Reese said he wouldn't like the results?

"What's the part I'm not gonna like?"

Reese looked up from the iPad. "Unfortunately, Mervale International didn't own that land the cabin is on five years ago. They bought it three years ago."

Sam glanced at Jo. That was a bit of a problem. But since Mervale didn't even actually know the cabin had been on that property, then maybe Thorne knew about the land ahead of time because he'd used it for his drug operation. Maybe Thorne had told Mervale about it.

"Maybe Thorne knew about that piece of land and knew there was an abandoned cabin. I mean, someone was using it to cook meth and that wasn't necessarily the owner, right?"

"Who did own it?" Jo asked.

"That's what I'm trying to find out." Reese pointed to the iPad. "I'm in contact with my friend right now. You know, the one who has access to certain legal databases. Problem is there are two kinds of trusts. One of them you can hide the actual owners, and that's the kind of trust this land was in when Mervale bought it. There's no way to find out who the actual owner of it was." Reese glanced up at Sam. "At least no *legal,* way, if you get my drift."

Sam got her drift. He didn't want to ask any more questions. Sometimes if you couldn't do things by the book it was better to not tell anyone how you gained the information.

The lobby door opened, and Reese stepped back around the post office boxes, her attention barely leaving the iPad. Sam heard Beryl Thorne's voice drift over from the lobby. "Is Chief Mason in? I have some information that he wanted."

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance. She'd come in person? She must really be worried about her company.

Sam went out to the lobby and shook her hand. She was dressed in a pale blue suit. She looked petite. Feminine. But he got the sense that she was hard as nails underneath. He didn't get the feeling that she had a hidden agenda as he did with Marnie Wilson. Seemed like Beryl Thorne was a straight shooter.

“We were just in the squad room talking over the case. Did you find out anything about the land?” Sam walked Beryl back into the squad room, and she and Jo nodded at each other.

Beryl handed Sam a stack of papers. “I had the legal department research that land. We bought it three years ago. It was in a trust. Like I said, that’s pretty common.”

Sam barely glanced at the papers. Reese had already discovered this, but he appreciated Beryl taking the time to come down to the station and didn’t want her to think her efforts were for nothing. “Thank you. I appreciate it. Does it say who owned the trust?”

“No, our records only indicate the trust as the seller.” Beryl looked around the squad room. “Do you know any more about what went on in that cabin? I mean, if whatever happened there was more than three years ago my company could hardly be held accountable.”

“I don’t think you’d be held accountable anyway,” Sam reassured her. He hadn’t heard back from the hazmat people as to how long they thought it had been abandoned. He wasn’t even certain they could tell for sure. But unless someone in Beryl’s company was directly involved in cooking meth he doubted they would have any responsibility. The presence of the bog birch leaf found in the shallow graves made him certain that the cabin was directly related to the skeletal remains, but that had happened before the company had even owned the land. The question was, who was the previous owner?

“That certainly is a relief.” Beryl’s eyes drifted to the cork board. Her eyes widened, and she quickly jerked them away. “I wouldn’t want my family name to be tarnished. But I certainly do hope you find the person who did this.”

“We’ll do our best.”

Sam walked Beryl to the lobby and held the door as she left. Reese was still intent on her iPad. Lucy sat patiently at her feet. Major must’ve found a new spot to hide, because he was nowhere to be seen.

“I want you to check another person. Name is Amber Desrocher. She could be one of our victims,” Sam said.

“I’m on it…” Reese’s eyes drifted over Sam’s shoulder, and he turned around to see Holden Joyce opening the door.

“Didn’t expect to see you so soon.” Sam said.

Holden shrugged. “The quicker we work this case, the quicker these families get closure. And I think we can at least agree on that.”

“Fair enough,” Sam said. “And in the interest of sharing information, we have a couple of new leads.” Sam wasn’t sure Jo would want Holden to know about her sister’s drug addiction, so he simply said, “We have a name that might be one of the victims, and we also just discovered the cabin changed hands three years ago.”

“Three years ago? I talked to the hazmat guys today and they think that meth lab was in operation long before that. I also talked to the medical examiner and found out that the skeletal remains have been there for five to six years. So I specifically asked the hazmat guys if they had any idea how long operations were going on in that cabin. They could tell by some of the chemical residue and the way it had changed over time that the meth lab was in operation during that time.” Holden looked from Sam to Jo, who had joined them in the lobby. “So I guess that means your guy Thorne is out then, right?”

“I wouldn’t say it rules him out. But it is one less tie to him,” Sam admitted.

“Maybe not. What if we find out that Sundown Realty Trust was owned by Thorne,” Jo asked. “It makes sense he might sell it to his wife’s company.”

“But Beryl would’ve known if he was the beneficiary of that trust. Surely she would have said something when she was here earlier.”

“Wait a minute. Did you say Sundown Realty Trust?” Holden asked.

“Yes. The land was in a trust, but we don’t know who the person behind it is.”

“I know who it is,” Holden said. “That’s Joseph Menda, and right now he’s in jail for murder.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

"Murder?" Sam glanced over the tops of the post office boxes to the cork board in the squad room. The coincidence of a murderer owning the land tied to the skeletal remains was a great lead. But if Menda was the killer and had owned the meth lab, that meant Thorne wasn't the killer. Unless, of course, the two of them had worked together.

Holden nodded, his eyes following Sam's. "Girls. More than one."

Reese whistled. "Sounds like he could be our guy."

"Can't be." Holden's jaw was tight.

"Why not?" Reese frowned at her computer. "Says here his trial was three years ago. Our girls have been there longer than that. Maybe he just didn't get caught for these murders yet."

"I wish this case was that easy, but I don't think he could have done it." Holden squinted as if trying to force data to the front of his brain. "It's his M.O. to bury them in shallow graves, but, as I recall, he'd been in jail in Texas for almost killing his girlfriend before that, and I believe that's in the timeframe John said our girls were killed."

"That explains why Mervale got that property so cheap."

Holden nodded. "Fire sale to pay for his defense."

"I'm surprised Mervale bought the land. Beryl Thorne seemed concerned about the family name. Seems like buying land from a murderer would taint it."

"But Beryl wasn't in charge of Mervale then. Her brother was. Maybe he cares more about cheap land," Jo said.

“They might not have known it was tied to Menda,” Holden said. “A realty trust hides the beneficiary’s name. Lawyers could have done the deal and the officers of the company would have been none the wiser. Menda comes from money, but even money can’t help when you’re a sadistic killer.”

“That also explains why Mervale didn’t know a cabin existed. Menda probably didn’t mention it so no one would discover what else he’d been up to out there.”

“*If* he knew it was being used for meth,” Holden pressed his lips together. “We didn’t have any indication he was involved in drugs.”

Sam looked at him. “No?” There might be hope to nail Thorne yet. “Maybe Menda didn’t. Maybe Thorne knew about the cabin and knew no one came to the land. Figured it would be a convenient place to set up shop.”

Jo snapped her fingers. “And maybe when he found out his wife’s company bought it he cleared out because that was just too close of a link to him.”

“Looks like we need to talk to Menda,” Sam said.

Holden nodded. “He’s in the New Hampshire State Prison in Concord. Best if you guys go without me… He and I don’t have the best relationship. Be careful. He’s smart, sneaky, and doesn’t have an ounce of remorse.”

CONCORD WAS ONLY A THREE-HOUR DRIVE, so Jo and Sam left right away in the Tahoe. Sam had suggested that he go with Wyatt instead of Jo, but one dagger-like glare from his sergeant told him to back off. Still, he felt protective of her as they sat on hard orange plastic chairs in the interview room, the scent of bleach and despair stinging his nostrils.

Joseph Menda shuffled in, the pant legs of his orange jumpsuit a little too long. His hands were cuffed in front of him, and his eyes sized them up, lingering on Jo a little too long.

Menda wasn’t anything like Sam had expected. He was thin, wiry, with a bushy head of hair. It was his eyes that gave away what was inside. Cold and dead with not an ounce of remorse, just as Holden had said.

He plopped into the chair, a smile spreading across his face. He'd almost be handsome if it wasn't for those flat, dead eyes.

"So what can I do for ya?" His demeanor reminded Sam of a kid being let out on a field trip. He was enjoying this.

"We have a question about your old property."

"Old property?"

"Up in Colebrook. A little cabin where you might have had a side business going."

Menda's forehead wrinkled. "Don't know what you mean."

"Drugs, meth. I know you weren't arrested for that, but we found evidence on your land."

Menda raised his brows in faux innocence. "This supposed land in Colebrook? Never been there. My grandparents left me a bunch of land. It's all gone now. I'm not copping to any drug charges."

"Really? How about a few young girls that ended up in shallow graves near there?"

Menda laughed. "Trying to pin more murders on me? That happens all the time." Chains clanked as he gestured to the door. "As you can see I'm in no position to be killing young girls. Though I do wish I was."

Sam's stomach churned, but he continued. "This was five years ago. You've only been here for three."

"Sorry. Not me. They got me on all the ones I killed." He leaned forward, his eyes sparkling with interest. "But tell me, what exactly did you find?"

Sam fought the urge to leave. The man was repulsive, but he wanted answers. "Three girls. Runaways probably. Found in shallow graves. I hear that's your M.O."

"I'm hardly the first guy to stuff someone in a shallow grave. Deep graves are hard to dig or I'd have buried mine deeper."

"So you're denying any involvement with these girls?"

"I don't know, maybe if I could see a photo…" Menda leaned even closer, his breath quickening.

Sam had brought photos, but wasn't sure he should show them. The guy was practically salivating to see them. Then again, if it would get him some answers…

He took them out of his shirt pocket and slid them across the table. The shallow grave, ivory-colored bones, the hole-punctured tarp. Menda's eyes

lit up.

"Look familiar?"

Menda sat back and sighed "Not really. That's not my work. Fascinating, though. Wish they had a bit more flesh on them."

"What about the holes in the tarp?"

Menda frowned and leaned forward again. "Those look like they were done on purpose. Why?"

"We were hoping you could tell us," Jo said.

Menda pivoted his attention to Jo. "Sorry, can't help you there. Maybe someone was trying to improve on my process."

"Improve?"

"Yeah, you know, copycat, but with an additional twist."

"You think this killer was a copycat?"

"Believe it or not, I have people who study me. Maybe someone was learning from me like I learned by studying the greats."

Serial killers copied one another? Sam glanced at Jo. She didn't look surprised.

"So you think whoever did this studied you?"

Menda leaned back in his chair, smug. "Sure. How does any good artist learn their craft? They study from a master."

"And you're a master," Jo said.

He tried to spread his hands, but the cuffs stopped him. He put them back in his lap. "Certainly. I get fan mail and emails all the time complimenting me, boasting and asking for tips. Of course, the prison censors them, but you can read between the lines." A smile of self-importance crossed his lips.

"Any idea who in particular might have killed these girls?" Sam tapped the photo.

Menda twisted his lips and squinted. "Five years ago, you say? No idea. I don't know who my followers are anyway, so wouldn't be any help."

Sam collected the photos and put them in his pocket.

Menda looked disappointed. His eyes met Sam's. "So if this was five years ago and you haven't caught the guy, why aren't there any fresh kills?"

"That's what I was wondering. Either the person moved on or maybe he's in prison."

"Or taking a break," Jo cut in. "Sometimes killers go dormant."

Menda licked his lips and nodded slowly. “That’s true, they do. I took a break once. Ten years.” He leaned forward, his dull eyes flashing a glint of excitement. “But that urge to kill never goes away completely, so if your guy hasn’t killed anyone in five years, my guess is he’s itching to start up again.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"There's no guarantee the guy is even still around here," Jo said as they finished filling Reese and Wyatt in on their interview with Menda three hours later. It was after five, and both of them were off shift but had stayed to get caught up on what had happened.

They were sitting around the squad room, Lucy at Sam's feet. Major was in his spot on top of the filing cabinet watching them. All of them, with the possible exception of Major, were interested in keeping updated so they could think about the case in their off hours.

That was what Jo liked about their little police force. They were a tight group, a team, and the job wasn't something you forgot about when you went home. She'd worked city stations before and found most cops clocked out when their shift was over and didn't think about work until they came back the next day.

"He could've been caught in another state." Sam glanced at Reese. "We should get a list of all serial killers arrested in the past five years."

"Or he could be dead," Jo suggested.

"My money is still on Thorne, at least for the meth lab," Sam said.

"What did Menda say about that?"

"Claimed he didn't know about it."

"That could be true." Reese held up her iPad to show a list of addresses. "I did some research on his past addresses. He's never lived in this area." She swiped right to a document. "Then I looked into his family. The grandfather was the CEO of a big company back in the day, and they are

quite wealthy. Joseph Menda was a black sheep, though. He's done a lot of bad stuff in his thirty-eight years."

Jo was impressed. Reese was becoming increasingly more competent. She might make a great detective someday. Jo was impressed with Wyatt too. She hadn't had a chance to work much with him, but it spoke volumes that he wasn't acting put out that he'd had to handle many of the minor local calls while she and Sam worked the more interesting cases. She made a mental note to make sure they included Wyatt in their brainstorming sessions.

"I also got a list of his arrests and timeframes that he was on probation. According to the records, he was in Texas during the time our girls were killed. Unless his probation officer was lying for him, he wasn't anywhere near here," Reese said.

"So whoever killed these girls must be some kind of copycat, just like Menda suggested," Wyatt said.

"Yeah, studying the greats." Sam used air quotes around the word "greats."

The thought turned Jo's stomach. She'd heard of copycat serial killers in her years of studying them, of course, but the thought was still disturbing. Had Menda studied someone himself? It seemed likely.

But Menda couldn't have taken her sister. He was too young. Tammy was taken twenty-eight years ago when Menda would've been only a child. Maybe it had been someone he studied. Was it possible that Menda could give her the clue her own research hadn't uncovered?

"Like a disciple?" Wyatt asked.

"Thorne could be his disciple," Sam said.

"Five years ago his construction was just starting up," Jo said. "Maybe he killed those girls, then went dormant while he focused on building his business."

"I requested copies of all the emails and letters Menda gets from the prison warden before we left," Sam said. "We might find a clue in there."

"What about Holden Joyce? He might have some additional information. I know there's bad blood, but if it helps us solve the case…" Wyatt shrugged.

"Speaking of which." Wyatt's suggestion was a perfect opportunity for Jo to tell Sam about Holden's visit, and Jo wanted to get that out in the open

as soon as possible. She didn't want any more secrets. "Holden stopped by my place last night."

"He did? Why?"

"To apologize. Weird, I know, but it seems like he really wants to work together."

Reese glanced up from her iPad, her blue eyes dark with suspicion. "I think he's up to something."

"Probably. He said he got bad information before about us being on the take or something, and that's why he was so suspicious. He realized his information was false and now he wants to make friends."

"I don't know if I fully trust him, but I did think he was sincere the last time he was here. And if cooperating with him means we keep someone from being killed, I'm all for it." Sam scrubbed a hand through his hair. "Anyway, it's late and we should all get some rest. Maybe we'll find something in those emails and letters tomorrow."

"I'll tackle that job," Wyatt volunteered. "I might be able to uncover something electronically."

During the last case they'd discovered that Wyatt was pretty good with computer forensics. "That would be great. What you did with the Dupont case really helped."

Smiling at the praise, Wyatt grabbed his backpack and stood. "I'll still handle the local calls so you guys can focus on the bigger stuff."

He left, and Reese put down a bowl of cat food for Major. Lucy trotted over to investigate, but the warning glare from the cat kept her at a cautious distance.

"Are you going to feed Lucy at home, Sam?" Reese asked.

Sam nodded. Lucy went home with Sam at night. He fed her supper and breakfast at home.

"Okay. See you tomorrow." Reese left, and Jo shoved her laptop into its neoprene carrying case. She was just zipping it up when Sam's phone dinged.

"It's Mick. He says he has something interesting." Sam looked up at her. "You want to swing by my place and find out what it is?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

If there was one place on the planet that Sam loved to be, it was his log cabin deep in the woods on the outskirts of town. He'd inherited it from his grandfather, and kept it largely decorated the way it had been when his grandparents were alive. It wasn't fancy, but it had everything Sam needed, including fond childhood memories. The furnishings were practical—overstuffed furniture, braided rugs, and a small television. The only thing that wasn't practical was his grandmother's china cabinet filled with fancy glassware and china that Sam never took out.

The warm cedar log walls were decorated with deer heads and mounted trout and bass caught by Sam's grandparents. A large moose head adorned the river rock fireplace. Sam's ex-wives had hated the place, stating that the taxidermy gave them the creeps. That didn't seem to bother Jo. She always made herself right at home, which she was doing right now by rummaging in his fridge, a disappointing endeavor because she was looking for something other than his favorite Moosenose beer.

"I knew I should have stopped at the package store and brought my own," she said, using an elk horn bottle opener to pop the top. She took a swig, then made a face. "Tastes like dirt."

Sam sipped his beer. To him it tasted like a fine blend of summer and relaxation.

"Anyone in there?" Mick's voice drifted in from the front of the house. Sam glanced over the half-height bookshelves that separated the kitchen from the living room, his gaze lingering just a second on the photo of his

daughters before continuing on to see Mick peering in from the other side of the screen door.

"Come on in," Sam shouted, and then turned to Jo. "Better grab the whiskey."

Lucy greeted Mick in her usual tail-wagging manner. He crouched down to her level and ruffled her fur before standing to accept the tumbler of whiskey from Jo.

"How's it going? Anything new?" Mick asked as they took seats around the oak mission-style coffee table.

Mick sipped his whiskey, his brows raising higher and higher as Sam filled him in on their visit to Menda at the prison. When Sam was done, Mick leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs, the glass resting between his knees.

"And there's no way Menda could have done it?"

"Nope. Reese did a full work-up. He wasn't in that area."

"That's creepier than hell that people idolize and follow serial killers," Mick said.

"No kidding."

"We also might have a lead on one of the victims," Jo said. "My sister remembers a young girl who had an older boyfriend from up north. She went with him one day and never came back."

Mick nodded thoughtfully and then said in a soft voice, "How is your sister?"

Jo shrugged and glanced down at the phone. She'd told Sam earlier there had been no further texts from Bridget.

"Says she's getting her act together." Jo's voice was casual, but Sam could tell by the way she picked at the corner of her beer bottle label that she cared deeply about her sister. She was just afraid to get her hopes up.

"If your sister's friend is one of the victims, maybe her family can tell us something," Mick suggested.

"Maybe," Jo said. "They're checking to see if she's one of the victims. We still haven't identified the other remains, so it could just be the girl took off. Runaways are like that."

Mick turned to Sam. "What about the meth lab? Anything new on that?"

"Not much back on that yet. The Staties and the FBI are still going over things," Sam said.

"And Menda claims no knowledge of that."

“Nope. Says it was family land and he’s never been there.”

“And you don’t have any other leads?”

“None, other than the fact that the skeletal remains had that bog birch leaf, and the leaf came from the cabin, and the cabin was a meth lab.” Jo blew a few corkscrew curls off her forehead, took another swig of beer, and made another face. “Maybe Holden Joyce is right and we’re trying too hard to prove that Thorne is involved, and that’s blinding us to other suspects or clues.”

“I don’t think so.” Mick pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. “I did some research and came across this incident from Thorne’s past. It’s not public. He was a juvenile, so the records are sealed, but I have my ways.”

He unfolded the paper and tossed it onto the coffee table. It was a police report.

“What’s that about?” Jo asked.

“Seems that Lucas Thorne wasn’t a model child. He and his friend Robert Summers were pulled in on suspicion of cat mutilation.”

“Cat mutilation?”

Lucy whined and looked at them disapprovingly. Apparently she didn’t like the idea of cat mutilation even though her relationship with Major was tenuous at best.

Mick made a face, “Yeah, apparently they killed a neighbor’s cat and not in a nice way. Not that there is any nice way to do that.”

Jo put her beer down and leaned forward, pulling the report toward her. “This is great!”

At their raised eyebrows, she grimaced. “Not that a cat got killed, that Thorne did this. This is common behavior among serial killers. They start with animals, then progress to people.”

Sam appreciated that Jo had been doing her homework on serial killers, but it was too bad they couldn’t exactly use this information officially. They’d have to get some sort of a warrant to unseal the record, but how would they explain that they even knew it existed?

“So, we aren’t off track,” Sam said.

“No, and the timing makes sense. What if Thorne really is a disciple of Menda? If he’s following in his footsteps, doesn’t it make sense that he might use that old cabin on Menda’s land, sort of as a tribute?”

Sam snapped his fingers. “And then when he discovered his wife’s company was buying it, he had to move the bodies.”

“But how would he know that land was Menda’s? It was in the trust and no one knew he even owned it,” Jo asked.

“Who knows with Thorne? He’s got contacts and he might have been determined enough to find out. It’s not impossible. After all, we did it.”

“Good point.”

Mick stared into his tumbler, swirling the amber liquid. “I think it’s a little far-fetched that the guy is both a drug dealer and a serial killer, don’t you?”

Sam glanced at Jo. Holden’s words came back to him. Was he grasping? “It might be, but it might not be. At least we can check him out for both. That doesn’t mean I’m going to be blind to other suspects.”

Mick nodded. “I hope it is him. Putting him away would solve a lot of problems, including a personal one for you and me.”

Sam nodded. Earlier that summer, Thorne had come into possession of a knife that Mayor Dupont had been holding as leverage over Sam and Mick. Where Dupont had gotten it was anyone’s guess, but the knife led to something in their past, something Sam wasn’t particularly proud of, and DNA evidence on the knife could be taken the wrong way with disastrous results for Sam and Mick. But with Dupont out of the way, the knife was no longer a threat.

Sam squinted at the report. “Wait! Robert Summers. Isn’t that Beryl Thorne’s brother?”

Jo nodded, “The one who is sick.”

“I remember Harry said that’s how Beryl and Thorne met. That he was a friend of the brother.”

Mick looked up from his drink. “I wonder how sick this brother is. Too sick for us to ask about Thorne? If they were that close, maybe the brother has information we could use to nail him.”

“I don’t know. If Beryl was taking over the company, he must be pretty ill.” Sam wasn’t sure he wanted to push his way in to talk to the sick brother. It could alienate Beryl.

“If he’s too sick, getting access to talk to him could be problematic. I get the impression that family protects their own,” Jo said.

“True. It might not be easy to get access to him, but I know someone we can get access to, and that person might make an even more informative source.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jackson Pressler had created an owl sanctuary on his land where the Great Bearded Owls had been discovered. Marnie Wilson had told Sam that Beryl Thorne went to the sanctuary every Thursday morning. Seeing as it was Thursday morning, Sam figured it was a great day to take Lucy for a walk in the woods. If he ran into Beryl and got a chance to talk to her alone, all the better.

If she was having doubts about her husband as Sam suspected, maybe she would open up about some of her suspicions. If Lucas Thorne was a serial killer, wouldn't he have exhibited some telling behavior? And who better to notice than someone who knew him intimately?

The crisp chill in the morning air heralded the advent of fall. Even though it could still be steamy in the afternoons, the days were getting shorter and cooler, and while Sam hated to say goodbye to summer, he didn't mind saying goodbye to the humidity it brought.

He let Lucy out of the Tahoe and took a deep breath of pine-scented air before pulling a gray sweatshirt over his police department T-shirt and starting into the woods. This was what he loved most about White Rock, the pristine forests where you could walk alone with your thoughts and no reminder of civilization, the sounds of birds, and chipmunks and squirrels scurrying through the underbrush, the dappled sunlight dancing on the path in front of him as it filtered through the canopy of leaves above. Lucy trotted along beside him, staying back to sniff at something every so often before racing ahead to catch up.

The path was more beaten down than Sam remembered from the last time he'd been here. The owls apparently had plenty of visitors now. Good. The more awareness there was of this rare species, the more apt the public was to get on board with protecting them from the construction that was a blight on his town. Ideally, now, if he could put Thorne away, he wouldn't have to worry so much about that construction.

He almost didn't recognize Beryl without her power suit. She looked smaller, younger, more vulnerable in her maroon hoodie and faded jeans. She held a big camera in her hand, pointing it up at the tops of the trees. Sunlight glinted off her hair, highlighting natural strands of copper mixed into the chocolate brown base color.

She turned as Sam approached. Her eyes flickered with confusion, then recognition and a smile. "Chief Mason, I didn't know you were a friend of the owls."

"As a matter of fact, I am. I'm a friend of nature."

Her smile widened, and Sam felt as if he was making inroads. They had something in common, and that was the first step toward getting her on his side.

Beryl pointed to the tree tops. "One of the bearded owls is up there. They rarely come out in daylight, but sometimes they roost in the trees in the early morning. That's when I often get my best shots."

Sam shoved his hands in his pockets and looked up. The owl perched on a limb as still as a rock. The pattern in its white and gray feathers blended into the bark of the tree to make it barely distinguishable. As Sam watched, the bird lazily blinked one large round, golden eye. "I was admiring the owl photographs in your office. Did you take those?" It would have been a great line to butter her up with, but Sam was sincere.

"As a matter of fact, I did." She looked down at her camera and shrugged. "Just a little hobby. Something to get me outside."

Sam's gaze drifted in the direction of the new hotel construction. From this part of the woods he could barely see the skeleton of the building. If Thorne had continued the lobby construction on this side, the parking lot and clearing of trees for the parking lot would have made the building quite visible. "Does your husband share your love of owls and nature?"

Her expression turned guarded. "I'm not sure what you mean."

"I noticed he moved the lobby for the hotel over there." Sam tilted his chin toward the hotel. "It's further away from the sanctuary."

Beryl simply nodded.

"Was that at your request?"

She shrugged. "I may have had something to do with it. Lucas does as he pleases, usually." She aimed her camera at the tops of the trees and clicked a few shots.

Sam detected a hint of bitterness in her voice, indicating that maybe she wasn't that happy with what Lucas did. "We've made some progress in the case that involves the land we were asking you about. It could be tied to the skeletal remains we found."

Her head whipped around, her face wrinkled with concern. "What are you saying?"

"Just that the two might be connected. We don't think you had anything to do with it. Not your company, at least."

Her frown deepened. "What does that mean?"

Sam gave another half shrug. He didn't want to spell it right out and accuse Thorne because that could put her on the defensive and might have the opposite effect of what he intended. He only wanted to plant the seed to let her know they might be onto her husband and open the door for a confession if she had any doubts about him.

"It doesn't really mean anything. We have a few suspects. We think it also may be related to the drug crisis plaguing our town."

Sam watched her face carefully when he mentioned the drug crisis. Had her jaw tightened or was he imagining it because he wanted to believe that she knew something about Thorne? Or maybe it was just because he had mentioned the drug crisis. Most people got upset about that.

"You think it might be the same person? That's highly unusual, isn't it?"

"Unusual, but not impossible. We think the skeletal remains might've been runaways who got involved in drugs. Easy pickings for someone who wants to kill."

Beryl chewed her bottom lip. She was thinking about something. Sam hoped it was about inconsistencies she'd seen in her husband's behavior. Maybe she already suspected he was up to no good and this was driving the final nail home. She'd made it clear the other day that she wouldn't want her family name tarnished. He hoped she was considering the fact that her husband could be either a killer or a drug dealer, and wondering how she could turn him in without being tainted in the process.

“So you have suspects? What kind of person are you looking for?” Beryl glanced over at the construction. “I mean, I hate to think of such a person running around loose in White Rock.”

“Hopefully they won’t be running loose for long,” Sam said. “But you know how it is. We look for inconsistencies in behavior. The deaths were about five years ago, so we’re looking for someone who would have been active then. Maybe someone who had large spans of time they couldn’t explain to their family. Maybe someone who missed a lot of work. You know, that sort of thing.”

Beryl nodded, but her eyes had a faraway look. Sam knew he was onto something, but he didn’t want to push too hard. He needed her to come to the conclusion herself.

She glanced at her watch and her eyebrows shot up. “Look at the time! I have to get to the office.” She picked up her camera case and started putting the camera away. Then she turned back to Sam. “Nice talking to you, Chief Mason. I hope you find your guy.” She slung the camera bag over her shoulder and started down the path.

Sam remained behind, letting her go on her own so she could process her thoughts. As he watched her disappear into the trees he couldn’t help but hope that maybe the seeds he’d just planted in Beryl’s mind would grow to produce a break in the case.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Holden Joyce was already at the station when Sam and Lucy pulled in.

"Late start, chief?" Holden asked.

Lucy sniffed at Holden, glared at Major, and then trotted into Sam's office.

"Slept in." Sam ignored the pointed look from Jo. He didn't need to let Holden Joyce know what he'd been up to with Beryl Thorne. He'd fill Jo in later. "What brings you here? You have any news?"

Holden nodded. "As a matter of fact, I do. The lab was able to match pollen spores found at the cabin with spores found in the tarp that held the skeletal remains."

"So that's another link. How solid is that?"

"We still need more, but this is at least one more spoke in the wheel, and also it's evident that there was a meth lab in that cabin. But the forensics lab couldn't say how long it's been since the cabin had been inhabited."

Sam poured water into the coffee machine, picked a mug from the rack, and held it out toward Holden, who shook his head. Sam glanced at Jo, but she already had a coffee, so he continued making his own. "Were they able to find any DNA to match the remains?"

"Unfortunately, they weren't."

"I have something that might be helpful," Jo chimed in, and they both turned to look at her. She was seated at her desk, the yellow smiley face mug steaming in front of her, a chocolate cruller on a napkin beside it. "Bev

Hatch got Amber Desrocher's dental and medical records. We were able to match her to one set of remains."

Sam glanced at Jo, and she gave a subtle shake of her head. Either she hadn't heard from Bridget or hadn't convinced her to look at photos of Thorne, but Sam wasn't about to tell Holden Joyce about Jo's sister.

"I assume Amber's parents have been contacted. Did they have anything? Maybe they knew who the guy was," Sam suggested.

Jo nodded. "They have been contacted, but they couldn't give any information. They hadn't been in contact with Amber for years, which is the problem with many runaways, unfortunately."

Holden's voice turned grim. "That is what makes them so attractive to killers."

"We have another angle of attack. If the pollen spores directly connect the skeletal remains with the cabin, then we know the cabin was used as a meth lab. We need to get a search warrant for Thorne's construction sites."

Holden frowned. "I don't get the connection."

"Some of the materials used in making meth are also used on construction sites. Duct tape, rubber tubing, tarps. If we can find those same materials at Thorne's construction site, there may be some forensic investigation we can do on them to narrow down dye lots or materials and match them up. Maybe we'll get lucky and discover something that can definitively link the materials at the meth lab to Thorne."

"And what's your probable cause for the search warrant?" Holden asked.

Sam couldn't tell Holden about the cat killing because he would want to know how they had gotten access to sealed records, so he simply said, "Just a hunch."

"I don't think you're gonna be able to get a search warrant on a hunch. I have my doubts about Thorne, but I'm willing to look into any evidence we can get. That said, I think Thorne has friends in high places, and without probable cause you'll have a hard time getting a warrant." Major, who had crept to the edge of the filing cabinet while they'd been talking, let out a low growl. Sam glanced in his direction. Apparently, the cat agreed with Holden.

"I think it's worth a try. Our acting mayor is hot to get this case closed. The election is next year, and if he can close this up quickly it'll be a notch

in his belt that'll work in his favor." Sam glanced at Jo. "I think we need to pay a visit and plead our case."

Holden shrugged and made a face. "Fine by me. In the meantime, we should also focus on other leads that might come to fruition."

Sam was skeptical at Holden's change of tune. All of a sudden he was cooperating, and that made Sam suspicious. Then again, maybe what Jo had said was right. Maybe Holden really was just trying to rectify the way he'd acted before so that they could work together and all do their jobs. Either way, Sam would take the cooperation. "We're doing that too. We got the correspondence sent to Joseph Menda. He thinks the killer could possibly be someone emulating him. Apparently, he gets fan mail."

Holden Joyce grimaced. "Yeah. Sick, huh?"

"Yep. But if he's right, maybe we can track that person through some of the mail he's been getting." Sam turned to Wyatt, who had been typing at his desk while half listening to the conversation. "Wyatt is looking into it."

"I'm on it right now," Wyatt said. "Had to go out on a call early this morning, but I should have something this afternoon."

"Perfect," Sam said. "In the meantime, Jo and I will go plead our case to Mayor Jamison."

THE MAYOR'S office was in the Town Hall, just down the street from the police station. The bright sun had burned off the morning chill, and Jo and Sam walked over. Once they were out in the street, Jo turned to Sam, "Where were you this morning?"

"I went up to the Bearded Owl Sanctuary. Marnie Wilson said Beryl Thorne goes there on Thursday mornings."

"You think she might be willing to go against her husband? Did you learn anything from her?" Jo didn't know much about marriage, never having been married herself, but she'd been in law enforcement long enough to witness the horrible things that spouses could do to one another. Still, a lot of them stuck together. She'd worked many domestic abuse cases in which the wives refused to press charges against the husbands, even though they were obviously mistreating them.

“She might,” Sam said. “I got a sense when she came here the other day that she was protective of her family name, and I also got the feeling this morning that she might be starting to wonder about things she’s seen or sensed about her husband.”

“I guess if it turns out he is a serial killer, she’d want him to be in jail instead of hanging around the kitchen.”

“No doubt. Anyway, it’s a long shot, but we’ll take what we can get.” Sam glanced sideways at her. “Anything from your sister yet?”

Jo’s hand instinctively went to the phone in her pocket. “Not yet. She may not even answer.” Jo sighed thinking of all the other times Bridget had seemed to just fade out of existence, especially when her attempts at going sober had failed.

The Town Hall was a brick building, built in the late 1800s. Inside, the lobby floors and walls were shining white marble. The moldings, sculpted in concrete, had fancy leaves at the corners. A line of flags draped from tall posts stood beside the stairway. Gilt-framed paintings of former mayors lined the walls. Jo wasn’t surprised to notice that there wasn’t one of Mayor DuPont.

They took the stairs to the second floor and walked the beige carpeted hallway to the walnut-paneled mayor’s reception area.

Dottie Chambers sat behind her desk, baby blue bifocals perched on her beak-like nose, eyes squinting at the computer screen. Dottie had been a fixture of the mayor’s office since the 1950s, and she guarded the mayor’s time like a mother bear guarding her cubs. Luckily, Sam had known Dottie since he was a little boy. She glanced up at them, her face widening into a smile when she recognized Sam.

“Sammie, you look so grown up.”

Jo smirked at the nickname, but whatever got them in to see the mayor worked for her.

“Nice to see you, Dottie,” Sam said.

Dottie popped up from behind the desk in a movement that belied her age. “I’ll just let Mr. Jamison know you’re here.” She leaned toward Sam as she came around the desk and whispered, “You’re in luck. No one is with him.”

She tapped the thick-panel mahogany door, then opened it a crack and stuck her head in. “Chief Mason is here.”

Silence ensued. Jo pictured Jamison scowling and trying to figure out how to get out of talking to them. She finally heard a resigned, “Send him in.”

Jamison sat behind a walnut desk. The windows behind him provided a bird’s-eye view of the rolling blue mountains in the distance. A stack of papers was piled in front of him, a pen in his hand. He looked disheveled, which aroused Jo’s curiosity because she’d only ever seen him looking like a magazine model. Apparently taking over as acting mayor was much more stressful than being vice mayor.

“I hope you have good news,” Jamison said.

“We may have some leads,” Sam said.

“Good. I’m getting my ass kicked on this. We need to catch this guy.”

Jo glanced at Sam. Jamison seemed almost human, friendly even.

“That’s what I want too, but we may need a warrant,” Sam said.

Jamison shrugged. “Okay. Judge Freeman is in today.”

“We were thinking we might need a little bit of a push from you to help us get it.”

Jamison put his pen down and frowned. “Now, why would you need that?”

“It’s for Thorne Construction.”

Jo wasn’t sure what she’d expected. Probably for Jamison to jump up and flail his arms in outrage as Dupont used to do when they wanted a warrant to investigate anything to do with Thorne Construction. But Jamison sat back thoughtfully, his eyes drilling into Sam’s. “You have probable cause?”

Another surprise. Jo hadn’t realized Jamison actually knew anything about the law, much less the words “probable cause.”

“We’ve linked the cabin with a meth lab, which links to the skeletal remains,” Sam said.

“And because we suspect that Thorne is a drug dealer, that kind of gives us probable cause,” Jo added.

“But you don’t actually have any solid proof that links Thorne to any of these cases, do you?” Jamison asked.

Sam wiggled his hand back and forth. “Depends on what you mean by ‘solid’.”

Jamison scrubbed his hands over his face and sighed. “Okay. I guess it’s worth a try.”

He picked up the phone and called Freeman. After a short conversation that involved Jamison reminding Freeman about some Cuban cigars, he turned to them. “Okay. Get your warrant written up. Judge Freeman will sign it.”

Sam didn’t waste any time. He was already halfway out the door shooting a thank-you over his shoulder.

As they spilled out into the street, power walking back to the police station, Jo turned to Sam. “That was weird. He seemed overly cooperative.”

“I know,” Sam said. “First Holden Joyce. Then Henley Jamison. What is the world coming to?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Reese set a record typing up a warrant request, and they faxed it to Judge Freeman. True to his word, he signed. Even Major seemed excited.

Sam ripped the warrant off the printer. “Wyatt, we could use a hand out there.”

“Sounds good.”

Sam was already halfway out the door. “Let’s take two cars. Shake him up a bit. You guys can take the Crown Vic. I’ll take Lucy in the Tahoe.”

Jo tossed the keys to Wyatt. “You drive.”

When they got into the Crown Vic, Sam’s taillights were already disappearing down the street. Wyatt didn’t waste any time. He seemed excited to be included, but not nervous. Jo reminded herself he was a seasoned cop, not a rookie. “So how is the search into the letters going?” she asked.

“Tedious. I mean, there’s a lot to look for, and I’m going over them with a fine-toothed comb. I don’t want to miss something.”

“No doubt. Could be a break in the case.”

Wyatt smiled. “Yeah, and I have some tricks up my sleeve to analyze the data.”

“Really?”

“Let’s just say I have a pretty good background in computer programming. I was a gamer as a kid,” Wyatt said. “So why do you think Jamison was cooperative with this warrant? Sounded to me like he usually blocked things like this.”

Was Wyatt changing the subject? Or did he just think that the details of his computer expertise would bore her? Either way, it was interesting that he'd notice that Jamison usually blocked things. Wyatt was quiet, going about his work without complaining, but he had been paying attention to the goings on at the station. That was a good sign.

"Dupont always blocked them, and it seemed like Jamison was on board with whatever DuPont did. But maybe we were wrong about him."

"Or, maybe he's up to something."

Jo looked at the rolling scenery. Wooded forest, rolling hills, layers of mountains. Wyatt was astute in noticing the undercurrents that were going on, and probably a good judge of character if he thought Jamison was up to something. Then again, he might have been keying off of what he'd heard from Sam and Jo. But what difference did that make? The more she worked with him, the more she could see that he was a good fit with the team.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. She liked how Wyatt didn't try to engage her in small talk or start a nervous, jittery conversation. He seemed calm, level-headed, all things she liked in a fellow cop. She made a mental note to invite him along to one of her jaunts to Holy Spirits with Sam after the case was over.

The construction site was much the same as Jo remembered from the last time she'd been there, except now the location of the lobby was at the opposite end of the building. Sam was already letting Lucy out of the Tahoe when they pulled in. Lucy looked as if she wanted to run off toward the construction site.

"Stay," Sam commanded. Lucy looked disappointed, but stayed.

"I don't want her getting hurt over there," Sam said.

Thorne must have seen them pull up, because he came storming out of the trailer. "What is this?"

"We'd like to take a look around," Sam said.

Thorne's face reddened. "You can't just come here anytime you want and look around."

"Got a piece of paper that says I can." Sam handed Thorne the warrant.

The shade of Thorne's face deepened as he read the warrant. Wyatt and Jo stood silently watching. Jo used the time to scan the site looking for likely places where they might find rubber tubing, tarps and duct tape. Down in one corner was a big metal shed. She made a mental note not to forget to search inside it. The rest of the site was tidied up. The only things

lying around were some metal scaffolding, lumber, and tools. She didn't see anything that would be used in the manufacture of meth.

Thorne shoved the paper back at Sam. "Fine. But you're going too far this time, Mason. I'm putting a call into the sheriff or the state police or somebody to let them know how you're harassing me."

"Good luck with that." Sam looked at Wyatt and Jo, and jerked his chin in the direction of the building. "You guys ready?"

Dust kicked up in their wake as they walked the perimeter of the project. Lucy focused her interest in one corner, and Jo wondered if maybe there was an animal buried there. Or, if Thorne really was a serial killer, might it be something worse? Down at the other end construction was in full swing. The sound of pneumatic nail guns and workmen grew louder as they made their way around the building.

When they'd made a full circuit, Jo said, "I don't see anything here, but what about that shed?" She nodded toward the metal shed.

"Yep, that looks like a likely place," Sam said.

The shed was unlocked, and the rusty door squeaked as they slid it open. It was about twenty by thirty. It was also hot as a sauna and packed with rows of metal shelving that held building supplies. Larger items leaned against the back wall.

"I'll take the far end. Jo, you take the middle, and Wyatt, you take the other end," Sam said.

They split off, and Jo walked slowly down the row, her gaze swiveling from one side to the other. Sweat dripped from under her White Rock Police Department hat. Her disappointment grew as she made her way down the row. There was nothing here but supplies. Nails, screws, brackets, and metal rods.

When she got to the end she looked at the stuff piled up in the back, but didn't see anything she recognized as familiar from the cabin. Sam and Wyatt soon joined her.

"Anything?" She asked them.

They shook their heads.

"I have a funny feeling about this. Wouldn't he at least have some duct tape or a few tarps here?" Sam said. "There was a new pallet up at the front that's shrink-wrapped, but it's all new and that won't help us."

They trudged back to the door to find Thorne leaning against it, arms crossed over his chest and a smirk on his face. "Satisfied?"

“Not really,” Sam said.

Thorne spread his arms. “See? Your trip was a waste of time and your accusations are false. I’m a legitimate businessman. I have nothing to hide.”

Jo glanced back and said, “Especially not when you’ve hidden it somewhere else.”

Thorne shook his head. “Such little faith. But I’m not the one hiding things, right, Chief Mason?”

Jo didn’t miss the look of pure animosity that passed between them. Thorne was referring to the knife he somehow had in his possession. He’d been using it to try to gain leverage over Sam and Mick. Jo wasn’t sure exactly what the story was. She only knew that it had something to do with Sam’s cousin, Gracie, who had been raped many years ago. Maybe Sam and Mick had exacted some revenge? If so, who could blame them? Gracie had been brutalized and her life had been ruined. But as far as she knew, Thorne had nothing to do with what happened to Gracie. He’d gotten the knife from Dupont.

She knew Sam wouldn’t let the threat stop him from prosecuting Thorne. She doubted the threat had much power, anyway, because Sam couldn’t have done anything really bad. He was too good a person.

“I get your drift, Thorne,” Sam said. “Where are your smaller supplies? Hoses, duct tape, that sort of thing?”

“We use that up real quick. I have a new shipment over there.” Thorne pointed to a shrink-wrapped pallet at the beginning of the aisle that Sam had inspected. It wouldn’t help them in this case. They needed to find something that had been lying around for five years. Something they could use to compare with the items found in the cabin.

“I bet you do,” Sam said.

“I don’t know what you’re after, but I haven’t done anything wrong, and now that you didn’t find what you were looking for you can stop harassing me.” Thorne took a step closer to Sam, but Lucy’s low growl had him quickly backing up. “I don’t think you want to find out how it feels to be accused of something.”

The tension grew as Sam and Thorne stared at each other. Then Sam turned and walked back to the Tahoe without another word. Lucy followed, casting one threatening glare back at Thorne. Jo and Wyatt brought up the rear.

“What was that about?” Wyatt asked as they got into the Crown Vic.

“Typical Thorne.” Jo glanced sideways at Wyatt. Would he press her to find out what Thorne’s threat was about? But to his credit, he didn’t. He simply started the car and drove.

“Maybe that’s why Jamison was so cooperative. He knew he was going to tip Thorne off, anyway,” Wyatt said.

“That could very well be.” Jo settled back into her seat. She liked where Wyatt was coming from, his thought process. But it made her wonder. Was Jamison in on things with Thorne and pretending to play both sides? If so, he might be an even craftier foe than Dupont had been.

IT WAS ALMOST five in the afternoon when they returned to the station. They pulled their chairs in a circle in the squad room. Lucy sat beside Sam, Major skulked around the perimeter of the circle behind them, weaving his way around the back legs of their chairs while casting wary glances at Lucy. He took care to stay far enough away so no one could reach down and pet him. At least he’d come down from his supervisory post atop the filing cabinet.

“You didn’t even find one thing?” Reese glanced behind her at the photos on the cork board. “Not even any remnants of old tarps?”

“No, which is suspicious in itself because you usually find tarps at a construction site,” Sam said.

“Looks like he got rid of things,” Wyatt said.

“So someone tipped him off?” Reese asked.

Sam nodded. “But who?”

“Jamison?” Wyatt asked.

“Or his wife,” Sam said. “Maybe I shouldn’t have dropped so many hints to her. I was hoping we could get her to volunteer some information.”

“I think you did the right thing,” Wyatt said. “I mean, who wants to be married to a serial killer? If you were, you’d think you’d want him put away pretty quick.”

Jo looked into the bakery bag that sat on the corner of her desk. Even the promise of a jelly doughnut didn’t lift her spirits. Good thing, because the bag held only chocolate glazed. Probably for the best. She needed to cut back on her sweets consumption. Wyatt stood and rolled his chair back

behind his desk. “We still have those letters from Menda’s disciples. We might find something useful in there.”

“Did you find anything interesting so far?” Sam asked.

Wyatt shook his head. “They’re mostly cryptic and vague references, and most of them are emails. So there’s very few physical return addresses to follow up on. A couple of them went to post office boxes so I’m trying to get the records of who the owners were. One went to a real address, but that guy died six years ago so he’s probably not our guy.”

Jo checked her phone for the millionth time. No text from Bridget. Worry about her sister battled with her desire to get a new lead. Even if Bridget had seen the boyfriend, that had been five years ago and memories got fuzzy. Then there was the question of her drug history. Not only would she quickly be discredited in court, but could they really trust her memory to be accurate?

“Anything from your sister?” The concern on Sam’s face showed that he could sense her worry.

Jo gave him a wan smile. “No.”

“It would be helpful if she could describe the boyfriend, but that’s not critical. Her testimony would likely be questioned, given her history. So it’s more important that she get better than we pester her to help on the case,” Sam said.

“Thank you.” Jo knew that Sam’s worry was sincere, and it warmed her heart.

The lobby door opened, and they heard Bev’s voice a few seconds before she walked around the post office boxes and into the squad room. It took Jo a second to recognize her because she wasn’t wearing her sheriff uniform. Tonight she had on a T-shirt, jean jacket, and jeans. Jo bit back a smile. She’d never pictured that Bev had anything in her wardrobe other than those brown and tan uniforms. She looked like she was ready for a night out at Holy Spirits. Jo mentally added her to her list of invitees.

“You folks are working late. Did you get a lead?” Bev asked.

“We wish. We’re just reviewing what we have so far,” Sam said. “We could use a good lead, if you have one.”

“Unfortunately I don’t.” Bev leaned her hip on one of the desks. “Turns out those meth people were smart. No fingerprints in the kitchen. The main house had a variety of them, but nothing in AFIS, so we can’t track down who they belong to.” Bev rattled off the details with her usual efficiency.

“So the prints are probably from people other than those running the meth lab?” Reese asked. “Unless, of course, the people running it had never been arrested.”

Bev nodded. “Possibly the drug addicts that hung out there. It’s also possible the meth lab was in operation at a different time than when the vagrants squatted there. They may not even be related.”

“Looks like we have a lot of things that may or may not be related,” Sam said.

Bev nodded, “And so far very few solid leads.”

“Anyone heard from Holden? He might have some new information,” Jo said hopefully.

Bev rolled her eyes, “Yeah, I heard from him. He doesn’t have anything. You know, sometimes I think those feds just butt in when they don’t have anything of their own to go on. Then they take the credit for all of our work.”

Jo smiled. She knew there was no love lost between Bev and Holden Joyce. In fact, she guessed he’d done exactly that to her in the past, but now that Holden seemed to be cooperating she hoped things would be different.

Sam had walked over to the cork board and was staring at the photos again. Jo knew his process was to mull over the physical clues. She was more about the psychology of suspects, but in this case there wasn’t much psychology to analyze. She was going to rely mostly on Sam.

“There’s got to be something in these photos that we can use,” Sam glanced at his phone. “It’s past five. Maybe we should all head home. I don’t know about you guys, but I could use a fresh night’s sleep. Maybe something will pop out at me tomorrow. Sooner or later, something’s got to break.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Sam spent a restless night, his brain working overtime to make sense of the clues. He was worried about Thorne's threat, not so much for himself, but for Mick. He didn't want his friend to be pulled into some trumped-up investigation with fake evidence, but there was nothing he could do about that right now. He certainly wasn't going to throw the investigation over it. Once Thorne was gone, that threat would be gone too, so the sooner they could nail Thorne on at least one of these cases the better.

But something was bothering him, niggling away at the back of his brain like an itch that no amount of scratching would satisfy. There was also the fact that only two girls had been identified. Two families at least had closure, but one family was still wondering, and Sam desperately wanted to be able to stop that agonizing feeling of not knowing for them. Sam thought about his twin daughters, Hayley and Marla. He couldn't imagine what it would feel like if one of them disappeared from his life.

He got to the station about an hour early, surprised to find Wyatt already there. He stopped at Wyatt's desk before heading to the sanctuary of his office. "How's it going?"

Wyatt looked up from the computer, his eyes blurry. Had the guy been at this all night? "Tedious, but I'm checking everything. I'm getting into the IP layer now to see where these emails came from, and I have a special program that's going to ferret out any consistencies. It's a long shot, but..."

Sam nodded. In his limited knowledge of computers, he knew the IP layer was the technical way computers communicated with each other.

Luckily, he didn't have to know any more than that. Wyatt was an expert, and that was good enough for him.

"Woof!"

"Hiss!"

Major darted out of Sam's office and shot under Kevin's desk.

Wyatt's brows crept up. "Looks like the morning is off to a great start with those two."

Sam left Wyatt to his task. In his office he found Lucy lying in a puddle of sunlight below the windows, her eye on the door, probably watching to make sure Major didn't try to intrude into her territory again. Sam went over and patted the top of her head. "You showed him, huh?"

Lucy's tail swished on the floor in agreement.

Sam got busy staring at the photos on his cork board again. Was his desperation to arrest Thorne messing with his head? So far, he'd spent all this time trying to figure out how to get evidence against Thorne in both cases, but what if the two cases were unrelated?

He should spend some time thinking about that, but he had no other suspects. He felt strongly that Thorne at least had something to do with the meth lab. The coincidences were just too much. But the murders? Maybe he had been stretching it. Thoughts of his girls surfaced again. He owed it to the families to make sure he approached this case the right way, without prejudice, so that they could catch the killer. He still remembered Menda's parting words about how the killer must be itching to start up again.

"Deep in thought, huh?"

Harry Woolston stood in Sam's doorway, dressed in white shorts, a white shirt and terrycloth bands on his wrists and forehead.

Sam was too busy taking in Harry's outfit to formulate words.

"I know that look," Harry said. "That's when you're stuck on the case. Maybe you need to call me in?"

"I don't know, Harry. Looks like you're kind of busy."

Harry ignored his remark. "What's the problem? You may need to think outside the lines. That's what I always had to do."

"Yeah. I can see with that outfit." Sam gestured up and down Harry's body.

Harry rolled his eyes. "Tennis. The wife has me trying out all these new things." Harry sighed. "I'd rather be doing detective work. Don't you need a consultant? I have lots of experience."

“Yeah. Maybe we could use you to go undercover at the country club,” Sam joked.

“Very funny. Anyway, let me tell you about a similar case I had back in my day...”

As Harry droned on about his case, Sam let his mind wander. There had to be a clue he was missing, and he had to figure it out fast because the more time that went by the better the chance the killer would strike again.

WYATT LOOKED up from his computer only long enough to see Harry Woolston disappear into Sam’s office. He liked the old guy’s tenacity. It reminded him of his grandfather. They had been close when Wyatt was little, but Wyatt didn’t have many memories of him because circumstances had forced him and his mother to leave town when he was barely ten. He’d never seen his grandfather again, but that was probably for the best.

He dragged his attention back to the computer, not wanting to dredge up painful memories. He really hoped he could help with the case. It would make him feel as if he were atoning. How much atonement he would need, he had no idea. Would he ever feel that he’d set things right? At least he was starting to like Sam and Jo. They were honest, and he really felt they wanted to work for justice, just like him.

But what was that comment Thorne had made when they’d been at the construction site? Clearly, there was something going on between him and Sam. Wyatt couldn’t imagine what it was. He’d come across people like Thorne before. The guy was bad news. So, if he was threatening to blackmail Sam with something, that only moved Sam higher in Wyatt’s estimation.

Wyatt zoned out. Watching the green numbers scroll on his screen, he let the program he’d written do the work. When he and his mother had broken off contact with the family, Wyatt had been lonely. He turned to video games and computers. He’d become somewhat of an expert, and that expertise was coming in handy right now. Last night, he’d written a program to look for consistencies in the correspondence sent to Joseph Menda.

He knew from reading the letters that the correspondents didn't come right out and talk about killing. They were smart enough to know that police read each word. Instead, the real meanings were cleverly disguised behind code words. Some talked about his clever "art." Others about his masterful "accomplishments." One guy even used landscaping jargon that was clearly euphemisms for killing. It was crazy the different ways they could come up with to hide what they were really trying to say.

They weren't all serial killers, of course. Most of them were fantasizing about killing and would never escalate to the real thing. Of course, most of the letters and emails weren't signed or used nicknames.

Wyatt's program was written to key off certain phrases that he'd determined would signal someone who was serious, as well as ferret out letters that appeared to be from the same person and where at least one had been sent fairly recently. Wyatt figured that if the killer was trying to impress Menda, he'd have written him a few times, and if he was still alive he might have sent one not that long ago.

His eyes shifted from the screen to Major, who was skulking around the perimeter of the room, stopping to sniff here and there every once in a while, looking up at him as if they had some sort of special bond. Maybe they did. They were both new to the station, and both feeling their way out, trying to find acceptance, figuring out where they belonged.

Ding!

His attention jerked back to the screen. The computer had found commonalities in a five-year-old email with one that had been sent three weeks ago. The emails were unsigned and sent from different places, but they had to be from the same person. Both referred to baking, of all things, and Wyatt's blood chilled as he saw that the latest one referred to an irresistible craving to bake his favorite pie again soon.

He got to work typing furiously, trying to find the source of the email. He was working so hard he didn't notice that Jo had come in until she was standing right beside his desk looking down at the screen, a furrow between her gray eyes. "Did you find something?"

Wyatt looked up at her, excitement building in his veins. "I did. I found a common thread between some old emails and some new ones. I think this could be our guy, and even better"——he pointed to the screen—"I have an IP address, and I've traced it to a cyber café near here."

Jo leaned in even closer. "Where?"

“Black Cat Café. On Grove Street.”

Jo’s frown deepened. “Grove Street is right near the Summers’ mansion. Thorne’s in-laws.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

The Black Cat Café was about ten minutes away in a little area of shops that had sprung up on a well-traveled road. It wasn't hard to spot, given that it had an oversized sign that depicted a giant black cat lounging along the top. The cat reminded Jo of Major, and she half expected the place to have a resident gang of cats inside. She was disappointed to discover otherwise.

The interior was what she would have described as urban trendy, a little progressive for their rural area. It was steeped in the earthy smell of coffee and buzzing with activity. People sat around in comfy micro suede purple and blue chairs, sipping steaming cappuccinos. The foam, no doubt, artistically swirled in the image of a cat. Others nibbled scones and picked at cinnamon-topped pieces of coffee cake at round bistro tables.

Near the windows in the corner, a long bar-height table held three computer stations. A piece of paper hung above with instructions on how to access the Internet. While the rest of the café was uber modern, this part was like a throwback to pre-wi-fi days when it was a big draw for a café to offer computers you could use to get online. Jo hardly ever saw that anywhere anymore now that everyone had their own laptops and wi-fi was everywhere. Maybe the Internet was spotty here.

They headed to the register, passing a case loaded with fancy pastries. Sam flashed a piece of paper with a photo of Thorne at the cashier, a twenty-something with a long, blond braid pulled over one shoulder. "Does this guy come in?"

She squinted at the photo, then looked back at Sam. “I’m not sure. I don’t think so.”

“Maybe he uses the computers?” Sam gestured toward the computers in the corner.

The girl looked at the photo again and frowned. “Hardly anyone uses those. Gary, the owner, only has them for those of us less fortunate. He likes to help people who are not as privileged as we are,” she said proudly.

“So you can’t say whether this guy comes in or not?” Sam asked.

“I can’t say for sure.” She glanced around the room. “It’s so busy in here. Everyone kind of blends in unless they’re a regular. This guy is not a regular, but I only work mornings.”

“Is there someone else here we could talk to? Maybe someone else saw him.” Sam said.

“Sure.” She glanced at another twenty-something, this one a tall guy with shaggy hair. “Hey, Matt. This guy has a question. Wants to know if you recognize a customer.”

Matt shambled over and looked at the photo, then shook his head. “Did this guy do something?”

“No,” Sam said, “We’re just trying to locate him.”

Matt looked as if he didn’t quite believe Sam, but he shrugged and said, “I don’t remember seeing him. He might have come in when I wasn’t working.”

“He would have been using the computers over there.” Sam jerked his head toward the computers. “Do those get much use?”

“A few times a week, sometimes more. Depends. It’s free so people who can’t afford the Internet or a computer come in to use them when they want to get online.”

Or, if they don’t want their online activities tracked, Jo thought.

“And are you here all the time?” Sam asked.

Matt shook his head. “I work most days in the summer, but only weekends once college starts.”

“Can I get a list of the other employees?” Sam asked.

A worried look passed over Matt’s face, and he glanced at the girl with the braid. “I’m not sure. Maybe you should talk to our boss, Gary.” He opened a drawer and reached in and pulled out a business card, which he handed to Sam.

“Thanks.” Sam turned away from the counter, disappointment evident on his face. “When was that last email sent?”

“Two weeks ago,” Wyatt said.

“Maybe we need to set up surveillance outside the café.” Sam said. “I wonder if Bev Hatch has anyone she could spare. If Thorne comes back in and we can get a photo of him using the computer, then match that with the time the email was sent, it could go a long way to improving our case.”

“And if he’s starting up again. As the last email might indicate, he probably will come in to brag some more,” Wyatt said.

The door opened, and Beryl Thorne walked in, stopping short when she saw them standing there. The photo of Thorne crinkled as Sam shoved it in his pocket.

“Chief Mason.” Her curious gaze darted from Sam to Jo, and then to Wyatt. Then a frown formed between her brows. “What brings you here?”

“Just following a lead,” Sam said.

Beryl looked around the room and leaned in, lowering her voice. “You mean on what you found in the woods?” Her voice held a note of incredulity, as if she couldn’t figure out what the café could have to do with skeletal remains.

Normally Sam would never reveal that he was following a lead. He didn’t like to give out too much information, but Jo knew he was trying to make Beryl nervous, get her uncomfortable enough to give them some evidence against her husband. If she knew that Thorne came here to use the computers, the fact that the police were snooping around might be the very thing that finally caused her to realize that her suspicions about her husband really did have merit.

“Here?” She glanced around the café.

“Not anyone in here right now,” Sam said. “What are you doing here?”

Her gaze darted to the pastry case. “Oh, I’m on my way to visit my brother. He doesn’t get out very much these days, and he loves the cream horns here, so I always bring him some.”

“Does your family come here often?” Sam asked.

The crease between her brows deepened. “No. I mean, we used to, but... Why do you ask? I thought you said Mervale wasn’t connected to anything you found.”

“Mervale isn’t,” Sam said. The slight emphasis he put on the word “Mervale” was barely noticeable, but if Beryl was already thinking her

husband might be involved, it could be a subtle hint.

She nibbled her bottom lip. “Well, I want to help, if I can. If you could be more specific about what you’re looking for here, maybe I’ve seen something on the occasions I’ve been here.”

“We’re looking for someone who might have been using the computers.”

Beryl glanced over at the computers and back at Sam. “For what?”

“I’m really not at liberty to say, but some sort of communication they might not want anyone to know about. You haven’t noticed anyone strange using them when you’ve been here?”

Beryl shook her head. “No, I never notice who is over there.” But the way she glanced at the computers again told Jo that she wasn’t as confident as her words sounded.

“Yeah, it was a long shot,” Sam said. “Well, have a nice day.”

Jo and Wyatt followed Sam to the door. As they spilled out onto the sidewalk, Jo glanced back in the shop to see Beryl Thorne staring after them, a look of worry on her face.

JO SLID her sunglasses down over her eyes and settled into the back of the Tahoe, letting Wyatt and Sam ride in the front. She glanced at the empty seat beside her, where Lucy would normally sit. They’d left the dog back at the station, figuring they couldn’t bring her into the café anyway, and she’d be more comfortable in her own dog bed than sitting in the hot car. Lucy hadn’t seemed to agree at the time, but Jo was willing to bet Reese had made the offer more appealing by feeding her treats.

“We need to find something to tie Thorne to those emails,” Jo said, as she watched the shops give way to wooded areas and fields. In the distance, the blue waters of the lake sparkled in a basin ringed by a wall of hazy blue mountains. If Thorne had his way, most of the scenery would be replaced with condos, hotels, and strip malls in the not-so-distant future.

“If he actually is the one who sent them,” Sam said.

Jo shifted her gaze from the window to meet Sam’s eyes in the rear-view mirror. “You’re having doubts that was him?”

“I just wanted to make sure we don’t overlook someone else because we’re so hot to pin it on Thorne.”

“I think you’ve been talking to Holden Joyce too much,” Jo said.

Sam snorted. “No, but he is right about not focusing too much on one person so that you don’t even look at other suspects.”

“It would be convenient if it was Thorne, though,” Wyatt added.

“True, but we want to make sure we get the right guy. We don’t want to let a serial killer go free,” Sam said.

“Or a meth manufacturer.” Jo glanced at her phone. Still no text from Bridget. “We need to show his photo around to the other people who work there,” Jo said.

“I’ve got the manager’s card. I’ll get Reese right on it,” Sam said.

“Good luck with that. I get the impression that people there all look the same to those kids,” Jo replied.

“I think the wife is a little nervous.” Wyatt’s gaze was fixed out the side window. Jo wondered if he was watching the scenery and wondering what the future might hold, as she was.

“Maybe we got her thinking,” Sam said.

“I wonder if Thorne told her we searched the construction site,” Jo said.

“It might be good if he did. That would give her some more to think about. I’m hoping that over time she’ll realize it’s not going to benefit her to cover up for him.” Sam glanced in the rearview mirror at Jo. “What do you think, Jo? Human behavior is more your department than mine.”

Jo had been watching Beryl Thorne. The telltale signs of nervousness were there, no doubt, but she couldn’t tell whether it was because Beryl knew something about Thorne or simply because their paths kept crossing in relation to the case.

Even if Thorne wasn’t the killer, he sure as hell was one of the biggest drug distributors in the area, and his wife had to have some inkling about that. “I think Beryl knows something. She had a nervous twitch, and her eyes were darting around the café, but I’m not sure she knows anything concrete. It could be something subconscious. You know, like she knows something is off but doesn’t want to admit to herself that her husband could be involved in something shady.”

“She definitely seemed worried,” Wyatt said. “I only wish we had something more than just a hope that she might rat out her husband.”

“If we just had a better way of knowing who was at the computer at the time the email was sent,” Sam glanced at Wyatt. “You don’t have any computer tricks for that, I suppose.”

“I wish. I can only trace the email to a specific computer using the IP layer and decoding the MAC address, but that won’t help us because anyone could have sat at that computer during the time. And who’s going to remember who was there a couple of weeks ago?”

“Maybe they have surveillance cameras,” Jo asked, hopefully.

Sam shook his head. “I didn’t see any in there.”

If Sam said there weren’t any surveillance cameras, you could bet money on it. Sam had a knack for noticing those kinds of details.

“If this was the city, we could pull up traffic camera footage and we might be able to catch him going into the café, or if we’re lucky, one of the cameras might actually show the café window,” Wyatt said. “But of course, we don’t have traffic cameras here.”

“Yeah. One of the disadvantages of working in a small town, I suppose,” Jo said.

“Yep, but I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else.” Sam glanced out the window, and Jo followed his gaze. The uncluttered scenery had given way to the beginnings of Main Street. What once had been a large farm where sheep and cattle had grazed, a new strip mall had been built. Jo’s chest constricted. How soon before their idyllic small-town life became just like city life?

Judging by the pace they were putting up that strip mall—one of Thorne’s—it would seem pretty soon. The grazing field had been replaced with blacktop. Where stands of pines and oaks once stood now was a concrete block building, its plate glass windows reflecting glare from the sun. The only saving grace was that Thorne had put a large landscaped area at the end of the parking lot beside the road, and several spots in the parking lot had been landscaped with shrubs and flowers.

Jo had to admit the landscaping was kind of nice. They’d planted hostas, colorful flowers, and trees. Grass was starting to sprout in the ten-foot-wide area separating the parking lot and the road. Thorne was even putting in an irrigation system. One of the kids who worked for him was going over the hard-packed ground with an aeration machine to prep for it. The landscaped area was one of the concessions Thorne had had to make to get the zoning board to agree to rezone this parcel for commercial use.

As they pulled down the street, a familiar black Toyota 4Runner was parked in front of the police station. “Looks like the FBI is here,” Jo announced. “Maybe there’s been a break in the case.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sam followed Jo and Wyatt into the police station. Reese looked up from her desk, rolled her eyes, and tilted her head toward the squad room where Holden Joyce sat in a chair feeding treats to Lucy and getting the stink eye from Major, perched in his usual place on top of the filing cabinet.

Sam handed Reese the card he'd gotten from the café. "Can you call this guy? He's the owner of the café, and I want to get the names of all his employees and the times they work so we can go down and show them Thorne's photo."

Lucy met him as they came around the post office boxes. She was clearly relieved that Sam and Jo were back, and that Holden wasn't going to be her new contact at the station.

"Have you guys found something?" Holden brushed treat crumbs from his shirt. Sam noticed he was wearing a regular T-shirt and jeans today, not his usual dark blue FBI suit. Did that mean he was feeling more comfortable around them, and if so, was that a good thing or a bad thing?

Sam filled him in on their visit to the café. Major hopped down and sniffed at the crumbs on the floor, then gave Holden a dirty look and trotted off into Sam's office, presumably to hide in the closet, which had become his new favorite napping spot.

"Unfortunately we didn't get very much either," Holden said.

The rest of them took their seats, Jo sitting on top of her desk, her feet swinging in front, Sam with his hip leaning against the back of Kevin's desk, and Wyatt pulling his chair around to the front of his desk and turning it to face them.

Holden continued. “We’ve done the research into serial killings going back five years, but we haven’t found anyone who hasn’t already been arrested. There are a few unsolved cases, but none involving shallow graves.” Holden glanced at Jo, and Sam wondered what that was about.

“So our guy is still out there,” Sam said.

“Yes, but we might have a lead on the meth lab front.”

“Really? Thorne?” Sam’s voice was hopeful.

Holden took a deep breath. “I don’t know if it is Thorne, but we have an informant in upstate New York who’s worked with a meth lab out of northern New Hampshire. That lab is still in operation, and we’re trying to find out where it is. They move around a lot to minimize getting caught. If it’s linked to the cabin, we don’t know, but he says the leader is someone who has a big business in northern New Hampshire.”

Sam wasn’t sure how he felt about that. On the one hand he desperately wanted to catch Thorne and put him in jail. On the other, it was a little annoying that the FBI had an informant all this time who might have been able to help his case against Thorne. Why hadn’t they done this before? If they had, Thorne might be in jail right now. Then again, that wouldn’t help the girls in the shallow graves.

“That sounds like Thorne,” Wyatt said.

Holden made a face. “It sounds like him, but a lot of people have big businesses up here. We don’t want to get fixated on Thorne and miss out on any clues that lead to someone else.”

“Agreed,” Sam said. “No sense in getting too excited. The informant’s meth lab owner might not be Thorne. Could be some other business owner, maybe even one of Thorne’s minions. The important thing is catching whoever killed those girls and whoever was running the meth lab, whether it’s Thorne or someone else.”

“If it’s the same person, that would make it all a little easier,” Jo said.

“Even if the informant does identify Thorne, we’re going to need physical evidence linking him with that cabin,” Holden said.

“Did your lab find any DNA evidence linking the cabin to the shallow graves?” Sam asked. “I mean, scraps of fabric common to the two locations or something like that? You have a pretty sophisticated operation up there.”

“We do, and that’s why it’s a little disconcerting that there was no evidence found linking them. It could be that the two are not related.”

“Yeah, but was there any evidence at either spot that links to Thorne? A hair follicle, a drop of blood, anything?” Jo asked.

“Well, that’s the problem. We don’t actually have Thorne’s DNA in the database,” Holden said. “So the problem is we have to arrest him first with physical evidence that links him and then get his DNA so we can match it up.”

“You mean Thorne’s never been arrested?” Damn it! Thorne had been a juvenile when the case Mick had told him about had taken place. Those records were sealed, but they likely wouldn’t have taken a DNA sample back then. Thorne had killed an animal, not a person, and back then they didn’t have the technology for DNA sampling and preservation procedures that they did now.

“So what are you going to do next?” Sam asked.

Holden held up his hands. “Don’t know. We’re reaching somewhat of a dead end. The parents of the two victims who were identified couldn’t help at all. The third one still hasn’t been identified. We pulled out all the open missing persons cases. She doesn’t match any of them.”

Jo frowned. “How can that be?”

Holden’s jaw tightened. “Unfortunately, there’re a lot of people who just go missing and no one cares. Could be her parents were drug addicts. Could be her parents were dead and she was in the foster care system. Could be a lot of reasons.”

Sam thought again about his daughters. He couldn’t imagine not caring about what happened to them. Were there really parents so cold and unfeeling? He noticed Jo glance at her phone again, probably wondering if her sister might suffer a similar fate.

“One thing we could do is put surveillance on the café,” Sam suggested. “It’s a long shot, but if the killer is starting up again as the last email indicates, maybe he’ll return to the café to email Menda again. If not a person, then maybe we could set up a camera outside the café. Those internet computers are right in the window. Then we could see who was at the computer at the time the email was sent.”

Holden thought for a few seconds. “I’ll see what I can do. I don’t think we can allocate any manpower for it. We’re stretched thin as it is, but maybe some kind of camera set up on the other side of the street might work. I’d need a warrant. I have to go back to headquarters anyway. I’ll let you know if anything new comes up.”

“Thanks. I’ll do the same,” Sam said.

Wyatt spun his chair back behind his desk. “I’m going to dig into these emails a bit more. Maybe I can find something else.”

“I’ll search the newspapers to see if I can piece together an itinerary of Thorne’s activities five years ago when the girls were murdered.” Jo opened her laptop and started typing. “There might be articles about what he was building, which could give us some kind of a timeline. Maybe something will come up and we’ll get lucky.”

“I’m going to take another look through those crime scene photos.” Sam headed to his office, Lucy trotting along beside him. He leaned his butt against the edge of the desk while he stared at the photos. Lucy sat beside him, her head tilted to stare up at the photos also, as if contemplating the evidence. He reached down to rub the fur on the top of her head. “There’s got to be something in this physical evidence. It always comes down to a clue at the crime scene that we’ve overlooked.”

He focused on the photos from the shallow graves, letting each one sift through his brain, tarps, holes, leaves, bones, scraps of clothing. The last body hadn’t been identified. Should they focus on that? The thought haunted him that there was a family out there somewhere with a loving member who had never returned home.

Movement beside him stole his attention from the photos. Major had jumped up on his desk and sat beside him, staring solemnly at the cork board.

“Hi, there.” Sam reached out tentatively to pet the cat. His fur was much softer than Lucy’s. He glanced from the cork board to Sam, the contrast of his sleek jet black fur highlighting his luminescent golden eyes.

Lucy snorted, her eyes narrowing on the cat. She didn’t make a move. She just watched him carefully. Maybe she was getting used to Major. Better not pay too much attention to him, though. Lucy was still his favorite, and he wanted her to know that.

Sam turned back to the photos. The tarp. Thorne should have had some of those on the job site. Sam had never seen a construction site without tarps, but why didn’t he have them? He must have known they were coming to inspect the site. Someone had tipped him off. Jamison? Freeman? Beryl?

The fact that the tarps were missing made Sam suspicious. He stared at the tattered blue scraps in the photos of the shallow graves. Those holes were so unusual. Tarps often had grommets, though not quite as many as

these holes would indicate. Hadn't he read about a case in which a particular style of grommet had helped link physical evidence that solved the case?

But where were the grommets? It looked as though they'd either been ripped out or had fallen out. Perhaps the tarps had rotted around them and the grommets were still in the dirt. Maybe he should consider having someone take a metal detector up there and recover them. But there were too many holes. There wouldn't be that many grommets in the tarp. What were the other holes for?

Something clicked into place in Sam's mind. Thorne had been doing landscaping at the strip mall they passed on the way back from the café. Thorne had fought the improvement, but Mayor Dupont had stood firm on that one, at least.

The people of the town absolutely refused to have that mall built unless it had a certain amount of greenery. Sam wasn't surprised that Thorne had taken the cheap route and planted grass seed instead of springing for new sod. That old ground was hard with years of use and wouldn't grow nice lush grass without some work to get the water deep down to the roots.

That was where the aeration machine came in, and the aeration machine made dozens of tiny holes in the ground. Sam's gaze swiveled to the photos of the shallow graves again. The holes in the tarp, the mismatched pattern where there was one missing hole. Thorne's cheapness might be his downfall if his aeration machine had the same pattern and the distance between spikes matched the distance of the holes. This could be the break he'd been hoping for.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The landscape work was still in full swing when Sam and Jo got to the strip mall. They had taken Lucy, but not Wyatt. A call had come in that Bullwinkle was holding up traffic at the intersection of Hill and Maple, and Wyatt had volunteered to take care of the wayward moose while Sam and Jo headed out to look at the aerator.

Sam wasn't surprised that Thorne wasn't there. He liked to lord over his empire from his climate-controlled trailer. All the better, as Sam would get more cooperation from the workers who had stopped working and were now frowning at the Tahoe with its police insignia as it pulled in beside their trucks.

One guy, the largest of the three, had been running the aerator. He watched Sam and Jo approach. The other two went back to wrangling a four-foot-tall rhododendron into a hole, casting looks back at them every few seconds. Lucy busied herself sniffing each plant one by one.

The smell of bark mulch permeated the air, and the sun warmed Sam's back as he picked his way toward the guy, careful not to disturb the mulch or squash a plant. Sam's eye was drawn to the machine. This one was a rolling aerator and looked like a walk-behind lawn mower, except instead of cutting grass it propelled spikes down into the earth. It was the type that could make the holes Sam had seen in the tarps. He couldn't see the spikes from where he stood, but he hoped they'd match the diameter and spacing of those holes.

"Something wrong, officer?" The man asked.

“No.” Sam gestured toward the machine. “Just wanted to get a good look.”

“You need your lawn aerated?”

Sam laughed. Most times it paid to be friends. As his grandmother always said, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar. “Nah, just looking for something. Mind if I take a look?”

The man stepped aside. “Not at all.”

Sam crouched down next to the machine, Jo beside him.

Sam glanced up at the man. “This job is for Thorne Construction, isn’t it?”

The man nodded.

“So this equipment belongs to you or him?” Jo asked as Sam tipped the aerator on its side. The spikes were about two and a half inches long and a little thicker than a pencil. Did that match the size of the holes in the tarp? With the way the tarp had been frayed and ripped, it was hard to tell. But they seemed about the right size to Sam. Bev’s lab had made a plaster mold of the holes from the piece of clay they’d dug out. They could easily prove it matched through that.

“Belongs to the company. We work for Thorne Construction.” The man crouched beside them. “Is something wrong with it? I don’t know anything about permits or specs. We just do what the company tells us.”

“Nah, just wanted to get a look at it.” Sam compared the spikes on the machine to what he remembered seeing at the grave site. The spikes seemed to be a bit farther apart. He’d have to call in for someone to measure them to be sure. He turned the cylinder slowly, studying each row of spikes, his hopes waning as he did.

There were no missing spikes. Whatever had made those holes in tarps in the graves wasn’t this.

Jo looked at him over the top of her sunglasses, her gray eyes mirroring his disappointment. Another dead end.

Sam nodded. He put the machine right, dusted off his hands, and stood. “Is this the only aerator you have?”

The man nodded. “We only have the one. It usually does the trick.”

“And when it doesn’t?” Jo asked.

“We borrow one from another company.”

“What’s the name of that company?” Sam asked.

“Mervale International.”

"SOMEHOW I DON'T THINK that getting a look at the Mervale landscaping equipment is going to be as easy as just walking up to the crew and turning a machine on its side," Jo said once they were back in the Tahoe.

"Think we need a warrant?" Sam asked.

"Unless you think Beryl Thorne will be nice enough to just show us whatever we want."

"She might, but if she isn't that might tip her or Thorne off, and they could hide or destroy evidence before we get a chance to look," Sam said. "Better get a warrant."

The police radio under the dash squawked with a blast of static. "Let's make use of this thing."

Sam keyed the mic, "Reese, you there?"

Static and then, "Yes, chief, 10-4."

Sam glanced at Jo. "Um, can you fill out a search warrant form?"

"10-21."

"Huh?"

"You're not supposed to ask questions over the police radio, chief. You'll have to 10-21 that."

"What?"

"Call me on the phone." Reese sounded exasperated.

Sam rolled his eyes. "I finally find a use for this thing and I'm not supposed to use it for that?"

"Sorry, chief. Police protocol. People can listen in, you know."

Sam hadn't thought about that. Guess Reese had a point. "Okay, talk later."

"That's 10-4, chief."

Sam hung the mike up. "See? That thing is not useful, just like I said all along."

"I'll call her. Maybe we should talk to Jamison again and have him push it through," Jo said.

Jo pulled out her phone, ignoring the fact that there was no text from Bridget. She couldn't let that steal her attention away from the case right now. She needed to focus. She called Reese and relayed the information they needed on the form and then told her to fax it to Jamison.

Reese was quick, and the form was on Dottie's desk by the time Jo and Sam got there. Dottie had already arranged an audience with Jamison, who seemed a bit perturbed to find them in his office again.

"I just pushed a warrant through for you and it came back to bite me." Jamison smoothed his blue patterned tie. "And you didn't find anything?"

"He might have been tipped off," Sam said.

Jo watched Jamison's reaction. If he was the one who had tipped Thorne, she couldn't tell by the way he reacted.

"Judge Freeman will never agree to another warrant against Thorne. Thorne complained loudly about the last one. He made noises about a harassment lawsuit." Jamison said.

"This one isn't against Thorne," Sam said. "It's for Mervale International and it's solid. We're looking for a machine that can make a series of small holes like those found at the graves. The graves were linked to the cabin and Mervale is also linked to the cabin."

Jamison was silent. His eyes moved from Sam to Jo and then back again. Finally, he sighed and leaned back in his chair. "Fine. Judge Moseley is in today. I'll give him a call."

"Thank you." Sam started toward the door.

"Better hope this one isn't a bust," Jamison yelled after him.

Jo was skeptical about Jamison's motives in helping. He'd never seemed helpful before. Then again, he'd been in the shadow of Dupont. Had she misjudged him? But even if he did help, she was also skeptical about Moseley signing the warrant. They probably had a black mark against them from the previous one. But whatever Jamison had told him must have worked because the warrant was coming off the fax machine when Sam and Jo got back to the station. They grabbed it, did a quick about face, and headed right back out to Mervale.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sam went straight to the back of the Mervale International parking lot, slowing as he passed the row of tall Lombardy poplars.

"I remember seeing some storage sheds back here when we came before." In the spaces between the trees, Sam saw the sheds. They were a little bigger than a residential tool shed, but looked a heck of a lot sturdier.

"I guess that's where they keep their equipment." Jo tapped the search warrant against her leg. "Let's go serve this and see what's inside."

The same blonde was behind the reception desk. Her eyes narrowed when she recognized them. "Are you here to see Mrs. Thorne?"

"No. This time we'd like to talk to the head of maintenance." At least Sam hoped there was a head of maintenance. Someone had to manage the equipment, and a building this size would need someone to perform maintenance work on the facility.

"That would be Mr. Blakely. I'll see if he's in." She made the call, and Sam and Jo shuffled around the lobby for a few minutes until a tall, beefy guy in his mid-30s wearing a corporate emblem T-shirt and cargo pants appeared.

"I'm Jimmy Blakely." The man extended a calloused hand.

"Chief Mason. This is Sergeant Jody Harris."

They all shook, and the man shifted on his feet. "Is there something wrong?"

"We'd like to take a look at your landscaping equipment."

The man hesitated. "I don't know. What exactly is this about?"

Jo handed him the warrant. “Ongoing case. We’re not at liberty to talk about it, but as you can see, we officially have the right to look.”

“Oh.” He looked down at the paper, and Sam could see he was torn over whether he should call his boss or simply lead them to the sheds. It didn’t really matter much to Sam. The search warrant would get them in eventually. But they could get a look at the machine quicker if Jimmy didn’t involve upper management. Sam hoped he wouldn’t, because he was pretty anxious to find the machine that had made those holes so he could start moving on the case before Thorne did something drastic.

“Okay, this way.” Jimmy walked to the door, and they followed. Sam’s pulse picked up a notch. They were getting very close to a big break. “We keep it all out back in the storage sheds.”

At the sheds, Jimmy pulled out a large ring of jangling keys and unlocked the doors.

“Do you have a lawn aerator?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. It’s in that shed.” Jimmy gestured toward the first shed. “It’s in the back. Let me get this other stuff out.”

Sam helped him pull out rakes, saw horses, and even one of those heavy-duty riding lawn mowers that commercial landscapers stood on to mow large lawns.

Finally, Jimmy pulled out the aerator. This one was a little different than the one they’d looked at earlier. It was narrower and looked heavier. Sam tipped it on its side, his hopes plummeting. Instead of the thin spikes, this one had round cylinders. Sam recognized them from some work he’d had done on one of the fancy Victorian homes one of his ex-wives had talked him into buying. The cylinders removed plugs of earth, churning them up and leaving them in the grass like Canada goose droppings. Unfortunately, the plugs were about a half-inch in diameter and three inches in between. They were too big and not spaced properly to be the machine that made the holes in the tarp.

“Is this the only aerator you have?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. We don’t need more than one. Hardly use it,” Jimmy said.

Jo glanced down at the machine. “What’s wrong?”

“Wrong kind.” Sam chewed his bottom lip. “But you probably had a different aerator before, right? Is this one new?”

“Nope. Look at the thing.” Jimmy gestured to the mud-caked, rusted machine. “I’ve been here almost 10 years now, and this is the only one

we've ever had. It still works okay, but like I said, we hardly ever use it."

"What's going on?" Beryl Thorne appeared between two poplars with a confused look on her face. "Chief Mason? What is this about?"

"We got a lead that links to some landscaping equipment."

"One that involves us? I thought you said nothing involves Mervale?"

"I didn't say our lead involved Mervale."

Beryl made a face. "And yet you're here."

Jimmy cut in, "I'm sorry, Mrs. Thorne. They had a warrant, and I thought I'd better comply. I hope it's okay."

"You did the right thing, Jimmy. Thanks. I'll take it from here." She held out her hand for the keyring. "I'll lock up when we're done."

Jimmy nodded, handed her the keys, and left. Then Beryl turned to Sam. "Just what is going on? If this is about that cabin, I thought it was clear that we didn't even own that place at the time in question."

"Right. Like I said, it's not Mervale that we have questions about."

Beryl crossed her arms over her chest. "Then why are you looking at our equipment?"

"The guy doing landscaping for Thorne Construction said that sometimes they borrow equipment from you."

Beryl's eyes narrowed. Fear? Suspicion? Or deviousness? "Thorne Construction? Yes, sometimes we lend them equipment. I mean, we do know each other. Is it Thorne Construction that's under suspicion?"

Sam made a noncommittal gesture, noticing how Jo was watching Beryl carefully for any signs that she had suspicions about her husband.

"Is this related to the reason you were at the café? Something about those emails?" Beryl asked.

"I can't really give out too much information." Sam glanced back at the aerator. Damn it. His one lead, and now it was a dead end. Then again, maybe Mervale wasn't the only place Thorne's landscaping crew borrowed equipment from. The Thornes themselves had quite a big estate, with a huge lawn to take care of. "Does Thorne Construction ever use landscaping equipment from your home?"

Beryl's eyes widened. "Our home? No. Just what are you insinuating?"

Sam held his hands up in a placating gesture. "I'm just following a lead. We think a piece of equipment is related to the skeletal remains."

"And you think that equipment might be at my home?" Her eyes darted from Sam to Jo. Sam almost felt sorry for her. After all, the poor thing *was*

married to Lucas Thorne. And if getting her riled up served to have her give evidence against him later, it would be better for everyone, including her. Even if Thorne wasn't the killer, he was a drug dealer, and Beryl would be better off without him. "You're barking up the wrong tree. We don't have any landscaping equipment like this. We use a service."

Damn! It looked as though this really was a dead end.

"Okay, then. I'll put all this stuff back in the shed for you." Sam rolled the aerator in, and Jo grabbed the wheelbarrow. Beryl picked up some rakes and followed them inside.

"I would like to know exactly what is going on. This is getting close to home, and I have a right to know if it concerns me," Beryl demanded.

Sam slid the aerator into place and looked at her. "I can't really say much as it's an ongoing case, but I think it is getting close to home for you. If you know anything, or have any suspicions, you should tell us."

"What do you mean? I don't know anything. How could I know something when I don't even know what you're talking about?"

Sam didn't have to be an expert in human behavior to tell by the way Beryl's eyes shifted to the left that she did know something. Now if he could only get her to say what it was. He contemplated telling her that Thorne had mutilated cats when he was younger. He figured that wouldn't sit well with an animal lover like her. But getting a wife to turn on her husband was a delicate balancing act. Sometimes they could become more defensive of their spouses. He needed to bring her along slowly and get her to come to her own realization that it was in her best interest to give them whatever she knew about Thorne.

Beryl sighed. "If I knew more about what your suspicions were I might remember something or know what to look for."

Fishing for information? Was that because she was trying to make sure her husband really was into criminal activity? Or so that she could warn him?

"Let's just say there is compelling evidence that what went on at the cabin might link to something at Thorne Construction," Sam said.

Beryl blew out a breath, her eyes hardening as if she'd reached some sort of conclusion. Sam hoped that conclusion was that she should turn on her husband. She reached into her pocket, pulled out a card, and handed it to him. "My cell phone number is on here. I understand that you can't tell

me specifics, but I'd appreciate a call if you discover that there's more you can tell me."

Sam accepted the card and put it in his pocket. Beryl turned to leave, then said, "It might be in your best interest to keep me informed because if I knew more I might know how I could help with the case."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Back at the station, Lucy and Major must have sensed Sam's mood. There was no growling or hissing when Lucy tried to pass Major at his usual post atop the filing cabinet to greet Jo and Sam.

Wyatt looked up from his desk when they entered the squad room. "How did it go?"

"Dead end." Sam put his keys on the hook on the wall and went to the coffee machine. "Anyone want a coffee?"

"I'm good," Jo said, walking to her desk with the doughnut bag she'd snagged from Reese as they passed the dispatcher.

"Me too. But I have something that might help." Wyatt approached Sam with papers in his hand. "When Reese said you were looking at the aerators, I did some research. I got the specs from the machines and measured the holes in the photos to compare them." Wyatt pointed to the columns on the paper. "Now, my numbers might be off because I was going by the photograph, and it's not life size. I have a call into the county lab to see if I can get the exact measurement from that chunk of clay we dug out at the site. This was just something quick I worked up so we could have something to work with right now."

The paper was neatly done. The hole sizes and spacing on the tarp were at the top, rows of measurements for the specs of the various machines under them. Sam didn't like what he saw. "None of these match the holes."

Wyatt nodded. I know. "But like I said, the math could be off."

"I don't know if it really matters. We're out of machines to look at," Sam said.

“Maybe we should go back to the drawing board with the holes.” Jo pulled a toasted coconut doughnut from the bag.

“Did you get any more on those emails?” Sam asked Wyatt.

Wyatt shook his head.

“Maybe Holden Joyce got that surveillance set up,” Jo said. “If what Menda said was true, our guy might be gearing up to send an email boasting about his intentions.”

“Hopefully he’ll do that before he actually kills someone else,” Sam said.

Major jumped off the filing cabinet, landing with a soft thud. He hopped onto Jo’s desk, peering into the bag.

“Do cats eat doughnuts?” Jo mumbled with her mouth full.

Major stuck his face in farther, his whole head disappearing into the bag.

“Guess so,” Sam said.

Major shook off the bag, then hopped down, telltale crumbs in his whiskers. Lucy trotted over and sniffed the bag, which had fallen to the floor. Major apparently hadn’t left much, because she went back to her place in the sun after a few sniffs.

“What about Beryl Thorne? Do you think she knows something?” Sam turned to Jo. “Didn’t you think she was acting a little weird?”

Jo chewed thoughtfully. “Yep. It seemed like she was. I got the impression she knows something and was deciding whether she should tell us.”

“How could she not know what Thorne is up to?” Wyatt asked. “She’s his wife.”

“Maybe they have separate lives,” Sam said.

“Or she’s in on it,” Jo suggested. “She could be acting like she’s concerned because she’s trying to get information. I mean, seriously, if your spouse was a killer or a drug dealer, don’t you think you would know? And if you knew you wouldn’t stick with them unless you were working with them.”

Sam shrugged. “There have been plenty of cases in which spouses didn’t know. And besides, Thorne is kind of a jerk. Maybe their marriage isn’t that great and she doesn’t pay much attention to what he does.”

“Well then, that could work in our favor, because if their marriage isn’t that great maybe she’s looking for a way to get rid of him.”

“To get rid of who?” Bev Hatch came around the post office boxes.

“Thorne,” Jo said.

Bev grunted. “Who wouldn’t want to get rid of him? Did you get something on him?”

“We thought we did, but it turned out to be a dead end.” Sam told her about their unsuccessful quest to find the aerator that made the holes in the tarps.

Bev stared at the photos, her face about two inches from the cork board. “Maybe there’s some other kind of equipment that makes these holes. Are you sure they’re relevant?”

Sam had been one hundred percent sure earlier. Now, not so much. “I don’t know, but it’s one piece of evidence we can use to tie to something physical. If we can just find something that makes this pattern of holes. Did your people find anything like that in the cabin?”

“I don’t think so. I’ll double check. It would be great if they did, because we haven’t come up with much. The DNA analysis and meth lab investigation have basically flat-lined. We need something new.”

“And it’s not a stretch of the imagination that Thorne would have a piece of equipment that could do something like this. He owns a construction company,” Jo said.

“It doesn’t have to be a lawn aerator, right?” Bev asked.

“I guess not. What other kind of equipment should we look for?”

“Nail gun?”

“But that doesn’t create a pattern. We need something that has a pattern that we can use to match to these holes.” Sam tilted his head and looked at the pattern in the tarp. “Unless it is something like a nail gun and the killer, for whatever weird reason, shot a pattern, missing one spot.”

“Maybe he didn’t miss a spot.” Wyatt looked at the cork board over Sam’s shoulder. “Maybe something was in the way when he was making the pattern.”

“Something that a spike couldn’t pierce,” Bev added.

“Like what?” Jo asked.

“I don’t know. Metal? What else can’t a spike go through? And what does this have to do with the bodies?” Wyatt asked.

Bev started pacing the room. “What if it has nothing to do with the bodies? Maybe the killer already had the tarp. It could be one Thorne had

on his construction site. Maybe it was no good anymore because of the holes, and he decided to use it to wrap the bodies?"

"Even better," Jo said. "If he frequently uses whatever it is that makes the holes, that's a link we can tie back to him."

"If we can find whatever makes the holes," Bev said.

Sam studied Bev. "So, you really think it is Thorne too, then?"

Bev raised her brow. "I didn't say that. I'm just riffing off of what you said, but I wouldn't be disappointed if it was him, and we don't have any better leads."

"What about the FBI?" Wyatt asked. "They said they had some kind of informant. Maybe we can get to Thorne that way."

"Sure. Maybe that might get him some jail time for the meth lab. But if we could get him for this"——Sam tapped a photo of the shallow graves——"we could put him away forever. If only we had something better." Sam glanced at Jo, but Jo gave a subtle shake of her head. She hadn't heard from Bridget.

"Maybe we can put our heads together and think of another piece of equipment that might do this." Bev stopped her pacing and turned to stare at the board, her arms folded across her chest. "Or maybe we're wasting our time trying to pin this on Thorne."

"Hey. Anybody home?" Harry Woolston's voice bellowed from the lobby, accompanied by the annoying sound of metal scraping on marble.

Any other time, Sam would've gotten a kick out of Harry's outfit. He wore a plaid cap with a pom-pom on top, a white polo shirt, and what looked like knickers.

Jo screwed up her face. "What's with your outfit, Woolston?"

Harry made a face. "That's the wife. She's got me into all kinds of hobbies to keep me away from policing." Harry looked down at himself. "Now it's golf."

Lucy looked at him and whined.

"Don't worry. It's just me." Harry started toward the dog, his shoes scraping on the wide pine floors of the bullpen.

Sam winced. "Hey, would you mind taking those things off? You'll scratch up the floor with those cleats."

Harry lifted his foot. "What? These?"

Sam's eyes fell to the bottom of the shoe. Like Harry's outfit, they were old-school, with metal spikes. His eyes flicked from the bottom of the shoe

to the photo of the holes in the tarp. “Harry, give me that shoe. I think you might’ve just provided a break in the case.”

JO PEERED over Bev’s shoulder as Sam pushed Harry into a chair, took his shoe, and then compared it to the holes in the photo. The photos weren’t to scale, but it looked as though they could match. But then she’d thought that about the spikes in the aerator, too. She cautioned herself not to get her hopes up.

“Would golf cleats be able to puncture holes in a tarp?” Wyatt asked. “Those things are pretty tough.”

“Probably not the new plastic ones, but these old metal spikes could,” Sam said.

“But why would the killer wear golf shoes?” Bev asked.

“Who can say? He’s not normal. We can’t speculate on why he would do anything.” Jo knew from her research that serial killers often had fetishes in which they exhibited odd behavior based on what had happened to them as children. She had no idea what this golf shoe fetish would be. Maybe his father was a golfer or he was abused by an uncle who golfed.

“But five years ago they had plastic ones, not these metal ones,” Wyatt pointed out.

“Sure, but the metal ones can still be purchased, right Harry?” Jo asked.

“Yeah, the missus got these over at the secondhand store.” Harry wiggled his toes, now clad only in a sock.

“We don’t even know if Thorne golfs,” Bev said.

Sam turned to face her. “Actually we do. I saw a golf trophy when I was in his construction trailer the other day.”

“We need to get a warrant,” Jo said. “Then we need to get that casting your lab made of the holes in the clay, Bev.”

“No problem on the casting. But good luck with the warrant. I heard Judge Freeman was already upset about the last one,” Bev said.

“Yeah, Thorne has him in his pocket, but maybe we won’t need a warrant.” Sam held a business card up, and Jo recognized it as the one Beryl Thorne had given them. “Maybe we can convince the evidence to come to us.”

Sam disappeared into his office, and Jo headed out to the lobby. Even though Reese had gone home, Jo knew where she kept the forms used to request warrants. She figured Sam was calling Beryl, but she had her doubts about whether or not Beryl Thorne was going to turn her husband in.

Sitting at the reception desk, she glanced at her phone for the umpteenth time. Still no message from Bridget.

Now she was starting to wonder if this did have anything to do with Thorne. The aeration machines had been a big failure. What if this golf thing was, too?

She busied herself filling out the form while Wyatt and Bev took measurements from Harry's shoes, much to his delight. Judging by the conversation filtering in from the squad room, Harry was happy to be part of the investigation, even if it didn't entail going out in the field. At least this was something his wife wouldn't protest about too much.

Just when Jo had finished filling out the form, the door opened. In came Beryl Thorne, holding a paper bag out in front of her, as if it contained a smoking gun, which, if it was the golf shoes, it very likely did. Her eyes darted around the room quickly. "Is Chief Mason in?"

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Sam came out of his office to find Beryl Thorne standing in the squad room holding a bag. So, she had come after all. When he'd gotten off the phone with her, he hadn't been sure she would. She had sounded incredibly uncertain.

He rushed over to her and took the bag. "Thank you so much for coming."

She looked as if she might bolt at any minute, her eyes flicking from Sam to the bag. "I brought his golf shoes like you asked." Her voice was shaky.

Sam put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "You did the right thing. This is important."

She swallowed hard and nodded.

Sam opened the bag. Inside was an old pair of golf shoes, similar to the ones Harry was wearing. They had metal cleats crusted with dirt. Apparently, Thorne didn't take very good care of his shoes. Either that, or because he had used them while burying the victims he didn't want them cleaned off. Some kind of weird serial killer souvenir, perhaps? All the better for Sam. Maybe that dirt would contain evidence they could use against him.

"You won't tell him I gave you these, will you?" Beryl asked.

Sam glanced up from the bag. Beryl looked frightened. "No, of course not." At least Sam hoped they wouldn't have to, but if they did it would be during Thorne's trial, and he'd be locked away, unable to retaliate against his wife.

Beryl wrapped her arms around herself, her eyes glued to the bag. “I suspected Lucas hadn’t been right for a while, but I never imagined he could be involved in something this horrible.”

Sam had already put on gloves and was lifting the shoes out of the bag to inspect them further. His heart leapt when he noticed that one spike was missing.

Wyatt ripped the photo from the cork board and brought it over for comparison. It looked as if the pattern matched.

“Does it help?” Beryl stared at the photo, her voice trailing off.

“Yes. Thank you very much. It helps.” Sam turned her around and walked her toward the lobby. He had important work to do, and it wouldn’t help to have the wife of the man he was about to arrest in the station. “How did you get these? Was your husband at home when you took them?” Sam hoped Thorne hadn’t seen her taking the golf shoes. It might tip him off and cause him to run.

“He was at home, but out back in the tool shed. He didn’t see me leave. He was busy rearranging his tools.”

Or hiding more evidence, Sam thought.

“Maybe you should go to your parents or somewhere else other than home.”

Her eyes registered alarm at his words. “Are you going to arrest him now?”

“Possibly. I’ll let you know.”

Beryl left, and Sam ran back to the squad room.

“I’ve already called Holden Joyce,” Bev said. Then, at the obvious look of disappointment on Sam’s face, she added, “I know he’s a pain, but he can expedite a search warrant for Thorne’s place. You guys seem to have a hard time pulling that off, you have to admit.”

She had a point. “What did he say?”

“He’s on it. He’ll get a warrant as fast as he can and let us know.”

“Great.” Sam grabbed his keys from the hook on the wall.

“Aren’t you going to wait for—?”

Sam interrupted Bev’s question. “No time for that. We might be able to catch him in the act of destroying evidence, but if we wait too long there might not be anything left. He didn’t have any tarps or hoses or duct tape at his construction site, but he might have them stored at home. His wife said

he was in his tool shed. We don't have time to wait." Sam glanced at Harry, but the ex-chief was already holding his palms up in front of him.

"I'll sit this one out, Sam."

"Good thinking. You broke the case. That's enough for one day."

Sam pointed to Lucy, who stood at attention next to Harry. "Come on, girl. This time you can come."

Bev and Wyatt were already in the lobby, with Jo close behind. Sam jogged to catch up, yelling over his shoulder to Harry, "Don't wait up, and try not to piss off the cat."

THORNE LIVED in a small mansion in the affluent section of town. They drove down streets lined with stately oaks, the properties spaced several acres apart. Thorne's house was a three story-brick manse with lush landscaping. It was dark now, but Sam could still see that the lawn was meticulously groomed and every hedge perfectly trimmed.

The house was dark. He hoped Beryl had taken his advice and gone elsewhere. He didn't want her to get hurt if things went squirrely.

Sam saw a shaft of light spilling from the door of a shed through the break in the hedges that separated the front yard from the back. The faint smell of wood smoke drifted toward him, and his gut clenched. Was Thorne burning the evidence?

He started toward the shed, but Bev grabbed his arm. She leaned over and whispered, "Holden texted. He's on the way. They'll be here in twenty minutes."

Sam's gaze didn't waver from the shed. There was a large window on one side, and a shadow moved back and forth. Thorne was busy in there, and Sam wasn't going to wait for the FBI.

"Good. Then they should get here for the good stuff. Follow me, but stay behind."

Sam squeezed through the hedge, sticking to the shadows. He didn't want to take a chance that Thorne might spot him and bolt. Beside him, Lucy quietly sniffed the air. When he rounded the corner of the house he saw the golden flames of a bonfire flickering in the fire pit. He hoped the evidence they needed against Thorne wasn't going up in flames.

Sam didn't want to spook Thorne, so he motioned for the others to hold back as he slowly approached the door. Inside, Thorne was loading a metal wheelbarrow that sat in the middle of the shed. Sam craned his neck to see what was inside, but he couldn't quite make it out from where he stood.

He moved forward, and Thorne spun around, squinting out into the night. His eyes widened as he recognized Sam.

"Mason, what the hell are you doing here? This is private property."

"Just out walking my dog." Sam stepped closer. Now he could see inside the wheelbarrow——rubber hosing and a few half rolls of duct tape.

Thorne scowled and pulled a phone from his pocket. "This time you've gone too far. I'm calling Jamison. I'll have you arrested for trespassing."

"Who's going to arrest me?"

"The county sheriff."

"I don't think so. She's here with me. And the FBI is on the way."

Thorne looked doubtful, but his finger hovered over the phone. "You're bluffing."

"Give it up, Thorne. We have a search warrant and evidence that proves you're the meth distributer and serial killer we've been looking for." At least, Sam hoped they had a search warrant. If Holden was on his way, he must've gotten one.

"What are you talking about?" Thorne's voice rose.

"What have you got in the wheelbarrow? Maybe some tarps or souvenirs from your kills?"

"You've got the wrong guy, I haven't killed anyone."

Sam took a closer look. No tarps, but he didn't let that get him down. They had plenty with the hoses and duct tape, and given the fact that Thorne was clearly trying to do something with them, he felt certain they could be linked to the meth lab. "I see you've got some items one might find in a meth lab. In fact, we found some stuff just like this in an old meth lab recently."

He was inside the shed now, his eyes scanning for the brilliant blue of a tarp. Nothing. Where had he hidden them? The wood smoke wafted in. The fire! Had he already burned them?

Sam hollered over his shoulder, "Bev, Jo, douse that fire. There could be something in there."

Thorne scowled. "It's just a bonfire, Mason. I don't know what you're talking about. This stuff is just duct tape, common gardening stuff." Thorne

stepped around the wheelbarrow. “You can’t just come in here and accuse me.”

Sam’s hand hovered over his gun. Thorne was not armed, but the shed was full of tools he could use as a weapon.

Next to him Lucy growled, and Thorne’s eyes flicked to the dog. The hair on the back of her neck stood up. He took a step backward. “This is harassment.”

“Not when you’re actually a criminal, it isn’t,” Sam pointed out.

“Why do you keep saying that?” Thorne demanded. Sam had to hand it to him. He was denying it till the end.

The sound of sirens split the air. Bev must’ve found something in the fire and relayed that information to Holden Joyce. Otherwise they would’ve come in silently.

Thorne's eyes took on a wild look. He was coming unglued. “You’d better back off, Mason,” he hissed. “Don’t forget, I have something on you and your buddy.”

Of course Thorne would bring that up, but just what did he actually have? The knife itself didn’t really prove much. Or did it? Had Thorne and Dupont somehow done something to add DNA evidence incriminating Sam and Mick of something they hadn’t done? All the better to see Thorne in jail tonight, where he couldn’t use it against him. Was the knife hidden here in his shed? In his office? They’d be searching both, and Sam made a mental note to have an active hand in those searches. “Sorry, Thorne. I’m not afraid of you or your threats.”

“This is preposterous! You don’t have anything on me!” But the trapped look in his eyes as he glanced at the wheelbarrow told Sam that they did indeed have something.

“You can cut the innocent act. We know you were in contact with Menda and sent emails from the café.”

Thorne’s brows mashed together as if he were starting to believe his own lies. “Café? Emails? What are you talking about?”

The silence grew louder, and Thorne became more agitated.

“How long are you going to play dumb? It’s over, Thorne. We have your golf shoes.”

“Golf shoes? I haven’t golfed in decades.” Thorne's eyes narrowed, darting from the window to Sam. “Where did you get my golf shoes anyway?”

“I told you, we have a warrant.” Sam was purposely vague. He didn’t want to get Beryl into trouble, just in case the charges against Thorne didn’t stick. “And what’s with the bonfire outside? I bet we’ll find that you’re burning evidence.”

Tires screeched in the driveway. Thorne glanced at the window again. Surely he wasn’t thinking about...

Thorne took two steps back, then made a running dive toward the window. The glass shattered. Lucy gave one warning bark and took off around the shed.

When Sam got to the other side of the shed, Lucy was holding Thorne pinned to the ground about twenty feet from the window. He hadn’t gotten very far. Holden Joyce and several FBI agents ran through the hedge.

“Let me go! I’m innocent!” Thorne thrashed, but Lucy held tight.

Holden glanced from the broken window to Thorne. “Right. Innocent guys usually jump through windows to get away.”

Sam called Lucy off, and the FBI agents cuffed Thorne and began reading him his rights. Sam took Holden to the wheelbarrow to show him the evidence.

Wyatt, Jo, and Bev had managed to extinguish the fire and were pulling out melted scraps of duct tape.

“Bag it all up,” Holden said. “The duct tape at the cabin was made with a certain adhesive that was defective. It was used for only a few months. If this matches, it’s one more thing we have against him.”

“And your informant?” Sam asked.

Holden nodded. “Hopefully he’ll come through. We’re going to need that. The duct tape is circumstantial, but it adds up.”

“We have the golf shoes back at the station. Forensics might be able to find blood under those cleats if we’re lucky. Maybe epithelials on the inside that match to Thorne.”

“Let’s hope so,” Holden said as they started back toward the FBI agents, who were now attempting to drag Thorne toward the car.

“I demand to know what this is about!” Thorne screamed.

“You’ve been read your rights. You’re being arrested.” Holden gestured toward the wheelbarrow, which was now outside surrounded by more FBI agents who were bagging the contents. “We have plenty of evidence showing you running a meth lab, and possibly enough to link you to a series of shallow graves.”

Thorne bucked and tried to pull away from the agents. “I told you, I’m innocent.”

“Sure you are,” Holden said, “You’ll get your day in court.”

Sam stood beside Holden Joyce, watching them pull Thorne away. Thorne turned around, his face red with fury as he spit the words at Sam, “I’ll get you back, Mason!”

“He’s protesting an awful lot about this,” Holden said.

Sam watched as they shoved Thorne in the car. “Won’t take him long to learn that he can’t wriggle out of this easily. With what we have, we should be able to prove Thorne was at least involved with the meth lab, and hopefully we’ll find evidence on the golf shoes that will tie him to the killings. I’m not surprised he’s protesting, though. That guy is so arrogant he probably thinks he can just claim he’s innocent, pay off a judge, and get off.”

Holden shook his head. “Considering he was caught destroying the evidence, I don’t think that’s going to happen. No judge in his right mind would take that payoff.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Dim lighting created a hushed sense of twilight in the hospital room. The only sound was the constant beeping of the machines.

Sam leaned against the bedrail, looking down at the still body. “Well, we finally got Thorne.”

Kevin didn’t answer, didn’t even twitch a muscle. Not that Sam expected him to. He hadn’t shown any signs of knowing anyone else was there on Sam’s previous visits, and Sam didn’t think he would now. But someday he would. Even though the doctor had said he’d lost so much blood it had been very traumatic to his system and he may never recover, Sam knew he would.

Sam wondered if somewhere in there Kevin could hear him. Probably not. The trips he’d been making to update him were more for Sam’s benefit than for Kevin’s.

Sam started to pace alongside the bed, his steps keeping time with the constant beeping of the heart monitor. “We have solid evidence for the meth lab. The FBI was able to match some things found in the abandoned cabin with things Thorne had in his shed. We finally got a search warrant to look through his house and office. Remember how many times we tried to do that before?” Sam glanced at Kevin as if he would magically answer the question, but he just lay there. The machines continued to beep.

Sam turned and paced back up toward the head of the bed again. “Did I mention his wife was instrumental in helping us nail him?”

Sam paced back down to the foot of the bed. “Yeah, and forensics found blood under the cleats of the golf shoes she gave us, so we’re well on our

way for nailing him for being a serial killer, too." Sam stopped the pacing and turned around. He frowned at the pale officer in the bed. "Though some of the details on that seem a little sketchy."

He shrugged and continued the pacing. "And of course, Thorne denies it all, especially the serial killings, but who wouldn't? He could go away for a long time for those three girls. We're just hoping there weren't more."

Sam stopped at the head of the bed again, leaned on the railing, and looked down at Kevin. "Anyway, Harry still blames himself for what happened to you, so the sooner you wake up and ease his conscience, the better. He's no spring chicken, you know, and of course Lucy misses you."

A slight movement made Sam's heart leap. Was that an eye twitch? Sam leaned closer, staring at Kevin's eyes. He could have sworn he'd seen a little flutter when he'd mentioned Lucy.

"Kevin, can you hear me?"

Kevin didn't move. Had it been his imagination? He glanced at the machines. They were still beeping at the same rate. No alarms, no nurses running. Wouldn't they have some monitors on Kevin to know if he was waking up? Wouldn't someone come? He leaned in closer. "Kevin, buddy. Can you hear me? We need you back at the department."

But Kevin didn't move.

"Well, I just wanted to give you an update. The others are waiting at Holy Spirits to celebrate." Sam turned to leave, then looked back at Kevin. "I wish you could join us. Maybe next time?"

Sam caught a nurse in the hallway. "Is there any improvement with Officer Deckard?"

The nurse smiled and shook her head.

"I thought I saw his eyes twitch."

The nurse's smile turned sad. "I don't think so. He's in pretty deep. It's going to be a long haul for him. In fact, we're moving him to a long-term care facility now that he's stable."

Sam nodded. He knew Kevin's brother had signed the paperwork to move him into Longview, but Sam was still holding out hope that Kevin would wake up before then.

"Okay. Let me know if anything changes," Sam said.

"We will. Have a good night, chief."

"You too." Sam turned and left, ready to join the livelier crowd at Holy Spirits.

JO WAS ALREADY on her second beer when Sam slid onto the bar stool next to her at Holy Spirits. She had been anxious for him to show up because she had important news that might help solidify the case against Thorne.

"Sorry I'm late, I stopped to visit Kevin." Sam signaled Billie for a beer.

Jo glanced up from her own beer, hopeful. "Was there a change?"

Sam shook his head. "Nope. I just like to keep him updated. The nurse said they might be moving him soon."

Jo nodded. "Yeah, I heard his brother signed the paperwork and closed up Kevin's house for the winter. His badge and the stuff he got from the hospital are waiting for him in your closet. You know, when he comes back."

"Hopefully that'll be soon." Sam accepted his beer from Billie. "I don't know if he can hear me, but I was hoping the news about Thorne's arrest would sink in and bring him back to us."

"Speaking of which, I have something that might help us." Jo held the phone up, and Sam's eyes widened. "Your sister?"

Jo nodded. Bridget had finally replied to one of her texts, and much to Jo's delight, she was still working on cleaning up her act. "She's in a program. I broached the topic of her identifying the man she saw Amber with, but she seemed a little reluctant."

"Maybe we should give her some time," Sam suggested.

"Probably, but we may not have time. Isn't Thorne fighting this and still insisting he was framed?"

"Yeah, but I'm not too worried. We have evidence against him. I'm just glad your sister is okay."

Jo's heart warmed at the genuine look of concern on Sam's face. Guilt gnawed away the warmth of friendship. Now was the time to tell him about her other sister. Her gaze drifted over her shoulder to see Wyatt approaching. Darn! She didn't want to do that in front of Wyatt.

"Hey guys, this place is great!" Wyatt stood between Jo and Sam, looking up at the stained-glass window.

"You've never been here before?" Jo asked.

"Nope. I usually spend my time closer to home, but now that I work in White Rock, I guess this kind of is home."

“Nice job on the work you did on the Thorne case.” Sam shook Wyatt’s hand.

Wyatt blushed. “Hey, just doing my job.”

Jo studied Wyatt. He was modest and a good cop. Yep, things were gonna work out between them just fine.

“I missed all the excitement, but I can still celebrate.” Reese appeared, a white paper bag in her hand. She passed the bag to Jo. “Brewed Awakening has jelly doughnuts again. I got you one.”

Jo looked inside the bag and smiled. Then she closed it up. Doughnuts and beer? They really didn’t go together that well. She’d save it for later. Still, the fact that her favorites were back was a good sign. Jelly doughnuts, her sister in a recovery program, and Thorne in jail. Things were looking up in a big way.

“Anyway, I got your text and just shot over to have a quick drink with you guys. I fed Lucy and Major, and they’re snoozing away at the station.” Jo had figured since she’d invited Wyatt she should invite Reese, too, so she’d texted her to see if she could join them.

Sam laughed. “Are you sure? There’s no telling what the two of them could get up to with nobody there to referee.”

“No, it seems things have calmed down between the two of them. At least Lucy let Major get within five feet of her food bowl tonight without growling.”

“If you say so.”

Reese ordered a shot of tequila and then turned back to Sam and Jo. “Bev Hatch stopped by the station. She said the last girl was identified. She was from Wyoming. She’s hoping maybe the parents will know something further that we can use in the case.”

“That would be good.” Jo swigged her beer. It was almost empty.

Sam held his beer up in a greeting toward someone behind Jo’s back. Judging by the scowl on Reese’s face, Jo didn’t need to turn around to see who it was.

“What is Marnie Wilson doing here?” Reese gave Sam a pointed look.

Sam took a swig. “Heck if I know. She’s campaigning now, so she’s probably trying to get the vote of the working people.”

“You sure she didn’t come to see you?” Reese didn’t mince words.

Sam made a face. “Why would she come to see me?” As if to prove his words, he turned back to the bar, away from Marnie.

Reese looked toward the door. “Isn’t that your friend Mick?”

Sam followed her gaze. “Yep.”

“Come on, Wyatt. Let’s go grab the table.” Reese nodded toward a table that had just been vacated by a rowdy after-work crowd. “There isn’t enough room for all of us at the bar.”

Reese and Wyatt passed Mick on the way to the table. Mick slid in on the other side of Sam. Billie had the whiskey glass on the bar before Mick’s butt hit the chair.

“So what are you gonna do now that your favorite bad guy is in jail?” Mick asked Sam.

Sam chuckled. “It’ll be a welcome break not to have to tangle with him.”

“Do you think the construction will stop?” Mick asked.

“I hope so. His wife is in charge now, and she seems a lot more environmentally friendly.”

Jo picked the label on her beer. She certainly hoped so too. She hated the strip malls and hotels that were springing up around White Rock, but somehow she had a feeling that Beryl Thorne wasn’t exactly as friendly as Sam thought she was. There was something about the woman that gave her pause, but she couldn’t quite put her finger on exactly what it was.

Mick leaned in closer and lowered his voice. “And did you find the item of interest?”

Sam shook his head. “I was in on the searching of his home, his office, and the shed. I didn’t find the knife.”

Jo’s gaze flicked from Sam to Mick. “He probably hid it somewhere. Is that really going to be an issue now that he’s in jail?”

Sam’s jaw tightened. “Hopefully not, but he might have left it with one of his minions. Maybe he’ll try to use it as leverage to get a lighter sentence.”

Mick tossed back his drink. “I guess we’ll have to wait and see.”

“Oh crap, is that Holden Joyce?” Sam squinted into the mirror at the crowd behind them, and Jo followed his gaze to see the FBI agent making his way toward them. “I thought he would just go away once this case was over.”

“I’ll let you guys talk shop.” Mick picked up his drink and headed to join Reese and Wyatt at the table.

“Sam, Jo.” Holden shook their hands. He seemed quite happy, jovial even. A big change from the original Holden Joyce they’d met on the last case. Apparently capturing a serial killing drug dealer was good for his spirits.

“How’s our favorite criminal?” Sam asked. “Still denying everything?”

Holden blew out a breath. “Yep, but we’re getting more and more evidence. We’ve linked more of the supplies in the cabin to him, and we’re still working on an eyewitness.”

“But what about the meth lab and the shallow graves? Is there anything more than that one leaf to link them?” Sam asked.

Jo knew that one leaf wouldn’t be enough to prove that Thorne was involved in killing those girls. Even if they proved he was at the cabin, and they linked the cabin with the gravesites, it was all circumstantial. The golf shoes that Beryl Thorne had given them were going to be important evidence in the case.

Jo glanced down at her phone, then finished her beer. Holden didn’t know about her sister yet, and she was going to keep it that way. She wasn’t going to volunteer her sister’s services until Bridget felt comfortable trying to identify Thorne. It was more important that her sister not have anything to stress over while she tried to get clean.

“He’s screaming about a setup and suing the police department,” Holden said. “What’s a guy gotta do to get a beer around here?” He leaned over the bar.

Sam signaled for Billie, then tapped Holden on the shoulder and pointed toward the table where Reese, Wyatt, and Mick now sat. “We’re over at that table when you get your beer.”

“I’ll be there in a second too.” Jo held up her empty beer. “I need to order another one myself.”

Holden slipped into Sam’s chair and leaned over the bar to catch Billie’s attention. “This one’s on me,” Holden said as they ordered the two beers.

Holden spun his seat to face her. The look on his face made her uncomfortable. Then again, the guy had been acting weird towards her the whole case. Why should now be any different?

“The evidence against Thorne isn’t exactly conclusive, but I know he deserves to be in jail. That said, he’s not the guy responsible for your sister.”

Jo's heart knocked against her ribcage. Holden Joyce knew about her sister? Of course he did. That was why he'd been acting the way he had been. He'd probably known she'd also been conducting her own unauthorized investigation all these years.

Holden nodded. "Yes, I know about your sister. And I talked to O'Reilly, too. I know you have some expertise in serial killers."

"Have you been checking up on me? Why?" Jo was miffed. What was the FBI guy angling at? Even though he hadn't been such a pain in the ass on this case, she still didn't really want to be friends.

"When I was a rookie I had a serial killer case." Holden's eyes glazed over in a haze of painful memories. "We didn't catch the guy. Ten children were brutalized and killed. I vowed that I would get him. I think he might be the same guy who took your sister."

Jo felt it like a punch in the gut. At first she was suspicious. Surely Holden Joyce was up to something. This was too convenient. She did the math in her head. Holden was about ten years older than her. He would have been fresh out of the academy and a newbie FBI agent when her sister was taken.

She remembered the cases of the other children. Had Holden been searching for this killer his whole career, just as she had? No wonder he had been so diligent. He didn't want to mess up again. And if what he was saying was true, then someone else believed that her sister's abductor was still out there. She wasn't alone.

"The police never found any similar cases after Tammy was taken. They had always worked under the assumption that the man who took my sister was eventually caught and incarcerated for other crimes, and never admitted to taking her," Jo said.

"Is that what you believe?" Holden paid for the beers that Billie shoved across the bar and slid one to Jo.

Jo studied his face. She was good at reading people. Holden wasn't conning her. He was serious about catching this killer, and he valued her opinion. "No, I think the person is still out there."

Holden nodded. "I do too, but the guy who killed the women in these graves, it's not him. And Thorne couldn't have been the one who took your sister. He was in Europe backpacking during that time. He would have been very young."

"Yes, but as we both know, serial killers can start very young."

“My case and your sister’s case are too old and too cold for the police to care about. But both of us seem to have a little bit of expertise in the subject. What do you say we combine forces and try to catch this guy?” Holden’s face turned serious. “If he’s still out there, he could kill again.”

Jo took a sip of beer, then turned her chair to face the room. Reese, Sam, Wyatt, and Mick were laughing at the table. Her heart clenched when she watched Sam. It should be Sam she was teaming with to catch a serial killer, not Holden Joyce.

“So what are you suggesting? The killer would be quite old now.”

“That doesn’t stop them from killing,” Holden said. “It wouldn’t take much. We’d be doing the same thing that you’ve probably already been doing. The same thing that I’ve been doing——gathering information, investigating on the side. What do you think? Are you in?”

Jo slid her thumbnail under the beer label. Investigating her sister’s case had consumed her, eaten up her whole life, and now that she was finally making a home here in White Rock she’d vowed to set it aside. But this new case had ripped the scabs off the old wounds, fueling the desire to investigate and find justice for her sister again.

“I’ll have to think about it. Maybe.”

Holden glanced toward the table. “Does Mason know about your sister?”

Jo sighed, “No.” Why hadn’t she told Sam? Looking back, it seemed she’d had a million chances, but something always came up. Was it because she’d always had an excuse not to tell him because she felt guilty about not being up front with him when she’d first come to town? Now she felt it was a huge betrayal of their friendship.

“You going to tell him?”

“Yes. Sam and I are partners. We don’t keep secrets like that from each other.”

Holden glanced at her. “Well, you’ve kept it so far.”

“Yeah, but no more. I’m going to tell him just as soon as I find the right time.”

She’d have to tell him if she was going to start this investigation on the side with Holden. Before she’d been on her own. It had been tough getting leads, getting people to talk to her. She didn’t have access to police files or databases, but the help of an FBI agent would make things much easier. She

was definitely going to take Holden Joyce up on his offer. After all, what did she have to lose?

This is a work of fiction.

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KILLING DREAMS

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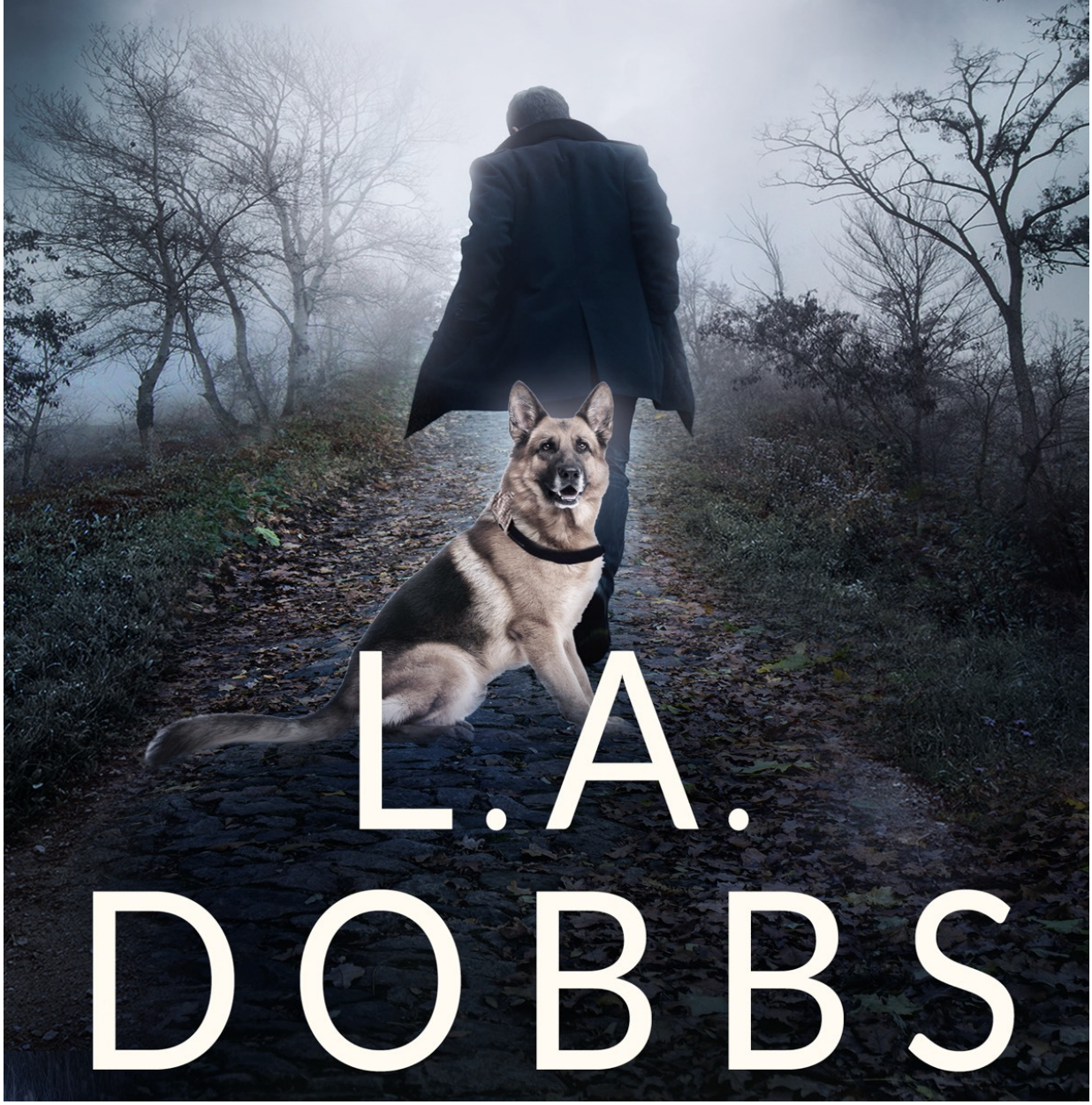
A SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERY BOOK SIX

CROSSING LINES



L.A. DOBBS

CHAPTER ONE

The killer gazed down into the shallow grave, the intense elation he'd felt only moments ago giving way to disappointment. The girl was no longer pretty. No longer fresh.

Her red hair, once so vibrant, was matted and dull, soiled with the leaves and dirt of the forest floor. Her formerly radiant porcelain skin was now tinted gray. The excitement he'd felt as he'd watched the spark of life slowly disappear from her eyes had faded.

Soon he'd need to find another.

It was a shame, really, after all these years. He thought his malevolent urges had gone away. But his sickness had returned despite his noble efforts to tamp it down. The recent discovery of those victims from years ago had stoked the evil fire that burned within him.

At least someone else was in jail for the others. The killer laughed at the thought of pompous Lucas Thorne sitting in a cell for something he didn't do. Not that Thorne hadn't done many things to land in a cell. He deserved to be in prison because he'd purposely harmed others and broken the law. The killer didn't deserve a cell. He couldn't help what he did. It wasn't his fault.

As long as Thorne remained in jail for those murders, no one would know who had really committed the crime. Which was a perfect cover for the killer.

The hoot of an owl jarred him out of his reverie. Above, the moon looked down between the tops of the trees as if watching his every move, a quiet witness to his indiscretions.

The killer picked up the shovel. Better get to work. The sooner this one was covered and forgotten, the sooner he could start on his next project. Yes, he thought of them as projects. He wasn't just a random killer. There was a method to his art. First choosing the perfect victim. Then stalking, and then finally, when he could no longer hold himself back, taking and killing. Helping them disappear into the earth was the final step.

Out here, he'd found the perfect place to lay his projects to rest. No one would be digging around in an owl sanctuary.

The thought of starting anew made him giddy as he picked up the shovel and tossed the first clump of dirt into the grave.

CHAPTER TWO

Sam Mason was suspicious of Beryl Thorne's intentions. As chief of the northern New Hampshire town of White Rock, he'd put her husband in jail. Not that she was angry about that. In fact, she'd helped by providing a damning piece of evidence—Lucas's golf shoes. But showing up at the door of Sam's log cabin after work with a six-pack in her hand seemed like an excessive maneuver just to thank him.

"I just can't believe I lived with a killer." Beryl shuddered. As she adjusted her position on Sam's overstuffed couch, her knee brushed his. He inched away and glanced at his German shepherd mix, Lucy. She was lying over by the river-rock fireplace. Her head rested on her paws, and her whiskey eyes flicked from Beryl to Sam. Sam thought he saw wariness in those eyes. Good girl. She was smarter than most humans.

"I imagine that would be disturbing." Sam took a sip of beer. It wasn't bad, just not the brand he preferred. Still, he wanted to be polite, so he'd accepted the gift, popped open a beer for each of them, and invited her in. Now he was wondering if maybe he'd made a mistake.

Judging by the low growl periodically coming from Lucy, she thought so too. Then again, Lucy didn't like most women who came to the cabin. Except Jody Harris. But Jo was Sam's second-in-command, so Lucy was used to working with her.

"… taking over the business." Beryl's words drew Sam's thoughts away from Jo.

"You're taking over Thorne Enterprises?" Lucas Thorne had been shady in his land acquisition deals, taking advantage of elderly farmers and

pushing the envelope with local building laws. Hopefully Beryl would be more of a rule follower. Sam wondered, not for the first time, how much she knew about her husband's *other* business. Thorne had been a drug distributer in the area. His recent incarceration had surely put a dent in the supply of drugs in town.

"Sure. Someone has to. And I have experience with my family business, so…" She shrugged and then looked at Sam with innocent brown eyes. "I know you and Lucas butted heads about a lot of things, but I'm going to run it differently."

"Good. So what about Mervale?" Sam referred to Beryl's family company, which she had been running in her brother's absence. "Is your brother able to take over now?"

Beryl looked away. "A little. He's getting better, so I'll help out there until he comes up to speed."

Interesting. Her brother, Robert, had run Mervale for years until he became ill. During the Thorne investigation, his illness was somewhat of a mystery. Beryl seemed protective of him, but Sam supposed that was only natural for a sibling.

"This place is great." Beryl gestured around the log cabin that Sam had inherited from his grandfather. It was still decorated the way his grandparents had had it. The taxidermy deer head from the six-point buck his grandmother had shot hung over the fireplace. Plaques with mounted rainbow trout and salmon he and his grandfather had caught hung around the room. Then there were his grandmother's finer touches, like the oak china cabinet and landscape paintings.

"Thanks. It was my grandparents' place." Sam wasn't much for small talk, and he was starting to wonder when Beryl would leave.

Beryl put her beer on the table, brushing against Sam as she leaned over. "I hope we can work together much closer than you did with my husband."

Lucy made a sound as if she didn't like what Beryl was getting at. Sam didn't much like it either, though he wasn't sure why. She was certainly attractive enough, petite with chocolate-brown hair and doe-like eyes. Sam guessed her to be around his age. She looked good for around forty. But Sam's instinct was to inch away.

Maybe it was the two ex-wives. He'd learned long ago that getting too involved could mean trouble. And now Beryl was looking at him expectantly.

Not to mention he didn't want to get involved with Thorne's wife.

But he also was thinking of Jo. She was the only woman that didn't make him feel like he was second-guessing himself during even the simplest conversations. But then she'd been acting a little off lately herself.

"Yeah. I—"

His phone vibrated on the table. Saved by the bell. Even better, it was Jo. "I better get this. Jo's at the station working night shift. Could be important."

He used the excuse to ease his way up from the sofa. He paced into the kitchen as he answered.

"Hey."

"Hey… um… did I interrupt something?"

Sam glanced back toward the living room. "No."

"Okay, well, I think you might want to get down here."

Sam's gut tightened. Jo was perfectly capable of handling things. She'd only call him in if something was very wrong. "What's happened?"

"I have a woman here. Maria Stillwell. She's filing a missing person's report for her daughter. She's seventeen, last seen day before yesterday."

Memories of the bodies in the graves bubbled up. They'd been teens too. But those girls had been runaways and had been put in those graves over five years ago. The killer was long gone.

"I have a bad feeling about this." Jo echoed his thoughts.

"She could be a runaway." They had very few runaways in White Rock, but they also had very few missing persons. In fact, usually none. That was why Jo was taking this so seriously.

"Mrs. Stillwell says they had a good relationship. No reason for her daughter to run. Might be good if you talked to her, unless you have something important going on. "

Sam glanced into the living room again. This was a great excuse to nip anything Beryl had in mind in the bud. "Nope, I've got nothing going on. I'll be right there."

Beryl looked up from the couch. "Something wrong at the station?"

"Nothing too concerning, but I do need to go and check it out." Sam picked up Lucy's leash, and she was by his side in a second.

"Oh. Of course." Beryl looked disappointed, which made Sam even more relieved that he had to go to the station. She stood. "Well, this has been nice."

“Thanks for the beer.” Sam held the door open for her.

She paused as she passed him, a little too close for Sam’s comfort. Looking up, she smiled and touched his arm. “Thanks again. I really do appreciate everything.”

“I should be thanking you. You gave me the key piece of evidence in your husband’s case.”

Beryl nodded, her jaw tightening. Did she regret playing such an important role in her husband’s arrest?

A flash in the bushes across the street caught his eye. Binoculars? Was someone watching them? He scanned the area but saw nothing out of the ordinary. Maybe just the reflection from the eyes of a deer. Beryl was making him paranoid.

Beryl hadn’t noticed anything. She continued down the steps. “Good night.”

“Night.” Sam and Lucy continued to the White Rock Police Tahoe. As he watched Beryl leave, he had the distinct feeling that he’d just dodged a bullet.

CHAPTER THREE

Maria Stillwell twisted the handle of her Coach-knockoff purse as she sat in the chair on the other side of Jo's green metal desk. Pictures of her daughter, a perky redheaded teen in her favorite pink T-shirt and jean shorts, were laid out on the surface of the desk. This wasn't the first missing persons case Jo had handled. She'd worked in bigger cities where there had been many, but she hadn't seen one since she'd been in White Rock. Something about it unsettled her, and that was why she'd called Sam.

Though now she wasn't sure if she should have called. Sam deserved his own personal time. She had the feeling she'd interrupted something, and she couldn't help but wonder what it was. Sam had sounded a little weird, out of breath even… maybe he had a date at his place.

It was really none of her business. Even though they'd developed a close working relationship and Jo considered him to be a good friend, he certainly didn't have to explain anything he did in his time off to her.

Even friends could have secrets. Like Jo's secret about the real reason she'd come to White Rock. She'd never told Sam, and that had been weighing heavy on her mind lately. She sensed it was affecting their relationship.

Her eyes were drawn back to the picture of the smiling girl.

She could be a runaway. She could just have stayed over somewhere after partying with a friend… or something more sinister could have happened, like what had happened to those girls in the woods. Or her sister… the real reason for her move to this town.

"… Kirsten's a good girl. Never stays out. She didn't run away. Something happened to her." Maria started crying.

Jo's heart went out to the distraught mother as she pushed the tissue box toward her. She remembered her own mother crying when Tammy was taken.

Lucy appeared around the corner of the antique brass post office boxes that separated the reception area from their desks in the old post office building that now housed the small police force. Sam was here. Lucy trotted straight to Jo and nudged her hand with her nose in greeting. The gesture lifted Jo's heart for a second before she turned back to Maria.

Jo introduced them, and Sam pulled the chair from Wyatt's desk up next to Maria. He radiated kindness.

"I've gotten the basic information," Jo said to Sam. She turned to Maria. "Is it okay if Chief Mason asks some questions too?"

Maria gave a shaky nod. "Anything that will help."

Lucy trotted over to Maria and sniffed her purse. The dog's attention earned a sad smile from Maria. "Kirsten loves dogs." She reached into her purse and produced a blue bandana. "I've heard how Lucy helps with cases, so I brought one of Kirsten's bandanas just in case she needs to sniff it."

Sam nodded, and Maria held the bandana out. Lucy sniffed diligently.

"Don't worry, I'm sure we'll find your daughter," Sam said. "Have you talked to any of her friends?"

"Just Mary. That's her best friend. Mary Ryder." Maria dabbed at her eyes with the tissue. "She didn't know anything."

"Can you give us names of her other friends? Anyone you think she might be with?"

Maria nodded toward Jo. "I gave them to Sargent Harris."

"What about places she hung out?"

Maria's lips pursed. "She did go to the woods by the campground a few times. I asked her not to hang around there. It's a bad crew, especially that Jesse Cowley."

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance. Jesse was a small-time drug dealer in town that they sometimes used as an informant.

Jo's worry about the case deepened. The bodies they'd found in the woods last month had been linked to a drug ring. But now that Thorne was out of the picture, the drug flow in town should be only a trickle. Still, Jo

figured Thorne was just a small cog in a larger cartel. Had they put someone in his place already?

"And you have no idea where your daughter might have gone? Maybe to stay over at a friend's or out of town?"

Maria shook her head. "No, of course not. She would tell me if she wasn't coming home, and she didn't mention a thing."

"What happened the night she disappeared? Did she do or say anything unusual?"

Maria took a shaky breath. "I didn't see her that night. I work afternoons at the Blue Hill Diner. That morning she was fine. Happy. She said she was going to get some videos at the store and stay in."

"And what happened when you got home from work and discovered she wasn't there?"

Maria looked down, fresh tears flowing. "I didn't know she wasn't there. If only I'd looked in her room. But she values her privacy. I thought she was in there watching videos."

"That's understandable. I had teens myself." Sam had twin daughters in college.

"This morning, I thought she was still asleep. Tonight when I got home from work, I realized she never came home, and she doesn't answer her cell." Maria turned pleading eyes on Sam. "Chief Mason, you just have to find her. Please."

"Don't worry, we will." Maria Stillwell looked somewhat relieved at Sam's reassuring words, but Jo knew that Sam had omitted one important thing. They'd find her, but what shape would she be in?

CHAPTER FOUR

Sam watched Maria Stillwell leave the police station, dabbing at her eyes with the tissue all the way to her car. He couldn't imagine what she was going through. Thinking about one of his daughters going missing made him feel like he was suffocating. He'd do everything in his power to get the girl back safely.

"Where do you think we should start?" Jo asked. She'd been standing beside him watching the woman too.

"We'll get a missing person's report out right away. Then start asking around." Sam looked down at the picture provided by Maria Stillwell. "Jesse Cowley's first on the list. If she was mixed up with him, maybe this is something as simple as the daughter partying too much when she wasn't supposed to be."

"Let's hope." Jo turned from the window, her manner hesitant.

Was he imagining that something was off between them? Ever since they'd teamed up with FBI agent Holden Joyce, Jo had been acting a bit strange. Could that have something to do with it? Holden and Jo? Nah, Holden had tried to get Jo fired. But then they had made amends on the last case. Still, Holden was a good ten years older than Jo, and why would Jo having a relationship with Holden have anything to do with her acting weird around Sam? They were good friends, nothing more.

Jo called from the squad room, "I don't know about this. How many missing teens do we have here in White Rock?"

"Not many." Sam could only remember three or four in the past ten years. When he joined her in the squad room, her expression was grim.

“Kind of reminds me of the last case,” Jo said.

“Let’s hope not.”

“Uhh… Sam… there’s something I should tell you.”

“Okay.” He drew the word out. Their gazes met, and Sam saw a hint of regret and hurt in her hazel eyes.

“When I came to White Rock, it wasn’t just to join a small-town police force.”

Sam frowned. “It wasn’t?” That’s what she’d told him. What other reason could she have?

Jo shook her head and looked down at Lucy. She petted the dog’s head almost as if for strength. “An unofficial investigation led me here.”

“You have an unofficial investigation going? Into what? Why didn’t you tell me?” Sam wasn’t one to disapprove of someone investigating things on the side. Sometimes you did what you had to do. He and Jo had investigated the suspicious death of fellow officer Tyler Richardson together unofficially, so Jo knew he wasn’t a stickler for the rules in that regard. Why would she keep her investigation a secret? He was starting to wonder if they really were the cohesive team he’d thought they were.

Jo took a deep breath then spoke. “My younger sister, Tammy, was kidnapped as a child. The killer was never caught. That’s why I got into law enforcement in the first place. I started my own investigation over the years. I collected clues, you know… and those clues led me to White Rock.” Jo looked away, nibbling her bottom lip. Clearly, she was uncomfortable.

Feelings of betrayal warred with sympathy in Sam’s chest. Betrayal because she hadn’t trusted him enough to tell him and sympathy because he’d do exactly the same in her shoes. “I’m sorry about that. You could have told me.”

Jo sighed. “I know that now. But when I came here, I didn’t know you. I didn’t know if you’d shut me down, turn me in. Whatever. The longer I didn’t tell you, the harder it became. I didn’t want you to lose trust in me.” She looked up at him with pleading eyes. “I hope I didn’t ruin our friendship.”

Sam’s heart melted a bit, but the bitter taste of her not trusting him remained. He said what he thought she wanted to hear, what he wished he really meant and hoped would become true after he’d had time to think about it. “No, of course not. I would have helped though.”

“I know. I tried to tell you several times, but something always came up.”

“Is that why you and Holden Joyce have seemed so tight?” Rumor had it that Holden had botched a serial killer case early in his career. Could it have been Jo’s sister? But if that were the case, why had he tried to make sure they took disciplinary action against her?

“Yeah, turns out he might be chasing the same guy. We didn’t figure that out until the last case.”

“So you two have been looking for the person that took your sister together?” A pinch of jealousy settled in Sam’s chest right next to the betrayal.

“We compared notes but haven’t done anything else.” Jo gazed out the window, a faraway expression on her face. “When we found those girls in the woods, I thought maybe it was the killer who took my sister. But I guess not. It did give me some ideas though. And if you aren’t too mad at me, I’d like your help following through with them.”

“Of course I’m not too mad.” Mad wasn’t exactly the word. Hurt. Betrayed. It wasn’t so much that she hadn’t told him, it was more that he hadn’t even sensed that she was keeping a big secret. Now he wasn’t sure if he could trust her. Or himself, even. But he wasn’t *mad*, just wary.

She smiled, relief evident in her eyes. “Great.”

They stood there for an awkward moment before Sam spoke. “Well, it’s late. We should start on the missing persons case tomorrow. Jesse’s probably partying in the woods right now, so it’s not an ideal time to approach him.”

Jo smiled. “Better to get him when he’s hungover and can’t think straight enough to give evasive answers.”

They walked out. “So what about your other sister? Is that why she turned to drugs?” Jo’s sister, Bridget, had been in and out of rehabs. Sadly, her involvement with drugs had helped provide a recent clue on the case that had put Thorne in jail.

“Yes. But she’s clean now. In fact, I’m picking her up tomorrow. She’s staying at my place.”

“Good. Okay, well then, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Lucy whined and looked between Jo and Sam as if sensing something had changed.

Jo might have sensed it too. Her voice was soft as she said, “Yeah, see you tomorrow.”

AFTER JO LEFT, Sam didn’t feel like going home. Jo’s revelation had unsettled him. He decided to seek out Jesse Cowley and see if he could make any headway on the case.

Kids had been congregating in one section of the woods to party since Sam was a teenager, so he knew exactly where to go. He usually left them alone. They didn’t bother anyone, and though some of them might be underage, there was never any real trouble. He figured there were a lot worse things they could be doing.

He parked on the side of the dirt road where there was a small grassy section people used for parking and trudged through the woods. Even from the road, he could see the bonfire and smell the woodsmoke. The raucous sounds of a party slowly materialized as he got closer.

When he was at the edge of the crowd, someone in a red hoodie turned and recognized him.

“Cops!”

There was an explosion of activity, kids throwing beers in the woods and running off in different directions.

Sam managed to catch Jesse by the arm. “Not so fast.”

Jesse scowled and jerked his arm away, his gaze darting to Lucy. Lucy was at the ready. She’d tackle Jesse to stop him from running on command, but Sam didn’t think that would be necessary.

Jesse knew he wouldn’t get into trouble—his value as an informant was too great—but he also had to make things look good in front of everyone else. If word got out that he snitched to the cops, it might not bode well for Jesse’s health. Sam didn’t want that to happen. Jesse wasn’t a bad kid. Not to mention he didn’t want to see his source of information dry up.

Jesse glanced around nervously. Everyone else had scattered.

“What?” he asked belligerently.

“We’re looking for a girl. Kirsten Stillwell, you know her?”

Jesse shook his head but looked hesitant.

Sam pulled out the picture. “This refresh your memory?”

Jesse narrowed his eyes. “Why? She in trouble?”

“No, she’s missing. We need to find her,” Sam said. “I was hoping maybe you would tell us she’d just been on a partying binge or something. Her mother says she never came home last night.”

Jesse’s gaze flicked from Sam to the picture. “Yeah. I guess I do recognize her. She hangs around out here sometimes. I don’t know anything about her disappearing though.”

“What *do* you know about her?”

Jesse shrugged. “Seems like a nice girl. I don’t know her that well, and I have no idea where she would be. I haven’t heard of any big parties going on.”

Sam nodded. Jesse had no reason to lie. He’d been hoping this would be an easy case, but he’d already had his first strike. “Okay, can you keep your ears open and let me know if you hear anything?”

“Will do.” Jesse backed away and then turned and sauntered off into the woods.

Sam turned to Lucy. “I guess we’ll have to wait until tomorrow to widen our search. Maybe she’ll show up at home in the meantime.”

Lucy chuffed.

“Yeah. I’m not holding my breath on that one, either.”

MAYBE TELLING Sam about her investigation into her sister’s disappearance wasn’t the right thing to do, Jo thought as she pulled into the yard of her cottage. On the one hand, it felt good to get it off her chest, but on the other, she sensed Sam was a little hurt. Now she was worried she’d damaged their relationship. Unfortunately, there was no one to blame but herself for taking so long to tell him.

A movement on the porch of the small cottage caught her eye. The orange feral cat she’d been trying to make friends with sat on the bottom step, watching as she got out of the car.

She approached the cat slowly. The soft yellow glow from her porch light illuminated the steps. The chirping of crickets and the gurgling of the stream that ran behind the cottage filled the air. Out here among the pines, it was quiet and secluded. That was what she liked about it.

She crouched and extended her hand. The cat came over and sniffed, eyeing her warily. Then he turned and trotted toward the woods.

At least he didn't run at the sight of her now. She was making progress. With any luck, the cat would feel comfortable enough to stay on the porch during winter. Hopefully she wouldn't get any flak from her landlord about that. He'd been clear about no pets being allowed inside, but he'd never mentioned the porch.

Jo stood and walked up the cottage steps, enjoying the cozy feeling of being home. When Jo had first come to White Rock, she'd rented the cottage thinking her stay would only be temporary. For a long time, she'd kept it bare bones, but as she'd settled in, she'd found herself scrounging flea markets and thrift stores for items. Now the place was homey and eclectic. She'd even planted pansies and petunias in the window boxes.

When she'd first come to town, she'd figured she'd move on just as soon as she checked out the lead on her sister's abductor, maybe work a year or two in the small mountain town, but somehow, White Rock had become home. And even though the cottage was small, she couldn't imagine living elsewhere. She made a mental note to ask the landlord again if she could buy it. Then he couldn't complain about the cat.

Now that her sister was coming to stay, it seemed even more important to have a permanent place to live.

It was dark inside except for the light on the fish tank that held her goldfish, Finn. At one time, the relationship with her aquatic friend was all she could handle. At least she'd progressed in that area. She picked out a green flake from the food container and held it over the water. Finn swam up and took the food from her hand then darted under the bridge to eat it.

She turned on the rest of the lights, cleaned out the antique flowered dish she used for the cat's food, and made a sandwich.

As she ate it, she wandered into the small back room that she'd fixed up for Bridget. It was barely big enough to hold the brass twin bed she'd bought from a yard sale, but considering Bridget was used to living on the street, it would probably seem like a palace.

What would it be like to have her sister here? Would she stay clean this time?

She was looking forward to having Bridget here even though they barely knew each other. They'd been close as children, but their adult lives had taken very different paths. It would be good to get to know her again.

But Jo worried too. What if she came this far in getting her sister the treatment that she'd resisted for years, only to lose her again?

No sense in thinking like that. She had to keep a positive outlook. Besides, she had more pressing things to worry about. Like a missing teenager.

CHAPTER FIVE

Jo got to the station early the next morning. Reese was behind the reception desk, her long dark hair sprouting out of a clip on top of her head. A white donut bag sat on the corner of the desk.

"No jelly today." Reese nodded toward the bag.

Jo's favorite donut shop had been out of jelly donuts for weeks now. Just as well. Jo had noticed her pants getting a bit tight, so it was best she refrain from the donuts. "It's okay. Gotta stick to salads this week."

Reese made a face indicating her thoughts on sticking to salads and grabbed a chocolate donut hole from the bag.

Sam and Wyatt Davis were already in the squad room. They were bent over a map of the area, which was spread out on Wyatt's desk. Lucy sat at their feet, looking bored.

"Anyone want a refill?" Jo put a dark-roast pod into the K-Cup machine and reached for her yellow smiley mug, glancing at the top of the filing cabinet where Major, the black cat they'd adopted after shooting its owner while he was resisting arrest, usually sat ready to strike.

The cat wasn't there. Maybe that was a good sign that he was feeling more comfortable at the station and claiming more nooks and crannies as his own. She just hoped he wasn't hiding somewhere, ready to make a sneak attack. He'd been a bit ornery since getting neutered.

As if answering her unspoken thoughts, a fuzzy pet toy in the shape of an octopus shot out from behind the filing cabinet. Lucy's ears perked up. She darted over and snatched the toy up by one of its legs just as Major darted out from behind the cabinet in pursuit of the toy. Major stopped

short, his black, fluffy tail in the air. He glared at Lucy with disdain, arched his back, and hissed.

Lucy held her ground, warning the cat with a low growl, the toy still in her mouth.

Uncertainty flickered in Major's luminescent green eyes. He swished his tail twice then turned and trotted off, his head held high as if he wasn't interested in the toy at all anyway.

"Point for Lucy," Wyatt said. "They've been fighting over that toy since yesterday."

Jo liked the way Wyatt had settled in. It was still weird there without Kevin, though. She should visit Kev later at Hillcrest, the long-term care facility where he'd been moved. He was still in a coma after being shot by the prime suspect in a murder case, but they were hopeful his brain would heal. Wyatt had turned out to be a good addition, and once Kevin was back, the four of them would be a solid team. But right now, they had a missing girl on their hands and were short one officer.

"I take it Kirsten didn't show up at home?" Jo joined them, looking over Wyatt's shoulder at the map.

"No. Talked to the mother this morning. She's understandably distraught." Sam glanced at her briefly. "I decided to question Jesse last night on the way home. He knows who Kirsten is and says she hangs out there sometimes but claims he doesn't know anything about what happened to her."

"Oh." Sam had questioned Jesse without her? They usually went together. Was he mad about her not telling him about her sister's investigation until now? "Do you think he was telling the truth?"

"I think so. He usually doesn't lie to us." Sam took out a pen and started marking things on the map. "I think we should concentrate on the area near where they usually party. Maybe she wandered off and got lost."

"Good idea. We can split the search up." Jo glanced at Lucy, who had retreated to a sunny corner, the toy tucked possessively between her front paws. "Lucy smelled an item of Kirsten's last night. If she's lost, she'll be able to find her."

"I called Bev Hatch, and she's going to send a few guys over to help," Sam said. Bev was the county sheriff. They'd worked with her in the past, and Jo liked the woman and her no-nonsense attitude.

"Sounds good. I'm ready—"

“Where’s Chief Mason? In there? I have to talk to him,” a voice boomed from the reception area.

“Hey, you can’t just walk in there!” Reese yelled, but apparently the visitor wasn’t listening, because a man in an expensive suit appeared in the squad room. He was of medium build with a thick neck and a thick head of dark-brown hair, which was graying at the edges. Jo guessed him to be in his fifties. He didn’t seem very friendly.

Reese appeared behind him, looking exasperated.

Sam straightened from the map. “I’m Chief Mason.”

“Charles Bascomb.” The man thrust some papers at Sam. “Attorney for wrongly arrested Lucas Thorne. I’m going to see he goes free.”

Wrongly arrested? Jo wanted to give this Bascomb a piece of her mind, but it wasn’t her place. She glanced at Wyatt. The muscle tic in his jaw told her he felt the same.

Sam looked over the papers. “I see. What makes you say your client is innocent?”

Charles snorted. “Are you kidding? Everyone knows you’ve been after him for years. And those golf shoes… Yeah, you know the ones I mean—the pivotal evidence in the case? Big mistake.”

Sam raised a brow. “Really?”

“Yes, sir.” Charles looked at Wyatt then Jo. Jo didn’t like the malicious glint in his eye. “Better get ready, because after I prove you trumped up evidence, there’s going to be a lawsuit.”

The man turned and walked out, causing Reese to have to jump out of the way.

“What was that about?” Reese asked.

Sam looked down at the papers. “Not sure. He’s filed a case to get the charges on Thorne dropped.”

“Can he do that? Thorne hasn’t even been to trial yet.”

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Why was he going on about the golf shoes? That was solid evidence,” Jo said. The shoes tied Thorne to the crimes because the unusual cleat pattern matched holes found on the tarps the victims were buried in. Thorne had always denied they were his shoes, but Jo figured he was just blowing smoke. After all, they’d gotten them from his wife, Beryl. Was Beryl having second thoughts about locking her husband up? “Do you think Beryl has something to do with this?”

“Beryl?” Sam looked thoughtful. “Nah, I don’t think so. She wanted Thorne in jail. Why else give us the shoes? In fact, she recently made a trip to my house, thanking me for putting him away.”

Jo frowned. Beryl was at Sam’s house? Was that what she’d interrupted with her phone call about Maria Stillwell?

Maybe Sam’s seemingly odd behavior had less to do with her sister’s investigation and more to do with his relationship with Beryl Thorne. She couldn’t picture Sam and Beryl together, but it was none of her business. Except that she was Sam’s friend and wouldn’t want any friend to get mixed up with the likes of Beryl Thorne. Jo didn’t trust her.

“Who else would hire a lawyer to get him out? Thorne himself?” Wyatt asked.

“Must be. I suppose I could ask Beryl. It’s Thursday, and she’ll be at the owl sanctuary.”

“That might be a good idea. We can go ahead and get set up for the search, then you can join us.” Wyatt looked at Jo, and she nodded.

“This is the last thing we need right now with a missing teen. If you can find out more from Beryl about this Bascomb’s motivations, then it might help keep distractions down.” Jo petted Lucy then grabbed the keys to the Crown Vic and turned to Wyatt. “I’ll drive. We’ll see you there in a bit, Sam.”

CHAPTER SIX

The owl sanctuary was deep in the woods on property owned by Jackson Pressler. Sam and Lucy drove down the dirt road that ran along the edge of Pressler's property to the small parking lot just south of the sanctuary. He was surprised to see two cars there. He recognized the small blue Honda as Beryl's, but who did the other one belong to?

"This might put a damper on our conversation. Can't talk freely with someone listening in," Sam said to Lucy as he opened the passenger door to let her out.

Lucy ran off and sniffed the shrubs at the head of the trail. She looked back at Sam, her expression questioning whether he actually wanted to go down the trail. Her keen sense of smell had probably already alerted her to the fact that Beryl was there, and Sam could tell Lucy didn't like her.

About twenty feet into the trail, movement up ahead answered the question as to who owned the other car. Marnie Wilson. Marnie was running for mayor, a top choice of Sam's friend and ex-chief of police Harry Woolston. Harry had been pressuring Sam to give her his support. Harry liked Marnie because she was an advocate for senior programs. Sam wasn't so sure about her, though. And now that the current mayor, Henley Jamison, seemed to be coming around to Sam's way of thinking, he wasn't sure who he wanted to put his support behind.

"Fancy meeting you here." Marnie was all smiles. Sam remembered that she knew Beryl and wondered if they had been meeting. Why out here? Maybe Marnie liked owls too.

"I didn't know you were interested in the owls," Sam said.

“I’m interested in everything to do with White Rock, naturally.” Typical politician answer.

“Naturally.”

“And what brings *you* here?” Marnie asked.

“Just checking on the sanctuary.”

“It’s fine. Beryl is taking photos.” A hint of suspicion glinted in Marnie’s eyes. “If you’re looking for her.”

“I’m not, but I’ll say hello while I’m there.”

“Okay, well, nice to see you. Have a good day.”

Sam continued ahead without looking back. Lucy was more than happy to bound ahead. She didn’t like Marnie either.

Birds flew overhead. Morning sunlight dappled the path in front of Sam as the smell of pine and earth surrounded him. Normally, this would be like heaven, but Sam couldn’t enjoy it. The thought of the missing girl weighed heavily on his mind. Not to mention thoughts of Thorne getting out of jail.

Beryl was lying on the ground, aiming her lens up into the canopy of trees. She turned her head when she heard Sam and Lucy.

“There’s a nest up there. Thought it might be interesting to get pictures from underneath with the sky above as the background.”

She snapped a few shots then held her hand up for Sam to pull her up. Sam hesitated before grabbing on. She stood deftly then remained a little too close for comfort.

Lucy apparently thought so too. She wedged her way between them, and Beryl bent down to pet her. Lucy tolerated it. Sam took the opportunity to step a few inches away.

“What a nice surprise.” Beryl beamed as if she thought Sam was there on some sort of social visit.

“You might not think it’s so nice after you hear what I have to say.”

Her expression dimmed. “What’s that?”

“Got a visit this morning from someone who claims he’s opening a new case to get your husband out of jail.”

Beryl appeared shocked. So she hadn’t known? Interesting.

“But I thought you had a solid case,” she said.

“Me too. This person mentioned the golf shoes specifically. Is there something I should know about them?”

Beryl shook her head slowly, her eyes tracking Lucy, who had wandered away and was sniffing at the edge of the woods. “No. Like I told you, I

found them in Lucas's closet."

"This person might be just bluffing. But you need to be prepared to get dragged into a case. Is there anything more you've remembered that might help?" Sam had always had a niggle of a doubt about Thorne's guilt in the serial killings. But that was the big thing keeping him in prison without bail. He had no doubts about the drug charges. Those would stick, but they wouldn't keep him in prison for life like multiple murder charges would.

"No. I haven't thought about it. That's something I want to forget about. The thought that he was killing those girls all that time." Beryl wrapped her arms around her waist then looked at Sam, alarm in her eyes. "He knows I supplied the golf shoes. If he gets out, he might come after me."

Sam had thought about that. Beryl seemed like a woman that could take care of herself, but Thorne could be brutal. "Don't worry, you'll get protection."

Beryl stared at him for a few seconds as if trying to judge if she could believe him. But still, he saw more than worry in her eyes… something calculating, almost predatory. "Who visited you? I have control of all the bank accounts now, both personal and business. If Lucas hired someone, he can't pay."

"A lawyer named Charlie Bascomb."

"Charlie?" Her tone was incredulous.

"You know him?"

"He's my uncle. I don't understand. Why would he do this?"

Sam was surprised. Her uncle? That was an interesting development. He glanced over toward the woods. Where had Lucy gotten off to? "Were he and Lucas close?"

"I don't think so. Lucas liked him, but I wasn't that close with him either. My brother was closer to him. I haven't really seen much of him since we were kids, but there was something I didn't like about him even back then. Robert used to go fishing with him every summer before he got sick. We have a family cabin on the Sacagewassett River. "

Woof!

The tone of Lucy's bark alerted Sam. Something was wrong.

He could just barely see her about a hundred feet into the woods. Her stance was rigid, ears pointing forward, eyes fixated on a particular spot on the ground. The same exact way she'd alerted him when they'd found the bodies buried in the woods just a month ago.

SAM SENT BERYL OFF, called Jo and Wyatt, and dispatched a text to Bev Hatch after Lucy's disturbing find. Now he stood looking down at the young victim in the shallow grave they'd partially uncovered. The red hair, pink T-shirt, and jeans left no question. It was Kirsten Stillwell.

"Dammit!" Jo looked around the woods as if the killer could still be there. The silence was unnerving. Even the birds hadn't made a peep since the grim discovery. Squirrels and chipmunks had taken their business elsewhere. Lucy sat off to the side. Her job of finding the body accomplished, she watched intently as Wyatt crouched down, taking pictures.

"Do you think this is personal or…" He looked up at Sam, the question of whether or not it could be the work of the serial killer in his eyes.

Sam had been wondering that as he inspected the grave. "Hard to say. My money's still on Thorne for those other murders."

"The ritual is different." Wyatt stood. "No tarp like the others. And this girl isn't a drug addict or runaway."

Sam nodded. "Points to a different guy."

"Or maybe just a change in his process. It's five years later. If he was dormant, his methods could have changed," Jo said.

"Does that happen?" Wyatt looked at Jo quizzically.

"Sometimes. But let's say it's not a serial killer. Could have been a random killing, or maybe someone who knew her." Jo walked slowly around the perimeter of the crime scene, careful not to disturb anything.

"Seems like they had things planned out." Wyatt pointed at the grave. "They'd need a shovel, and they picked an out-of-the-way spot."

"And why pick this spot?" Sam asked. It was remote, and people hardly ever came there. When they did, they mostly stayed in the clearing because that was the best way to see the owls. No one ventured into the woods, so the grave had a low likelihood of being discovered. Or did the location have some meaning to the killer?

"Lots of ways to get a body here through the trail system." Wyatt nodded deeper into the woods. There were acres of wooded area and trails with lots of places to park and move a body in.

Jo had wandered off and was inspecting trees and branches. Beyond her, Sam could see the steel frame of the hotel that Lucas Thorne had started

and now, apparently, his wife was continuing. “The killer could have parked at the construction site. It’s not far to transport a body to here.”

Wyatt raised a brow. “Another tie to Thorne.”

“Yeah, except he’s in jail.”

Sam caught Lucy’s eye. He tapped his thigh, and the dog trotted over. He crouched down, eye to eye. “Good girl.”

He pulled out a treat and fed it to Lucy then scratched her behind the ears before standing. “I guess this is all we can do for now.”

“Bev should be here in a few minutes. John Dudley is about five minutes out.” John was the medical examiner, and Sam didn’t want to disturb the body too much before he got there.

Jo sighed. “If it’s our serial killer, then maybe Bascomb really does have a case.”

“Or it could be a different killer,” Sam suggested.

Wyatt looked incredulous. “What are the odds of that? Two serial killers in this small town?”

Sam took a deep breath. “You’d think, but as we learned on the last case, there seems to be a network of them. Remember how Menda said that he gets fan mail, and serial killers try to copy each other? Maybe this one is following in the footsteps of Thorne.”

“Do you think it’s possible the discovery of those graves from five years ago spurred him to do this?” Wyatt asked.

“Let’s hope not, because if that’s the case, this may not be the last victim.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beryl Thorne was disturbed by the finding at the owl sanctuary. When Sam had started to dig at the site Lucy had discovered, she'd been nervous. When he uncovered what looked like a human hand, he'd tried to shield her from it. But she knew what was under there. And the way he'd stopped so abruptly and then insisted she leave pretty much said it all.

The news that Charles Bascomb was trying to get Lucas out of jail was disturbing. Charles was her father's brother, and Beryl had never liked him. He'd always seemed a bit pompous and overbearing, and he had that quality most lawyers had, where he acted as if he were sizing you up to put you on the witness stand.

Lucas had liked him, though. That should have been a clue that maybe she and Lucas weren't exactly a match made in heaven. But could Charlie really get him out? The main thing keeping Lucas in was the murder charges, and the evidence mostly hinged on those shoes. Beryl knew better than anyone that that evidence could fall apart at any moment.

Now that Lucas was in jail, she had no intention of giving her life and business back to him. The drug charges wouldn't keep him in there for long; he'd either rat out someone up the chain or find some way to get out on bail. And how had he gotten the money to pay for Charlie, or was Charlie doing this pro bono for a family member? Nah, Charlie had never been that altruistic.

There was one person who might be behind this. Someone who had been close to Lucas and Uncle Charlie and had the money to pay. In fact, that person had introduced her to Lucas—her brother Robert.

Beryl pulled up in front of her family home. The Summers estate was enormous. Her father had done well in real estate development, and the brick mansion situated on acres of manicured grounds behind big black iron fences was one of the biggest homes in White Rock.

Beryl found her brother in the sunny room off the kitchen that her mother always called the breakfast room.

He was sitting at the round table, eyes staring blankly out onto the back patio with its sparkling pool and flowered shrubs. Birds darted to and fro around the bird feeders just outside the window.

That was what he mostly did now since his breakdown. The doctors were working on sorting out his medication so he could get back to the level of function he'd been at before. Now, though, he didn't leave the house. He hardly noticed much of anything that was going on around him. He couldn't possibly have had anything to do with Charlie's bid to get Lucas off on the charges. He didn't seem capable.

Had Lucas gotten in touch and arranged things through Robert? Or maybe it was the other way around. Was it possible that Robert was more alert than he pretended?

"Hello, Robert." Beryl took a seat next to him and put her hand over his. Despite all the heartache his mental illness had caused over the years, Beryl still loved him. And it hadn't been all bad. The medicine had kept him stable and leading a normal life for decades until their father's death had plunged him into a bipolar roller coaster, this one worse than the one he'd experienced as a teen. Beryl was used to that though. It ran in the family.

Robert turned to her and smiled. "Hey, sis. Beautiful morning, isn't it?"

Beryl turned to the window. The sun streamed in, making a patch on the floral tablecloth. "Yes it is. Hey, I was wondering, have you been in contact with Lucas or Uncle Charlie?"

"Is Lucas okay?" Robert furrowed his brow, looking confused. Beryl wasn't sure how much he knew about Lucas being arrested. She'd tried to keep it from him. Robert couldn't be trusted to keep his mouth shut lately, and the less he knew, the less he could blurt out in front of the wrong person.

"He's okay. Did you talk to him?"

Robert shook his head.

"What about Uncle Charlie?"

His eyes flicked away to the yard, where a cardinal had landed on a bird feeder. His frown deepened. “Uncle Charlie? No. Haven’t seen him in a while.”

Beryl sat there a few more minutes. Robert seemed to be lost in bird-watching, but she thought his formerly blank stare now had an unusual glint of awareness.

NOTIFYING the family of the death of a loved one was the worst part of the job. After painstakingly uncovering the body and photographing every inch of the crime scene, John Dudley had taken Kirsten Stillwell to the morgue. There was no question it was Kirsten, but Sam sent off for her dental records anyway. He didn’t want the mother to have to identify her. It was late afternoon by the time the official notification could be made. Jo was supposed to pick up Bridget, but she texted her sister that she would be late so she could go with Sam. These things were easier with a trusted partner by your side.

At least she hoped Sam still thought of her as a trusted partner and the chilly vibes of disappointment she’d been getting from him were only temporary. It wasn’t like he’d never kept anything from her. Then again, she could sympathize with how he felt. Not long ago, he’d confessed one of his secrets to her, and she’d felt a tinge of betrayal. That had blown over quickly, and hopefully the same thing would happen here.

“That was awful.” Jo reached into the back seat and touched Lucy’s fur for comfort. They’d left Lucy inside the car while they’d given Maria Stillwell the bad news.

“Always is.” Sam turned in his seat and looked at her. Jo tensed, wondering if he was going to say more about her investigation and how she hadn’t filled him in. “I noticed you were inspecting the trees at the grave site. Is there some reason for that?”

Jo was relieved. His question presented the perfect opportunity for her to share some part of her sister’s investigation with him and bring them to

the same level. Hopefully this would go a long way toward repairing any damage she might have done to their relationship.

"I was looking for beech trees. The information I dug up on Tammy pointed to a killer whose MO was to strip the bark of the low-hanging branches of beech trees near where he buried his victims."

"There aren't any beech trees where we found the body."

"I know." Jo had been only mildly disappointed. The person that took her sister would be older now and probably not active. It was more likely that person had been caught decades ago and never confessed to having taken her sister. It was highly unlikely they'd been running around killing people all this time and never gotten caught. "But I didn't think it was my guy anyway. It's just a habit to look. Besides, Kirsten was a teen, and I'm convinced the person who took my sister only took children." Jo shivered at the thought.

"How did you get this beech tree lead?"

"A retired detective I've been working with."

"Do you have files and investigation records?"

Jo was encouraged that Sam seemed interested. "Yes. I'd be happy to show them to you and would love your take on them."

Sam started driving in the direction of the police station, and Jo watched the rolling blue mountains and swooping green meadows of northern New Hampshire out the window. Lucy stuck her head through from the back, and Sam rubbed her ears while still keeping his attention on the road.

"Did you find anything out from Beryl about Thorne's case?" Jo had been curious but hadn't had a chance to ask.

Sam shook his head. "I don't think it was her. She seemed surprised, though it turns out that Charles Bascomb is her uncle."

Jo turned to look at Sam. "Really? And she didn't know anything about his mission to get Thorne out?"

Sam glanced at her. "I don't think so. I know it seems strange. I got the impression they aren't that close. She said she didn't want Thorne out, and why would she? She's the one that put him in there. In fact, she was afraid he might come after her."

"And you trust her?" Jo didn't. She'd thought this whole thing with the shoes was weird from the beginning.

Sam met her eyes. "I trust my instincts. But as for trusting Beryl, I trust her about as much as you can trust another person."

Ouch. Jo got the meaning behind that. But he had a point. How much could you really trust anyone? And if Beryl Thorne had given the evidence to put her husband in jail, why in the world would she now want to get him out?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Later that night, Sam took Lucy to visit Kevin Deckard. It killed Sam that the officer was still in a coma after a shootout while trying to capture a murderer. He always brought Lucy. Kevin and Lucy had a tight bond, and he figured it might help bring him out.

Kevin had recently been moved from the hospital to the Hillcrest long-term care facility. His condition had stabilized, and doctors were still hopeful he'd wake up, but now it was a waiting game. Hillcrest was a low concrete building that looked more industrial than medical. The trees and shrubs planted on the grounds were pretty, and Sam supposed it was better than the hospital, but he hated the antiseptic smell and the beeping of machines that permeated the air.

Kevin lay on the bed, pale and still as usual. He looked okay, except for the part about him being in a coma. And his blond hair was a little shaggy. Kevin used to keep it cut short, and now it was almost to his shoulders.

Lucy whined and put her chin on Kevin's hand. Sam searched for any sign of life other than the rhythmic breathing.

Looking down from his position at the head of the bed, Sam talked to Kevin as if he were awake. He'd taken to doing this when he visited, which was frequently. He didn't know if Kevin could hear him, but if he could, Sam was sure the officer would want to be kept up to date about the goings-on at the station. Sam had discovered that talking to someone who couldn't reply was actually a good way to work things out.

He'd have loved to talk over his feelings about Jo and her investigation she'd hidden from him, but what if Kevin *could* hear? Jo's sister's

abduction wasn't his story to tell. Better to discuss it with his bestie, Mick. Sam thumbed in a quick text to the private detective that had been his friend since kindergarten. He'd drop Lucy off at home, and they could meet at the local bar, Holy Spirits, for a drink after.

Sam knew Jo's investigation was bothering him more than it should. He needed someone else to set him straight. But now, he had business to discuss.

"We had a tough one today. Missing girl turned up dead."

Lucy looked up at Sam as if agreeing it was tough.

"There's also a problem with Thorne." Sam paced over to the window and stared out at a bright-yellow forsythia. "Lawyer showed up talking about some wrongful arrest case and how he plans to get Thorne out. Turns out he's Thorne's uncle-in-law."

Sam turned back to look at Kevin. He would probably be mentally rolling his eyes if he could hear Sam. "Yeah, I know that's an interesting coincidence. I told you about the wife, Beryl, right?"

Sam paced to the foot of the bed. "I'm not sure if I can trust her, and I'm wary of her motivations." *Especially when she shows up at my house with a six-pack of beer.* "But I do think she was surprised when I told her about the uncle."

Lucy kept her chin on Kevin's hand but her eyes on Sam as he paced the length of the room. "Kind of odd, don't you think? Her not knowing her own uncle was going to try to get her husband out of jail."

Sam stopped at the end of the bed. "What do you think he's up to?"

Kevin's foot twitched. Sam stopped talking and stared at Kevin's foot. There it was again, a little twitch of the toe.

Sam ran out into the hallway and caught a nurse who was walking past with a cart. "Excuse me… Officer Deckard. I think he moved."

The nurse's brows rose, and she peeked into the room.

"His foot." Sam pointed.

The nurse touched his foot then moved to pry open his eyelids and shine a light into his eyes, her gaze switching anxiously between his face and the monitors. She glanced at Sam. "I don't feel any resistance. But the other night when I was tending to him, I thought I saw an eyelid flutter, so I had the doctor check. He didn't see anything, and the movements could be involuntary, but at least that's progress."

“Oh.” Sam felt disappointed, but maybe involuntary movements were the first sign. “Progress is good, I guess.”

Lucy, who had moved to the corner when the nurse came in, seemed to agree. She approached the bed and nuzzled Kevin’s hand as if to encourage further progress. Sam half-hoped the officer would suddenly pet her, but he didn’t. Maybe next time.

“It is.” The nurse smiled at Kevin then petted Lucy. “We’ll let you know if anything major happens, Chief.”

As Sam left, he allowed himself a smidgeon of hope. Everything else about the day had been crappy, but maybe this was a sign things were taking a turn for the better.

HOLY SPIRITS WAS HOUSED in a decommissioned church. It still had a few of the pews and the stained glass windows, but the altar had been replaced by a long bar, and round tables dotted the room. Instead of the smell of incense, it now smelled like French fries and beer, and the jukebox blasted rock and roll instead of religious hymns.

Mick was already waiting at the bar, his large hands wrapped around a tumbler of dark-amber whiskey.

Sam slipped onto the stool beside him.

“Hey, bud. How’s it going?” Mick asked.

“Long day.”

Billie, the owner, came over, and Sam ordered a Moosenose, his favorite brand of local beer.

“I heard about the body. Young kid?” Mick’s blue eyes brimmed with sympathy.

“Teen. The mother was in just last night, reporting her missing. I was hoping she got lost in the woods or was shacked up with a boyfriend.” Sam accepted the beer from Billie with a nod. “No such luck.”

Mick shook his head. “That’s a shame. You don’t think it has anything to do with the bodies from a few weeks ago, do you?”

Sam shrugged. “Those were from five years ago. Not to mention the guy we think put them there is in jail.”

“You said you weren’t totally sure they were from Thorne, but then the evidence came in and it seemed like a good course of action. What does Jo think?” Mick glanced over his shoulder into the bar. “Where is Jo, anyway?”

Sam pressed his lips together. “She went to pick up her sister, Bridget.”

Mick’s left brow quirked up. “She did get clean then? Do you think she can help identify Thorne?”

The bodies they’d found earlier in the summer had been runaways. It turned out Jo’s sister had known one of the victims and had mentioned her going off with an important man from up north right about the time the murders took place. White Rock was up north, and Thorne certainly did think he was important. But Bridget had been too fragile and busy trying to get off drugs to ask her to make an identification from a picture. Jo hadn’t wanted to push her, and Sam had agreed.

But now… maybe after she got settled in at Jo’s, things would be different. And right now, they might need that identification more than ever. “I’m not sure. We’ll see. Jo and I aren’t exactly on the same wavelength right now, so I’m not sure about asking her.”

Mick looked surprised. “What? Why? I thought you guys were tight. Anything to do with Marnie Wilson?”

Sam looked at Mick. “Why would Marnie Wilson have anything to do with it?”

Mick shrugged. “You were spending some time with her; thought maybe there was some jealousy.”

“No. Nothing like that. Jo and I are just friends.” Why would Mick say that? Sure, Sam sensed that Jo disapproved of him having lunch with Marnie Wilson, but Sam had only dined with her at Harry Woolston’s insistence. It was just a short lunch. Purely business. Surely Jo wouldn’t be jealous. That was ridiculous.

“Uh huh. So what’s it about then?”

Sam wanted to get Mick’s advice, but it wasn’t his place to tell Mick about Jo’s sister and the investigation she’d been doing over the years. “I can’t really give details, but she wasn’t exactly straight with me about the reason she came to White Rock, and it’s put a wedge in our relationship.”

“What? Did she do something criminal?”

“No. It was a personal reason.”

“Then what business is it of yours? It’s not like you didn’t keep personal things from her. You guys are partners, not married. You’re allowed to have personal lives that don’t involve each other.”

Sam hadn’t thought about it that way.

Mick continued, “And the secret *you* kept was a doozy. Was she mad about that?”

They both stared into their drinks, thinking about the little gift Mayor Dupont had given Thorne before his death. A knife that could put Sam and Mick in a precarious position because of something that had happened in their past. Thorne had threatened to do just that, which was another reason Sam wanted him to stay in jail.

Sam pulled on his beer as he thought about that. Things had seemed a little off after he’d told Jo about the knife, but not for long. And Mick was right, the knife was a big deal. And Jo had a right to her privacy, no matter how good a friendship they had. But even though the reason was personal, it involved an investigation. Maybe Sam was more hurt that Jo didn’t think enough of his investigative skills to ask him for help sooner.

So maybe his feelings weren’t hurt because she’d lied but because she didn’t need his help enough to come clean and admit her real reason for being here. “I don’t know. Her reason is a bit of a professional breach too. But you’re right, I might be making something out of nothing.”

“Ya think?” Mick patted him on the back. “Everything will turn out fine. You’ll see.”

Sam frowned. “Maybe not *everything*.”

Mick glanced over at Sam’s dire tone. “Uh oh. That sounds serious.”

Sam told him about Charlie Bascomb’s visit. “And to top things off, the guy is Beryl Thorne’s uncle.”

Mick raised a brow. “That’s interesting.”

“Beryl says she knows nothing about it. He and Thorne got along, so maybe Thorne got in touch with him.”

Mick looked at Sam out of the corner of his eye. “And you believe her.”

Sam shrugged. “When she was at my cabin the other night, she seemed quite concerned for her safety if Thorne got out.”

Mick’s eyes narrowed. “Wait. She was at your cabin? Is there something…”

“No. Not my type. She might like that though. But I got a good read on her. She’s not the one angling to get her husband out.”

“Do you think this Bascomb guy has a chance at getting Thorne out?”

They were both silent, thinking about the knife. Did Thorne still have it? Would he use it as leverage to get out of jail? With any luck, Beryl had tossed his things out once he’d been jailed and the knife was gone for good.

Sam broke the silence. “Considering we found another buried victim this morning, he could make a good case that Thorne isn’t the one who killed those other girls. The evidence did always seem a little too easy. The drug case is solid though.”

“But that might not put him away for life.”

“Yeah, and he could cut a deal and turn evidence on someone higher up.”

Mick blew out a breath. “Do you think Kirsten Stillwell was killed by the same person who killed those girls five years ago? If she was, that means Thorne never was the killer, and by rights, he shouldn’t be in jail for that. Much as I hate to say it.”

“I’m not sure. There were a lot of differences, but maybe the killer changed his methods.” Sam shrugged. “Jo seemed to think that was possible, and she seems to be an expert.”

“She does?”

“Yeah, I’ll let her tell you about that.” Mick and Jo were close too, so maybe she’d want his help. And since she had one of Mick’s secrets, it was only fair he have one of hers. Sam glanced in the mirror on the wall behind the bar. Looking between the liquor bottles, he could see the activity in the bar behind him. It was a habit mostly, as he was trained to watch everything around for trouble. Tonight, though, the patrons seemed easygoing. People sat at tables, laughing and nursing drinks. Some had burgers, others the meatloaf special. A couple selected a tune on the old-fashioned jukebox in the corner.

“Hopefully the Stillwell case will turn out to be a regular homicide. I’m praying it’s not someone who will kill again. Besides, what are the odds of another serial killer case so soon?”

“This thing with Thorne, though, it worries me.” Mick stared into his glass as he moved it in slow circles, the amber liquid swirling around the ice cubes as they clinked against the side. “I don’t know what the odds of another serial killer turning up in town are, but if Bascomb does get Thorne out of jail, it might not be good for either of us.”

CHAPTER NINE

The killer now knew that one girl would never be enough. He'd held off for so long that now it was as if a floodgate had opened. That was okay though. No one was looking for him, and if he was lucky, no one would find out what he'd done.

He'd have to branch out. Surely someone would be looking for the last girl, and he couldn't get too cocky about getting away with it. He needed to choose carefully, pick girls that very few would miss. Perhaps he'd been a little too hasty with this most recent one.

He should do more research, find out more about the target. Did she live alone? Have close friends that might panic if she didn't answer a text the next day? Maybe he would take her in a different way than the redhead he'd chosen the other day.

Ahhh, that red hair. Yes, he definitely wanted another one with red hair.

He didn't know how long it would take for the need to grow until he could no longer control it. Weeks? Days? Hours? It had been years since the last time, but he didn't think it would be that long again. For now, he'd pretend that everything was normal while he looked for the next one. No one would suspect a thing.

And, of course, he would send an email to Menda. Back in the day, the emails had been the best part of the whole process, bragging about his recent conquests to his mentor, the notorious serial killer Joseph Menda. Menda was the one the killer modeled himself after. Menda had gotten away with so many before he was caught. The killer hoped to do the same. He'd follow in Menda's footsteps.

Would anyone ever follow in the killer's footsteps? During his last spree, he'd thought that someone was following him, studying him as he'd studied Menda, but then he'd gone dormant. Maybe that person was still out there, watching and waiting.

That wasn't his concern right now. He needed to keep up appearances while moving along with his little project. The teenagers in this small town were easy pickings, all looking for some fun and excitement to relieve the boredom of small-town life.

Well, if they needed excitement, he was going to give it to them.

CHAPTER TEN

Jo felt nervous as she pulled into the cottage with her sister. It was good to have Bridget with her but also scary. They hadn't found much to talk about on the ride home, but Jo was tired from a long day. She didn't know her sister at all, and that made it awkward.

The headlights illuminated the small orange cat on the steps, and Bridget brightened. "You have a cat?"

Jo coasted to a stop so as not to scare the cat. The cat blinked. "Sort of. It's a stray, but I'm trying to get him used to the porch so he can stay there for winter."

Bridget's eyes were riveted on the little cat. A childlike smile played on her lips and tugged at Jo's heart. Her sister had seen so much that a woman should never see at a young age. Jo would do anything to try to make up for that.

"Remember we had a cat when we were little?" Bridget opened the door slowly so as not to scare the cat.

"Vaguely." Jo hadn't thought about the little gray cat in years. All her thoughts of her childhood had been overshadowed by memories of the aftermath of Tammy being taken. She hadn't mentioned Tammy to Bridget yet, but she supposed they'd eventually have to talk about it.

Bridget stepped out of the car and approached the cat cautiously, bending down when she got about ten feet away. The cat craned its neck out, whiskers twitching and tail flicking. Bridget leaned closer, and he gave one last flick of the tail and ran off toward the woods.

"Guess it will take some time to earn his trust," Bridget said.

“I’ve been trying. Come on, I’ll show you around. It’s not big, but it’s all I’ve got.”

As Jo passed her sister, Bridget grabbed her arm. Jo turned, and their eyes locked. Jo could see years of hurt and mistakes in Bridget’s green eyes and something else… a small glimmer of hope. “I really want to thank you for letting me stay here and for sticking with me all these years.”

Jo wanted to hug her but sensed that Bridget was still hesitant about people in her space, so she touched her shoulder instead. “No thanks necessary. I’m happy to do it. After all, we’re all each other’s got.”

Jo led her onto the small porch.

“This porch is great.” Bridget pushed the back of one of the wooden rockers, making it rock slowly as Jo unlocked the door. “I see the cat has been eating.”

Jo glanced at the food bowl. “Guess I better fill it up.”

Jo pushed the door open and gestured for Bridget to go inside. She stood in the living room, and Jo was suddenly nervous. Would her sister like it or think it was a mishmash of castoffs? Being nervous about what Bridget thought of her decor was silly—her sister had lived on the street—but for some reason, what she thought mattered. This was a new beginning for them, and she wanted it to start off right.

“It’s beautiful.” Bridget walked slowly around the small cottage. She wound around the back of the overstuffed sofa with its floral slipcover, ran her finger along the knotty pine mantel of the river-rock fireplace, and continued to the kitchen with its cheery painted cabinets and vintage Formica table. “It looks like a magazine.”

“Thanks. I picked most of it up at flea markets and yard sales.” Jo shrugged, trying to make light of it, but inside, she was pleased her sister liked it.

She nudged open the door to the small back room. She’d given it a fresh coat of crisp white paint and hung some artwork she’d picked up at a local festival. The red-and-white quilt and matching pillows gave it a cheery vintage look. “This is your room. I hope it’s not too small.”

Bridget sat on the bed, picked up a pillow, then looked at Jo, her eyes moist. “It’s perfect. My own bed and privacy? It’s like a dream.”

Jo sat next to her and took her hand. It shook slightly, and she wondered if Bridget was as nervous as she was. “I’m glad you like it. You can stay as

long as you want. I hope this will be a chance for us to get to know each other again as sisters."

Bridget smiled. "Me too."

The words sounded positive, but Bridget didn't look Jo in the eye as she said them. Her smile faded, and she looked away. Maybe it was Jo's suspicious cop instincts, but she got the impression Bridget had something on her mind. Of course she did; she was starting a new life and probably worried she would revert to drugs as she had so many times in the past. But this time something was different. She had Jo right beside her, and Jo was determined not to let her sister backslide.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next morning, Sam arrived at the station early. He'd promised Maria Stillwell he would find her daughter's killer, and the sooner he could make good on that, the better.

He looked over the report from the autopsy and was disturbed to discover that Kirsten had been strangled in a way similar to the other victims they'd found. The only forensic evidence found on the body was one dark-brown hair. Kirsten was a redhead, so it wasn't hers, but of course it could have come from anyone. Still, the hair could help place a suspect at the scene of the crime, *if* they actually had a suspect.

Wyatt looked up from his desk. "Hey, Chief, I have those addresses you wanted."

Sam had given Wyatt the names of Kirsten's friends that Maria Stillwell had provided. Sam intended to interview them today. Hopefully something would shake out.

"Aha!" Reese yelled from her position wedged in the narrow gap beside the filing cabinet and the wall. She wriggled out backwards and held up the octopus toy. "Major hid this behind here. Not fair to Lucy."

Lucy's ears perked up. She stared, bright-eyed, at the toy dangling from Reese's hand.

"Here you go." Reese tossed the toy to Lucy.

"Where *is* Major?" Sam looked around warily, expecting the cat to dart out and cause some sort of ruckus. He wasn't sure what to think about that cat. He was more of a dog person, but he felt responsible for its welfare since they were the reason it was homeless.

Sam didn't have to wait long to find out. No sooner had Lucy disappeared into Sam's office than he heard a loud, defiant meow, followed by a pitiful whimper from Lucy. Major ran out into the squad room with the toy in his mouth. He darted behind the filing cabinet. Reese put her hand on her hips and shook her head. "I guess we're going to have to move that thing closer to the wall."

"Looks like Lucy lost that battle," Wyatt said.

Sam went to check on the dog. She was sitting in the patch of sun under the ten-foot-tall windows that looked out over the town common with its bright-green grass and tall oaks and maples.

Sam crouched down and saw the look of exasperation in Lucy's eyes. "That cat's a bully, isn't he?"

Lucy blinked. Sam noticed a scratch on her nose. "Maybe I should disinfect this."

"Is she okay?" Wyatt and Reese appeared in the doorway, looking concerned.

Sam stood. "Just a scratch."

"I'll get the first aid kit." Reese disappeared back into the squad room.

"I can't believe Beryl Thorne didn't know her uncle was trying to get Lucas out of jail." Wyatt leaned against the doorway.

Sam put the paper with the addresses on the surface of his desk. It was a leftover from the post office that used to occupy the space and was scarred with postal marks and staples, but it was solid oak and oversized, which made it the perfect desk in Sam's eyes. He leaned his hip against the edge and filled Wyatt in on his talk with Beryl. "I know it sounds crazy, but that was my impression."

"I wouldn't trust any information Beryl Thorne gave me," Reese, who was now tending to Lucy's scratch, said.

Sam knew Reese didn't like Beryl any more than Jo did. He wasn't really sure why. Maybe they had some kind of intuition on other females. He should probably pay attention to that. In fact, Sam didn't much trust Beryl himself. "I don't really. But I think I'm a pretty good judge of people, and I'm sure she was truly surprised."

Reese petted Lucy on the head and stood. "Okay, you're all set, girl." She turned to Sam. "Seems like something funny is going on to me."

"No doubt. Don't worry, we'll get to the bottom of it. But for today, we have a murderer to track down."

Sam glanced at the corkboard where he usually laid out his clues. On his desk was a stack of crime scene pictures, but other than the hair, he didn't have one piece of physical evidence he could call a clue. Maybe if he tacked them up on the board, something would jell.

"Hey, everyone." Jo appeared in the doorway. "Sorry I'm late. I'm not used to having someone at the house."

"You picked up Bridget last night? How did that go?" Sam asked, hoping things would be normal between them today.

"Good. It's weird because I don't really know her that well." Jo shrugged. "She seems to be settling in. I guess we'll get to know each other better over the next few weeks."

Lucy whined, and Jo glanced over.

"What's wrong with Lucy?" Her eyes narrowed, "Hey, is she injured?" She rushed over, squatting beside the dog to inspect the scratch and clucking sympathetically.

"She lost the toy battle to Major this morning," Reese said.

Jo looked at Reese over her shoulder. "Oh no. Poor baby." Jo made a few more noises of sympathy at Lucy then stood and looked at Sam. "Did you visit Kevin last night?"

Sam brightened. "Yes. Sort of good news. He twitched."

"Does that mean he's waking up?" Reese looked hopeful.

"Maybe. The nurse said he's twitched a few times. Could just be involuntary muscle twitches, but it could also be the beginning of coming back."

"That would be great." Reese cocked her ear toward the front. "Phone, gotta run."

"I might visit Kevin later. I think it helps to have us talking to him." Jo glanced down at the dog. "Can I bring Lucy?"

"Of course."

"Okay then, we should get started on the interviews. Is that the list?" Jo inclined her head toward the piece of paper on Sam's desk.

"Yep. I figure you and Wyatt can take the first two, and Lucy and I will take the third—"

"Sorry, guys." Reese appeared in the doorway. "That was Rita Hoelscher on the phone."

"Oh no, not Bitsy again," Jo said.

Rita Hoelscher and her goat, Bitsy, had a long-going feud with Nettie Deardorff, and the White Rock police were often called upon to referee. Being a police force in a small northern New Hampshire town did have its unusual calls. One type was the refereeing of town feuds, the other was the various moose sightings, which the locals seemed to think was one moose who they had named Bullwinkle.

Sometimes, Bullwinkle would mess up someone's garden, and sometimes he would hold up traffic. Moose were usually peaceful but could cause damage because of their size. It would be very unwise to tangle with a moose, but luckily the locals knew to leave Bullwinkle alone.

"This time it's serious. Apparently Bitsy ate some of Nettie's nylons off the clothesline. Made her sick. She's at the vet now, and Doc Grueber says she'll be fine, but Rita is really mad. There's a shouting match going on in Rita's backyard right now." To make matters worse, Nettie and Rita lived next door to each other. "George Mathers called it in. He's worried."

Sam, Jo, and Wyatt exchanged a look. One of them would have to go.

"I'll handle it," Wyatt said. "I have a way with Nettie."

Sam looked at Jo. "Guess that leaves you, me, and Lucy to interview the friends."

Upon hearing her name, Lucy rose from the sunny spot and trotted toward the door.

"I guess someone is ready to get started." Jo followed the dog.

They ran into Harry Woolston on their way out. He was dressed in an oversized button-down shirt with splotches of blue and red paint down the arm. His fingers bore the same splotches, as did his jeans and sneakers.

"Painting your house, Harry?" Sam gestured toward the paint drips. He hoped Harry wasn't getting up on any ladders. The man was eighty years old.

Harry looked down at his clothes and made a face. "Nah. Another one of the wife's hobbies. She's got me painting now. Thinks I'm gonna be a regular Picasso."

Harry's gaze flicked from Sam to Jo to Lucy. "Is this a bad time? Marnie Wilson sent me over and wanted to ask if she could meet with you."

Jo's sigh was loud enough to be heard in the lobby. She looked irritated. She wasn't a fan of Marnie Wilson. "It actually is a bad time. We're on our way to interview suspects for a murder investigation."

Harry's blue eyes widened with a spark of interest. "Oh, right. I remember those days. Say, did I ever tell you about how I caught that killer up in Glenbrook?"

Harry had a never-ending supply of stories of the old days. Some of them were entertaining, and Sam understood how empty it could feel to not have a purpose, so he usually listened to them.

"I don't think we have time for a story," Sam said as gently as he could.

"Well, I might have some expertise that can…" Harry's words trailed off, and the light in his eyes dimmed. He'd almost gotten shot "helping" on one of their other cases. He blamed himself for Kevin being in a coma, and ever since then, his wife kept him on a short leash. But Sam suspected it was mostly his own guilt that made him stop insisting on handing out advice or going along to crime scenes.

"I don't have time. I have to finish my painting before it dries. I'll just tell Marnie she'll have to catch up with you later."

"Sounds good. Good luck with your painting." Sam slapped Harry lightly on the shoulder and left.

CHAPTER TWELVE

One of Kirsten's friends was named Mary Ryder. She lived with her parents in an old farmhouse with a sweeping view of the white mountains. The farmhouse could have used a good coat of paint, as many in town could, but the view would never get shabby, at least where Jo was concerned.

Mary's parents weren't home, but she was eighteen, so they could talk to her alone. They sat in rocking chairs on the front porch facing the view.

Mary was a short brunette. Her brown eyes were rimmed red from crying. She smiled briefly as she bent down to greet Lucy, but fresh tears came when she started talking about her friend.

"Kirsten was a good kid. She didn't deserve what happened to her." Mary wrung a tissue in her hand.

"Of course not," Jo soothed. "We want to catch the guy who did this, and you might be able to help. You were with her that night. Did you notice anything unusual?"

Mary gazed unseeingly at the view as she thought. "No. We were just partying like any other night." She frowned and glanced quickly at Sam. "I know we're not supposed to party in the woods, but what else is there to do in this town?"

Sam smiled to ease her worry. He had a bright, reassuring smile, and Jo realized he hadn't smiled as much at *her* since she'd told him about her sister's case. "Don't worry, we're not going to take action against anyone for partying in the woods. We've got more serious issues at hand."

“Maybe if you could think back and try to remember what she did that night. Were you together all night? When was the last time you saw her?” Jo asked.

Mary looked down at her lap, a teardrop falling on the shredded tissue clutched in her fist. She sniffled. “We were together at first. There were a lot of kids there that night. And Kirsten… well, she kind of likes this guy, Ricky Webster.”

Jo glanced at Sam, making a mental note to look into Ricky Webster. “Was she with Ricky that night?”

Mary pressed her lips together. “I’m not sure.”

“So you weren’t with her all night?” Jo asked.

Mary shook her head. “I mean, we saw each other here and there, but you know how it is. It was a big party, lots of people to talk to, and people tend to split off into little groups.”

Jo nodded. She remembered how it was, though thinking of how long it had been since she’d partied made her feel ancient instead of only thirty-eight.

“So you don’t really know who she was with? Didn’t you see her at the end of the night?” Sam asked.

Mary’s face turned red. “No. I left a little early with my boyfriend.”

“What time did you leave? Jo asked.

Mary glanced nervously at the house, probably not wanting her siblings, who they could hear running around inside, to tattle on her. “Around midnight.”

“Was Kirsten at the party when you left?”

Mary grimaced. “I can’t be sure.”

Establishing a timeline wasn’t going to be easy. Who watched the clock at a party? “When was the last time you remember seeing her at the party? What was she doing? Who was she talking to? Can you give us a rough idea of the time?”

Mary closed her eyes as if trying to envision the scene. “I can’t really say what time it was, but the last I remember seeing her was maybe an hour or two after she got there; probably around eleven. She was talking to a bunch of guys, Jesse Cowley, Bobby Anders, Craig Danskill.”

“And nothing after that? Did you think that was unusual that you didn’t see her before she left?” Sam asked.

"No. It's not like we keep tabs on each other, and like I said, it was crowded, so she could have been there and I just didn't notice her."

Jo shifted in her chair. This was going nowhere, not to mention that Mary had probably been drinking and who knew what else, so her memory wasn't very reliable in the first place. "Kirsten's car was at her house. Her mother said she went to the party with a friend. Wouldn't the person she came with have wanted to give her a ride home?"

"Not necessarily. A lot of times, we just get rides with each other, and then if one person wants to stay longer or leave earlier, we just get a ride with someone else."

"Do you know who Kirsten got a ride to the party with that night?" Maria Stillwell hadn't known who had picked Kirsten up, and her cell phone texts didn't glean any clues. In fact, she hadn't texted or called much that night at all.

"Oh, sure. It was Shelly. Shelly Macintyre. But I don't remember if they left together. Sorry, I wish I could be more help."

"You've been a big help." Shelly Macintyre was actually next on their list.

Sam stood and called to Lucy, then turned to Mary, who was still sitting. "Did Kirsten have any enemies? Anyone that would want to hurt her?"

"No. Everyone loved her. It couldn't be anyone that knew her." Mary looked from Sam to Jo, alarm in her eyes. "It must have been some random stranger, right?"

"It's possible," Sam said.

The alarm in her eyes turned to fear. "You don't think…" She glanced out at the woods beside her house. "That person is still out there. Do you think he'll come after me?"

"We're going to catch him. Then he won't come after anyone. Until then, though, you might want to steer clear of parties in the woods."

SHELLY MACINTYRE LIVED in a Victorian painted mint green and pink. It reminded Sam of the one his second wife had made him live in before

they got divorced and he moved to his grandparents' cabin like he'd always wanted.

Shelly was the opposite of Mary, tall and blond, but she had the same sadness about her. They sat on period carved-mahogany furniture in the floral-wallpapered living room while Shelly's mother hovered in the doorway.

"I can handle this, Mom." Shelly gave her mother a wan smile. Her mother left, and Shelly put her hand tentatively toward Lucy, who had been sitting quietly by her side for comfort. As they talked, the girl's left hand would occasionally reach down to pet the dog.

"Kirsten did ride with me that night. I can't believe it's the last time…" Shelly's face crumpled, and Sam and Jo gave her a few minutes to pull herself together.

"Why didn't she leave with you? Was that unusual?" Sam asked as gently as he could. He didn't want Shelly to blame herself for what had happened to Kirsten.

"It wasn't unusual. It's not like we had plans to hang out. She messaged and asked for a ride there. She said she'd get another ride home." Sam nodded. He'd seen the message on Kirsten's texts. It was the last one she'd sent.

"Any idea who she was riding home with?"

Shelly shook her head, her hand dipping down to pet Lucy. "Sorry."

"What about Ricky Webster? Could it be him?" Jo asked.

Shelly pressed her lips together. "I know they kind of had a thing, but she didn't say who was giving her a ride. I don't think her mom liked Ricky, so she didn't talk about him much."

"You don't know anyone who would want to hurt her, or was there anything unusual about her that night?"

Shelly frowned. "No. Of course not! She was a nice person… but there was something unusual that night."

"What?"

Her cheeks turned pink. "Well, one time I went to the, ahh… ladies room, and I thought I saw someone in the woods. I called out for them to cut it out. You know a girl needs privacy."

"Of course," Jo smiled. "You don't think it was someone from the party?"

“It could have been. I called out, but then they just sort of faded away back into the woods. Maybe no one was there. I did have a few beers.”

Sam exchanged a glance with Jo. Maybe no one was there, or maybe someone was lurking, waiting for his next victim. If it was the latter, he wondered if Shelly had any idea how close she may have come to being the body they’d found in the grave. Unless, of course, the murderer had targeted Kirsten specifically for a reason.

“If you think of anything, will you let us know?” Jo handed her a business card, and they left.

Back in the car, Jo asked, “You think that could have been the killer lurking in the woods?”

Sam started the engine and glanced over. In some ways, Jo was acting the same as usual, but he still sensed some sort of hesitation. He should probably say something and clear the air about her sister’s investigation. He thought about what to say as he answered her question. “It could have been. Those woods where they party are pretty far from where we found the body.”

“Yeah, and I suppose that doesn’t help us much. We don’t know if the lurker was someone from the party or a stranger.”

“Let’s send Wyatt a message to check into Ricky Webster.”

Jo got out her phone and messaged Wyatt.

“We have to drive past Brewed Awakening on the way to the next interview. You want to stop?” Brewed Awakening was Jo’s favorite coffee shop.

“Sure.”

Jo’s tone was missing some of her usual excitement for their regular coffee stop. Sam glanced in the rearview at Lucy. The dog flicked her eyes to Jo. Right, time to say something. Sam cleared his throat. “Umm… I wanted to—”

Squawk!

Static blared from under the dashboard. Sam had almost forgotten about the dispatch system the city had insisted they install. He hated that thing. You could hardly understand what the person on the other end—usually Reese—was saying. Why drive around talking into a mic when you could just call?

Jo was frowning at the thing too. “What did she say?”

“Darned if I know.” The mic had gone silent, and Sam tried to regain the momentum to smooth things over with Jo.

Jo shifted in her seat to look at him. “Were you going to say something?”

“Umm, yeah, I just wanted to clear—”

Squawk!

More static, then “… Station… Four?”

“We better answer.” Jo picked the mic off the hook and spoke into it. “Couldn’t hear you, can you repeat that?”

More static, then “I said, Holden Joyce is here. Says he has important information.”

“About this case?” Jo asked.

“Ten-four.”

Jo looked at Sam, who nodded and pulled over to execute a U-turn. “We’ll be right there.”

“I wonder what he would have on our case?” Jo asked.

“I don’t know, but this can’t be a good sign. If the FBI has something they think is relevant, then I don’t think we’re dealing with a simple one-off killing.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The killer ducked behind a wide old oak tree and congratulated himself on his good fortune. Who knew so many redheads would be in a small town like White Rock? Small towns usually had slim pickings. It was a lucky thing he'd found this one so easily. It was almost too easy, really. He'd been watching the comings and goings at the last victim's house—he liked to see the carnage that happened after they were found—and this girl was perfect for his next "project." She'd appeared almost as if due to divine intervention. It was meant to be.

Maybe it was a blessing of small towns. Everyone knew each other and came to give their condolences.

One thing about small towns that wasn't a blessing, though, was that it was harder to stalk someone. But he wasn't worried. He was very good at stalking.

As he watched, the girl went into a store. The front windows were loaded up with displays of perfumes and creams. He made a note on his phone of the time. The record keeping was part of getting to know her routine. Hopefully she would be like most people and follow the same pattern pretty much every day.

But he wasn't overly interested in what she did during the day. He needed to nail down her routine during the night, because it would be under the cover of darkness when he'd make his move. He needed to pick the perfect time to snatch her where there would be no witnesses. And even better if she routinely went somewhere where she'd be gone for a long time and no one would notice she was missing.

He’d have to look into her profile on social media. You could learn a lot about a person from social media.

But for now, he'd satisfy himself with watching. He liked watching.

She came out of the store, her long curls bouncing as she walked quickly toward the Main Street diner. He liked the color of her hair, orange like a carrot, not auburn, chestnut, or even strawberry blond. She probably had a smattering of freckles too. What color were her eyes? Maybe hazel or green. Well, no need to speculate on that. He'd find out the color of her eyes soon enough.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

"Glad you finally figured out how to use the police radio," Reese teased as Jo and Sam entered the station. She was at the reception desk, fingers rapidly clacking on the keyboard. She didn't look up from the screen before adding, "Holden's in the squad room."

Sam rounded the wall of post office boxes to see Holden Joyce standing next to the filing cabinet, petting Major.

"He lets you pet him?" Was the cat purring? Sam couldn't believe his ears.

Holden turned and shrugged. "Yeah, I think he likes me."

Lucy glanced warily at the top of the cabinet then proceeded to sniff around the side, presumably looking for the toy they'd been fighting over. Apparently it wasn't there, because she continued on sniffing under desks and in corners. Major watched her with smug luminescent green eyes as if challenging Lucy to discover where he'd hidden it.

"What brings you here?" Sam asked. If the FBI was coming to visit, it couldn't be good.

"I heard about the body found in the woods," Holden said.

"That wasn't necessarily the work of a serial killer." Jo popped a K-Cup into the coffee machine then gestured to the mugs as a way of asking if either of them wanted a coffee. They didn't. "We've only found one body."

Holden nodded, his expression grim. "I know. However, Joseph Menda has had the prison warden contact the FBI. Seems he's got another email, and he thinks it might have something to do with the case."

One of the things that had sickened Sam the most about the last case was that serial killers actually worshipped other famous killers like Joseph Menda. Menda was in jail now but received fan mail regularly. Some of it was just from sick people who got their kicks from communicating with a killer, but others were serial killers in the making or, even worse, active killers.

"What makes him think the person who sent the email is our guy?" Sam asked.

"He wouldn't give details, but he sounded pretty certain."

Jo looked at Holden over the rim of her mug. "Why would he be contacting us, though? Don't tell me he suddenly wants to help catch killers."

Holden laughed. "No such luck. He wants to barter the contents of the email and his interpretation of it for expanded outdoor exercise time."

Jo looked like she still wasn't convinced. "He could just be making it up to try to get more time. How did the email get past the censors, anyway?"

"As usual, the contents are in code. It doesn't mention any violence or killing. There are no trigger words in it, so it got through."

"I guess we have no choice but to look into it," Sam said.

Jo glanced at Holden. "Either way, it's not the guy *we've* been looking for. No beech trees near the body."

Holden's expression registered surprise, and his glance flicked from Jo to Sam. Apparently he hadn't expected Jo to confide in Sam so soon.

Jo's phone dinged, and she put the mug down and pulled it out of her pocket. "Sam knows about our case. He's going to help." She said the words to Holden but looked up from her phone at Sam, her gray eyes hopeful. Sam smiled and nodded, hoping to reassure her that he was going to help on the side case. Had she doubted he would?

Jo glanced back at her phone. "Vicky Rutherford says she's working the rest of the day, but maybe we could interview her tomorrow."

"Vicky Rutherford?" Holden asked.

"One of the victim's friends. We've already interviewed two of them. Don't have much so far. We got the name of a potential love interest, and one girl saw someone lurking in the woods." Sam wouldn't normally give out any information, no matter how insignificant, to the FBI, but seeing as Jo and Holden were buddies now and the three of them would be entering into an unofficial investigation together, he supposed he should trust him.

Holden's nod was almost friendly, showing none of the animosity that had been between them when they'd first met. "Hopefully Vicky will have something solid."

Jo took the last sip of coffee and put her mug in the sink. "Or maybe Menda will."

Wyatt came into the squad room, a large fruitcake in his hand. "I brought a snack."

"Yech." Jo shook her head when he offered it to her.

This wasn't the first time they'd been gifted with a fruitcake. Rita Hoelscher had somehow gotten the impression that they loved her fruitcake, and now every time one of them went on a call, she proceeded to send one back to the station.

"I got your message about Ricky Webster, and I'll look into that right away." Wyatt glanced curiously at Holden.

Sam quickly filled Wyatt in about the letter. "We're heading there now."

"Sounds like you should definitely check that out." Wyatt put the fruitcake on the edge of his desk and sat behind it. "I guess I get this fruitcake all to myself."

Sam laughed then turned to Jo. "I'll have Reese alert the prison, and we can head out. They should have Menda ready by the time we get there. Are you coming, Holden?"

Holden shook his head. "You know Menda and I don't get along. You'll get more out of him if I'm not there."

As Sam turned to leave, Lucy trotted up beside him, looking hopeful. "Sorry, you'll have to stay."

The fur on her forehead creased in disappointment until Wyatt took a bag of treats out of his drawer. "Come on, buddy, you can sit over here with me."

Lucy sniffed the air, took one final look at Sam, and then walked over to Wyatt.

As they got into the car, he noticed that Jo seemed more relaxed. He'd sensed a change when she'd made the comment about him helping. Things were going to be okay. He'd been irritated that his apology had been interrupted by Reese's announcement about Holden being at the station, but maybe he didn't even need to apologize now.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The prison that housed Menda was pretty much the same as any other penal facility. Plain beige walls, plain beige tile, unhappy stone-faced guards. Jo studied Sam out of the corner of her eye as they waited in the interrogation room for them to bring in Joseph Menda.

The ride over had been almost like old times, with none of the tension she'd sensed between them earlier. She could have sworn he'd been about to say something important to her before Reese's call on the dispatch system had come through, but it must not have been too important. At least he wasn't acting standoffish anymore.

The door opened, and Joseph Menda shuffled in. He was wearing an orange prison uniform, and his hands were cuffed. He had an air of arrogance about him as if he were a VIP guest being shown into the presidential suite at a swanky hotel.

He sat down and smiled at Jo, except when Menda smiled, it didn't make you feel happy. It made you feel scared.

"Sergeant Harris, so nice to see you." Menda's voice dripped with double meaning as his eyes drifted to Jo's chest. After a second, he looked at Sam. "Chief Mason. Glad you two could come."

"What's this about an email?" Sam got right to the point. He knew there was no sense in trying to engage people like the man in front of him in a normal conversation. There was nothing "normal" about Joseph Menda.

Menda leaned back in his chair, settling in. "First I want my extra exercise time."

"You'll get it if the letter turns out to be true."

“How do I know you won’t just take the information and leave?”

“If I don’t get the information, I *will* leave, so you don’t have a choice. Show me what you have.”

Menda thought about this and then must have realized he wasn’t in a position to bargain. He twisted to reach into his pocket—awkward with his hands cuffed—and threw a piece of paper on the table. “I printed it for you.”

Sam read the paper, the crease in his brow deepening the more he read. “This looks like a pie recipe.”

Menda leaned back again and smiled. “*Looks* like. That’s the code. There’s hidden meanings.”

Sam slid the paper over to Jo as he addressed Menda. “Want to enlighten us?”

Menda looked smug. He liked having information he could lord over people. Jo wanted to punch him, but she stayed in her chair. The information could be important.

“Well, you see the part about trying to get all the right ingredients and going to different stores?”

“Yeah.”

“That means he’s choosy. He picks his victims very carefully.”

“Great. A choosy serial killer. How does that help us, exactly?” Jo asked.

Menda tilted his head back, giving the impression of looking down at her as if he were so much smarter. “He stalks them, so now you know he’s lurking around town. White Rock isn’t that big. Should be fairly easy to pick out someone acting that way, don’t you think?”

“Unless he only does it at night.” Sam thought of the lurker in the woods. “How long does he stalk for? A day? A week?”

“I’d say a few days or maybe weeks.” Menda looked up at the ceiling, his face turning dreamy. “He gets to know their habits, figures when to grab them. It’s all very exciting.”

“Yeah, exciting.” Jo tapped the paper. “It says all that here? Doesn’t look like it to me.”

“Well, not in so many words, but you have to read between the lines. Preheating to the exact temperature, rolling the dough out carefully.” Menda’s hands clenched and unclenched as if kneading dough… or maybe strangling someone.

“I don’t know. That’s not really much help unless you can tell us something specific. Like where he stalks them or what he’s looking for.” Sam got up to leave.

“Wait!” Menda’s voice was laced with panic. “There is something that could be more help.”

“What?”

Menda nodded toward the letter. “It’s a strawberry pie.”

“Yeah, so?”

“See how he—or she—describes the strawberries? Ripe and red. Juicy.” Menda smiled.

“Uh huh… still not helpful,” Sam said.

Menda rolled his eyes. “I think he’s trying to tell us that he likes redheads.”

Sam’s heart turned over. Kirsten Stillwater had had red hair. Finally, they were getting somewhere.

“And the pink filling….” Menda made a show of leaning back and looking at the ceiling. “Was the victim wearing pink?” He looked forward directly at Sam.

Crap!

“Wait… you said he or *she*,” Jo said.

Menda shrugged, looking innocent. “Yeah, you never heard of a woman serial killer? There’s been a few. And women would know all about pies, right?”

Jo glanced at Sam. Could the killer be a woman? There had been no sexual assault, just murder. One thing for sure, if Kirsten was killed by the same person who killed the girls five years ago, then that ruled Thorne out, because he was in jail when Kirsten was killed. Other than the similar method of death, there was no evidence Kirsten was killed by the same killer from five years ago or even that Kirsten’s killer would kill again.

“Is that good enough?” Menda gave Sam a flat look, his dark eyes devoid of emotion. “Now I need you to talk to the warden about my exercise time.”

Sam pulled out his phone and made the call. He’d already made arrangements with the warden about Menda’s extra exercise time if the lead panned out.

“Good to see you are a man of your word,” Menda said.

Sam grunted and got up to end the interview. He turned back just before he reached the door.

"How do you know the person that wrote the letter is not just some whacko?"

"I don't, not really. Just a gut feeling. That's your job to figure out if I'm right. Better hurry. I get the impression this guy is twitchy, and it won't be long before another girl goes missing."

"WE NEED to get Wyatt to trace the origins of that email," Sam said as they left the interrogation room. That's exactly what Jo had been thinking. Wyatt was a video game addict and had proven to be a whiz at computer forensics and tracing anything online.

"Do you think it's really from the killer, or was Menda just making it sound that way?" Jo asked.

"Menda could have been grandstanding. He seemed quite pleased with himself." Sam pushed open the heavy steel industrial door and gestured for Jo to go through first.

"Do you think the part about the red hair is true?" Jo tucked one of her own red curls under her police hat. "If we know he's going to pick a redhead, then maybe we can put surveillance on any that fit the description. There aren't that many young redheads in town."

"But then what if it's not? What if he decides he wants a brunette, or this whole email is a hoax or something to throw us off track? Plenty of people know Kirsten had red hair and was wearing pink. We have limited resources. We need to take it seriously, though, because if this guy is looking for another victim, we need to do what we can to prevent him from finding one."

"Might not be a him."

"Huh?" Sam turned to look at her.

"Menda said him or *her.*"

Sam looked thoughtful. "Well, I guess that increases the pool of suspects."

Jo stepped out into the parking lot and started toward the Tahoe. She hesitated and turned back to the prison. Thorne was in there, but for how

long? “Too bad. I guess this means it wasn’t Thorne… unless the letter came from the prison, but why would Thorne send it? He can’t stalk or kill anyone from prison.”

“Thorne might not have done this murder, but that doesn’t mean the others weren’t his. That was five years ago and—”

“Mason! Fancy running into you here. Saved me a trip.” Charles Bascomb had come up beside them. His expression was smug and superior.

“Oh, were you coming to visit us?” Sam asked.

Bascomb’s eyes flicked to the prison. “Yeah, right after I confer with my client. My *innocent* client.”

Sam didn’t react. “Innocent might be a stretch.”

“Not really. I finally have solid proof about one of your pieces of evidence.”

“And what piece is that?”

“The golf shoes. They don’t belong to my client.”

Sam frowned. “And you can prove that?”

Jo kept silent, her gaze wavering between the two of them. Beryl Thorne had handed over those shoes, but what if she’d had ulterior motives? What if Bascomb was right and those shoes didn’t belong to Lucas Thorne? Was Sam too trusting of Beryl to consider that?

Bascomb smiled. His demeanor reminded Jo of a snake about to swallow a rabbit. “I can. But I don’t want to spoil the surprise. Consider this fair warning.”

“Jerk,” Jo said under her breath as he walked away.

“I would have used a stronger word.” Sam continued on toward the Tahoe.

When they got to the car, Sam turned to her. “We might have one hope to nail Thorne, something better than golf shoes. *If* he really is the killer.”

“What?”

“Bridget. She could testify that he was the man who Amber Desrocher was last seen with.”

Bridget had witnessed one of the victims leave with a man five years ago. If she could identify Thorne, that could help place him with the victim. But did she want to put her sister through that? Those were traumatic times, and Bridget was fragile. She couldn’t believe Sam was even asking. Maybe she didn’t know Sam as well as she thought.

“Do you think she would?” Sam pressed.

Jo got into the Tahoe and avoided eye contact. “I’m not sure. She’s still recovering.”

“Right. Of course. We can find some other way.” Sam started the truck.

“You know, it’s weird. Thorne has been denying all along that those were his shoes. I just assumed he was lying to avoid being charged with the crime. But what if he was telling the truth, and they really aren’t his shoes?”

“Then that begs the question… whose shoes are they?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Back at the station, Jo filled Wyatt in on their visit to the prison, and Wyatt updated them on the search on Ricky Webster. He hadn't found much. Webster's name was in the database, but he was waiting for more information to come back.

"That's good, because I need you to trace the source of this email that Menda received." Sam handed Wyatt the printout. "If we can figure out where it originated, it could help us find this guy. We don't know if it's the killer, but at least it's a lead."

Wyatt unfolded the paper. "I'll probably need to get into their servers in order to see the network path."

"We'll need a warrant for that," Jo said. "Better call Jamison."

Sam made a face at the mention of their acting mayor, Henley Jamison.

Jamison had taken over when the current mayor had been killed, and at first, he'd been just as abrasive and appeared to want to continue with his predecessor's campaign to thwart their efforts to bring justice. But during the last serial killer case, he'd mellowed a little. He'd been more cooperative and had even helped them push through the warrants they needed. Maybe that was because the mayoral election was next year and he wanted Sam on his side against Marnie Wilson. Whatever the reason, Sam would take the cooperation.

"I can get started while we wait for the warrant." Wyatt turned to his laptop.

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance. Neither of them wanted to ask for specifics. Wyatt had certain skills that might not be deemed legal when it

came to computers, and sometimes it was just better not to know. Wyatt looked up from his typing. “Do you think this email is really from the killer, or is Menda just concocting this for his own gains?”

“I hope it’s not from the killer,” Sam said. “I don’t want to be chasing a killer around White Rock. I hate to say it, but it would be better if Kirsten’s murder was personal.”

Sam rubbed his face. “In the meantime, I’m going to look at the crime scene with fresh eyes.” Sam glanced toward his office and the corkboard on which he had pinned up a few photographs of the crime scene.

“I was thinking about visiting Kevin, and I wanted to introduce Lucy to Bridget. Do you mind if I take her for a bit?” Jo’s eyes met Sam’s. She was still thinking over his words about getting Bridget to testify against Thorne. She wasn’t sure how she felt about that.

“Sure.” Sam leaned down to pet Lucy. “I can come pick her up at your place later if you want to.”

“That works.” Maybe once Sam met Bridget, he’d see how fragile she was and realize that it wouldn’t be a good idea to force her to testify against Thorne.

THE STAFF at Hillcrest were always happy to see Lucy. Jo stopped for each one of them to greet the dog on her way to Kevin’s private room.

The room was the same as it had been every other time she’d visited him. It was nicer than the hospital, as it had soft-yellow paint on the walls and some nice artwork, but still not as good as him being awake and at home. The hospital bed and monitors were a harsh reminder of the situation, no matter how homey they might have tried to make the room look.

Kevin lay motionless in the bed as he had for months now.

Lucy went right to the bed and nudged his hand with her nose.

“If anyone can wake him up, you can,” Jo said as she came to stand beside the dog. Did Kevin’s face have a little more color than usual, or was she imagining it?

She didn’t know how much Sam had filled him in on recent events, so she updated him with her version.

“We have a new wrinkle. Turns out Thorne might not be a killer.”

Kevin had been in a coma when they’d arrested Thorne. He didn’t even know they’d arrested him unless somehow he actually was hearing and understanding what she and Sam had said to him. She didn’t know if he was or not, but it couldn’t hurt to keep updating him.

“Not only that, but the killer might’ve started up again.” She glanced at the monitors for any erratic spiking of the lines but didn’t see anything.

“We’re not sure if it’s a serial killing; still investigating that. Maybe we’ll get lucky and only have one victim. If you can call that lucky.” She pulled up a chair and sat down next to the bed.

“My sister is living with me now. She’s finally clean. But she seems so fragile and lost. She’s not like I remember her, but all my memories are from before she got into drugs.” Jo hadn’t told Kevin about Tammy; maybe she would someday if he woke up. For right now, she didn’t want to burden him. “It’s going to take a while for Bridget to feel safe and start carving out a drug-free life.”

When should she tell Bridget about the investigation she’d been conducting on Tammy? Jo was sure that Bridget’s whole drug addiction had stemmed from their sister’s abduction. She’d been affected by it as a kid, and that had fueled her bad choices and need for drugs as a teen.

Maybe if Bridget could help with the investigation, it would be therapeutic, like it was for Jo. Jo’s instincts told her Bridget might need more time to settle in. She’d keep an eye on her emotional state, and hopefully it would become clear when to tell her.

Sam was coming to pick up Lucy tonight, and he’d probably expect to be filled in on the case. Jo wanted to fill him in, but not with Bridget there. She texted a message telling him that Bridget didn’t know about the investigation so he would know not to mention it when he came over.

“I wish you could come back. We could use your help.” Jo stared at Kevin, looking for the twitch that Sam had seen, but nothing moved.

“Lucy misses you.” Still nothing. “And I’m sure Major Payne would love to meet you.” Not a twitch.

She got up from the chair and started to pace. “But back to the case. First of all, it’s a bummer that this Charlie Bascomb guy thinks he can get the charges dropped. Did Sam mention Bascomb is Thorne’s uncle? Well actually, he’s Beryl’s uncle. I don’t trust her at all.” She turned and looked at Kevin, half expecting him to nod in agreement. “But Bascomb seemed

pretty sure that he could prove those golf shoes weren't Thorne's, and those shoes are a big part of our case."

Unless Bridget could testify against him.

"If only there was something else we could use to solidify our case." She let her voice trail off as a thought arose. She'd always suspected that Thorne had something to do with the murder of their previous mayor, but they'd proven the criminal who had put Kevin in the hospital was the actual killer. Even though the evidence pointed to him, Jo suspected he might've been a puppet for Thorne.

Jo sighed and turned, then walked back to the head of the bed. "I always suspected he had something to do with Dupont's death and maybe others too."

Kevin's foot jerked. It took Jo a second to register that she'd actually seen movement. Sam had said there had been a little twitching when he was here, but this was a full-out jerk. Jo stared at Kev's foot. It jerked again!

Jo ran out into the hallway. "Nurse! I think something is happening!"

A nurse rushed in, and Kevin's foot twitched again. She rushed up to lift his eyelids and shine a light in his eyes. Jo kept her eyes glued to the beeping machines. The heart rate one was increasing. Was that good?

A doctor came into the room. "Is he waking up?"

The nurse backed off from the head of the bed, and the doctor took over the examination.

"His foot twitched twice." Jo pointed, trying to be helpful.

The doctor stood back, staring at the foot, which of course didn't move at all.

"Is that a good sign?" Jo asked.

"I think it might be. We've been seeing a bit of changes with him lately." He looked at Jo. "But I really can't say for sure. Maybe whatever you were saying hit a nerve deep down in his subconscious."

What had she been saying? Oh, right, she'd been talking about Thorne. Well, if anything would hit a nerve deep down, it would be Thorne.

"That would be good, right? It would mean he has some awareness." Jo was glad she hadn't blurted out anything she didn't want Kevin to know.

The doctor nodded. His expression seemed pleased but stoic, as if he didn't want to give too much hope. "Whatever you guys have been telling him, keep doing it."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sam stared at the pictures on the corkboard. He was trying to pick out patterns, notice something missing or something there that shouldn't be there. Unlike the previous shallow graves, this one offered very little in the way of clues. This time, he'd have to solve the case by scrutinizing the suspects.

He glanced at the window, noticing the empty space below where Lucy usually lay. It felt weird without Lucy in the office, but he was glad she would visit Kevin, and he was looking forward to meeting Jo's sister when he picked her up.

Movement in the town common caught his eye. Darn it! Mayor Henley Jamison was walking down the sidewalk, red silk tie flapping over his left shoulder. He was heading for the police station. Sam figured it was too good to be true that the mayor would let him do his job without the usual harassment. At least he might have good news about the warrant.

Reese, Wyatt, and Jo were already gone, so Sam met Henley in the lobby. The mayor looked stressed.

"What brings you here?" Sam asked.

"This case. Please tell me it's not another serial killer."

"I don't know that for sure. Might not be. If I can get that warrant for the email, we'll be able to find out more."

Henley pulled a paper out of his inside jacket pocket. "I rushed it through."

"Thanks." Maybe Henley really was on the side of justice, unlike their former mayor, or maybe he had his own reasons for cooperating with Sam

now that would turn problematic later.

Major leapt onto the desk with the stuffed octopus in his mouth. His fluffy black fur was puffed out, and he eyed them with suspicion as he dropped the stuffed toy onto the surface. Was he presenting them with the toy? The cat must be feeling overconfident about letting the toy lie around, because Lucy wasn't there to snatch it away.

"I need this thing resolved quickly." Jamison rubbed the top of Major's head, and the cat slitted his eyes closed and purred. Sam didn't understand why the cat liked Henley so much. Any time Sam had tried to pet the cat like that, he'd been rewarded with a loud hiss and a deep scratch on his hand.

"So does the victim's family," Sam said. "Not to mention the next potential victim, if there is one."

Jamison jerked his attention back to Sam. "So you *do* think there will be more."

"Not if I can help it."

"Good. The election is a little over a year away, and I don't need anything marring my record. Marnie Wilson will latch on to any little thing to try to discredit me."

Would she? Sam didn't know her well, but she didn't seem like the type to stoop that low. Then again, he had a general mistrust of politicians, and he had never met one that wouldn't do most anything to win.

"Mew." Major batted softly at the toy, pushing it toward the edge of the desk, then looked up at them. Did he want to play? He'd never done that before.

"I don't know Ms. Wilson well, but she seems like a straight shooter," Sam said.

"Mew." Major batted at the toy harder. Now it was dangling off the edge. The cat stood and went to the edge to look over, as if assessing what might happen if the toy fell.

Jamison snorted. "Those are the worst kind. Trust me, you don't want her to win. It would be bad for the town." He glanced outside. "And I'm getting a little attached to this town."

"Right, well, either way, I aim to catch the killer as quickly as possible." Sam tapped the warrant. "This will help."

Jamison nodded slowly. Sam wondered if Jamison was playing at some game, but when he looked into his eyes, he didn't see deceit. Maybe

Jamison was the straight shooter and Wilson was corrupt. Hard to tell.

"Thanks, Mason." Henley left, turning back to look at Sam as he opened the door. "Let me know if you need anything else."

"Meow!"

Major swatted the toy, and it fell to the ground just as the door shut behind Henley.

Major sat on the side of the desk, glaring at Sam as if challenging him. So he *did* want to play. Maybe the cat was finally coming around. Sam picked up the toy and threw it into the squad room.

Major's green gaze followed the trajectory of the toy. Then he looked at Sam, flicked his tail, jumped from the desk, and trotted off toward the filing cabinet.

"So much for playing. Lucy would have been happy to chase that," Sam yelled after the cat.

Sam almost made it back to his office before he was interrupted again. This time it was Marnie Wilson. She wore a white blouse with jeans, giving her a down-to-earth "common man" look. Was that on purpose so the locals would relate?

"Hey, Harry Woolston said you were busy, but I saw the lights on when I drove past and figured I'd stop in. Is this a bad time?"

"No." It was, but Sam would rather just get it over with. She had something to say and would probably persist until she did.

"Oh, good."

They went to the squad room, and Sam gestured toward a chair. "Have a seat."

"Oh, this won't take long. I was just wondering about permitting for businesses and certain incentives." She stopped in front of the filing cabinet, perhaps unaware that Major was crouched up top now, glaring at the top of her head.

"What do you mean?" Odd question, what was she getting at?

"Like for energy companies. Do the town incentives include variation to the zoning laws for things like clean energy and job-creating resources?"

"I'm not sure. That's not really my department. We enforce the zoning laws, but I'm not familiar with the incentives."

"Oh, okay." Marnie glanced around, apparently not ready to leave, and Sam wondered if she had an ulterior motive.

“Do you have an energy company?” he asked, wondering where the odd question had come from.

Marnie laughed. “No, I’m just trying to solidify my positions on certain topics when I run for mayor. We’ll be starting to campaign in full soon.”

“Jamison mentioned that.”

Marnie tilted her head and looked at him. “I hope I have your support.”

“I’ll have to see where you both stand on the issues first.”

A crease formed between Marnie’s brows, but she forced a smile. “Of course.”

Major slowly snaked his paw forward and batted at a strand of hair so gently that Marnie didn’t notice.

“Is that all you wanted?” Sam was anxious to get back to work. He only had another half hour before he was supposed to head out to Jo’s to pick up Lucy.

“Yes.” Marnie started to leave then hesitated. “I heard about the murder. Terrible thing.”

“It is.” Sam nodded toward his office. “I was just working on it, trying to chase down some leads.”

“Oh, of course. I don’t want to keep you from that important business. Nice to see you again.”

“You too.”

Major hissed softly, his eyes following Marnie as she exited to the lobby.

Major liked Jamison and didn’t like Marnie. Guess Sam knew which way the cat was casting his vote.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jo drove home excited about the development with Kevin. She debated calling Sam, but he would be there soon, and she could tell him in person. She pulled into her driveway and turned to Lucy.

"We got good news about Kevin. Hopefully Bridget is doing good too."

Jo was a little nervous about Bridget and how she was adjusting. She'd been quiet. Introspective. But she supposed that was to be expected.

Bridget opened the door and came out onto the porch. Lucy bounded over, and Bridget smiled—the first smile that didn't seem laced with caution or bad memories that Jo had seen since she'd come home.

"She's gorgeous." Bridget looked up from petting the dog as Jo approached.

"And smart," Jo said.

"I can tell." Bridget straightened. "How was work?"

"Good." She didn't want to burden Bridget with tales of her visit to interview the serial killer or the fact he might kill again. Instead, she opted for the happy news. "My colleague that's been in a coma might be waking up."

"That's great news." Bridget moved aside so they could go into the cottage. She seemed more at ease here, not as jittery as last night.

A box lay tipped on the porch, soft blankets nestled inside. The cat dishes with food and water were beside it.

Bridget saw her looking. "I made a little bed for Pickles."

"Pickles?"

Bridget laughed. “That’s what I think his name should be, but we can change it if you want. I’ve been trying to get him used to people. He came over to me earlier but ran off when the car pulled up.”

Lucy sniffed the cat box then flicked a disapproving glance at Jo. Maybe she had a bad impression of cats from her bouts with Major.

“The name Pickles is perfect. Sounds like he likes you. It took me weeks to get him to come over to me.”

Bridget smiled and opened the door. “Gives me something to do.”

“I hope you don’t mind, but my boss is coming over to pick Lucy up.”

Bridget raised a brow. “Sam?”

“Yeah, is that a problem?” Jo asked.

“Not at all. I’m curious to meet him. I can tell you really like working with him.”

“You can?” Jo didn’t realize she’d given off any vibes about that. Maybe it was obvious that the two of them had grown close.

“Yep. I hope you like meatloaf.”

“Huh?”

“I made dinner.”

“You did?” Jo turned toward the kitchen and caught the smells of baked potatoes and meatloaf. The table was set. The cottage was neat and tidy. Bridget had been busy. That was a good sign. “Smells delicious.”

“I hope it’s good. I cobbled together some stuff you had in the fridge. Remember when Mom used to make it?”

The memory pinched Jo’s heart. Those had been happy times. She had many memories of happy family meals, happy parents, and of course, her two sisters. It was just her and Bridget now, but they could still try to be happy. She stood beside Bridget and put her arms around her sister’s shoulders.

“I remember. Those were good memories.”

“Yeah, too bad not all of the memories are good.” Bridget’s smile faded, and Jo wondered if maybe she should let Bridget in on the case sooner rather than later.

ON THE WAY to Jo's, Sam cruised by the place in the woods where Jesse and his gang partied. No one was there. Maybe Kirsten's murder had spooked them. That was good, except if they were there, it would have been a convenient way to see how many had red hair.

Lucy greeted him at the door, and his heart swelled at the exuberant greeting.

"Hi. Come in." Jo opened the door wide and stood back. Did she seem hesitant? Not as happy to see him as usual? Sam couldn't tell. He was probably reading too much into it, and besides, why would she be mad at him? *She* was the one who had been secretive. But Mick had been right that Jo's personal business was none of his concern, and he couldn't fault her for not confiding in him right away.

"This is my sister, Bridget." She looked like Jo, the same shaped nose and the same smile. But she was shorter, and her hair was a dark auburn, just as curly but shorter, forming a halo around her head. Her handshake was firm and her smile warm.

"It's nice to meet you," Sam said.

"You too. Jo says nice things, so you must be a good boss."

Sam smiled and assessed her demeanor. She seemed a bit hesitant, wary. She'd had a rough time, and he knew Jo was right about not approaching her to identify Thorne as the man she'd seen Amber leave with. Not now, at least.

He pushed the thought away as Jo appeared at his side with a Moosenose beer. She must have made a special trip for him, because she didn't drink it. A peace offering, perhaps?

"He's okay most of the time," Jo teased.

Sam took the beer over to the fish tank.

"How is Finn?" He peered in to see the fish swimming around near the little ceramic bridge. His orange-gold fins shimmered in the light.

"Good. Still swimming around. He looks happy, but it's kind of hard to tell."

"How was Kevin?" Sam asked as he took a flake of food out and teased it over the top of the water.

"Big news: he might be waking up."

Sam jerked his attention to Jo. "Really?"

"His foot jerked. Not just a twitch, a big jerk. The doctor came in and said it could be a good sign. Of course, he didn't say anything for sure, but

you know how they are."

"Don't want to get false hopes up." Sam looked back into the tank. Finn was at the top, his lips just below the flake. He let it go, and the fish inhaled it then swam to the corner and burped out little pieces of flake.

"Yeah. We can be hopeful, though, right, Lucy?" Jo patted the dog then popped open her own beer. Bridget sipped her water.

"Anything new at the station?" Jo sat in one of the overstuffed chairs and gestured to the other for Sam.

Sam sat. Bridget was perched on the fireplace hearth, and Lucy plopped down in front of it, just as at home here as she was at Sam's.

"The mayor came by with the warrant for the email, and Marnie Wilson stopped in with some strange question about zoning exceptions."

"Why would she ask about that? Is she starting a business?" The suspicion in Jo's eyes belied her distrust in Marnie.

"She was vague."

"Big surprise there." Jo turned to Bridget. "She's running for mayor." As if that explained it all.

As they made small talk, Jo seemed completely at ease, further proving Sam's suspicions that the rift between them was all in his imagination. The conversation was a little cautious because Sam didn't want to mention any specifics about the case with Bridget around, but otherwise it appeared things had gone back to normal between them.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The next day, Sam and Jo were in his office, staring at the corkboard. Lucy had snagged the toy and was curled up in the sun under the window with it tucked close to her side.

"We still need to talk to Vicky Rutherford and Kaylee Summers. I'll see if I can arrange a time," Jo said, consulting her notes from the small paper notebook she carried. Most cops used their cell phones or tablets, but sometimes she still liked using good old-fashioned paper and pencil.

Movement at the door caught Jo's eye. Major was rubbing his cheek on the frame, his eyes glued to the toy.

"I've looked at these pictures for hours and can't find any clue." Sam walked closer to the corkboard. He was good at finding patterns that stuck out, noticing things that didn't belong. If he didn't see anything amiss in the photos, chances were there was nothing. It was unfortunate, because they could usually glean a few clues to follow up on just by looking at the pictures of the crime scene. In this case, the only thing they had was one hair and a cryptic email.

Major appeared unconcerned about their lack of clues as he slunk slowly along the wall toward the toy.

Jo's gaze returned to the pictures. She couldn't see anything either. "Don't worry, something will break."

Sam turned to her. "I forgot to tell you last night that I swung by the party spot on the way to your place. No one was there."

"So the murder has them spooked."

“Maybe. Or maybe they are partied out. I was hoping to see how many redheads are in the group. I’ll have to track Jesse down and hope he remembers.”

Jo snorted. With the way Jesse smoked weed, she doubted he would.

Over at the window, Major crouched down and reached a paw out toward the toy.

Lucy slept, blissfully unaware, as Major skewered the toy with one of his claws and dragged it close. Lucy shifted position.

With the toy a safe distance away, Major grabbed it in his mouth and spun around.

Lucy woke up and looked for the toy, only to see Major’s fluffy tail high in the air as he made a beeline for the door with the toy in his mouth.

Woof!

Lucy’s gaze shifted from Major to Sam, her eyes pleading as if she wanted Sam to punish the cat and bring the toy back.

“Sorry, Buddy, I can’t fight your battles.”

Wyatt appeared in the door. “Good news. I’ve traced the email about the pie that Menda received. You won’t believe where it came from.”

“The prison?” Jo hoped it was Thorne messing with them.

“Nope. The Black Cat Café.”

The café was the place that emails had originated from in their previous case with the girls who had been murdered five years ago.

Sam frowned. “Wait a minute. So this is the same guy that killed those girls five years ago?”

“It doesn’t necessarily mean that,” Jo said. “It could be a copycat or disciple, or the email coming from the same place could be a coincidence.”

She hated to even think that serial killers had disciples.

“But it’s definitely not Thorne,” Sam said.

“Not unless he can spoof the IP address or something.” Jo looked to Wyatt to see if that was even possible.

Wyatt shook his head. “Nope. It definitely came from the café.”

Sam came around the desk. “Guess we better pay a visit to the Black Cat.”

Jo was already halfway out the door. “Good timing. I’m hungry.”

THE BLACK CAT Café hadn't changed since the last time they'd been there. Sam parked in front of the shop with its quirky sign featuring a giant black cat. Lucy eyed the sign warily from the back seat.

Inside, the pastry cases gleamed, the aroma of baking spiced the air, and customers sat at trendy tables on purple and blue microsuede chairs, drinking steaming espressos and cappuccinos, no doubt with cat-shaped foam.

The bakery smells made Jo's stomach grumble, and the pastries in the case pulled at her attention as Sam stepped up to the counter.

A girl with a long blond braid was behind the counter. They'd talked to her before. A flicker of recognition crossed her face as Sam approached.

"Is Gary in?" Gary was the owner, who they'd also spoken to before. Sam showed his badge just in case the girl had forgotten who they were.

"He's in the back." She went back to get him, apparently not eager to answer cop questions herself. Jo fought the urge to warn her about the killer. She'd be about the right age, but the bakery was ten minutes from White Rock, and Jo didn't want to send an alarm through the whole county. Besides, the girl was a blonde.

Gary came out wiping his flour-dusted hands on a rag. "Chief Mason. What can I help you with?"

Sam glanced over at the computers lined up on a long counter along the window. "We have an interest in finding out who sent an email from these premises."

"Again?" Gary looked a little put out.

"Yeah, sorry. Has anyone been using the computers recently?"

Gary shrugged. "From time to time. Not too often. Most people have their own these days or use smartphones."

Sam nodded. They knew from before there was no surveillance in the shop, so it wouldn't be as easy as looking at video. "Can they use the computers without ordering?"

"No. It's for customers only." Gary threw the towel over his shoulder, and tiny particles of flour wafted out. "If you have a picture like before, I could show it around."

"Unfortunately, I don't have one this time, so I need to take another approach."

Gary raised a brow.

Jo's attention drifted from the conversation, and she glanced into the case. She already knew what Sam was going to say. The lemon squares looked good, or maybe a chocolate muffin.

Sam explained, "We know the email was sent yesterday and what time it was sent. I'm going to need the record of all your credit card transactions for yesterday afternoon."

"Don't you need a warrant for that? I mean, maybe my customers might not like me handing their financial information to the police." Gary glanced out at the customers nervously.

"Technically, I do. I can get one, but you don't want that."

"Why not?"

"It would create all kinds of scrutiny on your business. Health inspector visits, all kinds of red tape…" Sam let his voice trail off. He and Jo weren't really ones to threaten businesses, but sometimes you had to cut some corners in the interest of expediting things. And they definitely needed to expedite this. The killer could be choosing his next victim right now.

"Okay. I can dig them up, but it might take a day."

Sam smiled. "Make it a few hours."

Jo was still looking at the pastry case. Her eyes fell on a pile of bone-shaped cookies that claimed to be healthy dog treats. Right next to them was a giant gooey cinnamon bun. Yep, that would do the trick. She stepped up to the counter and ordered. "I'll have six of those dog cookies and a cinnamon bun."

Sam gave her a look.

"You want something?" Jo gestured toward the pastries.

"Nah. Gotta watch what I eat." Sam patted his stomach. It looked pretty flat to Jo. It was hard to tell under his uniform, but the night before when he was wearing a T-shirt, she'd noticed. Not that she was looking.

As they left the shop, Jo peeked into the bag, inhaling the sweet smell of the cinnamon bun. She practically ran into Sam, who had stopped to hold open the door for someone who was entering. She looked up, suspicion blooming when she saw who he was holding it for. Beryl Thorne.

"Morning, Beryl," Sam said. Beryl looked surprised and maybe not happily.

"Sam! Jo. I wasn't expecting to see you two here." She stepped back, and they all stood outside on the sidewalk. Her gaze flicked to the bag in Jo's hand. "Kind of far to come for pastries. Though they do have the best."

Now Jo remembered. They'd run into Beryl here before. Her family home was near here, and she frequented the shop.

"I was just getting some cream horns for my brother. He loves those." Beryl blurted out an explanation, though neither of them had asked. Jo remained silent, taking the opportunity to watch the body language between Beryl and Sam. She still wasn't sure exactly what their relationship was, and since Beryl had given them the golf shoes that had put her husband in jail, she figured it might be a good idea to figure it out. She wanted to know if she could trust Sam's instincts when it came to Beryl.

Beryl stepped closer to Sam and lowered her voice. "Is there anything more on Lucas getting out of the charges?"

Sam glanced at Jo, who was chewing the small piece of cinnamon bun she'd broken off.

"Your uncle seems to be charging full force ahead. He claims one of our pieces of evidence is tainted."

Beryl chewed her bottom lip. She looked nervous, not flirty. Sam didn't seem to be conspiring with her. He was acting more like he was suspicious of her.

"Which evidence is that?" Beryl asked.

"The golf shoes." Sam paused a beat as if waiting for her to say something about them. "So if you know anything strange about them, now would be a good time to speak up."

She shook her head. "I don't know. They were in his closet, and I know he used to wear them golfing. He used to golf all the time with Robert."

Sam nodded, giving her a chance to say more. She didn't. "How is Robert?"

"He's doing much better. Probably be back to work soon." Beryl glanced at the shop. "Which reminds me, I better get those cream horns."

"Of course. Have a nice day," Sam said.

"You too." Beryl smiled up at Sam, then her gaze flicked to Jo. She nodded then turned and went into the store.

Jo shoved another piece of cinnamon bun into her mouth and got into the Tahoe. Lucy poked her head between the seats, nose twitching.

"Yes, I got you something too." Jo pulled a treat out of the bag, and Lucy's tail thumped as she happily crunched it down then stared at the bag longingly.

Sam started the car then looked into the café, where Beryl was standing at the counter. “She seemed kind of nervous about those shoes, don’t you think?”

“You noticed too?” Jo offered him a piece of cinnamon bun, and he took it absent-mindedly and popped it into his mouth.

“Yeah, why wouldn’t I?”

“I thought maybe you weren’t exactly looking at her with a cop’s scrutiny.”

“Why?”

“You two seem friendly.” Jo looked into the bag to avoid his gaze.

“Seriously? I don’t know why. I have no interest there.”

“I think *she* might.”

Sam frowned and put the car in gear. “Not happening.”

Jo gave Lucy another treat and broke off more of the cinnamon bun. “What do you think Bascomb has on the shoes?”

“No idea. Beryl did bring those shoes to the station, which is an oddity. Normally the evidence is procured from the scene or the person’s residence.”

“So you think he’s going to challenge how you came by that evidence?” Had Beryl told the truth about finding them in her husband’s closet? Beryl might have seen the crime scene photos with the small holes and the odd pattern in the tarps the victims were buried in and knew her husband golfed, so maybe that wasn’t so far-fetched. Then again, they had questioned her a few times and had asked her to come forth with any evidence against him, so it wasn’t entirely suspicious that she brought the shoes to them. They’d asked her to.

Below the dashboard, the dispatch system crackled to life.

“Got new info. You reachable?” Reese’s voice came amidst static.

Sam picked up the mic. “Yeah.”

“Ten-four.”

The static stopped.

“I don’t understand why she needs to summon us on that thing to see if we are reachable. Why can’t she just call or message us? Seems like an extra step,” Sam said. “I might have to disable this thing. It’s annoying.”

“I think she just likes using it.”

Jo’s phone rang with Reese’s call, and she put her on speaker.

“What have you got?” Jo asked.

“Wyatt managed to get something on the boyfriend. Ricky Webster. He was a person of interest in a missing persons case a few years back.”

Jo glanced at Sam. “Sounds like we better check him out.”

“I’ve got an address. He lives in a house owned by Hazel Webster, eighty-six Mountainside Road.”

“That’s only about ten minutes away. We’re heading over there right now.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

Beryl took one of her grandmother's green Depression glass plates from the cabinet and arranged the cream horns on it. As a kid, she'd loved these plates with their fanciful etched designs. Things had changed a lot since then. These days, she had too many things on her mind to care about fond childhood memories or what plates she used for pastries.

She brought the plate over to the table where Robert was sitting, his gaze fixated on the birds at the feeder.

He looked like he didn't have a care in the world as he watched the birds flit around the three feeders that sat in the large yard of her parents' estate. She followed his gaze. A bright-yellow goldfinch flew from the tall oak to the feeder. A tufted titmouse clung to a bag of suet, the gray tuft on top of his head bobbing as he pecked for seeds. A ruby-throated hummingbird hovered around a nectar feeder, its iridescent feathers gleaming in the sun. The scene was peaceful. She should probably watch birds more. She could use some peace right now.

Robert didn't acknowledge her. His eyes had a blank look, as if outwardly he was looking at the birds, but inside, something else was going on.

She hadn't lied to Sam about her brother getting better. He was. But in spurts. He seemed to fog up and then come alert. He'd been coming alert more and more, and she knew this was a good sign. She'd been down this path with him before. As the medication for his mental disorder got adjusted, he would eventually get back to his old self.

Prior to this recent breakdown, he'd been fine for years, but when their father had died last year, the grief had been too much. He'd gone off his medication and had a setback. Hopefully it wouldn't be long before he came back and could take the reins at Mervale again. She needed all her time to run Thorne Enterprises now that Lucas was in jail.

The thought made her stomach clench. She couldn't risk Lucas getting out. That would ruin everything she'd worked so hard for. Why was her uncle trying to get the murder charges dropped? Maybe Robert knew. He'd been close to Uncle Charlie and had even idolized him at one time.

Forcing a smile, she slid the plate right in front of Robert. "I got your favorite cream horns from the Black Cat Café."

Robert turned from the window, his eyes clearing as they focused on her. He smiled that same old smile she remembered from better times.

"Thanks. I do love these things." He reached for one and took a bite off the end.

"Are you feeling better?" Beryl couldn't keep the hopeful tone out of her voice.

"Much. A little tired but getting back to my old self."

"That's great." She cut her cream horn in half and started from the middle.

After he chewed in silence for a few beats, she nodded toward the outdoors. "It's a nice day. Good day for golf."

Robert smiled. "Yeah, it would be. I haven't played in ages."

Beryl knew that because he used to play with Lucas, and Lucas hadn't played in years, either. "I know Lucas got too busy with Thorne Enterprises, but you used to play with Uncle Charlie, too, didn't you?"

"A few times. But not for years. He never stays in town long enough."

Beryl took another bite, savoring the cream filling. "Has he been over lately asking about golf?"

Robert frowned. "Golf? No."

"Has he been here recently?" Beryl asked.

Robert looked thoughtful. "Sure. He always comes to visit and brings cream horns too."

"And did he mention anything about Lucas or playing golf or…"

Robert took another bite of the pastry. "I don't think so."

Beryl hid her disappointment. She was hoping Charlie would have mentioned something to Robert about his big plan to get Lucas out of jail,

but either he hadn't or Robert didn't remember. Because Robert certainly wouldn't lie to her about it. What reason would he have?

ROBERT HADN'T *EXACTLY* LIED to his sister. Uncle Charlie hadn't really talked about golf. But he had talked about fishing, and Robert didn't want her to know he'd gone out to the old fishing cabin by the river, because she insisted he stay home. He was not supposed to drive until he felt better. But he was starting to feel better, and it was so boring to just sit in the house all day.

Robert bit into another cream horn. Why was Beryl asking about golfing? Before she left, she'd looked around, and he'd seen her linger over some old golf pictures in the library too, especially the one with him and Lucas.

Was she pining for Lucas? That idea didn't sit well with him. Even though he and Lucas had been friends as kids, he sure as heck hadn't wanted him to marry his sister. Lucas wasn't a very nice person. And he'd thought he'd sensed tension in their marriage before Lucas went to prison, so he'd figured she'd be glad he was gone.

As he watched a blue jay swoop down to dominate the bird feeder, his thoughts turned to Uncle Charlie. He used to idolize his uncle. Charlie had been the one that helped him catch his first trout and had taught him some valuable computer skills, not the least of which was how to get to level ten on his favorite computer video game. But that was when he was a kid. He didn't idolize him anymore. It turned out Charlie wasn't a very nice person, either.

Then again, Robert had no reason to talk about Lucas or Charlie, because he himself had done some things he now regretted. None of them were saints, not even Beryl. Though she was a good sister, he thought, smiling at the plate of cream horns.

Maybe no one was as good as they pretended to be. Now that his mind was getting less fuzzy, he remembered lots of things he'd rather forget.

He was feeling much better today. Maybe he'd fill the bird feeder. It was getting kind of empty. Maybe he'd even get a haircut. His hair was getting rather long.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Hazel Webster's farmhouse was on several acres of fields overlooking a vista of the mountains. The driveway was dirt, and the overgrown lawn was dotted with dandelions. The house was clad in peeling white paint. The porch that ran along the front had several spindles missing. A dilapidated porch swing hanging from the porch ceiling creaked in the wind.

Even Lucy seemed hesitant as they approached the door, which had several layers of peeling paint and a flap of screen hanging out from the corner.

Sam knocked.

After a few seconds, the inner door cracked open to reveal a woman with messy gray hair. Sam guessed she was in her mid-sixties, but she had a weathered look that made her appear older. Cigarette smoke wafted out of the crack in the door and through the screen.

The woman eyed them with suspicion. "What do you want?"

"Chief Sam Mason, Sergeant Jody Harris. Are you Hazel Webster?"

"Yeah." Hazel's rheumy gaze flicked from Sam to Jo to Lucy.

Apparently their police credentials didn't do much to instill confidence, because Hazel didn't open the door any more than a crack. Usually Lucy warmed people up, but not Hazel.

"We're looking for Ricky Webster."

"He's not here."

"He lives here, though, correct?"

"He's a good boy. Ain't done nothing wrong."

“We just want to ask him a few questions.” Sam let his gaze drift over her shoulder to see if there was movement inside. Maybe Ricky really was home and hiding in there. But all he saw were dolls. Dolls of all sizes in various outfits. It was kind of creepy.

“He’s not here, and I’d appreciate it if you went away. I’m not going to have you here harassing my grandson like what happened down in Pennsylvania!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. We’re not here to harass, just a few questions is all. What happened in Pennsylvania?”

Her gaze narrowed as her voice rose. “You know what happened. You’re all in it together. He didn’t do anything to those girls!”

“Is there a problem?” Sam whirled around to see a young man. He had limp dark hair down to his shoulders and dark stubble on his chin. His cocoa-brown eyes assessed first Sam then Jo.

Lucy growled, but he seemed unafraid as he held his hand to her. She sniffed and then sat down. Apparently she didn’t sense any threat from the young man, and that made Sam relax.

“Ricky Webster?” Jo asked.

“Yes, ma’am.” His smile revealed straight white teeth and a spark of unexpected charm despite his scruffy appearance. “Sorry about my grandma. She’s not feeling well these days.” He looked over Sam’s shoulder at his grandmother. “It’s okay, Gram. I’ll talk to them.”

Hazel shot them another suspicious look before shutting the door.

Ricky led them over to the corner of the porch, away from the door and, perhaps, his grandmother listening at it. “Can I help you with something?”

Sam showed his badge. “Sam Mason, WRPD. This is Sergeant Jody Harris.”

Ricky simply nodded. Sam couldn’t read anything in his slightly hooded eyes.

“We have some questions about Kirsten Stillwell.”

Ricky bowed his head and squeezed his eyes shut. When he looked back up, they were shiny with tears. “I can’t believe she’s gone.”

Sam waited a moment, trying to judge if his emotions were real or just a show for him and Jo. “We’re trying to piece together her movements that night and heard she might have been with you.”

He looked away and nodded. “We were supposed to meet up. She never showed.”

“And did that make you mad?”

Ricky frowned. “Mad? No. Sad, maybe. I figured she hooked up with another guy. I mean, it’s not like we had an exclusive thing.”

Sam glanced at Jo. He knew she’d be studying every tic of his jaw and scuffle of his feet to look for tells that he was lying.

“So you never went to the party?” Sam asked.

Ricky sighed. “Nah. I don’t really fit in there.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

Ricky shrugged. “I don’t know. I don’t drink as much as the rest of them, and I’m a little older.”

“So how did you meet Kirsten?” Jo asked.

Ricky’s gaze flicked to her, and he hesitated, as if trying to decide whether to tell the truth. “Online. Dating app.”

“I see.”

Stalkers often found their victims online. Sam contemplated getting a warrant for Ricky’s internet activity, but he didn’t have cause. Maybe they could dig something up. They still needed to talk to Victoria Thompson, see if she could find some holes in Ricky’s story. If what Hazel had said about this mysterious business in Pennsylvania turned out to be anything, he might be able to get a judge to sign.

“According to our records, Kirsten got a ride to the party from a friend but stated she didn’t need a ride home. Was that because you were going to take her home?”

Sam’s question had Ricky swiveling his attention back in Sam’s direction. “Yep.”

“But you didn’t go to the party, so how was she to meet you?”

“We were supposed to meet in the parking lot on that dirt road.”

That made sense. The parking lot was only about a five-minute walk, and the path was well traveled by people going in to party. But would Kirsten walk it in the dark alone? Had the killer grabbed her on her way to meet Ricky? Or had Ricky not wanted to go to the party so there would be no witnesses to tie him to Kirsten?

“How long did you wait for her?” Sam asked.

“About an hour,” Ricky said. “I forgot my cell phone, so I’m not sure exactly of the time.”

That explained why he hadn’t texted or called her.

“Did you see anyone or anything suspicious when you were in the parking lot?” The killer, if it wasn’t indeed Ricky, had to have gotten into the woods somehow. That lot was closest, but that wasn’t the only way he could get in.

Ricky appeared to think about it for a while. “No. Just everyone’s cars.”

“So you just left when she didn’t show up?” Jo asked.

Ricky sighed. “Well, not exactly. I went in to see if I could find her, but I didn’t talk to anyone. I just stuck to the edges of the crowd looking for her. Never saw her though, so I guess she must have left by then.”

That was exactly what one would say if they weren’t sure someone had seen them lurking around.

“Did you see anyone suspicious in the woods at that time?” Jo asked.

Ricky shook his head. “I don’t think so. I was looking in at the party around the fire. I might have heard a few people, but it’s not unusual for couples to go off into the woods.”

Sam nodded. “And what did you do after that?”

“I came home.” Ricky glanced back at the house. “Gram can verify that.”

“What time would you say that was?”

Ricky pressed his lips together as if thinking. “Around eleven? Yeah, it was, because I remember I looked for my phone and finally found it in the sugar canister. Gram puts things in strange places sometimes. Anyway, when I pulled it out, I looked to see if Kirsten called or messaged, and it was five past eleven.”

Sam calculated how long it would take to get from the spot where they’d found the body and then back here. Ricky wouldn’t have had time to kill Kirsten and get back here. But could they believe him? Sam didn’t exactly think that Hazel would be a reliable witness to corroborate his alibi.

Sam glanced at Jo to see if she had any more questions, but she shook her head slightly. “Okay. If you think of anything that could help us, let us know.”

“I will.”

Sam could feel Ricky’s eyes on them as they walked to the truck. Lucy hopped in first, and Sam got into the driver’s seat then glanced back at the house to see Ricky and Hazel watching them from the porch.

“I think we need to dig into what happened in Pennsylvania,” Sam said as he started the Tahoe.

“Hopefully Wyatt has the details on that.”

“Do you think Ricky was lying?”

Jo looked out the window at the farmhouse as Sam pulled away. Ricky and Hazel had gone inside. “Maybe. He definitely has something in his past.”

Jo’s phone rang, and she looked down. “It’s Reese. At least she’s using the phone instead of that dispatch system.”

Jo answered. “Hey.”

Sam could hear Reese on the other end but couldn’t make out the words.

“Are you sure?” Jo said into the phone.

Sam glanced over at the incredulous tone in Jo’s voice. Her eyes were wide, brows raised. She talked into the phone as she turned to meet Sam’s gaze. “We’ll get over there right away.”

“Please don’t tell me they found another body.”

“No. Hillcrest called the station. Kevin is waking up.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The killer had a name. Victoria. Vicky. Such a lovely name. And the long red curls...divine! Funny thing, you could get information on anyone from Facebook, especially with his new fake profile of a young blond girl. No one would suspect.

His research had been enlightening. He knew that Victoria was friends with people named Carly, Ronda, and Melanie and that she worked at Liscomb Insurance. She liked to have lunch at the diner downtown. She was there now as he watched her from a park bench.

The diner was one of those old-fashioned diners that looked like something out of the 1950s, full of chrome and Naugahyde. It even had glass cake stands on the green Formica counter. Vicky was sitting in front of one of those cake stands right now on a little round stool.

She was eating some kind of sandwich and had a coffee in a white stoneware mug in front of her. He couldn't see from where he was, but he could picture the lipstick stains on the rim.

Why people communicated things about their daily life on social media was a mystery. Didn't they realize how dangerous that was?

Vicky had revealed that she bought a new pair of jeans and a white tank top to her friend Carly. Vicky and Carly had also commented about their plans for Friday night. Those plans included meeting at a little picnic area.

The killer knew the exact spot. It was secluded and private. The kind of place where no one could hear you scream. If he was lucky, Vicky would arrive well before Carly, and he could grab her. The thought made his palms tingle.

But she might struggle like the others, especially since the news about Kirsten was getting around town now. People seemed to be on edge and taking extra precautions.

How could he get her to arrive early and leave himself enough time? Could he fake a message from Carly telling Vicky to show up a half hour early? Having been fascinated with computers since childhood, his skills were finely honed. He could at least try. He didn't want anyone messing up his date with Vicky.

Funny, though, the ongoing police investigation didn't bother him. He had resources, and he was clever. Once it was time to move on, he could easily pin the blame on someone else. Just like he'd done before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Sam, Jo, and Lucy hurried into Hillcrest. Lucy must have sensed the severity of the situation, as she was on high alert, ears forward and trotting toward Kevin's room with a sense of urgency.

Sam glanced into the room. Kevin lay in the bed, looking much as he had the last time he'd seen him. It didn't look like he'd woken up at all.

Sam turned to the nurse at the station. "Someone called about Officer Deckard. Did he wake up?"

The nurse smiled. "Briefly. He's in and out, but we're keeping him heavily sedated to bring him out slowly." The nurse glanced at some monitors behind the desk then into Kevin's room across the hall from the main station. "You can go in if you want."

Lucy got to the side of Kevin's bed first. She whined and put her nose upon the bed, sniffing as if she could sniff out consciousness. Maybe she could.

Sam stood on one side and Jo on the other. Jo took Kevin's hand and felt a twitch. "I think he knows we're here."

Sam leaned over. "Kevin, can you hear me?"

"His finger moved," Jo said.

Sam took Kevin's other hand and put it on top of Lucy's head. The edges of Kevin's lips tugged upward.

"Is he smiling?" Jo asked.

Sam nodded. "I think he knows that his hand is resting on Lucy's head."

Kevin started moving, eyelids fluttering and legs twitching. He opened his mouth as if saying something, but it came out as a mumble.

Jo leaned closer. “Are you trying to tell us something? We’re here for you.”

“Thorne.” Kevin said the word clear as day, but Jo couldn’t tell if he was just having a bad dream or trying to communicate.

Sam’s eyes met Jo’s over the bed. “I’ve kept him up to date on what’s going on with Bascomb and Thorne’s case.”

“Don’t worry about Thorne, Kev. We’ll make sure he stays in jail,” Sam said, even though he knew that if the murder charges were dropped, he might not stay in jail for long. All they would have is the drug charges, and those didn’t bring as stiff a sentence as murder.

More eyelid fluttering. “’tel… corner.”

Jo looked up at Sam again, and he shrugged then put his hand on Kevin’s shoulder. “Just rest, buddy. Plenty of time for talking later.”

Kevin didn’t rest, though two of his fingers stroked the fur on Lucy’s head. Sam was encouraged.

“Lucy,” Kevin mumbled.

Lucy whined and nudged his hand for more petting.

“Loooshy... corner...” As if the effort of getting the words out had exhausted him, Kevin’s twitching stopped, and his hand stilled then slid from Lucy’s head.

Lucy nudged him again but got no response.

Sam had a momentary panic, but the monitors showed a strong heartbeat.

“He gets tired very easily.” The nurse had appeared in the doorway.

“So he’s not going backwards?” Jo’s eyes were glued to Kevin. “We didn’t hurt his progress, did we?”

“Not at all. It’s good for him to talk to people who care about him. His progress is encouraging, but I wouldn’t try to push.”

Sam took that as their cue to leave. They said good-bye, but there was no further communication from Kevin. At least he had talked and seemed to know who Lucy was. That was good progress. But did his attempt at communication have any meaning?

BACK AT THE STATION, Jo and Sam filled Wyatt and Reese in on Kevin's condition while Major watched them from atop the filing cabinet.

"So he'll make a full recovery?" Reese's expression brimmed with hopeful optimism.

"They aren't saying yet. But I think he recognized Lucy, so that's a good sign," Jo said.

"And he might have been trying to communicate a message."

"Really?" Reese asked.

"He said something about Thorne and a corner."

"What does that mean?" Wyatt asked.

"I have no idea. I've been keeping him up to date on the Thorne case though. Maybe he'll be able to communicate more to us later."

"Let's hope." Reese handed Sam a folder. "Gary from the Black Cat dropped these off."

Inside the folder were photocopies of the receipts from the afternoon the email was sent to Menda. Sam's hopes dimmed when a cursory glance showed mostly cash transactions.

"I got some hits on Ricky Webster." Wyatt turned the laptop around so they could see the screen as he briefed them on what he'd found. "Seems Mr. Webster was a suspect in a murder investigation of a young girl down in Pennsylvania several years ago."

"The grandmother mentioned something about that," Sam said. "And they both acted suspicious."

"It gets better. *That* victim was also found in a shallow grave."

"Just like Kirsten." Jo said.

"Right. Except Mr. Webster had an air-tight alibi for the Pennsylvania girl. He couldn't have killed her," Wyatt said.

Sam looked skeptical. "Really? There were no holes in the alibi? A cover-up? Seems like a very disturbing coincidence."

"I agree." Wyatt handed Sam some papers. "It seems legit, but I've printed everything out for you. Maybe you can find some anomaly."

"I don't like it," Jo said. "He was supposed to meet the victim. Claims she didn't show. No one saw her or him. His grandmother is his only alibi, and she's biased. Was she the alibi back then?"

Sam had been studying the papers and shook his head. "Nope. It was a church pastor. Ricky was a suspect because his mother's car was seen there, but turns out he was working with the pastor on a youth church project."

“His mother’s car?” Jo frowned. “Menda said something about the killer being a female. You don’t think Ricky and his mother…”

Wyatt shook his head. “Nope. His mother is dead.”

Sam didn’t look convinced. “I’m still suspicious, and with the email saying he might strike again, I think we need to keep a close eye on Mr. Webster.”

“We still have two of Kirsten’s friends to talk to as well. Maybe one of them will have seen Ricky with Kirsten.” Jo’s phone dinged, and she pulled it out to look at the screen. “That’s one of the friends now, Kaylee Summers. She wants to meet tonight.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kaylee hadn't seen Ricky with Kirsten, and she didn't have any more information than the others. Jo was starting to feel anxious about the case. They weren't making much progress, and each passing day lessened their chances of finding the killer.

There was one more friend to interview though. Maybe Vicky Thompson would have something they could act on. She messaged her again and got an immediate response. Tomorrow at noon would work fine.

Bridget was sitting on the porch steps of the cottage when Jo pulled in. She looked fresh in a yellow sundress as she snaked a piece of string to entice Pickles into play.

The kitten's eyes were glued to the string as it wriggled back and forth. He pounced, doing an awkward kitten leap. Grabbing the string out of Bridget's fingers, he rolled over, falling off the step then recovering quickly and shaking off the string.

The antics made Bridget laugh, which made Jo smile. It was the first time she'd heard her sister laugh like that since she'd been home.

"Hey there," Bridget said as Jo approached slowly so as not to scare the kitten off.

"I see things are progressing with our furry friend." Jo nodded toward Pickles.

"They are. He's great."

"He seems to have taken a liking to you."

Bridget shrugged as the kitten eyed Jo warily, backing away. "He still won't let me pet him, but I'm hopeful."

Pickles scampered off, and Jo sat on the steps next to her sister. “Nice night.”

“It sure is.” Bridget drew a deep breath. “I went into town today. The counselor suggested just doing normal things, so that seemed like a good way to start. I took an Uber.”

“That’s great!”

“I didn’t do anything major, just went to that little corner store. Got some bread and ingredients for lasagna, which is in the oven.”

“Seriously? I never knew you were such a good cook.”

Bridget shrugged. “I’m actually not, but in rehab, I took it up to keep my mind busy.” Bridget looked at Jo, her expression turning serious. “Plus I want to pay for my keep. I really appreciate you taking me in and caring about me all these years, and this is the only way I have to repay you.”

Jo squeezed her sister’s hand on an impulse, delighted that Bridget squeezed back. “It’s no trouble, really. I love having you here, and you don’t have to do anything to pay me back. We’re family and should share everything.”

“Thanks.” Bridget’s smile faltered slightly.

Jo got the impression there was something keeping her sister from being fully happy. It was as if something was holding her back, but before she could ask, a car pulled in.

The car belong to Holden Joyce.

“Wonder what he’s doing here,” Jo said.

“Who is it?”

“A friend from the FBI.” Except Holden wasn’t really a friend. Their only commonality was the cold case for the serial killer that took her sister. Holden had been involved in the case in his younger days, and he was looking for that person too. Had he found something?

Jo glanced at Bridget, nervous now. Was it time to tell Bridget about her investigation? Holden wouldn’t say anything in front of her, would he?

Thoughts of the investigation dredged up feelings of guilt at not filling Sam in sooner. There hadn’t been time or opportunity. All her files were here at the house. She couldn’t show them to Sam without Bridget knowing, and she didn’t want to cause some sort of setback for her sister.

Holden got out of his car, casting a wary glance at Bridget. “Hi. Is this a bad time? I didn’t realize you had company.”

“Holden Joyce, this is my sister, Bridget Harris.”

Bridget smiled at Holden. “Nice to meet you.”

“Same here.”

Maybe she sensed that Holden had some urgent and private business, or maybe she wasn’t comfortable around him. Whatever the reason, Bridget stood and brushed off the back of her dress. “I have to check on dinner. Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise.”

Jo listened for the door to shut then turned to Holden. “What’s up?”

“I stopped by the station. Wyatt told me about one of your leads. Ricky Webster.”

“The boyfriend. He’s a strong lead with a sketchy past.”

“I know. I remember that case back in Pennsylvania. I think it was about five years ago.”

Jo got a bad feeling. If Holden was bringing that up, it could have something to do with Tammy. “Was that case related to our killer?”

“Sort of. Not those cases, but I found a tentative link from that case to another case in Ohio that had the same beech tree markings our killer likes to use.”

“What are you saying? They knew each other, or that they are the same killer but changed the way they do things by not stripping the bark from the trees?”

“I don’t think it’s the same killer, but the connection is scary. They could have known each other.”

“Great, now I’m envisioning a ring of serial killers all comparing notes. What happened in the Ohio case?”

“Unsolved. Actually, the Pennsylvania one is unsolved too.”

“That only makes Ricky a more viable suspect.”

Holden nodded. “For Kirsten Stillwater’s murder, but not your sister. Ricky is too young.”

He had a point. Ricky was only in his mid to late twenties. He wouldn’t have been born yet when Tammy was taken. “Ricky lives with his grandmother. His mom is dead, but I wonder where his father is.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Maybe killing runs in the family.”

BRIDGET HELD the small flake of fish food over the water of the fish tank. Finn swirled below in a flash of gold, then swam up and grabbed the food. She hadn't meant to eavesdrop, but the presence of the FBI man made her nervous, and the subtle bubbling of the tank didn't drown out the voices outside.

Her first thought had been that he'd come for her. She'd done things in her past. Things she wasn't proud of. Things she could be prosecuted for. And she couldn't let that happen, not now when she'd finally gotten clean and had a fresh start in front of her. She didn't want Jo to lose faith in her. Right now, she had nowhere else to go.

Then she thought Holden might be Jo's boyfriend. Except she didn't picture Jo with Holden; she pictured her with Sam. They'd make a cute couple, and she could tell there was some chemistry there even though she was sure neither of them would admit it. She also sensed some tension between them, as if they had some unresolved issue. No idea what that was about, and it was none of her business.

Holden's visit hadn't been about her, and he wasn't Jo's boyfriend. The reason he was here was a total shock. He and Jo were looking into the abduction of her sister Tammy. She couldn't hear every word they'd said, but apparently they were working a case unofficially to find the person who had taken Tammy.

And if that was true, Bridget wanted in.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Sam stared at the octopus pet toy that lay unclaimed in the middle of the squad room. It was odd that neither Lucy or Major had it, but he had bigger things to worry about. They weren't making the progress he wanted on the case, and every minute brought them a minute closer to the killer grabbing someone else.

He was convinced that it was just a matter of time before this person struck again, and Sam was determined not to let him claim another victim on his watch. The safety of White Rock was his responsibility, and it weighed heavily.

The best lead he had was Ricky Webster, and his story was full of cracks. Sam needed to find the chisel that would wedge one of those cracks wide open and supply him with some hard proof. Unfortunately, he hadn't heard from Jo last night after she'd talked to Kaylee Summers. That likely meant that Kaylee hadn't provided anything useful.

Jo was due in any minute. Good time to get a coffee. He picked out his usual blue-and-white WRPD mug from the rack. Major was in his spot on top of the filing cabinet, just a little higher than eye level with Sam.

Sam met the cat's gaze as his coffee brewed. "So what's with the toy? Is this some kind of trick?"

Lucy snorted as if that was exactly what she was thinking too.

"Lucy is too smart for that." Sam turned back to the gurgle of the coffee machine.

"Mew." It was the most timid meow he'd ever heard. Turning back to the cat, he saw the usual malevolent glint in his chartreuse eyes. It was

probably a fake meow for the purpose of tricking Lucy into thinking the cat was timid and docile so she'd let her guard down over the toy.

Sam took a sip of coffee then turned to Lucy. "Don't fall for it, Lucy."

"What's going on?" Jo came around the side of the post office boxes. Her gaze fell on the toy. "Oh, I see. They're at a stalemate."

"We'll see who caves first. Coffee?" Sam gestured toward the coffee machine.

"Yes, please. I slept in late. Bridget's been feeding me too good." Jo put her notebook down on her desk as Sam put the yellow smiley mug she favored under the spout and pressed the button.

"So things are working out good with you two?" Sam handed her the mug, wondering when she would fill him in on Tammy's case. He understood her wanting to protect Bridget from that, but he thought maybe Bridget had a right to know. But they were busy on the current case and wouldn't be able to do any investigating anyway. Tammy's justice would have to wait a little longer.

"Yes, very good. She seems to be settling in." Jo took a sip, her gaze meeting Sam's. "I'm not sure if I should tell her about working on Tammy's case."

She was asking for his advice? Good, that meant things were getting back to normal between them. "You think she can handle it?"

Jo shrugged. "I'm not sure, but it seems wrong to not include her."

"I agree."

"Morning!" Reese came bounding in with a white bag from Brewed Awakening. Wyatt was right behind her.

They passed the bag around as Jo filled them in on her talk with Kaylee Summers.

"So we still don't have anyone that can place Kirsten with Ricky Webster, and even though his past is suspicious, he wasn't found guilty of anything." Reese stated the obvious.

"True, but I found something interesting out from Holden Joyce."

Sam frowned. When had Jo talked to Holden Joyce? Must have been last night, because he hadn't been here at the station. Maybe they were closer friends than she let on. "What's that?"

"He said that the case where Ricky Webster was accused had links to another case. An older one." Jo gave Sam a knowing look. Must be

something connected to her sister. As far as he knew, she hadn't told the others about her sister, so he didn't ask if it was connected.

Wyatt frowned as he chewed a chocolate-glazed cruller. "What's that mean? There's some kind of ring of serial killers, or just one killer that gets around a lot?"

Jo grimaced. "Hopefully not a ring, but maybe more than one acting together."

"Horrifying." Reese shivered.

"I'm not ready to rule Ricky Webster out. If he was a suspect in a previous case, they might have collected DNA. He has brown hair, and we need to compare that to the hair found on Kirsten's body."

Jo nibbled the edge of her lemon-filled donut. She usually preferred jelly, but Sam guessed they were out again. "We can't, though. Need justification for that, and we don't have any."

Reese cleared her throat. "I could have one of my contacts get a head start." As an attendee of the police academy, Reese had made lots of useful contacts, and not all of them thought it was important to go by the letter of the law. Sam didn't like to do that in general, but he'd found out long ago that serving justice sometimes necessitated breaking rules.

"It could work against us if he turns out to be the killer and someone finds out we did that without due cause," Sam cautioned.

Reese shrugged. "You know my friends are discreet."

"Okay. In the meantime, we need to talk to the other friend, Vicky Thompson. With any luck, she'll have seen Kirsten with Ricky."

"I'm one step ahead of you." Jo held up her phone. "I messaged her, and she can meet us on her lunch hour today."

VICKY THOMPSON WORKED at the one and only insurance agency in town, Liscomb Insurance. Jo had arranged to meet Vicky in the small park across the street from Liscomb's. Vicky was seated at a picnic table shaded by a huge canopy of leaves from the giant oak just behind it. Acorns dusted the ground near the trunk, and an industrious chipmunk foraged among them. The rustle of leaves and warm summer air gave it the feel of a picnic despite the grim purpose of their meeting.

The first thing Jo noticed about Vicky was her vibrant red hair. Given Menda's interpretation of the note, it set off alarm bells. She glanced at Sam. His jaw was tense, and she knew he was thinking the same.

"Hope you don't mind if I eat." Vicky held up the triangular half sandwich she'd been working on. Ham and cheese on white bread. "I only take a half hour."

"Not at all," Sam said.

Lucy gazed longingly at the sandwich.

"Hi, there. I've seen you around town." Vicky leaned over and put her hand out. Lucy sniffed it then glanced up at the sandwich in her other hand.

"That's not for you, Lucy." Jo called the dog back to her side.

Sam got right down to business. "Thanks for taking the time to talk to us. We're trying to piece together what Kirsten Stillwell did the night she was killed. Did you see her that night?"

Vicky's face turned sad, and she nodded. "Yeah, I talked to her for a bit, but I'm afraid I don't know much about what else she did. She was at the party, I saw her around the fire, but I can't really tell you anything specific. I wasn't paying much attention."

"Understandable. Do you remember seeing her with Ricky Webster?"

Vicky made a face. "I actually never met him, so I'm not sure what he looks like."

"Was she with someone you didn't know?" Jo asked.

Vicky took the last nibble of her sandwich and thought as she chewed. "I don't think so. I know pretty much everyone and don't remember anyone unfamiliar, but it's also hard to tell when it's dark with only the fire for light. Some people stand on the fringes, and you can't see who they are."

Jo pulled out her phone and scrolled to a picture of Ricky Webster she'd gotten from the internet. She showed it to Vicky. "Did you see this person at the party or with Kirsten?"

Vicky frowned at the picture. "He looks vaguely familiar, but I don't think so." Then her eyes grew wide, and she took in a breath. "Is that the guy who… who…"

"We're not sure who abducted Miss Stillwater," Jo said.

"But you think whoever did this was at the party, don't you?" Vicky put down the chip she was about to eat, her attention riveted on Sam and Jo for the answer.

“The party is the last place she was seen, and we can’t find anyone who saw her leave. We don’t know if the killer was there.” Sam pulled out his WRPD card with his number on it. “If you think of anything that might help, will you let us know?”

Vicky put the card down in front of her and picked up her phone. “Of course. I’ll put you in my contacts.”

“We might want you to look at some pictures later,” Sam said.

“Yes, any time.” Vicky held up the phone. “Okay. I have you in here, so if you call, I’ll be sure to pick up. I want to do anything I can to help.”

Lucy trotted over to Vicky at the distressed sound in her voice and nuzzled her hand. Vicky patted her, relaxing slightly, then looked up at Sam and Jo. “If Kirsten’s killer is running around out here, I wonder if it’s safe?”

“He might not still be here, or the killer might have targeted her for some specific reason. Someone with a grudge maybe.” Jo tried to reassure her. “Still, I’d be extra careful until the case is solved. No going to parties in the woods alone. Or maybe even at all.”

Vicky nodded, her gaze drifting over Jo’s shoulder, searching the area as if expecting the killer to suddenly appear. “Maybe I should do all my hanging out with friends earlier in the day before dark.”

“That might be a smart idea,” Sam said. “We’ll let you finish the rest of your lunch.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The day didn't get any better for Sam and Jo. Mayor Henley Jamison was waiting for them in the lobby of the station when they returned. He was feeding Major cat treats.

"Are you teaching him a trick?" Jo's expression was incredulous as she watched the cat sitting calmly in front of Henley as he tossed treats down.

"Nah. Cats don't do tricks." Jamison threw the last treat, and Major shot a look at Sam and Jo as if to say, "See, that's how it's done," then hissed at Lucy before trotting off to the squad room.

"Did you come here to feed the cat?" Sam asked.

"No. Something much worse. Bascomb is making a lot of noise about getting Thorne out of jail."

"He can't actually get him out, can he?" Sam asked. "I mean, the drug charges are still going to stand even if the murder charges don't hold up."

Jamison made a face. "Sure, but he can get out in a few years on those. Not to mention he's crying about wrongful arrest now, and that doesn't look good for the town."

Or for Jamison's reelection plans.

"What does Bascomb have that he thinks will clear Thorne? He mentioned the golf shoes, but they were tied directly to the crime, and those came from Thorne's wife." The warning pinch surfaced in Sam's solar plexus and had him questioning Beryl and her intentions again. Could she have done something to the shoes and Bascomb found out? She could have seen the picture of the holes in the tarp and modified the shoes. Or worse, what if they really weren't Thorne's shoes after all?

“I don’t know what he has, but we better make sure we dot our i’s and cross our t’s. If it turns out those shoes were obtained illegally or have been tampered with, it’s your butt on the line.” Jamison smoothed his yellow silk tie. “I need to be very careful about public perception right now. The election is next year, and trust me, you don’t want Marnie Wilson to win.”

Sam frowned. The way Jamison said it, it sounded like more than just his ego was at stake. Sam wondered just what Jamison thought Marnie would do if she became mayor, but he didn’t ask.

“I’ll see what I can find out,” Sam promised.

“Okay, see that you do.” Jamison left.

“Well, that was uplifting.” Jo glanced into the squad room. “He’s always full of happy thoughts. Major doesn’t like too many people. Weird he would pick Jamison.”

“Life is full of weird, and I’m afraid the day is about to get worse,” Reese, who was sitting behind the desk in the lobby, said.

Sam sighed. “Why?”

“I talked to my friend in forensics. They did have DNA on Ricky Webster. Unfortunately, the hair didn’t match.”

Sam’s spirits sank even lower. “Darn.”

“But that doesn’t necessarily mean he didn’t meet her. The hair could be from anyone she came in contact with, and maybe he just didn’t leave a hair,” Jo pointed out.

“Right, but it would have been more convenient if it *was* his. Then we’d have something solid on him,” Sam said.

“I’ve got something that might help,” Wyatt yelled from the squad room.

They all headed in. Lucy gave the filing cabinet a wide berth, glancing up to make sure her adversary’s position was known, much like Sam did when there was a confrontation with a suspect. After making sure Major was on the filing cabinet, she looked around for the toy. It was still in the middle of the room. She trotted over and sniffed, eliciting a hiss from Major.

“What have you got?” Sam asked Wyatt.

Wyatt had a pile of receipts on his desk. He tapped one. “This receipt is from The Black Cat Café, five minutes before the email that was sent to Menda.”

Sam frowned. “We’ve already determined that there are no credit cards to trace around that time.”

Wyatt nodded. “I know, and this might not help, but it lists out what they bought. A caramel latte and a cream horn.”

Sam’s heart jolted. He looked at Jo. Lots of people probably ate cream horns, but he knew for sure that Beryl often bought them at the Black Cat Café. Was it any coincidence that Beryl kept turning up all over this case? Maybe it was time Sam paid her another visit.

SAM MESSAGED BERYL FOR A MEETING, and she told him to come right to the construction trailer at the site of the hotel that Thorne had been building. She’d taken over operations there and was continuing with the project.

Sam took Lucy. They were both very familiar with the site, having visited Lucas Thorne there dozens of times. None of those visits had been pleasant, but maybe Beryl would be more welcoming.

The hotel was still less than halfway done. Honestly, Sam had hoped the whole project would be scrapped once Thorne was in jail. He hated the idea of a big modern hotel being built on what used to be farmland. Apparently Beryl didn’t mind the idea, though, because a small crew was at work on the steel beams. Mounds of dirt lay where they’d pushed it aside for the foundation. The sound of equipment spiced the air, drowning out the sounds of birds and crickets that used to be heard there.

Lucy trotted over to the corner of the building. There must be something good over there, because she’d done that a few times before when he’d visited Lucas.

“Lucy.” Sam didn’t want her to get hurt on a nail or piece of metal.

Lucy glanced back at him then started digging at the dirt.

Sam whistled. It wasn’t like her to not come when he called.

She jerked her head up, cast one last glance at the corner, and then trotted to him.

He bent down to pet her. “You stay away from that corner. Could be dangerous.”

The word “corner” jogged his memory. Hadn’t Kevin mentioned something about a corner?

“To what do I owe this pleasure?” Beryl Thorne appeared in the doorway of the trailer, a white hard hat on her head, her dark hair hanging in a ponytail in back. She wore jeans and a T-shirt and had large, scuffed tan work boots on her feet. Her smile seemed genuine, if not a bit confused.

“Morning.” Sam glanced over at the hotel. “The place is coming along. I guess you’ve been busy.”

Beryl came down the steps to him. Lucy, who normally greeted everyone, stayed rooted at Sam’s side, her attention wavering from the conversation to the construction.

“I have a lot of money invested in this business, so I’m taking over and running it my way.” She glanced at the site and smiled. “I have a few different ideas than Lucas.”

That was a good thing, at least. Sam hoped her ideas were more palatable than her husband’s. “Good.”

“You said you had a question in your message?” Beryl said.

“Right. Your uncle is really making a case to get your husband out of jail. I take it you aren’t keen on that.”

Beryl shook her head. “Not at all. What is my uncle doing? Is this about the shoes again?”

“He claims that he has evidence that will rule out the shoes. Those are our main physical evidence against Lucas.” If that were true, it would really put a damper on the case unless they could get someone to identify him and connect him to the victims, like Jo’s sister Bridget.

“I don’t know what he could be getting at about the shoes.” Beryl seemed disturbed, her eyes darting around the site. “I gave them straight to you from Lucas’s closet.”

“Could anyone else have been in your house and tampered with them?”

Beryl looked shocked. “Who would do that? Who would have even known about them being connected to the case?”

Sam shrugged. “Might not have been anyone who knew they could be evidence.” *Except the killer.* “Maybe it was just a coincidence. What about your brother? He and Lucas were close, and I’m sure he comes to your house.”

Beryl stiffened. “What about my brother?”

Sam smiled, trying to make it seem like just friendly conversation. He'd clearly struck a nerve at the mention of Robert, and he didn't want her to clam up. "You said they were friends. That's how you and Lucas met, right?"

She relaxed. "Yes. They've been friends for a long time. But I don't think my brother would be in Lucas's closet."

"Do they golf together?"

"They did... but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Maybe nothing. Just thinking out loud. Is your brother feeling better? I hope he enjoyed the cream horns."

"Huh? Oh right, I was buying some when we ran into each other at the Black Cat Café." Beryl clutched her clipboard to her chest. "He did enjoy them, and he is getting better. Thanks for asking."

"Better enough to get his own cream horns?"

"Why do you ask that? And no, he isn't well enough for that. He's staying at home for a few more weeks as far as I know." Beryl shuffled on her feet as if the questions made her nervous. Even Lucy picked up on it as she riveted her attention on Beryl, a faint woof escaping her lips.

"I see. You mentioned something about a family fishing cabin, and I wondered if he might be well enough for recreation. There's some big trout in that river. I fish it myself. Is the cabin near one of the good spots?"

"I'm not sure about the good spots. It's just past the pumping station near the big bend. Robert and my dad and Uncle Charlie all loved to fish, but I don't think Robert is quite well enough for that." Beryl's attention drifted to the men working on the hotel, and Sam followed her gaze, frowning when he recognized one of the men.

"Hey, is that Ricky Webster?"

Beryl turned to him. "Who?"

Sam pointed at the worker, who was turned slightly toward them. Today his dark hair was in a short ponytail and he had a hard hat and tool belt, but it was the same guy he and Jo had interviewed. "In the blue shirt. Ricky Webster."

Beryl shrugged. "I'm sorry, I couldn't say. Hank does all the hiring and oversees the workers."

"Of course."

"Now if there's nothing else, I need to get to work." Beryl looked at him expectantly.

"Nope, nothing else." Sam watched her walk away. Things were starting to come together. Beryl had acted nervous at his questions. She was the key to those golf shoes, and was it any coincidence that his main suspect for the murder of Kirsten Stillwater was working at Beryl's construction site? Joseph Menda's words about female serial killers and Jo's theory about serial killer teams came to mind.

As Sam headed to the Tahoe, his thoughts became more disturbing and confusing. Beryl's reaction to his questions, the cream horns, the family cabin.

It was time to get some answers straight from the source. It was time to pay a visit to Lucas Thorne.

BACK AT THE STATION, Sam went straight to Wyatt's desk. "I want to put surveillance on Robert Summers."

Wyatt frowned. "Beryl Thorne's brother?"

"Yep. Something isn't right there. I just came from talking to Beryl, and she seemed nervous whenever I mentioned her brother. Plus…" Sam tapped the receipts still on Wyatt's desk. "He has an affinity for cream horns."

Wyatt leaned back in his chair. "I can park outside the driveway. I know a spot I can pull off in the woods and not be seen. But that mansion is pretty big, and if someone really wants to go somewhere, they don't have to go out the front."

"But if someone doesn't know we are watching, they'll go right out the front. Besides, there's only one driveway, so if they take a car, you'll spot them."

Wyatt sat forward. "Okay. You got it."

A hiss drew their attention to the area near the coffee machine. Lucy had dared to sniff at the toy, and Major must have taken exception. He jumped down from the top of the filing cabinet in one graceful leap, landing on his feet, then grabbed the toy up in his mouth and ran off to Sam's office. Lucy turned disappointed eyes on Sam.

"Sorry, buddy."

Jo shook her head and came to Wyatt's desk. "I wish those two would iron out their differences." She turned to Sam. "You really think the killer

could be the brother?”

“I don’t know. Beryl is evasive about him, but he must really be sick, because he hasn’t been at Mervale. She seems to be awfully nervous lately.”

“Maybe that’s just because her husband is a murdering drug dealer and she is afraid he’ll kill her if he gets out of jail. Especially since she’s the one that gave a piece of damning evidence to the police.”

“Could be. I’m just covering some bases. Speaking of which, the next base is to talk to Thorne himself. You in?” Sam asked.

“Are you kidding? When do we leave?”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

They left Lucy at the station since dogs weren't allowed in the prison, and she seemed keen to wait for Major to go to sleep so she could steal the toy. Jo had seen her do this before. Major snored in his sleep, so it was easy to tell that he was in deep. Lucy would simply sneak in and gently paw the toy away. It was a bold move on Lucy's part, because Major woke up easily, and if she got caught, the resulting clawing might not be pretty.

In the car, Jo turned to Sam. "What do you expect to get from Thorne?"

Sam shrugged. "Not sure. I'd like to try to feel him out on Beryl, find out if she could be involved in any of this. And find out what Bascomb is doing with those shoes."

"Jamison seemed to think Bascomb had something important. Maybe we should try to find more on Thorne."

"Like what?"

"An eyewitness."

Sam turned to Jo. "Are you sure?"

Jo looked out the window at the thick forest passing them. She wasn't entirely sure, but she also didn't want Thorne to get out of jail prematurely.

"Bridget is stronger now and seems more settled. I can feel her out. I also want to tell her about my research into our sister's case." Jo paused, trying to get a read on Sam's feelings about that. With everything going on, she hadn't had a chance to bring him up to speed on the case, and things still seemed a little strained between them. Maybe he didn't even want to help her with it.

"Seems like she should know," Sam said.

“I was hoping I could fill you both in at the same time.” Jo nervously awaited his answer. The longer he didn’t say anything, the more nervous she felt.

She turned to look at him, and he smiled. “That would be great. I want to help you out, though we don’t have any bandwidth right now.”

“I know. We need to catch Kirsten’s killer first. And make sure Thorne doesn’t get off on some technicality about those shoes.” Jo took a deep breath, her nerves about Sam settled. “Bridget placing Thorne with the victims will help.”

“That would be great, though it doesn’t help us now. Thorne didn’t kill Kirsten Stillwater or write that last note to Menda.”

“But he could have killed those girls five years ago. We might just have a copycat. Wouldn’t be the first serial killer copycat—I’ve found several cases in my research.”

“And let’s not forget about Ricky Webster. There’s something suspicious about that story, *and* he works at the Thorne construction site.”

“That is a strange coincidence.”

Sam nodded as he turned into the prison parking lot. “Lots of strange coincidences in this case. Let’s see if Thorne can clear some of them up.”

LUCAS THORNE WAS NOT happy to see Sam and Jo.

“What do you want? Going to make up some more charges against me?” He glared at them from across the stainless steel table in the visiting room.

“Nah, don’t need to. You’ve done plenty.”

Thorne turned smug. “You won’t be singing that tune for long. Some of your evidence is tainted, and soon you’re going to be the one in here and I’ll be out where you are.”

Jo snorted. “I doubt that. We got the evidence from a very reliable source.”

“You mean my wife?” Thorne laughed then looked at Sam. “I suppose you bought her innocent act. Most guys do.”

“What’s that mean?” Sam asked.

Jo wondered too. Mostly about if Sam had bought Beryl’s act.

Thorne leaned across the table, his eyes full of hate. “She’s no angel. She’s done things. Things that would make me look like a Boy Scout.”

“What kinds of things?” Jo asked.

Thorne leaned back in his chair, looking satisfied that he’d piqued their interest. “She’s ruthless. Cutthroat. Doesn’t let anything stand in her way. She gets what she wants, so if I were you, Mason, I’d be careful.”

Jo glanced at Sam, who simply cleared his throat.

Thorne nodded. “Yeah, at first, that ruthlessness was what I liked about her. Turns out she’s a traitor.”

“You’re no angel either,” Sam said. “In fact, your troubles go way back even to when you were a kid. Troubles that started your affinity for murder.”

Thorne made a face. “What are you talking about?”

Now Sam was the one who looked smug. “Being the police, we can get a glimpse into sealed records if the situation warrants it. And murdering five women definitely warrants it.”

Thorne shook his head. “Still not following you.”

“Seems like there was an incident where you killed a pet. That’s the first step many serial killers take,” Sam said.

“I didn’t kill any pet. Is this another of your trumped-up charges?”

“No. It happened in your younger days when you were a juvenile delinquent with your brother-in-law, Robert.”

Jo admired how Sam had deftly turned the conversation to Robert and put Thorne on the defensive. Robert was one of their suspects, and this could be a good way to get Thorne to give up some information on him without even realizing he was doing it. They could kill two birds with one stone—find out more about what Bascomb had up his sleeve with the golf shoes and get the scoop on Robert Summers.

Thorne laughed, but there was no mirth, only evil. “You think I killed that pet? That wasn’t me, that was Robert. He always did have a mean streak.”

JO’S INSTINCTS told her that Thorne was telling the truth about Robert being the one who killed the pet. Considering that and all the other things

that had come up, not the least of which was Bascomb and Thorne's claims about the golf shoes, she was starting to worry that maybe Thorne hadn't killed those five girls after all.

"Maybe we should be looking at Robert Summers more carefully," Jo said as they exited the visiting area. "Sending Wyatt to watch the house was a good idea."

Sam glanced sideways at her and said sarcastically, "Gee, thanks."

Jo's laugh earned a genuine smile. "I guess that did sound a little condescending, but I'm a bit off-kilter now, because if Robert Summers is involved in Kirsten's death, then maybe he was involved in the deaths five years ago."

"Yeah, I know."

They lapsed into silence as they exited to the lobby, where they ran into Sheriff Bev Hatch.

"Hey, how are you guys?" Bev smiled at Jo and Sam. "You must be happy about the news."

"News?" Jo looked at Sam. She hadn't heard any news to be happy about.

"You didn't hear?" Bev looked pleased to be the one to tell them. "Looks like Bascomb didn't get a win with those golf shoes. He submitted them to an independent lab to find alternative DNA, but turns out Thorne's is the only one on there, including a smudge of blood that matches."

"That's great news." Jo was relieved but now confused, given what Thorne had said about Robert. Maybe he was lying. Probably was. He wouldn't be the first pathological liar that didn't exhibit nervousness when not telling the truth. Especially when it came to something that lent itself to their own survival.

"So the shoes *are* Thorne's?" Sam asked.

Bev nodded.

"Bascomb must be mad about that. I wonder what else he has up his sleeve."

Bev shrugged and headed toward the inner door. "Who knows. I'm just glad we got over this hurdle. Thorne is exactly where he belongs, and I don't want him getting out."

Sam and Jo continued to the Tahoe in silence.

"This is good news but doesn't help with our current case," Sam said.

"True, but maybe we can get Bridget to identify Thorne before Bascomb comes up with something else. At least that will be another nail in his coffin."

"It might be smart to show Bridget the picture of Robert just in case."

Jo thought about Thorne's words again. Robert had killed the pet. Killing pets was often the first step before serial killers turned to killing people. "We might as well, because even if Thorne did kill those girls five years ago, he can't possibly be the one that killed Kirsten Stillwater. That person is still out there."

APPARENTLY BRIDGET HAD MADE further progress with the cat, as evidenced by the fact that it was sitting beside her and submitting to being petted when Jo pulled into the driveway that night. Pickles looked warily at Jo as she approached. He must have decided that she was okay, because after a few minutes, he came over and rubbed his face on her ankle.

"Wow, he's really coming around. Kind of reminds me of our first cat when we were kids," Jo said as Pickles trotted off to the woods.

"You remember? I loved that cat." Bridget stood and brushed off the seat of her pants. "I put a cat bed in the box and some food. Maybe he'll come back to stay on the porch tonight."

"That would be great." Jo turned her attention to her sister. She looked happy. At ease. And since she'd brought up their childhood—"I have something to tell you. It's about Tammy."

Bridget didn't appear to be the least bit disturbed or surprised at the revelation. "Have you been investigating it?"

"Yes." How had she guessed that? Had she seen something in the house? Jo thought she'd locked everything in her armoire. Though maybe it wasn't a big stretch for her to guess that her cop sister was investigating their other sister's unsolved abduction case.

"Makes sense. So what have you found?"

Jo blew out a breath, suddenly disappointed that she didn't have more to tell her sister. "Unfortunately, not much. I just started working with Holden Joyce on it, and Sam said he would help." She glanced at Bridget. "It's not really an official case, so it all has to be done on the side."

“I understand. I won’t say a word. But that’s good, because it means I can help out, right?”

Could she? She didn’t want Bridget to be put in any danger, but she owed it to her sister to let her help. If Bridget felt anything like she did about their sister’s disappearance, then she couldn’t deny her that. “Sure. I’ll show you everything I have. Do you mind if I show Sam at the same time?”

“Not at all. I like him.”

“You might be able to help out on another case too.” Jo studied Bridget for any sign of hesitation or wariness about getting involved in a case, but all she saw was curiosity and eagerness.

“Really? How?”

Jo told her about the Thorne case and how he might be the person she’d seen with Amber. “If you could identify him, that would prove he knew the victim and could help keep him in jail.”

“Sure, I’ll do that. No problem.” Bridget wrapped her arms around her waist. “If he killed people, then I’ll do whatever I can to see he gets punished for it.”

“It won’t bring up bad memories or anything?” Jo was still hesitant. She wanted Bridget to look forward, not slide backwards. She’d never forgive herself if showing her pictures of Thorne made her get back on drugs.

Bridget touched her arm. “Don’t worry about that. I’m going to all my meetings and have no desire to get back into drugs. I’ve worked too hard.”

“Good. Then maybe you could stop by the station tomorrow.”

“I have a meeting in the afternoon and could stop by after?”

“Perfect.”

“Oh! I almost forgot about dinner!” Bridget turned and hurried up the porch steps. “It’s almost ready.”

“You made dinner again?”

“Yeah, of course. It’s good therapy. Tonight is roast chicken.”

Jo followed her in, happy at the prospect of a hot meal. Usually she just made a sandwich or ate crackers. Having Bridget live with her definitely had benefits.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The next morning, Jo, Reese, Wyatt, and Sam stood in front of the corkboard in Sam's office. Various bits of information on the case were tacked to the board, along with pictures of Beryl Thorne, Ricky Webster, and Robert Summers.

Lucy lay in the puddle of sun that streamed in from the tall windows. Major had retreated to Sam's closet. The toy was nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they were both taking the day off from battling over it.

"I dug into that previous case that Ricky Webster was indicated in. There was some question about a car at the scene of the crime. The car was his father's, but the father couldn't have driven it there because he was sick in the hospital," Reese said.

Jo turned to Reese hopefully. "So Ricky was at the scene?"

Reese shook her head. "His alibi was solid."

"Maybe another family member took it?" Wyatt suggested.

"Or the father wasn't as sick as they thought." Sam turned from the corkboard. "We should talk to him. Hopefully he's not as mean as the grandmother."

"Can't," Reese said. "The father died last year."

"So Ricky was cleared in that case, but his alibi for this one is flimsy. Could be Ricky isn't the only Webster who likes to kill," Sam mused.

"You mean like a family of killers?" Reese looked both disgusted and intrigued.

"Wouldn't be the first time," Jo said. "Though it is rare."

“Just because someone in his family might have killed the person back then doesn’t mean Ricky killed Kirsten. It’s not fair to assume that,” Wyatt said.

They all turned to him. It wasn’t what he’d said but the way he’d said it. Clearly he felt strongly about people making assumptions based on what a person’s relations had done. It was unusual, because Wyatt was typically pretty low-key. Did he have a past that they didn’t know about?

“You sound pretty heated about that,” Reese said.

Wyatt blushed. “Oh, sorry. It’s just that happened in another case I investigated, really got me mad.”

Sam cleared his throat. “Wyatt has a point. We can’t assume Ricky and his family are killers just because of an unsolved case and a coincidental location of a parked car.”

“We can’t cut him any slack either.” Jo glanced at the corkboard. “Though that hair found on Kirsten does bother me, and we know it didn’t match Ricky. Then again, his story is shaky, he was the last person that was supposed to be with Kirsten, and he works for Thorne Industries.”

“And let’s not forget how Beryl Thorne and her brother Robert keep cropping up in this case. Robert didn’t leave the house yesterday, and no one came in either,” Wyatt said. “But I wonder, just how sick is her brother, anyway, and what is he sick with?”

“And what was he doing five years ago when those other girls were murdered?” Jo stared at the picture of Robert Summers. He looked happy, jovial even, but she knew that even the most evil serial killer could look like a happy-go-lucky guy. Ted Bundy had charmed many of his victims.

“Good question. If Thorne’s story about Robert killing the pet is true, we should do some research.” Sam turned to look over his shoulder at Reese.

“I’m on it!” Reese left the room.

“Wyatt, I’d like you to watch the Summers house again today. I’m going to call Bev Hatch and see if she can spare us a man to put a tail on Ricky Webster,” Sam said.

Sam punched Bev’s number into his phone. They had a good working relationship, and if things weren’t too busy for the county sheriff, she’d lend an officer to him.

“Hey, Sam, please tell me you don’t have another victim.” Bev’s voice was wary.

“No. Nothing like that, thankfully. But that is kind of why I’m calling. You might be able to help us prevent another one.”

“How so?”

Sam brought her up to speed on the case and asked if she had a spare officer that could keep a tail on Ricky. “If Kirsten Stillwater’s death was the work of a serial killer, we think he may strike again soon. If it was some sort of argument or lovers’ quarrel, then we might get lucky and catch Ricky hiding evidence or doing something suspicious. Either way, I think it’s a good idea to keep an eye on him.”

“Just so happens it’s a slow time. Give me the address, and I’ll send someone,” Bev said. “I hear Thorne is pissed about the shoe DNA. Claims someone planted that DNA and it was all a setup, and he’s yelling about police corruption. You’ll have your hands full juggling that as well as looking for a killer.”

Sam sighed. “Any word on what, exactly, Bascomb has up his sleeve next?”

“I heard he’s lying low. The DNA was a blow to his ego. He was positive it would prove his client’s innocence, even though we’d gone over that evidence thoroughly.”

“Great. I can’t wait to see his next act.”

Bev snorted. “No kidding. Okay, give me the Webster address, and I’ll get someone right on it.”

Sam gave her the address and hung up. Lucy must have sensed things were about to roll, because she stood and stretched then came over to stand between Sam and Jo, looking bright-eyed and wagging her tail as if to indicate she was ready.

“Speaking of Thorne, Bridget is coming down today to look at a picture and see if she can identify him as the person who was with Amber before she disappeared.”

“That will help with that case. Now we just need something to break with the Stillwater case.”

“At least the killer hasn’t nabbed anyone else. Maybe her death was personal, and there won’t be any more killing.”

“Or maybe the killer is just waiting for the perfect moment to grab his next victim.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

D*ing!*

The killer's computer chimed, and he looked to see a reply from Vicky to Carly about their new meeting time.

Perfect!

The killer sat back and smiled at the screen. As usual, he'd overcome the little glitch in his plans. His Vicky—that's what he'd come to think of her as now, *his*—had moved her plans with Carly up to three in the afternoon.

No problem.

He'd just have to hack Carly's account and message Vicky to move the meeting up an hour. That would give him plenty of time to grab her before Carly arrived.

At first he'd been disappointed when Vicky had changed the time from evening to earlier in the afternoon, but now he realized this time was even better. Vicky had told Carly she wanted to change the time because she'd been afraid of Kirsten's killer and didn't want to be out after dark.

Everyone else was probably thinking that way too. No one would be expecting him to grab someone in broad daylight, including the police. The killer had contacts, and from what he had heard, the cops were ramping up their investigation.

Oh well, he could hardly expect them not to. But he was smarter than the cops on the case. He'd proven that years ago. And now that things had been fixed so Thorne would be in jail forever, they would be totally

confused about any evidence on these murders that matched evidence from five years ago.

Now, to fix things so Carly never suspected she'd been hacked. This part was important, because he didn't want them to figure out the message was actually spoofed and trace it back to this computer's IP address. He was confident he could cover his tracks; otherwise he'd have used the computers at that café like he always did to send emails that he didn't want traced.

Now all he had to do was go to the meeting spot ahead of time and pretend to have car trouble. The van was already loaded up with everything he needed. When beautiful Vicky got curious, he'd grab her and bring her to the woods.

He rubbed his hands together in anticipation. He could hardly wait until three o'clock.

SAM WAS ANXIOUS. He should be doing something. But what? He had his suspects being watched, but were Ricky and Robert really *all* the suspects?

Beryl came to mind. She'd come to his cabin with the beer and acted nervous. She was taking over Thorne Enterprises. Thorne had said she was dangerous. But she couldn't be the killer, could she? She was small. Would she have been able to overpower Kirsten? She'd have the element of surprise, and if she were able to incapacitate someone right off the bat, maybe she could have done it.

Could she have also messed with the golf shoes to keep her husband in jail? They hadn't found any of his DNA when Sam had originally submitted the shoes. In fact, it had been unusual that they hadn't. They'd been wiped clean, but Beryl had suggested that Thorne always cleaned his shoes at the end of the season.

Bascomb had claimed someone planted the DNA. Corruption was everywhere—could Beryl have paid someone off? She would have had plenty of access to shoes and other items that Thorne had worn from which she could get his epithelial cells. Maybe even samples of his blood.

Not for the first time, Sam wondered if they really had pinned the murders of those girls on the wrong person.

He could have someone watch Beryl, too, but he was out of people. He and Jo were the only ones left.

It was still early, not even noon. He'd think about that and come to a decision before dark. His instincts told him something was going to happen sooner rather than later, and tonight might be the night.

In the meantime, he needed some downtime away from the case to let his subconscious marinate on the clues. While he was doing that, he had a question for Kevin that needed to be answered.

Hillcrest had left a message that Kevin was regaining spurts of consciousness, and Sam wanted to check on him. He glanced at the corkboard as if committing it to memory then turned to Lucy. "What do you say? Want to visit Kevin?"

At the sound of Kevin's name, Lucy leapt up from her spot and trotted over.

SAM AND LUCY had great timing and arrived during one of Kevin's "awake" moments. His eyes fluttered open as they approached the bed.

"You're awake?" Sam asked softly.

"Little bit." Kevin sounded groggy, his eyes unfocused. The nurse had told Sam on the way in that Kevin was in and out, resurfacing like a diver coming up for air but then going back down into the depths when he got tired.

Sam touched his shoulder lightly. "It's good to have you back."

Kevin smiled, his lids drifting closed. "Good to be back." His voice was barely above a whisper.

Lucy huffed and pushed her nose into Kevin's hand. His eyes flew open, and he smiled, his hand seeking the top of her head. "How you doing, girl?"

Lucy made a sympathetic whine.

"She's great. I think she misses you." Sam could tell Kevin was about to drift off again. Better ask him now. "Last time I was here, you mentioned something about a corner."

Lucy's ears perked straight up.

Kevin frowned. “I did?”

“Yes, seemed urgent. What was that about?”

Lucy had picked her head up, her watchful brown eyes flicking from Sam to Kevin and back again as if she knew what this was about.

Kevin’s frown deepened. “I don’t know. My memory, it’s fuzzy. But now that you mention it, it does seem important. I just don’t know why.”

Lucy woofed softly and swished her tail back and forth.

“I think Lucy might think so too.”

Kevin nodded, his eyes closed. “I think so.”

“Maybe you’ll remember later.” Sam didn’t want to press him and risk ruining his recovery.

Kevin didn’t answer as he fell into a deep sleep. Sam left, wondering if the word “corner” really had any significance at all or if it was just a meaningless word Kevin’s brain had conjured up during it’s recovery.

CHAPTER THIRTY

"Good news!" Sam announced as he and Lucy walked into the squad room. "Kevin is awake and talking."

The news lured Reese in from the reception area. "He is? That's great!"

"I think Lucy might have had something to do with it." Sam reached down to ruffle her fur before heading to the K-Cup machine.

"Lucy has that way about her," Jo said. "I was afraid for a while he might not come out of the coma. What did he say?"

"Not much." Sam leaned against the table and blew on the top of his coffee. "The nurse said he's in and out, but it's an improvement."

Sam didn't mention the bit about the corner. He wasn't sure if it actually meant anything. Lucy was looking up at him with a slight wrinkle in her brow as if thinking about the corner, too, and wondering why he didn't mention it.

"I dug into the Summers family and discovered something that might be of interest." Reese's words tugged Sam from his thoughts.

"Oh?"

Reese held up a printout of a man holding a large trout. Though it was black and white, Sam could tell it was a nice rainbow, probably over six pounds. He'd caught some that big himself in the river. "Is that Robert Summers?"

Reese nodded. "Says here he caught this seven-pound trout and broke a record."

"Must have been before he got sick," Jo said.

“Way before,” Reese said. “In fact, it was five years ago, right about when those girls were killed.”

“Where is that?” Jo asked.

Reese glanced at the article. “Says it’s a family fishing cabin right here on the river in White Rock. He was there with his father and uncle.”

“Beryl mentioned they had a cabin here in town, but I’m not sure that proves much. Robert Summers lives here, so it’s not a big revelation that he was here during the time those girls were killed.”

“No,” Jo agreed. “But it does prove he wasn’t sick. He’d be physically capable of grabbing a girl and killing her.”

Sam thought while he sipped the coffee. “I wonder if we could tie him to the drug ring somehow. He and Thorne were buddies. Maybe he’s been involved all along, and we were so focused on Thorne we never looked any closer.”

“Bridget is stopping by in a little while. We could show her this picture along with Thorne’s to see if she recognizes either one of them,” Jo said. “But Robert’s too sick to have killed Kirsten, so we’re back at square one.”

“So Beryl says,” Sam said.

Reese sighed. “I hope we find the killer soon, but I also want Thorne to be tied up in this somehow. I don’t want him to get out of jail.”

Jo grabbed her phone off the desk. “I’m going to call Vicky and see if she can come in too. We only showed her photos of Ricky Webster. We should show her Robert just in case. Maybe she saw him at the party or with Kirsten some other time. It’s a long shot but worth a try.”

She pressed the contact and held the phone to her ear, tapping her foot as she waited. After a few minutes, she made a face. “No answer. She might be busy working. I’ll text.”

Sam frowned. Vicky had said she’d be available for their call. “It’s only three. She’s probably still working. Maybe Sal doesn’t allow her to talk or text during work hours. Let’s give him a call and see if he’ll make an exception and let her talk to us.”

Jo did as instructed, her face darkening as she listened to Sal’s answer. “He said she already left for the day.”

Sam got a bad feeling. “Maybe she’s driving and can’t answer?”

“Do you think so?” Reese’s worried gaze flicked from Sam to Jo. “Doesn’t seem likely to me. What young person doesn’t have hands-free calling these days?”

THE KILLER TRIED to maintain the speed limit. It wouldn't do to get pulled over now, especially not by the annoying Chief Mason.

It was almost comical how easy it had been to pull the wool over the eyes of the White Rock police. Apparently, they weren't the smartest group of cops. They'd been wrong about the identity of the killer five years ago, and with a little bit of clever manipulation, they could be fooled into being wrong about the killer now too.

Too bad Lucas was in jail. He'd be perfect to pin this on.

Oh well, Lucas staying in jail worked for the killer too. The killer had another sucker he could use as a scapegoat, and that person would provide extra insurance in case Lucas really did get cleared.

It had been ridiculously easy to grab Vicky. She'd agreed so readily to change the time, never once suspecting it wasn't even Carly that had messaged her.

All it had taken was pretending the killer had hit an animal. Young women were always so easily fooled by that one, or so the killer had found over the years.

Vicky had eagerly rushed to the side of the van to see if she could help the poor animal. A little bit of chloroform on a rag and some strong hands, and she was out like a light. Shoving her in the van had been easy, and now the killer drove with eager anticipation of getting to work on her. He glanced in the rearview mirror to make sure she was still in the back, the sight of her orange corkscrew curls bringing new waves of excited anticipation.

Soon the killer would have her in his special place and could get to work.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

"Vicky Thompson still hasn't answered your text?" The look of alarm on Sam's face ratcheted Jo's anxiety up a notch.

She glanced at her phone again even though it hadn't pinged. "Nope."

They'd decided to give Vicky twenty minutes in case she was busy. Maybe she was in the shower or didn't have Bluetooth. They were sitting in the bullpen, Sam at the old desk that used to be Kevin's and Jo at her own. He leaned out so he could be heard in the reception area. "Reese, have you heard anything from Wyatt?"

"Not in the last hour." Reese's voice came back along with the crinkling of a bag of chips. "You want me to raise him on the dispatch system?"

"No." Sam pulled his phone out. "I hate that thing. I'll just call."

Wyatt picked up on the second ring. "No movement so far. He's sitting tight in the house."

"How do you know he's in there?"

"Saw him go outside with some birdseed. Maybe filling a feeder in back. Came out a side door and went back in a few minutes later."

Sam relaxed slightly. If Robert was the killer, then he wouldn't have Vicky stashed while he casually strolled outside to fill bird feeders. Vicky was probably just busy or didn't have her phone handy. Maybe she was one of those people that always forgot to recharge their phone.

"Sounds like something's up," Wyatt said as if he could read the worry in Sam's silence.

Sam filled him in on their conversation with Vicky and how she had promised to answer. “She has red hair, so I’m a bit worried.”

“We can ping her cell phone and see if we can get a location,” Wyatt offered. “You have the number?”

Sam gave it to him.

“Okay, I have my laptop here and will do a trace. I’ll call you back.”

Bridget came in as Sam hung up.

“Hi, how are you, Chief Mason?” Bridget asked.

“Good. You?” Bridget looked relaxed today. The lines of stress he’d seen on her face the other night were gone. Living with Jo must be good for her. Hopefully looking at photos of her friend’s abductor wouldn’t set her back.

“Great.” She turned to Jo, who had come out from behind her desk. “You wanted me to look at a picture of someone to see if I recognize him?”

“Yes, two people actually.” Jo grabbed the pictures they’d printed earlier then turned back to Bridget, concern on her face. “If you’re sure you’re up to this.”

“Yes, definitely.” Bridget nodded.

“Okay.” Jo placed the pictures on her desk, and Bridget bent over to look at them. “No. Neither of these are the guy. Not unless he’s changed a lot.”

“Are you sure?” Sam tried to keep the disappointment out of his voice. He was hoping an eyewitness would go a long way to placing either of the men with the victims.

“Yes. Very sure.” Bridget didn’t waffle, so Sam felt she was confident about neither Thorne nor Robert being the man Amber was seen with. If she had identified Thorne, that would have been good for the case against him, but just because she hadn’t didn’t mean that Thorne wasn’t the killer. Amber could have gone off with a different man and ended up as one of Thorne’s victims.

Sam’s phone rang. Wyatt.

“I’ve located Vicky’s phone. It’s on Route 73, along the river. Probably one of those picnic areas. Looks like it’s stationary, so you might want to try her again.”

“Okay, thanks.” Sam hung up and turned to Jo. “Still no answer or call back from Vicky?”

“Nope.”

“Wyatt located her phone near one of the picnic areas on Route 73. Those places are pretty isolated. I think we need to head out there. If she’s not answering, she could be in trouble.”

ROBERT SUMMERS SMILED as he watched the colorful goldfinches and house wrens flock around the feeder. He was feeling much better. His medicine was starting to work, and he was coming out of the fog. That promised bright days, and maybe he could even go back to work at the family business.

But with his new clarity came a niggling sensation, a drive to do *something*. Something he had little control of.

His sister’s visit and the talk about golfing had triggered it. What was that about? Come to think of it, he hadn’t golfed in ages... maybe he should take it up again. But where was his golfing stuff anyway?

He went upstairs, taking the wide curving staircase easily where just a few days ago it had taken all of his energy to climb.

His mother was on a trip to Europe, and she’d let him use one of the many bedroom suites on the second floor of the mansion while he recovered. The blue suite, they called it. He stored his off-season things in this room. His golf attire would be in the closet.

The closet was a spacious walk-in, neatly arranged. Robert liked things to be organized just so. His quirk for neatness had driven his ex-wife crazy, among other things. His golf bag sat in the corner, a little dusty but all the clubs cleaned and in good condition. A basket of golf balls lay next to it. But where were his golf shoes?

He rummaged around in the shoe rack but couldn’t find them. The longer he looked, the worse the sinking sensation in his stomach became. Memories and urges started to bubble up. None of them good.

The cabin....

He rushed down to the library. His father had kept all the information about the cabin there. The deed, family pictures, and even a few of the taxidermy fish they’d caught hung on the walls. And, of course, the video feed so they could check on it from the house.

He tapped on the laptop that sat on the desk. Though his father was gone now, they kept the laptop here with the surveillance system feeds from the front of the house, their business, and other properties.

Funny thing, the video feeds for the cabin were black, as if something had happened to the cameras. Maybe a tree had fallen? When was the last time they'd checked the cabin? But hadn't someone mentioned the cabin recently? Beryl?

He glanced at the hook partially hidden inside the deep bottom drawer where the key hung. It was empty.

Was someone at the cabin?

Memories flooded his brain. Horrible memories. Suddenly, he knew what he had to do.

He ran for the car.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

A white Toyota Camry sat in the parking lot of the small wooded picnic area beside the river. Its driver-side door gaped open. No one could be seen in or around the car.

Sam and Jo approached the car cautiously with their guns drawn, anyway.

Lucy wasn't as cautious. She ran to the other side then back to Sam and Jo. No one was there, either in the car or on the ground.

"I don't like the looks of this." Jo holstered her gun and squinted into the forest, looking for any sign of Vicky. Maybe she'd just seen a stray dog or cat and wandered into the woods. All Jo saw were chirping birds and chipmunks scurrying amongst the dead leaves.

"Me, either." Sam inspected the area for anything out of the ordinary. Over by a rock, Lucy whined. Sam went over to see fresh tire tracks in a small patch of dried mud.

"Looks like a car pulled over here recently. It must have been within the last hour, because the mud hasn't fully dried. Someone must have spilled some water, or maybe it's condensation from the AC running in the car." Sam took a picture with his cell phone.

Jo went back to the car and looked in the back. A black leather purse sat on the floor. Jo put on a glove then looked inside, her heart sinking when the name on the license confirmed what Jo already knew.

She held the license up for Sam to see "It's Vicky's car. Someone must have grabbed her somehow. No one leaves their purse in a car and the door open."

She held the purse out for Lucy to sniff. “Lucy. Find.”

Lucy trotted off, sniffing the edges of the area near the woods. If the killer had taken Vicky from her car into the woods here, Lucy would find the trail. Maybe they could catch him before... Jo didn’t want to finish the thought.

“She might have been lured into the woods.” Sam watched Lucy as she sniffed in a circular pattern, returning to the car then following a trail straight to the tire track. She stopped there and looked at them.

“Or lured her into another car somehow.” Jo’s spirits sank. If the killer had taken her into the woods here on foot, it would be a lot easier to catch up to them. But if he had lured her into a car… they could be anywhere by now.

Sam’s phone trilled. “It’s Wyatt.”

He put it on speaker.

“Robert Summers is on the move. Heading east out of town. I’m following but got caught up in traffic because Bullwinkle decided to lumber out into the middle of the road. Robert just turned onto Old River Road, but I can’t get there.”

Sam, Jo, and Lucy sprinted for the Tahoe. Old River Road was the road that led past the place the teenagers partied, where Kirsten Stillwater had last been seen.

“He left just now?” Sam asked Wyatt as he buckled in.

“Yep, about four minutes ago.”

“We’re on our way. We’ll cut over on Chester Road to avoid the traffic.” Sam started the car and peeled out.

Jo glanced back at Vicky’s car. “That’s odd. Vicky’s been grabbed already. If Robert is the killer, then how is it possible that he’s been at home all this time?”

Sam blew out a breath. “He could have gotten out earlier and Wyatt didn’t notice? Maybe he stashed her somewhere and went back home?”

“Maybe.” Jo hoped, if that was the case, that he hadn’t already killed her and was just now heading back to dispose of the body. “If he did, maybe he’s not finished with her. We can still save her if we hurry. But we’ll never catch up with him. Old River Road is five minutes from here, and he could go anywhere off that road. There’s plenty of cutoffs.”

“I have an idea of where he might be going. The Summers family has an old fishing cabin on the big bend in the Sacagewassett, and that road leads

out there.”

Somehow it didn’t make Jo feel any better that the man they suspected of being a serial killer had a remote fishing cabin where no one could hear his victims scream.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The cabin was in the densest section of woods. Here, the trees were so thick that it looked like twilight even though the afternoon sun was bright. The lush canopy of foliage above filtered the sun's rays.

Aside from the dark shade, the thing that struck Sam was the silence. No birds chirped. No squirrels foraged. No frogs croaked.

No victims screamed.

The only thing he could hear was the rushing of the river that flowed past about twenty feet from the cottage.

The absence of wildlife wasn't a big surprise, because they'd arrived to find two cars in the driveway. The fact that there were *two* cars was a bit of a surprise though.

Two cars? A serial killer team?

He kept his eye on the cabin as they donned their bulletproof vests, making sure to put Lucy's on first. It was a log structure similar to Sam's, except this one was painted dark brown with green trim. There was a porch on the front, and a river-rock chimney stuck up out of the middle of the roof. He scanned the windows for movement inside but didn't see anything.

They crept toward the front, guns in hand. Lucy kept to his side, her rigid posture indicating she was on high alert.

As they got closer, they could hear voices coming from the back of the house.

"I won't let you do this." The man's voice was muffled, and Sam couldn't make out who it was, nor could he hear the reply.

He tilted his head toward the back of the cabin to indicate they should proceed there. Not that he had to. Jo and Lucy knew exactly what to do, and they were already tight up to the side of the structure, moving along slowly.

"You can't stop me!" The high-pitched voice was that of a man in a panicked state.

The next sound, a shotgun being cocked, chilled Sam's blood. He jumped out, his gun held in front of him. "Hands up in the air!"

Sam didn't quite know what to make of the scene. The yard was carpeted with pine needles from the stately scotch pines that towered over the cabin. Large rocks ringed a fire pit in the center of the yard. A rusty chair sat off to one side, along with a weathered Adirondack settee. An old picnic table in faded barn-red paint sat near the fire pit.

Robert Summers stood to one side, a shotgun raised up to his shoulder. In front of him lay Vicky Thompson, her body still.

Sam's stomach lurched. Were they too late to save her?

But it wasn't Vicky that Robert was pointing the gun at. It was his uncle, Charles Bascomb.

The two men were clearly in a standoff, but which one was the killer?

"Put your guns down, and we can end this peacefully." Sam kept his tone even and measured.

Lucy vibrated with energy at his side. Her ears forward, eyes alert, muscles tensed, she was ready to spring toward the assailant. Whoever that was.

Jo stood next to Lucy, her gun steady, gaze shifting between Robert, Charles, and Vicky. Sam knew she was trying to figure out how to get to the victim without triggering one of the others to shoot.

"Chief Mason, thank God you're here." Charlie kept his Glock raised toward Robert. "He's sick. I tried to stop him."

"What? You're the sick one!" Robert shouted.

"Why don't you both put your weapons down, and we can talk this out," Sam said. He didn't trust either one of them. For all he knew, they were in on it together, and this was some sort of act they'd conjured up to confuse the police.

"I knew he had problems but never that it was this bad." Charlie looked down at Vicky. "I knew when he snuck out of the house that he might be up to something. He had problems when he was younger, but I thought the medicine had helped."

Robert's face turned red. "That's a lie! I never left the house!"

"Except you're here now," Charlie pointed out.

"Only because I figured out what you were up to. When I saw that someone had turned off the surveillance cameras at the cabin, I knew it was you." Robert glanced over toward the cabin, and Sam followed his gaze to a camera mounted on the side under the overhang for the roof.

Charlie shook his head, pity in his expression. "Now, son, you know that's not true. How would I even know how to turn off the surveillance or gain access to the camp? You did it. Why don't you just confess? I'm sure Chief Mason knows all about your juvenile criminal record."

But something didn't make sense. The timing didn't add up. Wyatt had been watching the Summers house, and Robert had been at home when Vicky was abducted.

Robert wouldn't have had time to grab her then drive back to the Summers place in time for Wyatt to see him leaving the house.

"I was only following in your footsteps, Uncle Charlie. Good thing I came to my senses before I actually hurt anyone." Robert sounded sad.

"You're delusional. Everyone knows about your mental condition. Now put the gun down and let me help the girl like I've been trying to do," Charlie said.

"*I'm* the one that was trying to help her. That's why I came here. I saw the key missing from the library, and it all came back to me. I knew what you were up to. I remembered. Yes, that's right. I saw what you did five years ago. I followed you that day after golf, and I saw what you did to that girl. Right at this cabin. She was in the tarp..." Robert choked on his words.

Sam thought about the newspaper picture of Charles, Robert, and Robert's dad at this very camp. It coincided with the time of the murders of the five girls. The murders that Thorne was now awaiting trial on. He'd thought the fact that Robert had been here as well had pointed to his guilt, but Charles had been here too.

Thorne had always denied the golf shoes were his, but if Bascomb was the killer, why would he try to get the murder charges against Thorne dropped? Wouldn't it be better for him if Thorne was convicted of those murders?

Had it just been a clever ruse to make sure those golf shoes provided solid evidence against Thorne so he would stop trying to dispute that they were his? Bascomb was part of the family and the only one with access to

the shoes. He'd taken them to the forensics lab, signing them out himself as part of the chain of custody.

But what about the email to Menda? It came from the Black Cat café, and Robert enjoyed their pastries. It wasn't far from his house. Even if he wasn't one hundred percent well, he might have risked a little trip there.

"Robert, you said you haven't been out of the house. Is that really true?" Sam asked.

"Yes, my medicine had me messed up. But the dosage is finally calibrated, and today, I remembered so much more. When I saw the cabin feeds turned off, I had to come."

"Not even a trip to the bakery for your favorite cream horns?"

Robert frowned. "Huh? No. Beryl brings them, and Uncle Charlie brought me some too."

Charlie Bascomb waved his gun, apparently agitated that things weren't going his way faster. "You're crazy, Mason. What do cream horns have to do with anything?"

"We found a receipt at the Black Cat Café for cream horns at the same time that someone sent an email to James Menda with code about their intentions to choose another victim."

Bascomb was still for a second. Sam waited, his heartbeat slowing. Bascomb's reaction to the cream horns had told him everything he needed to know.

Bascomb exploded into action. He swiveled his gun towards Sam.

"You won't take me. I have it all planned. I'll tell them Robert killed you!" He jerked to the right. The gun went off—aimed not at Sam but at Jo!

The bullet hit her in the chest, the impact knocking her to the ground.

Sam should have shot at Bascomb right away to take him out of commission. That was what his training had taught him. Jo was wearing a bulletproof vest—she would be okay. But his concern for Jo overrode his training, and he wavered, his attention focused on her. Was she moving?

In that split second, Bascomb aimed again.

Lucy was more clearheaded than Sam. She'd been trained to take out the shooter as well as protect those he aimed at. Bascomb was too far away. Robert was closer, and when Bascomb aimed the gun at him, Lucy leapt to the rescue.

A shot rang out as Robert and Lucy went down.

Sam jerked around, ready to take Bascomb down, but he was already falling, blood spurting from his knee.

Sam turned toward Jo. She was halfway risen, her gun still pointed at Bascomb.

She smiled and looked up at Sam. “Got him.”

Sam rushed over to Vicky and felt for a pulse. “She’s alive!”

Jo struggled to a sitting position and was already calling for an ambulance.

Sam checked Bascomb, who was holding his knee and rolling around in pain. “Better make it two.” He turned to Jo. “What about you?”

“I’m fine.” She grimaced as she stood, looking down at her vest. “These things really do work.”

Sam glanced at Robert. He was sitting up, stroking Lucy’s fur. She lay on the ground, tail wagging, one paw bent at an unusual angle.

Robert looked over at Sam, concern etched on his face. “Can you get an ambulance for dogs? I think she’s hurt.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The ambulances arrived at the same time as Wyatt. Sam hadn't been able to wake Vicky, but her pulse was steady. Jo insisted the EMTs look at Vicky and Lucy before herself.

According to the EMT, Lucy's injury wasn't life-threatening, but it was a nasty break that would need attention right away. Sam left Wyatt in charge, instructed Jo to get checked out by the medics, and drove Lucy to the vet.

The EMT's diagnosis had been spot-on, and luckily, Doc Gruber could operate right away. Sam stayed until Lucy was out of the operation and waking up.

"You did good, girl." Sam petted her head, and Lucy's tail swished. She looked up with glassy eyes.

"She's going to need a while to recover. I want to keep her overnight, but you can pick her up tomorrow."

Doc Gruber ushered Sam out of the examining room, and he reluctantly went back to the station.

"How's Lucy?" Reese asked before he even got all the way through the door.

"Mew!" Major, who was sitting on the corner of Reese's desk, mirrored the receptionist's questioning look as his eyes darted to Lucy level as if looking for the dog. Did the cat miss Lucy, or was he glad Sam had shown up without her? Hard to tell.

"She's going to be fine. Doc Gruber is keeping her overnight, and she'll have to take it easy for a while afterwards."

Sam contemplated petting the cat but then thought better of it. Major and Reese followed him into the squad room.

"Where's Jo?" Sam hoped she hadn't been hurt worse than she'd let on.

"I forced her to get checked out at the hospital. She should be back soon," Wyatt said. "Did I hear you say Lucy was okay?"

"She's fine. I'll pick her up tomorrow." Sam noticed Major skulking around the room, looking behind desks and cabinets. "If I didn't know better, I'd say Major might miss Lucy."

Jo rushed in. "Is Lucy okay?"

"Yes." Sam turned to Jo. She looked a little pale and was rubbing her shoulder but otherwise seemed okay. "She broke her leg, but Doc says she'll make a full recovery. How about you?"

"Fully recovered already." Jo grimaced. "Except for the giant bruise and sore spot." Jo pointed to the spot where the bullet had hit her.

"Good thing we wear vests," Sam said. Everyone nodded, knowing that if Jo hadn't been wearing a vest, she wouldn't be standing there right now. In fact, she might not have even been alive.

"I popped in to check on Vicky while I was at the hospital." Jo took a seat behind her desk. "She was awake and identified Bascomb as her abductor."

"Bev Hatch got Bascomb to confess to everything pretty easily," Wyatt said. He'd taken Bascomb to the sheriff's office, which was where they held the dangerous criminals awaiting charges.

"Forensics is trying to match the hair found on Kirsten Stillwell to Bascomb and the photo of the tire tracks from the abduction site to the tires on his van."

"He confessed to everything?" Jo frowned. "You mean to killing Kirsten and abducting Vicky?"

"And the girls that were murdered five years ago," Wyatt said.

Jo's brows shot up. "He did kill them? Did he mention an accomplice?"

"No, thankfully."

Jo blew out a breath. "I was afraid of that. What Robert and Charles were saying at the cabin was a bit confusing, but clearly one of them was involved in the current murders. I was still holding out hope that Thorne was involved in the others, too, though."

Wyatt shook his head. "'Fraid not. At least not from what I heard. Maybe Bev will get more out of him."

“I hope he was involved.” Reese’s blue eyes shone with anger. “Otherwise, we’ll have to drop the murder charges, and the only thing holding him inside are the drug charges. He deserves to be in there for a long time, but without the murder charges, I think he’ll get out pretty quick.”

“Especially with a wrongful-arrest suit pending,” Jo said.

“Unfortunately, Robert confessed something to Bev, too,” Wyatt said. “He once idolized his uncle and was a witness to the murders five years ago. He said he followed him one night after golf to an old cabin and witnessed him burying one of the girls.”

“That’s sick. Are we sure he didn’t help out? Maybe he’s trying to pretend he only watched for a lesser sentence,” Jo said.

Wyatt shook his head. “Bascomb says he never saw Robert. He wasn’t involved. It was all Bascomb. He actually seemed rather proud of it at the end.”

Reese folded her arms over her chest. “Well, that stinks. Now Thorne will be out free. That drug charge isn’t enough to keep him in for long.”

“Maybe not, but I have an idea of something that might keep him in longer, and we can thank Kevin for that,” Sam said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Sam picked Lucy up first thing the next morning. She appeared mostly unaffected by her injury. She had a cast on her front leg and a prescription for pain medicine but was bright eyed and energetic.

She barely limped on the way to the Tahoe.

"It's good to have you back." Sam ruffled the fur on her head.

Lucy whined and put her chin on his arm, looking up with loyal whiskey-colored eyes.

"You feel up for a little adventure?" Sam asked.

Lucy raised her head and wagged her tail, which Sam took as an affirmative.

Sam knew exactly where to go. Kevin's mention of "corner" associated with Thorne, combined with the fact that Lucy had shown unusual interest in a corner at the Thorne hotel construction site, had intrigued him. Even though Kevin didn't seem to remember what it meant, Sam wanted to follow the lead.

It was a long shot, but he had nothing to lose and everything to gain if that lead turned into something they could use against Thorne.

Lucy sat in the passenger seat, head out the window, inhaling the fresh air as he drove. Sam imagined she was trying to cleanse her airways after breathing in the stale air at the vet overnight. When they pulled into the construction site, she seemed excited.

Sam worried about Lucy jumping out of the Tahoe with her broken leg. Maybe he'd look into getting a ramp so she could walk down from the

tailgate. But she was careful and managed to jump out onto her good leg with barely a wince of pain.

The site was in full swing. Loud construction noises, workers shouting, dust and dirt in the air. The work was happening at the far end of the building, away from the corner that seemed to interest Lucy, so no one paid any attention to them.

Lucy trotted over to the side of the building, but this time Sam joined her instead of calling her back.

"So you think there's something here?" Sam asked Lucy.

The dog glanced up at him as if trying to gauge if he would make her stop digging like he had the other times.

"Okay, I guess we've got nothing to lose."

Lucy pawed at the dirt, but Sam imagined her leg must be sore, and he didn't want her to injure it further.

"Hold on, I'll do that." He gently pushed her aside and started digging with his hands. "It would help if I knew what I was looking for. I guess anything that isn't dirt is fair game."

Sam was wondering if he should go back and get a shovel when his fingers brushed against something foreign about four inches down. It was some kind of fabric, and he hoped it wasn't the site of another shallow grave. But this didn't seem to be attached to a body, thankfully. He pulled it out and held it up.

A man's glove.

Memories of Mayor Harley Dupont's murder investigation bubbled up. The killer had fled through a wooded area, leaving partial fingerprints in blood on some of the leaves. But there were also smudges on the leaves. Someone had been wearing gloves. Those gloves had never been found. And this one had dark-brown stains… could that be blood?

Sam took a photo and then pulled an evidence bag out of his back pocket and placed the glove inside. He dug around the hole but found nothing else.

"Is this it?" Sam held the bag up in front of Lucy, who sniffed it then lay down. She didn't appear interested in the corner anymore, so apparently that was what she'd been after.

Sam pushed the dirt back and scanned the area. This section of the construction site hadn't been disturbed since before the mayor's murder. The glove could have been there since then, but why would Thorne bury a

bloody glove on his own construction site? Maybe this section was going to have more concrete poured, and he thought that would ensure the glove was never found. But how did Kevin know about it? If that brown stain was blood, whose blood was it?

There was only one way to find out. Sam would submit the glove to the lab right away. In the meantime, he wanted some answers from Beryl Thorne, and since her car was parked over at the construction trailer, there was no time like the present to get them.

BERYL APPEARED surprised to see Sam when she answered the knock on the trailer door. "Sam … I …" Her gaze fell on Lucy, and her expression turned concerned. "Oh no, what happened?"

"She got hurt when we captured your uncle. She'll be okay."

"Oh, it's terrible. I never imagined that Uncle Charlie was the… the…" She appeared flustered, shaking her head. She was acting appropriately upset, but Sam got the impression that she was hiding her true feelings. Maybe some of Jo's skill in reading suspects was rubbing off. He wished Jo were there, but her presence would make Beryl act differently.

"He's confessed to the murder of Kirsten Stillwell and the abduction of Victoria Thompson."

Beryl's hands flew to her face. "That poor girl. Will she be all right?"

Sam nodded. "Physically, yes."

"Oh, good." Beryl managed a small smile.

"He also confessed to killing those girls five years ago. The ones that your husband was accused of."

Her smile snapped into a thin line. "He did?"

Sam nodded. "I don't think he would lie about that, so that leaves the little matter of Lucas's golf shoes. You remember, the ones you gave me as evidence against him."

She gnawed her bottom lip, and tears sprouted to her eyes. Could she do that on command? Sam wouldn't put it past her. Maybe Sam had thought she was attractive once, but not anymore. Now all he saw was someone who would do anything to get what she wanted. She and Lucas were a good match, at least in that respect.

“I wasn’t completely honest about the golf shoes.” Beryl sniffed and brushed away a tear. “But I did what I had to do. He’s done bad things. What difference does it make if some evidence isn’t what we thought?”

“Makes a pretty big difference when the case gets to trial.”

She glanced up at him from under wet lashes, pleading. “But Lucas deserves to be in jail, don’t you think?”

“I do, but only for the crimes he’s actually committed. Those shoes could be problematic, might even allow him to get out earlier than he should for the drug charges. Obviously the murder charges are being dropped,” Sam said.

Beryl did look repentant but probably only because she didn’t want Lucas getting out. “I know what I did was wrong, but I was protecting my brother.”

“How so?”

“I thought my brother was the killer. I’ve been worried about him for years. There’s been … things… But now I realize it was Uncle Charlie. Robert idolized him and tried to be like him.” Beryl wrapped her arms around her waist and shivered. “Thankfully, he didn’t progress to actually killing people like Charlie.”

At least that part was true. Robert had confessed as much but claimed he’d stopped short of killing. In the end, he knew it was wrong and had tried to stop his uncle.

Beryl continued. “I saw the picture of the tarp in your office with the holes and knew they were from golf shoes. I found the shoes in my brother’s closet and figured if I could hand them in and say they were Lucas’s, it would be evidence against him.”

“And you wiped them clean?” The shoes had no DNA on them before Charlie got a hold of them.

“Yes. I knew there could be DNA from Robert on there and didn’t want him to get mixed up in it, so I wiped them down.” Beryl wiped tears from her cheek. “I know I was wrong, but I was protecting my brother. Am I going to get in trouble?”

“It’s a crime to submit false evidence. The real killer went free because we thought we had him locked up. Kirsten Stillwell might not have died if we’d kept looking and found a trail that led to Charles.”

Sam glared at Beryl. She was trying to look all innocent, but Sam realized she could put on the innocent look at will. The sight of her

sickened him. But he also felt sick at himself because he'd eagerly bought her story about the golf shoes because he'd wanted the killer to be Thorne so badly. This was partially his fault.

Would he make sure she got charged for her crime? He wasn't sure what that would accomplish. His energy was probably better spent somewhere else, like figuring out how to keep Thorne in jail. Though he might regret that. With Lucas in jail, Beryl would be running the business, and Sam was afraid she might be even worse.

Sam turned to leave then stopped and took the glove out of his pocket. He turned back to her and held it up. "Do you happen to know anything about this? It's a glove. It was buried over at the construction site."

"No. The construction crew wears gloves, so maybe it's from one of them. Looks like you have it in an evidence bag though. Why the interest?"

"Just a hunch." Sam studied her face to see if she knew more, but all he saw was confusion.

"Where did you find it?"

"The corner right there, closest to the parking lot."

Beryl's eyes narrowed. "We've been working the other side, where the lobby is. That side hasn't been touched since Lucas was in charge. So whatever it is, it's probably been there for a while."

"Yeah, that's what I figured."

As Sam left, he could sense Beryl's nervous energy. She'd wanted him to assure her that she wouldn't be charged for the false evidence, but he wasn't sure what he was going to do about that. It might be just as much punishment to keep her in the dark, waiting nervously and never knowing if that charge would come.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

"Why would Thorne bury an incriminating piece of evidence on his own construction property?" Wyatt asked.

They were in Sam's office, staring down at the glove laid out on his desk.

"And how would Kevin even know it was there?" Jo asked from the floor, where she was sitting next to Lucy under the window.

Sam scrubbed his hands over his face. "Those are good questions. Still, I can't help but feel like this is important. And there's no harm in sending it to the lab. I'll visit Kevin later today and see if his memory has come back."

Jo kissed Lucy on the top of the head and stood, wincing as she straightened. Clearly, her injury was hurting her.

"How is your injury?" Sam asked.

Jo waved his concern away. "It's healing. I'm fine."

Sam and Wyatt exchanged a glance, but before they could argue with her, Major skulked in, carrying the toy octopus in his mouth.

"Oh-oh, what's he up to?" Wyatt asked.

"Probably sees an opportunity to torment Lucy while she's injured and can't fight back properly," Sam said.

Major walked slowly toward Lucy. The dog appeared as if she didn't know what to think either, her wary gaze flicking from Sam back to Major.

Major stopped a few feet from the dog, dropped the toy, and then batted it toward Lucy. It skittered to a stop against her cast.

Lucy looked as if she was expecting the gesture to be some kind of trick, but Major didn't take any further action. He simply sat on his

haunches and started washing behind his ears.

After a few beats, Lucy sniffed the toy and then tucked it under her chin.

"Did Major just *give* Lucy that toy?" Jo's tone was incredulous.

"Looks that way." Sam wasn't sure what to make of it, but the cat didn't seem to have an ulterior motive. He appeared more concerned with grooming than the toy. "Maybe he feels bad that Lucy got hurt."

"Maybe." Jo still sounded uncertain. "I guess we can take that as progress."

"Speaking of progress." Reese appeared in the doorway, stepping to the side to let Major exit. "The brown hair is a match to Bascomb, and the tire tracks at the abduction site match the tires on his van."

"Good. More nails in Bascomb's coffin," Wyatt said.

"But what about Thorne?" Jo turned to Sam. "Did you ask Beryl about the shoes?"

Sam told them how Beryl had given them the shoes to protect her brother.

"She's not to be trusted," Jo warned. "She tried to make sure her own husband went down for a murder charge!"

"Bascomb was actually pretty clever," Reese said. "Thorne had always said those shoes weren't his, and Bascomb used that as an excuse for his case as well as an excuse to get them to the lab. He was afraid once the trial began that they'd be able to prove the shoes really weren't Thorne's and they might start looking for the real killer—him!"

"How do you think he got Thorne's DNA on them, and how did he plan to explain how that had been missed before?" Wyatt asked.

"According to Bascomb, he managed to get Thorne's DNA from visiting the construction site trailer where Thorne kept extra clothes. He was going to blame shoddy forensic analysis on why it wasn't found prior."

"It would've been quite diabolical if it had worked," Jo said.

"And it might have if he had been able to refrain from killing," Wyatt added.

"That's why we need to make sure our case against Bascomb is solid. After this fiasco with the shoes, I'm sure everything we do is going to be scrutinized," Sam said.

"We still have one witness that might be able to link Bascomb to the murders from five years ago. My sister Bridget." Jo's gaze met Sam's.

“Why don’t you bring Lucy by tonight, and we’ll show her a picture of Bascomb.”

“It’s worth a shot.” Stopping by Jo’s wasn’t really all that unusual for Sam and Lucy, but Sam sensed something different about this invitation. Now that they’d caught the killer, maybe Jo was finally ready to show him the files on her sister’s case.

KEVIN SIPPED water through the straw of the little pink plastic tumbler. It felt good to sit up in bed. Good to drink something. Good to be awake. Even if he didn’t remember exactly why he was here or what had happened to him. The doctors said that was normal. Those memories would come back in time.

At least he remembered the things that mattered, like who he was and who the people important to him were. Like Lucy, the K-9 he worked with and who was trotting through the door right this minute.

Kevin smiled and put his hand out as Lucy raced to his side, her soft nose pushing at his hand, tail wagging, eyes bright. He even thought that maybe she was smiling.

“Hey there, I missed you too.” Kevin patted the top of her head, the soft fur bringing him joy.

“You’re looking good.” Sam appeared in the doorway. “It’s great to see you sitting up.”

“Thanks.” Kevin knew Sam’s words were sincere. Somewhere deep inside his subconscious, he knew that Sam and Jo had been watching over him, keeping him part of the team. “You’ve been coming to visit often, haven’t you?”

Sam pulled a chair up to the bed. “Here and there. Jo’s been coming too. Keeping you up to date on the cases.”

“I appreciate that.” Kevin’s words were sincere. He didn’t actually remember any of the cases but appreciated the effort.

“The other day when I was here, you mentioned something that might have to do with a case.” Sam leaned forward in the chair, his elbows on his thighs. He appeared to be studying Kevin as if this was very important. It made Kevin uneasy, and he shifted his position under the sheets.

“What was that?”

“Something about a corner, and I got the impression it had to do with Thorne.”

Thorne… Thorne… Kevin concentrated as hard as he could to latch on to the fleeting slip of a memory connected with that name. Yes! Thorne was someone important in town but who skirted the edges of the law. He couldn’t remember specifics but was encouraged to be able to dredge up even the most vague of impressions.

“I don’t remember anything about a corner.” Kevin shrugged a shoulder apologetically.

“No? Maybe something about our investigation into Mayor Dupont’s murder?”

Kevin shook his head. He didn’t remember any investigation but didn’t want to tell Sam that.

Sam leaned back in his chair. “It might come to you, but I might have found what you were talking about.”

“Really?”

“Lucy did actually. She’d always been interested in a corner over at the Thorne construction site, so I went over and dug. Found an old glove which might or might not have bloodstains on it.”

“A glove?” Kevin cast about in his mind for any memory concerning a glove but came up blank.

“I was wondering if it could be related to Mayor Dupont’s murder.”

Kevin remembered Dupont. He even remembered something about a murder investigation. But he didn’t remember anything about a glove. “Sorry, I couldn’t say.”

“Oh well, don’t worry about it. I sent it to the lab. I’m sure you’ll remember in time.” Sam got up and patted the sheet atop Kevin’s leg. “I’m going to go. You need your rest. Have they mentioned anything about when you might get out of here?”

“Maybe a couple of weeks if things are still progressing.”

“Good, that’s great news.” Sam walked toward the door. Lucy gave Kevin one last nudge with her snout then trotted over to Sam, who turned to look at Kevin. “I’ll check back tomorrow. Have a good night.”

“Thanks for stopping by.” Kevin vaguely remembered that Sam was a good boss. What was this business about the corner, though? Somehow the memory made him uncomfortable, as if he’d done things that he’d rather

forget. But that was in the past… he was sure of that, because he knew he was a good person now. And even if he wasn't, he had a new lease on life, and he could be a good person for the rest of it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Bridget crouched down in the corner of the porch with one of the cat treats in her hand and clucked at Pickles. “You want a treat, kitty?”

She was trying to get Pickles to eat out of the bowl in the new shelter she’d made with the box, plush cat bed, and a fleece cat-sized blanket. Cold weather would be here before they knew it, and she wanted the cat to at least have a safe refuge up here on the porch.

Pickles crept forward, glancing from the box to Bridget. Though the cat had been coming up on the porch to eat, he wasn’t used to the box or Bridget hovering beside it.

“Here you go.” Bridget extended her hand out farther, the treat pinched between finger and thumb. It wasn’t one of his usual treats. Bridget had spared no expense, getting gourmet treats that cats couldn’t resist, or so the label said.

Pickles looked at her with suspicion for a few seconds before the smell of the salmon treat got the better of him. He slowly came closer, stretching his head out to sniff at the treat. After a few sniffs, he must have decided it was worth the risk. He grabbed it between his teeth and chowed down. Bridget swirled her finger in the bowl just in case he hadn’t noticed it was full of the same treats. Pickles stuck his head in and started eating.

“That’s a great little hideaway for him.” Jo gestured toward the box.

“If only he’d stay on the porch long enough to get used to it.” Bridget risked trying to pet the cat. She ran her fingers lightly down his back, and he didn’t flinch. “I guess he’s coming along pretty good though.”

Jo leaned against the doorway and watched the cat. “My landlord didn’t want me to have pets, but I wonder if he’s ready to sell this cottage.”

Bridget glanced up. “You want to buy it?”

“Yeah, I like it out here, and I’m ready to put roots down in White Rock.” Jo’s gaze flicked from the cat to Bridget. “What about you? Do you want to stay in White Rock?”

Bridget thought about that for a minute. She liked it here. It was peaceful, and the people were friendly. It was the first place she’d felt wanted in a long time. Plus her only family was here, and it was time she stopped running from anything that reminded her of the trauma of her sister’s abduction. And with any luck, the bad things she’d done in the past would stay in the past. She could make a new start here.

“I think I could, but I’m going to need a place of my own. Maybe one that allows a cat.” Bridget looked down at Pickles.

The sound of tires on gravel stole their attention, and they looked up to see Sam and Lucy pull into the driveway. Pickles scampered off as they approached the porch.

Sam watched the cat run toward the woods. “What’s going on with the cat?”

“We’re trying to get it used to being on the porch so it will have shelter for the winter,” Jo said.

“Good thinking. Will your landlord mind?”

“I don’t think he’ll mind a cat on the porch, and besides, I’m thinking about seeing if he’ll sell it to me.”

Sam nodded. “That would be great. This place suits you.”

“It does.” Jo bent down to pet Lucy. “And I still have an interest in a cold case near here. Speaking of which, I have something inside to show the both of you.”

JO HAD BEEN nervous about showing Sam and Bridget the information she’d collected on Tammy’s disappearance. But now, as they stood in front of the powder-blue armoire where she kept her accumulation of notes and listened to Sam’s and Bridget’s thoughtful questions about the case, she was glad she had.

“So you’ve been in contact with this retired detective for over ten years?” Bridget was staring at a page of notes Jo had written after talking to one of the cops that had launched his own search for the serial killer.

“Yes. He’s a wealth of knowledge.”

Bridget glanced up at her. “And what about that FBI guy?”

“Holden Joyce? I just recently found out that he has an interest in finding this particular killer too. We decided it might make sense to work together.”

“Have you planned your next step?” Sam asked.

“I wanted to get your input first,” Jo said.

“Okay. I think maybe we should go back to some of these locations.” Sam pointed at the picture of the bark-stripped beech trees. “Isn’t that picture from the box that Tyler Richardson had in the locker?”

Sam did seem truly interested in the case. That was good. Tyler had been a cop in White Rock and met with a mysterious death. Sam and Jo had been told to stand down on the investigation, so they’d investigated on the side. During that investigation, they’d found a mysterious box with pictures of surveillance Richardson was doing on Thorne. Those pictures had been in the box.

“Yeah, the bark is stripped just like we think the killer does with the trees near where he buries the victims.”

Sam turned to her, confused. “But everything Tyler had had to do with Thorne.”

“I know. These pictures could be a coincidence.” It would be an odd coincidence, but Bascomb had confessed to the murders and denied leaving the beech tree markings at any of his burial sites, so what other explanation was there?

“Joseph Menda alluded to some sort of serial killer network. You don’t think the killer you’re looking for could have operated in this area? Maybe he knew Bascomb or found out about the area on some sick serial killer forum or something,” Sam suggested.

“There’s a serial killer forum?” Bridgett sounded incredulous.

“We’re not sure, but according to one we’ve been interviewing, some of them do communicate.” Sam stepped back from the armoire. “What about Ricky Webster? His past record is a little sketchy, and he works for Thorne Enterprises.”

“But he wasn’t involved in Kirsten’s murder or Vicky’s abduction.” Jo made a mental note to dig into Ricky’s past a little more. “Still, that is a lot of coincidences.”

Sam pointed to the picture from Tyler’s box. “You never found the spot?”

“Nope.”

“Maybe we should start there. Reese might be able to use Google satellite or something to narrow down where it could be.” Sam’s phone pinged, and he looked at the screen. “It’s from Reese. That was blood on the glove I dug up over at Thorne’s. Mayor Dupont’s blood.”

“Dupont? But we already caught his killer,” Jo said.

“We always thought there might have been another person there. Maybe that person was Thorne.”

“If we could tie him to Dupont’s murder, we’d be able to keep him in jail a lot longer,” Jo said. “But just having the glove buried on his property doesn’t exactly tie it to him. Anyone could have buried it there.”

“Yeah, but it’s a start. Which reminds me.” Sam gave Jo a pointed look and tilted his head in Bridget’s direction in an indication that he was wondering if they should show Bridget the picture of Bascomb. Jo nodded.

Sam pulled the picture out of the back pocket of his jeans. “Bridget, I was wondering if you’d take a look at this. Does it look like the guy you saw Amber with?”

Bridget glanced at Jo. She didn’t look afraid, just determined. She took the photo in her hand, her eyes widening. “Yes. Yes, that is definitely him. Who is he?”

“He’s the guy we just arrested for Kirsten Stillwell’s murder. He confessed to Amber’s murder too, but every piece of evidence we can get is welcome.” Sam took the photo back. “Thank you.”

“No problem, anything I can do to help.”

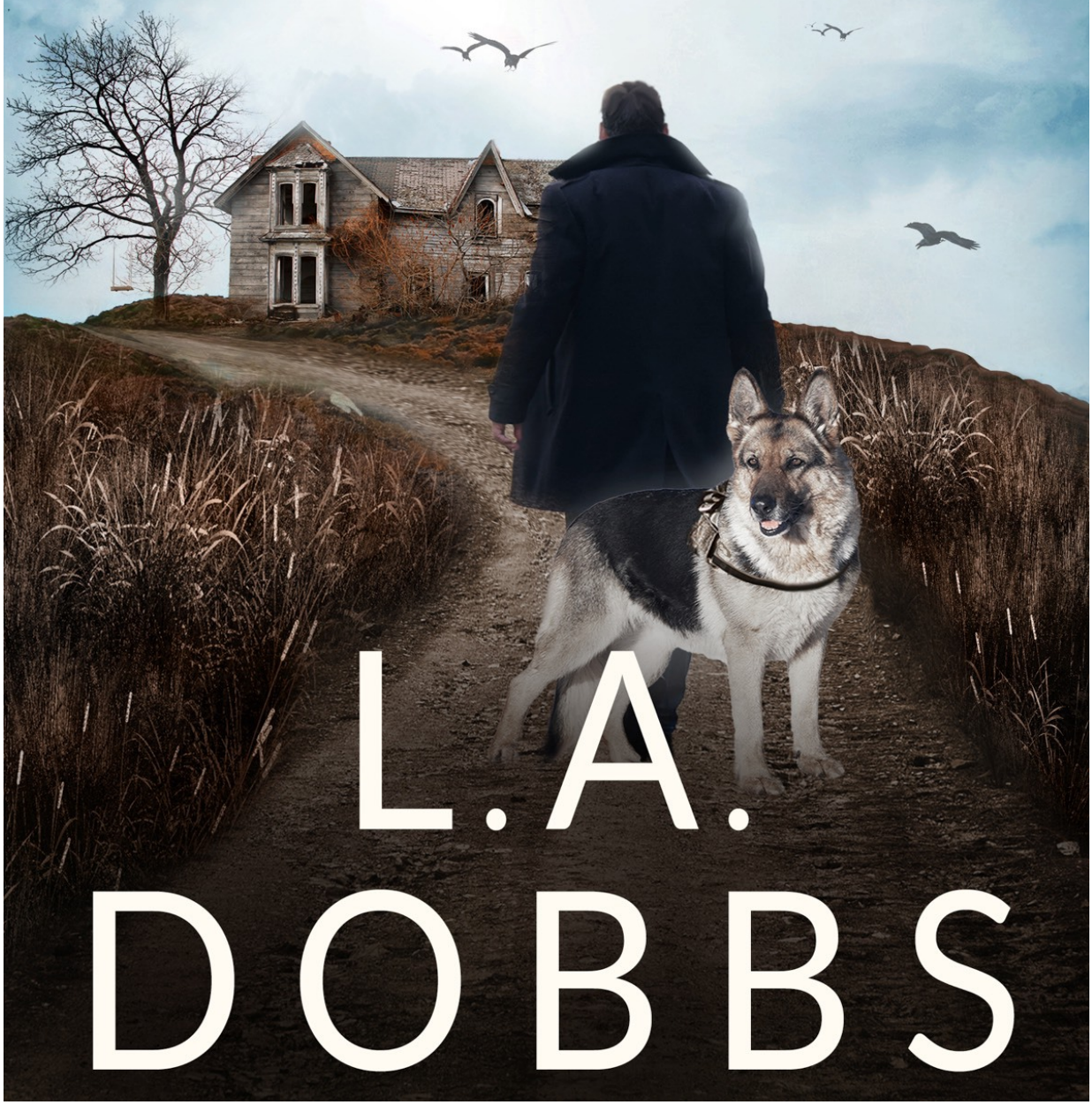
Jo touched her sister’s arm and smiled. Bridget had changed a lot in the few days she’d been staying with her. More confident. Less jumpy. And she seemed truly interested in helping with Tammy’s case, not at all freaked out like Jo had been afraid she would be. Maybe getting absorbed in the case would be good for her.

Jo turned to Sam. “Looks like we’re building a good case against Bascomb, and now with the glove, we might have a new case against Thorne.”

“If we can keep them in jail, those are two killers that won’t kill again.” Sam turned back to the notes and photos tacked up inside the armoire. “And if we can figure this out, maybe we can catch another.”

A SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERY BOOK SEVEN

SEEKING JUSTICE



L.A. DOBBS

CHAPTER ONE

A chill ran down Police Chief Sam Mason's spine as he took in the grim scene before him. Amidst the towering trees of the owl sanctuary, a woman lay sprawled on the ground, her face obscured by a curtain of blond hair. Next to her, the lifeless body of a tiny owl, its white feathers ruffling in the breeze, tugged at Sam's heartstrings.

The hush of the forest felt heavier, the usual ambient rustle of leaves and chirping of distant birds eerily absent. The only sounds piercing the quiet were the restless sniffing of his K-9, Lucy, and Beryl Thorne's intermittent nose blowing.

His second in command, Jo Harris, methodically documented the scene. With phone camera in hand and razor-sharp focus, she made a record of the crime scene.

"Did you see anyone leaving?" Sam's voice cut through the silence, his eyes meeting Beryl's. Always a little too close for comfort, Beryl stood near him, her red-rimmed eyes peering out from a crumpled tissue.

"No." Beryl sniffled. "I came to photograph the owls, like I usually do, and then… I found her." She leaned into Sam, her sobs soaking the fabric of his uniform. Sam caught Jo's gaze over Beryl's trembling form. Jo rolled her eyes. Lucy let out a low woof as if agreeing with Jo's eye roll.

"Beryl," Sam said, gently extricating himself from her grasp. "You can head home. We may need more from you later, so be ready."

"Thanks." Beryl managed a half smile, her doe-like eyes shimmering with unshed tears. She turned and left, her body trembling slightly. The vulnerability in her posture tugged at Sam, but an instinctive caution held

him back. He watched her leave, a familiar unease niggling at his conscience.

His gaze flicked back to the crime scene, but his mind drifted to Beryl's notorious husband. Lucas Thorne, the underhanded swindler and suspected drug dealer, had been a literal thorn in his side for years. It was Beryl's evidence that had finally put the man behind bars, yet her eagerness to betray her own husband raised more questions than it answered. It was true that she did come to photograph the owls often, but Sam still got a feeling that might not be the whole story.

Sam shook off the thoughts. He needed to focus on the scene in front of him.

"Sam." Jo motioned him over. She was crouching by the victim, her fingers lightly brushing away some debris from the woman's hair. Jo's sharp green eyes were narrowed in concentration.

"Look at this." She gestured at the victim's matted hair, revealing bits of bark embedded in the blond strands. "She didn't fall here accidentally. She was hit with that log." Jo pointed at a hefty piece of wood nearby, its rough bark mirroring the fragments in the victim's hair. "Must have been hit hard, too, to fall so hard onto that jagged rock."

Jo moved to a patch of mud near the log, her eyes catching a peculiar pattern. She knelt down, her fingers hovering over the impressions in the soft soil.

"Sam, look at these footprints," she said, her voice laced with intrigue. "The edges have tread, but the middle is smooth. Maybe someone with an odd gait. I've never seen wear like this."

Sam peered over her shoulder. There were three larger prints mixed among some partials of smaller ones. "Me either."

He turned to take in the scene. The soil underneath the leaves on the ground was muddy. Because of the layer of leaves, there weren't too many footprints. He could see Beryl's near the body and a few where she had been standing. The other smaller ones had probably been made by the victim.

The leaves partially covered up another thing, the gun which lay near the body. "There's the gun," Sam pointed out.

Jo snapped a few pictures. "What kind of killer leaves the gun?"

"Good question." Sam dialed the medical examiner as Jo continued to survey the crime scene, her eyes darting between the lifeless woman and the

fallen owl. The sunlight filtered through the trees, casting dappled patterns on the forest floor. A soft breeze rustled the leaves overhead. It would have been almost pleasant if not for the circumstances.

"Look at this." Jo lifted the owl's wing carefully.

Sam looked down to see a bullet hole right in the poor bird's chest, out near the wing. His gaze was riveted to the body. No bullet holes, at least not that he could see. "We should call John. I need to get a better look to see if our victim was shot too."

Jo looked disgusted. "Who would shoot an innocent owl?"

Sam gestured to the body. "Same person that would murder, I guess." Sam's gaze swept the area. "I don't see the bullet though."

"Maybe we can get Wyatt out with a metal detector."

"Good idea. Let's be careful not to disturb those footprints. We can take a cast of them."

Sam turned his attention back to the victim, whose long hair obscured her face. As he gently pushed the strands aside, recognition flickered through him. Blood seeped from a wound on her forehead, evidence of a violent meeting with the jagged rock beneath her. "I know who this is."

Jo, who was crouched next to him, glanced at him curiously. "Who is she?"

He let out a sigh, his eyes never leaving the lifeless face. "April Summers, the environmental activist."

Recognition flashed in Jo's green eyes. "The same one who chained herself to a tree in the logging area?"

"That's the one." Sam's mind was racing. "Had quite the fallout with the owner of the logging company, Travis Burton. I had to intervene."

Jo's left brow quirked up. "Well, then looks like we might already have our first suspect."

Their attention was diverted by Lucy's urgent barking. She was a few yards into the woods, her body stiff and alert, tail wagging slowly. Sam and Jo hurried over to her, crunching leaves underfoot.

Lucy's intelligent amber eyes were fixed on a splash of color among the fallen leaves—a bandana, its red-and-black design contrasting with blotches of neon-green and hot-pink paint. Jo took a few photos and then picked it up with gloved hands and slid it into an evidence bag.

Holding up the bag, Jo gave Sam a meaningful look. "And now we just might also have our first clue."

CHAPTER TWO

Sam and Jo left the medical examiner and his assistants to examine the body and rushed back to the police station.

They found their receptionist, Reese Hordon, standing in front of the desk. Her black hair was tucked under a White Rock Police Department baseball cap, and she had a paint stick in her hand.

"Rocky Bluffs or Quail Egg?" Reese asked.

"Huh?" Sam blinked, trying to decipher her question.

Reese stepped aside to reveal two cans of paint sitting on the desk. Major, the station's resident black cat, was perched atop one can, his luminescent green eyes narrowed as he watched Lucy trot over. Sam braced himself for some hissing and clawing, but the two animals simply sniffed and then ignored each other. Maybe they really had come to some sort of truce.

"Gray or beige?" Jo clarified, nodding toward the paint cans. She paused for a moment, scanning the worn walls. "I vote gray."

"What's wrong with it the way it is?" Sam liked the way the station looked. It was like stepping into the past. The scent of aged paper and stale coffee lingered in the air. Embossed brass post office boxes, still bearing the proud image of an eagle, served as a makeshift divider between the reception area and the bullpen. The old metal desks, with their history of nicks and dents, were scattered haphazardly across the worn wooden floor. Sam glanced at the scratches on the floor near the coffee machine, each one a silent testament to past arrests. He smiled, remembering how one

particularly stubborn thief had left the long, jagged line next to the filing cabinet.

Reese wrinkled her nose. “We need to jazz it up. Add some local artwork maybe. The walls, they’re just… grubby.”

He looked back at Reese then at the cans of paint. With a noncommittal shrug, he said, “Okay. Whatever Jo said.”

Sam headed past the post office boxes to the bullpen. Kevin Deckard was seated behind one of the desks, diligently focused on a stack of paperwork.

Lucy bounded over to Kevin, her tail wagging high in the air. Kevin dropped what he was doing to pet her, a large smile playing on his lips. The two shared an unspoken bond, born from the night Kevin took a bullet meant for Lucy. That same bullet had thrown Kevin into a coma, and although he was back now, it was only part-time until he fully recovered.

“How you feeling, Kev?” Sam asked, casting a sidelong glance at the man.

Kevin’s smile broadened, though it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Pretty good. Doc says I might be able to come back full-time very soon.”

Something in Kevin’s tone had Sam pausing. Was Kevin covering up something? Was the healing not as smooth as they all hoped? He decided to let it pass, for now.

“You brought donuts!” Jo snatched the white bag from her favorite coffee shop, Brewed Awakening, from Kevin’s desk and headed to the coffee machine. “Coffees?”

Everyone wanted one. Major hopped up onto the filing cabinet to supervise as Jo worked the K-cup machine, pouring her own into a yellow smiley mug last.

“So what about the case? It was murder? Who was it?” Reese leaned against the wall and sipped from a blue mug. She’d taken the call from a distraught Beryl, so she already knew there had been a body found at the owl sanctuary.

“April Summers,” Sam started, pulling out a maple-frosted donut and taking a bite. “A conservation activist.”

Reese raised her eyebrows, accepting a sugar-dusted donut from Jo. “The one who chained herself to the tree at the logging site? I’ve heard she’s made a lot of enemies.”

“That’s her,” Sam confirmed, washing down his bite with a sip of black coffee.

Kevin looked up from his cinnamon twist, confusion etching his brows. “She was found at the owl sanctuary, right? Wyatt took the Crown Vic up there with the metal detector.”

“Right,” Jo chimed in, pouring cream into her coffee. “But the most baffling part is the dead owl lying next to her.”

Kevin’s brow furrowed in confusion. “You mean to say the owl was also… murdered?” he asked, his grip tightening on his donut.

“In a way, yes,” Sam replied. “It was shot.”

“But the woman, April, she wasn’t?” Reese asked, moving to lean against a desk, her coffee cradled in both hands.

Sam shook his head. “Doesn’t seem so. We found a log near the body, bits of its bark caught in her hair. We think she was hit with it, fell, and hit her head on a rock.”

Kevin sat back in his chair, nibbling on his cinnamon twist, eyes narrowed. “That’s odd. If the killer had a gun, why resort to a log?”

“Anybody home?” A voice rang out from the reception area, and Reese poked her head around the post office boxes and motioned someone to join them. It was Jackson Pressler, one of the older residents of White Rock. Sam wasn’t surprised to see him. Jackson had been the one to discover the rare owls on his property and petition the government to make that area a sanctuary. He must have seen all the activity.

“Hey, Jackson, what can we do for you?” Sam asked.

Jackson ran his hands through his white hair, nodding grimly. “Saw the cars heading up the dirt road to the sanctuary. Can’t help but worry.”

Jo, ever the empathetic soul, wheeled a chair toward him. “Have a seat, Jackson.”

Jackson waved it away, standing resolute. “Don’t need it, thank you, Jo. I just need to know what’s happening near my land.”

Sam met his gaze, deciding honesty was the best approach. “There’s been a murder, Jackson. At the sanctuary.”

The old man’s eyes widened, shock and anger flashing through them. “Again? Damn it! I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. It’s that Thorne construction stirring up trouble.” He jabbed a finger into the air for emphasis. “Saw a young fella trespassing the other day while I was out fishing on the Hogback River behind my place.”

“Did you recognize him?” Sam asked, already mentally making space for another suspect on his list.

Jackson shrugged. “Eyes aren’t what they used to be, and he was far away. But he was young, wore a black-and-tan baseball cap. Hightailed it out of there when he saw me.”

Sam nodded, and Jackson continued. “Hate to think there’s a killer running around.”

Sam returned Jackson’s gaze, a solid resolution hardening in his own. “Jackson, I assure you, we’re on it,” he said, giving the man’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “This isn’t a random act, and we already have a lead to follow up on.”

“Who was it?” Jackson inquired, curiosity lighting up his eyes.

Sam pursed his lips, thinking for a moment. “Can’t say yet,” he finally responded, casting a glance toward Jo, who was already settled at her desk by the window, laptop open. “We need to notify the next of kin first.”

“I’m on it,” Jo confirmed, her fingers flying across the keyboard.

Sam’s gaze returned to Jackson. “Suffice to say, it’s someone who might have ruffled a few feathers.”

Relief washed over Jackson’s face, the tension in his shoulders easing. “I appreciate that, Sam.”

With a final nod, Jackson turned and made his exit from the station. As the door closed behind him, Sam redirected his attention back to his team. “Guess I better get going and interview our first suspect.”

CHAPTER THREE

Kevin watched Sam, Jo, and Lucy leave the station. He felt a twinge of longing. He was dying to get back out in the field, but he'd have to convince the doctors he was ready for that first.

Turning his back on the door, he stepped toward the metal filing cabinets. His part-time duty was to file that paperwork, a job he'd done dozens of times before his accident. He knew the system like the back of his hand. Or he used to. Right now, he just stood staring at the cabinets, uncertainty furrowing his brow. The cabinets seemed like uncharted territory. He stood before them, an unfamiliar sense of disconnect gnawing at him.

How hard could it be? They probably filed them alphabetically. He was sure he'd remember the system once he opened the drawers. He had to figure it out either way because he didn't want anyone to know there were still gaps in his memory. But the way Jo had looked at him oddly made him think she might have guessed.

The station door creaked open, pulling Kevin out of his thoughts. He couldn't see who it was from his position, but a knot of worry formed in his stomach at the thought that Sam and Jo might have returned. He turned to the filing cabinet, feigning nonchalance as he opened a drawer.

A voice wafted over to him, the tone as smooth as a polished river stone. "Hey, Reese, brought you some brownies for helping me out."

"You didn't have to do that," Reese said.

"That's what friends are for. So, they're really letting you paint this place?" the smooth voice said.

“Yeah, it needs it.”

Kevin couldn’t see them, but he imagined Reese gesturing toward the gray paint. What was the color? Rocky Bluffs. A beat of satisfaction pulsed within Kevin. He’d remembered the color of the paint, a small-but-significant sign his memory was still healing.

“You can say that again. Oh! Hi, Major.”

Kevin almost shouted out a warning to the woman with the smooth voice, but then the sound of a familiar meow echoed through the room, followed by the sight of a black streak of fur darting past the PO boxes. A woman in a sunflower dress followed quickly behind. With an ease that spoke of familiarity, she swooped down to scoop up Major. Few managed that feat—Major was notoriously aloof.

As she straightened, her gaze found Kevin’s. Her eyes, wide and inquisitive, met his, and for a moment, everything else faded away. There was a hint of recognition, a spark of curiosity, and in the pit of his stomach, Kevin felt a flutter of something he couldn’t quite name.

“Oh. Hi,” the woman said as she cradled the cat. Major’s fluffy tail swished in the air. “Kevin, right?”

“That’s right.” Kevin’s brows knitted in curiosity. Who was this cheerful woman?

With a graceful motion, she released the cat, who landed sprightly on all fours, shaking himself off before stalking away. As Major disappeared around a corner, he shot a glance back at Kevin. An unspoken “I’m not always as grumpy as I seem.”

The woman extended a hand, her voice warm and bright. “Bridget, Jo’s sister.”

Jo’s sister? Kevin allowed himself a moment of surprise before he gripped her hand firmly, her introduction giving him a sense of familiarity amidst the whirl of changes. She seemed so unlike Jo, who was all business and plain outfits. Bridget, in contrast, appeared free-spirited and whimsical in her sunflower dress and tousled dark hair. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Bridget’s eyes roved the room, a small frown creasing her forehead. “Is Jo around?”

“She’s out with Sam… and Lucy,” Kevin added quickly, noting her fondness for animals. Anyone who appreciated animals was all right in his book.

“Can I assist you with something?” he asked, hoping to extend his hospitality.

“No, I just came to chat with Jo,” Bridget replied, her gaze drifting from the paperwork in his hand to the filing cabinet. “Those go in the bottom drawer, don’t they?”

Kevin blinked, taken aback. “Um…”

Bridget gestured at the folders he held, her cheeks flushing slightly. “Case files. I’ve seen Jo file them numerous times.”

“Oh, right,” Kevin stammered, scrambling to cover his confusion. “I was just… just sorting out the paperwork.”

Bridget studied him for a moment, her gaze insightful. His pulse quickened. Was she piecing together his struggle? Yet something in her eyes communicated understanding, not judgment.

“Are you just visiting?” he ventured, trying to shift the attention away from himself. He hadn’t even known Jo had a sister.

“No.” Bridget shook her head, her hazel eyes meeting his. “I’m living with Jo now.”

“Oh.” For a second, panic gripped him. Had he been expected to know that?

Noticing his discomfort, Bridget’s expression softened. “A lot happened while you were in the hospital. I’m here to stay now, though. It’s a long story.”

“Ah, right. Well, it’s great to meet you, Bridget.”

“Likewise.” Bridget beamed, her positivity contagious. “Well, I’d better get going. It’s nice to meet you, Kevin, and I’m glad to see you’re doing well enough to be back to work.” With a final wave, she made her exit, leaving Kevin with the echo of her laughter and a newfound sense of belonging.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Kevin seemed a bit off, didn't he?" Jo broke the comfortable silence in the White Rock Police Department Tahoe, her eyes trained on the winding road ahead. Lucy's head popped between the front seats, a soft whimper escaping her. It was almost as if she were joining in on the conversation.

"You noticed that too?" he asked.

"Occupational hazard," Jo responded with a quick smile, her eyes sparkling with a hint of mischief. "Always observing."

Her light-hearted jab drew a chuckle from Sam. His eyes, lined with laugh lines that had deepened over their two years of partnership, twinkled. "Guess that's why you're a detective."

"But I hope Kevin is okay," Jo said, her tone turning serious. She reached back to pet Lucy, the dog's snout pushing against her hand as if echoing her concern.

"Adjusting after a coma takes time. He'll be all right," Sam assured her, turning onto the dirt road that led to the logging site. "Did you dig up anything on April Summers?"

Jo nodded, her eyebrows furrowing in thought. "It's peculiar. She pops up six years ago, making waves as an activist, chaining herself to trees, leading sit-ins at construction sites. But before that, it's like she didn't exist. I'm still looking for any family or next of kin."

"Every person has a past. She must have family, someone we can notify," Sam mused.

"Exactly. No one just pops out of nowhere. I'll keep looking."

As they drove on, the dense forest gave way to a large clearing. Jo's gaze swept over the area, her usual cheery demeanor replaced with a tight-lipped silence. The sight of the bare landscape, a stark contrast to the lush forest, always left a sour taste in her mouth. Yet she understood its necessity and admired the company's effort to maintain a balance, working on one area at a time to allow regrowth. However, the forest's sacrifice reminded her of the stakes of their current case.

The distant buzz of chainsaws signaled their arrival at the logging site office, stationed in a repurposed trailer. A woman emerged, shielding her eyes from the sun. In her late thirties, she had a hardened look that reflected years of working under the rough conditions of the logging industry. Her posture was tense, a common reaction to unexpected visits from law enforcement.

"Can I help you?" Her voice matched her appearance, gritty but not unkind.

"We'd like to talk to Travis if he's in," Sam replied, his gaze wandering past her into the confines of the trailer.

"He's down the road, overseeing the crew." She pointed in the direction of the cacophony.

"And you are?" Sam probed, maintaining a friendly tone.

The woman's demeanor softened a bit. "Danika Ryder," she said, extending her hand. "Travis's assistant."

Before further introductions could be made, a truck came barreling down the road, dust billowing in its wake. Travis. He clambered out of the truck, concern etched on his weathered face. "Chief, what brings you here?"

Jo studied his demeanor. He did look a bit worried, but was that because he'd murdered someone last night or because he was doing something else he didn't want them to know about?

"Just following up on something," Sam responded, managing to keep his voice level. "A body was found at the owl sanctuary."

"I don't get out to the owl sanctuary. Don't much care about the owls," Travis said.

Lucy, ever the dutiful K-9, sniffed at Travis's feet. He shifted uncomfortably. Jo noted the impression his boot left in the soft ground—a distinctive circular tread pattern.

"Well, you might care about the victim…" Sam began, leaving the sentence hanging for a moment.

“Victim?” Travis’s voice took on an anxious edge, his glance flicking toward Danika.

“April Summers. I hear you two didn’t exactly see eye to eye,” Sam continued, watching Travis closely.

Travis scoffed. “Sure, she was a thorn in my side, shutting down operations for a day. But kill her? No way.” He shook his head emphatically. “That woman was trouble. I’m not the only one that she caused trouble for. She cost Archie Wells a bundle over those condos he wants to build over on Pine Street.”

Sam frowned. “She did? I wondered why construction stopped over there.”

“She had something to do with that, I believe. You’d have to ask Archie. But if you’re going to put everyone she crossed on your suspect list, then it’s going to be a pretty long list.”

Sam nodded, then his gaze focused on Travis. “So where were you last night?”

“Last night? That’s easy. Was here working on the books.” He looked at Danika, and she nodded. “During the day, I have to oversee the crew, but I need to keep up with the accounting, so one night a week, I work on them here at the trailer.”

“Was anyone else here?” Sam glanced over at Danika, expecting her to chime in, but she just looked down at her feet.

“Nope, sorry. Now I have to get back to work.” Travis gestured toward the forest. “Unless you have more questions?”

“Not right now. We’ll be in touch when we do.” Sam glanced at Danika, and they left.

Sam and Jo climbed back into the Tahoe, the echoes of Travis’s protests still hanging in the air along with the lingering scent of freshly cut lumber. Lucy leapt up into her designated spot in the back, tail thumping against the seat.

As they settled in, Jo turned to Sam, her face contemplative. “That boot print Travis made back there didn’t match the one at the crime scene.”

“Doesn’t mean he doesn’t own another pair,” Sam replied, his gaze focused on the road as they began to pull away from the logging site.

The heavy hum of the Tahoe’s engine filled the silence, allowing them a moment to digest the latest revelations. The buzz of Jo’s phone shattered the quiet. Glancing at the screen, her face softened at the sight of her sister

Bridget's name. Jo and her sister had been working on a cold case that touched them both personally—the unsolved abduction of their other sister, Tammy, when they were children.

Bridget's text flashed on the screen: *Got some new info on the serial killer angle. Will catch up at home later.*

Sam glanced over at Jo, catching the tail end of her text conversation. "Updates from Bridget?"

Jo nodded, stowing her phone away. "She's got something on the cold case. She'll fill me in at home tonight. You in?"

Sam glanced in the rearview mirror at Lucy, who wagged her tail in response. "Wouldn't miss it for the world," he said, his face softening into a determined smile.

CHAPTER FIVE

Lucy stopped short in the police station lobby, where Reese was crouched on the floor with a roll of blue painter's tape in her hand. Jo almost ran into the dog, and Sam almost ran into Jo.

"What are you doing?" Jo asked.

Reese turned to look at them, and Lucy trotted over to sniff her face. Reese crinkled her nose and laughed as she petted Lucy's soft fur. "I'm taping the molding so we get clean lines with the paint."

"Of course, I knew that." Jo was no stranger to painting. She just hadn't expected to see Reese on the floor. Apparently Lucy had felt the same, but satisfied that nothing was wrong, she trotted into the station. Major was not concerned. In fact, he was taking advantage of Reese's absence at the green steel reception desk and was lounging on top of it.

Sam and Jo followed Lucy into the bullpen. Wyatt was engrossed in paperwork at his desk. He looked up, the tattoo ink on his arm visible from under the edge of his rolled-up shirt sleeve.

"How'd it go with Travis?" he asked.

"Says he didn't kill her, of course, but he did mention that April had a few enemies," Sam said.

Wyatt grimaced. "I suppose that's no surprise. Tends to happen when you disrupt businesses."

Jo nodded. "Did you come up with anything?"

A glint appeared in Wyatt's eyes. "Well, it seems the gun was registered to the victim."

Jo's brows shot up. "That is interesting."

“It’s wiped clean, though. And she wasn’t shot.” Wyatt held up the preliminary report from the medical examiner.

“Didn’t think so.” Sam started toward his office. “Maybe we better go in my office and start organizing the investigation.”

“I printed out some of the pictures I took as well as some of Jo’s from when you were there this morning.” Wyatt handed Sam a stack of paper, and the trio moved into Sam’s office with Lucy following closely behind.

Sam made his way behind the vintage wooden table that served as his desk. The old scarred wood of the tabletop was littered with round postal stamps, evidence of its prior life in the post office.

Jo tugged a chair from the corner, its mismatched leg causing it to rock slightly as she settled down.

Wyatt chose to stand, his attention focused on the large corkboard behind the desk as Sam began arranging photographs from the crime scene.

Lucy plopped herself into the warm pool of sunlight that streamed through the tall windows that overlooked the town square.

Sam placed the pictures one by one. April, lying motionless on the ground. The innocent owl, white feathers marred with blood. The gun. The log. The bandana. Various angles of the entire scene.

“I suppose it’s too much to ask that Travis was wearing a bandana when you visited him.” Wyatt pointed to the picture of the bandana.

“He wasn’t,” Sam said.

“Maybe that’s because he lost it in the woods,” Jo chimed in.

“Good point.” Sam continued tacking up the last few pictures.

“But we don’t know that bandana had anything to do with the murder because we found it a ways away from the scene.” Sam turned to Lucy, who was asleep in the sun. “Actually, Lucy found it.”

Wyatt nodded. “Must have some meaning then if she brought your attention to it.”

Sam tacked up the last picture of a bullet in a branch. It looked a little off-kilter to Jo.

“That photo,” she began, head tilted to the side as she pointed at the picture of a bullet nestled in a branch. The angle seemed slightly askew. “You took it from below, looking up, right?”

Wyatt nodded. “Yeah, I figured since the owl was probably in a tree, the bullet might’ve ended up there.”

“Good thinking.” Sam glanced over at Jo, and she shrugged. They’d only looked on the ground.

“But are we thinking this was all an accident then?” Jo asked, gesturing from the images of the owl to those of the woman. “She shoots, misses, the bullet hits the branch, and it falls on her?”

“Well, the weird part is that the gun was wiped clean. No prints,” Wyatt interjected, pausing for a moment to let the information sink in. “So if she didn’t shoot, then who did?”

Jo’s brows furrowed in thought. “She wouldn’t wipe the gun after an accidental shooting. Unless”—she glanced at the two men—"she was trying to frame someone else? But even that doesn’t make much sense.”

“But why use her own gun for that?” Sam questioned, crossing his arms.

“And she was hit with a log. The back of her head had traces of bark,” Jo added. She gestured to the picture of the log. “That’s no accident.”

“Someone else had to be there,” Sam deduced, studying the images. “Maybe they shot the owl then hit her with the log…”

“But how would they get her gun?” Wyatt asked.

“And why shoot an owl?” Jo added

Sam glanced at Wyatt. “What do we know about April’s time in town? Any idea where she was staying?”

Wyatt nodded. “She checked into the Ledgewood Motel. I talked to Bruce Johnson, who owns it, but he won’t let me in until I produce a search warrant.”

“All right.” Sam sighed. “I’ll get on that warrant. Meanwhile, Wyatt, dig into any digital trails she might have left. Jo, you keep trying to find anything about her family. There’s got to be something out there that will explain more about who would have a motive to kill her.”

CHAPTER SIX

Bridget maneuvered her car onto the stone driveway of the cottage she shared with Jo.

The quaint old cottage was always a welcome sight. Nestled in the forest, it was a faded red with white shutters. Flowers spilled from window boxes and planters, a riot of colorful petunias, pansies, and impatiens. It was off the beaten track, quiet except for the babbling of the brook out back and the chirping of birds. It was small but homey.

Orange fur moved on the porch. Pickles, the feral kitten she and Jo had been trying to look after, watched her. His curious eyes were wide and alert. She stepped from the car, slow, calculated. No sudden moves. Pickles was a bolt of lightning when spooked.

She squatted, extending a hand toward Pickles. "No pressure, little guy."

The small cat approached cautiously. He sniffed and then recoiled. Probably smelled Major.

Bridget laughed softly. "Major can be a bit off-putting, but he's really a nice cat."

Pickles looked up at her skeptically. Even though the two cats had never met, there must be something in his scent that warned Pickles that Major was a tough cookie.

Turning her attention to a bowl tucked away in the corner of the porch, she noted it was scraped clean. A satisfied smile tugged at her lips. She'd been leaving food for Pickles, and it seemed to be working. "Good boy, Pickles."

But at her words, the skittish cat darted off into the lush greenery. She watched his retreat, a soft sigh escaping her. Each day brought her a step closer to gaining his trust. By the time winter crept in, maybe Pickles would consider the porch, or even the warmth of the indoors, a safe haven.

Unlocking the door, she stepped inside, greeted by the soothing bubbling of the fish tank. Finn, Jo's pet goldfish, glided around his aquatic home. His golden-orange scales glinted under the tank light, the color as vibrant as a summer sunset. The fish darted up, a well-trained response to the likelihood of a food opportunity.

Bridget retrieved a bright-red flake from the food jar, dangling it just above the water's surface. Finn rose, snapping up the flake in a quick, eager pucker. He then hovered, eyeing her for more treats. With a laugh, she indulged him with a couple more flakes.

"All right, Finn, that's your lot," she said with an amused shake of her head. "I've got everyone else to feed."

A spark of anticipation kindled within her. She had news to share, information about Tammy's disappearance that she'd uncovered. Bridget could hardly wait to share her findings with Sam, Jo, and Holden Joyce, the FBI investigator who had been helping them.

Bridget unpacked her culinary treasures from the local specialty store. Her growing interest in cooking, born from the long hours she now found at her disposal, had led her to explore more gourmet options. She wanted to put together something nice for Jo, Sam, and Holden.

She started by unwrapping the cheeses—a creamy brie that felt like velvet under her fingertips, a sharp aged cheddar with a robust aroma, and a tangy goat cheese, crumbly and soft. She arranged them thoughtfully on the polished wooden board she had recently acquired, its rich grain adding an elegant touch to the presentation.

Next came the crackers—an assortment of whole-grain, seeded, and classic water biscuits, each offering a different texture and flavor profile. Bridget enjoyed the rhythmic sound they made as she placed them strategically around the cheeses, imagining the different combinations her friends might try.

The figs were her personal favorite. She loved their unique, sweet flavor and the way their softness contrasted with the cheese and crackers. She placed them on the board, their deep purple skins adding a pop of color and a hint of exotic flair.

To complete the array, she added some cured meats—thinly sliced prosciutto, spicy salami, and a few slices of smoked ham. Their savory scents mingled with the other elements, creating an inviting aroma.

Jo entered the kitchen just as Bridget carefully positioned the last of the meats on the tray.

"Pretty fancy. Not sure this crowd will appreciate it." Jo folded a slice of prosciutto into her mouth, her eyes sparkling with amusement. "Just regular cheese and crackers would be fine."

Bridget shot her a wry smile, her fingers nimbly arranging a handful of cheddar cubes. "It's fun. Besides, it's the least I can do." She didn't elaborate on how much Jo's support over the years and her sister letting her live here meant to her.

"Seen Pickles today?" Jo asked, peering through the window, her gaze trailing into the woods.

"Yep. He ate the food I left. Let me pet him, but I don't think he liked smelling Major on me, though."

"Major? The cat at the station?"

"I stopped by to see if you were in when I was in town getting the food. I hope you don't mind." The thought hadn't occurred to her that Jo would mind, but maybe she did?

"Not at all! Sorry I wasn't there." Jo grabbed a cube of cheese then frowned. "Major lets you pet him?"

"Yeah. He's sweet." Bridget, relieved that Jo didn't mind her stopping into the station, artfully arranged grapes on the board. "I met Kevin. He's getting the hang of things, it seems."

"Kevin's been cleared for part-time work." Jo's tone was a mix of relief and concern. "But something doesn't sit right. He puts on a brave face, but I can tell he's struggling."

Bridget kept her focus on the board, rearranging grapes to avoid Jo's penetrating gaze. She'd noticed something off about Kevin, too, but decided to play it down.

The way he'd been looking at that filing cabinet told her he had no idea where to file things, and the way he'd pretended like he knew exactly where the files went told her that he was trying to hide that fact. But the reason he had memory issues was because of the coma he'd been in when saving Lucy from a bullet, so that made him a hero in her book. "I think he was acting fine. He was filing up a storm when I went in."

Jo quirked an eyebrow, her worry easing slightly. “Really? That’s a relief.”

A sudden knock on their door stole their attention

“Hey, you guys in there?” Sam’s voice rang through the small cottage.

“Yes, come in!” Jo yelled.

Seconds later, Lucy burst into the kitchen, all tail wags and wiggles.

Bridget exhaled a sigh of relief. For now, she’d keep her observations about Kevin to herself. After all, everyone had their secrets. Even her.

SAM FOLLOWED Lucy into the kitchen, where Jo and Bridget were preparing food. He raised an eyebrow as he snagged a piece of cheese from the elaborate plate on the kitchen counter. “What’s all this? Looks pretty fancy.”

Jo chuckled and passed him his favorite Mooseneck beer. “You know, there’s a world beyond canned beans and hot dogs, Sam.”

“Hi, Sam.” Bridget gave Sam a hug, and he felt a beam of pride. He couldn’t really take credit for the way Bridget had cleaned up her addiction, but he liked to think he’d helped a little bit.

“I’ve been watching cooking shows and thought you guys might enjoy some of the finer things in life. There are figs, three kinds of cheeses, and prosciutto.” Bridget handed the tray to Sam. “Will you take it into the living room?”

With the beer and plate, Sam moved into the living room, Lucy following closely behind.

Sam eased into an armchair, his gaze roaming the room. The place had a touch of feminine charm that was a far cry from his rugged cabin, but it wasn’t frilly, so he didn’t feel out of place. It was clean, cozy. Filled with trinkets that gave it a lived-in feel. “Place is looking good, Jo.”

Across the room, Jo was arranging a few more logs in the fireplace, her back to him. “Yeah, I’m settling in now, and I’ve got a meeting with the landlord tomorrow. Try to make it permanent,” she said, her voice casual. Too casual.

Sam eyed her for a moment. She was trying to act casual about it, as if it didn’t matter, but she wasn’t fooling anyone. “Hope you’re not paying list

price. You put enough work into this place. Brought it back to life."

He took a swig from his beer, eyes flitting back to the fireplace.

"We'll see." Jo finally turned around, a hopeful glimmer in her eyes.

Sam nodded, taking another sip. "Best of luck. You deserve it."

"Thanks, Sam." Her lips curled into a small smile. The kind of smile that said she appreciated his words more than he knew.

All he could do was tip his beer in response, sinking a little deeper into the chair. Even though he and Jo were close, all this time he'd wondered if maybe she was only renting because she didn't plan on staying. He was glad she was making a move to buy the cottage. He'd hate to lose her at the station and as a friend.

A lingering twinge of hurt remained in Sam over Jo's initial secrecy. She'd come to White Rock for a lead on her sister's case, not opening up to him about her true motives until very recently. Yet he understood that situations could spiral and lines could blur. He'd been down that road himself, keeping secrets when perhaps he shouldn't have.

As they talked, the door creaked open, diverting their attention to the entrance.

"Knock, knock." Holden Joyce stood in the doorway with a six-pack of beer. Holden had to be in his early sixties, but the only thing that gave away his age was the gray in his hair.

Sam glanced at him, grudging respect in his eyes. "Look who's here. Old Man Winter himself."

Holden's hearty laugh filled the room. "Flattery will get you everywhere, Sam. Or is it mockery? I can't tell the difference."

Sam shrugged, a wistful smile playing on his lips. "Maybe a bit of both."

Bridget gestured toward an overstuffed chair. "Have a seat. Want a glass for your beer?"

With a simple shake of his head, Holden replied, "Nope," as he twisted off the beer cap and took a leisurely sip. He eased into one of the plush chairs, eyeing the charcuterie board with a slight frown.

Sam noticed and felt a grin tug at the corners of his mouth. Apparently, he wasn't the only one who thought it was a little bit fancy.

Once upon a time, the relationship between Sam and Holden would have been described as rocky at best. But things had changed. Sam knew that Bridget saw Holden as a father figure, and that alone carried weight.

And now, with Holden helping them dig into the cold case of Jo and Bridget's sister, Sam found his initial skepticism about the man waning.

As if on cue, Lucy ambled over to Holden, her tail wagging in restrained optimism. She nudged his hand with her nose, and he obliged, petting her softly. Sam watched the interaction, his thoughts crystallizing.

If Lucy liked Holden, then he had to be decent. That dog had instincts sharper than any detective's, and her approval was as good as a background check in Sam's book.

Perhaps it was time to fully let go of past reservations. After all, they were all on the same side now.

Sam scooped up a fig with a cracker. Was that how you were supposed to eat those things? Should he put cheese on it? He added a piece of cheese and took a bite. That was pretty good, so maybe Bridget was on to something.

Bridget leaned in, shifting the atmosphere. "Remember Eve Duchamp?"

Jo nodded. "Our babysitter? She was devastated when Tammy disappeared."

Holden took a sip of his beer before speaking. "The FBI put her family under the microscope, especially her dad."

"He was cleared, though, right?" Jo asked, a trace of old pain in her eyes.

Holden shook his head. "Yep. They found nothing on him. But the scrutiny still left a stain on the family. They changed their name and moved away."

Bridget glanced at Jo. "So, what originally brought you to White Rock?"

"I got a tip from one of the seasoned detectives on Tammy's case," Jo began. "But what does Eve have to do with any of this?"

Bridget piled some prosciutto and fig on a cracker. "Well, you remember she moved away, and as Holden said, her family changed their last name."

Jo, who'd been reaching for another slice of cheese, paused. "Yeah?"

"Turns out they moved to White Rock," Bridget stated, her eyes meeting Jo's.

Jo looked back and forth between Bridget and Holden, her hand hovering in midair. "What? But her family had nothing to do with Tammy's disappearance. Are you sure they moved here?"

“Absolutely.” Bridget nodded. “Heard a rumor, so I checked it through some resources Reese has access to.”

Sam’s brow quirked up. He knew Bridget and Reese had become friends, but he didn’t realize Bridget had called on her to use her resources.

“Don’t worry,” Bridget hurried to add. “She doesn’t know that we are working a cold case. I said it was about an old friend from a former life. I hope I didn’t just get her into trouble.”

“Nah. I’ve asked her to do things off the record for me too.” Sam leaned back. “Eve’s family probably wanted to move away from it all. But moving here is quite a coincidence. People often move near relatives, though. Could just be that simple. Besides, the police cleared the father. Eve would have been too young, but… did she have an older brother?”

Jo met Sam’s eyes as she picked up a slice of cheddar. “She did. Barry. But he was never a suspect.”

The room fell silent for a moment, the atmosphere thickening.

Sam took another sip of his beer, placing it on the table. “That’s a good find, Bridget. We should look into this further.”

Bridget looked puzzled, still holding a cracker. “How?”

Holden leaned forward, catching Sam’s eye. “First, find out how long they stayed in town. Are they still here? Any relatives? Were children abducted from this area while they lived here?”

Jo shook her head while she chewed on a cheddar-topped cracker. “Unlikely. Their last name was Duchamp, and there are no Duchamps around here.”

“But relatives could be on the mom’s side,” Sam pointed out, taking a piece of cheddar from the board. “Different last name.”

Holden nodded. “Still, it’s a long shot, thinking their move here has anything to do with them being involved. But every angle’s worth investigating.”

He paused, taking a sip of his own beer. “One thing’s for sure—this case is different from most others I’ve worked on. Typically, serial killers go after adults. Tammy was a child.”

Sam looked at Holden then at Jo and Bridget. “Which means we are looking for someone who is a true monster.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

The thumb drive clicked into the slot with a sense of finality. Kevin's fingers danced across the keyboard, his brow furrowed in concentration. Access denied. He tried another combination. Denied again. Each attempt was a hope rising and falling in the span of a heartbeat.

He reached for his water, the glass cold against his palm, the sound of his swallow loud in the silent room. His eyes were locked on the screen, the blinking cursor a taunt, the password field a chasm between him and the truth.

Why the heck can't I remember?

He was sure that the drive was some sort of evidence in a case, but why had it been in his possession on the day he was shot? His brother Brian had dropped it off with Kevin's personal effects at the station while he lay unconscious, mind and memories adrift. He didn't remember any visits from Brian while he was in the hospital.

The knowledge that Brian had been the one to bring his personal effects to the station was unsettling for Kevin. They hadn't seen eye to eye on most things, their lives taking divergent paths early on. Brian's path had always skirted the gray areas of legality, his career choices a series of get-rich-quick schemes that never quite panned out.

That Brian had been there, talking to the doctors and nurses on his behalf while Kevin was unconscious, felt out of character. It gnawed at Kevin, this niggling suspicion that Brian's presence wasn't rooted in familial concern. Why now? After all these years of distant, sporadic

meetups during obligatory family gatherings, why would Brian suddenly care about him?

Brian had not visited and had only called once since Kevin had woken from the coma. Another fact that proved Brian probably didn't really care. There was an edge to Brian's voice on the call, a probing undertone as he asked about Kevin's recovery—no, not the recovery but specifically about when he'd be back at work, what cases he was on.

What are you up to, Brian?

But that was one mystery that might not be solved. With Brian, one never knew. The thumb drive, though… Well, Kevin hoped he could solve that. It could be important.

When he'd first looked at the drive, he thought it was empty. But after talking to Wyatt, he'd discovered that drives could seem empty if someone really wanted to hide what was on them.

Wyatt hadn't seemed at all suspicious as to why Kevin was asking all the questions. In fact, he seemed glad Kevin was interested in computer forensics, and it had been simple for Kevin to get more ideas from him on how to find out if the drive had data on it without actually telling Wyatt he had a drive.

Kevin still wasn't sure why he didn't want Wyatt to know. With his memory being all messed up, he was operating on instinct.

He'd discovered there was data on the drive, but of course, it had been locked behind a password. He'd been trying to crack that password for weeks now. With each failed attempt to breach the drive's defenses, Kevin's frustration mounted.

Maybe this was all for nothing. Kevin squeezed his eyes shut, trying to remember why he had that thumb drive and how to access it. But somehow in the dark recesses he felt like he actually never knew the answers in the first place. He was just keeping the drive because it was somehow important. And if it was that important back before he was shot, it was probably pretty important now.

The drive was but one of the foggy memories that eluded him. There was also something about a corner. He had no idea why that kept tugging at him. He felt it was loosely related to Lucy and Sam but had no idea why. Apparently that was important too. Sam had asked him about it and said he mentioned it when he'd been in a coma.

He turned his thoughts back to the thumb drive. Foggy memories emerged. Tyler Richardson, the officer who was shot last year. Lucas Thorne. Did the drive have something to do with them? The names flickered at the periphery of his consciousness, elusive yet insistent. He inhaled sharply, the air cutting through the fog of uncertainty.

Maybe he should just bring it to the station. He was sure Wyatt could crack into it in no time. But the thumb drive had been found in his pocket, which meant he hadn't turned it over to Sam for a reason. That reason eluded him now.

Better safe than sorry. If he hadn't wanted anyone to see what was on the drive back then, he might not want them to see it now. Better to get a look at it himself first.

His pulse throbbed in his temples as he put his fingers back on the keys. Try again. Keep trying.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The following morning, Sam and Lucy walked into the station and were immediately hit by the pungent smell of fresh paint. He squinted at the walls, now a shade of gray that was actually kind of pleasant. Reese was wielding a paint roller with an artist's focus.

"Hey, it's looking good, Reese. Smells like a chemical plant, though."

"Beauty often comes at a cost, Sam." Reese set the paint roller down, bent over to pet Lucy, and grinned. "Lucy, stay away from the walls." Reese raised her voice, yelling into the squad room, "You, too, Major, especially that tail of yours!"

Just as Sam was about to reply, the front door burst open, and in strode Mayor Henley Jamison, his expensive suit impeccably tailored and his tie flapping over his shoulder as if caught in a breeze only he could feel. He halted midstride to sneeze then scowled at the freshly painted walls.

"This does look better," he conceded, nodding at Reese, who was standing paint roller in hand. "Good job."

Sam glanced from Reese to the mayor then asked, "Something I can help you with, Mayor?"

Jamison's frown deepened. "I'm here about that case involving the activist. The owl people are in an uproar."

Sam raised an eyebrow. "Owl people? I didn't know we had owl people."

"Well, we do. They call themselves the Owl Protection Society, and they're on my case," the mayor huffed, striding past the row of brass-embossed post office boxes that doubled as makeshift dividers.

As the mayor and Sam entered the squad room, Jo and Wyatt looked up from their battered metal desks. Jamison's eyes narrowed as he surveyed the room, his expression softening as his gaze settled on Major, who was on top of the metal filing cabinet.

Major, who lashed out at most visitors, had recently taken a liking to the mayor for reasons Sam couldn't understand. The cat rolled on his back and purred as the mayor took something from his pocket.

"Got something for you." Jamison tossed the toy to Major, who batted it from the air with one paw. It landed on the ground, arousing Lucy's curiosity.

Lucy trotted over.

Major jumped from the cabinet.

Lucy sniffed the toy.

"Meow!" Major lashed out his razor-sharp claw, connecting with Lucy's nose.

"Yipe!" Lucy ran off into Sam's office, and Major picked the toy up in his mouth and trotted off in the opposite direction.

"And here I thought they were getting along," Sam said.

"Sorry." Jamison shrugged. "So, back to business. I need this case solved pronto before the news blows up. The owl aspect adds interest and pretty soon it will be on all the TV stations. That won't be good for my campaign."

Sam felt a spike of annoyance. The mayor's political concerns should be the least of anyone's worries when a life was lost. "We're doing everything we can to seek justice for the victim, campaign or no campaign."

His eyes flicked to Jo. "Any progress on identifying more about the victim?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. Still running down leads."

Jamison seemed visibly perturbed. "Well, you better find something fast."

"It would help if you got that search warrant issued so we could get her things at the motel," Sam said.

Jamison gave a curt nod. "My assistant is faxing that over even as we speak."

They all turned to look at the fax machine, which whirred to life.

"Relax," Sam said, exasperated. "One unsolved murder isn't going to ruin your campaign."

“You should hope not,” Jamison shot back. “If you think Thorne buying up land was bad, wait until you see what Convale is planning.”

Sam’s brows furrowed. “Thorne was a drug dealer. Convale is a corporation. How bad could they be?”

Jamison snorted. “You don’t want to find out.”

“How do you know so much about that, and what does this have to do with your mayoral run?” Sam asked, increasingly perplexed.

“Let’s just say Marnie Wilson has tight connections with Convale,” Jamison replied. “If she gets in, you might not like the changes coming to this town.”

Sam exchanged a quick, wary glance with Jo.

“Listen, don’t worry. We have two good leads, and in my experience, as long as you have one lead, it usually snowballs into more,” Sam tried to reassure the mayor.

Jamison leaned in closer, his curiosity piqued. “Leads? Like what?”

Sam took a moment before answering. “Well, Jackson Pressler thought he might’ve seen someone.” Sam didn’t mention that Jackson’s vague description of a young man in a baseball cap wasn’t a blockbuster lead.

“And the other?”

“The victim had some friction with Archie Wells.”

“Wells, the builder?” Jamison’s eyebrows shot up in surprise.

“That’s the one.”

Jamison looked puzzled. “You think a guy that high up on the social ladder would resort to murder? It’s a stretch.”

“I’ve heard Archie has a temper,” Sam countered, locking eyes with the mayor.

“A temper is one thing. Murder’s another,” Jamison huffed, glancing at Jo and Wyatt, who had stopped pretending not to listen.

“I agree,” Sam conceded, “but it’s a lead, and in my line of work, you follow those wherever they take you.”

“Do your best. That’s all I ask,” Jamison said as he exited, a mix of worry and impatience clouding his face.

No sooner had the door swung shut behind him than Jo and Wyatt swiveled in their chairs. “What was all that about Convale?” Jo’s brow furrowed.

“Yeah, he seemed like he was holding something back,” Wyatt chimed in, his eyes narrowing.

Sam shrugged, trying to dispel the lingering unease. “What could it be? They’re buying up land, sure, which isn’t great for us, but how much damage could they really do?”

“But Marnie being in with them? What’s that about?” Jo pressed, still puzzled.

“Politics,” Sam sighed. “Jamison probably doesn’t want any factor, no matter how small, tipping the scales in Marnie’s favor.”

“But what he said about Convale changing things… That didn’t sit well with you either, did it?” Wyatt observed.

Sam paused. “No, it didn’t. But how much can they change? It’s probably nothing to worry about, and right now we have a case to solve, so let’s make sure Major didn’t do any damage to Lucy and then head on out to Archie Wells’s place and see what he has to say.”

CHAPTER NINE

Sam, Jo, and Lucy approached Archie Wells's building, its sleek, modern façade sharply contrasting with the surrounding quaint New England architecture. Sam couldn't help but think it was as out of place as a skyscraper in a cornfield.

As they entered the spacious, well-lit reception area, the receptionist looked up, her gaze flicking from Sam and Jo to the imposing figure of Lucy by their side. There was a moment of hesitation in her eyes, a subtle mix of surprise and concern, before she regained her composure.

"Good morning," she greeted, offering a practiced smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "How can I assist you today?"

"We're here to see Mr. Wells," Sam said, displaying his badge. "Chief Sam Mason and Sergeant Jo Harris from White Rock PD."

The receptionist's nod was quick, a little too quick. "Of course, Chief Mason, Sergeant Harris," she said, picking up the phone with slightly trembling hands. "Please, have a seat. I'll see if Mr. Wells is available."

Sam and Jo took a seat in the sleek chairs lining the wall, the polished chrome and leather clashing with the traditional attire of the town's residents. Lucy, unfazed by the surroundings, sat obediently at Sam's feet, her eyes scanning the room.

A few minutes passed, filled with an awkward silence punctuated only by the soft clicks of the receptionist's keyboard and the distant hum of office machinery. Finally, the receptionist hung up the phone and stood up, her posture rigid.

“Mr. Wells will see you now,” she announced, her voice still maintaining that rehearsed warmth but with an undercurrent of nervousness. “Please, follow me.”

They were led down a corridor lined with abstract paintings, the kind that looked expensive but said little. As they approached Archie’s office, Sam noticed the receptionist’s pace slowed slightly, her shoulders tensed as if bracing for something.

The office door opened to reveal a spacious room with a large, imposing desk. Behind it sat Archie Wells, a man whose appearance was as sharp as the building he occupied.

Wells was a man who knew how to command a room. Tall and impeccably dressed, he wore a suit that probably cost more than what some people in town earned in a month. His brown eyes had a penetrating quality, like they could dissect your thoughts if you held his gaze for too long. Charismatic but not someone you’d want to underestimate.

He rose from behind his large, imposing desk, a monument to his ego or success—Sam wasn’t sure which. Archie offered his hand with a genial smile, first to Sam then to Jo. He moved to greet Lucy next, but the dog stayed put beside Sam, unyielding. Archie’s hand hung in the air for a moment before retreating, a brief flicker of annoyance crossing his features.

“What can I do for you, Chief Mason?” Archie finally asked, resettling into his leather chair.

Sam glanced at Jo. She was scrutinizing Archie, her eyes almost squinting. She had that look—the one she got when she was mentally recording every detail. She would have her opinions, sure as day follows night, but for now, she stayed silent, and so did Lucy.

The dog’s stillness wasn’t lost on Sam. Lucy had a keen sense about people, and her nonreaction was, in itself, telling. Archie might have the charm, the looks, and even the money, but Lucy wasn’t buying it, and that was good enough for Sam.

Sam looked at Archie and leaned forward slightly. “We’d like to ask some questions about April Summers.”

Archie’s jaw tightened ever so slightly. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowing just a fraction. It was a game of minute gestures now, and Sam was all in. “I don’t really know her,” he admitted. “Just that she likes to get into other people’s business.”

“Like yours?” Sam probed.

Archie shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “I guess you could say that.”

“I heard she was disputing something about the land you wanted to build your latest project on,” Sam continued.

“That’s right,” Archie confirmed. “Said it should be unbuildable as it was wetlands. She was wrong.”

“But it held up your project?” Sam pressed.

Archie nodded, his gesture restrained but conveying a world of frustration. “Yes.”

“That probably cost you a lot of money,” Sam mused.

Archie snorted. “You don’t know the half of it. What’s she done now? I hope someone is finally realizing what a fraud she is.”

Sam found the comment interesting. “Really? Why do you say that?”

Archie locked eyes with Sam, and for a moment, it felt like a measuring contest. “Let’s just say people like her have a knack for making noise but not much else. All talk, no substance. That woman is not what she seems. Why are you asking all this? Something happened, didn’t it?”

Sam nodded, watching Archie’s reaction closely. “Yeah, April Summers was murdered.”

Archie’s expression changed as realization dawned. “You don’t think I had something to do with it?”

“Did you?” Sam returned evenly. “She was costing you a lot of money.”

Archie shook his head. “Was. Past tense. We resolved our issue. But if someone killed her, you might have a long list of suspects.”

“How so?” Sam asked.

Archie looked uneasy as he spoke. “Look, I guess it’s okay to say this now, but you didn’t hear it from me. When I said April was a fraud, I meant it. Sure, she acted like she was gung ho about the environment, but she wasn’t above looking the other way if you paid her off.”

“Is that what happened with you?” Sam asked, leaning in a bit.

Archie sighed. “That’s water under the bridge now, but you can bet if she was trying to extort money from me that I wasn’t the only one.”

“SO WHAT DID you make of Archie?” Sam asked Jo once they were in the Tahoe and driving away.

Jo turned her gaze away from the window to look at Sam. “I felt like he was really surprised to find out April was dead.”

Sam nodded, processing her input. “Yeah, he seemed genuinely taken aback. That part felt real.” He paused for a moment then asked, “Do you think he was telling the truth about April extorting money from him?”

Jo considered for a moment before responding. “He seemed to be truthful about that too. His reaction didn’t come across as rehearsed or deceptive.”

“That’s what’s puzzling,” Sam said, his brow furrowing. “It’s out of character for an activist, isn’t it? If she truly cared about the environment, how could she just let people off the hook because they pay her?”

“Maybe she cared more about the money than the environment,” Jo suggested. “It’s not unheard of for people to start off with good intentions and then get swayed by financial incentives. Could be April was playing both sides.”

Sam nodded. “Guess we’ll have to dig deep into her financials. You want a coffee?”

“Of course. Why do you even ask?” Jo smiled.

Sam turned into the drive-through of Brewed Awakening, their favorite coffee shop. Lucy’s ears perked up in expectation of a donut hole or two.

“If what Archie says about him having resolved his issues with April is true, then he has no motive.”

“Well, much as I don’t like him, I do have to admit that the apartment complex is under construction again, so maybe he was telling the truth,” Jo said.

Sam shrugged. “Maybe. Doesn’t mean he didn’t have another project that April was trying to mess up. I’ll check on that.”

They got to the window, and Sam ordered their coffees.

Shelly leaned out the window to smile at Lucy. “You want a couple of donut holes?” She glanced at Sam for approval, and he nodded. He could hear Lucy’s tail thumping against the back seat.

“Here you go, Chief, Jo. Some for Lucy too.”

“Thanks, Shelly,” Sam replied, taking the bag and handing over the payment.

As he drove away, Lucy let out a soft whine from the back seat, her keen nose having already detected the smell of the donut holes. Jo reached

in, twisting around in her seat to offer a donut hole to the dog, who accepted it gratefully.

"So, did you find anything in April's past that might indicate she was into extortion or blackmail?" he asked, resuming their earlier conversation.

"That's the thing," Jo said, sipping her coffee. "I can't find much about her past at all. She's squeaky clean until about six years ago. Then there were the usual arrests that come with being an environmental activist. Before that, nothing."

He took a sip of his coffee, savoring the earthy brew. He hoped it would kick-start his brain into figuring out their next step. "That's strange. Maybe she wasn't into activism before that."

"Or extortion," Jo added. Sam wondered about his next steps. Extortion was a seedy business, the hallmarks of which couldn't often be found through proper police channels. Luckily, Sam knew someone who specialized in digging up dirt like that. Mick Gervasi, his best friend since childhood, was always the guy to call when he needed to go off the record. Mick had a knack for finding out things no one else could.

"Should we bring Mick into this?" Sam asked, his eyes meeting Jo's for a moment.

Sam couldn't see Jo's eyes behind her Oakley sunglasses, but her slight nod and the twitch of the corners of her lips told him she was on board. "He could be useful."

"Wanna meet tonight at Holy Spirits?" Sam asked. Holy Spirits was their favorite bar, a decommissioned church transformed into a local watering hole. "Mick's in town, and I'm sure he'll be up for it."

Jo's eyes twinkled as she chuckled. "Sounds good. Maybe our case will get some divine intervention."

Sam laughed. "Speaking of cases, did Bridget say anything about her plan to look into that babysitter's family?"

"I think she might be talking to Reese about it," Jo responded, her voice tinged with something he couldn't quite place. Hope, maybe? Or fear.

"Maybe we could invite Bridget to join us tonight, discuss what she's found," Jo said.

For a moment, Sam hesitated. Bridget was a recovering drug addict and alcoholic. "You sure that's a good idea, considering it's a bar?"

"It's her choice to make, Sam. If she's uncomfortable, she'll say so."

That settled it. “All right then. We should see if Holden wants to meet up too.”

Jo glanced at the dashboard clock. “I have that meeting with my landlord at two, but I’ll call Bridget to see if she wants to come, and then she can call Holden. I’ll let you know what they said when I get back to the station. Shouldn’t be more than an hour or so.”

“Perfect. Then we can leave right from the station to Holy Spirits.” Sam glanced over at her. “Your landlord’s Garvin McDaniels, right?”

Jo nodded.

Sam chuckled. “Be careful with Garvin. My dad knew him, and he’s a tough customer. He’s gruff around the edges but a softy inside. Still, he won’t let that property go cheap.”

Jo smiled, finishing her coffee. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

CHAPTER TEN

Jo's car crunched over the gravel driveway, stirring a cloud of dust as she approached Garvin McDaniels's farmhouse. The old building stood isolated among several acres of unkempt land, its once-vibrant paint dulled and peeling, giving the structure a forlorn appearance. Weeds had claimed the garden, and the fence surrounding the property was in disrepair, with some posts leaning at odd angles.

She parked and stepped out, her gaze sweeping over the sprawling property. Despite its state of neglect, there was a sense of enduring resilience about the place. Trees dotted the landscape, a stone wall edged one side of the property, and wildflowers grew in a field.

Approaching the house, Jo's footsteps echoed on the rickety wooden porch. She raised her hand and knocked gently on the weathered wooden door, its paint chipped and faded from years of neglect. After a moment, the door creaked open, and Garvin McDaniels appeared on the threshold. His brows knitted together as he squinted at her, taking a few seconds longer than she was comfortable with to recognize her.

"Ah, it's you," he finally said, his eyes still narrowed suspiciously. "Jo, right? You're rentin' the cottage by the creek."

"Yes, that's right," she confirmed, her voice laced with polite formality.

"Something wrong with it? Plumbing's not acting up again, is it?" His voice was tinged with concern.

"No, no, everything's fine," Jo assured him quickly, not wanting him to get the wrong idea. "May I come in? I wanted to discuss something about the cottage."

At her assurance, the tension in Garvin's face eased a fraction. "Ah, all right then. Come on in."

She stepped inside, immediately confronted by a strange sight—stacks of empty plastic yogurt containers piled haphazardly throughout the room.

"Excuse the mess," he grumbled, catching her gaze. "I don't like throwin' things away. Those containers are good for leftovers, though I don't have much of that since Ethel passed."

Jo nodded, her eyes darting around. The clutter and piles of unidentifiable junk gave credence to his statement—Garvin really didn't like throwing anything away.

Garvin shuffled toward a cluttered kitchen counter, brushing aside a stack of newspapers to reveal a sleeve of crackers and a jar of peanut butter. "I'd offer you something, but this is about all I've got," he said, gesturing toward the humble spread.

Jo felt a pang of concern. "You've got to eat more than just crackers and peanut butter, Mr. McDaniels."

His eyes narrowed, taking on a defensive edge. "Ethel used to cook proper meals," he said gruffly, referencing his late wife. "But now that it's just me, why bother?"

Jo sensed she'd crossed a line and quickly tried to reroute the conversation. "I didn't mean any offense," she said. "Actually, you don't have to go to any trouble. I didn't come here for food. I came to talk about the cottage."

Garvin's eyes flicked up, as if caught off guard. "The cottage? What about it?"

"I'd like to buy it," Jo said, her voice steady despite the inner churn of thoughts about Garvin's living condition and the newly added layer of complexity about the property.

Garvin stared at her for a moment, as if processing what she'd just said. Then his eyes narrowed even more. "Well, now, that is strange."

"Why is that?" Jo asked, leaning in, intrigued and confused.

"Because Marnie Wilson was here the other day asking about that very property," he divulged, scratching his stubbled chin.

Confusion swirled in Jo's mind. Marnie Wilson? Why would she be interested in the cottage? Could Garvin be mistaken? She couldn't dismiss the thought that maybe, just maybe, the old man was going senile.

"Are you sure it was Marnie?" she pressed, seeking clarity.

“As sure as I’m standin’ here,” he asserted, clear eyes meeting hers.

Garvin’s eyes narrowed as he considered her question. “Why Marnie Wilson would want that cottage, I couldn’t say. But I do know that property is valuable, and I’m not sure I’m ready to let it go.”

Jo nodded, respecting his sentiments. “I understand, Mr. McDaniels. But if you ever do decide to sell, I hope you’ll consider me. I’ve poured a lot into making that cottage my home.”

He looked around his own cluttered living space, where the weight of memories and collected odds and ends pressed against the walls. “You know, it’s not all about money,” he said softly, his voice tinged with nostalgia.

“I agree,” Jo said earnestly. “For me, it’s about the home I’ve created there. I don’t even know the property’s worth, to be honest. But it’s invaluable to me.”

Garvin met her gaze, his eyes softening a touch. “Well, I can appreciate that sentiment. I’ll think on it, but as I said, I’m not ready to sell just yet.”

“I respect that,” Jo said. As she turned toward the door, an idea sprang to mind. The piles of yogurt containers, the crackers, and the peanut butter—all signs of a man missing home-cooked meals and, perhaps, companionship. “If you don’t mind, Mr. McDaniels, maybe I could stop by sometime with some baked goods. My sister makes a mean pie.”

His eyes brightened for a moment. “I wouldn’t say no to that.”

Jo smiled as she left Garvin’s house. If apple pie and occasional company made him more inclined to sell the property to her, so be it. One thing was for sure—Marnie Wilson was not likely to engage in such a grassroots campaign. Sometimes, the little things did count for more.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Bridget was perusing the shelves at a cute local cooking shop called Gourmet Haven when her phone pinged. It was Jo.

"I sort of volunteered you to make a pie," Jo said.

"What?" Bridget frowned as she turned down the center aisle. She was on the hunt for saffron threads. She had stumbled upon a recipe for a decadent saffron risotto on the internet and the dish looked too good not to try.

"I just came from Garvin McDaniels's place, and he doesn't want to sell. But all he had were crackers and peanut butter, and his eyes lit up when I mentioned pie, so I figure I can try to worm my way into his good graces with pie."

Bridget chuckled. "If it helps you get closer to owning that cottage, then consider that pie baked. I'm living there, too, after all. But hopefully, not for long. I really want to find my own place."

"No rush on that. I love having you with me."

"I know, but sooner or later, it will be time for me to fly on my own." Bridget loved living with her sister, but the place was small, and it wouldn't be long before they started getting in each other's way. Jo's house was a great place to get on her feet again, but she didn't want to ruin their close relationship by overstaying her welcome.

"Before I let you go, do you want to meet up with Sam, Mick, and me at Holy Spirits around five thirty?" Jo asked.

Bridget brightened at the mention of Holy Spirits. "Sounds like fun."

"You sure?" Jo's voice was tinged with concern. "It is a bar, after all."

Bridget sighed. “You don’t have to baby me, Jo. Alcohol was never my thing. Don’t worry, I’m not about to spiral.”

Jo let out a relieved breath. “I didn’t think so. Just double-checking. Oh, and can you touch base with Holden? Invite him too. We can talk more about Tammy’s case. Have you made any progress on finding out more about Eve’s family?”

“Not yet,” Bridget admitted, “but I might have something to discuss tonight.”

“Okay, great. See you tonight.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Bridget snagged the jar of saffron and headed toward the register.

Purchase in hand, Bridget exited into the sunny day. She was meeting Reese at the local diner and was excited to see what the other girl had dug up on Eve Duchamp and her family.

Bridget walked down the street, her thoughts drifting to the pie. Apple was probably best. Or maybe she should bake a few different kinds and let Jo decide. She was already savoring the wafting aroma that would fill the kitchen, the crispness of the crust, and the gooey sweetness of the filling, when suddenly her thoughts were shattered. A sensation crept up her spine, an old intuition she hadn’t felt in years. When she lived on the streets, this gut feeling had been her guardian angel. Her heart tightened. Her breathing felt like dragging air through a narrow straw.

Turning, she caught sight of a man—a tall figure all in black, a figure strikingly similar to someone from her past. Panic surged through her veins like hot lead. Without another thought, she darted into the nearest alley, back flush against its rough, brick walls. She clenched her fists and waited for him to find her. Each second felt like a lifetime, but minutes passed, and nobody came.

Slowly, Bridget peeked out from her hiding spot. The street had returned to its normal bustle of tourists and locals. Had she imagined him? Maybe her mind had conjured up a monster from fragments of her past. She so hoped that was the case because that man knew things—terrible things she never wanted to resurface.

Taking a steadying breath, she resumed her walk toward the diner. Her eyes darted in her peripheral vision, her heart still thudding like a drum in her chest. She would have to act normal, especially when she saw Reese. No one could know about the man or the dark secrets clinging to her past.

She couldn't risk anything ruining the idyllic life she was making for herself here in White Rock.

By the time Bridget reached the cozy, retro-themed diner, her heart had finally settled down, and she felt more like herself. The homey atmosphere of the diner helped calm her down even more. The air was filled with the comforting aroma of coffee and grilled beef. The clatter of dishes and silverware melded with snippets of conversations mixed with laughter from nearby tables.

She spotted Reese already seated in one of the booths, her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail, engrossed in her phone. Bridget felt a momentary burst of gratitude. Making new friends hadn't been easy, and she appreciated the budding friendship with Reese.

"Hey there," Bridget greeted, her voice tinged with genuine warmth.

Reese looked up, and her face broke into a smile. "Bridget! Hey, come sit."

Bridget slid in the opposite side. The red vinyl of the booth was worn but welcoming to the touch, and the lighting—a mix of natural daylight and fluorescent lamps—cast a warm, slightly nostalgic glow over everything.

Bridget felt a sense of relief wash over her. Everything here was normal, homey, easy. No one was bursting through the door trying to ruin her life. Now she was certain she had imagined the man on the street being the same one from her past. Probably just a touch of PTSD from the horrible life she used to lead.

Being around Reese was easy—she was funny, smart, and one of those people who made you feel like you'd known them forever. Bridget found herself admiring Reese, especially her ambition. Reese was going to the police academy, and Bridget couldn't help but feel a pang of envy. What a decisive path to have.

Bridget's eyes flicked briefly over the laminated menu, its colorful pictures of milkshakes and burgers a bit faded from years of use. She already knew what she craved—a comforting grilled-cheese sandwich.

The waitress, a middle-aged woman with a warm smile and streaks of silver in her hair, approached their booth. Her name tag read Jenny, and her uniform bore a few faint stains from what was likely a long shift. "What can I get you ladies?"

"I'll have a grilled cheese, please," Bridget said, handing the menu back to Jenny.

“And I’ll take a BLT,” Reese added, setting her phone face down beside her coffee mug.

“Coming right up,” Jenny assured them, tucking her notepad into her apron and sauntering back toward the kitchen.

“What’s in the bag?” Reese gestured toward the small paper bag that sat next to Bridget on the booth.

“Saffron.” Bridget grinned, pulling the tiny jar from the bag to show her. “I found a recipe for saffron risotto I wanted to try.”

“Sounds delish. I love how you keep trying new recipes and everything comes out awesome. I burn everything I make.”

Bridget laughed, the sound tinged with a lightness that belied the morning’s unsettling episode. “I’m sure you’re not that bad. Besides, you’re probably good at a lot of things that I stink at.”

Reese’s eyes sparkled as she leaned closer over the table. The atmosphere seemed to shift, filling with a sense of expectancy. “Speaking of things I’m good at, I scoured my resources and found out more about Eve Duchamp and her family.”

Bridget’s heart jumped in her chest. “Go on,” Bridget urged, her eyes locked on to Reese’s.

“They changed their name to Woodson and stayed in town for years,” Reese said.

The waitress came back with their lunches, and they refrained from talking until she was well out of earshot.

“Are they still in town?” Bridget asked.

Reese grabbed the ketchup and smacked the bottom as she poured a puddle for her fries. “Hard to know. I couldn’t get any information on that. I dug around a bit but couldn’t find out anything more.”

Bridget settled back in her seat. “Well, what you did find is huge. Thank you so much. I just hope you’re not getting yourself in any trouble for me.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Reese reassured her with a small wave of her hand. “I’m happy to help. Besides, what you’re doing—searching for your past, for the truth—it’s brave. I admire that.”

Bridget felt a warm glow at Reese’s words. She needed that encouragement more than she cared to admit.

As they dug into their lunches, the conversation pivoted from the serious to the mundane. Reese entertained Bridget with amusing anecdotes about her police academy classmates and their trainers. Bridget found

herself laughing genuinely, her grilled cheese forgotten momentarily as she relished the natural camaraderie.

It had been such a long time since she'd had a friend she could just talk to. A long time since she didn't have to glance over her shoulder, anticipating trouble. And it had certainly been a long time since she could sit down and enjoy a good meal without the weight of her past threatening to spoil it.

A warmth washed over her. Here she was, building a new life piece by piece. A life filled with potential friendships, promising opportunities, and a freedom she had never thought she'd experience. She was determined to protect this fledgling happiness at all costs.

If that man was in town, he couldn't be allowed to talk. Never. Her darkest secret had to stay buried. Desperation had driven her to unspeakable acts to survive, and the weight of it was a stone, cold and heavy, in her soul. But as she looked at Reese, her resolve solidified.

She'd protect her new life.

At any cost.

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Where's Reese?" Jo asked as she walked into Sam's office. Sam and Wyatt were standing behind the desk, staring at the corkboard.

"Lunch," Sam said without turning around.

Jo's gaze fell on the puddle of sunlight under the window. "And Lucy?"

Sam turned and looked at the place on the floor where Lucy would normally be lying. He frowned. "Not sure."

Sam turned back to the corkboard and the crime scene photos, notes, and maps. The lone footprint was the centerpiece of his scrutiny—a singular trail of evidence that seemed out of place.

"Boots," he muttered, more to himself than to Jo or Wyatt. "Heavy-duty. Not Wells's style. He wouldn't be caught dead in them. And he doesn't have any new projects going for April to mess with, so he might have been telling the truth."

Jo tilted her head, absorbing the implication. Sam was right. She couldn't picture Wells wearing boots. Of course, there were hundreds of people in White Rock who did. But the strange tread could help them narrow down suspects. She pushed off from the doorframe, drawn into the puzzle.

Sam's finger tapped the dirt-impressed sole printed on the photograph. "These footprints definitely indicate one person," he stated firmly. The singular set of tracks emerging from the scene was isolated, indicative of a lone perpetrator—a detail that both narrowed and broadened their scope of inquiry.

Wyatt piped up, shuffling through his notes. “Checked the other set against April’s shoes. They’re a match.” His voice was steady, the facts falling into place like pieces of a familiar puzzle.

“Good work,” Sam said.

“And I got the pair of shoes Beryl Thorne was wearing that day.” Wyatt smirked. “She asked about you and seemed hurt that you didn’t come out yourself.”

Jo rolled her eyes.

Sam ignored them both. “And they checked out?”

“Yep, exact match.”

“Okay, so we can rule out these.” Sam took a red pen and x’d out several footprints. “All that is left is the shoe with the odd tread.”

“So we’re looking at the killer’s footsteps,” Jo concluded, the weight of the evidence settling in the room like dust after a scuffle. The theory turned to certainty with her words, sharpening the focus of their quest. “Looks big. Probably a man.”

Sam leaned in, his eyes narrowing. “We can determine shoe size, maybe even the make, if we’re lucky. If we match the treads to a suspect…” He let the possibility hang in the air, tantalizingly within reach but just as elusive.

“But we need a suspect first,” Jo added, the reality of their predicament grounding her speculation. “Can’t exactly start flipping people over and checking their shoes.”

Sam’s attention moved to the photo of the paint-stained bandana. “And this,” he said, his voice gaining an edge, “is another clue that might help, but we need to narrow things down to someone painting.”

“And let’s not forget that Jackson saw a young man with a baseball cap,” Wyatt added. “Yet another part of the puzzle. But we need to snap the pieces together.”

“Construction workers,” Jo pondered aloud, taking a step closer. “New projects, renovations around town.” She was already compiling a mental list of recent building permits issued in the area. “Could just be someone painting their room. Hard to find out who is doing that.”

“Might not be a bad idea to talk to Mel down at the paint store.”

Before Jo could answer, a ball of black fur streaked through the room. Major carried the toy Jamison had given him in his mouth. Lucy chased behind, her nails scrabbling out from under her as she tried to turn the corner too fast.

“Guess those two are back at it,” Wyatt said as they all peeked out into the squad room. Major was up on the filling cabinet, the toy tucked securely under her front paws as he stared down at Lucy. Lucy danced and whined and looked at Sam and Jo as if they were going to intercede for her.

“Sorry, buddy.” Sam patted Lucy on top of her head. “I’m not messing with Major, and if you’re smart, you won’t either.”

Wyatt laughed. “Truth. Speaking of messing with the king of the filing cabinet, do you know where the Deardorff file is, Jo?”

“It should be in the bottom drawer,” Jo responded, motioning with a casual flick of her wrist toward the cabinet. The ongoing goat saga between Nettie Deardorff and Rita Hoelscher was town lore by now—comical, if not a tiresome distraction from serious police work.

Wyatt shook his head. “Nope. I looked.”

Jo frowned. They always kept it there, but Kevin was doing the filing now. She rummaged around in the top drawer and found it in the back. “Here it is.”

“Thanks.” Wyatt took the file to his desk. “I need to enter the latest incident. Bitsy ate the giant pumpkin Nettie was growing. Bitsy was Rita’s goat, and most of their arguments revolved around her.”

“How did it go with Garvin?” Sam asked, shifting gears from the investigative trail to personal matters with an ease that came from years of balancing the professional and the personal.

Jo proceeded to her desk, a half smile touching her lips as she pulled out her bottom drawer and put her feet up on it. “Well, he’s an interesting character. Lonely, I’d say. But get this, he said Marnie Wilson was interested in buying the cottage too.”

Sam’s eyebrows lifted in surprise, mirroring Wyatt’s perplexed expression. “Marnie? What interest could she have in your place?” There was a hint of skepticism in his voice.

Wyatt chimed in, “Doesn’t add up. Doesn’t she live in a fancy house?”

Jo shrugged, the corners of her eyes crinkling in thought. “I’m not sure. Garvin seemed pretty convinced though. But he also made it clear he’s not looking to sell just yet.”

“You think Garvin was confused?” Sam asked, the detective in him finding it hard to let go of an anomaly.

Jo shook her head, her certainty firm. “No, he was pretty lucid about it. But I have a plan.” Her smile turned sly, a hint of mischief sparking in her

eyes.

“Oh?” Sam leaned back in his chair, intrigued. “Do tell.”

Her smile widened as she pushed off from the doorframe, ready to leave them with something to ponder. “Let’s just say I’ve got a secret weapon to persuade Garvin when he’s ready to sell. Homemade pie has a way of opening doors—and persuading hearts.”

Sam and Wyatt exchanged a look of amused acknowledgment.

“What? I’ll have Bridget make one for you guys too. But right now, I need to get to work on this case.” Jo opened her laptop and started typing. “I know there is something on April Summers that will give us a clue, and I aim to find it.”

“And I,” Wyatt said, “need to meet Bruce at the motel. I got the search warrant, and I can pick up April’s things.”

“That’s good news,” Sam said. “Let’s hope we find something enlightening.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Two hours had ticked by in a blur of fruitless searching when Sam's voice cut through Jo's focus. "Ready to hit Holy Spirits?"

Jo's eyes lingered on the screen for a moment longer before she sighed and stood, stretching the stiffness from her muscles. "Sure."

"I'll just leave Lucy in my office and swing in to get her after we leave the bar."

They often left Lucy alone with some food, and Major lived in the police station, so he had his own food and litter box in a closet.

Jo eyed Major, who still had the toy. He narrowed his gaze at her as if warning her not to take it away. "Let's hope the two of them don't tear the place apart."

Reese poked her head in from the reception area. "Don't worry. I'll be here for a while, painting. I'll keep them in line."

"Nice job on the paint, Reese," Sam said as they stepped out into the evening, the setting sun casting long shadows on the streets.

Holy Spirits was an easy stroll away, the fading light giving the old church a serene, misleading aura. To the uninformed observer, it was a place of quiet sanctuary, its tall, stately doors suggesting nothing of the revelry within. More than a few tourists had stepped inside, only to be surprised at what was actually in there.

Inside, the transformation from sacred to spirited was complete. The vaulted ceilings created an expansive canvas for hushed conversations and laughter. Dim lighting cast everything in a forgiving amber hue, shadows playing hide and seek in the alcoves.

The rugged charm of the place was undeniable, from the rough-hewn fieldstone walls to the worn wooden floors that told tales of dancing, spills, and the wear of countless boots and heels. A melodic hum from a jukebox somewhere in the background was the heartbeat of the establishment.

In a nod to its past, pews had been repurposed into communal seating, fostering a sense of togetherness among patrons, while the round tables near the entrance offered a more private gathering space. Locals clustered around them, the air occasionally punctuated with the clink of beer mugs and the scrape of chairs.

Jo followed Sam to the back, where the bar stretched out in place of the former altar. The tall windows were a kaleidoscope of jewel-toned glass, setting a sacred backdrop to the rows of bottles that lined the area. The reflected room behind them shimmered in the glass, lending an air of infinite space.

Mick was already at the bar, wearing his trademark black leather jacket and nursing a Scotch on the rocks.

Sam slid into the seat on one side of him and Jo on the other.

"Evening, Sam, Jo," Mick greeted, his voice as smooth as the whiskey he favored.

"Hey, Mick." Sam returned the greeting with an easy nod.

Jo caught Mick's startling blue eyes with her own and gave him a smile.

Before they could dive into conversation, Billie Hanson approached with a practiced smile. "The usual for you two?"

"That'll hit the spot, Billie," Jo confirmed, grateful for the prospect of a cold beer.

As Billie slid the beers in front of Sam and Jo, Mick tilted his tumbler in request for a refill. Billie obliged with a clink of ice cubes and a swirl of amber liquid.

"So what can I do for you guys?" Mick asked. "I mean, it's good to see you both, but I get the impression you wanted more than a drinking buddy."

Sam laughed and clapped Mick on the back. "You know I always love hanging with you, but as it turns out, we do have a use for your unique skill set."

"You heard about April Summers?" Jo asked.

"The activist?" Mick asked. "Heard she got killed."

"Yep," Sam agreed. "Turns out she was a bit more than an activist."

Mick's eyebrows arched, an unspoken question hanging between them.

Jo turned her barstool to face Mick squarely. “Turns out she wasn’t quite the idealist everyone thought she was.”

Mick’s nod was slow, contemplative. “So you’re saying you need someone to do a bit of… unofficial snooping?”

“That’s about the size of it,” Jo affirmed, taking a pull from her beer.

Their conversation, now edging into delicate territory, was suddenly cut short as Bridget and Holden appeared at Jo’s shoulder.

The five of them exchanged greetings, and Billie appeared on the other side of the bar. Bridget ordered a soda water without any hesitation, and Holden did too. Jo wondered if Holden was trying to show support for Bridget.

As they waited, Jo gestured to a corner table, slightly removed from the ebb and flow of patrons. “Let’s grab that spot over there. We’ll have a bit more privacy for talking.”

They all agreed, and once Bridget and Holden had their drinks in hand, the group made its way to the sequestered table. The wooden chairs scraped against the floor as they settled in, the sound muted by the drone of bar noise.

The murmur of the bar seemed to recede as the conversation took a turn toward the serious, the group’s collective focus narrowing.

Sam, who had been sipping his beer, set it down with a gentle thud. “What’s going on with the case? Were you able to find anything on the babysitter’s family?”

Bridget nodded, her eyes reflecting the gravity of the situation. “Yes, a bit of a breakthrough. Their last name was changed to Woodson. And it turns out, they stayed around here for a good while. But that doesn’t mean anything. I guess it could be a coincidence.”

Mick raised his eyebrows, leaning in, intrigued by the conversation. “Wait a minute. Fill me in on this.”

Mick already knew the story about Tammy, so Jo quickly filled him in on the newest information about the babysitter and her family.

Mick rubbed his chin thoughtfully, his gaze distant for a moment as if he were rummaging through an internal archive of faces and names. “You might think it’s a dead end,” he said finally, “but sometimes all it takes is a fresh pair of eyes. I might be able to help.”

“How?” Holden asked, the protective note in his voice softening a bit with curiosity.

Mick's expression was a blend of confidence and mystery. "Well, let's just say I've got a knack for finding people. And I know a thing or two about how folks hide in plain sight. I've seen it happen before."

Sam nodded. "He does."

Jo's brain was whirling. "Wait a minute. How hard is it to change your name?" Jo had never run across that in her investigations to date.

Holden shrugged. "Not too hard. I mean, you have to go to court to do it legally. And then there is a whole process to keep that out of the public records. That's what your babysitter did, so it was hard to find out where they went. Of course, you can't blame them after that notoriety."

"Of course." Jo tapped her finger on her beer. "So then if someone did that, their new identity would appear as if they just came out of nowhere."

Holden nodded.

Jo put her beer down. "Well, that's interesting. Maybe that's why I can't find anything on April Summers."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Bridget and Jo turned off their engines in unison, headlights fading to darkness in front of the cottage. The night was still, save for the chorus of crickets and the soft rustle of wind through the trees.

Bridget's gaze swept the shadows that clung to the edges of the porch, half-expecting them to coalesce into the figure of the man from her past. Her muscles tensed, the laughter and warmth of Holy Spirits fading into a cold prickling at the back of her neck. She scanned the perimeter. Every snapped twig or rustle in the underbrush could be him, waiting, watching.

But the night yielded no threats. The only movement was the gentle swaying of branches in the autumn breeze. Pickles, unconcerned with human fears, purred softly, rubbing against her leg. It was enough to loosen the knot of anxiety in her stomach. No one rushed out at her. No ghost from her past appeared.

"Everything okay?" Jo's voice pierced the stillness, her silhouette framed by the doorway.

Bridget's laugh, a little too sharp, too quick, scattered the tension. "Just jumpy, I guess." She dismissed the question, turning to see Jo's brows knitted in concern.

She offered her sister a reassuring smile, a silent plea not to probe further. The last thing Bridget needed was Jo's detective instincts kicking in, unraveling threads best left untouched.

In the shadowed light of the porch, Pickles greeted them with a tentative stare. Bridget was happy to divert the focus to the tiny cat. "Look, he's on the porch."

They approached cautiously, but this time Pickles didn't bolt. He even let them both pet him.

"Wow, this little guy is really making progress," Jo said.

"He is." Bridget checked to make sure Pickles had enough food and water in his little area on the porch then stood and unlocked the door. "He's starting to trust us. Maybe he really will be ready to stay on the porch once it gets cold."

Jo stood and brushed her hands on her jeans. "All the more reason to make sure Garvin sells this place to me."

Bridget, halfway in the house, turned to look at her. "Yeah, with the help of my pies."

Jo grimaced. "I hope you don't mind."

Bridget shook her head. "Not at all," she reassured her. "I love making pies. It's therapeutic."

As they moved into the living room, the ambient light from the fish tank cast a soft glow that seemed to dance across the walls, reflecting the gentle rhythm of life beneath the water's surface. Bubbles meandered upward, and Finn zoomed around, his golden-orange color vibrant under the lights.

He darted to the top as they approached, and Jo sprinkled a few flakes into the tank that Finn gobbled up.

"Tea?" Bridget asked as she headed toward the kitchen.

"I'd love some."

Tea in hand, they sank into the chairs. Bridget blew across the steaming surface of her mug, curiosity alight in her eyes. "So, what did Mr. McDaniels say that had you wanting to give him pies?"

"He's not ready to sell yet, but he seemed like he could use some company. He kept mentioning his late wife, and he barely had anything to eat there. I thought bribing him with pie might be worth a try."

A laugh escaped Bridget, then she leaned forward, her expression turning serious. "And this business with Marnie Wilson wanting to buy it?"

Jo shrugged, the motion loose, nonchalant. "Garvin mentioned she's got her eye on the place. No idea why."

Bridget's distrust was palpable. "I don't really know her well, but something about her rubs me the wrong way."

"Yeah," Jo agreed, her voice dropping a register. "Join the club."

Bridget's gaze held a hint of concern as she hesitated, the mug halfway to her lips. "I hope I didn't land Reese in hot water, you know, with all the

dark-web digging."

Jo brushed off the worry with a flick of her wrist. "Not in the slightest. We've tapped Reese's—let's say, unconventional—talents before. I'm kicking myself for not turning to her expertise earlier, actually."

Relief flickered across Bridget's features. "Good to hear. I mean, whatever it takes to figure out what happened to Tammy, right? By the book or not."

"It really gets under your skin, doesn't it?" Jo leaned forward, the case pulling them back in. "That constant gnawing of not knowing what happened to her."

Bridget nodded and took a sip of her tea to distract herself from the hollow feeling she always got when she thought about Tammy.

Suddenly Jo stood and gestured to her sister. "Come on, let's go take a look at what we have. Maybe something will shake out."

In the bedroom, Jo flipped up the corner of the rug and grabbed the old skeleton key that unlocked the antique powder-blue armoire. Unlike any typical armoire, this one was a trove of the unofficial cases that refused to leave Jo's mind. Tammy's case was front and center.

The interior was an array of tacked-up notes and photographs. Together, Jo and Bridget stood before it, reviewing evidence that spoke of darker days—the beech trees with their odd broken and bark-stripped branches, the yellowed clippings from newspapers that had long since faded from memory, and the names of various suspects, all crossed out as they proved to be dead ends.

They both stood in front of it in silence, studying the clues and information, hoping to see things from a different angle that might shed some new light on the case.

Finally, Jo said, "I think we need to add the Woodsons to our collection here."

Bridget nodded slowly. "But we're not sure they are involved."

"Still, they could be a piece of the puzzle. And who knows, maybe they know something." Jo reached into the bottom drawer and pulled out an old photo album. With a pang of sad nostalgia, Bridget recognized it as being the one her mom had in the bookshelf in the living room.

"We probably have some pictures of them in here, and we can put that on the door," Jo said. "Visuals are very powerful."

They perched on the edge of Jo's bed, the album creaking open to release echoes of their past, the photos a parade of outdated hairstyles and furniture from a life once whole.

There was Tammy, just a child and forever young on the glossy pages, wearing her favorite shirt—sunshine yellow with white daisies—now a grim reminder of the day she vanished. That was the very shirt she was wearing that day. Bridget's heart squeezed, the weight of old grief fresh as the image seared itself anew into her memory.

"Here's one from one of the summer cookouts," Jo pointed out, flipping through the fragile memories. "Let's see… Ah, perfect for the armoire's door."

The photo they chose was a moment captured in time. Mrs. Woodson, maternal and smiling, with Tammy—a younger version, her tiny hand clutching Mrs. Woodson's shiny gold initial necklace—sitting on her lap. And there, the patriarchal figure of Mr. Woodson, a silent guardian.

"Remember how Tammy loved jewelry?" Bridget smiled at the memory. Their little sister had loved anything shiny and would grab out and clutch it in her tiny fist.

"Especially that crystal necklace Mom had, the one that reflected like a prism."

"Yeah, Tammy ripped it off her neck one time and it dropped onto the kitchen floor. Mom was so upset. But it only got a tiny chip."

"Mom never wore that again after Tammy was taken," Jo said somberly.

Gently, they slid the photograph from its sleeve and pinned it to the armoire's door—a new piece in the puzzle that was Tammy's disappearance. It joined the tapestry of clues, a silent hope that maybe this time, it would lead them to an answer long awaited.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kevin straightened his uniform and took a deep breath as he nudged the door to the police station open. A sweet, sugary aroma wafted up from the bag of donuts in his grip. Had Bridget told Jo that she'd noticed Kevin was confused about where to file things?

He knew Bridget had noticed and if Sam and Jo found out how bad his memory really was, he was afraid they would make him go back out on leave. That was the last thing Kevin wanted. He wanted to get back to being out in the field. Sure, his memory was still a little shaky, but it wasn't that bad. Was it?

As he crossed the threshold, his gaze flicked around the reception area. Reese had almost finished painting, and the place looked good. She wasn't at the desk, though, so he continued past the old post office boxes into the squad room.

Lucy saw him before anyone else and rushed over, tail wagging and eyes bright. It warmed Kevin's heart that she was so happy to see him.

"Hey, girl, how ya doing?" He petted her with his free hand.

"Meow!" Major seemed to take offense to Lucy getting all the attention, so Kevin gave him a pat as well. Thankfully, the cat didn't scratch him—you never knew when Major would lash out.

Jo and Wyatt had been working at their desks. Jo's eyes lit up at the sight of the donut bag.

"Good morning," she exclaimed, a grin spreading across her face as she reached for the bag. Kevin had made sure to include a few of her favorite jelly donuts. Kevin's worry ebbed slightly, the corners of his mouth lifting

in genuine relief. Jo wasn't looking at him differently, and he took that to mean that Bridget hadn't said anything.

They pulled chairs to the center of the room and passed the donut bag around, the ritual of morning coffee knitting the team closer together. Sam emerged from his office, and Kevin held his breath, but when Sam clapped him on the back and said that it was good to see things getting back to normal, Kevin knew he was in the clear.

The banter was casual, familiar, and then easily segued into the case. Jo hadn't made much progress, but Wyatt had collected April's things from the motel and was trying to get into her computer and dig around. Settling into the rhythm of the morning briefing, Kevin found his footing in the flow of information. "The gun… Why wipe it clean if it wasn't the murder weapon?" His brow furrowed in thought.

"Distraction, maybe, or just habit," Sam suggested, his eyes narrowing on a map pinned with various markers. "It did kill the owl. Maybe April's killer had the gun in his hand and then wiped it clean."

"But then why hit April with a log if he had the gun?" Wyatt asked.

Sam shrugged and bit into a chocolate glazed.

Kevin nodded, his thoughts already pacing ahead. "And the bandana, found by Lucy away from the crime scene in the woods. Could it be a marker of some sort?"

Wyatt leaned back in his chair, fingers drumming a silent rhythm on the desktop. "Or maybe even not related. You know how people party in those woods and drop all kinds of trash."

Sam nodded. "True, but not usually near the owl sanctuary. The big party spot is on the other side of the forest."

The dialogue continued, the team tossing ideas back and forth until Kevin's voice cut through, carrying a thread of fresh perspective. "Why the owl sanctuary? The time of death puts them there in the middle of the night. Kind of a strange time to be there."

The room stilled, the significance of the location hanging between them like a clue begging to be deciphered.

Jo's expression grew contemplative, her mind visibly turning over the pieces. "That's a good point. But it's secluded, remote. A good place to kill someone and not be seen, if you know about it. You can get in and out through the construction site, and no one would notice."

“But it is also a place that is visited early in the morning, so the killer must have known that would happen,” Sam added.

“Maybe it’s personal?” Wyatt proposed. “Or symbolic?”

Kevin watched as Jo scribbled a note, her eyes alight with the thrill of the chase.

The discussion of the crime scene morphed into strategy, the team’s collective focus narrowing. And there, in the midst of maps and markers, donuts, and coffee, Kevin’s place on the team felt reaffirmed.

Sam stood and chugged down the rest of his coffee. “Jo and I are heading out to Mel’s paint store. It’s a long shot, but maybe he’ll recall someone buying those specific colors splattered on the bandana.”

Kevin felt a pang of envy. He willed himself to have patience. He’d get out in the field in due time.

Reese breezed into the room, the energy around her shifting like the sudden gust of a new weather front. She snagged a donut from the box with a grin. “Thanks for the breakfast, Kev.”

The phone’s shrill ring cut through the early morning calm. Reese moved to answer it, the informal dispatcher and multitasker of the precinct. “White Rock PD.”

“Yes, Mrs. Holscher,” Reese said into the phone, the hint of a smirk tugging at the corner of her mouth. “Your rose bush, you say?”

The room was silent except for the muffled voice on the other end of the line, punctuated by Reese’s responses.

“I don’t think we have a law against that, Mrs. Holscher,” Reese continued, her smirk blooming into a restrained smile. The rest of them couldn’t help but mirror the expression.

“Monetary damages? You’ll have to talk to a lawyer for that,” she added, scribbling something on a notepad. The pen paused momentarily. “Yes. Now calm down, Rita.”

She glanced up at Sam and Jo, her eyes twinkling with the unspoken acknowledgment of the absurdity of the situation.

“I’ll see if I can get someone to come out,” she promised before hanging up.

Reese let out a chuckle. “Rita’s on the war path. She says Nettie’s chicken pecked up her rose bush. She wants someone to go out.”

Sam shook his head, the barest hint of amusement in his gaze as he turned from Reese to the rest of the team. Jo’s lips quirked in a knowing

smirk, while Wyatt's fingers flew over his keyboard, the steady clatter a backdrop to the quieter drama.

Wyatt glanced up, his eyes squinting from the strain of screens and secrets. "I can swing by Rita's after this," he offered, though everyone knew his expertise was too vital to be spared for a neighborhood tiff.

"Nah, stick to cracking those passwords," Sam countered, his voice low and firm. "We need into April's digital life ASAP."

Sam turned to Kevin. Kevin's heartbeat picked up, a mix of nerves and excitement making his hands feel unusually clammy.

"Do you feel ready to take on Rita?" Sam's question was casual, but it carried the weight of a test.

Kevin could barely nod before the keys to the Crown Vic spun through the air toward him. He snatched them from their arc, the jingle of authority loud in his grip. A smile split his face, broad and bright.

Sam's lips quirked. "Rita will appreciate the pomp. And we can always use the goodwill."

"I'm on it," Kevin replied, his voice steadier than he felt. The keys were warm, the metal edges biting slightly into his palm—a reminder of responsibility and the trust now placed in him.

The team returned to their tasks, but Kevin couldn't stop smiling as he moved to the door.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sam, Jo, and Lucy made their way to the paint store, nodding to townspeople and stopping for kids to pet Lucy. Some people greeted them warmly. Others avoided them. They were used to it.

"About time the police station got a touch-up, huh?" one of the locals commented with a grin. Either they had misinterpreted the purpose of their visit or knew about Reese's painting project.

Inside the paint store, the smell of turpentine and sawdust mingled in the air. The store was an organized chaos of color swatches and dusty paint cans. Behind the counter stood Mel, a gruff old man with a shock of white hair that matched the streaks on his apron. His hands were permanently stained with the testimony of his trade, and his eyes, though sharp, carried the gentle weariness of years of experience.

Sam and Jo approached the counter.

Mel scratched the stubble on his chin, a smudge of white paint highlighting a weathered crease on his cheek. "Ran out of paint, did ya?" He cocked a grizzled eyebrow at Sam. "Told that girl Reese she'd need another gallon, at least."

Sam shook his head. "No, not here for paint, Mel. We've got something else on our minds." He showed him a picture of the bandana on his phone. "See these paint splatters? You recall anyone buying paint like this?"

Mel peered at the fabric, his eyes squinting as if the colors might jump out with a clearer explanation. "Those garish colors? Nope. Can't say I do. Who'd want their walls to scream like a carnival midway?"

Sam's mouth twitched at the corners, almost a smile. "Well, we're thinking the person who chose them might not be aiming for *Homes and Gardens*' approval."

Mel let out a dry laugh, shaking his head. "Sorry, can't help ya. My customers have better taste than that."

Jo, who had been quiet, piped up. "Are you sure, Mel? It could be important."

The old man shrugged, a gesture that spoke of a long life of seeing too much yet never enough. "Maybe someone bought it at another store. There are plenty around. I think I'd remember those colors."

Sam put his phone in his pocket. "Thanks, Mel. If you think of anything, let us know."

Mel gave a noncommittal grunt, already turning back to his work, his mind on the paint and brushes that were his world.

Sam and Jo stepped out into the sunlight, the door jingling a goodbye behind them.

Sam nodded. "You win a few, you lose a few. Come on, let's get Lucy back in the Tahoe."

Sam closed the Tahoe's door, securing Lucy in the back. His eyes fixed on a figure across the street. A man in a tan-and-black baseball cap was slipping a pack of cigarettes into his coat pocket.

Jo followed Sam's gaze. "Didn't Jackson say he saw someone with a cap like that lurking around the sanctuary?"

"Yeah, he did." Sam's voice was flat, his gaze still locked on the man who looked like he was staring into some sort of art gallery. "And look who it is. Ricky Webster."

Jo's eyebrows drew together, a wrinkle forming on her forehead. "Ricky? That's weird."

Ricky had been a suspect in their last case and had been cleared, but Sam always thought there was something weird about him.

They watched Ricky light a cigarette, his movements furtive, a twitch in his shoulders as if he were expecting someone—or running from something.

"We should have a chat with him," Jo suggested, already stepping off the curb.

Sam nodded. "Let's not spook him."

They approached casually, with the practiced nonchalance of seasoned officers.

"Hey, Ricky," Sam said, not unkindly.

Ricky turned, a plume of smoke trailing from his lips. His eyes flicked over Sam and Jo, landing on Lucy with a hint of a smile before darting back to the officers. "Hey. What's the pleasure?"

"We were just admiring your cap," Jo said, tilting her head. "It's quite distinctive."

Ricky tapped a finger against the brim, his smile now fixed. "Got it at the conservation meet last month."

"Really?" Sam couldn't picture Ricky being a member of the conservation committee. "Because we've got a witness who saw a cap just like that near the owl sanctuary. Around the time April was killed."

Ricky's face tightened, the smoke curling between them like a barrier. "A lot of guys have caps like this."

"But not a lot of guys were seen wearing them near a crime scene," Jo pressed. Her voice was steady, but her eyes were sharp as flint.

Ricky's gaze flicked between them, calculating. "You think I got something to do with that mess? I heard it happened at the owl sanctuary, and I haven't been near there."

"We're just talking, Ricky," Sam assured him, his tone even. "But if there's anything you want to get off your chest…"

Ricky's fingers crushed the cigarette, dropping it to the ground and stamping it out. "I ain't got nothing to say. Not without a lawyer."

Hazel Webster, Ricky's grandmother, emerged from the bookstore they were standing in front of. Her hair was a crown of wiry gray, each strand rebelling against the notion of being tamed. The lines on her face told stories of a life chiseled by hardship, and her eyes—sharp as flint—had a reputation for setting any nosy officer straight.

She caught sight of Sam and Jo, and her lips pinched together. "What's this now?" she demanded, her voice like gravel stirred in a bucket. "You lot got nothing better to do than badger my grandson?"

Ricky stood a pace behind, his lips forming into a smirk as he watched his grandmother stand up to Sam and Jo.

Sam doffed his hat, a gesture of respect that did little to soften Hazel's scowl. "Ma'am, we assure you, we were just having a word with Ricky. Nothing to be concerned about."

Hazel snorted, a clear sign she wasn't buying a word. "A word, eh? Your 'words' have a way of turning into trouble. He's a good boy. Takes care of his grandma, don't you, Ricky?"

Ricky nodded, his cheeks tinged with a flush of embarrassment. "I was just helping Gran with the shopping," he said, his voice a quiet testament to his decency.

With a wary eye still fixed on the officers, Hazel handed Ricky her bag and looped her arm through his. As they began to walk away, Sam and Jo offered parting apologies, which Hazel dismissed with a harrumph that ricocheted off the store windows.

Once across the street, Sam spared a glance over his shoulder. Ricky was gently guiding Hazel, his attentiveness a stark contrast to the scene that had just unfolded.

Jo, watching alongside Sam, remarked quietly, "He does seem like the caring-grandson type."

Sam's lips pressed into a thin line, his eyes never leaving Ricky's retreating figure.

"Sometimes," he said, his voice dropping to a murmur meant for Jo alone, "the ones who seem the nicest have the most to hide."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Sam and Jo pulled into the police station to find Marnie Wilson hammering a "Marnie for Mayor" sign into the precinct's front lawn. Today, she was dressed in an outfit that Jo always thought of as her *common man* outfit. Jeans and a flannel shirt—something a blue-collar worker would wear.

Marnie's eyes lifted, catching sight of Sam, and for a fleeting moment, they softened, betraying a warmth reserved just for him.

"Marnie." Sam's voice held a professional detachment, a barricade against any personal undertones. "The lawn of a police station might not be the ideal place for campaign material."

"Oh, come on, Sam," she coaxed, a playful tilt in her words. "It's public property."

Jo, standing a step behind, watched the exchange, her lips pressed into a thin line. She didn't trust the gleam in Marnie's eye nor the coy dance of politics. Lucy, ever the barometer of intent, sniffed disinterestedly at Marnie before trotting back to Jo's side, aligning herself with the silent sentiment.

Sam didn't bite, his indifference to Marnie's charms as solid as the badge on his chest. "Just doesn't seem right," he said. "Might look like the department is picking sides."

Her smile flickered, but she recovered quickly, gesturing toward the ruckus down the street. "Looks like Jamison has bigger fish to fry," she said.

The crowd outside the mayor's office was a mess of noise and anger. Signs jabbed the air—Owl Killer, Fairness to the Birds. They were a loud

bunch, getting louder as Jo and Sam approached.

Jo's gaze fixed on the nearest sign, the words a blunt accusation. Owl Killer. The message was clear, the crowd's mood uglier by the second. She could feel the tension in the air, thick enough to choke on.

Sam caught her eye, and without a word, they edged closer to the action. The protesters didn't let up, their shouts bouncing off the buildings, calling for justice, for answers.

The cacophony from the Owl Protection Society cut through the morning air, their outrage over the unsolved owl murder palpable. Flustered, Mayor Jamison tugged Sam to the side, his voice laced with desperation. "Can't you clear them out?"

"They're exercising their rights, as long as they keep it peaceful," Sam countered, his gaze fixed on the protestors. Jamison's eyes darted to the police station, narrowing at the sight of Marnie Wilson. "Is that Marnie putting up her campaign sign?" he grumbled.

"Yeah, that's her. I've tried to talk her out of it," Sam replied, watching Marnie give her sign one final push into the soft earth.

Jamison's face twisted with suspicion. "She could be orchestrating this spectacle," he muttered.

Sam exchanged a skeptical look with Jo. While he doubted Marnie's involvement, the dirty tricks of political games were not lost on him. Every move was calculated, and if Marnie had indeed played her hand in this, it was a shrewd one. Sam's mind turned over the possibilities as he surveyed the scene, and he wondered how far Marnie would actually go to win the race.

If she was involved in the Owl Protection Society's presence here, was she just taking advantage of the death of the owl, or did she have something to do with it? Sam doubted she would go that far.

A tall man stepped up to the group. He stood out in stark contrast with the casual attire of the townspeople. His suit was impeccably tailored, and his polished demeanor spoke of boardrooms rather than back roads. His hair, dark and perfectly coifed, caught the afternoon light, and his eyes—just as dark—swept over the scene with an unreadable expression.

"Good afternoon, Mayor," he greeted with a nod that was both respectful and slightly aloof.

Jamison's response was a narrowed gaze, tinged with recognition. "Victor, what brings you here?" he asked, his tone a mix of surprise and

caution.

Jamison turned his attention to Sam. “Do you know Victor Sorentino?” he inquired with an undertone that suggested a complicated history.

Sam, who had been sizing up the newcomer with a lawman’s critical eye, extended his hand. “Can’t say that I do. Sam Mason, chief of police.” He introduced himself then gestured to his right. “This is Sergeant Jody Harris.”

The handshake between Sam and Victor was firm, each man gauging the other. Victor’s smile was polished, yet it didn’t quite reach his eyes, which remained cool and detached. “A pleasure. I’m the senior public liaison for Convale,” he stated, his voice carrying an edge of authority.

The man’s refined exterior, coupled with the underlying hardness in his demeanor, suggested a narrative far richer than his title implied. Sam couldn’t shake the feeling that behind Victor Sorentino’s cultivated smile lay a realm of unsaid words and veiled intentions.

“So, what does a senior public liaison do, exactly?” Jo asked.

Sam watched Victor carefully, a silent bet with himself that the title was corporate speak for someone tasked with making sure Convale’s image stayed spotless.

Victor’s smile never wavered as he answered Jo. “My role is to inform the public about our initiatives. I let them know what’s on the horizon, how we’re advancing our energy programs and ensuring they receive the best service at the lowest cost,” he explained, each word sounding practiced and polished.

Mayor Jamison, clearly still uneasy, probed further. “Why are you here, Victor? Are you part of the Owl Protection Society?”

“No,” Victor replied smoothly. “I just make it a point to stay abreast of the town’s significant events.” His eyes held Jamison’s, a gleam surfacing as he added, “Though it doesn’t seem to cast you in the best light, what with the election coming up.”

With that, Victor acknowledged Jo and Sam with a nod. “Pleasure to meet both of you,” he said before turning on his heel and walking off with a grace that felt out of place in the midst of the protest.

Sam’s frown deepened as he watched Victor walk away, the man’s presence leaving an uneasy echo. “Odd guy,” he muttered, more to himself than anyone else.

Jo nodded, her arms crossed as she watched Victor's retreating figure. "Yeah, I get a weird vibe from him," she said, her voice tinged with suspicion.

Mayor Jamison, who had been silent, unfolded his arms and let out a huff. "He's always looming where he's not wanted," he grumbled, eyeing the spot where Victor had stood just moments ago.

Sam's gaze swept over the crowd. "They seem peaceful so far," he remarked, his voice laced with the tension of the afternoon. "If things get out of hand, give me a call." He didn't like the uncertainty of the situation, the potential for a spark to ignite chaos.

As Sam and Jo turned to leave, Sam's mind was already churning, his thoughts returning to their main priority. "We need to stay focused on the bigger problem—finding out who killed April," he said firmly, the weight of responsibility pressing down on him.

Jo glanced back at the crowd then at the outline of the sanctuary in the distance. "And the owl."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Jo's scowl was almost audible as they passed the "Marnie for Mayor" sign in front of the police station. "That's kind of close to the curb. Hope no one runs it over," she said, the corner of her mouth twitching in amusement.

The squad room was a welcome respite. Jo went straight to the K-Cup coffee maker, her movements fluid and practiced.

Jo glanced over her shoulder, her hand hovering over the assortment of K-Cups. "Coffee, Sam?" Without waiting for his response—she knew it would be a yes—she called out across the room, "Wyatt, you want one?"

From his desk cluttered with papers and tech equipment, Wyatt barely looked up, his eyes glued to April's computer screen as he worked to crack the passwords. "Sure," he mumbled, absorbed in his task.

The soft hum of the machine filled the space as Jo selected the pods, dropping one into the holder for Sam. Sam watched the dark liquid dribble into his navy blue WRPD mug, his thoughts momentarily adrift to the protestors outside.

"Hope that owl protest dies down soon," he mused aloud, leaning against the counter.

Jo smirked, pressing her own mug—a vintage seventies yellow smiley mug she'd found at a yard sale—against the dispenser. "Kinda fun to see Jamison sweat, though." Her eyes sparkled with mischief.

Lucy patrolled the room, her nose skimming the floor tiles. Every so often, she'd pause, sniffing more intently, before moving on to the next potential clue in her canine investigation. She paid particular attention to the corners and under the desks.

Jo picked up the extra mug of coffee, the steam curling up in soft tendrils, and walked over to Wyatt's desk. She placed it next to his mouse pad, nudging it into his line of sight. "Here," she said.

Wyatt, his fingers never ceasing their dance across the keyboard, grunted a distracted, "Thanks," his eyes not leaving the screen.

Coffee delivered, Jo turned and strolled back to her own space, her steps slowing as she neared Lucy. She reached down to give the German shepherd a gentle pat on the head. "What are you hunting for, huh?" she asked playfully. Lucy's response was a nudge against Jo's hand and a brief glance before resuming her sniff patrol.

Jo's gaze drifted to the empty spot atop the filing cabinet where Major usually perched. "Looking for Major? If so, be careful what you wish for." Major was probably tucked away in a closet guarding his latest toy, and Jo could only imagine the chaos that would happen if Lucy poked her nose in there.

"How are things going?" Sam asked Wyatt. "Was there anything on her phone? Her belongings?"

Wyatt's chair groaned as he leaned back, his eyes finally detaching from the glow of the computer screen to meet Sam's expectant look. He passed a hand through his longish hair, pulling at the ends in a gesture of fatigue.

"She only had some clothes and a duffle bag. Her phone was in her pocket, so I worked with John on that." Wyatt squinted as his eyes adjusted to the broader light of the room.

"Find anything?" Sam asked.

Wyatt shook his head. "Just a few texts, but they're very basic. One was to Travis and another to Archie Wells, confirming appointments."

"Nothing personal? No calls?" Sam furrowed his brow.

"Not a single one." Wyatt took a gulp of his coffee. "If she had another phone, it wasn't in her motel room."

"And the computer?" Sam nodded toward the open laptop.

"Not much to go on," he admitted. "Cracked her password, though."

Sam leaned against the edge of Wyatt's desk, arms folded, a silent prompt for more information.

"The bank account's the only thing sticking out," Wyatt continued, taking another sip of coffee.

"Interesting how?" Sam prodded, his voice low, matching the hum of concentration that filled the squad room.

Wyatt set the mug down, a slight clink against the wood. “Her account’s seen some peculiar activity. Large sums. Cash deposits.”

“That seems to support what Archie said about her extorting money,” Jo said from her desk.

“Sure does,” Sam agreed.

“And only one check written.” Wyatt looked back at his screen. “To the motel.”

Sam’s brows rose. “At least that’s a lead.”

“And something else.” Wyatt nudged a small pocket calendar across his desk toward Sam. “There are a few notes in there about meetings, all with initials, but one very interesting note on the day she died.”

Sam leaned forward to look at the calendar. It was inside a plastic bag and lay open to the current week. The entry on the day April died had simply the initials H.M. and the time ten p.m.

“Any idea who H.M. is?” Sam asked.

Wyatt shook his head. “I’m searching through her computer now.”

Sam stood. “Good job. Looks like we might have a few more leads to follow.”

“Finally, we are starting to get somewhere.” Jo sipped her coffee and looked at the empty desk. “Have you heard from Kevin? I hope Nettie and Rita aren’t giving him a hard time.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

"Officer Kevin, look at this! That ornery chicken has devoured my prize-winning rose bush!" Rita demanded, her hands planted firmly on her hips.

Kevin looked down at the rose bush. It was too late in the season for blooming, but he could see quite a few peck holes at the base.

Nettie retorted with equal vigor, "And that goat of hers ate my new housecoat. It was drying on the line, and now it's ruined!"

The two women, both widows well into their seventies, stood on the border of their adjoining properties, their arms crossed over their chests, their brows knitted in both annoyance and a faint plea for attention.

Kevin stood between them, the unlikely arbitrator. "Now, ladies," he began, the corners of his mouth struggling against the urge to smile. "We can't have this feud every other week."

Rita's sharp eyes softened a bit. "Well, I wouldn't say a thing if her feathered beast didn't terrorize my garden."

"And I'd keep quiet if her goat didn't have a taste for laundry!" Nettie shot back.

Kevin nodded, understanding the undercurrent of loneliness that often prompted their disputes. "Rita, I'm going to bring you a new rose bush this weekend. How does that sound?"

Nettie's eyebrows rose. "Since when is gardening a service of the police department?"

Kevin straightened up, all business now. "It is now," he said, and the simple statement seemed to settle the matter.

Rita beamed, the creases in her face deepening with genuine joy. “Well then, Officer Kevin, I’ll have to make you my famous fruitcake as a thank-you. Not that dried-up old thing Nettie makes.”

Nettie huffed, but the sparkle in her eye gave away her affection for her old friend. “My fruitcake isn’t dry. It’s traditional.”

They both looked to Kevin, expecting him to take sides, but he just shook his head, the image of peacekeeping authority. “Now, now, no need for any more of that. We’re all neighbors here.”

There was a beat of silence before Rita offered a truce. “I’ll trim back Bitsy’s roaming area. No more housecoat incidents, Nettie.”

“And I’ll… I’ll keep the chicken on my side,” Nettie conceded but only with a playful roll of her eyes.

Kevin tipped his hat. “Thank you, ladies. You both make White Rock the place I’m proud to serve.”

He climbed back into the cruiser, a feeling of accomplishment blooming in his chest. He’d done it! His first call since being out of the hospital, and it had gone as smooth as butter.

As he looked in the rearview mirror, Nettie and Rita were already chatting over the fence, their argument forgotten as quickly as it had ignited.

As calls went, this one was pretty run-of-the-mill. Maybe that was a good thing since he didn’t have his service gun back yet. But it was a big step forward. So far, he’d been relegated to office work and organizing things in the evidence room that they shared with other regional police departments. In fact, he was scheduled to work the evidence room that afternoon.

He chose the scenic route back to town, allowing the thread of roads less traveled to draw him away from the straight path home. The old diner appeared almost as an afterthought along the road that was once more highly traveled, a drab structure that stubbornly defied the passage of time.

Kevin had eaten in the diner a few times. The food wasn’t that great. He supposed it had once been better back when this was the main road and the diner got more traffic. Right now, only three cars were parked outside, and it looked fairly empty inside.

The woman sitting at the booth by the window caught his attention. There was something familiar about her. Wait… Wasn’t that Jo’s sister?

Kevin slowed the car. Bridget's presence there was unmistakably out of place, her innocent air clashing with the seedy atmosphere of the diner.

The man she was with raised a red flag in Kevin's seasoned mind. His demeanor, even viewed from a distance, screamed trouble. Was Bridget in some kind of trouble? She'd kept his secret about the filing cabinet, and he wanted to return the favor by helping her… if she needed it.

Kevin pulled into the parking lot. At the least, he could use a cup of coffee. If she was fine, he would leave reassured. If not, he'd be there to assist.

BRIDGET STIRRED HER COFFEE ABSENTMINDEDLY, the spoon clinking against the mug in a slow, rhythmic pattern. The diner, once a beacon along the highway, now looked like a relic from a bygone era. Its walls looked greasy and dirty. The stainless-steel counter must have once gleamed with fresh paint but was now dulled and sapped of vibrancy. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting an unflattering glow over the handful of patrons scattered across peeling vinyl booths.

When Bridget lived on the streets, having a meal in a diner like this would have seemed like heaven. She'd adjusted to her new life already. But there was one good thing about the diner—Jo wouldn't see her in here. Not that she was hiding, but the fewer reasons Jo had to worry, the better.

Even though Bridget hadn't seen anyone following her, she'd figured that it was better to be safe than sorry, so she'd reached out to Carl Denozi, one of her friends from her past life, to see if he knew anything. It wouldn't be a bad idea to keep in touch in case she ever needed his vast array of not-so-legal services.

Her sandwich lay half-eaten, the bread slightly stale. Carl's burger was a mess of grease and condiments, but he seemed to like it. They spoke of old times, of people who had been mere whispers on the street. Some names brought a faint smile to Bridget's lips, others a shadow of concern.

Carl took a deliberate bite of his burger, the juiciness of the patty seeping into the bun as he chewed thoughtfully. Bridget sipped her coffee, watching the steam curl upward before dissipating into the stale air of the diner.

“You heard anything about Annie?” Bridget asked. Annie had been a sweet girl, way too young for a life on the streets.

Carl wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, shaking his head. “Annie’s just… vanished, you know?” He sighed. “It’s a rough life out there. Not everyone’s cut out for the long haul.”

Bridget’s gaze dropped. “And Sheila?” she inquired, the name tasting bittersweet on her lips.

“Heard she’s trying to patch things up with her folks,” Carl replied, a hint of respect in his tone. “Went back home to clear her head. Maybe she’ll make it out.”

She nodded, a small smile flickering. “Good for her,” Bridget murmured. “Everyone deserves a shot at a second act.”

They fell into a contemplative quiet, mulling over the fragility of the paths they’d each taken. The silence was comfortable, filled with shared understanding and the ghosts of friends who’d slipped through the cracks.

Carl took a swig of his drink, peering over the rim of his cup at her. “Why bring them up, Bridget? You thinking of heading back… to that life?”

Bridget shook her head quickly, her fingers tight around her mug. “No, it’s not that. It’s just… knowing where people end up, it helps. Keeps you grounded, you know?”

Bridget studied Carl. He was different now, more cautious. But Bridget wondered if beneath that veneer of change, the old connections lingered.

“Are you still… you know, connected?” she ventured, her voice low.

Surprise flickered across Carl’s face. He leaned back, appraising her with a new level of scrutiny. “You looking for a piece of the action?” he asked, the question hanging in the air like smoke.

“Not like that,” Bridget rushed to clarify. “It’s just… up here, in the woods, a girl’s gotta fend for herself.”

Carl’s eyes narrowed into slits, the easygoing façade slipping. “Into something, Bridget?” he prodded. There was a hardness in his voice, a hint of the street sharpness that could cut through lies.

She shook her head, her fingers wrapped tightly around her coffee mug. “Nothing like that,” she repeated. “Just… making sure I can protect myself if the past comes back to haunt me.”

A silence settled between them, loaded and tense. Carl’s gaze didn’t waver, as if he was trying to decipher a hidden message in her words. Bridget held his stare, her own resolve steeling.

Finally Carl nodded. “Yeah, I’m connected. What do you need?”

“Nothing too big. Just something small. Personal protection.” Life on the street had taught Bridget a few things, and one of those was how to handle guns. She wouldn’t be able to get one through legal channels so didn’t have much of a choice. She didn’t need anything big, didn’t want anything conspicuous. Hopefully, she’d never have to use it anyway.

“Okay. It might take a while, but I’ll see what I can find for you.”

The bell over the diner’s door jingled, cutting through the static atmosphere. Bridget looked up, momentarily startled by a police uniform. Not Jo, thankfully. It was Kevin.

Kevin ambled to the counter. “Coffee, please,” Kevin said, nodding toward the pot with a faint smile.

As Doris poured the dark brew into a thick, white mug, Kevin’s eyes wandered over to Bridget. Their gazes met, and she lifted her hand in a small wave.

“Hey there,” Kevin greeted, walking over to her booth. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

A hint of suspicion colored his tone as his eyes flicked to Carl. Carl was already on his feet, tossing a twenty-dollar bill on the table.

“Nice to catch up with you, Bridget,” Carl said, a hint of haste in his voice. “Gotta run.” With a nod that didn’t quite seem directed at either Bridget or Kevin, he brushed past Kevin and out the door.

As Carl’s presence faded, Bridget gestured to the now-vacant seat across from her.

“Take a seat, Kevin,” she offered, her eyes following Carl’s retreat through the window.

Kevin slid into the booth, placing his coffee on the table.

“You okay?” he asked, a tinge of concern threading his voice.

“Yeah, just an old friend,” Bridget replied, though her eyes stayed on the door a moment longer before finally meeting Kevin’s. “What brings you out this way? Don’t tell me my sister has you spying on me.”

He shook his head, the amusement clear in his eyes. “Hardly,” he replied. “I was out on a call and just driving by. Needed a coffee.” He lifted his mug, as if the coffee were evidence enough of his innocent intentions.

Then his expression softened, his eyes holding a quiet empathy. “Why would Jo need to spy on you?” he asked softly, genuinely curious.

Bridget's cheeks tinged with color, and she looked away briefly before meeting his gaze again. "Jo's just… overprotective. Since I was an addict and lived on the streets," she confessed. "I've worked hard to clean up my act, and I think she's worried I might fall back."

Straightening up in the booth, Bridget's voice carried a firm resolve. "I have no intention of going back, but Carl… Well, he's from that old life. Sometimes it's good to keep in touch."

Kevin nodded as if understanding the complex pull of past connections.

Her gaze dropped momentarily then lifted to peek up at him from under her lashes—a mix of vulnerability and trust in her eyes. "You won't tell Jo, will you?" she asked.

Kevin's response was immediate, his voice quiet but firm. "Your secret's safe with me," he assured her. "We all have secrets. And I know you noticed I couldn't remember where to file things. You didn't tell Jo, so I guess we're even. We'll keep each other's secrets."

Bridget considered his words, a hint of playfulness appearing in her eyes. "Sort of like a pact?"

Kevin laughed, a short, hearty sound. "Sort of," he agreed.

Extending her hand across the table, Bridget offered a tangible sign of their mutual understanding. "Then I guess we should shake on it."

Kevin placed his hand in hers, and for a moment, they both acknowledged the gravity of their shared confidences with a firm handshake. As they did, Bridget couldn't help but notice the strength and warmth in his grasp, and it felt reassuring—a silent affirmation of their newly formed bond.

CHAPTER TWENTY

In the squad room, Jo stared at her screen, the cursor blinking back at her with a kind of indifferent challenge. She'd hit a wall with April Summers. The digital world was keeping its secrets close this time.

The research into people with the initials H.M. hadn't been much more successful. She hadn't struck out, but there were hundreds of them.

"Any luck?" Sam asked, glancing over from his desk piled with his own leads to nowhere.

Jo rubbed her temples. "I'm swimming in a sea of H.M.s. Six hundred and counting. It's like looking for a needle in a haystack… if the haystack were made of needles."

Sam let out a dry chuckle. "That's one prickly haystack."

The sound of the front door opening announced Reese's entrance. After a few minutes of rustling sounds, Reese appeared at the doorway of the squad room, all bubbly and smiles.

Jo caught a twinkle in Reese's eyes. "What's up? It looks like you are bursting to tell us something."

Reese's grin widened, lighting up her face. "Oh, it's nothing to do with our cases. I've brought a piece of artwork for the reception area. I'd love to hear what you all think," she said, her gaze eagerly shifting from Jo to Sam and then to Wyatt. Her excitement was palpable, like that of a child showing off a new toy.

Led by their curiosity, the trio followed Reese out of the squad room. As they approached the reception area, Reese held the artwork with a flourish

reminiscent of a game show host revealing a grand prize. The painting, however, was a stark contrast to her enthusiasm.

Jo scrutinized the canvas, her brows knitting in confusion. It was a chaotic ensemble of colors and shapes. Bold splotches of paint, ranging from bright oranges to deep blues, clashed violently against each other. Startling greens swirled unpredictably, their edges blurred and undefined. Here and there, aggressive splatters of red seemed to burst from the canvas, like drops of blood in midexplosion. Amidst the chaos, streaks of yellow melted into their surroundings, giving off an impression of a solar flare caught in a cosmic dance.

Wyatt, usually not one to mince words, leaned closer to the artwork, squinting as if trying to decipher a hidden message among the vibrant chaos. The painting, in its abstract boldness, seemed to demand attention, yet its meaning, if there was any, remained elusive.

Sam, standing beside Jo, tilted his head slightly, his expression morphing into a puzzled frown. “What’s it supposed to be?” he asked, his tone a mixture of bewilderment and curiosity.

“It’s not ‘supposed to be’ anything. It’s modern art,” Reese replied, her enthusiasm slightly dampened by their puzzled reactions.

Wyatt, who had been studying the canvas with a critical eye, joined the conversation. “I don’t know about modern art, but something tranquil might be more fitting. You know, a river or mountains… Something calming.”

“Or a moose,” Sam added with a half smile, picturing a giant moose adorning their police station wall.

They all turned expectantly toward Jo, who had been observing the painting in silence. She was about to comment when something about the chaos of colors tugged at her detective instincts. The paint splotches, the hues, and the shades… They were strangely familiar. A sudden realization struck her, and without a word, she darted into Sam’s office.

Returning moments later with the photograph of the bandana in hand, she held it up next to the painting. The colors of the paint splatters on the canvas were an uncanny match to those on the bandana. The vibrant oranges, deep blues, startling greens—it was all there.

“Reese, where exactly did you get this?” Jo asked, her tone laced with a blend of urgency and excitement.

Reese, taken aback by Jo’s sudden interest, answered, “Oh, it’s from a local artist. Her studio is right next to the bookstore downtown. Lily Dunn

is her name."

Sam grabbed his keys from the hook on the wall. "Looks like we're going shopping for a painting."

DUNN ART WAS an inviting palette of pastel hues, with a cornflower-blue awning trimmed in sunny yellow that fluttered gently in the soft breeze. Gorgeous paintings sat in the window, everything from serene landscapes to bold abstracts.

Warm light spilled from the interior onto the sidewalk, casting a welcoming glow that stood in stark contrast to the dimming sky. Inside, a young woman with an edgy pixie cut and a smock splattered with a spectrum of paint stains manned the register.

Her expression was one of easygoing welcome until her eyes registered their badges and uniforms. Her welcoming smile hesitated, the corners of her lips dipping slightly, as a shadow of concern crossed her features.

But then her gaze fell upon Lucy, and the woman's face visibly relaxed, a softness creeping back into her eyes as she regarded the dog, a universal icebreaker. Lucy always had the effect of setting people at ease.

Lucy sniffed at Lily's feet then looked up at Sam. A sure sign that Lucy recognized her scent, most likely from the bandana she'd found.

"Welcome to Dunn Art," she said, regaining her composure. "Can I help you find something?" Her attempt to sound casual was betrayed by the slight quaver in her voice, a clear sign she was uncertain about the nature of their visit.

"Are you Lily Dunn?" Sam asked.

"Yes, I'm Lily," she started tentatively, her initial professional tone faltering as her brain made the connection. Then, as realization dawned, her eyes widened slightly. "Oh, the painting for Reese! It's quite the statement piece, isn't it?" She forced a chuckle, her attempt at levity a thin veneer over her growing apprehension. "I'm thrilled it's in the station. I think."

Sam's lips twitched into a half smile, recognizing the defensive pride of an artist concerned for her work's reception. "It's definitely… distinctive," he said diplomatically. "But we're here about something else."

He held out the photo of the bandana, watching her closely. Her hand shot up to her throat, to the white bandana she wore, now smudged with splashes of various colors of paint. She twisted it beneath her fingers, a brief flash of a gold chain glinting underneath.

Sam studied Lily's face as he presented the picture of the bandana. "Does this look familiar?" he asked, his tone casual but his eyes intent.

Lily gave a noncommittal shrug. "Bandanas? Yeah, they're part of my look. It comes in handy to have one on if I need to wipe off some paint that I splattered," she said, trying to appear unfazed. "Lots of people wear them, though."

"But this one has paint on it," Sam pointed out, "similar to the colors in the artwork Reese bought from you."

Lily's eyes flickered between Sam and Jo, a hint of tension creeping into her demeanor. "Well, I guess it does. It could be mine," she said with forced lightness. "But what exactly are you getting at?"

Sam leaned in slightly. "Just wondering if it's yours. And if you might've been near the owl sanctuary recently?"

There was a flicker, a tiny spasm around her left eye, as she replied a bit too quickly, "Nope, haven't been around there."

The room hung heavy with silence as Sam held her gaze. Finally, Lily offered, "I do hike in the woods sometimes, though. Maybe I dropped it on a hike, and it somehow ended up over there? The wind blew it or an animal dragged it?"

Sam gave a slow, thoughtful nod. "Maybe," he conceded. "Well, if you weren't at the owl sanctuary, then that's all we need to know."

He turned to leave, with Jo following behind. At the door, Jo paused, glancing back at the colorful canvases that adorned the walls. "By the way, you do great work." Jo gestured broadly at her paintings.

The faintest smile washed over Lily's face as they departed, but her hand subconsciously twisted the bandana as she watched them leave.

Sam and Jo, with Lucy in tow, made their way back to the Tahoe parked along Main Street.

"So, what'd you think of that?" Sam inquired as they reached the SUV.

Jo glanced back at the shop, where Lily could still be seen through the front window, shuffling paintings on a wall, her motions betraying a hint of agitation. "She's hiding something, Sam. Did you see her? She was way too nervous."

Sam gave a thoughtful nod, his gaze lingering on the figure of Lily inside. “Lucy recognized her scent, but Lily did have a point about the possibility that she dropped the bandana elsewhere. But I agree, she is hiding something. You think she could have been up at the owl sanctuary?”

Jo opened the back door of the Tahoe, allowing Lucy to jump in before she climbed into the passenger seat. “Maybe,” she mused, clicking her seat belt in place. “But did you notice her feet? Tiny. There’s no way she could have made those prints we found. She can’t be our killer if the killer is the one who left those tracks.”

As Sam started the engine, his eyes met Jo’s. “True, her feet don’t match. But even if she isn’t the killer,” he said, his voice dropping to a lower, more contemplative tone, “she might have seen something or someone. And if she did, that makes her either a witness, an accomplice… or the next potential target.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Kevin stood amid the meticulous array of the regional evidence room, a space shared by the White Rock Police and neighboring districts, including the small, often-overlooked Berlin precinct. It was a quiet room, surrounded by the silent testimony of a hundred cases. He was cataloging a set of gold chains, the camera in his hand clicking with each snapshot he took for the database.

His brows drew together, concentration etched deep into his features as he worked. The chains glinted under the fluorescent lights, each number he entered a promise of order, a bulwark against the chaos that memory issues tried to bring into his life.

Kevin worked methodically, a process that had become a grounding routine in the wake of his memory loss. His gloved hands moved with practiced ease, cataloging a series of items from an old narcotics case, each tagged and bagged, their relevance in court now expired.

He picked up a notepad from the pile, an afterthought among the more high-tech evidence. It was filled with scribbles of what looked like a programmer's shorthand—strings of characters, symbols, and numbers, a cryptographer's sketchbook. As he flipped through the pages, Kevin felt a pull in his mind, the sensation of a curtain fluttering in a long-abandoned room. A memory bubbled up. The thumb drive.

Without really knowing why, he pulled out his phone and began snapping pictures of each page, ensuring the focus was sharp, the detail clear. He paused over a particular string of alphanumeric characters that

sparked a deep-seated recognition, a sequence that whispered to him of something important and personal.

With the notepad photographed, he emailed the pictures to his private account, a pang of urgency in his chest. He didn't have the thumb drive here—it was at home, tucked away in a drawer, its contents just out of mental reach—but he had a hunch. A hunch that the key to its secrets was contained within the scribbles of this notepad.

The door clicked open and Officer Daniels from Berlin stepped in, a friendly grin on his face that seemed so at odds with the solemnity of the room.

"Hey, Kevin. Need to pick up the B and E evidence from last week. Roberts needs it for a lineup."

"Should be in the back," Kevin replied, his voice steady, his gaze never leaving the screen. "I'll grab it for you in a sec."

Once the last serial number was entered and double-checked, Kevin pushed back his chair and stood, his back releasing a slight twinge of discomfort. He walked toward the back, his eyes scanning the meticulously organized shelves, but a seed of doubt crept into his mind.

He paused, his hand hovering over the shelf where the evidence was supposed to be. The quiet confidence that had carried him into the room began to crumble as his mind grasped at the memory of where he had placed it.

"Everything okay?" Officer Daniels called out, leaning casually against the door frame.

"Yeah, just give me a moment," Kevin replied, the words almost catching in his throat.

He pulled out his notebook, the one companion that never failed him, and flicked through the pages filled with his tidy, precise handwriting. His finger landed on the entry from last week, and relief washed over him.

"Moved Item #2047 for drug seizure items," he read aloud to himself, the tension in his shoulders easing.

Navigating to a different section with a resolve that belied his earlier confusion, Kevin located the item and handed it to Daniels.

"Thanks, Kevin. You're a lifesaver," the officer said with genuine gratitude, clasping the evidence bag.

As Daniels disappeared through the doorway, Kevin let out a breath of relief. The room felt larger suddenly, the shelves not just a storage space but

a landscape he had to navigate with painstaking attention.

Returning to his computer, he entered the new location for the item, ensuring the digital record matched the physical one. Then, with methodical care, he scribbled down a reminder in his notebook.

His hands might have betrayed the subtlest of shakes, a silent herald of his internal struggle, but his spirit was steadfast. He pressed on, cataloging the next set of items, each entry a small victory in his quiet battle against forgetfulness. Thankfully, he only had another hour to go before he was off the clock. His brain needed a rest, but before that he had to see if anything he found in the notebook cracked the password on the thumb drive.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

In the cozy warmth of Jo's kitchen, the woods outside her window faded into the soft glow of twilight as Jo watched Bridget preparing food.

"Good thing you made a giant batch of this stuff," Jo quipped, unable to resist the alluring aroma. She deftly dipped a fork into the pot, aiming for a taste.

Bridget was quick to bat her hand away with a playful swat. "Why is that?" she inquired with a mock sternness that only siblings could share.

"Because Sam just called. Mick's got some lead on the case, and they're both heading over. Thought they might want to dig in," Jo explained, retracting her fork but not her interest in the meal.

Bridget's eyes lit up at the mention of additional guests. "Really? That's great! More people to impress with my culinary skills." A smug smile played on her lips as she stirred the risotto, which was flecked with strands of orange.

"What's that orange stuff?" Jo leaned in closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper as if discussing state secrets rather than dinner plans.

"Saffron," Bridget declared with a flourish, giving the creamy dish a final, confident stir.

Earlier, when Jo had walked through the door, the house was alive with homely smells, the gentle buzz of family life in the air. Pickles lounged on the porch, watching her warily from the corner as she approached but not running away. Finn was his usual bubbly self.

"I'll call Holden and see if he wants in. If we're discussing their case, he'll want to be here." Bridget reached for her phone. She dialed Holden

with practiced ease, her excitement barely contained. Jo leaned against the counter, munching on a homemade buttermilk biscuit as she eavesdropped on the one-sided conversation.

"Hey, Holden, it's Bridget. Mick has some news on the case," she said.

There was a pause, a soft murmur from the phone that Jo couldn't quite catch.

"Yes, and I'm making supper too. Saffron risotto. So why don't you come over and bring your appetite with you?" Bridget continued, her invitation wrapped in the promise of a good meal and good company.

Another pause, this one longer, as Holden responded.

Bridget's laughter filled the kitchen, genuine and infectious. "No, I promise, nothing too fancy this time. You'll love it. See you soon?"

As Bridget ended the call, she looked over at Jo, her expression a mix of pride and anticipation. "Holden's on his way. Says he wouldn't miss home cooking for the world."

Sam arrived first with Lucy trotting at his heels, her tail wagging in anticipation of the household's welcome.

"Smells like heaven in here," he announced.

Jo looked up from where she was chopping fresh herbs. "Heaven's got nothing on Bridget's cooking," she teased, sliding the herbs into the risotto pot as Bridget had instructed her.

Lucy, ever the social butterfly, made her rounds, nudging and sniffing hellos, securing her place among friends.

A knock on the kitchen door surprised them. No one ever used that door because it was around back and in the dark. Jo opened it cautiously to find Mick.

"Did you just come out of the woods or something?" Jo stood back to let him in.

Mick laughed. "Or something. Just checking around the place. You know how it is. Saw you all in here and figured I'd come in this way." Mick shrugged off his leather jacket and headed toward the liquor cabinet. "I hope you have whiskey."

Bridget glanced over her shoulder and chuckled. "Of course, we got the best for you."

Mick raised an eyebrow and made himself at home getting a small glass from the cupboard. "Anyone else?" he asked over the clink of ice and the slosh of liquid.

“I’ll stick with beer,” Sam said.

“Me too,” Jo added.

Holden was the last to arrive, knocking and then pushing the door open with a soft creak. He had a bakery box in his hand. “Didn’t want to come empty-handed.”

Sam looked into the box. “Boston cream pie. My favorite.”

Bridget plated the meal, and they all moved to the table, the chairs scraping softly against the floorboards as they sat down.

Holden, his gaze roving appreciatively over the spread, was the first to sink his fork into the risotto. “Oh, this is heavenly,” he declared, his voice muffled by a mouthful of the creamy grains. The risotto was rich and complex, the saffron lending a luxurious earthiness.

Bridget watched the table with a mixture of pride and anticipation, her cheeks flushed from the heat of the stove and the warm glow of the overhead lights.

Sam savored a bite of the chicken. “The chicken’s perfect. It always comes out too dry when I make it.”

Mick spooned up some of the golden caramelized Brussels sprouts. “I only know how to grill, so my chicken comes out burned.”

Jo leaned back in her chair, a forkful of risotto paused at her lips. “I hope Bridget never gets her own place. I’ve been eating like royalty since she came.”

Laughter bubbled around the table, harmonizing with the clatter of cutlery on china.

As the meal continued, the conversation ebbed and flowed, punctuated by appreciative “mmms” and the occasional request to pass a dish. They were a tableau of satisfaction, a family forged not by blood but by circumstance and shared toil.

Once the meal began to wind down, Mick wiped his lips and sat back. “So, are you guys ready to talk about what I discovered?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Sam said.

Jo started clearing plates. “Yeah, spill. We’re dying to find out.”

Mick leaned forward, his hands clasped in front of him on the table, the dim light from the overhead fixture casting deep shadows on his face. His voice was low but clear, a storyteller’s cadence that held everyone rapt.

“I dug into the Duchamps—or the Woodsons, as they’re known now,” Mick began, his eyes scanning the faces around the table. “And there’s a

branch on that family tree that reaches right to the Websters."

Jo turned from the sink, her expression sharpening. Sam's chair creaked as he leaned in, his brow furrowed. They exchanged a knowing look.

"Ricky Webster keeps popping up in our investigations," Jo said.

"Ricky's just a kid, though," Sam interjected, his voice firm yet thoughtful. "Can't tie him to Tammy's case, not realistically."

Mick nodded in agreement. "Exactly, but family ties can be telling. It doesn't imply guilt but perhaps a path to explore."

The room seemed to hold its breath, awaiting the next piece of the puzzle.

"And there's more," Mick continued, reaching for his glass and swirling the liquid contemplatively before taking a sip. "April Summers? Well, she hasn't always been April Summers."

Bridget, who had been quietly refilling water glasses, paused. "Who was she?"

"She was Mary Madden not too long ago. Lived in White Rock. And she was married to Hank Madden."

Jo's eyes widened. "Hank Madden? Could that be H.M. from the day planner?"

"Could be. And if it is, then April's ex-husband might have been the last person to see her the day she died."

"That's not all," Mick said. "April or Mary also had ties to another person in town."

"Who?" Jo half-expected Mick to say Ricky Webster.

"Lily Dunn. She's her niece."

Jo was shocked. "You mean the artist?"

Mick shrugged. "I don't know who she is. Just have the name."

Jo glanced at Sam. "Maybe that's what Lily was hiding."

"And I can see why. Her bandana was found near there. But why would she lie?" Sam asked.

"Most liars I know are guilty of something," Holden said.

Sam nodded. "You got that right."

Jo looked around the room. "Well, that was enlightening on many fronts. Thanks, Mick." She gave a scrap of chicken to Lucy. "Eat good, girl, because we're going to have a busy day tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The next morning, Jo and Sam went to visit Lily Dunn at her art studio. Wyatt had done some research on Hank Madden and found out he worked for one of the construction crews building a house up on mountain road. They decided to catch him when he got home later that afternoon instead of showing up at his work.

As Lucy, Sam, and Jo entered, the bell above the door announced their presence with a cheerful jingle.

Lily stood behind the counter, arranging a display of hand-painted mugs, her movements meticulous. Her smile was a thin veil over her anxiety as she greeted the detectives. “Back again, detectives? I hope you want to buy another painting.”

Sam’s eyes were gentle, but his voice carried a weight that anchored the conversation in seriousness. “Not quite yet. We just need to ask you a few more questions.”

Jo lingered near a stand with prints, her gaze not on the art but on Lily, reading the quivers of unease that ran through her.

“We wanted to ask about your aunt, Mary Madden,” Sam said.

“Aunt Mary? I haven’t heard from her in ages.”

“When did you last hear from her?” Sam asked.

Lily’s lips pursed. “It was before the divorce. She… she cut ties with us then. I haven’t heard from her since.”

Sam’s gaze was steady, his voice carefully neutral as he broached the subject. “Did you know that your aunt had taken on a new identity? That she was going by the name April Summers?”

The question seemed to pierce through Lily's composure, her eyes widening as she shook her head slowly. "April Summers? No, I— What do you mean?"

Sam took a deep breath, readying himself to deliver the difficult news. "Your Aunt Mary had changed her name. We thought you might know why."

Lily's hands fluttered to her mouth, her eyes clouding with confusion and the beginning of distress. "But… I had no idea. Why would she do that? Why wouldn't she tell us?"

"We're not sure yet," Jo added gently. "Sometimes people need a fresh start, or maybe there were other reasons. Unfortunately, she can't tell us herself."

Lily's grip tightened around the mug, a lifeline in the tumult of revelations. "I don't understand. Why can't she tell us?"

Sam leaned forward slightly, his voice as gentle as he could make it under the circumstances. "She was found dead at the owl sanctuary. Murdered."

The world seemed to tilt on its axis for Lily. She gripped the edge of the counter. "Murdered?" she whispered, a lone word filled with a chasm of realization and sorrow. "By who?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," Sam said, his voice firm, eyes locked on hers. "You surely can grasp how it looks. Your bandana was found not far from where your aunt was murdered."

Her reaction was instant. Her eyes ballooned in shock, and her posture stiffened. "You can't possibly believe I had anything to do with that! Why would I kill my aunt?"

"We're not accusing you," Sam clarified, but there was an edge of insistence in his tone. "We're just trying to piece together the puzzle. If there's anything you're holding back, now is the time."

Lily's façade began to crumble, the weight of implications and coincidences too heavy to bear in silence. "I—I was there but not for what you think. I was meeting someone."

"Who?" Sam asked.

Lily looked down at her feet. "It has nothing to do with my aunt."

"We'd still like to know," Sam insisted.

Lily nodded, a troubled frown creasing her brow. "Yes, but it was personal. We're… It's not something my parents approve of. I don't know

anything about Aunt Mary being there or what happened to her, I swear."

"Lily," Sam said rather sharply. "Who were you meeting?"

"Ricky Webster."

Jo leaned in, a soft but authoritative presence. "You met with Ricky Webster near the sanctuary?"

"Yes, on Tuesday." Lily looked up at them, fear in her eyes. "I swear I never saw my aunt and have no idea what happened."

Sam was inclined to believe her, but maybe she was just a good actress. Still, he nodded slowly and passed her his card. "If you think of anything, let me know."

"I will." Lily nodded, looking relieved that they weren't putting her in cuffs and taking her into the station.

As they made their way to the car, the early morning stillness was beginning to give way to the buzz of the town waking up. Jo walked beside Sam, her strides matching his, the leash of their K-9, Lucy, looped loosely in her hand.

"Do you believe her?" Jo asked, her voice steady, her eyes scanning the street as they walked. "That she didn't know about her aunt being April?"

Sam paused by the driver's-side door of the Tahoe, glancing back at Lily's art shop, now quiet and unassuming in the light of day. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "But one thing's clear," he added as he unlocked the car and gestured for Lucy to jump in.

"And what's that?" Jo probed, her gaze following his.

"Ricky Webster lied to us," Sam said, his jaw setting firmly. "And we need to find out why."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Thorne construction site was a beehive of activity, with workers in hard hats and reflective vests moving about, their voices echoing over the noise of machinery. Dust kicked up around the soles of Sam and Jo's boots as they navigated through the organized chaos. Lucy was beside them, ears perked up and alert.

Ricky Webster was near the corner of the steel structure. His back was turned, and he was gesturing animatedly to a fellow worker, unaware of the approaching officers.

"Ricky Webster!" Sam called out, his voice firm enough to cut through the noise.

Ricky turned, his expression shifting from surprise to defiance as he recognized the uniformed figures.

A flicker of annoyance crossed his features, quickly masked by a feigned casual demeanor. He muttered something to his fellow workers before sauntering over to meet the pair.

Ricky's rough exterior softened for a moment as he extended his hand to pet Lucy, who, to Sam's surprise, wagged her tail in response. Ricky's eyes, wary yet defiant, met Sam's. "Can I help you, Chief?" he asked, his voice tinged with a forced politeness that didn't quite reach his eyes.

Sam noted the subtle shift in Ricky's posture—defensive yet trying to appear relaxed. He decided to cut straight to the chase. "Ricky, I think you might've forgotten to mention something important when we last talked," Sam began, his tone even but firm. "I wanted to give you another chance to come clean."

“Look, I already told you everything I know,” Ricky started defensively before Sam cut him off.

“No, you didn’t,” Sam said, stepping closer. “You left out the part where you were with Lily Dunn near the owl sanctuary. Now I wonder, why would you lie about that?”

“It wasn’t like that,” Ricky insisted, his hands balled into fists at his sides. “I was just trying to keep Lily out of this mess. Her folks would be mad at her if they knew we were meeting.”

“And what about her aunt?” Sam asked.

Ricky frowned. “Her aunt? I don’t know her aunt.”

Lucy’s gaze flicked from Ricky to Sam. Her posture was relaxed. She didn’t think Ricky was lying.

“You didn’t know her aunt was April Summers?” Jo asked.

Ricky’s brows shot up. “What? She never told me that.”

“So you lied to keep her parents from knowing you were seeing each other? To protect her,” Jo concluded, her tone skeptical but not unkind. “Or was it to protect yourself?”

“I’ve done nothing wrong!” Ricky’s voice rose, tinged with anger and frustration.

Ricky’s frustration was palpable as he crossed his arms defensively. “You’re always accusing me,” he blurted out, his tone laced with resentment. “But I never do anything wrong. Maybe you should stop wasting time on me and look at someone who actually had a problem with her.”

Sam’s interest piqued. Clearly, April Summers had been a figure of contention in the community, but Ricky’s insinuation hinted at a specific conflict. “Who are you talking about, Ricky?” Sam asked, his voice calm but insistent.

Ricky’s gaze shifted toward the construction trailer, a temporary office amid the skeletal framework of the new build. He pointed a rough, work-worn finger in its direction. “Beryl Thorne,” he said, his voice carrying a note of certainty. “I saw ’em—April and Beryl—arguing right over there.”

Sam studied Ricky’s expression, searching for any sign of deceit. “What were they arguing about?” he inquired, hoping for more detail.

Ricky shrugged, his expression one of frustration mixed with a hint of fear. “Dunno the words. Just heard shouting. But they were really going at it.”

Sam glanced over at the trailer. Beryl said she hadn't known April. A wave of unease washed over him. If what Ricky said was true, Beryl had known April, and what an odd coincidence that it was Beryl who discovered the body.

Sam's gaze lingered on Ricky, weighing his words, the implications. "We'll talk to her," he assured. "But if we find out you're holding back more than you're letting on, protecting Lily will be the least of your worries."

As Sam and Jo stepped away from Ricky Webster, the wheels turned in Sam's head. How had Ricky, a construction worker, known April Summers, an activist who had seemingly come from nowhere?

"Ricky," Sam called out, spinning on his heel to face the young man again. "One more thing—how did you know who April was?"

Ricky, who had started to turn back to his work, hesitated. He glanced over his shoulder, his posture stiffening. "Everyone who works in construction knew who she was after she started making trouble for the new development projects. Hard to miss someone when they're stirring up that much noise."

Sam nodded, satisfied for the moment. "All right, we'll be in touch if we have more questions."

As they walked away, Jo whispered to Sam, "Think he's telling the truth?"

Sam kept his eyes forward, watching Lucy sniff the ground. "Hard to say. But one thing's for sure. This case just got a lot more tangled."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Beryl wasn't in the trailer, so Sam and Jo decided to head out to her house. Sam guided the Tahoe through the winding roads, the landscape awash with the vibrant hues of fall. The town's quaint, serene landscape belied the turmoil of the investigation they were entangled in. Lucy lay sprawled in the back seat, her ears occasionally twitching at the sound of their conversation.

Jo, sitting shotgun, gazed out at the passing scenery, her mind clearly elsewhere. She finally broke the silence, her voice tinged with skepticism. "I don't buy Beryl's innocent act, not for a second. It's too convenient, her stumbling upon the body the way she did."

Sam nodded, keeping his eyes on the road. He knew of Jo's distrust toward Beryl. "You think she's involved?"

"I mean, she found April's body, right? And then there's the fight they had. Plus, her footprints all over the crime scene." Jo listed the points, ticking off each one with her fingers. "It's suspicious."

Lucy let out a soft whine from the back, as if in agreement. Sam glanced at her through the rearview mirror, a slight smile tugging at his lips. Lucy always had a sense for these things.

"But what about the larger man's footprint we found there? Could Beryl have had help?" Sam pondered, his tone contemplative.

Jo turned to face him, her brow furrowed. "An accomplice? Maybe. But then why show up the next day to 'discover' the body? A ploy to throw us off?"

Sam considered this. “It’s possible. She’s smart enough to think of that. But there’s something that doesn’t quite fit.”

The Tahoe rolled past a charming row of local shops, their quaintness a stark contrast to the gravity of their conversation. Jo’s gaze returned to the window, watching the world outside while her mind worked through the details of the case.

Jo shifted in her seat, her gaze still fixed on the passing scenery. “You know, the more I think about it, the more I can’t shake off this feeling about the connection between the Websters and the Duchamps… or the Woodsons, as they’re known now.”

Sam glanced at her, his expression thoughtful. “It does seem like a strange coincidence.”

“What are the odds that an old clue led me here and then we discover my old babysitter’s family, who was investigated in Tammy’s disappearance, moved here? They left town, changed their name, and now we find they’re related to the Websters. Too many connections for it to be just a coincidence,” Jo said, her voice tinged with a mix of suspicion and unresolved pain from her past.

Sam nodded slowly. “And we’ve had our run-ins with the Websters before. Remember the leads in that serial killer case that pointed to them? It turned out to be a dead end, but…”

“But it doesn’t mean they’re clean. Just that they weren’t involved in that particular case,” Jo interjected, her tone firm. “Ricky’s too young to be a part of that, but his father or maybe an uncle… There’s something there. I can feel it.”

Lucy let out a soft huff from the back seat, almost as if in agreement. Sam reached over to give the dog a gentle pat. “We need to tread carefully. If there’s a connection between the Woodsons and the Websters, it could lead to something much deeper.”

Jo turned to face Sam, her eyes burning with a mix of determination and a deep-seated need for closure. “And more deadly.”

Sam steered the cruiser onto a narrower road, the canopy of trees creating a dappled shade over them. “We’ll look into the Woodsons’ history deeper, that’s for sure.”

The conversation paused as they each retreated into their thoughts, piecing together the fragments of information. The car seemed to hum with

the weight of their deliberations, Lucy's occasional shifts in the back seat the only sound breaking the silence.

Lucy shifted in the back, her movement drawing their attention. Jo reached back, giving the dog a reassuring pat. "Even Lucy's unsettled by this."

The Tahoe pulled into Beryl's driveway, the gravel crunching under its tires. Jo glanced at Sam, a determined look in her eyes. "Let's get some answers."

Sam nodded in agreement, killing the engine. Lucy perked up, sensing the shift in energy. The three of them stepped out of the car, ready to confront whatever lies awaited them inside.

"It's still hard to believe she stayed here after everything with Lucas," Jo mused aloud, her gaze fixed on the mansion's towering façade.

Sam nodded in agreement. "Money and pride can make people cling to the strangest things."

Beryl greeted them with a performance of surprise and charm, her smile a little too wide, her eyes a little too bright. "Detectives! To what do I owe this pleasure?"

"We have a few questions," Sam said, his tone even.

Beryl ushered them into her living room, a space that radiated a false sense of warmth and comfort. Jo took in every detail—the perfectly placed cushions, the photographs smiling from the walls, the faint scent of lavender in the air. It all felt like a façade.

"So, Beryl, we need to talk about April Summers," Sam started, his voice steady.

Beryl's smile faltered slightly, but she quickly regained her composure. "April? I didn't know her, so I don't know what questions I could answer."

Jo observed Beryl's performance, a growing sense of disdain bubbling within her. She knew Beryl was lying, but Sam was playing along, giving Beryl enough rope.

"Are you sure about that, Beryl? Maybe you didn't recognize her at first? Her face was covered, and you were understandably upset," Sam prodded gently.

Jo felt a flicker of annoyance. Sam was going too easy on her. Beryl, however, appeared to sense something was amiss. Her eyes narrowed slightly.

"What are you getting at, Sam?" Beryl's tone had a sharp edge.

Jo cut in before Sam could respond. “We know you’re lying, Beryl. You were seen arguing with April.”

Beryl’s expression tightened. “Who told you that?”

“Our source is confidential,” Jo stated firmly. “But they saw you, Beryl. Arguing with April, just days before she was found dead.”

The room grew tense, the air thick with unspoken accusations and defensiveness. Beryl’s façade of innocence began to crumble under the weight of their scrutiny.

“Fine,” Beryl sighed, her composure breaking. “I knew her. We had… disagreements.”

Sam leaned forward. “Disagreements about what, Beryl?”

Beryl’s face twisted with disdain. “April was a snake, extorting money from me.”

Sam leaned in, his voice even. “We heard she had a penchant for extortion.”

“Worse,” Beryl spat out. “She threatened to tell the conservation committee that part of the land for the project was protected. Said she’d throw a wrench in the works.”

Jo’s eyes narrowed. “Is it protected land?”

Beryl shook her head vehemently. “No, but that’s how despicable April was. She’d fabricate documents, make it look official, file a complaint. Get a judge to halt the construction… unless I paid her off. They’d eventually find out she was wrong, but in the meantime I’d lose a lot of money.”

Jo absorbed this, her mind racing. “Is that why you killed her?”

Beryl recoiled as if struck. “I didn’t kill anyone! I paid her to stop her lies.”

Sam’s gaze remained fixed on Beryl. “You understand how this looks, though? Your motive?”

“I understand,” Beryl said, her voice a mixture of anger and fear. “That’s why I said I didn’t know her.”

Jo’s mind raced. Extortion. It was a motive, but was it the truth? Beryl’s history of manipulation clouded the waters.

“Why didn’t you tell us this before?” Jo demanded, her tone accusatory.

Beryl looked away, her hands clasping and unclasping in her lap. “I was scared.”

Sam interjected, “And where were you the night of the murder, Beryl?”

Beryl turned to Sam, a wounded look in her eye. “Seriously? You think I had something to do with her death?”

“Your footprints were at the scene. You had an argument with her. You lied to us. You even discovered the body.” Sam spread his hands. “I’m going to need more than your word.”

Beryl sat straighter. “If you must know, I was out with someone all night.”

Sam’s left brow quirked. “So you have an alibi? Mind telling us who it is so we can check it?”

Beryl looked away from Sam. “Victor Sorentino.”

Jo glanced at Sam. Victor? That smooth-suited guy they’d met at the owl protest? He was a bigwig at Convale. Jo wondered how Beryl knew him. Clearly, they had a relationship close enough for her to spend the night. Sam didn’t seem at all bothered by that, which was a good sign. It was clear Beryl had a thing for Sam, and at one time Jo had thought maybe Sam returned her affections. Jo was relieved to see that wasn’t the case.

Sam noted it down. “We’ll need to confirm that.”

“Fine,” Beryl said. “Is there anything else?”

Sam rose. “I think that’s it for now. Thanks for your time.”

They stepped outside, the chill air a sharp contrast to the stifling atmosphere of Beryl’s living room. Jo took a deep breath, trying to shake off the claustrophobia.

“Do you think she’s telling the truth?” Jo asked.

Sam shrugged. “Maybe. We’ll check her alibi. See what Victor has to say.”

They got into the Tahoe, each with their own thoughts. They’d left Lucy in the car with the windows cracked, and the dog, sensing the mood, lay quietly in the back seat, her presence a silent support in the sea of uncertainties they navigated.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Kevin sat in the dim light of his living room, the glow from his laptop casting shadows across his face. The thumb drive, an unassuming piece of plastic and metal, lay next to the printout of the pictures he'd taken of the notebook he'd found in the evidence room. He'd poured over the pages, deciphering the cryptic notes scrawled in the margins. Each set of numbers and words he tried from the notebook felt like a key, but so far, none had fit the lock.

With a deep breath, Kevin tried another combination from the notebook, his fingers tapping the keys with a mix of hope and skepticism. The screen blinked—access denied, again. He rubbed his temples, feeling the weight of frustration and the nagging sense that the answer was right there, just out of reach.

Then a sequence of numbers and a word written in the corner of a page caught his eye. They were different, less orderly, almost an afterthought. It was a strange combination, but something about it felt right. With a hesitant hand, Kevin entered the sequence into the password prompt.

The moment he pressed Enter, the folder icon changed, signaling success. He leaned in closer, his heart rate quickening. The contents of the drive began to reveal themselves—about a dozen images, each featuring a grove of beech trees.

Kevin scrolled through them, a mix of disbelief and realization dawning on him. This was very strange. The lower branches didn't look natural. It was as if someone had broken and stripped them as some sort of marker.

“What does this have to do with the narcotics case?” he wondered aloud. The notebook, the thumb drive, the trees—there was a link, a mystery wrapped in the shadows of his own lost memories.

His eyes fixed on a set of numbers. Coordinates? Whatever these trees signified, they were a breadcrumb trail leading to answers he desperately needed to find.

Kevin’s initial surge of excitement ebbed away, replaced by a creeping sense of puzzlement. This wasn’t the incriminating evidence or dangerous secrets he had anticipated. It was… benign, almost disappointingly so. But then again, in a town like theirs, where every detail could mean something more, Kevin couldn’t shake off the feeling that these pictures, these markings, held a significance he couldn’t yet understand.

He thought about the branches, wondering if they were some sort of code or message. The numbers, too, intrigued him. Could they be locations? And if so, what did they signify? A meeting place or perhaps somewhere that drugs or drug money had been stashed? It was a puzzle, but not the kind he expected to find.

With a sigh, Kevin decided it was time to bring someone else in. Sam would know what to do, he thought. He would hand over the drive to him when he visited the station next. Perhaps together, they could unravel this peculiar mystery.

But how would he explain cracking the code? Just luck? He couldn’t tell Sam he’d taken pictures of the notebook in evidence. That was against the rules, and he didn’t want anything to jeopardize his chances of full reinstatement.

As he shut down his laptop, Kevin couldn’t help but feel a mix of worry and curiosity. The discovery felt significant yet elusive, a piece of a larger puzzle he was yet to see in its entirety.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

"Looks like Jamison didn't waste any time." Jo pointed to the campaign sign with Jamison's name in bold letters. He'd put it on the opposite side of the walkway from Marnie's in front of the police station.

"I hope this doesn't turn into a sign war in front of the station." Sam opened the door and gestured for Jo and Lucy to enter.

Inside, Reese was crouched on the floor in the corner, meticulously applying the last strokes of paint to the baseboard. Lucy rushed over, whining slightly.

"Don't worry. I'm fine!" Reese laughed, patting Lucy's head, amused by her apparent concern.

Reese stood up, wiping her hands on a rag. "Almost done in here. Planning to start on the hallway next, if that's okay with you, Sam."

Sam looked around, nodding. "It's looking good, Reese. Go ahead with the hallway."

The front door of the station opened, and in walked Harry Woolston. Now pushing eighty, Harry had once been the chief of police, and he loved to stop by to talk about old times. He was somewhat of a mentor to Sam, so his presence was always welcome even though Sam did sometimes get frustrated with Harry's habit of trying to "help" with the cases.

"Evening, everyone," Harry greeted, his voice deep and resonant. He glanced around, taking in the fresh coat of paint with a nod of approval. "Sprucing up the place, I see. I don't think this place has been painted since I was chief."

Sam stepped forward to greet him. “Harry, always good to see you. What brings you by?”

Harry, removing his hat, revealed his shock of white hair and characteristic warm, yet shrewd, eyes. “Just passing by and thought I’d drop in. Saw that campaign sign out front, Sam. Supporting Marnie for mayor, are you?”

Sam shifted slightly, a touch of discomfort in his stance. “Marnie thought our station was prime real estate for her sign. I’m staying neutral, though. As you can see, Jamison has put his stake in the ground too.”

Harry chuckled, seemingly unfazed by Sam’s diplomatic response. “Of course, of course. So, how’s the April Summers case going?”

“We’re running down some leads,” Sam said.

Harry laughed and petted Lucy. “I know that means you aren’t narrowing in on anyone.”

Sam smiled. “Don’t be too sure. We have several suspects.”

“Funny thing it is, that she changed her name and all,” Harry said. “I knew her when she was Mary Madden. She seemed like a nice girl.”

“It sounds like she wasn’t very nice as April Summers.” Jo held up a coffee mug to offer Harry a cup.

Harry shook his head. “Gotta watch my caffeine after three p.m.”

“So do you know anyone who would want her dead?” Sam asked.

Harry shook his head. “Nah, didn’t know her well. I remember the divorce. It was quiet. No violence or fighting like you get these days. Things seem so much more violent. Like, look at all the murders. Never had that many in my day.”

Sam laughed. “Guess things were a lot better back then.”

Harry leaned against the counter, his eyes reflecting a time long past. “Sure were. You know, though, I remember another person who changed their name. A whole family, actually.”

Jo looked up from her coffee. Was he talking about the Woodsons? She’d never considered that Harry might be able to shed some light on her sister’s case. “You do?”

“Oh, they were a curious case. Moved to town about thirty years ago under the name Woodson. Had a bit of trouble with their boy once, and when I dug deeper, I found they’d changed their name. A strange coincidence, don’t you think?”

Sam glanced at Jo and asked, “What was the trouble with their son?”

“Nothing serious, just some teenage rebellion. But it involved Daniel Webster. That man was always a bit of a troublemaker. I remember pulling in Barry Woodson and Webster for questioning over some petty theft.”

Jo, her detective instincts kicking in, took note. “Who is Daniel Webster? Is he related to Ricky?”

Harry nodded. “His uncle.”

“What kind of troublemaker was he?”

Harry scrunched up his face. “Stealing, B and E, nothing too bad.”

Jo thought there was a big difference between these small crimes and being a child abductor or serial killer. Still, Jo made a mental note to find out more about this uncle.

Harry’s phone pinged, and he took it from his pocket, squinting. A look of alarm crossed his face. “Uh-oh. Looks like the missus needs me to bring some milk home for supper. Guess I lost track of time.”

Sam thanked Harry for stopping by, and Harry left in a rush.

“Boy, his wife really has tightened the leash on him,” Reese said.

Jo laughed. “It was interesting he remembered that old case with the Websters and Woodsons. I just keep thinking there is something there.”

“Me too. But right now, I think it’s about time we go question Hank Madden. He should be home from work by now.” Sam turned back toward the door.

They stepped out of the station, the evening air crisp and cool. The town seemed peaceful, but Jo knew that under the calm surface, there were undercurrents of turmoil. They were getting close.

In the car, Jo turned to Sam. “Harry’s visit was timely. I think we need to find more about the Websters for Tammy’s case. Ricky and Hazel are pretty tight-lipped, but I bet we can get something out of Lily. Seems like it would be easy to get her to talk.”

Sam nodded. “I agree, but first let’s see what Hank Madden has to say.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The Tahoe pulled up to a modest, weathered house, a stark contrast to the grandeur of Beryl's residence. Sam, Jo, and Lucy got out and approached the door, seeing a shadow peek out through a side window as they walked toward the front steps. They were surprised when the door swung open to reveal Danika Ryder, the woman from the logging area, her face etched with worry.

"Detectives? What brings you here?" she asked, her voice tinged with nervousness.

"We're here to see Hank Madden," Sam stated, his tone professional yet firm.

Danika looked relieved. Had she thought they were here for her? Then she hesitated, eyeing the detectives with a mix of curiosity and apprehension. "I was just getting ready to go to work. I had the morning off. Does this have anything to do with what you were questioning Travis about out at the logging site?" she asked cautiously, referencing their previous visit.

Sam, maintaining a neutral expression, replied, "We really just need to talk to Hank. Don't let us keep you from getting to work. Though it is an interesting coincidence, finding you here."

Danika shifted her weight, a flicker of concern crossing her features. "Well, I live here," she explained, as if to justify her presence. "With Hank."

Just then, Hank appeared beside her, his expression a blend of surprise and wariness.

“Detectives? What’s this about?” he inquired, his expression shifting from surprise to guarded caution upon seeing them. Lucy sniffed the air, sensing the tension.

Sam wasted no time. “Mr. Madden, I’m Chief Mason, and this is Sergeant Harris. Could we come in?”

Apprehension crossed Hank’s face, but he nodded and opened the door for them to enter. The living room, into which they stepped, was a stark contrast to the unassuming exterior of the house. It was unexpectedly spacious and neatly kept, yet there was an air of simplicity to it.

The walls were adorned with a few framed photographs, capturing what seemed like happier times—a younger Hank with friends, a few hunting trophies, and scenic landscapes. The furniture was modest but comfortable, an older-style sofa and matching armchairs arranged around a well-worn coffee table.

Hank stood to the side and motioned for them to sit.

“This won’t take long,” Sam said and remained standing. Lucy stood beside him, her nose twitching as she took in a variety of smells that were undetectable to Sam.

“You were married to Mary Madden, is that right?” Sam asked.

Hank crossed his arms over his chest. “Yes. That was a long time ago, though.”

“Were you aware that she changed her name to April Summers?”

Hank’s eyes flickered with a mixture of recognition and discomfort. “Yes, I was aware. Toward the end of our marriage, Mary… She started changing. It was one of the reasons we couldn’t make it work.”

Jo observed him closely, noting the mix of resignation and bitterness in his tone. “Changed how?” she probed.

“She became distant, secretive. Like she was becoming someone else. When I heard she changed her name, I wasn’t surprised,” Hank admitted, his gaze drifting momentarily.

Sam turned to Danika. She didn’t look at all surprised to hear this news. “Did you know that Hank had been married to April Summers?”

Danika nodded.

“And you didn’t think to mention that when we were at the logging site the other day?” Sam asked.

“I didn’t think it was relevant. You were questioning Travis about April’s escapades with the tree. That has nothing to do with us.” Danika

gestured from herself to Hank.

Sam stared at Danika for a few beats. It made her nervous, judging by the way her eyes darted from Sam to Hank.

He turned back to Hank. “Are you aware that April Summers was murdered?”

Hank nodded. “Danika told me you were out at the logging site the other day.”

“After the divorce, did you keep in touch with her?” Sam leaned slightly forward to gauge Hank’s reaction.

“Hardly. We went our separate ways. I had little to do with her once she became April,” Hank asserted, but his voice lacked conviction.

Danika stood close to Hank, her body language protective.

Sam pressed on. “Your initials were in April’s day planner. A meeting scheduled for the night she died. Can you explain that?”

Hank’s eyes darted to Danika, a flicker of panic crossing his face. “My initials? I never had a meeting with her. Maybe it was someone else with the same initials.”

Sam had to admit that could be true, but he didn’t think that was the case.

“Are you sure you didn’t talk to her? Did she call? Maybe you ran into her in the store and she wanted to meet, and you said yes just to appease her?” Jo suggested, just in case Hank didn’t want to admit to meeting his ex in front of Danika.

Danika quickly chimed in. “He couldn’t have met her. We were together here, at home, all night that night.”

Hank frowned at Danika. “Yes, that’s right. I usually don’t go out much on work nights. My job is too physically demanding, and I need lots of sleep.”

Jo’s eyes narrowed. Something seemed off about their alibi. She glanced at Lucy, who let out a low, rumbling growl, echoing the detectives’ skepticism.

Sam continued. “We’ll need to verify that alibi. Do you have anyone who can confirm you were both here?”

Hank shifted uncomfortably. “It was just us,” he muttered, avoiding direct eye contact.

As they left Hank’s house, the evening air had a crispness to it, a reminder that the day was drawing to a close. Jo mulled over the

conversation, her instincts telling her there was more to Hank and Danika's story.

Jo began, "That alibi is a little too convenient."

Sam nodded in agreement. "We need to check their story. There's more to this than Hank's letting on."

"Maybe we should swing back after Danika goes to work." Jo opened the back door, and Lucy jumped in, then she got into the passenger seat.

Sam nodded in agreement, starting the car. "It's a strange coincidence, her showing up twice in this case. Something doesn't add up. And why didn't she mention she was living with April's ex when we were questioning Travis?"

"Let's not forget there's still Beryl," Jo added. "My money's still on her being involved."

"I need to check with Sorentino about her alibi." Sam's lips pursed as if the very thought was distasteful.

Jo glanced at the clock. It was nearing five p.m.—an opportune time to catch Lily at her shop. "I'd like to talk to Lily again to see if she can tell us more about the Websters. I have a hunch they are involved in my sister's case. The shop should be quiet around this time, and I feel like she might open up to me."

Sam gave a nod of approval. "Good idea. I'll go up to Convale and have a talk with Sorentino."

"Sounds like a plan," Jo said, a determined glint in her eye.

Sam pulled into the station, and Jo hopped out and headed toward their other official car, an old model Crown Victoria. "I'll see you back here in about an hour."

"See you then." Sam pulled back onto the road and headed toward the Convale Corporate office.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Kevin walked into the station, the thumb drive a small but significant weight in his pocket. He'd been second-guessing himself about turning it in. It felt almost like a burden, and he wished he had someone he could trust, someone he could talk it over with. But he didn't. He could only trust himself.

He immediately noticed the freshly painted walls and Reese, diligently adding the final touches. At a nearby desk, Wyatt was engrossed in something on his computer.

"Place is looking good," Kevin commented, glancing around.

Reese looked up, her face breaking into a smile. "Thanks, Kevin. I'm pretty happy with the progress."

Major meandered over to Kevin, rubbing against his leg. He bent down to give the cat a scratch behind the ears. "Hey, buddy."

Wyatt chimed in without looking up from his screen. "What's up, Kev? You finally coming back full time?"

"Not yet," Kevin replied, his hand still on Major. "Hopefully soon, though. Where's Sam and Jo?"

Reese dipped her brush in the paint. "Last I saw, Sam dropped Jo off, and then they both headed out again. Must've gotten some leads. They were coming back from questioning Hank Madden but didn't come into the station."

Kevin nodded. "How's the case going?"

"It's still in the narrowing-down stage, but at least the leads haven't dried up. You heard about how April used to be Mary Madden, right?"

Wyatt asked.

Kevin nodded.

“And Beryl Thorne lied about not knowing her,” Reese added. “I wouldn’t be surprised if she was behind this.”

Both Kevin and Wyatt snorted.

“No kidding. She’s not to be trusted,” Kevin said.

“We could use you back here, Kevin,” Wyatt said sincerely, finally looking up from his computer. “Place isn’t the same without you.”

“Yeah, we miss having you around,” Reese added, a sentiment of genuine camaraderie in her voice. “Seems like things are moving in the right direction. I mean, you did get to go out and settle the issue with Nettie and Rita, so that’s progress.”

Kevin laughed, the warmth of their words giving him a sense of belonging. Hopefully giving the thumb drive to Sam would help solidify his standing as part of the team but not if he told Sam how he’d cracked it. Instead, he’d just pretend like he’d gotten lucky with the passwords.

Part of him hesitated at that. If he didn’t tell anyone that the password had been found in the notebook related to that narcotics case, that could be withholding evidence. It would probably get sorted out, though, once someone figured out what those images were for. Kevin was sure it would come back around, and if it was an important part of that case, someone would figure it out. Or maybe he should pretend that he hadn’t been able to crack it at all.

“I hope I’m not stuck only dealing with Nettie and Rita when I get back. I’d like to think my talents are best used elsewhere.”

After a few more minutes of conversation, Kevin checked his watch. “I should head out. I hope you guys catch a break in the investigation.”

“Thanks,” Wyatt said, returning to his typing.

“See you Monday,” Reese called as Kevin walked out the door. Monday was the next day that Kevin was due back to work. He guessed he could give the thumb drive to Sam then. That would give him time to decide if he wanted to let Sam know he’d figured out the password or not.

It was a short walk to the town diner. The interior was a cozy blend of classic and modern—checkerboard floors paired with sleek, comfortable booths and warm, ambient lighting. The walls were adorned with black-and-white photos of the town’s history, adding a touch of nostalgia.

He chose a booth near the window, sliding into the cushioned seat with a view of the street. The waitress, who had a friendly face with a ready smile, came over almost immediately. “What can I get for you, hon?”

“Coffee, black, and a piece of apple pie, please,” Kevin ordered, settling into the comforting rhythm of the diner.

As she bustled away, Kevin’s hand brushed against the thumb drive in his pocket. He leaned back, his gaze drifting outside, lost in thought.

The diner was the polar opposite of the seedy one where he had seen Bridget—clean, well lit, a place where families and friends gathered. The memory of Bridget flashed in his mind. Despite their brief interactions, he felt a connection to her, a sense of trust that he couldn’t quite explain.

The waitress returned with his coffee and pie, the aroma of the freshly baked apple filling the air around him. “Here you go. Let me know if you need anything else,” she said warmly.

“Thanks,” Kevin replied, offering a grateful smile. He took a sip of the hot coffee, letting the bitterness and warmth ground him in the moment.

Kevin’s thoughts were interrupted as the diner door swung open, a familiar figure stepping inside. Bridget, as if summoned by his musings, appeared, her eyes scanning the room before landing on him. Her eyes widened in surprise, and a small smile played on her lips as she made her way over.

“Seems like we’re destined to keep bumping into each other in diners,” Bridget joked, her voice light.

Kevin chuckled, shifting in his seat to face her. “Can’t help it. I’m a fan of good food and coffee,” he replied with an easy grin. “Care to join me? I promise I’m not stalking you with diner locations.”

Bridget laughed, the sound warm and genuine. “I’d love to,” she said, sliding into the seat opposite him. “I was just thinking I could use a good cup of coffee.”

The waitress came over, and Bridget ordered a coffee, her eyes twinkling with amusement as she looked back at Kevin. “So, what brings you here today? Other than the obvious culinary delights, of course.”

Kevin, feeling a pleasant flutter of happiness at her company, leaned back, enjoying the moment. He knew he should keep things light. Small talk. He hardly knew her. But as he talked about the weather, the urge to tell her about the thumb drive and his worries about it being something really important gnawed at him.

CHAPTER THIRTY

There were no customers milling about in Dunn Art, just the way Jo had hoped. Lily was in the back corner arranging a large canvas, and Jo stepped in quietly. The air was thick with the scent of paint and varnish, a sharp contrast to the crisp autumn air outside. As Jo approached, Lily looked up, her eyes flickering with a hint of anxiety.

"Sergeant Harris," Lily greeted, her voice slightly tremulous. "What brings you back?"

Jo took a seat on one of the wooden stools near the counter. "I have a few more questions about Ricky Webster," she said, watching Lily closely.

Lily's hands paused in their work, and she let out a small sigh. "What about him?"

"It's about his family, actually," Jo clarified. "I'm interested in his father and uncle. What can you tell me about them?"

Lily hesitated, glancing toward the door as if expecting someone. "I don't know much about them. He mentioned his uncle was sort of a black sheep. Been in and out of jail a few times."

"And Ricky?" Jo probed gently.

"He's different," Lily defended quickly. "He's not like them."

Jo nodded, noting the defensiveness in Lily's tone. "Do you know if Ricky ever mentioned anything about his father or uncle that struck you as odd or concerning?"

Lily frowned. "Odd or concerning? What do you mean?"

"You know, like something out of the ordinary."

Lily chewed her lip, clearly conflicted. “Not really. Ricky doesn’t talk much about his family. He tries to keep his distance from that side of his life. Well, except his grandmother. He dotes on her.”

Lily’s hands moved to a gold chain around her neck, fidgeting nervously. Jo noticed that she wasn’t wearing her usual bandana today. “How well do you know Ricky’s family?”

“I don’t,” Lily admitted. “But his grandmother, Hazel, she’s… kind of eccentric.”

Jo pondered this, her mind racing. “And Ricky, has he ever shown any violent tendencies?”

Lily’s eyes widened. “No, nothing like that. He’s a good person, just… misunderstood.”

Jo observed Lily’s increasing agitation. “Lily, you seem nervous. Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Lily shook her head, her voice barely above a whisper. “I just… I don’t want to cause any trouble for Ricky.”

Jo softened her tone. “I understand. But anything you tell me could help. Has Ricky ever mentioned anything about his family’s past?”

“Ricky’s always kept his distance from his family’s troubles. He tries to stay out of it.” Lily’s eyes narrowed. “Do you think someone in his family did something to Aunt Mary… I mean, April? I don’t think they even knew her.”

“Maybe not as Mary, but you yourself admitted you didn’t know anything about her once she was April Summers.” Jo didn’t want to tell Lily she was really asking because she suspected the Websters had something to do with her sister Tammy.

Lily nodded slowly, her gaze drifting as if lost in thought. “Ricky mentioned some trouble down in another state… Pennsylvania, I think. Is that where Aunt Mary went after she left here?”

Jo’s mind clicked into place. Pennsylvania was indeed one of the addresses linked to April Summers. “Yes, she was there.”

Lily’s eyes flitted around the empty shop. Her voice lowered, and she leaned closer. “His uncle got into some trouble there. Some bad business.”

Jo’s pulse quickened. A previous serial killer case she’d looked into involving children had been in Pennsylvania. “And Ricky’s father?”

Lily bit her lip, clearly uncomfortable. “Like I said, I really don’t know anything about him.”

As they spoke, Lily's fingers nervously twisted the gold chain around her neck. Then, as Lily adjusted her top, the necklace slipped out, revealing a crystal ball pendant. Jo's heart stopped for a moment. The pendant was identical to one her mother had worn, the one Tammy used to love.

"That necklace," Jo said, her voice steady despite the shock. "Where did you get it?"

Lily glanced down, seemingly surprised by its appearance. "Oh, this? Ricky gave it to me. He said it was special."

Jo felt a surge of adrenaline, and she reached out to touch the crystal. Running her thumb over the surface, she felt a rough spot. Images of her mother inspecting it and announcing it just had a small chip after Tammy dropped it bubbled up.

Lily stepped back, looking a bit alarmed at the way Jo had grabbed the necklace, but Jo continued, "Ricky gave this to you? Do you know where he got it?"

Lily shook her head. "He never said. Just that it was from his family. Like an heirloom or something."

Jo's mind raced, piecing together the puzzle. The connection between the Websters and her family's past was too strong to be a coincidence. She stood abruptly.

"Lily, thank you. You've been more helpful than you know."

As Jo hurried out of the shop, her thoughts were a whirlwind. She needed to get to the Webster house. If Ricky's father or uncle had ties to her family's past, especially to Tammy's disappearance, she had to uncover the truth. Jo's heart pounded as she rushed to her car. She should tell Sam, Bridget, and Holden, but every second counted. She was close to finding out the truth, and nothing was going to stop her.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

The Convale corporate offices were set deep in the woods on the outskirts of town. A symbol of corporate might, the building loomed over the small town, its sleek glass façade reflecting the afternoon sun. Sam's grip on the steering wheel tightened, the company's plans to industrialize White Rock's pristine lands grating against his love for the town's natural beauty.

Parking the cruiser, he took a moment to compose himself. Convale, with its giant energy structures, threatened to change the town forever, and Victor Sorentino was the face of that change. Sam's previous encounter with Victor had left a lasting impression. The man was polished, urbane, a stark contrast to the rugged simplicity of White Rock.

He reached into the back seat, unclipping Lucy's seat belt. She jumped out, her tail wagging, always ready for action.

Sam liked bringing Lucy along when he questioned people. She was more than just a police K-9. She was a keen judge of character. Her reactions to people often gave Sam valuable insights, and her presence tended to unnerve those he questioned, making it easier to extract information. Besides, no one ever questioned the chief of police bringing a K-9 along, even in places where animals weren't typically allowed.

"I don't really like this Sorentino guy," Sam muttered to Lucy as they approached the sleek glass doors of the building. He thought back to his previous encounter with Victor Sorentino. There was something about the man he didn't trust. His demeanor was too polished, too controlled. It was almost as if he was performing.

Lucy looked up at Sam, her whiskey-brown eyes full of agreement. Sam knew Lucy felt the same as he did.

Stepping into the lobby, Sam passed by a large model of an energy structure, a reminder of what was at stake. He approached the receptionist, who eyed Lucy warily as the K-9 sniffed around, her senses alert.

"I'm here to see Victor Sorentino," Sam announced, his tone carrying an edge of authority.

"Do you have an appointment?" the women asked.

Sam smiled and pointed to his badge. "No, but I'm pretty sure he'll make time to see me."

The receptionist made a call, her eyes flicking to Sam and then to Lucy. "Mr. Sorentino will see you now," she said, directing him to the elevators.

Victor's office was on the top floor, offering a panoramic view of the town and the unspoiled forest around it. Unspoiled for now, Sam thought, because if Convale had its way, there would be an ugly path of giant metal electrical towers slashing through the landscape.

The office was spacious and impeccably decorated in a sleek, modern style. Victor stood by the window, his back to Sam, gazing out over the town. His dark hair caught the light, and his posture exuded a sense of command.

Victor turned and greeted them with a polished smile, though his eyes betrayed a hint of curiosity at Lucy's presence.

"Chief Mason," Victor began, extending his hand in greeting. "To what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

Sam shook Victor's hand, maintaining a steady gaze. "I'm following up on some leads in the April Summers case," he said, watching for Victor's reaction.

Victor raised an eyebrow, his composure intact. "April Summers? I'm afraid I don't see how that would involve me." He moved to sit on the leather chair behind his desk and gestured for Sam to sit on the chair facing it.

"That's what I'm here to find out," Sam replied evenly. "Did you know April?"

Victor's response was swift and smooth. "No, I can't say that I did. What would my connection to her be?"

Sam observed Victor carefully. "One of our suspects claimed you were their alibi for the night April was killed."

The surprise on Victor's face seemed genuine. "An alibi? For whom?"

"Beryl Thorne," Sam stated. "She mentioned she was with you that evening."

Victor paused, his expression shifting as he processed the information. "Ah, Beryl," he said after a moment. "Yes, we had a late dinner, and she came back to my place."

Sam nodded, noting the slight delay in Victor's recognition. "Can anyone else corroborate that?"

Victor leaned back in his chair, a confident air returning to him. "I'm sure the staff at the restaurant can vouch for our meeting, but as for my place, it was just the two of us. She did stay until morning, but she left before dawn to get some early morning pictures at the owl sanctuary."

Victor had a bit of a smirk on his face as he said that, and Lucy let out a sniff. Sam imagined that was the dog's version of rolling her eyes.

Sam leaned forward slightly, maintaining a casual tone. "Word around town is that April had a penchant for extortion. Did she ever try that with Convale?"

Victor's expression remained unfazed. "Extortion? If she did, it never reached my desk. Convale is a large company, Detective. We deal with all sorts of allegations and claims."

Sam nodded, filing away Victor's response. "How well did Beryl know April? Did she ever mention having an argument with her that day?"

Victor paused, his eyes narrowing briefly. "No, she didn't mention any argument. Why would she?"

"That's interesting," Sam mused. "You had dinner together that night. I would think Beryl might want to vent about an argument with someone she knew."

Victor shrugged, a dismissive gesture. "Our conversation was primarily about business… and other things."

"And what other things would those be, if you don't mind me asking?" Sam probed, watching Victor's reaction closely.

Victor let out a laugh, though it lacked warmth. "Personal stuff. Nothing pertinent to your investigation, I assure you."

Victor leaned forward, fixing Sam with a scrutinizing gaze. "You seem quite interested in Beryl, Detective. Is there something I should be aware of regarding you two?"

Sam met Victor's gaze steadily. "No, there's nothing. Just following up on all leads."

As the interview concluded, Victor stood up, his posture relaxed yet authoritative. "Is there anything else, Detective?"

Sam took a moment then shook his head. "Not for now."

Leaving Victor's office, Sam went over the interview in his head. Could Victor and Beryl have teamed up to kill April? Victor seemed like the type of guy who would have someone else do his dirty work, but that didn't mean he wasn't involved somehow. But why would they kill her?

In the car, Sam turned to Lucy in the back seat. "I still don't like him, do you?"

Lucy gave a soft woof, indicating that she still didn't like Victor either.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Jo's gaze swept over the dilapidated old farmhouse as she approached. It was the only house for miles, standing isolated, far from town, a testament to neglect and years of wear. The screen door, its mesh hanging out like an afterthought, creaked eerily in the wind.

She rapped on the wooden frame, her heart pounding with a mix of determination and apprehension. Hazel Webster, a lit cigarette dangling from her lips, answered the door. Her eyes, sharp and defensive, sized Jo up.

"Well, if it isn't White Rock's finest," Hazel declared, her voice a rasp of suspicion.

"Is Ricky home?" Jo would much rather discuss this with Ricky than Hazel. Even though Hazel probably knew more about the past, Jo didn't trust her answers.

"Nope." Hazel started to shut the door.

"I'm here to talk about a necklace," Jo said hastily. "A crystal ball pendant. Ricky gave it to Lily Dunn."

Hazel's eyes narrowed, and she looked at Jo, opening the door a smidge wider. "Accusing my grandson of stealing now, are you? Ricky's a good boy. Don't you forget that."

"No, no," Jo quickly reassured her. "We think it's important to a case. We know Ricky didn't steal it. Actually, it was some sort of family heirloom."

The mention of a family heirloom seemed to trigger something in Hazel. Her fierce demeanor wavered, replaced by a flicker of curiosity.

“Heirloom, you say?”

Jo nodded, describing the unique pendant in detail. A spark appeared behind Hazel’s bloodshot eyes. She knew something.

“Maybe I remember something. Come in,” Hazel muttered, turning back into the shadows of the house.

Hesitation gripped Jo. She should let Sam know what was going on. But Hazel had already disappeared inside, and if she wanted more answers, she’d have to follow. Besides, Hazel was a frail old woman, nothing for Jo to be afraid of.

Taking a deep breath, Jo stepped over the threshold into the dimly lit interior that seemed to swallow light whole.

The house smelled of stale smoke and old wood. Dust motes danced in the slivers of light filtering through dirty windows. Jo followed Hazel through a narrow hallway lined with crooked family photos, each frame holding a faded memory.

They entered a cluttered living room, where Hazel gestured to a worn sofa. The house was oppressive from the water stains creeping down the walls to the old worn fabric on the furniture. She felt sorry for Ricky living here.

As Hazel settled into an armchair, her eyes became distant, her words slow and measured. “Now, what’s this about a necklace?” Hazel’s voice trailed off, her eyes suddenly snapping back to the present. She looked at Jo with a new intensity, as if weighing whether to reveal more.

“It was a crystal necklace, the kind that reflects a rainbow of light. Do you know where it came from?” Jo asked.

Hazel took a long drag of her cigarette, the ember glowing in the gloom. Jo suppressed the urge to cough.

The silence stretched, thick with anticipation. Jo leaned forward, sensing the importance of what Hazel might disclose next. The old house creaked around them, as if echoing the tension of the moment.

Hazel’s demeanor transformed as a sharp, knowing glint appeared in her eyes. She leaned forward, scrutinizing Jo with an intensity that hadn’t been there moments before. “My sister-in-law had a necklace like that,” she said, her voice carrying a weight that made the air in the room feel heavier.

Jo shifted uncomfortably, feeling a chill run down her spine. “And where is your sister-in-law now?” she replied cautiously.

Hazel chuckled, a low, raspy sound that echoed slightly in the cluttered room. “Long gone. We were close once after she moved here. Sad thing what happened.”

“What happened?” Jo asked.

Hazel got that glazed look again. “There was a tragedy near their home.” Hazel shook her head. “They had to move away. The police had been poking around, and my brother-in-law, well… he wasn’t quite right.”

Jo’s gut churned. “Did they move up here?”

Hazel nodded.

“The Woodsons,” Jo said.

Hazel looked at her sharply. “How did you know? Is this related to that April Summers incident? Ricky had nothing to do with any of it.”

“I know,” Jo reassured her. The last thing she wanted was for Hazel to get mad and kick her out. Not when it seemed like she was going to finally get some answers. But could she trust Hazel’s answers? The woman was clearly not all there.

An ominous creak from down the hall captured Jo’s attention, drawing her gaze toward the shadowed entrance of another room. A fleeting glimpse of what seemed like an arm resting on a chair sparked her curiosity. Was someone else in the house, silently observing their conversation?

Hazel, noticing Jo’s diverted focus, commented casually, “Oh, that’s just the dining room. That’s where we usually have our tea. In fact, I seem to have lost my manners. I should have asked if you’d like some.”

Jo couldn’t shake off a creeping sense of unease. She didn’t want to stay for tea, but her detective instincts urged her to maintain a façade of normalcy if she hoped to get more answers from Hazel.

“Tea sounds lovely,” she said, her voice steady despite the racing thoughts.

Hazel nodded, her movements slow but deliberate. “You stay right here,” she commanded, her tone leaving no room for argument as she shuffled off to the kitchen.

Once Hazel’s footsteps faded, Jo seized the opportunity to investigate. She tiptoed toward the dining room, her heart pounding with a mix of anticipation and dread. Was someone in there listening, and what would they do if she appeared in the doorway?

She inched closer. There was someone in a chair… or something. She could see an arm, but it was oddly still.

“Here’s your tea.” Hazel’s voice in her ear made her jump.

Jo whirled around to see Hazel standing with a flower-patterned china teacup and saucer extended toward Jo. How had the women snuck up on her without Jo hearing?

“We’ll take it in the living room.” Hazel herded Jo back to the other room, and they sat. Jo took a few sips of tea to be polite.

Jo leaned forward, her focus sharpened. “Can you tell me more about your brother-in-law? What was the specific issue?”

Hazel’s gaze turned piercing, almost knowing. “I think you might know more than you let on.”

A strange sensation twisted in Jo’s stomach, a mix of unease and a sudden wave of dizziness. “What do you mean by that?” she pressed, trying to steady her voice.

Hazel’s laugh was a dry cackle that seemed to echo in the cramped space. “You were there, weren’t you?” she accused, her eyes glinting with a mix of cunning and madness.

Jo’s instincts screamed that Hazel’s grip on reality was tenuous at best. She might possess crucial information, but sifting truth from delusion appeared increasingly complex. Rising from her seat, Jo felt a wave of unsteadiness wash over her.

“Thank you for the tea, Hazel, but I really must go,” she said, her words more rushed than she intended.

“But you’re not leaving yet,” Hazel protested with a sly smile. “I haven’t gotten to the good part.”

“I have to get back to the station,” Jo insisted, her voice firm despite her spinning head. She moved toward the hallway, her steps cautious.

As she paused at the entrance of the dining room, curiosity tugged at her. She hesitated, her hand hovering near the doorframe.

“I wouldn’t go in there, dear.” Hazel’s voice floated from behind, a warning laced with an unsettling undertone.

Jo stepped into the room.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Sam's eyes flicked to the empty space where the Crown Vic usually sat as he pulled into the station parking lot. Jo wasn't back yet? He felt a hint of concern as he let Lucy out and headed into the station. Lucy, trotting beside him, seemed to sense his unease, her ears perked and attentive.

As they entered the station, the smell of fresh paint greeted them. Reese, covered in a splatter of colors, was working on the hallway.

"Hey, Chief," Reese said.

"Hi. Have you seen Jo?" Sam asked, scanning the area.

"No." Reese stood, brushing a lock of hair from her face with her paint-streaked hand. "Haven't seen her since she left with you earlier today."

Sam shrugged and checked his phone. Jo must be on to something good.

They made their way into the squad room, Lucy's nails clicking gently against the linoleum. She paused and looked up at the top of the filing cabinet where Major perched. His brilliant green eyes bore into Lucy's with a mix of superiority and disdain.

Sam was about to continue on to his office when the door opened and Hank Madden wandered in, looking nervous. Interesting. Sam's instincts, honed by years of experience, told him that Hank had something big on his mind.

"Mr. Madden," Sam said. "What can I do for you?"

Hank's gaze darted around the room and finally back to Sam. "I thought a lot after you left, and I have some information…. about April."

"Shall we talk in my office?" Sam gestured toward his office, and Hank walked ahead. Sam followed him in and shut the door.

Sam took his place behind the desk while Hank settled into the chair in front, the uneven legs causing a slight wobble. Lucy took her spot near the window even though there wasn't much sun left to the day. The atmosphere was tense, the air thick with unspoken words.

Sam watched as Hank's gaze shifted uneasily to the corkboard adorned with the grim tableau of the crime scene. The widening of Hank's eyes betrayed his shock. "Is that where she was killed?" he asked, a tremor in his voice.

Sam responded with a simple nod, his keen eyes fixed on Hank, observing every nuance of his reaction.

Hank's gaze darted away from the corkboard, his throat bobbing with rapid, nervous swallows. The man's discomfort was almost palpable, filling the small office with a tense air. Sam waited patiently, his detective instincts kicking in. There was an authenticity to Hank's reaction that couldn't be easily feigned. Hank hadn't seen this crime scene before. He wasn't the killer.

"What did you want to tell me, Hank? Something you couldn't tell me before or something you just remembered?" Sam asked finally. His voice was calm but firm, cutting through the tense atmosphere.

Hank fidgeted in his seat, his eyes darting everywhere but at the corkboard. "I… uh, Danika doesn't know I'm here. She's at work," he stammered.

"I see." Sam smiled to urge Hank on.

Hank sighed. "The truth is I did meet with April the night she died. But she was alive when I left her, I swear."

Upon Hank's admission, Sam leaned forward, his demeanor calm yet assertive. "Why did you lie about meeting her, Hank?" he asked, his voice steady but laced with a hint of scrutiny.

Hank shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his hands fidgeting. "I was nervous," he confessed, his voice strained with emotion. "I didn't know what to say, and… and I didn't want Danika to find out I met with my ex. It's complicated."

Sam nodded slowly, understanding the human complexities of such situations. "I get that, Hank," he said, his tone softer but still firm. "But you have to see how it looks from our side. Lying about meeting April, especially under these circumstances, doesn't reflect well on you."

Hank's face crumpled, and he buried it in his hands, his body language exuding distress. "I know, I know," he muttered, his voice muffled and filled with regret. "That's why I came down to tell you the truth. I swear, she was very much alive when I left her. I wouldn't hurt her. I just couldn't."

Sam's next question was pointed. "Why did you meet her?"

Hank's discomfort was palpable. "I still have… had feelings for her. But she's changed. It was… disturbing."

Sam's gaze narrowed slightly as he assessed Hank's demeanor. "Disturbing enough to kill her?"

Hank's agitation spiked visibly. "No! I didn't kill her," he insisted, his voice rising in a mix of desperation and indignation. "Why would I come here to tell you I did meet her if I killed her?"

Sam remained calm, methodically piecing together the timeline. "Where did you meet her?"

"At that old diner outside of town," Hank replied, a hint of defensiveness in his tone.

"And what time was this meeting?" Sam continued, his questions deliberate.

"Nine p.m.," Hank answered.

"How long were you there with her?"

"Around forty minutes, give or take," Hank said, his gaze flickering away momentarily before returning to Sam.

"Where did she go after?" Sam asked.

Hank shrugged. "No idea. Said she had another meeting."

"That late at night?"

"That's what she said."

"And did you follow her?"

Hank shook his head vehemently. "No, I didn't follow her."

"What did you do?"

"I went to my friend's bar, O'Malley's in Lincoln. Stayed there, had a few too many and slept it off in his apartment above the bar."

Sam observed Hank's body language closely. The nervousness, the eagerness to provide details—it all painted a picture. But was it the truth?

"Seems odd then that Danika said you were at home with her all night," Sam said.

Hank chewed his bottom lip. “I know. I was surprised when she said that. I guess maybe she was trying to protect me. Or maybe she got the nights mixed up.”

Sam remained silent.

After a few beats, Hank looked up at him. “Chief Mason, you have to believe me.”

Sam nodded slowly. “Is there anything else you can tell me, anything that might help point to the killer?”

Hank thought for a few seconds then shook his head. “No. But you can check with my friend. His name is Bud O’Malley. He’ll tell you I was there all night.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I will.”

Hank stood. “Thanks, Chief.”

As Hank left the office, Sam leaned back in his chair, his thoughts swirling. Something about Hank’s story didn’t quite add up, but what? He picked up his phone, intending to message Jo for her take on it, but she hadn’t replied to his last message. Where was she?

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Jo stood frozen just inside the threshold of the dining room, her heartbeat kicking into overdrive at the figures she saw seated around the table. She drew her gun by instinct.

The room was dimly lit, casting elongated shadows across the table. The table was set for a tea party, complete with porcelain cups and saucers, each adorned with intricate floral patterns. A pot of tea sat in the center, steam gently rising from its spout. But it was the guests at this bizarre gathering that seized her attention with a jolt of eerie foreboding.

Looming around the table were giant stuffed animals, each dressed in human clothing. A bear, towering and imposing, wore a frilled blouse, its glassy eyes staring blankly ahead. Next to it, a bunny donned a flowered hat, its ears poking through the fabric. Jo's heart raced as she scanned the room, her initial alarm giving way to a surreal confusion.

She lowered her gun slowly, her gaze moving across the table. Each animal seemed more bizarre than the last. A stuffed dog wore a bow tie, looking almost comical with a tiny teacup placed before it. A moth-eaten fox in a waistcoat had its paw wrapped around a spoon as if poised to stir its tea.

Jo's mind reeled at the absurdity of the scene, her grip on the gun loosening. The air in the room felt thick, and a dizzying sense of disorientation washed over her. Her eyes traced the table settings, the untouched snacks, the half-filled cups, and the lifeless eyes of the plush guests.

Behind her, Hazel's voice cut through the eerie silence. "I told you not to go in there."

Jo turned sharply, her heart pounding in her chest. Hazel stood in the doorway, her eyes gleaming with a mix of mischief and madness. "What is this?" Jo managed to ask, her voice barely above a whisper.

Hazel chuckled softly, a sound that sent chills down Jo's spine. "It's my family," she said, her tone unsettlingly serene.

Jo's eyes returned to the table, and that was when she saw it. At the end of the table sat a large stuffed cat, its fur matted and dusty. But it was the shirt it wore that made Jo's blood run cold—sunshine yellow with white daisies, dirty and old, and unmistakably stained with blood. Tammy's shirt.

A gasp escaped Jo's lips as the realization hit her. Her arm felt impossibly heavy as she tried to raise her gun, her movements sluggish as if she were moving through thick mud. She turned back to Hazel.

"You?" she breathed, her voice laced with shock and horror.

Hazel's smile widened, revealing a set of crooked teeth. Her eyes sparkled with a sinister delight. "Yes, dear," she said, her voice dripping with a chilling satisfaction.

Jo's mind raced, her training kicking in despite the surreal circumstances. She needed to act, to arrest Hazel, to get out. But her body felt disconnected, her movements slow and uncoordinated.

As Hazel stepped closer, the room seemed to spin around Jo. The stuffed animals, the blood-stained shirt, Hazel's twisted smile—they all merged into a nightmarish tableau that threatened to engulf her.

She had to focus. She had to survive. But as Hazel's shadow loomed over her, Jo realized she might be too late. The truth was within reach, yet it felt more elusive and dangerous than ever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Kevin watched Bridget use her fork to cut a small piece of the lemon meringue pie she'd ordered. She looked up at him. "Thanks, by the way, for not telling anyone about that meeting outside of town."

Kevin shrugged, a half smile playing on his lips. "No problem. You kept my secret too." He sipped his coffee as Bridget chewed the bit of pie.

"How's your memory coming along?" Bridget's voice was soft, laced with genuine concern.

Kevin hesitated, his gaze drifting away momentarily. "It's fine," he said, though his voice lacked conviction. Inside, doubts gnawed at him. Was he really getting better? Memories seemed to come back in bits and pieces, like a puzzle he couldn't quite solve.

"I'm actually doing better, starting to remember things from before." His voice carried a hint of uncertainty, like he was trying to convince himself as much as Bridget.

As he placed the thumb drive on the table, Bridget's gaze followed the small device, her eyes reflecting a mixture of curiosity and concern. "What's that?"

He hesitated for a moment, the decision to share this with Bridget feeling more significant than he'd anticipated.

"This," he said, tapping the drive lightly, "is something I had in my bag from the hospital. At first I didn't know why, but then the other night I remembered that it had something to do with work."

Bridget's brow quirked up. "Really? And you had it since you were in the hospital? I hope it's not important."

“I don’t think it is.”

“What do you mean, you don’t *think* it is?” Bridget forked more pie.

“Well, I don’t remember exactly what it’s for,” Kevin said. “At first, I wasn’t even sure it was police business. It was encrypted. But then I figured out how to look at the contents, and well… I don’t see how it could be anything important.”

“What’s on it?”

Kevin paused then spoke. “It’s just got pictures of some beech trees and some numbers,” he began, watching her reaction closely.

At the mention of the beech trees, Bridget’s eyes widened, her breath catching in her throat. “Beech trees?”

Kevin nodded, surprised at her reaction. “Yeah, is there some meaning to that?”

“Do they have markings on them?”

“Yeah, well, the branches at the bottom are broken in almost a pattern, and there is bark stripped from them. Not sure if that constitutes markings, but it doesn’t look natural.”

Bridget was practically jumping out of her seat. Maybe the thumb drive really was important? Judging by her reaction, it could be.

Bridget fished in her purse for a pen and grabbed a napkin from the table and started drawing. “Did they look like this?”

BRIDGET’S MIND raced as she turned the napkin to face Kevin. Her drawing was pretty basic, but she’d tried to depict the way the tree branches looked. This could be the missing piece, the link they had been searching for all along. But why did Kevin have this information, and what did it mean for them now? The questions multiplied, each one more pressing than the last.

He studied it. “Yeah, something like that.”

Kevin’s eyes flicked up from the napkin to meet hers. “How do you know about them?”

“We think those were made by a serial killer to mark where he buried his victims.”

“What?” Kevin appeared shocked. “Who do you mean by *we*? What serial killer?”

Bridget sighed. “I guess I’d better start from the beginning.”

As Bridget recounted the past, her heart weighed heavy. She locked eyes with Kevin across the table. “My sister Tammy was abducted when I was just five,” she said, her voice soft but strained with enduring pain. That day’s chaos and terror still haunted her.

“Our family fell apart after that,” she continued, the raw ache in her voice evident. “That’s what ultimately led to my spiral into addiction. I was seeking any escape from the relentless pain.”

Kevin’s face softened, and his hand found hers on the table, offering comfort. She welcomed the soothing warmth.

“In contrast, Jo turned her grief into a quest for justice. She became a cop to find answers,” Bridget said, her gaze momentarily drifting into distant memories.

“I’m so sorry. I never knew about that. Jo never said anything,” Kevin said.

“Well, it’s not something you bring up at a party.” Bridget gave a sad laugh. “It’s kind of hard to talk about.”

“Of course,” Kevin responded, his voice thick with empathy. “I hope they put the bastard away for good.”

“That’s the thing. They never caught him,” Bridget replied, her voice tinged with bitterness. “But Jo’s never given up. Now, Sam, Holden, and I are helping her.”

“Helping her?” Kevin asked.

“Jo has been investigating this for years in her spare time. That’s what led her to White Rock in the first place,” Bridget said.

“What happened to the original case?”

Bridget shrugged. “Trail went cold, then it got put on the back burner. It hasn’t been active in years. So we’re working on it on our own.”

Kevin’s face showed a flicker of hurt. “I had no idea you all were working on this.”

“Jo only recently brought everyone into the loop, even Sam. You were still in a coma back then. I’m sure they would’ve told you as soon as you were back to one hundred percent,” Bridget quickly reassured him.

Kevin’s expression softened with Bridget’s words. “So you think these trees might be tied to the killer who took your sister?”

Bridget nodded, her eyes intense with a blend of hope and determination. “We haven’t had much to go on, but there was a recent tip about our old babysitter moving to White Rock. It might all be connected. If her family was involved somehow…”

Her voice trailed off as she was caught in the labyrinth of possibilities. “If only we knew where those trees were,” she added, frustration seeping into her tone.

Kevin thought for a moment, his brow furrowed in concentration. “There were also some numbers on the drive that I thought might be some sort of coordinates.” He quickly pulled out his phone, fingers dancing over the screen as he entered the mysterious numbers.

The map zoomed into White Rock, pinpointing a location on Mountain Loop Road. Bridget’s heart skipped a beat, adrenaline surging through her.

“What are we waiting for!” she exclaimed, leaping from her seat with a sudden burst of energy. Her eyes sparkled with a mix of excitement and resolve. This could be the breakthrough they’d been hoping for—a tangible lead in a case that had long seemed hopeless.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Sam sat alone in his office, the dim light casting long shadows across the room. He leaned back in his chair, his eyes fixed on the corkboard that covered an entire wall with photos and information about the April Summers case.

He mulled over his conversation with Hank Madden. The man's alibi had checked out, but something didn't sit right. Why had Danika lied to give Hank an alibi? Sam's gaze returned to the footprint. He had been so sure it belonged to Hank, but now doubts crept in. Could Hank's friend have lied for him?

A sudden commotion broke his concentration. "Lucy! No!" Reese's voice echoed from the reception area. A second later, Lucy bounded into Sam's office, Major's new toy gripped firmly in her jaws. Close on her heels was Major, determined to reclaim his possession.

Sam leaned over the desk, watching the unfolding chaos. Lucy raced across the floor, leaving behind a trail of paint paw prints. Reese rushed in, rag in hand, frustration etched on her face. "They ran right through my trough of paint!"

Sam sprang into action, grabbing another rag to help clean up the mess. As he wiped, he noticed something odd about the prints. There was only one set, and they looked strange in the middle. He paused, realization dawning. The prints overlapped—Major had run through Lucy's exact footsteps.

A lightbulb went off in Sam's mind. He glanced back at the footprint on the corkboard, a surge of adrenaline shooting through him. The single set of

footprints at the crime scene with the unusual tread—could they be overlapping prints too? Was it possible that two people were there when April was killed?

Sam had a suspicion of who those two people might have been. He tossed the rag back to Reese. “I gotta run!”

Reese looked up, surprised. “What? Sam, the mess!”

But Sam was already at the door, grabbing his jacket. “Sorry, Reese! I’ll explain later!” he called out as he dashed through the station.

Sam was halfway out the door when he heard the rapid patter of Lucy’s paws behind him. The German shepherd was in full police mode, her playful demeanor replaced by a focused alertness. She seemed to understand they were on police business, her feud with Major momentarily forgotten.

As Lucy rushed past, the toy she’d been tussling over dropped from her mouth, landing with a soft thud on the floor. Major, close behind, stopped in his tracks. His bright, luminescent eyes widened in surprise as he sniffed at the abandoned toy. For a brief moment, he looked at Lucy, an expression of feline astonishment etched on his face. But then, as if deciding the toy was no longer of interest now that the game had ended, he turned and sauntered away with a dignified air.

Sam couldn’t help but smile at the scene. It was clear to him that for Major, the joy was not in the toy itself but in the rivalry it sparked with Lucy. As he and Lucy made their way to the Tahoe, the dog left a partial paw print smudge of paint on the door. Sam noticed it but decided against cleaning it off. They were in too much of a hurry.

Sam whipped out his phone and sent a quick message to Jo: *Might have a breakthrough. Heading to the logging site. Meet me there ASAP.*

He threw the car into gear and sped off. Every second counted. If his theory was correct, they were closer than ever to unraveling the mystery. But time was of the essence.

As Sam’s car tore through the streets of White Rock, the setting sun cast a golden glow over the town. He just hoped he wasn’t too late.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Jo lay sprawled on the floor, her head spinning as she tried to focus on Hazel standing over her. “What did you do to me?” she managed to ask, her voice barely a whisper.

Hazel’s laughter was chilling, echoing through the room. “Never accept tea from a stranger, dear,” she taunted, her eyes gleaming with malice.

Jo’s hand trembled as she reached for her gun, trying to lift it. But her muscles felt like they were made of jelly, unresponsive and weak. Hazel easily kicked the gun out of Jo’s feeble grasp, sending it skittering across the wooden floor.

With surprising strength, Hazel hauled Jo up from the floor and forced her into one of the dining room chairs. Jo struggled, but her efforts were futile against Hazel’s unexpected vigor. The old woman moved with a swift, unsettling agility as she secured Jo’s wrists with zip ties.

Jo’s heart raced as Hazel picked up the discarded gun, holding it with a familiarity that sent shivers down Jo’s spine. The realization of her dire situation settled in, her mind racing for any solution, any chance of escape.

Hazel stepped back, studying Jo with a cold, calculating gaze. “You’re in my world now, dear. And in my world, I make the rules.”

Jo’s mind raced, trying to piece together a plan amidst the fog that clouded her thoughts. She needed to stall, to find a way to alert Sam, to survive this nightmare. She’d made a fatal mistake and rushed out of Lily’s without telling anyone. No one knew she was here.

Her eyes darted around the room, seeking anything that might help her. But all she found were the unnerving stares of the stuffed animals seated

around the table, silent witnesses to her predicament.

"You don't remember me, do you?" Hazel's voice was taunting, a twisted smile curling her lips. "I visited the Duchamps—or should I say, the Woodsons—back then. Your family lived just down the street."

Jo's heart raced. Hazel had been to her childhood neighborhood? But her focus was on the gun, on Hazel's unstable demeanor. She needed to keep Hazel talking, to buy time, to find a way out of this.

"I don't remember you," Jo managed to say, her voice strained against the dryness of her throat.

Hazel chuckled, pacing around the table. "I saw Tammy then, such a perfect little thing. Easy to take. And there were others, many others. They're all out in the woods near the beech trees."

Jo's eyes flickered to the window. Outside was dense forest. Her breath caught in her throat. Was that where the answers to her sister's disappearance lay buried?

"What are you going to do with me?" Jo's voice was barely above a whisper, fear lacing her words.

Hazel leaned in close, her breath foul, her eyes wild. "Maybe it's time you joined your sister. Reunited at last."

She noticed Hazel's attention momentarily drift to the stuffed animals, a hint of madness in her gaze. Jo seized the moment, shifting in her chair, trying to wriggle her hands out of the zip ties. But Hazel's attention snapped back to Jo, her grip on the gun tightening.

"You're not going anywhere, dear," Hazel hissed, her finger twitching on the trigger.

Jo's heart pounded in her chest. She needed a miracle now, anything to turn the tide. She thought of Sam, of the investigation, of Bridget, of the years searching for Tammy. She couldn't let it end here, not like this.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The logging site felt eerily silent compared to the bustling activity of his last visit. The absence of chainsaws and machinery noises left the air almost unnaturally still, a stark contrast that heightened his senses.

Sam tapped his fingers on the steering wheel, glancing at his phone every few seconds. Jo should have been here by now. He knew she wouldn't want to miss this. If his theory was correct, this could blow the case wide open. He frowned at the empty message screen. It wasn't like Jo to be unresponsive.

Peering through the Tahoe's windshield, he noticed movement in the office trailer. Someone briefly peered out at his car before ducking away.

"They see us," he said to Lucy. "Guess we can't sit here and wait any longer."

With a sense of urgency, he grabbed his hat and stepped out of the vehicle. As he and Lucy made their way to the trailer, the door swung open, revealing Danika Madden's questioning gaze.

"What brings you here, Chief Mason?" Danika asked as she noticed Sam approaching the trailer.

Sam gave a nod, gesturing to the door. "Just a few more questions. Mind if I come in?"

Danika stepped back, opening the door wider to let him enter. Inside, Travis was seated at a makeshift desk cluttered with papers.

"Evening, Travis," Sam greeted casually.

Travis looked up, a hint of irritation in his eyes. "I told you everything the other day, Chief."

Sam smiled slightly. “Yeah, you know how it is. We have to dot every *i* and cross every *t*. Go over things several times. So, what are you doing here so late anyway?”

Danika and Travis exchanged a quick glance before Travis responded. “We’re just going over the accounting. Like I told you before, it’s a weekly thing, can’t be done during the day since I’m busy with operations.”

Sam nodded, making mental notes as he took in their demeanor. “I see. Well, I won’t take up too much of your time. Just need to clarify a few details about April Summers. You know, routine follow-up.”

Danika nodded, her eyes darting from Sam to Travis. She fidgeted with a pen, trying to appear nonchalant.

Sam leaned against the edge of a cluttered desk. “You know, I’m curious about April Summers. She was quite vocal against your operation. Did that ever get… personal?”

Travis swallowed, his eyes flickering away. “Just business disagreements, nothing more.”

Sam hummed thoughtfully. “You know, rumors say April had a knack for… let’s say, persuasive tactics. Ever experience that?”

Travis shifted in his seat, a bead of sweat forming on his forehead. Danika stopped fidgeting, her grip tightening on the pen.

“Chief Mason,” Danika started, her voice shaky. “We don’t get involved in that sort of thing.”

Sam’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Speaking of involvement, Danika, why exactly did you provide Hank with an alibi? Was it for him or for yourself?”

The question hung heavily in the air. Travis’s nervousness was palpable. He looked like a cornered animal. Danika’s face paled, her mouth opening but no words coming out.

Sam pushed further, his tone more pointed. “We know April had a meeting that night shortly before she was killed. Someone who didn’t want to be seen meeting with her. We figure she was trying to extort money.”

Sam left plenty of room to make Travis sweat. If his theory was true, then Travis met with April at the owl sanctuary so no one would see them.

“Not surprising,” Travis said.

Lucy sniffed the air, sensing the rising tension. Travis glanced at the dog, his resolve faltering.

“You know, plenty of people in town have Ring doorbells, and we’re hoping to figure out who drove out on that road by looking at their

recordings." It really wasn't true, but Sam figured the threat of it might get Travis talking. He was right.

Travis's eyes darted between Danika and Sam, a war of emotions playing out on his face. Sam's steady gaze finally broke through his defenses.

"Travis, we need the truth," Sam pressed. "What happened that night?"

Travis exhaled sharply, his shoulders slumping. "Okay. I did meet with April, but I swear, I didn't plan to kill her."

Sam leaned forward. "Go on."

Travis ran a hand through his hair, visibly grappling with the memory. "She said she'd stop the protests if I paid her. It was ruining the business, so I agreed to meet her. But I didn't want anyone to see us together, so she suggested the owl sanctuary."

Sam's eyes narrowed. "So you and Danika went out there together?"

Travis shook his head, avoiding Danika's gaze. "No, just me."

Sam sensed the inconsistencies but decided to keep Travis talking. "And what went wrong?"

Travis shrugged. "We argued over the price. She was asking for too much. She was… She was crazy, Chief. Then she pulled out a gun. We struggled, and it went off. I never meant for the owl to get hurt. It was an accident."

Sam studied Travis's face. "But you didn't shoot her? You used a log instead?"

Travis's eyes flickered to Danika, who now had tears streaming down her face. "I didn't club her."

Sam's gaze was unwavering, fixed on Danika. Her eyes, brimming with tears, conveyed a storm of emotions. "Tell me what happened, Danika," Sam urged gently, sensing the floodgates about to open.

Danika took a shaky breath, her voice trembling. "I… I knew about Hank and April. I saw them in the diner and followed her afterward. To the owl sanctuary." She swallowed hard, a tear trailing down her cheek.

"And then?" Sam prompted her, his voice soft but insistent.

"I stayed hidden," Danika continued, her voice gaining a desperate pitch. "I saw Travis arrive, and they started arguing. It got heated… then April pulled a gun."

Sam leaned in, his focus intensifying. "What did you do?"

Danika's hands wrung together nervously. "I panicked. I couldn't let her shoot Travis. I picked up the nearest thing I could find—a log. I thought… I thought I'd just knock her out, stop her…"

Her voice cracked, and she paused, gathering herself. "But when I hit her, she… she fell onto that rock. It was horrible." Fresh tears streamed down her face.

Sam's expression softened slightly. He understood the weight of her unintended actions. "You didn't plan to kill her?"

Danika shook her head vehemently. "No, never! It was just a moment of madness. I wanted to protect Travis, to stop the madness."

"But then you wiped the gun clean, left the scene, and lied about being there."

Danika burst into tears.

Sam sighed deeply. "You understand I have to arrest you for this?"

Danika nodded, resigned. "I understand. I just… It was a split-second decision. I've regretted it every second since."

As Sam cuffed Danika, he glanced at Travis, whose face was etched with concern and guilt. "We'll need to talk more, Travis. There are still pieces to put together, and you lied as well."

"He didn't have anything to do with April's death," Danika said.

With Danika in custody, Sam led her outside, his mind heavy with the weight of her confession. Lucy followed, sensing the gravity of the situation, her demeanor serious. As they left, Sam's thoughts lingered on Jo's whereabouts. One mystery was closer to resolution, but another concern gnawed at him. Where in the world was Jo?

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The drive into the heart of the woods on Mountain Loop Road felt like a descent into another world. Dense foliage and towering trees flanked the dirt road, creating a tunnel of shadows that swallowed Bridget and Kevin's car. Bridget sat rigidly in the passenger seat, her hands clenched tightly in her lap, while Kevin focused intently on the road, his eyes occasionally flicking to the GPS.

"This place feels… forgotten," Bridget murmured, gazing out at the darkening woods. Her breath fogged up the window, blurring the eerie landscape outside.

Kevin nodded, his jaw set. "Yeah, it's like we've stepped out of time." He slowed the car, peering ahead where the road seemed to dissolve into the encroaching wilderness.

The GPS beeped, indicating they had reached the vicinity of the coordinates. Kevin pulled the car onto the side of the dirt road, parking under the cover of a large oak tree. The engine's shutdown echoed eerily in the silence of the woods.

"We'll have to go on foot from here," Kevin said, his voice steady but with an undercurrent of tension.

Bridget nodded, her heart pounding in her chest. She grabbed the flashlight from the glove compartment, her fingers brushing against Kevin's as she did so. The brief contact was grounding, offering a moment of human connection amidst the fear and uncertainty.

They stepped out of the car, the doors closing with a thud that seemed too loud in the quiet of the forest. Bridget's flashlight cut a bright swath

through the twilight as they ventured away from the road, guided only by the dim light and the GPS.

Every crunch of leaves underfoot sounded magnified, and the occasional rustle in the bushes sent jolts of fear through Bridget. Kevin led the way, his own flashlight moving methodically from side to side, scanning for any signs of the mysterious beech trees.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Bridget whispered, her voice barely audible over the rustling leaves underfoot.

Kevin nodded, his eyes fixed on the GPS. "This is where the coordinates lead." Kevin turned to look around. "Right here."

Bridget scanned the tree trunks with her flashlight. "There," Bridget whispered, her voice barely audible. The beam of her flashlight revealed the distinct broken branches and the same stripped bark in the photo that Jo had. Of course, it looked a little different since so many years had passed. The trees had grown, but there was no mistaking those lower branches.

A cold shiver ran down Bridget's spine as she realized the significance of their discovery. This was it—the connection to her sister's disappearance. But their discovery was overshadowed by the ominous feeling of being watched, the woods around them holding secrets that were yet to be revealed.

As Kevin and Bridget crept through the dense underbrush, a faint glow caught Kevin's attention. "Wait, what's that?" he murmured, peering into the darkness.

Bridget followed his gaze, her eyes straining to make out the source of the light in the enveloping gloom of the forest. At first, it was just a dim, almost-imperceptible glimmer, but as they cautiously moved closer, the soft illumination gradually took shape.

"There's a house," Kevin whispered, disbelief coloring his tone. The presence of any structure in this isolated part of the woods was unexpected, to say the least.

They moved closer, their footsteps muffled by the thick carpet of fallen leaves. The house, obscured by the trees, slowly came into view. It was an old farmhouse, its once-vibrant colors faded and peeling under the relentless assault of time and weather. The windows, dirty and cracked, emitted the faint light they had seen from afar, casting eerie shadows on the gnarled trees surrounding the house.

Kevin's attention was abruptly drawn to a familiar shape in the dim light. "Hold up," he whispered, squinting through the trees.

Bridget paused, following his gaze. There, parked in a clearing beside the old farmhouse, was the White Rock Police Department Crown Victoria sedan.

"Jo or Wyatt must be here. Sam always drives the Tahoe," Bridget breathed, a mix of relief and new anxiety coloring her voice.

Kevin nodded. "But why? This is too much of a coincidence. Something isn't right."

As they inched closer to the house, a chill ran down Bridget's spine. The silhouette of someone holding a gun in the window froze her in her tracks.

"Get down!" Kevin hissed, pulling her to the ground.

Kevin crept up to the side of the house, Bridget right behind him.

Bridget peered through the window, the sight that met her eyes sending her into a panic. It was Jo, her sister, tied to a chair, a gun pointed at her by an old woman.

Bridget's heart raced as she stared at the house, the shadowy figure with the gun visible through the window. Panic and determination warred within her. "We can't just stand here," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Kevin turned to her, his expression etched with concern. "Bridget, listen to me. You need to stay back. Go to the car and call Sam. I'm going in."

Bridget's eyes flashed with defiance. "And let you face that alone? No way. Jo's my sister."

"Bridget, it's too dangerous," Kevin insisted, the urgency in his voice rising. "You're not trained for this. We have no idea what we're walking into."

She set her jaw, her mind racing with memories of past dangers she'd faced. "I can't just hide while you go in there. I've faced worse, Kevin. I won't leave Jo."

Kevin's eyes softened for a moment, as if he understood her fear and resolve, but his tone remained firm. "It's not about bravery. It's about being smart. I need you to be safe, and we need backup."

Bridget's heart pounded, her fear for Jo clashing with the realization of the risk. Reluctantly, she nodded, her voice tight. "Fine, I'll call Sam. But I'm not going far. And if you need me, I'm coming in."

Kevin hesitated then gave a curt nod, acknowledging her decision. "Just… be careful."

As Kevin moved stealthily toward the house, Bridget's resolve hardened. She couldn't just wait. She'd follow at a safe distance, ready to help. Her experience on the streets had taught her how to move quietly, how to survive. She wasn't about to run back to the car and risk losing the only sister she had left. With a deep breath, she crept forward, every sense alert.

CHAPTER FORTY

Jo still hadn't shown up by the time Sam was done booking Danika. Sam's anxiety spiked as Lucy paced restlessly by his side. The German shepherd's behavior sent warning signals flashing through his mind. Something was seriously wrong.

"Have you heard from Jo?" Sam asked Reese as she was on her way out the door.

Reese shook her head. "Not since earlier today. Is something wrong?"

"I'm not sure. She's not answering texts."

"The last time I saw her you guys had just come back from talking to Hank Madden." Reese stilled, her coat halfway on. "Do you need me to stay?"

"No. You go ahead home. I'm going to go check with Lily Dunn. That's where Jo was going after our talk with Hank."

He drove quickly to Lily Dunn's art store and found her just as she was locking up for the night. The young artist looked surprised to see him. "Chief Mason? Is everything okay?"

"Lily, did Sergeant Harris come to talk to you?" Sam asked, his voice tense.

Lily's brow furrowed in confusion. "Yeah, earlier today. She came by asking about Ricky Webster."

Sam leaned in slightly, his instincts on high alert. "What exactly did you talk about?"

Lily, sensing the seriousness in his tone, took a deep breath. "Well, she came in asking about Ricky and his family." Her voice held a defensive

edge.

Sam nodded, encouraging her to continue.

“She seemed really focused on his father and uncle,” Lily said, fidgeting with the hem of her shirt. “Kept asking if they were in trouble a lot and stuff like that.”

“And what did you tell her?” Sam pressed, watching her closely.

Lily shifted her weight from one foot to the other. “Not much because I don’t really know anything about Ricky’s family. I keep telling you guys that he’s not a bad guy. What does it matter what his father or uncle did?”

Sam’s gaze didn’t waver. “Was there anything else?”

Lily started to shake her head, then her expression changed. “Yes, actually. She noticed my necklace.” She instinctively reached up to touch the chain around her neck. “She seemed really interested in it.”

Sam’s focus sharpened. “What about the necklace interested her?”

“She started acting weird when she saw it. She practically grabbed it from my neck.” Lily looked down at the crystal orb. “Asked where I got it.”

“Where did you get it?”

“From Ricky. He said it was some kind of family heirloom.” Lily stuck the key in the lock and locked the door. “As soon as I told her that, she rushed out. Kind of weird, if you ask me. Sorry I can’t be more helpful.”

“Actually, you’ve been more helpful than you know.” Sam turned and rushed toward the Tahoe. Lucy was already in front of him, as if she knew what to do next.

“Weird,” he heard Lily say as he rushed out. “That’s exactly what Jo said.”

As they drove, Lucy whined and shifted restlessly, her behavior mirroring Sam’s growing unease. The dog seemed to sense the urgency, her ears perking up, eyes focusing ahead as if she, too, was on a mission to find Jo.

Sam’s thoughts raced as he pieced together the fragments. The necklace must have been physical evidence that connected Jo’s sister to the Websters. Sam wasn’t sure exactly what or how, but that had to be why Jo raced off. And if that was the case, then Jo had been at the Websters’s house for hours. His grip tightened on the steering wheel, the fear for Jo’s safety fueling his haste.

As the car sped through the darkening streets, Sam felt a growing sense of dread. He needed to find Jo—and fast.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Kevin's hand rested on the latch to the screen door, his movements deliberate and cautious. The front door stood open, and he just needed to make it past the screen door without alerting anyone to his presence. He eased the door open, inch by painstaking inch, ensuring it remained silent. The hinge gave a faint protest, a whisper in the stillness that seemed magnified to his tense ears.

As the gap widened just enough to allow his entry, the dim interior of the house revealed itself. Shadows clung to the corners, stretching across the floor and up the walls, transforming mundane objects into sinister silhouettes. Every shape seemed to hold a threat, every darkened corner a potential danger.

Kevin paused, letting his eyes adjust to the gloom, his senses alert for any sound or movement, his heart pounding in his chest. Each step he took was calculated, his mind whirring with the training he thought he'd forgotten.

He could hear muffled voices from deeper within the house. Jo's tone was steady, but there was an underlying strain that sent a chill down Kevin's spine. Hazel's voice, on the other hand, was eerily calm, almost singsong.

Moving with deliberate slowness, Kevin assessed his surroundings. The hallway stretched before him, lined with framed pictures that gazed down like silent sentinels. He needed to get a sense of the layout, figure out where they were. The old wooden floorboards felt like treacherous terrain under his cautious steps.

A sudden creak from beneath his foot shattered the quiet. Hazel's voice sharpened. "What was that?"

Kevin froze. His mind raced.

The sound of a chair scraping against the wood floor came from the dining room, the noise oddly amplified in the stillness of the house.

Was that Jo? Did she know someone was here to help her so she was covering the noise? Or was it just a coincidence? Kevin couldn't afford to assume that Jo might be aware of his presence. He couldn't rely on her being in a position to assist him. In this moment, it was all on him.

Despite the gaps in his memory since the gunshot that had sent him to the hospital, Kevin felt a surge of confidence. His police training, deeply embedded in his psyche, hadn't failed him. For the first time since waking from his coma, Kevin felt a sense of capability and readiness. He was up to the task, relying solely on his own instincts and skills honed from years on the force. His memory, though fractured, served him well now.

Sweat beaded on his forehead as he crept forward. The realization that Jo was incapacitated gnawed at him. She wouldn't have let herself be overpowered and tied up if she'd been at full capacity.

Through a sliver of an open door, Kevin caught a glimpse of the dining room. He pulled back quickly, the bizarre scenario etched in his brain.

The table had been set for a tea party, but the guests were not what he expected. Large stuffed animals, adorned in an array of outlandish outfits, sat around the table. Each had a teacup placed meticulously in front of them, as if they were frozen in a moment of a genteel gathering.

Hazel's actions were more than just odd. They were the doings of someone deeply unhinged. Someone unpredictable.

At the center of this surreal assembly sat Jo, tied to a chair. Her head was drooping, but he could see her expression—a mixture of disbelief and resolve. Hazel held Jo's gun, her finger worryingly close to the trigger.

Kevin's mind raced. How could he overpower Hazel without getting shot? He had no weapon except maybe the element of surprise, but Hazel was bound to be unpredictable. He'd seen a doorway at the other end of the room. Hazel had her back to that door. If he could get around to that door, maybe he could signal Jo without Hazel noticing. They might have a chance if Jo's capacity to act hadn't been severely hindered.

He backtracked, his breath held tight in his chest. As he edged toward the other door, his mind played out the scenario. If Jo saw him, she'd know

what to do. They had practiced this sort of silent communication in training sessions. One problem, though. Jo was tied to a chair and looked to be on the verge of falling unconscious.

Another problem. Hazel had a gun, and he didn't.

Surveying the interior, he saw a room at the end of the hallway. That room might offer both cover and a strategic view into the dining room. If Hazel remained oblivious to his presence, this could be his chance to signal Jo.

As he edged down the hall, Kevin paused to glance into the kitchen. The stillness assured him they were alone in this part of the house. He couldn't shake the urgency gripping him. At least Bridget was safe. Hopefully she'd called Sam and he was already on his way.

Every second mattered.

BRIDGET SHOULD HAVE CALLED Sam before following Kevin inside, but it was too late now. She kept to the shadowy area of the foyer, her footsteps light and controlled so no one would hear her. Her time on the streets had honed her ability to move unnoticed, a skill that now felt both familiar and unsettling. The dimly lit hallway stretched before her, each shadow a potential hiding spot, each creak a warning of her presence.

She glanced at Kevin's back, shrinking into the shadows as she watched him navigate the hallway with a focus that spoke of his own training. He was past the doorway to the room that Jo was held in and heading toward a room at the end of the hall. Bridget hesitated for a moment, torn between the urge to rush in and the knowledge that a single misstep could be disastrous.

Her mind raced with images of Jo tied to a chair, Hazel with a gun. She couldn't just stand there. She had to do something. But what? Calling Sam had been the sensible choice, and now she could kick herself for not doing as Kevin asked.

Her sister's voice sounded weak. "Why Tammy? Why did you have to take her?"

Hazel's laugh sounded like a cackle. "She was such a pretty little thing."

"She was only a child!" Jo's voice sounded stronger.

“I know.” Hazel’s answer was chilling.

“How did you pull it off?” Jo asked.

Hazel’s confession seeped through the walls. She spoke of drugging Eve, the babysitter, to ensure she wouldn’t interfere. The casual, almost-proud tone of her voice as she recounted how she had waited in the shadows, watching and waiting for her moment to snatch Tammy, sent shivers down Bridget’s spine.

“It was easy to slip something into Eve’s supper that night. Her mother had invited me to eat over.” The ease with which she admitted this was staggering.

“How convenient,” Jo answered.

Hazel’s words were like poison. “I knew when Eve would be out, and I simply opened the door and walked in. I made it look like someone came in the window, though.”

That explained a lot about the investigation and why the police had spent so much time on their father and Eve’s family. She remembered some mumblings about it being someone the family knew, an inside job.

Bridget’s breath hitched as Hazel continued. “Oh, Tammy did fuss. Thought she’d wake the whole house. Had to let her take that silly bauble necklace to keep her quiet.”

Jo’s voice, strained and hollow, asked the question Bridget dreaded to hear. “What… What did you do with her?”

Hazel’s reply was cold and remorseless. “You don’t really want to know, do you? It’s not pleasant.”

Bridget stifled a sob, her hand clamped over her mouth. The revelation was a physical blow, a vortex sucking the air from her lungs. Every moment of Hazel’s confession was a torment, a twisted unveiling of the nightmare that had haunted their family for years.

Kevin’s figure disappeared into the room at the end of the hall, and Bridget detached herself from the shadows and crept over to the room on the right. It was a kitchen. She had an idea of what Kevin was planning. He’d maneuvered himself to surprise Hazel from behind. That might work great if he was the one with the gun, but Bridget knew he didn’t have one.

She was going to have to provide backup somehow, and for that she’d need a weapon.

The kitchen was a mess of old dishes and clutter, but Bridget navigated it with ease, her eyes scanning for anything she could use as a weapon. She

picked up a heavy frying pan, its weight reassuring in her hand. She was good using heavy objects as weapons. On the streets when you didn't have a gun or a knife, sometimes a heavy object was all you had.

She edged closer to the dining room, her heart thumping loudly in her ears. Every instinct screamed at her to be cautious, to be ready for anything. She could hear Jo's voice now, strained but steady, trying to keep Hazel talking.

Was Jo trying to distract Hazel because she knew they were here to help, or was she just buying time until someone came?

Bridget peeked around the corner, assessing the situation. Kevin was in position, ready to make his move. Hazel's back was partially turned, her focus on Jo.

This was it. Bridget tightened her grip on the frying pan, her body coiled like a spring. She knew the timing had to be precise.

So she got into position and waited.

JO SAT TIED to the chair, her mind swirling in a fog of confusion. The effects of the drugged tea Hazel had given her were evident in the dizziness and disorientation clouding her thoughts. She tried to focus, tried to make sense of the macabre stuffed animal tea party around her.

Keep her talking.

Jo managed to think up questions about her sister to keep Hazel distracted. To stop her from the next thing she had in mind. Sam would notice she was missing and figure out where she was. Sooner or later.

Unfortunately, she'd rushed off after she'd seen Lily with the necklace and had made the biggest mistake of her career. She hadn't told anyone where she was going. Maybe that wasn't the biggest mistake. Taking tea from a madwoman might have been the biggest.

Hazel moved around the room, her words a taunting melody of madness. She spoke in riddles and hinted at secrets from the past. Jo's heart raced with a mix of fear and a desperate need for answers. She strained against her bindings, seeking any slack, any hope of escape.

Her mind flashed back to her childhood memories—innocent days before Tammy's disappearance shattered their lives. Across the table, the

stuffed animals, lifeless yet dressed for a party, seemed to mock her, their glassy eyes watching her struggle.

Was someone else here in the house?

She thought she had heard the creak of a floorboard earlier, and she'd tried to cover it up by wiggling her chair around. If it was Sam, she didn't want Hazel to investigate.

It seemed to have worked as Hazel remained focused on her. But no one had come barging in. If that noise had been Sam and Lucy, Jo was sure they'd be in here right now. Probably just the wind.

But then she saw it, a shadow in the hall!

Someone *was* here. But who?

Hopefully not Ricky, come to do his grandmother's evil bidding.

Jo forced herself to keep Hazel engaged. The key was to keep her talking, to delay whatever end Hazel had planned.

"How many others, Hazel?" Jo asked, her voice steady despite the pounding of her heart.

Hazel let out a chilling laugh, a sound devoid of humanity. "Oh, many, dearie. So many." There was a twisted pride in her voice.

There it was, another shadow in the hall. As she tried to focus her blurry gaze past Hazel, she saw Kevin poke his head out. Their eyes met, a silent conversation passing between them in mere seconds. Jo gave a subtle nod, signaling her readiness. But was it only Kevin here? He didn't have his police gun. Would he be able to outmaneuver Hazel without a weapon?

She had to create a diversion.

Jo swallowed hard, pushing down the horror that threatened to overwhelm her. She subtly pulled the tablecloth, and the cup and saucer on it, toward her. "Did you have help with… all of this?"

Hazel's face contorted into a sneer, "Help? You think I needed help? No, I managed perfectly on my own. Much more efficient than that Joseph Menda." Her lips curled in disdain. "He's a pompous ass, if you ask me."

Menda was a known serial killer whom Jo had interviewed once in prison. She agreed with Hazel that the guy was a pompous ass. "Did you work with him?"

Hazel's laugh echoed again in the cramped room. "Work with him? Please. I'm far more capable than he ever was."

Using her shoulder, Jo nudged the teacup. It shattered on the floor.

Hazel snapped her attention back to Jo, who looked down at the shards of the teacup.

“That was my grandmother’s!” Hazel bent down to inspect the pieces.

Behind Hazel, Kevin quietly stepped into the room.

Jo, seizing the moment, threw her weight to one side, toppling her chair with a thud. She swung out her legs, aiming to kick Hazel to throw her off balance.

But Hazel reacted with alarming speed, the gun in her hand swiveling toward Kevin. Jo’s heart skipped a beat as she saw Hazel’s finger on the trigger.

Suddenly, in a blur of motion, a cast-iron frying pan soared through the air, striking Hazel in the chest with a resounding clang. The gun discharged, its deafening blast echoing through the room.

Jo, now sprawled on the floor, struggled to see the aftermath. Her view was blocked, her heart racing with fear and uncertainty.

Had Kevin been hit? Where had that frying pan come from?

The tension was palpable, a heavy silence falling over the room as the dust began to settle.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Sam and Lucy were halfway to the door of the farmhouse when he heard the gunshot. They took off at a run, bursting through the door, Sam with his gun at the ready.

The sound of the gunshot still echoed in his ears, setting his nerves on edge. Lucy's keen senses told her right where to go, and she didn't hesitate to run down the hallway into a room on the left. Sam followed.

He didn't know what he expected to see but certainly not this. The room was a bizarre tableau of giant stuffed animals seated at a table, their inanimate faces staring blankly. Stuffing floated through the air like snowflakes in a grotesque winter scene.

On the floor, Jo was sprawled, with Lucy hovering over her, frantically licking her face. Jo seemed shaken and dazed but unharmed. Bridget was cutting the zip ties that secured Jo to her chair.

Kevin was atop Hazel, pinning her to the ground. Hazel had a wild look in her eyes as she clutched a giant stuffed animal head that was rapidly losing its stuffing.

"You shot Bobby!" Hazel's voice was full of venom as she clutched the head, sounding close to tears.

"What happened here?" Sam scanned the room, taking in every detail, the strangest of which was a frying pan lying next to a smashed teacup.

He tried to piece together the events that might have led to this moment. He had no idea why Jo, Kevin, and Bridget would all be here, much less why they would be participating in this macabre tea party.

Jo rubbed her wrists where the zip ties had dug in and tried to steady herself with the help of Bridget. “Hazel is the one who took Tammy… and others.”

Sam’s brow quirked up. Hazel? Female serial killers were very rare, and he hated the idea that she’d been right here under his nose the whole time. “She confessed?”

Jo nodded, standing on shaky legs. “When I talked to Lily, she had this necklace on.” Jo turned to Bridget. “It was mom’s necklace, the one Tammy liked. It even had the chip where Tammy had dropped it in the driveway.”

Bridget hugged Jo. “Maybe you shouldn’t be talking.” She turned to Sam. “Hazel drugged her tea.”

Jo shook her head. “No, it’s okay. I need to explain. When I saw that necklace, I rushed here without thinking.”

Sam nodded. It was starting to make more sense. “When you never answered my texts or showed up back at the station, I went to Lily’s, and she told me you rushed out after finding out Ricky had given her that necklace.”

Jo looked apologetic. “I should’ve let you know, Sam. I had no idea it would turn out like this.” She gestured to the bizarre scene around them. “She drugged me and took my gun.”

Meanwhile, Hazel continued her struggle, her eyes wild. “Bobby made me do it! I did nothing wrong!” she shrieked, her voice cracking as Kevin finally clicked the handcuffs around her wrists.

Sam’s focus shifted to Kevin. “Good job, Kevin. But how in the world did you know to come here?”

Kevin shifted uneasily. His voice was steady, but his hands betrayed a slight tremor as he told Sam about discovering the contents of the thumb drive. “I was actually on my way to give it to you.” He paused, his gaze flickering to Bridget. “I stopped at the diner for a coffee… and ran into Bridget there. We got talking.”

Bridget nodded as if to lend credence to his story.

“The thing is,” Kevin continued, “I didn’t even remember why I had the thumb drive. It was just there, with my stuff from the hospital. But then Bridget mentioned something about her sister and the beech trees, and I realized the numbers on the drive were actually coordinates.”

Kevin glanced at Jo, an apologetic edge to his tone. “If I had known the significance, I would have brought the drive to you sooner, Jo. I’m sorry.”

Jo, her expression softening, shook her head slightly. “No need to apologize, Kevin. You would have no way of knowing about any of that. I was going to bring you in on this, too, but I didn’t want to overwhelm you.”

“It’s fine,” Kevin assured her. “Anyway, the coordinates on the drive pointed to the woods out back here. We had to see if it led to the beech trees related to Tammy’s case.”

Jo glanced at Bridget. “And did they?”

Bridget nodded. “There’s a stand of beech trees out back in the woods with lower branches broken and stripped of bark long ago. We saw the lights on in the place through the trees and came to investigate then saw you inside.”

“I came in to distract Hazel and hopefully get your gun from her,” Kevin said.

“Thanks for that. You did good.” Jo smiled at Kevin then turned to Bridget. “But what are *you* doing in here?”

Bridget looked sheepish. “I followed Kevin in. He told me to go back to the car and call Sam, but I… Well, I didn’t.”

Sam’s attention was drawn to the frying pan on the floor. “And the frying pan?”

Bridget grimaced. “I thought it might make a good weapon.”

Kevin chimed in. “Turns out she was right. If that pan hadn’t hit Hazel and thrown off her aim, she would have shot me instead of Bobby.”

With a firm grip, Kevin hauled Hazel, who had been muttering and crying the whole time, to her feet. Jo leaned on Bridget as they all made their way out of the house.

“Hazel’s confession makes things a lot easier,” Sam said.

Suddenly the old woman straightened up and glared at Sam. “I didn’t confess to anything!”

Kevin gripped her arm tighter. “Yes, you did. Jo heard you, and so did I.”

“That was Mitzi talking!” Hazel pointed to the bunny with the flower hat.

Sam wondered if she was laying the groundwork for an insanity defense. “You can tell us more about Mitzi down at the station.”

“Just don’t blame Ricky. He’s a good boy. Tell him I’ll be home soon,” Hazel said as she shuffled alongside Kevin.

As they walked out, Sam took Jo's arm since she was still a bit shaky. Lucy pressed against her leg, her way of lending support.

"This will be the second person I've booked today," Sam said.

Jo looked at him in surprise. "Second?"

"Yeah," Sam replied. "I solved the April Summers case while you were out here drinking tea. I'll tell you all about it after you get checked out at the hospital. We need to make sure Hazel didn't give you anything too damaging."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Three days later…

THE WARM GLOW of the firepit flickered across the faces of those gathered in Jo's backyard, casting a soft light on the close-knit group. It was a serene fall evening, a gentle breeze carrying the scent of burning wood and fresh pie.

The fire crackled and popped as Sam tossed another log onto the flames, sending a flurry of sparks dancing into the night sky.

Mick, relaxed and contemplative, sat on a tree stump, his legs crossed at the ankles. In one hand, he held a cup of something dark and strong, his other hand balancing a paper plate.

Jo, comfortably nestled in her camping chair, cradled a mug as the steam wafted up, mingling with the crisp night air. She took a careful sip, savoring the warmth and sweetness of the pumpkin chai.

Kevin, perched casually atop the cooler, had become Lucy's new best friend for the evening. The German shepherd sat obediently beside him, her eyes following every bite of pie that moved from the plate to Kevin's mouth. Occasionally, some pie made it to her own mouth.

Holden, meanwhile, lounged in a lawn chair, his posture relaxed but his eyes keenly observing the group. His drink, a modest glass of amber liquid, rested on the grass beside him within easy reach.

Bridget had laid out an array of homemade pies, a taste test of sorts before she baked one for Jo to bring to their landlord. She watched, amused, as her companions debated which pie might win over the old man's heart.

"So, which one are we thinking for Garvin?" Jo asked, her voice warm and light. She took a bite of the apple pie, the cinnamon and apple flavors bursting on her tongue.

"I bet he's an apple pie kinda guy," Mick chimed in, holding up his slice for emphasis. "Classic, reliable, can't go wrong with it."

Kevin, delicately balancing a piece of cherry pie on his fork, disagreed. "I don't know. This cherry pie is something else. It's got that perfect balance of tart and sweet. Might be a nice surprise for him."

Holden, thoughtfully sampling the pumpkin pie, weighed in. "There's something to be said for the subtlety of this pumpkin pie, though. It's not overly sweet, just right for a fall evening."

Bridget laughed, delighted at their debate. "I'm glad you all like them. I was thinking the pecan pie might be his favorite. It's rich and a bit different."

Lucy, sitting loyally beside Kevin, looked up expectantly as he fed her another small piece of pie crust. She seemed to agree with whatever choice would result in more treats for her.

Sam, who had been quietly enjoying each sample, finally spoke up. "Well, I think Garvin will be happy with any of them. But, if we're placing bets, my money's on the apple pie. It's a safe bet for winning someone over."

Suddenly, Lucy, ever alert, pricked up her ears and turned her gaze toward the edge of the woods. Everyone followed her gaze to see Pickles, the little orange cat, hesitantly peeking out from the shadows.

"Aww, he looks scared," Bridget observed softly, noting the cat's apprehension amidst the unfamiliar crowd.

Jo smiled, watching the feline with a mix of concern and affection. "Not used to all the people here, I guess."

For a moment, Pickles seemed to weigh his options, cautiously taking a step forward toward the warmth and light of the fire. The group stilled, silently encouraging the cat to join them. However, as Lucy shifted slightly, sitting up with interest, Pickles seemed to make up his mind.

With one swift movement, the cat turned and disappeared back into the safety of the woods. Jo sighed, a hint of disappointment in her voice.

“Hopefully, he’ll come back later.”

Sam chuckled, tossing another log onto the fire. “Don’t worry, he knows where the good food is. I’m sure he won’t stray too far.”

Holden, gazing into the fire, spoke in a more somber tone. “FBI’s gonna start digging up the woods behind Hazel’s house.”

Jo’s eyes clouded with a mix of emotions. The idea of finding closure was comforting, yet the image of Tammy’s bones, hidden in the dirt for so long, unsettled her stomach.

Sam, sensing her discomfort, added gently, “With Hazel’s confessions, there might be a lot of digging. She’s been cagy about the exact numbers, but it could be dozens.”

Jo shivered, despite the warmth of the fire. “Matching those bones to cold cases… some of them decades old… That’s a daunting task.”

“Yeah,” Mick chimed in, “but at least Ricky’s cooperating. Gave the FBI permission to search the woods. Maybe the kid isn’t as bad as everyone thought.”

Jo nodded slowly, a thoughtful look crossing her face. “At least Hazel only gave me a sedative in that tea,” she said, trying to lighten the mood.

Sam raised his beer to her. “I’m glad. I can’t afford to lose my second in command.” He chuckled, earning a playful eye roll from Jo. “Though now that Kevin is back full time…”

“I’m sure I couldn’t replace Jo,” Kevin joked, raising his beer to Jo.

“I’m so glad you’re back. We can use the help,” Jo said.

“I just hope I don’t disappoint. I am glad to have my gun back, though. Could have used that at Hazel’s,” Kevin said.

“You proved you’re more than capable,” Sam said, clinking his bottle against Kevin’s. “Doctor couldn’t argue after that rescue.”

“I’ll second that,” Jo said. “Weird that Wyatt didn’t find anything else on that thumb drive.” They’d given the drive to Wyatt, figuring that if more was hidden on there he’d be able to uncover it, but there was nothing else.

“Nothing else on it but those trees and coordinates,” Sam mused, looking at Kevin. “Still a mystery where it came from.”

Kevin shook his head, his expression a mix of frustration and acceptance. “I wish I could remember.”

Jo scrunched up her face. “It’s odd because that means that someone knew about this and put it on that thumb drive, and somehow Kevin ended up with it. But who gave it to him and why?”

Kevin shook his head. “I have no idea. Could it have been part of an investigation that somehow ended up in my pocket when we got that call?”

Sam shook his head. “If it was, I would think one of us would know about it too.”

“Maybe you found it at the station? We found pictures of the beech trees in Tyler’s things, and I suppose he could have had a thumb drive tucked away around there. You might have found it and not had a chance to mention you had it,” Sam said to Kevin.

“If it was Tyler’s, then we might never know why he had it.” Jo shrugged as if accepting the fact then turned to Sam. “What’s going on with the April Summers case?”

“Danika is being charged with involuntary manslaughter,” he explained. “And Travis as an accomplice. If only they’d called the police…”

“It really was an accident,” Kevin added. “But hiding it made things worse.”

“At least those owl protesters are gone. Satisfied the ‘owl killer’ was caught,” Jo said.

“Bet Jamison is happy about that.” Holden poked at the fire with a stick.

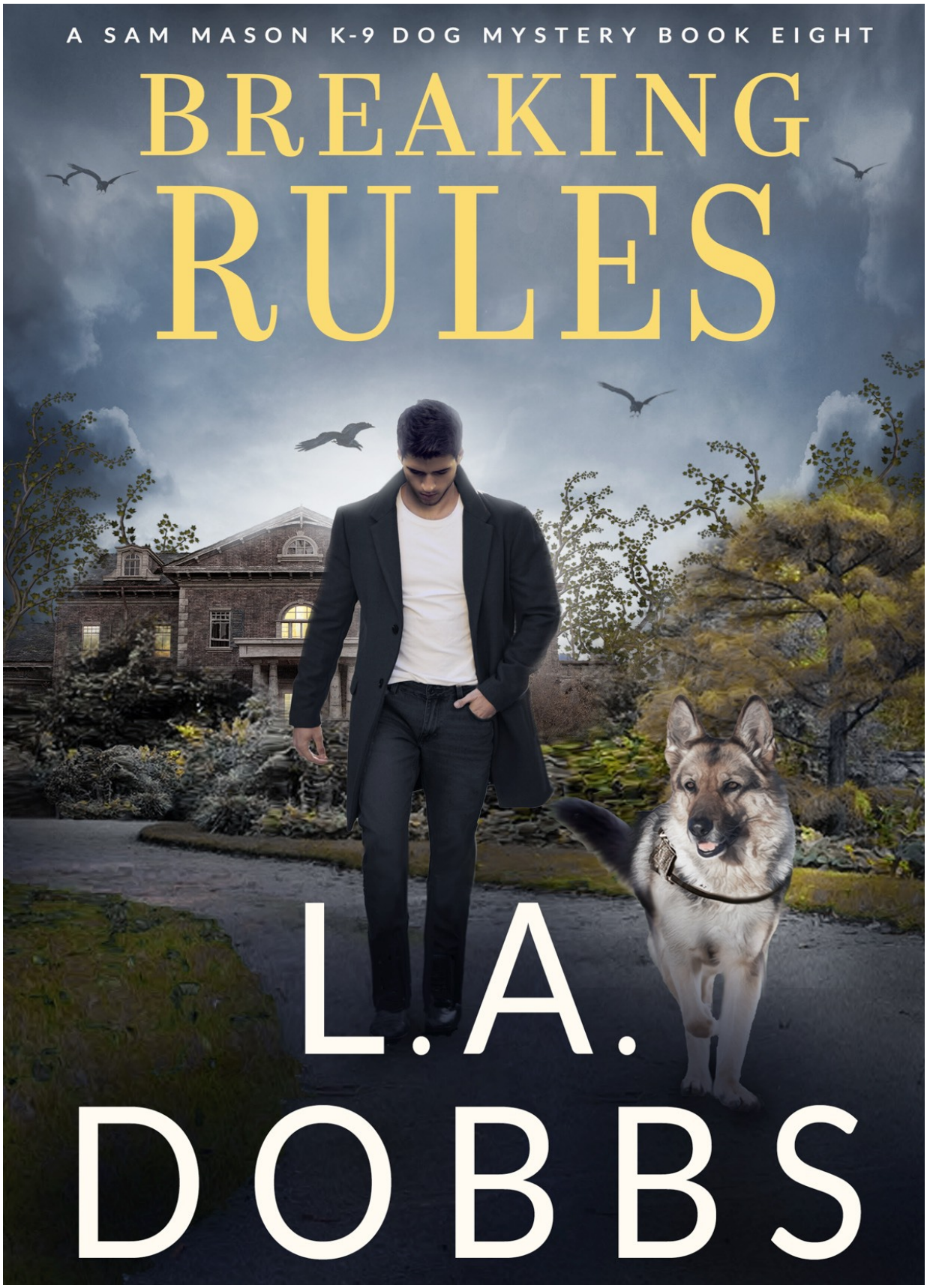
“Can’t wait to see how this mayoral election turns out,” Mick said with a hint of disdain in his voice. “I saw a campaign commercial from that Marnie Wilson person. Don’t know who’s worse, her or Jamison.”

The group shared a collective groan, the future of the town hanging in the balance of the upcoming election.

Sam stared into the fire, the flames reflecting in his eyes. “Well, things are bound to get heated on the campaign trail,” he said, his voice carrying a note of foreboding. “Let’s just hope it doesn’t turn deadly.”

A SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERY BOOK EIGHT

BREAKING RULES



L.A. DOBBS

CHAPTER ONE

George Bennett lowered his jigging rod into the freshly drilled hole, the cold air biting at his cheeks as he settled on his makeshift seat. Lake Whitepine lay serene under the early-morning sky, its frozen surface a mirror to the faint pink hues of dawn. The solitude of ice fishing had always appealed to George. It was a peaceful escape, a world away from the daily grind.

He worked the rod with practiced ease, rhythmically moving the jig in the frigid water. Every tiny vibration, every subtle shift in the line's tension, he felt it all, attuned to the nuances of the sport. George savored these moments of tranquility, the soft creaking of ice his only companion.

As the sky brightened, he felt a weight on the line. George's heart skipped a beat. He jerked up, setting the hook.

"It's a big one," he muttered, a grin spreading across his face. He adjusted his grip, ready for the fight. The line danced under his expert guidance, the promise of a hefty catch sending a thrill through him.

But the excitement quickly morphed into unease. The tug on the line felt wrong, heavier and less lively than a fish. The usual chorus of morning birds fell silent around him, as if nature itself held its breath. A chill crept up his spine, one that had nothing to do with the winter air.

He peered into the hole, expecting the glint of fish scales. Instead, what he saw made his blood freeze. Through the clear, dark water, a human face, blue lipped and ghostly pale, appeared. Dead eyes stared back at him, void of life. A scream stuck in George's throat. His grip on the rod faltered, and it clattered to the ice. He stumbled backward, feet slipping, and landed hard

on the cold surface. The breath whooshed out of him, his mind reeling in shock and disbelief.

For a few heartbeats, George lay there, staring at the hole in the ice, his heart pounding in his ears, his breath coming out in quick puffs. Slowly, he pulled himself up, his body trembling. By some miracle, his rod hadn't slipped into the water.

With a deep breath, George edged closer and picked up the rod, his hand shaking. The hook was still snagged on something, something he didn't dare imagine. He didn't want to know which part of the body he had caught.

With the rod gripped in his left hand, he scrambled for his phone with his right. His fingers felt numb as he dialed nine-one-one, his voice barely more than a hoarse whisper.

"There's a body... in the lake."

THE COLD AIR was filled with the distant hum of approaching snowmobiles as Chief Sam Mason and his team worked around the hole in the ice. George Bennett stood nearby, his hands still wrapped around the fishing rod, his face a mask of shock and disbelief.

Sam gently took the rod from George's unresisting grip. "We'll take it from here," he said softly. "Thanks for keeping a hold on that. If you had let go, the body would have drifted off, making it almost impossible for us to find under the ice."

Officer Kevin Deckard, meanwhile, was busy attaching a grappling hook to a sturdy rope, preparing for a more secure hold on the body submerged in the frigid water.

Sergeant Jo Harris approached George, her voice calm and steady. "Can you tell me exactly what happened, George?" she asked, guiding him a few steps away from the growing crowd of onlookers.

As George recounted his morning's horrifying turn of events, Kevin and another officer began drilling additional holes around the original one, creating a larger opening to retrieve the body. The sound of the augers drilling into the ice echoed across the lake, drawing more curious fishermen

from their bob-houses as they abandoned their lines to witness the commotion.

Lucy, the German shepherd police K-9, paced around, her nose twitching, sensing the tension in the air. She occasionally paused to sniff at the ice, her ears perked up, attentive to every movement around her.

With the expanded hole, Sam and Kevin, aided by a couple of fishermen, carefully maneuvered the body onto the ice. The deceased's features were bloated, making immediate identification difficult.

The murmurs of the crowd grew louder as someone near the front peered more closely at the body now laid out on the ice. "Isn't that Alex Sheridan?" the onlooker questioned, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

Recognition sparked in a few others as they nodded.

"I recognize the jacket. And it sort of looks like him. Hard to tell." A tall man with a bushy beard grimaced and looked away.

Alex Sheridan, known in the small town as an avid hiker, seemed an unlikely victim for such a grim fate. Questions and speculations started to ripple through the crowd.

"How did an experienced hiker end up under the ice? Could it have been an accident?" they whispered among themselves.

The name caught Jo's attention. Alex was the campaign manager for Marnie Wilson, who was running for mayor. Jo was no fan of Marnie—she thought the woman was shady—so it was something of a coincidence that her campaign manager was now dead.

Jo's attention was split between George's recounting and Lucy's meticulous sniffing. Lucy was better than any human at finding clues, so when the dog's attention lingered at the feet of the victim, Jo took notice.

"Sneakers," she muttered under her breath, her eyes narrowing. The body was indeed clad in light sneakers, wholly unsuitable for hiking in the snow-covered terrain around the lake.

"Who goes hiking in the snow wearing sneakers?" She voiced her thoughts aloud, more to herself than anyone else.

The victim was wearing an expensive jacket, thick gloves—well, at least one glove; the other had probably fallen off in the water—and jeans.

Her gaze shifted to Lucy, who was now intently sniffing around the side of the body.

Sam overheard Jo's comment, and his gaze immediately flicked to where Lucy was still sniffing. He nodded and signaled to Jo that he saw the

discrepancy too.

“Here comes John.” Kevin jerked his chin toward the shore about fifty feet away.

John Dudley, the medical examiner, was attempting to navigate the slippery surface in his impractical loafers. They watched as he half walked, half slid over to them. Behind him, his crew was getting a gurney out of the back of the ambulance.

Sam reached out to steady him. “John, those loafers aren’t exactly ice friendly,” he chided lightly.

John grumbled in response, regaining his balance. “I don’t get those fancy cleats like you police folks,” he said half jokingly. “One of these days, I’ll learn.”

While John began his preliminary examination of the body, Lucy seemed intrigued by Alex Sheridan’s jacket. She sniffed eagerly, particularly interested in the chest area. Noticing Lucy’s behavior, Jo carefully inspected the jacket, her gloved fingers probing for hidden compartments. It was a good brand, now waterlogged and with a few rips in the outer shell, probably from getting snagged on branches under the water.

“Look at this,” Jo called out softly. She’d discovered a small, sewn-in pocket on the inside of the jacket, cleverly hidden in the lining. With a gentle tug, she pulled out a key too small to be for a house or car. Safe deposit box? It was an unusual place to hide something, suggesting its importance.

“Why would Alex go to such lengths to hide a key?” Sam asked.

“Clearly, it must be important,” Jo said. “Lucy sniffed it out.”

Sam petted Lucy on the head. “Good girl.”

Kevin put the key in an evidence bag.

“Is that an evidence bag?” someone from the crowd asked.

“Is this a crime scene?” another added.

Jo, overhearing the query, exchanged a glance with Sam. Her instincts were already buzzing with the suspicion of foul play, but she kept her thoughts to herself. The hidden key was too peculiar a detail to be dismissed, yet without concrete evidence, they couldn’t jump to conclusions.

Sam, sensing the growing tension among the crowd, stood up and addressed the group. His voice, authoritative yet reassuring, carried over the murmurs. “Everyone, please stay calm,” he began. “It’s standard procedure

to bag any items found with a body in unusual circumstances. Until we get more information from John's examination, we really don't know what we're dealing with."

His words seemed to settle some of the nerves among the onlookers, though a buzz of speculation continued to ripple through the crowd. It was clear that the discovery on Lake Whitepine had already ignited a wave of curiosity and concern in the small community.

"Let's get him back to the lab and see what else we can find," Sam directed while the body was carefully moved onto the stretcher.

John blew into his hands and stomped his feet, which would have slid out from under him if Sam hadn't caught his arm.

"Thanks. I'll let you know what I find." John nodded at Sam and headed toward shore.

Lucy gave one last sniff at the hole then lifted her nose to sniff the air, turning about a quarter of a circle. Jo looked in that direction. It was due east from where they were. Was Lucy able to sense where the body had gone in?

The condition of the body indicated it hadn't been underwater that long. Would they be able to determine from the currents and the time he had been under where he fell in? Jo hoped so, because that location could hold vital clues to how Alex had ended up in the water.

CHAPTER TWO

The chill from the lake still clung to Sam as he pushed open the door of the White Rock police station. The familiar scent of brewed coffee and hard work greeted him, a comforting reminder of the countless hours he'd spent within these walls. The station, with its history etched into every brass post office box and weathered metal desk, always felt like stepping back in time.

Lucy, her tail wagging, trotted ahead toward Reese, stationed at the reception desk. Reese's long dark hair was pulled back today, and her brows rose in curiosity as she saw them.

"I've been getting calls all morning," she started, her voice tinged with concern. "People saw the police cars down at Gilham Bay. It's true, then? There was a body?"

Sam nodded, the weight of the morning's discovery pressing down on him. "Yep. George really did find a body under the ice. Someone in the crowd thought it was Alex Sheridan."

"Wait, Alex Sheridan." Reese screwed up her face and looked at the ceiling. "Isn't that Marnie Wilson's campaign manager?"

They all glanced out the front door at the "Marnie for Mayor" sign that Wilson herself had hammered into the half-frozen dirt last month.

"I think so," Jo said.

"So was it an accident?" Reese asked.

"Not sure."

As Sam told Reese some of the details, Major, the station's resident cat, made his appearance, his sleek black fur contrasting against the freshly

painted walls. He sauntered over, taking a curious glance at the humans before sniffing Lucy. Sam braced himself, waiting for the usual skirmish, but none happened. After a few sniffs, Major simply sauntered off, his tail high in the air.

"It's almost as if they have their own weird way of communicating now," Jo said.

Just then, Kevin walked in, a white bag of donuts in his hand.

"Thought we could use a pick-me-up," he said, heading past the post office boxes and into the bullpen area.

The squad room was simple. A few metal desks lined the walls, and a coffee machine and filing cabinet sat near the entrance. Sunlight streamed in through the tall windows overlooking the town square and highlighting the scratches in the wide pine floors.

Wyatt, hunched over his desk with his eyes fixed on the computer screen, spoke as soon as they came in. "John's got some prelim info," he said in his usual concise manner. "Victim's Alex Sheridan. Rents an apartment over at 34 Maple Street. Unmarried, no siblings. Parents, uh, Thomas and Elaine Sheridan, living in Florida. He was the campaign manager for Marnie Wilson and, before that, worked as an IT consultant."

"Good work," Sam took a donut out of the bag Kevin had handed to him and passed the bag to Wyatt. "Can you check on his finances? Particularly where he banked and if he had a safe deposit box?"

Wyatt's brows rose a notch. "Sure."

"We found a small key in his pocket. Seemed important." Jo busied herself with the K-cup machine next to the filing cabinet, where Major sat perched like a silent overseer, his eyes following her every move.

Kevin pulled a chair aside, making himself comfortable, while Sam leaned casually against a nearby desk, his posture relaxed but his mind racing. Reese chose to lean against the wall, her position strategic to keep an eye on the reception area.

Wyatt looked up over the screen of his laptop. "John's still working on the autopsy. No word yet on the manner of death," he reported. "Oh, and I put the phone number for Alex's parents on your desk."

Sam rubbed his chin thoughtfully, his gaze distant. "Water probably washed away any DNA we might have found on the victim," he mused aloud. The possibility of losing crucial evidence was always a bitter pill to swallow.

Jo leaned against the desk, her arms crossed. “That’s assuming he was murdered,” she pointed out. “Could’ve been an accident.”

Sam nodded slowly, his eyes still fixed on the evidence photos. “It does seem strange he’d end up in the water like that... And those sneakers—if he was walking around the lake in the snow, you’d think he’d wear boots.”

“Good point,” Jo agreed. “The logical place to begin is by talking to his coworkers. That means a visit to Marnie Wilson’s campaign headquarters.”

Sam sighed, knowing what came next. “Right, but first, I need to make that call to Alex’s parents in Florida.” His voice was tinged with the solemnity that always accompanied the task of notifying next of kin. It was a part of the job that never got easier, no matter how many times he had to do it.

Sam walked into his office, the door closing behind him with a soft click. The room felt like a sanctuary, steeped in the history of the building. His desk, a massive wooden piece that had once served as a table in the old post office, bore the blue stamped postmark ink and staple holes—silent witnesses to its past life. Behind the desk, a large corkboard stood empty for now, but soon, it would be covered with crime-scene photos and notes, a visual map of the investigation.

Lucy followed him in, her presence a quiet comfort. She stayed close by his side, choosing to forgo her usual spot in the sun-drenched corner of the office. It was as if she sensed his need for her companionship, her intuitive nature attuned to his emotions.

On his desk, the phone number for Alex Sheridan’s parents glared up at him. It was a call Sam had made too many times before, yet it never got easier. He let out a heavy sigh, steeling himself for the task. Picking up the phone, he dialed the number, each beep echoing slightly in the quiet room.

As he waited for the call to connect, Sam glanced at Lucy, her brown eyes watching him knowingly. The comforting weight of her presence grounded him, a silent reminder of the bonds that made the difficult parts of his job bearable.

After the initial shock and exchange of information, Thomas Sheridan’s voice came through the phone, tinged with a mix of confusion and apprehension. “Chief Mason, what exactly happened to Alex? How did you find him?”

Sam took a deep breath, choosing his words with care. “Mr. Sheridan, I’m sorry to have to tell you this, but we found Alex’s body this morning

under the ice at Gilham Bay. It appears he may have fallen through the ice, but we're still investigating to understand exactly what happened."

A sharp intake of breath was audible on the other end of the line, followed by a stifled sob. The reality of the situation seemed to hit them anew. "Under the ice?" Thomas repeated, his voice barely above a whisper, struggling to grasp the magnitude of what he'd just been told.

"Yes, sir." Sam's voice was gentle, infused with empathy, as he navigated the delicate conversation. "Mr. and Mrs. Sheridan, I'm sorry to have to ask, but were you close to Alex recently? Had you noticed anything unusual about his behavior?"

There was a pause on the other end of the line, a heavy silence filled with unspoken grief. Then, Thomas Sheridan, Alex's father, cleared his throat. "Why do you ask? Is there something suspicious?" There was a cautious edge to his voice, a father's protective instinct even in the face of tragedy.

"We're just covering all our bases," Sam assured him softly, his words careful. He could hear the faint sound of crying in the background—Alex's mother, no doubt overwhelmed by the news. Sam's heart ached for them, but he knew these questions were necessary.

Thomas's voice was firmer when he spoke again. "Alex was a bit out of sorts, but that's understandable. His grandfather, Frank Milson, just passed away. They were very close. In fact, Alex is the executor of his will."

Sam's detective instincts kicked in, a flicker of alertness at the mention of a will. "Did Mr. Milson have a lot of money?" he asked, trying to tread lightly.

"No, nothing significant," Thomas replied. "Frank lived a simple life."

"Would anyone else be jealous of Alex being the executor?" Sam probed further, aware that family matters, especially those involving wills, could often be more complex than they appeared.

Thomas hesitated before answering. "I wouldn't think so. I don't think he had much of value, so I don't think Alex's cousins would care. From what my in-laws said, they were glad not to have the responsibility."

Sam mulled over this information. A seemingly insignificant inheritance could sometimes hold unexpected value. "Thank you, Mr. Sheridan. This information is very helpful. And please know we're doing everything we can to figure out what happened to Alex."

CHAPTER THREE

Marnie Wilson's campaign office, bustling with the fervent energy of campaign work, was alive with the sound of ringing phones and clicking keyboards. Brightly colored posters adorned the walls, their slogans vying for attention, while a table laden with donuts and coffee cups hinted at the long hours spent here. The air was tinged with a mix of determination and exhaustion.

Lucy was immediately the center of attention, drawing smiles and gentle pats from the campaigners. The soft clatter of her nails on the tiled floor mixed pleasantly with the hum of conversation.

Amid the congenial chaos, a young woman approached them. She was the embodiment of youthful dedication, with honey-blond waves framing her face and a Marnie Wilson campaign T-shirt hugging her frame. Her enthusiasm was almost palpable, a bright note in the otherwise mundane room.

"Hi there! Can I help you?" she asked, her voice ringing with an upbeat tone that echoed around the room. "Alex, our campaign manager, isn't in yet, but I'll try to assist. I'm Amelia Donovan. Are you here to volunteer for Marnie?"

Exchanging a glance with Jo, Sam raised a brow. Clearing his throat, he braced himself to deliver the news that would undoubtedly dampen the vibrant atmosphere.

"We're actually here about Alex," he said, his voice steady yet sympathetic.

The eagerness in the young woman's eyes dimmed, replaced by a flicker of concern. "What about him?" she asked, her brows knitting in worry.

"He's been found dead," Sam disclosed, the words casting a palpable shadow over the room.

The reaction was immediate. The once-lively space fell into a hushed stillness, the only sounds now the muffled rustling of papers and the low murmur of disbelief. The campaigners' faces, moments ago alight with the zeal of political ambition, now mirrored shock and grief.

"What? How?" someone whispered, their voice a mere breath in the suddenly oppressive air.

"We're still investigating." Sam didn't want to give them the disturbing details. Glancing around, he noted Marnie's absence, a fact that brought a sense of relief. With her out of the picture for the moment, he could probe deeper without the complication of her scrutinizing presence. He cleared his throat, his voice firm as he addressed the crowd.

"Does anyone know if someone wanted to hurt Alex?" he asked, his gaze sweeping over the sea of faces.

A young man with a nervous twitch in his eye stepped forward, wringing his hands. "No, no way. Alex was well-liked. We're all here for the same cause, right?"

Sam nodded, taking in the earnestness in the young man's eyes. "Maybe someone else. A friend or even some altercation that might have happened?"

The crowd all looked at each other, shaking their heads.

"What was his mood like recently?" Sam pressed on, watching the reactions ripple through the group.

A woman with streaks of gray in her hair and a motherly demeanor chimed in, her voice heavy with sadness. "He was grieving, of course. His grandfather's passing hit him hard, but Alex was strong. He wouldn't let it derail him."

"They were close, weren't they?" Sam prodded further, his eyes scanning for any flicker of hesitation or unspoken words.

"Oh, very," added another campaign worker, a tall man with stooped shoulders. "His grandfather was like a mentor to him. But to suggest that his sadness... It's just unthinkable."

Continuing his questioning, Sam shifted his focus, delving deeper. “Had Alex been arguing with anyone lately? Any unusual visitors or calls?” he asked, his voice even but probing.

A bespectacled young woman, her hair tied back in a practical ponytail, stepped forward. “Not that I know of,” she said, her voice steady but her hands betraying her nerves as they fidgeted with the hem of her cardigan. “Alex was easygoing. He avoided conflicts, mostly.”

As he listened, Sam’s attention was partially divided. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Lucy trotted off toward the back of the room. The campaign staffers continued to pet her absentmindedly as she passed, but her focus was unwavering.

She headed straight toward someone in the back who was on their phone, back turned to the crowd. Lucy sniffed the person then looked back at Sam. Sam took note as the person hung up and turned back around, eyes widening upon seeing Sam watching them.

Sam continued asking questions, wondering in the back of his mind why Lucy had called attention to that individual. A few minutes later, his questions were answered when the front door burst open and Marnie Wilson marched in.

Her presence was commanding, her strides purposeful as she made a beeline toward Sam.

“I heard about Alex,” Marnie stated, her voice laced with a mix of urgency and control. “Is it true?”

Sam met her gaze, his expression solemn. “I’m afraid so.”

Marnie’s face contorted briefly with shock and sadness, but she quickly regained her composure. She straightened her back, narrowing her eyes slightly. “You surely don’t think this has anything to do with my campaign, do you?”

“It’s standard procedure to start our investigation at the victim’s workplace.” Sam replied smoothly without really answering her question.

“Victim?” Marnie echoed, her voice catching on the word. “You mean... he was murdered?”

Sam half shrugged, his eyes not leaving hers. “We haven’t determined the cause of death yet.”

Marnie’s reaction was calculated. She glanced around at her team, who were hanging on every word.

Turning back to Sam, she composed herself. “Well, please do whatever you need to. Alex was a valuable member of our team. We want to help in any way we can.”

Seamlessly transitioning into her role as a politician, she turned to address the room, her voice resonating with a blend of grief and determination. “Everyone,” Marnie began, her tone commanding the attention of all present, “today, we’ve suffered a tremendous loss. Alex was not just our campaign manager; he was a friend, a confidant, and a pillar of our team.”

A hush fell over the campaigners as they listened, some nodding in agreement, others wiping away tears.

“But we must remember,” Marnie continued, her voice rising, “Alex believed in what we are doing here. He worked tirelessly for this campaign because he believed in a better future for our community.”

She paused, letting her words sink in. “In his memory, let’s honor his dedication. Take the time you need to grieve, but let’s also carry forward his passion. We owe it to Alex to make this the best campaign ever!”

Applause broke out, a mixture of respect for Alex and admiration for Marnie’s leadership.

Sam took that as his cue to leave.

“I don’t think we learned very much in there,” Jo said as they got into the Tahoe. “What did you think of Marnie’s reaction?”

“She acted upset, but it seemed just that—an act,” Sam observed, squinting thoughtfully.

Jo nodded, her expression mirroring Sam’s skepticism. “Yeah, she didn’t miss a beat before turning it into a campaign rally. No doubt she’s not letting anything slow down her run for mayor.”

“She’s a politician through and through,” Sam mused, his mind already turning over the day’s events. “But we can’t rule out anything or anyone yet. This is just the start.”

CHAPTER FOUR

After leaving Marnie's campaign headquarters, Sam and Jo went back to the station.

Reese was sitting at the reception desk, looking exceptionally pleased with herself. "I managed to sort out that issue with Nettie and Rita over the phone," she said, beaming, a hint of pride in her voice.

"What was it this time?" Jo asked with a smile. The police department was always fielding calls from Nettie Deardorff and Rita Hoelscher. If it wasn't Nettie complaining about Rita's goat, Bitsy, it was Rita complaining about Nettie's chicken. Jo thought they just wanted attention, but the department always responded to each call.

"Nettie said that Bitsy is a peeping Tom. She said she might not have known, but there were hoofprints in the snow under her window." Reese shook her head. "I told her that we'd talk to Rita. That seemed to appease her."

Sam laughed. "Keep it up, and you'll be an officer in no time."

"And if you're lucky, one of them will send you a fruitcake," Jo added as she headed toward the squad room.

Major was in his usual spot atop a filing cabinet. He regarded both Jo and Sam with a disdainful hiss as they entered.

"Looks like Major's in a foul mood today," Jo said.

But Major's mood seemed to soften as Lucy trotted in. The cat eyed her calmly.

Sam, Jo, and Wyatt exchanged raised-brow looks. "Guess Major's mood doesn't extend to Lucy."

“Where’s Kevin?” Sam glanced around.

Wyatt answered, still typing away. “Went to Golden View. That’s the assisted-living place where Frank Milson lived. Should be back any minute.

Jo made coffees, and Kevin came in just as she was finishing.

“Hey, everyone.” Kevin accepted the coffee that Jo was holding out. “Thanks. Did you guys find anything out at the campaign office?”

Wyatt stopped typing and looked up to hear the response.

Kevin pulled his chair out into the center of the room, settling into it with a purposeful air, while Sam leaned against the edge of the desk. Lucy made herself comfortable in the stream of sunlight that came from the tall windows.

Jo had settled behind her desk. “At the campaign headquarters, people seemed shocked about Alex’s death.”

Kevin leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his attention fixed on Jo. “Do you think that was genuine for everyone?”

Jo shrugged and started tapping the eraser end of her pencil against the smooth surface of her desk. “Hard to tell. There were a lot of people there, and I couldn’t study everyone at the same time.”

Sam sipped his coffee then added, “Someone there was making a call, though. I think they alerted Marnie. She said she was informed before she arrived. But she acted shocked... emphasis on ‘acted.’” He made air quotes with his fingers to stress his point.

Jo nodded in agreement, her pencil now paused in midair. “Then she turned it into a rally for her cause. Nothing much changes with her.”

Wyatt glanced up from his screen, his expression thoughtful. “Sounds like she’s more concerned about her campaign than the death.”

“Did you expect anything more?” Kevin asked. They all shared a similar opinion of the mayoral candidate, though the current mayor, Henley Jamison, wasn’t much better.

Sam turned to Kevin. “What about you? Wyatt said you went to Golden View. Did you discover anything useful?”

“Everyone there said Alex was a doting grandson. But the cost of that place... They said Alex insisted on the best for Frank. I don’t know if Frank had money that Alex used to pay for it, but they said Alex paid the bills,” Kevin said. “I asked if they noticed anything strange about Alex or anyone he didn’t get along with, but they all said he’d been fine except for his understandable grief over the loss of his grandfather.”

“I’ve been digging online,” Wyatt said. “I doubt Frank had much. His career in the sewer department wouldn’t have left him wealthy, and most of his savings were likely eaten up by his illness. Reese got a warrant for Alex’s bank information, and he had minimal savings.”

“What about the safe deposit box? He had that key, and he could have kept cash in there,” Jo said.

Wyatt shook his head. “No record of a safety deposit box.”

“Do you think he made a lot as a campaign manager?” Kevin asked.

Wyatt snorted. “Doubtful. Before that, he was an IT consultant at the bank, so maybe he got some good investing advice? I didn’t find any investment portfolio at his bank, though.”

“Maybe his parents have money or one of Frank’s other kids. They could have been paying for Frank’s care,” Sam suggested.

“I’ll dig in and see what I can find,” Wyatt said.

“Did you find out anything else from his social media?” Sam asked.

Wyatt glanced at his screen. “Looks like Alex kept to himself. He had some friends. Lots of pictures of him hiking, snowshoeing, skiing, boating in the summer.”

“That doesn’t sound like a ton to go on. Maybe we’ll find out more at his apartment tomorrow.”

The sound of the door swinging open was accompanied by Reese’s curious and cheerful voice, “Hey! Wow, what have you got there?”

“Pies,” came Bridget’s voice, light and musical, just a moment before she stepped into view. At first glance, no one would have pegged her as Jo’s sister. While both were of a petite build, Bridget sported a short, stylish haircut that matched her vibrant, flowery demeanor. In contrast, Jo’s auburn curls, which fell in longer waves, were usually tucked up under her police cap, her manner more serious and focused on the tasks at hand.

Bridget stopped a few steps into the room. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

Jo exhaled, a smile tugging at her lips. “Actually, a break is just what we needed.”

“Good, then,” she said, placing a foil-covered pie plate on Jo’s desk. “Apple pie for your visit to Garvin McDaniels,” she said with a wink.

“You’re bribing your landlord to sell to you with pie?” Wyatt asked.

Jo laughed. “I wouldn’t put it that way, exactly. He’s a lonely old man who doesn’t get any home-cooked food.” Both were true, and Jo did feel

empathy for her elderly landlord, but she also wanted to sweeten him up a bit so that he'd decide to sell her the cottage she rented. She'd approached him with an offer previously, but he'd been reluctant to sell.

Jo lifted the foil off and took a whiff.

"That smells delicious." Kevin craned his neck to see the pie across the room on Jo's desk.

Lucy must have thought so, too, because she stood, stretched, and sniffed the air.

"Don't worry, I have one for you all to share too." With a flourish characteristic of her warm personality, Bridget revealed her next surprise: a ricotta pie with a mouthwatering golden crust and creamy filling. She set it down on the edge of Kevin's desk.

Reese, who had come in to join them, leaned over the pie. "That looks amazing, Bridge."

"Thanks. I made a special one for you since I know you love coconut cream." Bridget's smile broadened as she handed it over, acknowledging the friendship that had blossomed between them.

Reese, ever practical, fetched paper plates, and the team gathered around to enjoy the pies.

The atmosphere in the office shifted from the usual high-stakes tension to a lighter, more relaxed mood.

Sam leaned back in a chair and let out a breath. "Well, I guess that was supper." He patted his stomach.

"Speaking of which." Reese glanced at her watch and then turned to Bridget. "Do you want to eat at the diner with me tonight?"

"That sounds great." Bridget smiled, her gaze cutting quickly over to Kevin, who was engrossed in his piece of pie.

Sam wondered what that was about but didn't ask. He stood and grabbed Lucy's leash. "We might as well call it a day. Hopefully, we'll get into Alex's apartment tomorrow. That might reveal something. Thanks for the pie, Bridget."

CHAPTER FIVE

Jo's steps crunched on the frostbitten path leading to Garvin McDaniels's house. The air nipped at her cheeks, a harsh whisper of the season's turn.

Garvin's house was remote, surrounded by fields and forest. The old farmhouse had seen better days. Paint was peeling, and a few porch balusters were missing. Yet it looked better than it had the last time Jo had been here. Now that it was blanketed under a blanket of snow, the house seemed to reclaim some of its lost dignity, its weed-infested lawn mercifully hidden from view.

As she drew closer, a knot of apprehension tightened in Jo's stomach. She hoped Garvin wouldn't mind her stopping by. He had refused to sell to her, mentioning that he'd also refused Marnie Wilson, who had expressed interest too. Hopefully, Marnie didn't have something more persuasive than pie.

Jo approached the door and knocked.

Garvin opened the door, his expression shifting from surprise to a warm welcome. "Sergeant Harris, what brings you here?" he asked, his eyes landing on the pie.

"Please call me Jo. I thought you might like some homemade apple pie," Jo said, offering it to him. The scent of the pie seemed to fill the space between them, a symbol of her goodwill.

Garvin accepted the pie, a smile touching his lips. "Thank you, Jo. That's very kind of you. Please come in."

In Garvin McDaniels's modest living room, Jo settled into an armchair, its fabric worn from years of use. The room was a capsule of memories, the

furniture holding the imprints of a family's history. On the walls, photographs in faded frames told stories of joyous gatherings, holidays, and milestones. Each image was a window into Garvin's past, a life rich with moments now frozen in time.

Garvin, sitting across from her, gestured toward one of the photos. "That's my Essie," he said, his voice carrying a mix of pride and lingering sorrow. "She's been gone five years, but it feels like just yesterday."

Jo followed his gaze to the photograph, noting the way Essie's laughter seemed to echo through time. "How long were you married?" she asked softly, her voice respectful in the hallowed space of Garvin's memories.

"Would have been fifty years this spring," Garvin replied. His voice, tinged with sadness, barely rose above a whisper, as if speaking too loudly might disturb the delicate balance of the past and present.

"Do you have kids?" Jo inquired, her curiosity gentle but genuine.

Garvin nodded. "Yes, but they live far away. Got their own lives." His glance drifted, momentarily lost in thoughts of distance and time. Then he suddenly brightened, his eyes lighting up with a new thought. "How about some pie?" he offered, a hint of enthusiasm creeping into his voice.

Jo had initially planned not to stay long, but observing his lifted spirits at the prospect of sharing the pie, she decided to stay. It was clear he could use the company.

Garvin carefully pulled out china dessert dishes from the cabinet, his best, no doubt reserved for special occasions. Together, they moved to the kitchen table, a sturdy, well-used piece surrounded by chairs that bore the patina of many years.

Jo sensed the depth of his loneliness, his attachment to the cottage now more understandable. It was more than a building; it was a vessel of memories, of a life he had shared with his wife.

Garvin cut two pieces of pie and slid a plate in front of her. "Coffee?"

"That would be great. Black is fine."

Garvin made the coffee, and they both dug into the pie.

"Lordy, this is delicious." Garvin dug his fork into the golden sugar-sprinkled crust. "Been a while since I had anything homemade."

"My sister made it. She's getting to be an excellent cook. That's sort of one of the reasons I want to buy the cottage," Jo ventured.

Garvin's eyes narrowed, and for a moment, Jo wondered if she'd crossed the line, but then, he smiled. "Tell me more about why you want to

own that property."

"I've really made it my own, you know," she began, her eyes brightening with enthusiasm. "I've picked up furniture from yard sales. Each piece has its own story and was bought to fit in a specific place in the cottage."

Garvin listened, a gentle smile playing on his lips as he took a bite of the pie. "Sounds like you've put a lot of work into it."

Jo nodded, gesturing animatedly as she described her efforts. "And the porch! I've put up window boxes full of flowers. You should come by and see them in summer." Her voice softened, a wistful tone creeping in. "It's quiet, serene. The stream out back adds just that right touch on quiet nights. And it's the perfect size for me."

Garvin's eyes followed her gestures, his expression one of understanding. "I haven't been there in a long time, but it is a nice spot, that's for sure."

Jo's gaze drifted, picturing her cherished space. "It's become more than just a house to me. And now, with my sister staying, it's even more important. It's our sanctuary, a place that truly feels like ours. There's even a stray kitten in the woods we've been feeding."

Garvin frowned, and Jo, remembering his strict rule about not having pets, hurried to say, "But don't worry, we're not having it inside or anything."

Garvin nodded thoughtfully, absorbing her words. His smile was warm but held a hint of reluctance. "I can see why you love it so much," he admitted. "But I still don't know about selling. It's a big decision."

Jo reached out and touched his arm. "I understand. Don't worry. I'm not going to pressure you. I have enjoyed talking to you, though."

"Does that mean you'll stop by again?" Garvin looked hopeful.

"I sure will. Maybe next time, I'll even bring dinner."

AFTER LEAVING GARVIN'S HOUSE, Jo returned home, her thoughts still lingering on their conversation. Pulling into the driveway of the cottage always made her feel good. The yard was covered in a twinkling blanket of snow. Bridget had put white fairy lights along the porch and shrubs, which

made the place look even more cozy. Snow glistened on the boughs of the stately pines in the forest behind the house.

Pickles, the marmalade-striped stray cat they'd been feeding, was on the porch. He lay curled up in the box they had set up for him, now lined with blankets to ward off the chill. Despite the cold, Pickles remained steadfast in his reluctance to venture inside the house.

"Hey there, Pickles," Jo murmured, reaching out to gently stroke his fur.

The cat, in response, leaned into her touch, his purring a soft, comforting sound in the quiet evening.

"Don't worry, buddy. Garvin's warming up to the idea," she whispered, half to Pickles, half to herself, harboring hope for her purchase of the cottage.

Bridget was in the kitchen. Jo smelled something delicious cooking as usual.

"How did it go with Garvin?" Bridget asked, eager for an update.

Jo shrugged off her coat, settling down at the kitchen table. "It went well, I think. He's still undecided about selling, but I feel like we made a connection. Gave him the pie, talked about the cottage. He's considering it. What are you cooking? It smells fantastic."

Bridget turned from the stove, a plate in hand. "I know you've had a long day, so I made you some stuffed peppers," she announced, placing the dish in front of Jo. The peppers were beautifully prepared, their vibrant red skins slightly charred from the oven, stuffed to the brim with a savory mixture of seasoned ground meat, rice, and herbs. Steam rose from them, carrying with it the mouth-watering scent of garlic and tomato.

Jo looked at the dish, her stomach rumbling despite the fact that she wasn't particularly hungry. "This looks amazing, but you really don't have to go to all this trouble, especially since you already ate."

Bridget waved away Jo's protests with a smile. "I enjoy doing it, and I want to make sure you're well fed. Consider it a thank-you for letting me stay here."

Jo took a bite of the stuffed pepper, the flavors bursting on her tongue, a perfect blend of spice and comfort. It was a simple yet profound reminder of the care and love that Bridget brought into their home.

"How was your dinner with Reese?" Jo asked again, eager to hear about Bridget's evening.

"It was great. She's such a nice person,"

Jo nodded her agreement, her mouth too full to talk.

"She suggested I take this pastry certificate course at the college." Bridget looked up at Jo, seeking her opinion.

Jo smiled, her heart swelling with pride. "I think that's a fantastic idea. You have such a talent for baking. And cooking." She held up her forkful of stuffed pepper.

Bridget's smile broadened. "I'm seriously considering it. I can't keep relying on you forever. It's time I stood on my own two feet, and maybe I'll get a job in the culinary field."

Jo reached out, touching Bridget's hand gently. "You're not a burden, you know. But I support you, whatever you decide."

"Thanks. Oh, I fed Finn."

Jo glanced toward the fish tank in the living room. Finn, her goldfish, swam back and forth amid the air bubbles drifting toward the surface. "Thanks."

They talked a bit about their day, and then the conversation shifted to a more somber topic. Bridget's expression turned serious. "Holden called earlier. They've found five bodies at the Webster residence. They'd been there a long time. None of them are Tammy, though."

Jo's heart skipped a beat at the mention of their sister, who had been abducted when she was a child. They'd recently caught the killer after decades of searching and discovered where all the victims were buried. They'd given DNA samples to the FBI, hoping for a match that might bring closure to their family's long-held agony.

"That's... both relieving and heartbreaking," Jo murmured, a mix of emotions swirling within her.

Bridget nodded solemnly. "He said some of the families might finally get closure. But there are a few they can't identify yet. It's tragic, thinking about those lost children. How can it be that no one knows they are missing?"

BRIDGET METHODICALLY CLEARED the dinner table, surrounded by the comforting hum of the kitchen appliances. The plates clinked as she stacked them, her movements efficient and practiced. Wrapping up some

leftovers, she thought of Pickles on the porch. Providing for him had become a small but significant part of her daily routine, instilling a sense of purpose and connection in her new life.

Stepping into the chilly night, Bridget carried a plate of food to Pickles, who was still nestled in his makeshift shelter. The cat, recognizing her presence, looked up with cautious amber eyes. "Here you go," she murmured softly, setting the plate down. The cold air bit at her skin, but caring for Pickles filled her with a warm sense of responsibility.

Kneeling beside the box, she gently stroked Pickles's fur. "You know, winter's coming," she said thoughtfully. "Maybe think about coming inside? But if not, I'll make sure you're warm and fed." Her words, meant for Pickles, echoed her own longing for safety and comfort, a subtle reminder of her need for a secure haven.

As she stood, her gaze drifted into the dark night beyond the porch. Memories of her tumultuous past surfaced, contrasting starkly with the tranquility she had found living with Jo. The darkness seemed to hold both fears and possibilities.

A shiver ran through her, not from the night's cold but from a lingering fear. She'd recently thought she'd seen someone following her—a shadow from her past that she hadn't mentioned to Jo. This person knew things that Bridget didn't want anyone to discover.

"Maybe it was just my imagination," she whispered into the night, trying to dismiss her fears. The possibility of her past catching up with her loomed in her mind, unsettling her newfound peace.

Resolutely, Bridget stood taller, a determined glint in her eyes. She was building a new future here, one she was fiercely determined to protect. Maybe she would have to take steps to guard herself. Just as a precaution. Fear would no longer dictate her life. She was prepared to do whatever she needed to secure her future.

CHAPTER SIX

Sam and Lucy arrived at the White Rock Police Department early the next morning. They met Reese coming out of the door with a trash bag. Lucy sniffed the bag and then backed away.

"What's in there?" Sam asked.

"Litter box cleanout." Reese wrinkled her nose.

"Oh, right." Sam made a mental note to show his appreciation for Reese more. She did a lot of the little things that kept the station running, and she would be missed when she graduated from the academy. Sam had been lobbying to add an additional position so he could hire her, but so far, no luck.

Jo was already there, poring over some files at her desk. Wyatt was tapping away at his computer, looking unusually serious. Kevin was at the filing cabinet, filing something. Major looked down with his luminescent gaze as if mentally trying to direct Kevin as to where to put the file.

"Just got the ME report from John." Wyatt tapped his computer screen. "Alex had water in his lungs. Cause of death is drowning, but that's not all."

Jo leaned in, her eyes narrowing. "What else did they find?"

"Alex had alcohol in his blood," Wyatt continued, "and also temazepam."

Kevin frowned. "Temazepam? Isn't that a sedative?"

Wyatt nodded. "Yes, and Alex didn't have a prescription for it. Someone probably drugged him."

Sam rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "Maybe someone slipped that into his drinks at the bar."

Jo nodded. “He might have been unconscious or too drugged to help himself when he drowned.”

“It increasingly looks like homicide,” Sam concluded, his tone resolute.

Reese poked her head into the squad room. “Chief, I just got a call from Alex’s landlord. He’s okay with us checking the apartment and will meet you there in half an hour.”

“Great,” Sam said. “Let's head out.”

ALEX’S APARTMENT was a short ride from the police station. The building manager, a tall man with a hawkish gaze and stiff posture, met them at the entrance. His eyes followed their every move, and he stayed close to the door as if guarding a secret.

As they entered the apartment, a faint smell of lemon-scented cleaner hung in the air. Lucy padded ahead, her nose twitching as she sniffed around the unfamiliar environment. The team moved with quiet efficiency, each step deliberate, their expressions a blend of professional focus and empathetic awareness.

The apartment’s stillness was eerie. Every surface was clean, every item in its place, creating an atmosphere that was strangely unsettling in its perfection.

The weight of their responsibility sat heavily on Sam’s shoulders. It was his job to get answers for the grieving parents, and he intended to do so.

“Let’s split up,” he directed, his voice low but commanding.

The team nodded, each member already knowing their role in this choreographed dance of investigation.

Sam headed to the bedroom, his shoes making a faint sound on the polished wooden floor. The room was as meticulously arranged as the rest of the apartment, the bed made with military precision, the closet doors closed.

As he opened the closet, a faint scent of cologne wafted out, a lingering hint of Alex’s presence. Sam scanned the neatly hung clothes, a mix of

professional and casual wear, all arranged by color and style. The precision spoke of a controlled, orderly personality.

He then moved to the desk, a clean workspace with a laptop, neatly stacked papers, and a few pens lined up parallel to the keyboard. “Everything’s so organized,” he muttered to himself. He flipped through the papers, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Each document was filed, labeled, a testament to Alex’s meticulous nature.

Jo appeared in the bedroom doorway, her sharp hazel eyes taking in everything in one glance.

“I don’t see anything out of place,” she said. “The whole apartment is spotless. I bagged up the laptop for Wyatt to check out, but if someone had a reason to kill Alex, there’s no evidence of it here.”

Sam nodded, his jaw tightening. He didn’t know what he’d been expecting to find, but there was little here to tell them about Alex’s final day.

“Let’s go see if Kevin’s found anything,” Jo suggested.

They found Kevin in the second bedroom, focused intently on an open cardboard box on the floor. He held up a small photo, the colors faded with age.

“This fell out of this book.” Kevin lifted a heavy bible. “Looks like the box is from Frank Milson.”

Sam stepped closer, examining the old photo. Two men in their thirties sat at a table with paperwork in front of them. He imagined one of them must be the grandfather, Frank Milson. Frank had been a sewer worker, so he was probably the guy in the suit that was a little too large. The other man’s suit was more tailored. Sam wondered what they were discussing. A business venture?

Sam put the photo down and glanced into the box. It looked like a regular box of personal items. Books, a few pictures, some trinkets. Remembering Kevin’s earlier report about the costly monthly fees at Golden Pines, he said, “Maybe we’ll find something enlightening in here. Let’s bring it in for evidence.”

Just then, Lucy let out a sharp warning bark from the living room.

The team exchanged glances, immediately on alert. Jo rested her hand casually on her holstered gun as they headed toward the sound. Sam felt the familiar spike of adrenaline, his senses heightened.

They hurried into the living room, following Lucy's insistent barks. She was pawing aggressively at the large area rug in the center of the room, her nails scratching at the fibers.

"What is it, girl? What do you see?" Sam knelt, examining the spot on which she was focused.

Lucy whined and barked again, nosing at the edge of the rug.

"I think she's found something under there," said Jo.

The landlord appeared in the doorway, his face pinched with irritation. "Now listen here, I won't have you damaging my floors. This building is old, and these floors are hard to replace. If you start ripping up those boards, you'll pay to have 'em fixed."

Sam shot him a hard look. "This is police business. We're investigating a homicide."

The landlord pressed his lips together but refrained from making further complaints.

Sam stood and motioned for Kevin to help him. Together, they grasped the corner of the heavy rug and dragged it aside, revealing the weathered hardwood floor beneath.

Lucy immediately began pawing at one of the boards, her nails scraping urgently.

Jo knelt, examining the board closely. "This one looks loose," she said. Carefully, she worked her fingers around the edges, wiggling it. With a soft pop, the board came free.

Beneath was a shallow compartment, a space between the hardwood floor and the subfloor. Sam shined his flashlight inside. "Well, I'll be," he muttered. "There's a compartment in here. Let's get these other boards up."

The boards on either side came up easily. Reaching in, he grasped the handle of a small suitcase tucked inside. He hauled it out, resting it on the floor as they gathered around. It was vintage looking, made of worn brown leather with brass clasps. It was heavy, as if containing something substantial.

He tried the clasps, but they held fast. Locked tight.

Kevin peered at the locks. "Looks like it takes a small key like the one you found in Alex's pocket, Jo."

"Or we could just break into it," Jo suggested.

"We can't damage it. It could be evidence," Sam said. "Let's get this back to the station and get the key out of evidence. Then we'll see what's

inside.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

"What's the deal with the suitcase?" Reese asked as they rushed into the station.

"It was tucked away under Alex Sheridan's apartment floorboards," Sam said, his mind already sifting through the possibilities of what the case could hold. "Lucy alerted us to it."

"Good girl." Reese petted Lucy, who wagged her tail in excitement.

"We think the key we found in his pocket might open it," Jo said as they all hurried into the squad room.

"I'll go grab it from the evidence room." Reese headed toward the closet in which they kept evidence for active cases. Once the cases were closed or inactive, they transferred evidence to a bigger facility in another town.

Kevin placed the suitcase on the nearest desk with a thud, and they all gathered around.

"Did I hear you say you found it under the floor?" Wyatt got up from his desk and joined them.

"Yep." Jo turned to him. "We also got his computer for you to sift through. It's still out in the Tahoe."

Major hopped onto the deck, sniffing around the suitcase as if doing his own investigation. His sleek black fur looked silky, like he'd just been brushed. *Probably Reese*, Sam thought.

"Looks like Major knows enough not to touch the suitcase," Kevin said. "Wouldn't want him to mess up any prints."

Lucy came over to the side of the desk and sniffed the lock, too, her nose only a few centimeters from Major's. Sam braced for a fight, but the two animals simply sniffed and then exchanged some sort of look. Were they communicating? Sam had no idea, but at least they weren't battling each other.

"Got it!" Reese came running into the room, and her gloved hand pressed the key into Sam's gloved hand.

Sam put the key in the lock.

Click!

Sam opened the suitcase, and everyone peered inside.

"What the…" Jo gasped.

"Holy smokes," Wyatt said.

Reese let out a low whistle.

"Well, maybe that explains how Alex could afford the expensive assisted living for his grandfather," Kevin said.

"And possibly why someone would want to kill him," Sam said.

Nestled in the worn blue lining of the suitcase were huge stacks of hundred-dollar bills.

"That's a lot of cash," Reese said.

Kevin put on gloves and grabbed a stack of bills and rifled through them. "All hundreds. This stack alone is ten grand."

"How many stacks do you think are in there?" Jo asked.

Wyatt tilted his head, scrutinizing the suitcase. "I'd estimate around fifty stacks. Maybe more."

Reese let out another whistle. "Fifty stacks of hundred-dollar bills? That's..." She trailed off, clearly doing some mental math.

"Five million," Wyatt supplied. "If there are fifty stacks of hundred-dollar bills, with one hundred bills per stack, that's fifty thousand bills. At one hundred dollars each, that's five million dollars."

"Over five mil in cash just casually stashed under the floorboards," Kevin murmured in disbelief. "What was Alex Sheridan up to?"

"And why was it in this old suitcase?" Jo asked.

Sam nodded. "Good questions. We need to trace the origins of this money before we jump to any conclusions. Wyatt, run the serial numbers on some of these bills and see if anything pops up."

Wyatt nodded, grabbing a stack and heading to his computer. The others watched in tense silence as Wyatt typed rapidly, cross-referencing the serial

numbers against law enforcement databases.

After a few minutes, Wyatt swiveled his chair around. “Well, this is interesting. I traced one of the hundreds back to a bank robbery at the old White Rock Bank and Trust fifty years ago. The corner branch on Main that’s now a florist.”

Jo’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “A fifty-year-old bank heist? Alex Sheridan wasn’t even born yet.”

Kevin’s left brow quirked up. “Frank Milson was.”

“Is there a record of how much was stolen from that bank?” Sam asked. “I don’t remember anyone ever talking about it, but that was way before my time.”

Wyatt nodded. “Yup. The reports show a little over ten million dollars was taken. The robbers were never caught, and only a fraction of the cash was ever recovered.”

Kevin shook his head. “And now, all these years later, we find some of the missing money hidden under the floorboards of Alex Sheridan’s apartment. This case just got very interesting.”

“You can say that again.” Sam gestured to the money. “Reese, log this into evidence. Wyatt, contact the archives and pull the case files on that old White Rock Bank robbery. We need more details. I want to know everything about that heist and who was involved.”

“Did you say the White Rock Bank robbery? That was one of my old cases,” Harry Woolsten said, appearing behind them.

Lucy bounded over to Harry, tail wagging. He chuckled and gave her a good scratch behind the ears.

“Hey there, girl,” Harry said. He looked up at the others. “That bank job was one of the biggest cases we ever had around these parts. Strange, since heists like that usually happen in the big city, where there’s more money to grab. But I suppose the appeal to those thieves was that our small-town force wouldn’t have the resources to catch them.”

Sam tilted his head. “Really? I never heard anything about it.”

“The hubbub had died down years before you were old enough to pay attention to these things. It was a real mess, though,” Harry said, shaking his head. “Those crooks created one heck of a distraction by setting off an explosion near the records room next to the vault in the bank. Blew the whole thing to smithereens.”

“An explosion as a distraction, huh?” Kevin murmured. “Clever tactic.”

“Yup. Blew the vault wide open for ’em too,” Harry continued. “Then, the masked thieves made their escape on a helicopter that landed right on the roof! Darndest thing. Never did find that chopper or those crooks.”

“And now, fifty years later, we’ve got a suitcase full of cash from that robbery right here.” Sam gestured to the money lined up on the desk.

Harry whistled appreciatively. “Well, ain’t that something. My first big case, coming back around full circle.”

“You must have been new to the force. Must have been tough handling such a major crime,” Kevin said.

“You bet it was. I was just in my late twenties. My boss was a real piece of work too. Guy named Dominic Hartman,” Harry said, shaking his head. “He and I did not see eye to eye, I’ll tell ya that much. Always butting heads. In my opinion, Hartman did a lousy job investigating that case.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Oh yeah. Rushed through everything, didn’t follow up on leads. Just wanted it wrapped up as quick as he could,” Harry said. “In fact, we did end up finding a duffel bag of the stolen cash a few months later. It was in the woods. Looked like it had fallen out of that escape copter or something. But ol’ Hartman didn’t think it was worth the effort to keep digging.”

Kevin and Jo shared a look. “Interesting,” Kevin said. “Maybe there’s more to uncover here after all this time.”

“Could be.” Harry nodded. “Sure wish I’d handled things differently back then. But you know how it is, being the new guy. Didn’t have much choice but to go along with the boss.”

“Well, maybe we can use your help now,” Sam said. “Reese, get Harry copies of those old case files on the heist. Let’s see if his years of experience shed any light on this.”

“You got it, Chief,” Reese said, already heading off.

The look of excitement on Harry’s face brightened Sam’s mood. He wouldn’t have Harry go out in the field or get into danger, not after what had happened before, but there was no harm in letting the old guy read over some files. Maybe Harry would remember something important. Sam had a soft spot for Harry, who had been the chief of police before him, and loved seeing the gleam in his eye when Sam asked him to consult on cases.

Sam clapped Harry on the back and headed to his office. He needed some thinking time to come up with a plan. Was the money the thing that

had gotten Alex killed, or was that just a coincidence? And if it was the money, why hadn't the killer taken it?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kevin scrolled through the digitized case files on his computer, the click of the mouse echoing in the quiet squad room. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Jo staring blankly at her monitor, tapping a pencil in a rhythmic beat. Wyatt's rapid keystrokes filled the background as he typed away on some task. Harry sat at one of the empty desks, a look of concentration on his face as he flipped through the paperwork on the old robbery that Reese had given him.

Kevin was grateful no one was paying attention to what he was researching. With the vintage suitcase of cash found in Alex Sheridan's apartment, he now had a valid reason to access the cold case records to find out more about the decades-old unsolved bank robbery case that was likely the source of the money. But Kevin had an ulterior motive: a chance to follow up on the old narcotics case that had held the password that unlocked the thumb drive found among his belongings when he had been hospitalized last year.

The thumb drive had contained information that led them to a serial killer's burial ground. Kevin still couldn't remember how he obtained the thumb drive or what had led him to think he would find the password in that old notebook that was part of the evidence in the narcotics case. But he had, and he'd taken the information from that case without authorization. If anyone found out, it could cost him his reinstated position with the White Rock Police Department.

But now that he was the only one that knew there could be a connection, the duty to figure out why lay heavy on his shoulders. If only he could find

a way to do it and not let anyone know about his indiscretion.

So far, he had kept his fragmented memory hidden, but he had noticed Jo eyeing him strangely when he occasionally referenced the small notebook he now kept in his pocket to remind him of details he should know. He had to keep up the charade, at least until he figured out what had really happened during those gaps in his recollection.

Kevin continued scrolling through the digitized narcotics case files, skimming for any details that might trigger his spotty memory. Most of it was familiar territory—records of arrests, evidence logs, investigative notes.

There were a few references to Thorne Industries, but Kevin already knew about the company's connection to the case, didn't he? He did remember that they had been cleared of any wrongdoing, though.

Harry sneezed, jolting Kevin's attention from the computer.

"Darn cat." Harry pulled a hanky out of his pocket and blew into it.

Kevin's gaze met Jo's, and she shook her head and rolled her eyes. Kevin smiled and discreetly closed the file on his computer. Accessing that right in the station might not be so smart. It was close quarters.

He opened the file for the old robbery case. Based on the vintage suitcase full of cash they had found hidden under Alex Sheridan's floorboards, it seemed likely the money was from that old heist. But how had Alex gotten connected to it?

As Kevin skimmed through the bank robbery file, something caught his eye. Someone walking their dog had found a duffle bag of money in the woods. It turned out that money had come from the bank. According to the file, the bag appeared to have fallen from a great height. Like maybe out of the helicopter.

The case reminded Kevin about D. B. Cooper, the man who hijacked an airplane and jumped out with a bag of cash. There was no hijacking here, though. So where had the robbers gotten a helicopter? How had the bag fallen out? Was it the only thing that fell out?

The report included pictures of the find and the area around the bag. There was no evidence of a person, no clothing or blood or anything. Just the bag.

The coordinates of where the bag had been found were familiar. Why? Kevin consulted his notebook and sucked in a breath. They were very near the coordinates the thumb drive had pointed to. Right next to the Webster

property, where the FBI were right now digging up graves. What a strange coincidence.

Harry slapped the file folder down on the desk. “If I had been lead on this case, we would’ve found those crooks.”

Jo raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? What would you have done differently?”

“For starters, I wouldn’t have just sat around, waiting for clues to fall in my lap.” Harry jabbed a finger at the paperwork. “It’s almost like Hartman wanted them to get away with it.”

Kevin leaned forward, intrigued. “What makes you say that?”

Harry waved a hand dismissively. “Ah, Hartman was an arrogant SOB. Thought he knew everything. But he barely followed up on any solid leads. Like that bag of money they found in the woods.”

“I was just looking at that part of the file,” Kevin said. “Were you in on the search?”

Harry nodded. “We searched only for one day. Never found anything else. No tracks, no clothing, no other money bags. Just the one busted-open bag.”

Jo furrowed her brow. “That is strange. Why only one bag?”

“Exactly!” Harry exclaimed. “The whole thing seemed off to me. But Hartman dismissed it, said we’d found all there was to find.”

Kevin pulled out his notebook, scanning his scribbles. “It looks like the bag was found near the Webster property.”

Harry thought for a moment. “You know, I think it might be pretty close. That land doesn’t belong to the Websters, though. It’s owned by some company...” He snapped his fingers, trying to conjure the name. “Obsidian something. We tried to get info on them but hit a dead end. Probably some shell corporation.”

Sam came out of his office, phone in hand. “That was John Dudley from the ME’s office. He finished the autopsy on Alex Sheridan.”

Wyatt swiveled his chair around. “And? What’s the official cause of death?”

“Drowning,” Sam replied. “They found water in his lungs. Looks like he went into the lake alive.”

“So it was just an accident?” Wyatt asked. “He wandered onto the ice and fell through?”

Sam shook his head. “Not likely. The tox screen showed alcohol and drugs in his system.”

“Alex was an experienced hiker. He wouldn’t mix drinking and drugs before going out on the ice,” Jo said.

“Not to mention the lack of hiking shoes,” Kevin said.

“Right,” Sam agreed. “It points to this not being an accidental drowning.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair. “Someone could have forced the alcohol and drugs on him to knock him out. Then dumped him in the lake to drown.”

“That’d be a pretty cold way to kill someone,” Wyatt said with a frown.

Jo nodded. “Especially in the dead of winter. The frigid water would finish the job quickly.”

“We’ll need to dig more into Alex’s background,” Sam said. “Figure out who might have wanted to get rid of him. The money is an obvious motive.”

“But it might not be the only motive,” Harry said. “That money’s been hidden for fifty years, and no one’s been killed over it. Maybe Alex’s death is about something else.”

Jo crossed her arms. “You know, Alex was managing Marnie Wilson’s campaign. Could be someone from that world who wanted him gone.”

“Political types can certainly play dirty,” Kevin agreed. “We should take a closer look at Wilson and her crew.”

“Did anyone else come up with anything on Alex?” Sam asked, glancing around at the team.

“I checked out his social media,” Jo said, tapping her pen on her notepad. “Doesn’t show much personally. He belonged to a hiking group on Facebook, but there’s no animosity there, at least not about him being executor of Frank’s will.” She flipped a page. “Oh, and it seems he was pretty into politics, especially his grandfather’s support of Marnie Wilson. That could be why he left his IT job to work on her campaign.”

Sam nodded and turned to Wyatt. “Did you find anything on his computer?”

Wyatt leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. “Well, Alex was a big gamer, part of some online groups. Bit of a loner in real life, it seems, but he had some pretty high-tech equipment and apps.” Wyatt, a big gamer himself, sounded a little envious.

“Anything on his schedule leading up to his death?” Sam asked.

Wyatt shook his head. “Nope, calendar’s empty the past few days. No appointments or plans logged. I also did a check in the parking lot of his apartment and the campaign headquarters, and his car isn’t in either place.”

“Guess it must be at the murder scene. We need to find it.” Sam turned to Kevin. “Kev?”

Kevin felt a tingle of nervousness, worried Sam would somehow know he had been looking at the old narcotics case file. But he straightened in his chair and flipped open his notebook, pretending to consult his notes. “The money they found in the woods seems odd. It was on a property abutting the Webster farm.”

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance. Hazel Webster was the serial killer they’d arrested not that long ago, and her land was where she’d buried many bodies. In fact, the FBI was up there digging right now.

“I don’t think we should read too much into that. The Webster property is out in the middle of nowhere, and that area is heavily wooded, so it makes sense the getaway helicopter would fly over it,” Sam said.

“We searched back in the day. Never found a thing beyond that one busted money bag.” Harry glanced down at the paperwork. “Though looking at this now, I can see we would have caught the guys if I’d been in charge back then.”

“I bet you would have.” Sam clapped Harry on the back then turned to the rest of them. “We need to figure out what Alex did on his last day. Let’s start at the place he would normally be on a workday. Marnie Wilson’s campaign headquarters.”

CHAPTER NINE

"Harry, I'm not sure you should investigate with us." Sam looked at Harry as they left the police station and headed down Main Street. Marnie's campaign headquarters was just a few blocks away, so it made sense to walk.

"I know. I'm just going to visit my girl Marnie." Harry smiled at Sam, and then his face scrunched up, and he doubled over in a fit of sneezing. "Ugh, that smoke," Harry sputtered, doubling over in a fit of coughing as the door to the cigar bar swung open.

Sam patted Harry firmly on the back. "You okay there?"

Jo looked on, concern in her eyes. "Deep breaths, Mr. Woolsten."

Lucy whined softly, nudging Harry's leg with her nose.

Sam glanced through the haze of smoke wafting from the open doorway. He caught sight of Victor Sorrentino, the Convale public liaison, sitting at a table near the window, smoke wafting out of an ashtray in front of him. Victor gave Sam a curt nod, which Sam returned before the door swung closed again. Sam didn't much like Victor. He didn't trust the guy, and he was wary of Convale, the big energy company that loomed at the edge of town, but it was still smart to maintain a cordial relationship.

Harry waved a hand, still coughing slightly. "I'm fine, I'm fine. I'm allergic to cigar smoke. Triggers my asthma." He took a few more breaths. "Whew. Anyway, as I was saying, Marnie's got some great ideas for supporting our seniors here in White Rock. You know she wants to start a community garden at the rec center? And fund more activities and classes at the senior center downtown. She'd make a fine mayor."

Sam nodded absentmindedly as they continued down Main Street.

"Have you decided who you'll endorse yet?" Harry pressed. "Marnie could really use the support of the chief of police."

"I'm still weighing my options," Sam replied. "The election's not for a few more months anyway."

"True, true," Harry conceded. "But if you wait too long, Marnie might not need you anymore!" He let out a chuckle that turned into more coughing.

Jo gave Sam a knowing look. They both knew Sam had no intention of endorsing Marnie, but neither wanted to burst Harry's bubble.

"We'll see, Harry," Sam said diplomatically as Marnie's campaign office came into view. "We'll see."

"Afternoon, folks," Amelia said as Sam, Jo, and Harry entered Marnie's campaign office. She was sitting at the main desk, the one that had belonged to Alex until yesterday. Apparently, she hadn't wasted any time claiming Alex's former position as her own. Her smile seemed a little less inviting today, and her eyes held a glint of wariness.

"Hello, Amelia," Sam replied. "We were hoping to speak with Ms. Wilson about Alex's death and the ongoing investigation."

Amelia frowned slightly. "I'm afraid Marnie isn't in the office currently. Was there something I could help with instead?"

"Well, we had a few questions for the staff," Sam explained. "Trying to build a timeline of Alex's last known movements and interactions."

Harry piped up eagerly, "Say, where is Marnie anyway? She's usually here this time of day."

"She had a last-minute speaking engagement added to her schedule," Amelia said briskly. "I'm sure she'll want to be fully briefed when she returns."

"Of course," Sam said. "To start, we'd like to know if Alex was in the office as usual yesterday. And if anyone saw him or spoke to him later in the day or evening."

The staffers glanced around at each other uneasily, but no one spoke up.

"Anyone?" Jo prompted. "Anything you can recall would be helpful."

Finally, a nervous young man with glasses said, "Alex was here yesterday, at least in the morning. We have a staff meeting at ten a.m. every day, and he ran that as usual."

An older woman with short gray hair chimed in, “That’s right, he was here. Poor boy. He seemed down after losing his grandfather recently, but I never thought... well, it’s just awful.” She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

“So no one saw or spoke to him after he left work?” Sam clarified.

Headshakes all around.

“Did he say where he was going after work yesterday?” Jo asked. “Any appointments, errands, plans?”

Again, no one seemed to have any useful information.

Sam surveyed the group. “If any of you do recall something that could help us determine Alex’s movements yesterday, please give me or Sergeant Harris a call.” He handed Amelia his card to pass around the office.

“We’ll do that,” Amelia said briskly, placing the card on the desk in front of her. “Now, if there’s nothing else, we should really get back to work. The election is coming up quickly, and we need to honor Alex by continuing the hard work he started.” Her no-nonsense tone left no room for argument.

“Of course,” Sam said. “We’ll be in touch if we have any other questions.”

He and Jo turned to leave, Harry shuffling out behind them.

“Well, that was a bust,” Jo muttered as they stepped outside. “No one seems to know anything useful about what Alex was up to yesterday.”

“Or no one wants to say,” Sam said grimly. “We’ll keep digging.”

He glanced back through the glass door at Amelia, who had already returned her attention to her computer screen, fingers clicking rapidly across the keyboard.

Sam, Jo, and Harry continued down Main Street, away from Marnie’s campaign headquarters.

“Hey!” a voice called from the narrow alley between the hardware store and the bakery. “Chief Mason!”

Sam turned to see a young woman peering out from the alley. She was one of the campaign staff, though he couldn’t recall her name at the moment.

“I’m glad I caught you,” she said, glancing around furtively. “Can we talk for a minute?”

Sam exchanged a look with Jo, and they changed course, heading for the alley. Harry made to follow, but Sam held up a hand.

“Let’s speak to her alone first,” he said.

Harry harrumphed but stayed put on the sidewalk.

In the semidarkness of the alley, the young woman wrung her hands nervously. “I’m Monica, by the way. I didn’t want to say anything back there, but I saw Alex yesterday evening.”

“Where?” Jo asked intently.

“Here, at the office,” Monica said. “I had to come back to finish up some work. I was just leaving when I heard voices coming from Marnie’s office.”

“Alex and Marnie?” Sam clarified.

Monica nodded. “They were arguing about something. I couldn’t make out details, but it was definitely heated.”

“What time was this?” asked Jo.

“Around seven thirty,” Monica said. “I didn’t want to interrupt, so I just slipped out quietly. I felt weird about it after, you know, hearing them fight like that.”

Sam studied her face. She seemed genuinely uneasy recalling the incident. “Did you hear any of what they said specifically?”

Monica shook her head. “Just raised voices. Sorry I don’t have more details.”

“Did Alex argue with anyone else recently that you know of?” Sam asked.

Monica shook her head. “Not that I ever witnessed.”

“What about Amelia?” Sam said. “They didn’t have any conflicts?”

“No, not really,” Monica replied. “I mean, they disagreed on campaign strategy sometimes, but nothing major.”

Sam nodded. “I noticed Amelia’s already taken over Alex’s desk as campaign manager.”

“Yeah, she got promoted quick,” Monica said uneasily. “I know it sounds awful, but someone has to manage the campaign, and Amelia was eager to step in.”

Monica glanced behind her nervously. Sam realized he probably couldn’t keep her much longer without drawing suspicion.

“Did Amelia know she was next in line for Alex’s job?” he asked.

“Oh yeah, everyone knew that,” Monica said hurriedly. “Anyway, I should get back. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Before Sam could respond, Monica hurried back down the alley, taking the back way to the campaign office.

Sam's phone chirped. It was Reese.

"Hi, Sam. I tried to call you through the system in the Tahoe." Reese loved using that antiquated police radio in the car, but Sam avoided it as much as possible.

"I'm not in the car right now."

"Oh. Okay. Well, I figured you'd want to know this right away, so I called. They found Alex Sheridan's car in the parking lot of the Drunken Moose."

CHAPTER TEN

The gravel parking lot of the Drunken Moose was sparsely populated, and most of the cars were parked close to the entrance except one. A dark-blue sedan sat in the back near the woods. Kevin squatted beside the right front tire, his head tilted to look underneath the car.

"Anything stand out, Kevin?" Sam asked as they approached.

Kevin straightened. "No signs of struggle that I can see. It's locked up tight. I jimmied the door to take a look inside but didn't want to mess with it too much before the tow truck gets here."

Jo walked around to the passenger side, shining her flashlight beam across the interior. "He kept it real neat in here, just like his apartment."

"Yeah, kinda weirdly clean for a twenty-something guy," Kevin said.

Lucy circled the car, nose to the ground. She completed two full laps then sat down near Sam, looking up at him and whining softly.

"I guess Lucy's not catching any interesting scents either," Sam said, scratching the dog behind her ears. "Good girl, Luce. You did your best."

Jo peered upward, surveying the vehicle's position beneath the towering pines. "Why park all the way out here, though? The only lights are up closer to the building, and it must get dark back here at night."

Sam nodded. "Maybe the lot was full last night when he got here."

"Or he didn't want anyone to see his car," Kevin added.

"Could have been meeting someone secretively," Jo said.

Sam crossed his arms. "Or doing something he shouldn't have been."

Tires crunched on gravel, and all three turned to see the tow truck rolling up.

“I’ll talk to the lab about giving the car a thorough going-over back at the impound lot,” Kevin said.

“Okay.” Sam looked at Jo. “Let’s go inside. Maybe someone will know what Alex was up to in here last night.

Sam pushed open the heavy wooden door, the familiar smells of stale beer and fried food washing over him as he stepped inside the Drunken Moose. Jo and Lucy followed close behind, Lucy’s nose twitching as she took in the new scents.

The interior was dimly lit, with a long wooden bar running most of the length of the room. A few patrons sat on barstools, nursing beers or watching a basketball game on the TVs mounted above the liquor shelves. In the back corner, the steady clack of pool balls could be heard from the game room.

Sam scanned the space until his eyes landed on the bartender, a burly man in his forties with a bushy beard. “Hey, Pete,” Sam called out with a wave.

Pete looked up from the glass he was wiping and nodded in greeting. “Chief Mason, Sergeant Harris. What brings you in today?”

Jo leaned against the bar. “We just have a few questions about someone who was in here last night—Alex Sheridan. Did you happen to see him?”

“Yeah, I remember Alex coming in,” Pete replied, setting down his rag. “Nice kid. He’d come in sometimes with his grandpa, get food and chat. Real shame what happened.”

Sam nodded solemnly. “So Alex was definitely here last night? What time did he arrive?”

Pete furrowed his brow, thinking. “Must’ve been around eight or so. I didn’t notice him come in, but later on, I saw him sitting in a back booth with a couple of other guys.”

“Back booth, huh?” Jo asked. “Any idea who he was with?”

Shaking his head, Pete said, “Nah, I didn’t recognize ’em. It was busy.”

“How’d he seem?” Sam asked. “Anything off about his behavior?”

“Well, he got pretty lit,” Pete said with a chuckle. “His buddies practically had to help him stand.”

Jo and Sam shared a look.

“Did he leave with them? When did they leave?” Jo asked.

Pete shook his head. “I didn’t see him leave. Place was packed last night. I barely remember even seeing Alex, let alone some random guys.

When I saw the car here this morning, I was glad he'd gotten a ride home with someone. Sorry I can't be more helpful, but I had my hands full here behind the bar."

"No problem. Thanks for the help," Sam said. "Anything else comes to mind, give me a call."

"You got it, Chief."

Sam turned and headed for the exit, Jo and Lucy on his heels. Pushing out into the crisp afternoon air, Sam paused outside the front door. "So Alex was here getting drunk with some mystery pals," he mused. "And then what happened?"

"Good question," Jo added grimly.

Sam looked up at the small camera over the door. "We need to figure out who those 'friends' were ASAP, and I think I might know how we can do it."

"WE'D BETTER STOP FOR DONUTS," Jo said as they got into the Tahoe. "This case is going to require some brain food."

Sam started the engine. "Can't argue with that logic. Brewed Awakening it is."

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Jo brought up the mystery surrounding Alex's presence at the bar. "So do you think someone lured Alex to the Drunken Moose, or did he go there to meet up with people?"

"Hard to say at this point," Sam replied, turning onto Main Street. "Could've been a planned meetup or just a chance encounter."

Jo nodded. "Yeah, no way to know yet. We gotta find the guys he was drinking with."

"Agreed. Pete didn't recognize them, so likely not regulars." Sam slowed for a stop sign. "You think they slipped Alex something?"

"Maybe," said Jo. "No drugs turned up at his place, so if they did dose him, it was probably just for that night, to incapacitate him."

Sam turned left toward Brewed Awakening. "Incapacitate him in order to drown him in the lake, make it look accidental."

"Right."

Sam pulled up to the window and turned to Jo. "The usual?"

“Yep.”

Lucy poked her head between the two seats as if to say she wanted “the usual” as well.

“Morning, Chief, Jo,” the teenage girl greeted them cheerfully from the drive-thru window.

“Hey, Emily,” Sam replied.

Lucy popped her head further into view and gave a little woof.

“Well, hi there, Lucy!” Emily grinned, leaning down to get a better look at the police dog. “Here for a snack too?”

Lucy’s tail thumped against the seat in response.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Emily laughed. She turned her attention back to Sam and Jo. “So what’ll it be today? The usual dozen with two coffees?”

“You got it,” Sam confirmed.

Jo leaned across Sam. “Can we get three jelly?”

“Of course!” Emily headed off to grab their order.

A minute later, she returned with a large paper bag and two steaming cups of coffee. “Here’s your dozen assorted with three jellies, two black coffees, and...” She held up a small paper bag. “Two donut holes for Lucy.”

Lucy gave an approving woof and wagged her tail excitedly.

“Thanks, Emily,” said Sam, passing her cash through the window.

“No problem. Enjoy!”

“Will do,” Jo replied, grabbing the bag. “I need some brain fuel.”

They pulled away from the drive-thru window and continued toward the station. Jo opened the bag, and the sweet scent of baked goods filled the SUV. She fished out a jelly donut and took a big bite, getting raspberry filling on her cheek.

“Mmm, that hits the spot,” she mumbled through a mouthful.

Sam chuckled and grabbed a napkin, handing it to her. “Try not to get jelly in the police car.”

Lucy let out an impatient huff, eyeing the bag with the donut holes.

“All right, all right, here you go.” Sam passed one back, and Lucy gobbled it up.

“So what’s our next move?” Jo crumpled up her napkin, having polished off the first donut.

“We need to figure out if the money had anything to do with Alex’s death. Who knew he had it? Was he spending more than usual?”

“Good call,” said Jo, nodding. “And we should...” She trailed off, looking back at Lucy.

The dog had sat up and was whimpering softly, claws scratching the window as they drove past a long dirt road.

Sam glanced in the rearview mirror. “Lucy okay back there?”

“She’s scratching at the window, looking down that dirt road to Fish Cove,” said Jo. She watched the dog, whose amber gaze was fixated on the road.

Sam slowed the Tahoe. “Huh, weird. She doesn’t usually react like that.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Jo agreed. “Isn’t that the road that Thorne Industries is building that storage facility on?”

Sam nodded. “Sure is.”

Jo leaned back in her seat. “We should check that out. Why does everything always seem to lead to Thorne?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Back at the station, the atmosphere buzzed with the urgency of piecing together Alex Sheridan's last night. Sam leaned against one of the desks, arms folded, as Jo perched on the corner with a furrowed brow.

Jo handed around the donut bag, and Wyatt, Kevin, and Reese pulled chairs into the middle of the room.

"So Alex was seen arguing with Marnie in her office." Reese nibbled on a chocolate cruller. "And then he ends up at the Moose later on?"

"Yep." Jo nodded and took a sip of coffee.

Kevin chimed in, scrolling through notes on his tablet. "And these two mystery men had to carry him out because he couldn't walk straight."

"Pete didn't actually see him leave, but he said they were holding him up. John said there were drugs in the tox report, but the question is did Alex take them on his own, or did someone spike his drink?"

"And then the next question is who would do that and why," Jo added.

Above them, Major watched with unblinking eyes from atop the filing cabinet.

"What did Alex do that made someone want him dead?" Kevin glanced at Major and broke off a piece of his donut. He walked cautiously to the cabinet and offered the piece to Major. "Do cats like donuts?"

Major hissed and swatted at the morsel dismissively. It arced through the air and landed on the floor. Lucy gobbled it up. She chuffed at Major as if they had planned it.

"Guess not," Kevin muttered.

Sam shifted his gaze from Major's high perch to his team, each member locked into the rhythm of the investigation. "We need to pin down where Alex went into the water. That's our primary crime scene."

Kevin, his face lit by the screen's glow, looked up. "Currents could have carried him from anywhere. We need to trace it back."

Reese perked up, a spark in her eyes. "I know someone from the academy who's an expert in currents and hydrology. She could probably give us an idea about where to start looking based on where Alex ended up."

"Do it," Sam said, his voice steady and commanding. "Get her on it as soon as possible."

Jo stood, brushing crumbs off her jacket. "We also need to find out who Alex was drinking with at the Moose."

"There was a camera over the front door," Sam said, remembering the placement from their visit. "Give Judy Glover a call and see if she'll send us the tapes."

Jo made a face, a slight twist of her lips betraying her thoughts about the owner of the bar. "Judy's not exactly a friend of the force, but I'll see what I can do."

Kevin leaned back in his chair. "We need to dig into Alex's finances too. Was he spending more than usual? Did he give anyone a large sum of money?"

Wyatt tapped away at his keyboard. "I'll look into that. If he was throwing around cash, that might have put a target on his back."

Sam nodded at Wyatt. "Keep me updated on what you find."

"I thought of another thing," Wyatt said. "We've checked Alex's cell phone record, but what about his phone at campaign headquarters? They have landlines there that go through a central switchboard."

Sam frowned. He hadn't even thought of that. "That's a good idea. Can you look into it?"

"I'm on it." Wyatt's fingers danced across the keys.

"I'll talk to Marnie about the argument with Alex," Sam said, thinking about Marnie Wilson's calculated demeanor.

"Why wouldn't she mention something like that?" Reese wondered aloud, frowning.

Sam pursed his lips, weighing the possible reasons. "She might not want to tarnish Alex's reputation. Or maybe—"

“She’s hiding something,” Kevin interjected, leaning forward. His chair creaked beneath his shifting weight.

Reese swiveled her head between them. “You think she had something to do with it?”

Before anyone could respond, the squad room door swung open. All eyes snapped toward the sound, conversation halted.

Reese hopped off her chair. “Can I help you?”

A gruff male voice answered. “Detective Dominic Hartman. I heard you folks have new evidence on an old case I worked.”

Sam’s brow furrowed as Reese ushered the man inside. Hartman was broad-shouldered, his face creased from years on the force.

“This is Detective Hartman,” Reese said, introducing him. “He’s here about an old case he worked.”

Sam rose from his desk, extending his hand. “Chief Sam Mason. What case are you referring to?”

Hartman’s grip was firm as they shook. “The helicopter bank job. Heard some of the stolen cash resurfaced.”

A hush fell over the room. Sam studied the older man, unable to read his expression. Harry thought Hartman had done a shoddy job investigating the case in the first place, so why would he care now? The silence lingered as Sam contemplated Hartman’s motives. Was the detective’s sudden interest an attempt to obscure his mishandling of the original investigation? Sam didn’t want to share too much information with Hartman but thought he might have valuable insights into the case.

“We did recover a large sum,” Sam said carefully. “But we’re still piecing together the details.”

“Mind if I ask where the money turned up?” Hartman’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Sorry, I can’t say. It’s tied to an ongoing investigation.” Sam’s tone remained even, unyielding.

Hartman nodded slowly, lips pressed into a thin line. “Fair enough.” His gruff voice carried a hint of respect for police protocol.

An uncomfortable silence lingered for a beat before Sam spoke again. “Since you were the lead on the original investigation, is there anything that might help us now? Any loose ends or suspicions you had back then?”

Hartman stroked his jaw, brow furrowed in thought. The team watched him intently, the only sound the ticking of the wall clock.

Finally, Hartman grunted. “There was this guy, Eric Feldman. Worked at the bank.”

Jo perked up at the name. “What about him?”

“We looked into him hard but could never get enough to charge him.” Hartman shook his head slowly. “Just had a feeling about that one, you know?”

Sam nodded, knowing that detective’s gut instinct well. “What made you suspicious of him?”

“Little things, really.” Hartman’s gaze grew distant, drifting back decades. “He acted nervous whenever we brought up the case. Kept changing his story about where he was that day.”

Kevin made a note, pen scratching against paper. “Anything else?”

Hartman snorted humorlessly. “We put a tap on his line for a while, but he must’ve figured it out. Never said anything incriminating on the phone after that.”

The room hung on Hartman’s words, everyone picturing the investigation unfolding in their minds.

“So you had him pegged as being involved?” Sam pressed.

Hartman’s jaw tightened, a muscle twitching. “Like I said, we could never prove anything concrete.”

Reese frowned. “What happened to this Feldman guy?”

A grim look passed over Hartman’s weathered face. “Killed himself. Before we could even wrap up the case.”

The words settled over the room like a heavy pall. Even if Feldman had been involved with the bank job, he couldn’t have anything to do with the Alex Sheridan case.

Hartman turned back toward the door. “I’d appreciate it if you could keep me in the loop if you turn up anything new on that robbery case.”

“I’ll try,” Sam said.

Hartman glanced around the squad room. “Looks a lot better than that dungeon we were in when I was a cop. You guys have a good day.”

“Well, that was unexpected,” Jo said, leaning back in her chair.

“You think he’s just curious about an old case?” Kevin asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sam shook his head. “I don’t know. Something doesn’t feel right.”

“What do you mean?” Reese asked, her brow furrowed.

“Why show up now?” Sam mused, pacing the room. “After all these years?”

“Maybe he just wants closure,” Wyatt suggested, shrugging.

“Or maybe he’s trying to cover his tracks,” Kevin countered, tapping his pen on the desk.

“We need to look into this Feldman guy,” Sam said, his voice firm. “See if there’s anything there.”

“I’ll dig into his background,” Wyatt offered, already typing again.

“Don’t spend too much time on that. Feldman can’t be connected to the Sheridan case. Jo, you and Kevin follow up on those leads from the Moose.”

“On it.” Jo nodded, grabbing her jacket.

“Reese, keep working on those currents and hydrology with your academy friend.”

“You got it, Chief,” Reese said, picking up the phone.

Sam snapped his fingers, and Lucy trotted over to his side. “While you guys are doing that, Lucy and I are going to have a little chat with Marnie Wilson.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sam strode into Marnie Wilson's campaign headquarters, Lucy at his side. Amelia's eyes widened when she saw him.

"Chief Mason!" She glanced nervously at Marnie's office door. "Ms. Wilson is quite busy at the moment."

"I'm sure she can spare a few minutes." Sam's tone left no room for argument.

Staffers gathered around Lucy, cooing and petting her. One hung back, speaking urgently on the phone—the same one who'd done so the first time they'd been there. Sam avoided eye contact with Monica. He didn't want anyone to guess that she'd given him information.

Marnie emerged from her office, a practiced smile on her face. "Chief Mason, what a pleasant surprise. Please, come in."

Sam and Lucy followed her inside, closing the door behind them.

Lucy sat next to Sam, eyeing Marnie warily. The dog didn't seem to like the politician. She probably sensed something humans couldn't sense.

"Are you here to give me your endorsement?" Marnie asked, her voice honey sweet. She perched on the edge of her desk, crossing her legs.

Sam ignored her flirtation. "Why did you lie about the night Alex was killed?"

Marnie's smile faltered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Someone told us that Alex was in your office that night."

Marnie glanced out the glass office wall into the room. "Who?"

Sam crossed his arms over his chest. "Someone reliable. Is it true?"

"I..." Marnie's composure cracked. "I must have forgotten."

Sam studied Marnie's face. "Forgotten? Or deliberately misled us?"

Marnie slipped off the desk and stepped behind it, putting a barrier between them. "I would never mislead the police, Chief Mason."

"Then why didn't you mention this before?"

"Alex was my campaign manager. He came in here a lot at night." Marnie waved her hand dismissively. "We would go over what happened during the day, discuss whether there was anything I needed to do or pay attention to. All the times blend together. I don't keep track."

"Did you usually argue with him?"

"Never." Marnie shook her head vehemently.

"But the person overheard you arguing that night."

Marnie's brow furrowed. "I don't recall..."

Sam waited, watching her closely.

"Wait, there might have been one argument," Marnie said slowly, as if the memory was just coming back to her. "But it was nothing. That's why I forgot about it."

"What was it about?"

"Campaign strategy." Marnie shrugged. "Sometimes, we disagreed on the best approach."

"And that's all it was? A disagreement about strategy?"

"Of course." Marnie's tone turned indignant. "What else would it be?"

Sam held her gaze. "You tell me."

Sam watched Marnie closely, searching for any signs of deception. Her explanation seemed plausible, but something about it didn't sit right with him. Lucy's ears perked up, and she swung her attention to the door just before a knock sounded.

Amelia cracked the door open, an apologetic look on her face. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Ms. Wilson, but Mr. Rickman is on the line. You told me to interrupt no matter what."

Marnie's eyes darted to Sam then back to Amelia. "Thank you, Amelia. I'll take the call in a moment." She turned to Sam, her smile tight. "Are we done here, Chief Mason?"

"For now. But if you remember anything else about that night… or your argument… it could be important to our investigation."

Marnie nodded, her fingers tapping on the desk. "Of course. I'll let you know if I recall anything else."

Amelia held the door open as Sam and Lucy exited the office. He paused, turning to Amelia. “I have a question for you, if you don’t mind.”

Amelia glanced at Marnie’s office then back at Sam. “Of course, Chief Mason. What can I help you with?”

“Did you ever happen to overhear Ms. Wilson and Alex arguing?”

Amelia’s eyes widened slightly, and she hesitated before answering. “No. Of course not. Why would they argue?”

Sam studied her face, noting the way she avoided direct eye contact. “You worked closely with Alex?”

Amelia nodded, her fingers twisting together. “Sort of. I mean, yeah.”

“Did you notice anything unusual about Alex’s behavior in the weeks leading up to his death?”

“No, not really. Well, maybe he was a little more tense than usual, but I figured it was just the stress of the campaign.” Amelia glanced behind her and then leaned closer. “Alex might not have been the good guy everyone thought he was.”

Sam tried to hide his surprise. “What makes you say that?”

Amelia’s eyes darted away. “I mean, he was kind of secretive. And yeah, he doted on his grandfather, but smoking cigars and drinking with an elderly man is a bit weird, don’t you think?”

Sam frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Amelia shrugged. “Just that maybe there was more to Alex than any of us knew.”

“And what about last night?” Sam asked. “How late did you work?”

“I left at five,” Amelia said. “Alex was still here when I took off.”

“And what did you do after that?”

Amelia looked down at her shoes. “Went straight home. It was a work night, so I went to bed early.”

Sam’s phone pinged. He glanced at it briefly before turning his attention back to Amelia. “Thanks for your time. If you hear anything or remember anything else, please get in touch.”

Amelia nodded, relief evident on her face as Sam turned to leave. Lucy padded along beside him, her nails clicking on the linoleum floor.

As they exited the building, Sam pulled out his phone to read the text more thoroughly. It was from Jo.

Bad news. Glover wants a warrant to hand over the surveillance tapes.

Sam sighed and did an about-face. It looked like he'd be making a trip to the mayor's office to see if Henley could speed things up.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sam headed straight to the town hall to see if he could get Mayor Jamison to fast-track the warrant. Jamison wasn't in his office. His assistant pointed Sam toward the campaign office on the other side of town. It was nearly five o'clock. He hoped Henley would still be at campaign headquarters.

Jamison's makeshift campaign HQ was in an old mill building that had been vacant for more than a year. The brick building's weathered exterior was a stark contrast to the sleek campaign posters plastered on the windows. Sam pulled into the gravel parking lot, the Tahoe's tires crunching beneath him. As he approached the door, Lucy at his heels, it swung open, and the pungent aroma of cigars assaulted his nostrils.

Lucy stopped short and let out a low growl.

Victor Sorrentino let the door close. He wasn't smoking a cigar, but the stench clung to him. His polished suit and expensive shoes seemed out of place in the rustic setting.

"Chief Mason." Victor smirked. "Is someone under arrest, or is this just a social call?"

Sam met Victor's gaze, refusing to be intimidated by the man's presence. "Just business as usual with the mayor."

Victor chuckled. "Of course. Well, don't let me keep you."

As Sam made his way inside, he couldn't shake the feeling of unease. Henley had seemed wary of Victor previously. It was one of the reasons Sam had initially preferred Henley over Marnie for mayor. Sam didn't trust Convale or anyone tied to it. But now, with Victor's unexpected appearance

at Henley's campaign office, Sam found himself questioning his assumptions.

The interior of the mill was bustling with activity, volunteers and staff members hurrying about with purpose.

Jamison emerged from a back room, a broad smile on his face. "Chief Mason! What brings you here today?" Jamison's face softened as he knelt to greet Lucy, his hand outstretched.

The German Shepherd's tail wagged enthusiastically as she nuzzled Jamison's palm. Sam couldn't help but smile at the interaction. Lucy's instincts about people were rarely wrong, and her affection for Henley was another of the reasons Sam had initially preferred him over Marnie for mayor.

"She's a good girl," Jamison said, standing up and brushing off his slacks. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Sam's expression sobered. "I'm here on official business, Mayor. It's about the Alex Sheridan case."

Jamison's brow furrowed, a flicker of worry crossing his features. He glanced around the bustling room before gesturing toward a closed door. "Let's talk in the conference room."

As they entered the makeshift meeting space, Lucy padded alongside them, her nose twitching as she investigated the unfamiliar surroundings. The room was sparse, with a long folding table and mismatched chairs scattered around it.

Henley closed the door behind them, muffling the chatter from outside. "What do you need, Sam?"

Sam leaned against the table, his arms crossed. "I need a search warrant for the surveillance tapes at the Drunken Moose. Alex was there the night he died, and I believe those tapes could provide crucial evidence."

Jamison's shoulders tensed, and he avoided Sam's gaze. "A search warrant? I don't know, Sam. I don't want to call in too many favors with the judge."

Surprise etched itself onto Sam's face. "This is a murder investigation, Henley. I thought you'd be more than willing to help."

Jamison ran a hand through his thinning hair, his eyes darting around the room. "I understand, but... I just don't want to ruffle any feathers, you know?"

Sam's instincts prickled at Henley's reluctance. Something wasn't adding up. He fixed Henley with a steady gaze, his voice low and serious. "Mayor, I need those tapes. If there's something you're not telling me..."

Henley held up his hands in a placating gesture. "No, no. It's nothing like that. I'll see what I can do, Sam. I'll talk to the judge and try to get that warrant expedited for you."

Sam nodded, his suspicion not entirely abating. "Thank you, Henley. I appreciate it."

As they exited the conference room, Sam couldn't shake the feeling that Jamison was hiding something.

As he got into his car, he noticed a text on his phone. Jo and Bridget wanted to meet at Holy Spirits.

"Looks like you'll have to hold the fort at the station for a bit." He glanced at Lucy in the rearview mirror. "Try not to get into it with Major, okay?"

Lucy simply stared back at him, but Sam thought he saw a glint of mischief in her eye.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jo and Bridget sat at the bar in Holy Spirits, the repurposed church-turned-drinking establishment. Stained glass windows cast a kaleidoscope of colors across the worn wooden floors, and the lofty ceiling created an airy atmosphere. The bar, with its amazing backdrop of colorful stained-glass windows, was lined with an eclectic mix of liquor bottles and beer taps.

Bridget sipped her soda water, the bubbles fizzing against her glass. Jo nursed a cold beer, the condensation dripping down the bottle.

"I messaged Sam to come by after work," Jo said, setting her phone on the bar. "Last I heard, he was talking to Henley Jamison, trying to expedite a warrant."

"It will be great to see him." Bridget nodded, her eyes sparkling with excitement. "I applied for the pastry chef course. It starts next week!"

Jo grinned, reaching over to squeeze her sister's hand. "That's fantastic, Bridge! I'm so proud of you."

Bridget beamed, her cheeks flushing with pride. "I can't wait to get started. I'm finally getting my life together."

"You're going to be amazing," Jo said, raising her glass in a toast. "To new beginnings."

Bridget clinked her glass against Jo's, the sound echoing through the bar. "To new beginnings."

As they sipped their drinks, Jo leaned in toward Bridget. "I'm going to bring Garvin another pie tomorrow, and I was thinking maybe something else too."

"Like what?"

“I was thinking maybe a home-cooked meal. All the guy eats is peanut butter.”

Bridget’s eyes lit up. “I’d be happy to whip something up. Maybe a hearty casserole or a comforting soup.”

“Sounds perfect. What kind of pie would be good?”

“Blueberry goes perfect with casseroles.” Bridget’s phone pinged, and she looked at it. “That’s Holden. He’s going to swing by. Says he has some information on the Webster case.”

Jo’s eyes grew distant as she reflected on the long journey that had brought her to White Rock. The search for their missing sister, Tammy, had consumed her for years. Now, with the killer caught and the FBI excavating the grounds where she had buried her victims, Jo felt a mix of emotions.

Bridget reached across the bar, her hand resting on Jo’s arm. “When they find Tammy...” Her voice trailed off, the unspoken words hanging heavy in the air.

Jo met her sister’s gaze, a grim understanding passing between them. “It’s going to be hard,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Like ripping the wound open all over again.”

Bridget nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “But it will also bring closure. We’ll finally know what happened to her.”

Jo took a deep breath, steadying herself. “You’re right. It’s just... It’s been so long.”

“I know,” Bridget said, squeezing Jo’s arm. “But we’ll get through it together.” A moment of silence stretched between them before Bridget spoke again. “I was thinking... I’d like to do something special for Kevin. He really went above and beyond to help us with that case.”

Jo nodded, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. “He did. He saved the day.” She paused, studying her sister’s face. There was a softness in Bridget’s eyes when she spoke of Kevin, a hint of something more than gratitude. Jo decided not to press the issue, at least not now.

Jo’s brow furrowed as she turned to Bridget. “You know, as grateful as I am to Kevin, there are still some things that don’t quite add up.”

Bridget’s shoulders tensed. “What do you mean?”

“That thumb drive he had. Where did he get it? And don’t you think it’s weird that it led straight to the Webster property?”

Bridget’s eyes narrowed. “It is kind of weird, but I’m sure it’s not anything nefarious. Didn’t seem like it was from what I could tell.”

Jo decided to let the matter drop, at least for now. “You’re probably right. My cop’s mind thinks everything is suspicious.”

Bridget laughed. “You can say that again.”

Jo smiled, eager to change the subject. “So, about doing something special for Kevin... I have an idea.”

Bridget raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Why don’t you make a double batch of whatever you’re planning to cook for Garvin? I’m sure Kevin would appreciate a home-cooked meal. He’s a single guy and probably doesn’t get that very often.”

Bridget’s face lit up, a smile spreading across her features. “That’s a great idea! I could make a big batch of that casserole and drop some off at the station.”

Jo nodded, pleased to see her sister’s enthusiasm. “He’d love that. And it would be a nice way to show your appreciation without making a big fuss.”

Jo felt a presence behind her, and her shoulders tensed.

“Evening, ladies,” Sam said, sliding onto the stool next to her. “Mick’s on his way. Said he had to make a quick stop first.”

Mick was Sam’s childhood friend, now a private detective, whom they used sometimes to dig into things that were best done through unofficial channels.

Jo relaxed, taking a sip of her beer. “Don’t sneak up on me like that. I was ready to go for my gun.”

Sam simply raised a brow and ordered his favorite Moosenose beer.

“Anything new?” Jo asked.

“I stopped by Henley’s office and asked him to expedite the warrant for those surveillance tapes,” Sam said, accepting the beer the bartender placed in front of him.

Jo raised an eyebrow. “How’d that go?”

“He said he’d do it, but he seemed a bit hesitant. Not sure what that’s about.”

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t my favorite crime-fighting duo.” Mick appeared behind them, clapping Sam on the shoulder.

Sam chuckled, gesturing for Mick to take a seat. “Glad you could make it.”

Jo leaned in, her voice low. “Wyatt and Kevin were still hard at work when I left, but they’ve probably gone home by now. Reese contacted her

friend, so we should have more information tomorrow."

Sam nodded, his expression growing serious. "Listen, Mick, we need your help with something."

Mick leaned forward, his eyes glinting with interest. "I'm all ears."

In hushed tones, Sam and Jo filled Mick in on the details of the case, explaining the potential connection to the decades-old bank robbery. Mick listened intently, his brow furrowing as he processed the information.

"We need you to dig into Eric Feldman's background," Jo said, her voice barely above a whisper. "See if you can find anything that might tie him to the robbery or to Alex Sheridan's death."

Mick nodded, his expression determined. "I'm on it. I'll see what I can uncover."

Sam glanced around. The bar was getting a bit crowded, and he didn't want anyone to overhear them discussing police cases. "What do you say we get a table? That one in the corner looks good."

As the group settled into a corner table, Holden Joyce joined them, his expression grim. He slid into the booth next to Mick, his eyes darting around the room to ensure no one was within earshot.

"I've got some news from my FBI contacts," Holden said, his voice low. "They've been excavating the Webster property, and they've found more bodies."

Jo's heart sank, her stomach twisting with dread. "And Tammy?"

Holden shook his head. "They haven't found a match for the DNA samples you and Bridget provided."

Bridget's hand found Jo's under the table, squeezing it tightly. Jo returned the gesture, drawing strength from her sister's presence.

"But there's something else," Holden continued, his brow furrowing. "Not all the bodies are children. Some are adults."

A heavy silence settled over the table as they processed this information. Sam was the first to speak, his voice rough with emotion. "What does that mean? Was Hazel Webster killing people of all ages?"

"Or was there another killer?" Mick added, his eyes narrowing.

Holden sighed, running a hand through his hair. "It's too early to say. The FBI is still processing the scene, trying to identify the victims and determine the cause of death. They think there are more bodies."

Jo's mind raced with the implications. If there was another killer, someone who had been working with or alongside Hazel Webster, it meant

that the danger might not be over. There could still be someone out there, someone who had escaped justice.

"What does Hazel say?" Jo asked.

Holden shrugged. "She's acting like she has no idea about any of it."

"She confessed to us!" Jo said.

"Well, now, she's playing dumb. Probably trying to get an insanity plea." Holden sighed.

"What do we do now?" Bridget asked, her voice small.

Holden met her gaze, his expression softening. "The FBI has the resources, expertise, and jurisdiction to deal with this, so we let them handle it. For now."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next morning, Bridget drove into town, mentally checking her grocery list for the shepherd's pie she planned to make for Garvin and Kevin. The thought of cooking for them brought a smile to her face, but it was tinged with worry about her past. She checked her phone one last time, confirming the message from Carl, a friend from her old life who still had connections.

As she pulled into the Roadside Diner's parking lot, Bridget spotted Carl sitting in a booth. She could see even through the window that the diner's walls looked greasy and dirty, the once-gleaming stainless steel counter now dulled and sapped of vibrancy. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting an unflattering glow over the handful of patrons scattered among peeling vinyl booths.

Bridget hesitated for a moment, questioning her decision, but the need to protect herself and those she cared about propelled her forward. She stepped inside, the bell above the door jingling. She carried a large purse, its contents soon to be altered.

Sliding into the booth across from Carl, Bridget managed a tight smile. She could see the tension on his face, his eyes darting around the diner.

"Hey, Bridge," Carl greeted her, his voice low. "How you doing?"

"Good. You?" Bridget replied, trying to keep her tone casual.

The waitress approached their table, her expression bored. "What can I get you folks?"

"Just coffee for me, please," Bridget answered, her stomach too knotted to consider food.

"Me too." Carl nodded in agreement, and the waitress walked away to fetch their drinks.

Bridget glanced around the diner, ensuring no one was paying attention to them. There was only one other patron, a disheveled man sitting on one of the stools at the counter, his back to them. She reached down, grasping the large purse at her feet. With a subtle movement, she handed it to Carl under the table.

Carl took the purse, his fingers brushing against hers briefly. He unzipped a pocket, retrieving the envelope filled with cash that Bridget had carefully placed inside earlier. In exchange, he slipped a small, cold object into the purse—the gun Bridget had requested.

The waitress returned with their coffees, setting them down on the table. Bridget and Carl thanked her, waiting until she was out of earshot before continuing their conversation.

"So, how's Jackie doing these days?" Bridget asked, sipping her coffee and trying to appear that they were two old friends catching up.

Carl shrugged. "Last I heard, she was still working at that dive bar downtown. You know, the one where we used to hang out?"

Bridget nodded, memories of their past lives flickering through her mind. "Yeah, I remember. Those were some crazy times."

They reminisced about old acquaintances and haunts, their voices low and their laughter forced. The weight of their transaction hung between them, unspoken but ever present.

"Well, guess I better get going. Nice seeing you." Carl stood and tossed a ten-dollar bill onto the table.

"You too. Thanks." Bridget took another sip of coffee as she watched him walk out. She wanted to wait a few minutes, just in case. She didn't want anyone to notice them leaving at the same time.

A familiar car pulled in. What the heck? Was that Kevin? What was he doing here?

KEVIN PULLED into the Roadside Diner parking lot, and his brow furrowed as he spotted Bridget through the window. He'd just been to Rita's to pick up a fruitcake, the dense, unappetizing brick now sitting on the

passenger seat like a forgotten paperweight. Taking his usual route past the diner, he was surprised to see Bridget there again, and wasn't that the same shady guy he'd passed on the road?

Kevin's mind raced with questions. Was that a boyfriend? No, he hadn't gotten that vibe the last time he saw them together. But why did Bridget keep meeting with him? Kevin hoped she wasn't in trouble. He cared about her, more than he wanted to admit.

As he stepped out of the car, the cold air nipped at his face. He made his way toward the diner entrance, the bell above the door jangling as he pushed it open. The familiar sounds of clinking dishes, sizzling grills, and murmured conversations enveloped him.

Kevin approached Bridget's booth with a grin. "Don't tell me you come here because you like the coffee?"

Bridget made a face. "They do have a mean corn muffin, though."

Kevin laughed as Bridget gestured for him to sit. He slid into the booth across from her. "Was that your friend that I saw you with before that I passed on the road out there?"

Bridget's smile faltered, a flicker of unease in her hazel eyes. "Yeah, he's just an old acquaintance."

Kevin leaned forward, his voice gentle. "If you're in trouble, you can tell me. I'm here for you."

She shook her head, shaggy brown hair brushing her freckled cheeks. "I'm not in trouble. Just being careful."

He nodded, understanding the need for caution all too well. Lowering his voice to a whisper, Kevin said, "I know you noticed I'd misfiled some things at the station. And I know you never mentioned it to anyone." His blue eyes met hers. "That's how I know I can trust you. And you can trust me too."

Bridget's gaze softened as she squeezed Kevin's hand. "After what we went through at Hazel Webster's place, I know I can trust you. If it wasn't for you, Jo might not even be alive."

Warmth spread through Kevin's chest at her words. It felt as if their shared experience and secrets were forging a bond between them, and he liked that.

Bridget's lips curved into a smile. "That's why I'm making you a special surprise."

Kevin chuckled. “I hope it’s not a fruitcake. I already have one of those.”

Bridget laughed, the sound like a bright melody in the dingy diner. “Nope, a casserole. I’m making one for Jo to take to Garvin McDaniels, and I’m going to double the recipe and make one for you too. I’ll bring it to the station tomorrow afternoon.”

Kevin’s heart swelled with gratitude. Bridget’s thoughtfulness touched him deeply. He knew he would protect her, no matter what secrets she held close. Whatever she was up to, he would keep her confidence. But a part of him longed for her to open up, to share the burden she seemed to carry alone.

“Thanks. I never get anything home cooked. I’m sort of a macaroni-and-cheese-in-the-box kind of guy,” Kevin said.

“Jo figured you’d appreciate some home cooking. That’s why she suggested it when I mentioned I wanted to do something special to thank you for the whole Hazel Webster thing.”

The fact that Jo had suggested it and it wasn’t something Bridget had thought of dampened his spirits a little. Maybe he was making too much of it. Best to slow down and not read too much into that.

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the diner’s clatter fading into the background. Kevin wished she would confide in him, but he knew he had to be patient. Bridget would tell him when she was ready.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sam stood by the K-cup coffee brewer, filling his navy-blue-and-white WRPD mug. Major, perched atop the filing cabinet, swiped his paw down every few seconds as if trying to catch the steam rising from the mug.

Lucy snoozed peacefully next to Jo's desk, her tail twitching occasionally. The office hummed with the usual morning bustle.

Kevin strode in, a triumphant grin on his face. "Guess what I've got." He held up a fruitcake double wrapped in plastic wrap.

A collective groan rose from the team. Sam raised an eyebrow. "Rita's fruitcake? Again?"

Kevin chuckled. "Yeah, but that's not all." He produced a white box and placed it on the desk. "I also got some corn muffins."

Jo leaned forward, intrigued. "Corn muffins? Where'd you get those?"

"The Roadside Diner," Kevin replied, opening the box to reveal a dozen golden muffins.

Jo wrinkled her nose. "I didn't know that sleazy diner had anything edible. You actually go there?"

Kevin shrugged, a smile tugging at his lips. "Sometimes. The muffins are pretty good."

The team gathered around, each grabbing a muffin and a plate. The sweet, buttery scent mingled with the coffee aroma, creating a cozy atmosphere.

Sam took a bite of his muffin, savoring the gritty texture. He swallowed and cleared his throat. "All right, let's go over things. Did anyone learn anything new about the case?"

Wyatt sat back behind his desk. “I’ve got a couple of things.” He paused, ensuring he had everyone’s attention. “First, the phone system at Marnie’s headquarters has been switched to go through one number. I can’t tell who made what calls. It looks like Alex used that number along with everyone else.”

Sam furrowed his brow. “Is that normal? Routing all calls through one number?”

Wyatt shook his head. “It seems suspicious, given the circumstances. With Alex’s computer skills from gaming, he could’ve done it easily without anyone knowing. But why would he?”

Reese walked in and grabbed a corn muffin. She leaned against the desk, taking a bite and dropping crumbs, which Lucy promptly hoovered up.

Sam rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe if he didn’t want anyone to know who he was calling?”

Wyatt nodded. “Yeah. The other strange thing is that the phone system change happened just over a week ago.”

Jo’s eyes widened. “That certainly is odd timing.”

Kevin, who had been quietly listening, spoke up. “A week ago? That’s around the time Alex’s grandfather passed away, right?”

Sam nodded. “And just before Alex was found dead.”

The room fell silent, the weight of the new information settling over them. The pieces were starting to come together, but the picture remained unclear.

“I’ll ask Marnie if she had the phones switched for some reason.” Sam took a sip of coffee. “What else?”

Wyatt pinched off a piece of the corn muffin top. “I also looked into the Feldman case. It seems there was some question about whether it was really a suicide.”

Jo leaned forward, her green eyes narrowed. “Why is that?”

Wyatt scrolled through the file on his screen. “It’s just a note in the case. The coroner had some doubts, but it was ultimately ruled a suicide.”

Kevin, who had been quietly mulling over the information, spoke up. “Feldman worked at the bank, right? What if he knew something about the robbery, and someone didn’t want him to tell?”

The room fell quiet as the implications of Kevin’s words sank in.

Jo broke the silence. “So someone murdered him and staged it to look like a suicide, and no one found out?”

Kevin shrugged. “It was a long time ago, and they didn’t have the forensics and modern tools that we have now. Easier to get away with stuff like that back then.”

Sam held up his hand, his expression serious. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We’ll look into Feldman’s case further, but we can’t jump to conclusions.”

Wyatt nodded, his eyes still glued to the screen. “There is something else interesting about the Feldman case.”

The team looked at him expectantly, bracing themselves for another bombshell.

“The investigating detective for that case was Hartman,” Wyatt revealed, his voice heavy with significance.

“Interesting, but again, I don’t think they had a lot of people to investigate back then, so maybe it’s not as coincidental as it seems.” Sam turned to Reese. “Did you get the warrant for the tapes from the Drunken Moose? Jamison said he’d try to rush it to us.”

Reese shook her head. Her phone beeped in her back pocket. She pulled it out, her eyes scanning the text message. “I didn’t get the warrant yet, but I just got a message from Susan, my hydrologist friend.”

As everyone turned to Reese, eager to hear what she had to say.

“Susan said the currents and where the body ended up point toward it going in somewhere near Fish Cove,” Reese explained, her voice tinged with excitement.

Sam’s eyes widened, and he turned to Jo. “Isn’t that where Lucy made a ruckus when we were in the car?”

Jo nodded, her expression serious. “Yeah, she was really agitated when we passed by that dirt road near Thorne Industries’ new storage facility.”

Sam stood up, grabbing his coat from the back of his chair. “All right, let’s go check it out. Jo, you’re with me. You too, Lucy.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jo gazed out of the passenger window of the Tahoe as Sam navigated the dirt road winding through the dense pine forest. Thorne Industries' skeletal storage facility loomed ahead, an intrusive presence in the otherwise pristine landscape.

Lucy, perched in the backseat, stared intently at a small path leading down to the water. Her ears stood upright, alert and focused.

Jo glanced at Sam, noticing the furrow in his brow.

"I don't like this," Jo said, gesturing toward the construction site. "Sticks out like a sore thumb."

Sam nodded, his eyes fixed on the road. "I agree. It's a shame to see nature get ruined."

As they drove closer to the water, the road became rockier, and the terrain turned swampy. The Tahoe bounced and jostled, but Sam maintained a steady grip on the wheel.

"This place is so remote," Jo mused, her eyes scanning the surroundings.

"Definitely not a nice beach spot." Sam glanced out over the swampy area that went out about twenty feet before they could see a trickle of open water. "Good place to catch bass, though."

"Also a good place to commit a crime with no witnesses."

Lucy whined softly, her nose pressed against the window.

Jo reached back and patted her head, trying to soothe the agitated dog. "Easy, girl," Jo murmured. "We're going to check it out."

As they approached the end of the dirt road, Sam pulled the Tahoe to a stop. The construction site stood silent, the steel beams casting long shadows across the ground.

Sam and Jo exited the vehicle. Lucy bounded ahead, her nose to the ground, her tail wagging with purpose. The air was still and heavy, the only sound the crackling of ice.

This part of the lake was swampy, with reeds and humps of grass sticking up from the frozen water.

"Look," Sam said, pointing to a spot where the brush had been trampled. "Someone's been here recently."

Jo nodded, her eyes scanning the area. "And there," she said, gesturing toward a section of the swamp where the ice had been broken. "Looks like something happened farther out."

Lucy barked sharply, her ears pricked forward.

They picked their way through the swamp. Here, they could see that farther out, the water was moving enough that ice hadn't formed.

"That could be where he went in," Sam said.

Jo surveyed the scene, her mind racing. "If they dragged Alex, he was already incapacitated when they brought him here."

Sam nodded, his eyes narrowed. "They could have met him at the Moose and slipped something into his drink. Once he passed out, they brought him here and pushed him under the ice."

"We just need to find solid evidence." Jo scanned the area for something that might be clear evidence that Alex had been here. She remembered the tears in his orange jacket, but she didn't see any fabric sticking up on the broken branches. That would have been too much to hope for.

"Let's see if Lucy can find anything," Sam said.

Lucy was already familiar with Alex's scent, since she'd been with them when the body had been pulled from the lake, so she knew just what to do when Sam instructed her to sniff for Alex's scent.

They watched her zigzag around a path toward the open water. Then she veered off and stopped at something else. She looked back at Sam and Jo and gave a little woof.

"Guess she found something." Sam and Jo headed toward the dog.

"What is it?" Sam asked, petting Lucy on the head.

Lucy snuffled around a grass clump.

“Feathers?” Jo pointed to a clump of white feathers and then looked up into the sky. “This seems like a good place for ducks, but maybe those aren’t from any of the ducks around here.”

“Alex’s down jacket,” Sam said. He pulled out an evidence bag and began collecting them. “That would explain why the killer didn’t clean them up. They could have spilled out if the jacket got ripped but would look perfectly natural here.”

“Good job, Lucy.” Jo petted Lucy, who wagged her tail.

Sam stood, holding the bag up. “Maybe this is a long shot, but it’s worth a try.”

“If they did drag Alex out here, they would have needed a vehicle to transport him. It’s too remote to carry a body on foot.” Jo’s gaze drifted back toward the construction site.

Lucy’s sharp bark startled Jo. She noticed the dog was no longer beside them. The bark had come from up near the road.

“Looks like Lucy was thinking the same exact thing you were.” Sam headed back up the path.

Lucy was standing on the side of the road, her ears alert and her body rigid, staring intently at something in the dirt.

“Tire tracks.” Jo crouched, examining the tracks, then took out her phone and started snapping photos. “These are recent. And they’re not from any construction vehicles.”

“We need to get Wyatt or Kevin out here to make some casts.”

Sam was about to call the station on his own phone when Lucy’s whine distracted him. He noticed the dog’s gaze fixed on a spot near the tire tracks. Curious, Sam approached and crouched, his eyes widening as he saw a pile of ashes amid an area of tamped-down snow.

“Someone was standing here,” Sam said, his voice low. “Smoking.”

Jo joined him, her brow furrowed. “Maybe assessing the construction.”

Sam shook his head. “Don’t think so. The construction is on the other side of the car. The person was standing facing the swamp.”

Jo’s eyes widened as the realization hit her. “You think the killer stood here and watched Alex’s body sink beneath the ice?”

Sam nodded, his jaw clenched. “That’s cold. Really cold.”

Jo shook her head in disbelief. “Who even smokes cigarettes these days besides Hazel Webster? And she’s in prison.”

Sam leaned closer, examining the ashes. “These aren’t from cigarettes. The ash is too coarse. Too big. This is from a cigar.”

Jo pulled out her phone and began snapping photos of the ashes and the surrounding area. “A cigar smoker? That narrows down our suspect list.”

Sam stood up, brushing the snow from his pants. “And who do we know that’s associated with Thorne Industries and smokes cigars?”

Jo’s eyes met Sam’s, a knowing look passing between them. “Victor Sorrentino.”

Sam pulled out his phone and dialed on speaker. “I’ll call Reese and get someone out here to take a cast of those tire marks. Maybe we’ll get lucky, and they’ll match Victor’s car.”

“Or Beryl’s.” Jo couldn’t help the sarcastic remark.

“Hey, Sam,” Reese answered the phone. “I’m glad you called because I have good news!”

Sam glanced at Jo. “Really? We could use some. What is it?”

“Judge Warner just signed off on your warrant for the surveillance tapes from the Drunken Moose.”

Sam smiled. “That is good news. We’ll be back at the station in ten. Have the paperwork ready.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sam picked up the warrant at the station and drove directly to Judy Glover, who studied it as if she was looking for a loophole. Her sharp eyes scanned the document, her lips pursed in concentration. Sam waited patiently, his hands clasped behind his back.

"This all seems to be in order," Judy finally said, her tone clipped. She handed the warrant back to Sam with a guarded expression.

Sam had no idea why she didn't like the cops, but he tried to remain friendly as he accepted the video file. "Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Glover. This tape could be crucial to our investigation."

Judy merely nodded, her eyes already drifting back to her computer screen. Sam took that as his cue to leave.

By the time he got back to the station, Kevin had sent the ashes to the lab for analysis along with the feathers to see if they matched those in Alex's jacket.

Wyatt, who had been sent out to make the tire cast, was also back and hunched over his desk, carefully examining the cast he had made.

"Find anything interesting?" Sam asked, leaning against Wyatt's desk.

Wyatt looked up, his eyes bright with excitement. "Actually, yeah. Looks like the size of a car tire, so we're looking for some sort of sedan. I'm running the tread pattern through our database now to see if we get a match."

Sam nodded, impressed by Wyatt's thoroughness. "Good work. Let me know as soon as you find something."

Sam held up the thumb drive Judy had given him. “Anyone want to watch a really boring movie that hopefully has an exciting ending that helps solve the case?”

Kevin grinned, grabbing his chair and rolling it over. “I’m always up for a good mystery. Let’s see what we’ve got.”

The rest of the team gathered around, their faces illuminated by the glow of Kevin’s computer screen as he inserted the thumb drive and pulled up the video.

At first, the footage was uneventful. People came and went, their backs mostly to the camera. Sam leaned forward, his eyes narrowed in concentration as he tried to spot anyone familiar.

“There’s Alex,” Jo said, pointing at the screen. Sure enough, Alex Sheridan entered the building alone, his head down and his hands shoved into his pockets.

“He’s alone, so he must have been meeting someone there like we thought,” Jo said.

The team watched as more people filtered in and out, none of them recognizable. Sam drummed his fingers on the desk, frustration mounting. Would this video really give them the break they needed?

As the footage neared closing time, a few stragglers exited the building. But there was no sign of Alex.

“Wait, who is that?” Jo asked, leaning closer to the screen.

Kevin paused the video, zooming in on the person in question. The team collectively held their breath as the image sharpened, revealing a woman with wavy honey-blond hair.

“Isn’t that the woman from Marnie’s campaign?” Jo asked.

“Amelia Donovan,” Sam confirmed, his voice grim.

Jo’s brows rose. “She got Alex’s job as campaign manager.”

“You think she killed him for the position?” Kevin asked, his eyebrows raised skeptically.

Sam sighed, leaning back in his chair. “No. And besides, she’s leaving alone. But if she’s not involved, then why lie to us? She said she was at home the night Alex was killed.”

The team exchanged glances, the implications of Amelia’s deception sinking in. If she had lied about her whereabouts, what else could she be hiding?

“I’ll dig into her background, see if I can find anything,” Wyatt said.

As the tape continued to play, Sam suddenly sat up straighter, his eyes narrowing. “There’s another strange thing,” he said, pointing at the screen. “Look there. That’s the bartender locking up.”

Jo leaned in, her brow furrowed. “So? What’s so strange about that?”

“Alex never left the bar,” Sam said grimly.

A heavy silence settled over the room as the team processed this new information. If Alex had never left the bar, then how had he ended up dead in the lake?

“I planned to have a chat with Marnie about why those phone lines were switched. And while we’re at it, I can find out why Amelia lied,” Sam said.

Kevin raised an eyebrow. “But if Amelia had something to do with it, what about the cigar ashes at the crime scene ?”

Jo nodded thoughtfully. “If it’s tied to Alex’s death, she might not have acted alone.”

“Maybe she smokes cigars,” Wyatt suggested.

Jo frowned. “Could be, but does she have a car that matches the tire tracks? Or maybe those tire tracks are not related.”

“Of course, we need to prove the area where we think he went in is tied to the murder,” Sam said, his mind already racing ahead. “But there’s something else bugging me. That bag of money Harry said they found in the woods back in the day.”

Sam continued, “Harry made it sound like they didn’t search very thoroughly back then. And besides, they didn’t have Lucy. Maybe there’s something there that could help us.” He reached down to give the German Shepherd an affectionate pat.

At the mention of her name, Lucy’s ears perked up, her tail wagging slightly. Major, on the other hand, continued to snore softly atop the filing cabinet.

Wyatt frowned, his fingers flying over his keyboard. “I couldn’t find anything on Obsidian Enterprises, so how could we get permission to search again?”

Jo leaned forward, a mischievous glint in her eye. “Maybe we don’t need permission. The FBI is up there digging already. Who would think a few cops searching would be out of place?” She shrugged. “And who would even be watching?”

Sam considered this for a moment, weighing the risks and benefits. On one hand, an unauthorized search could land them in hot water. But on the

other hand, if they found something crucial to the case, it could be worth it.

"All right," he said finally, his jaw set with determination. "Let's do it. I want to get over to Marnie's campaign headquarters, and it's already late in the day. First thing tomorrow. But we need to be careful. No drawing undue attention to ourselves."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sam, Jo, and Lucy strode into Marnie's campaign headquarters, their presence commanding attention. The bustling activity ground to a halt as curious eyes darted their way. Sam scanned the room, his gaze lingering on each face, searching for a flicker of guilt or unease.

Amid the sea of desks, one stood out—Amelia's, conspicuously empty. The sight of it sent a ripple of suspicion through Sam. Where was she? And why had she lied about her whereabouts the night of Alex's murder?

Before he could ponder further, Marnie emerged from her office, her expression a mix of surprise and annoyance. "Chief Mason, Sergeant Harris. What can I do for you?" Her tone was clipped, her smile tight.

Sam met her gaze head-on. "We need to talk. In private."

Marnie's eyes narrowed slightly, but she maintained her composure. "I'm rather busy at the moment. Can this wait?"

Sam's jaw clenched, his patience wearing thin. "I'm afraid not."

A beat of silence passed between them, the tension palpable. Finally, Marnie relented with a sigh. "Very well. Come into my office." She gestured for them to follow, her movements stiff and controlled.

Marnie settled behind her desk, her posture regal and unyielding. Jo and Sam remained standing while Lucy settled at their feet, her ears alert and her eyes watching Marnie with suspicion.

"What's this about?" Marnie asked, her fingers steepled before her.

Sam glanced out into the other room then back at Marnie. "I noticed Amelia's desk is empty. Is she out today?"

Marnie's brow furrowed, a flicker of confusion crossing her face. "She took the day off. Why do you ask?"

Sam shrugged, his tone casual. "Just curious."

Marnie's lips pursed, a hint of defensiveness creeping into her voice. "I'm not a tyrant, Chief Mason. I allow my people to take time off when they need it."

Sam nodded, his gaze unwavering. "Of course. I was just wondering how well you know Amelia."

Marnie's eyes narrowed, her guard rising. "Not particularly well. She's a relatively new hire."

Jo stepped forward, her voice cutting through the tension. "She seems very ambitious."

Marnie's gaze shifted to Jo, a flicker of agreement in her eyes. "She is. The girl is a hard worker, always eager to take on more responsibility."

Sam's voice took on a thoughtful tone. "I imagine she was thrilled to be promoted to Alex's position."

Marnie nodded, a hint of pride in her voice. "She was. She pushed hard for the role, made it clear she was ready for more."

Suddenly, Marnie's expression shifted, suspicion clouding her features. Her eyes bored into Sam's, and her voice was low and measured. "Why the sudden interest in Amelia? Do you suspect her of something?"

Sam shrugged, his expression nonchalant. "It's probably nothing, but Amelia lied about where she was the night Alex was killed. In fact, we have surveillance that shows she was in the same bar. Might have been one of the last people to see him."

Marnie's brows shot up, surprise etched on her face. "I hadn't noticed anything odd with Amelia or anything between her and Alex. As far as I know, Amelia will be back tomorrow. If there's nothing further I can do to help..."

Sam held up a hand, interrupting her. "Actually, there is. Why did you switch the phone system over?"

Genuine confusion clouded Marnie's features. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"The phone system was switched to go through a common number shortly before Alex's death," Sam explained.

Marnie shook her head, bewildered. "I ordered no such thing. I don't even know how phones work or that it didn't go through a common number

before. Alex was the tech whiz."

Sam nodded slowly, giving Marnie time to process the information, to let the implications sink in. He watched as a flicker of nervousness danced in her eyes.

"Did you ever remember what you and Alex *really* argued about?" Sam asked, his voice measured. "It could be important, and you wouldn't want to hold anything back that could be important to the investigation. Might not look good for your campaign."

Marnie hesitated, her gaze darting away from Sam's intense scrutiny. "I didn't want to say anything because I didn't want to get involved or have you looking into my contributors. And it seemed petty, especially now that Alex is... gone." She sighed, her shoulders slumping. "I caught him in my office, going through my calendar." She pointed to a leather binder on her desk, a day planner thick with pages and notes sticking out. "I still prefer to keep my information on paper. I avoid technology when I can, which is why I'm not familiar with the phone system."

Sam raised his eyebrows, intrigued. This was not the response he had expected. He leaned forward, his eyes locked on Marnie. "Did you have any idea what he was looking for?"

Marnie shook her head, her expression perplexed. "No, I don't. He shut the folder pretty quickly when I walked in. I confronted him about it, but he lied and said he wasn't looking in there. I saw him with my own eyes!"

Sam's mind raced, trying to piece together this new information. What could Alex have been searching for in Marnie's personal calendar? And why the secrecy?

He reached for the day planner, his fingers brushing against the worn leather. "May I?"

Marnie hesitated for a moment then nodded. "Of course. I have nothing to hide."

Sam flipped through the pages, his eyes scanning the neat handwriting and colorful sticky notes. Meetings, appointments, reminders, contact information—nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first glance.

He turned to Marnie, his expression serious. "Can you think of any reason why Alex would be interested in your schedule? Any events or meetings that might have caught his attention?"

Marnie shook her head, her brow furrowed in thought. "I can't think of anything specific. He has everything on his own calendar." She paused,

glancing at the planner. “But I did think maybe he was looking at the contact list.”

Sam leaned forward, his interest piqued. “The contact list? Why would that upset you?”

Marnie sighed. “Some of the donors prefer to remain anonymous. If word got out, it might jeopardize future donations.”

Jo’s eyes narrowed. “So you think Alex was trying to figure out who these secret donors are?”

Marnie nodded, her expression troubled. “It’s possible. But I can’t imagine why he would do that.”

Sam’s voice was low, his tone serious. “Maybe he was planning to leak that information to the newspaper for money.”

Marnie’s head snapped up, her eyes wide with shock. “No! I don’t believe Alex would do anything like that. He was dedicated to this campaign, to our cause.”

Not for the first time, Sam wondered exactly what Marnie’s cause was, but that was a conversation for a different day. “Apparently, Alex did something that got him killed. We need to explore every possibility, no matter how unlikely it may seem.”

Marnie’s shoulders sagged in defeat. “I understand. It’s just hard to believe Alex would betray me like that.”

Sam’s gaze flicked to the day planner. “In the meantime, I’m going to need a copy of your contact list.”

Marnie hesitated, her fingers tightening around the leather binder. “I don’t know, Chief Mason. Those donors trust me to keep their information private.”

Sam met her gaze, his expression sincere. “I give you my word, Marnie. We will keep the donors’ identities secret. But we need that list. It might contain important information about Alex’s murder.”

Marnie sighed, her resolve crumbling. “Fine. I’ll make some copies and send them over.”

Sam nodded. “Thank you. We’ll be in touch if we have any more questions.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

As they walked out of Marnie's office, Sam turned to Jo, his brow furrowed. "What do you think? Was she telling the truth?"

Jo shrugged, her expression skeptical. "Hard to say. She's a politician, so lying comes with the territory." She glanced back at the closed door. "But something about her story doesn't sit right with me."

Sam nodded, his thoughts racing. "Yeah, I got that feeling too. Why would Alex risk everything to snoop through her calendar? And why was she so reluctant to share that contact list?"

Jo sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I don't know, but I have a hunch it's more than just protecting her donors' privacy."

They stepped out into the parking lot, the cool evening air a welcome respite from the tension inside.

"And is it a coincidence that Amelia took the day off?"

Jo glanced back at the building. "Good question."

Jo opened the car door for Lucy, who hopped in eagerly.

"I bet you know, don't you?" Jo said, scratching the dog behind the ears.

Lucy chuffed, her tail wagging.

Sam chuckled, shaking his head. "If only she could talk, right?" He pulled out his phone, his eyes scanning the screen. "Hey, Mick just texted. He's got some news on the Feldman case."

Jo's eyebrows shot up, her interest piqued. "Oh yeah? What's he got?"

"Not sure, but he's stopping by my place in a few minutes." Sam glanced at his watch. "It's almost quitting time anyway. You want to join us?"

Jo hesitated for a moment, weighing her options. She had a pile of paperwork waiting for her at the office, but the prospect of a breakthrough about Feldman was too tempting to pass up.

"Sure, why not?" she said, clicking her seat belt into place. "I could use a break from staring at my computer screen."

Sam grinned, starting the engine. "Great. Maybe Mick's found something that will help us crack this case wide open."

Sam's home was a log cabin nestled in the heart of the woods, a sanctuary from the chaos of police work. As they pulled up, Jo spotted Mick waiting on the porch, his leather jacket gleaming in the fading light.

Inside, the cabin felt warm and inviting. A stone fireplace dominated the living room, flanked by worn leather couches. Rustic wooden beams stretched across the ceiling, and the walls were adorned with mounted fish that Sam and his grandfather had caught. Jo had spent many evenings here, unwinding after tough cases or celebrating victories. The place didn't have too many feminine touches, but she really liked it.

Lucy bounded through the door, making a beeline for her water bowl in the corner. Sam headed to the kitchen, grabbing a couple of beers from the fridge.

"Make yourself at home," he called over his shoulder, rummaging through the cabinets. He emerged with a bag of chips, a sheepish grin on his face.

"Not quite as fancy as what Bridget's been serving up at your place," he said, tearing open the bag. "But it'll have to do."

They settled in the living room, and Sam handed them each a beer and put the chips on the coffee table. "So what have you got, Mick?"

Mick leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. "I talked to Feldman's brother today. He's convinced there's no way Feldman killed himself."

Jo frowned, her fingers tapping against her beer bottle. "What makes him so sure?"

"He said his brother was happy, never talked about killing himself, but apparently, Feldman had been acting nervous and scared even before the robbery," Mick said, his voice low. "His brother said he was jumpy, always looking over his shoulder like he was expecting someone to come after him."

Sam's brow furrowed, his mind racing. "So you think Feldman knew something? Something that got him killed?"

Mick nodded, his expression grim. "That's what it looks like. And whoever did it made it look like a suicide to cover their tracks."

Jo leaned back, her eyes widening. "So either Hartman is incompetent, or he was covering up."

Sam stood up, pacing the room. "Think about it. Feldman worked at the bank. He would have had access to all kinds of information about the robbery. Maybe he saw something he wasn't supposed to, or maybe he was even involved somehow."

Jo nodded, her mind whirling with possibilities. "And when the heat got too close, someone decided to shut him up permanently."

Sam nodded. "But who?"

Mick leaned back, his expression serious. "I can't tell you how I found this out, but apparently, there was some sort of an investigation going on. Something to do with a big loan the bank had made to Convale."

Sam's brows shot up. "Convale? What was the investigation for?"

Mick shrugged. "That was so long ago, there weren't many people for me to talk to, but something about some rules being bent to give the loan. The state banking commission was looking into it, but get this… all the documents were destroyed in the explosion when the bank was robbed."

"Whoa." Jo glanced at Sam. "You don't think the robbery was a cover-up?"

"If it was, then that sheds a whole new light on the old case and maybe even the Alex Sheridan case," Jo said.

"Sure does. But what would Alex know about the old bank robbery?" Sam asked.

"Wouldn't surprise me if Convale was behind it. Is it any coincidence we found the cigar ashes at the crime scene and Victor Sorrentino smokes cigars?" Jo asked.

"I was thinking about that too," Sam said. "And if that site out by the storage facility is where Alex went into the water, it's on Beryl Thorne's property," Sam said.

Mick chuckled. "And we all know how close Beryl and Victor are."

"But then, there's Marnie and Amelia." Sam sipped his beer. "And I also saw Victor coming out of Henley's campaign office. There might be another angle we haven't thought about."

Mick raised a brow. “Campaign espionage gone wrong?”

“Crazier things have happened.”

Jo put her empty beer bottle on the table and stood. “Well, either way, it looks like we have our work cut out for us, which is why I’d better get home and get a good night’s sleep. It’s going to be a busy day tomorrow.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jo awoke to the aroma of cinnamon buns. She stretched, the events of the previous day still swirling in her mind. The information Mick had found about the old bank loan was quite interesting, but what did that have to do with Alex's death? Alex's death was the case they were working, and she needed to keep her investigating thoughts on that.

She padded into the kitchen, where Bridget was bustling about, her hair pulled back from her flushed face. "Morning, sis," Bridget said, sliding a plate of warm cinnamon buns across the counter.

Jo smiled, grabbing a roll and taking a bite. "Thanks, Bridge. These are amazing."

Bridget grinned. "I was thinking about making a shepherd's pie for Garvin and one for Kevin. Are you going to Garvin's again tonight?"

Jo nodded, her mouth full of cinnamon and sugar. She swallowed then said, "Yep. Gonna stop by after work."

Jo walked over to the window, cinnamon bun in hand. She peered out at the porch. Pickles was snoozing contentedly, his tail twitching occasionally. Jo smiled. "Looks like Pickles has finally decided to make himself at home."

Bridget joined her at the window, grinning. "About time. He knows where his bread is buttered."

Jo nodded, her expression thoughtful. "I'll see if I can work on Garvin about him. He didn't seem to mind when I told him we were feeding a stray cat on the porch, but maybe I can get him to agree to us having the cat inside."

“I’ll be sure to make the shepherd’s pie extra tasty so he’s in an agreeable mood.”

Jo laughed and turned away from the window, her mind already back on the case. “I gotta get to work. See you there later?”

“Yep. I’ll drop off the pies later this afternoon so you can go straight to Garvin’s with his.”

“Perfect.”

On her way to work, Jo stopped at Brewed Awakening and arrived at the station with a box of donuts.

“Donuts!” Reese jumped up from her desk. “I hope there’s a Boston cream.”

Jo opened the box and tilted it toward Reese. “There’s only one. Better take it before one of the guys gets it.”

Wyatt, Kevin, and Sam were already in the squad room. Jo passed around the box and sat on the edge of her desk. “Are we going to search the woods today?”

Sam nodded, grabbing a chocolate glazed donut. “That’s the plan, but let’s give it some time to warm up. It’s frigid out there.”

Jo eyed Sam. “Are you sure you even want to? It’s been decades, and it’s a long shot there is anything there.”

Sam shrugged. “I know, but it’s been bugging me, and you know how I hate to leave any stone unturned.”

The team gathered around the box of donuts, sipping their coffee. Lucy watched each bite intently, her tail wagging in anticipation of a crumb falling her way. Major sat perched on the edge of the filing cabinet as if paying attention to the conversation.

Sam leaned forward, his expression serious. “Before we get started, I need to fill you all in on something Mick discovered about the Eric Feldman case.”

The team exchanged curious glances as Sam continued. “It turns out there was an investigation into a loan between the bank and Convale, and all the records were destroyed in the robbery explosion.”

Kevin’s eyes widened. “You think the robbery might have been a cover-up for the fact they wanted those records destroyed?”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe. It’s convenient, but we don’t have any positive proof. It’s all just hearsay right now.”

“Do you think this is related to Alex’s murder?” Wyatt asked.

Sam held up a hand. “I’m not sure, and it’s not something we should be focusing on right now. Our priority is finding Alex’s killer. We can’t spend too much time on this old case, but it’s something to keep in the back of our minds when considering motive.”

Reese handed a paper to Sam. “Joe from the crime lab faxed this over. They found some fingerprints on the suitcase and money we found at Alex’s. Some match Alex Sheridan, and some are unidentified.”

Sam looked at the paper and nodded. “Well, that doesn’t help much right now. Maybe if we can make an arrest, we’ll match those unknown prints.”

Reese nodded. “So what’s next?”

Sam stood up, grabbing a donut. “We’ll search the area the other money was found at this morning. It’s a long shot that we’ll find anything related to Alex’s case there, but I want to be thorough.”

“I got some coordinates from the files of the original case.” Reese licked a blob of cream from the side of her donut. “Put it on your desk.”

“Good work,” Sam said. “That will help narrow it down. And I invited Harry to join us. Figured he might remember something.”

“I fired up the metal detector earlier. Works fine.” Wyatt pointed to a gizmo leaning in the corner. They didn’t use the department metal detector too often, but Sam figured it might come in handy this time.

“Sounds good. That should help with this snow cover.”

“I found something interesting too…” Wyatt wiped his hands with a napkin and headed back behind his desk. “About Amelia Donovan.”

Sam raised a brow. “Oh?”

Wyatt leaned forward, his expression serious. “Amelia has some trouble with the law. A restraining order was taken out against her a few years ago. Turns out she might be a bit of a stalker. The restraining order was from a boyfriend that tried to break up with her.”

Sam rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe Amelia didn’t just want Alex’s job. Maybe there was more.”

“And maybe that explains why she wasn’t around yesterday,” Jo said. “I’d be curious to see if she’s in today.”

“Right. Don’t want to jump to conclusions. She really could have just taken the day off,” Sam said.

Jo sipped her coffee. “Sure, but there’s another thing too. Remember Amelia mentioned something about Alex drinking and smoking cigars with

his grandfather?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, thought that was weird.”

“How would she know that if she didn’t know Alex a lot better than she says she did?” Jo asked.

“Good point. Guess she would have had to know him on a personal level to be with him and his grandfather,” Sam said.

“Unless she just ran into them around town,” Wyatt interjected.

“So you never got to ask Amelia why she lied about being at the Drunken Moose the night Alex was killed?” Kevin asked.

Jo shook her head. “But we did get to question Marnie about the argument. She suddenly remembered what it was about. Said she caught Alex looking through her day planner.”

“So Marnie was lying,” Kevin said, leaning back in his chair.

“Yeah, but she used the excuse that she didn’t want to cast Alex in a bad light,” Jo said, her brow furrowed.

“What’s so bad about looking in her day planner?” Reese asked.

“She said it contained confidential information, like a contact list of her donors and supporters.”

Reese’s eyes widened. “Oh! That reminds me. Marnie faxed over something for you. I bet it’s that list.”

Wyatt nodded. “We should compare that to the outgoing calls. Alex changed that phone system for a reason.”

The station door squeaked, and Harry walked in. “What are you all sitting around for? We have a big patch of woods to search.”

Sam glanced out the window. “Has it warmed up?”

“Little bit.” Harry turned to look out the door. “Sun is out, so it should be good by the time we get there.”

“Okay, then. Let’s go.”

Lucy was the first to jump up. She trotted over to Reese and nuzzled her hand as if to say good-bye, then she looked back at Sam and trotted to the door.

“Guess someone is ready.” Sam followed Lucy.

Jo was the last one out, noticing that Major jumped down from his position on top of the filing cabinet and trotted behind her. As she walked out the door, she looked back to see Major had hopped up onto Reese’s desk, and both were watching them wistfully as if wishing they could go along.

Harry rode in the back seat of the Tahoe with Lucy. Jo rode shotgun and Sam drove, Wyatt and Kevin followed in the Crown Victoria police car. As they drove out to the Websters' property, Harry regaled them with stories of the original search. "We scoured that place," he said, his voice gruff with memory. "Never found a damn thing. But I always had a feeling we missed something."

Jo glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "Like what?"

Harry shrugged. "Just a hunch. I mean, the bag was there, but there had to be more. How did it get there? Someone must have been on that helicopter and either pushed it or jumped out with it."

"Maybe there was a fight on the helicopter, and it got pushed out," Sam said.

"Or fell," Jo added.

"Maybe. I bet Lucy finds something today." Harry settled back in his seat, his eyes drifting closed. "Wake me when we get there," he mumbled.

Lucy rested her head on his knee, her eyes watchful. Jo couldn't help but smile at the sight. Despite his gruff exterior, Harry had a soft spot for the dog.

As they pulled up to the Websters' property, Harry sat up, his eyes alert. "Let's do this," he said, reaching for the door handle.

After walking around a bit, Harry pointed to a crop of birch trees. "I think we found the bag over there. I remember those birches. They were just saplings back then."

Lucy trotted over, sniffed around, and seemed to agree.

They spread out and crunched through the snow, searching.

"This isn't the best time to search. Anything we might spot by eye is covered in snow," Sam said.

Jo glanced over at the Webster property that they could barely see through the tree trunks. Digging was still going on.

"No word yet, huh?" Kevin looked at Jo sympathetically.

Jo shook her head. "No."

Wyatt looked grim. "There's a lot of bodies there."

Sam frowned. "Too much for one old lady."

"She must have been doing that for a long time," Kevin said.

Wyatt was still staring at the graves. "Or she had help."

Suddenly, Lucy started chuffing and digging in the snow. They all headed over to the spot which was in an area dense with underbrush.

Jo moved closer, her boots sinking into the powdery snow. “What is it, girl?”

Lucy barked excitedly, her tail wagging as she looked at Wyatt.

“You think I need to use this?” Wyatt asked, turning on the metal detector and sweeping it over the area.

Suddenly, the detector let out a sharp ping. “There’s something here,” Wyatt said, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Let’s see if we can narrow it down.”

He handed a long, thin device to Kevin and instructed, “When I sweep over the area and the detector goes off, I’ll move it in circles to locate the center. Then you can go in with the smaller instrument to find the exact spot.”

They worked together, Wyatt moving the detector in ever-tightening circles until Kevin marked a spot. He brushed the snow away carefully, using the device again to make sure he hadn’t cleared away the target.

“I think I’ve got it.” Kevin held up a small object about the size of a dime. They wiped away the grime to reveal a gold pin. In the center was a tiny pinhead-sized ruby, glinting in the weak winter sunlight. Engraved on the pin were the number ten and a delicate tree design.

“Probably someone lost that in the woods,” Jo said, examining the pin. “Likely not related to the case.”

Harry held out his hand. “Let me see that.” He squinted at the pin, turning it over in his fingers. “Why, that’s an old service pin.”

Wyatt frowned. “What in the world is a service pin?”

Harry explained, “They don’t do it much anymore, but back in my day, companies used to give out pins for years of service.”

Jo’s eyes widened. “So this could be from the time of the robbery?”

Harry nodded. “It could be.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. “But is it related?”

Harry shrugged. “That’s a good question. If it fell off of someone on the helicopter, it could be.”

Harry shrugged. “More likely, it’s just been sitting here.”

“Probably, but Lucy thought enough about it to alert us, so we might as well bag it up as evidence.”

Harry nodded and handed it to Kevin, who had produced an evidence bag. “Can’t hurt.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sam, Jo, Kevin, Wyatt, and Harry trudged into the police station, snow clinging to their boots. Lucy bounded ahead, her tail wagging as she spotted Major perched on Reese's desk. The cat bent his head down, and Lucy raised hers so the two could sniff each other.

Reese looked up from her paperwork. "Did you guys find anything good out there?"

Kevin held up an evidence bag containing the small gold pin. "Just this old service pin. Might be related to the robbery. Might not be."

Reese examined the pin through the plastic. "So we aren't sure if this is part of the case?"

"We'll have to investigate further to determine if it's connected," Sam said.

Harry's phone buzzed in his pocket. He fished it out and glanced at the screen. "It's the wife. She's requesting me home for lunch."

He answered the call, his voice softening. "Right away, dear." Hanging up, he turned to Sam with a conspiratorial grin. "The wife doesn't need to know about our little foray into the woods today, does she?"

Sam laughed and clapped him on the back. "It'll be our secret, Harry."

Harry bid the team farewell and headed out into the crisp afternoon air.

Sam turned to the others. "I'm going to go study my corkboard. Got some new pictures to tack up." He disappeared into his office, closing the door behind him.

Kevin settled at his desk and logged in the gold service pin they'd found. As he typed, his thoughts drifted to their foray into the woods. He

hadn't said anything to the team, but he'd remembered exactly where he and Bridget had gone after finding the coordinates on the thumb drive. That had to be a good sign for his memory, right?

His stomach grumbled, reminding him of the peanut butter sandwich waiting in his lunch bag. As he unwrapped it, Kevin's mind wandered to Bridget's promise of a home-cooked casserole. The thought of a hearty, comforting meal was appealing. He wasn't much of a cook, so his meals consisted mostly of spaghetti and takeout. Maybe he could ask Bridget to join him and make an evening of it. The idea of her company, sharing a meal and easy conversation, brought a smile to his face.

Kevin forced himself to focus on the paperwork in front of him, scrolling through the endless lines of text. The words blurred together as his thoughts alternated between the casserole and Bridget's warm presence.

"Hey, I think I got something here," Wyatt called out, breaking Kevin's reverie.

Jo glanced up from her computer. "What is it?"

"It's the tire tracks from the scene where we think Alex went in. I just got the reports back, and measuring tire to tire, it looks like a very long car. Like maybe a limo."

Jo's eyebrows shot up. "A limo? You're saying Alex may have been brought to the scene of his death in a limo?"

Wyatt rose from his desk. "Kind of looks that way. I mean, at least it shows a limo was there. I need to look at the pictures on Sam's board."

They filed into Sam's office, where a corkboard displayed a collage of photos and notes related to the case. Pictures of Alex's apartment, the mysterious key, the suitcase full of money, and the area near the storage sheds where they suspected Alex had entered the water were all pinned up.

Wyatt tapped a photo showing several tire tracks. "I made a cast of one, but this wider-angle shot captures more of them. It looks like the car sat for a while. These impressions of the tires are deeper in two spots. Look at the length in between those two spots."

The team studied the images, their minds racing with possibilities.

"We still haven't proven this was where Alex went in," Kevin noted, "but we haven't disproven it either."

"I think we might have." Reese appeared in the doorway holding another paper. "Just came in."

Jo took that paper. “It’s the analysis of the feathers we found. They compared them to the down inside Kevin’s jacket. They say it matches.”

Sam took the paper and read it. “It’s eider duck down on both.”

Wyatt looked skeptical. “Could it just be from a duck that was in that area?”

“Nope.” Reese waved her phone in the air. “I looked it up. No eider ducks near here. They stick to the coastline, and we’re pretty far from that. Plus the individual DNA points match up on the report. Those feathers are from Alex’s jacket.”

Sam nodded. “So with the hydrologist report and this, it looks likely that that’s the spot Alex went in. Just one of those might be shaky, but two makes it much more likely.”

Sam glanced at Lucy, remembering how she had sniffed out the feathers. No one might have thought them unusual if it hadn’t been for her. She opened one eye and blinked at Sam as if she knew exactly how valuable her services were.

“But why would a limo be out there?” Jo wondered aloud.

Sam’s gaze landed on a picture of the Thorne Enterprises logo. “It’s one of Beryl’s properties. Maybe she likes to check on her investments in style.”

“Or Victor,” Jo added. “He seems like the type to ride in a limo.”

Sam sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Guess we need to have a chat with Beryl or Victor.” He grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. “I’ll pay Beryl a visit, see if she can shed some light on this limo business.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The sun was low in the sky when Sam parked the Tahoe at Thorne Enterprises' latest project, a big hotel and conference center that was swallowing a swath of wilderness whole. Sam hated it.

Lucy had sat alert on the passenger seat the whole ride as if she knew this was important. Her gaze swiveled from the structure to the construction trailer, her eyes narrowing as if she knew Beryl was in there and didn't trust her.

Sam patted Lucy's head. "I feel the same way, but we have to talk to her."

Sam and Lucy got out of the car and walked up the rickety steps to the trailer door.

The door swung open before he could knock. Beryl Thorne stood framed in the artificial light, the day's fading glow casting long shadows behind her. She was as poised as ever, but her gaze held a flicker of surprise, veiling the shrewd calculations beneath.

"Sam, and Lucy," she greeted them with what Sam suspected was a fake smile. Unlike most people, she did not bend down to pat Lucy. She probably knew the dog did not like her. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"I have a few questions," Sam said bluntly. "Mind if we step inside for a moment?"

"Of course." She opened the door wider.

The interior of the trailer looked more like it belonged in a high-rise office building than a construction site. Across from the door was a large

mahogany desk, and a sitting area had been set up at the other end. The filing cabinets were mahogany to match the desk.

Beryl had added some feminine touches since she'd taken over for her husband, Lucas Thorne, who was in jail. It looked like she didn't expect him to come back.

"I see you've made a few changes," Sam commented dryly.

Lucy sat by the door, silent but vigilant.

Beryl perched on the desk's edge, every inch the composed executive. "Gotta make the place my own. I'm sure you didn't come here to talk about my decor, though. What's this about?"

Sam leaned against the filing cabinet, arms crossed. "I assume you've heard about Alex Sheridan?"

Beryl's brow furrowed. "I have. Marnie told me. She said you suspect foul play."

Sam nodded solemnly. "Yes. He was found in the bay, but experts in currents think he was put in at the site where you're building the storage facility."

He watched Beryl's reaction closely. Her eyes widened, and she seemed genuinely surprised. "What? That's terrible!" Then her eyes narrowed. "Surely, you don't think I had something to do with that? I didn't even know him."

Sam held her gaze, searching for any hint of deception. "We have to consider all possibilities and ask all the questions."

"The only time I go out there is with the construction manager to assess progress," Beryl said.

"You don't go and check it out at other times?" Sam asked

"No. Why would I?"

Sam nodded and waited a few beats before asking the next question. "We found limo tracks out there. Do you know anything about that?"

Beryl let out a delicate chuckle. "A limo? You think I visit my construction sites in a limo? I don't even have one."

"What about Victor Sorrentino?" Sam asked pointedly.

Beryl's laughter faltered, her demeanor shifting. "What about him?"

"He seems like the type to ride around in a limo," Sam continued, unfazed by her reaction. "I bet Convale has one at his disposal."

"It's preposterous to suggest Victor would be involved in murder," Beryl countered quickly, a defensive edge sharpening her voice.

Sam locked eyes with her. “Found cigar ashes at the crime scene, too,” he added, watching the play of emotions across her face—a flash of concern, a mask of composure quickly restored. He pressed on. “Did Victor know Alex?”

Beryl’s eyes flashed with a mix of annoyance and defensiveness. “I don’t think Victor knew Alex at all. He never mentioned him to me.” She crossed her arms, her posture stiffening. “And what possible motive would Victor have to harm Alex? I don’t appreciate either of us being accused like this.”

Sam held up his hands in a placating gesture. “I’m not accusing anyone of anything, Beryl. I’m just asking questions, trying to piece together what happened.”

Beryl’s expression softened slightly, but her gaze remained sharp. “That’s good, because you and I need to remain allies. We have a common interest, after all.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. “And what interest might that be?”

Beryl leaned forward, her voice low and conspiratorial. “Keeping my husband in jail.”

Sam’s mind raced, trying to connect the dots. He kept his expression neutral as he replied, “Hopefully, the evidence will take care of that.”

Beryl’s lips curved into a smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes. “Don’t be too sure, Chief. Lucas has a new lawyer, and he thinks the evidence is a bit... flimsy.”

Sam’s thoughts flashed back to the golf shoes Beryl had given him, the very evidence that had helped put Lucas Thorne behind bars. A nagging suspicion crept into his mind. Did Beryl know something about those shoes that he didn’t?

Sam moved toward the door, signaling the end of their conversation.

Beryl stood up. “Are you done interrogating me, Chief Mason?” Her tone was sharp, a challenge in her eyes.

Sam paused, his hand on the doorknob. “It wasn’t an interrogation, Beryl. Just questions.”

“Be careful, Chief Mason,” she said, her eyes glinting with a veiled threat. “Digging can unearth more than just answers. Sometimes, it’s better to let sleeping dogs lie.”

Sam nodded, acknowledging her warning. Lucy was already at the door, impatient to leave, her gaze still fixed on Beryl.

As Sam walked out into the crisp evening air, a thought nagged at him. Beryl had never denied that Victor had a limo. It was a small detail, but it stuck out in his mind like a burr.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kevin spent the rest of the day chasing down information on Feldman and following up on the social media of Alex Sheridan. He didn't find much. The guy had no enemies.

"Bridget!" Reese's voice carried in from the reception area. "Wow, looks like you've been busy."

The sweet smell of fresh-baked pies wafted in a few seconds before Bridget appeared in the squad room, a wicker basket of food dangling from her arm. "Special delivery!" Bridget announced cheerfully, setting the basket down on a nearby table.

She carefully placed a pie and a casserole in front of Jo, who looked up from her work with a grateful smile. "Thanks, Bridget. Garvin's going to love this."

Bridget then turned to Kevin, presenting him with his own set of homemade goodies. "And for you, Detective Deckard."

Kevin grinned as he accepted the offering. "You didn't have to do this, Bridget."

She shrugged, a playful glint in her eye. "Consider it a thank-you for your concern earlier."

Wyatt, who had been quietly observing the exchange, smirked as he slipped on his jacket. "Those look delicious." He glanced at the clock. "And just in time for quitting hour."

"Speaking of which…" Jo gathered her things, including the food from Bridget, and headed for the door right behind Wyatt. "I better get these to Garvin while they're still warm. Thanks again, Bridget."

As Jo left, Reese popped her head into the room. “Hey, Bridge! When does chef school start?”

Bridget’s face lit up with excitement. “Next week! I can’t wait to get started.”

Reese’s phone buzzed, and she glanced at the screen. “Oh shoot, I gotta run. Dentist appointment.” She waved a quick goodbye and hurried out.

And then there were two.

Kevin found himself suddenly nervous as he stood there with Bridget, the delectable pie and casserole between them. He hesitated, his mind racing with the possibility of extending their time together.

Kevin peered into the basket, admiring the golden crusts and savory aromas. “These look incredible. You’ve really outdone yourself.”

Bridget beamed at the compliment, a hint of pride in her smile. “Thanks. I hope they taste as good as they look.”

Kevin nodded, his stomach rumbling in anticipation. Then, before he could second-guess himself, he casually said, “It would be a shame to eat all this alone. Maybe you’d like to join me? My place is just a few blocks away.”

Bridget’s eyebrows rose in surprise, but a pleased expression quickly followed. At least, Kevin hoped it was a pleased expression. His heart hammered in his chest as he awaited her response.

“I’d love to. That sounds perfect.”

Relief and excitement flooded through him as he returned her smile. “Great! Let me just grab my coat, and we can head out.”

GOOD THING he’d tidied up before he left for work, Kevin thought as he pulled into the driveway of his small ranch house. As he stepped out of his car, Bridget pulled in behind him, her headlights illuminating the darkening evening.

Kevin hurried to open the driver’s door for her, a gentlemanly gesture that earned him a warm smile.

“What a cute house,” Bridget remarked as she stepped out.

“Thanks,” Kevin replied, leading her up the walkway. “It’s not much, but it’s home.”

Once inside, Kevin took Bridget's coat and the basket of food then headed to the kitchen.

"I'll help set the table," Bridget offered, already rolling up her sleeves.

Side by side, they moved around the small kitchen, gathering plates, glasses, and utensils. As they worked, their bodies brushed against each other a few times, and he couldn't help but steal glances at Bridget, admiring the way she moved with such grace and efficiency.

"We might need to reheat the shepherd's pie," Bridget suggested, peering into the basket. "It's got ground beef, onions, carrots, peas, and a creamy mashed potato topping."

Kevin's stomach growled in response, and he chuckled. "Sounds perfect. I'll pop it in the oven for a few minutes."

Finally, everything was ready, and they took their seats at the small kitchen table.

Kevin had worried it might be awkward, just the two of them, but the conversation flowed easily.

"This is great." Kevin lifted his fork, which was loaded with a big chunk of shepherd's pie.

Bridget smiled, her hazel eyes sparkling in the warm light of the kitchen. "I'm glad you invited me. And thanks for the compliment on the meal. Cooking has become a real passion of mine."

"I can tell," Kevin said, savoring another bite. "You're a natural in the kitchen. You're starting a pastry chef class soon?"

"Yes! I can't wait to learn more techniques and expand my skills. Baking is like therapy for me." Bridget's expression turned thoughtful. "Honestly, discovering my love for cooking saved me. After everything I went through on the streets, I needed something to hold on to, a purpose."

"I know it couldn't have been easy. But look at you now. You've come so far."

"I owe so much to Jo," Bridget said, her voice filled with gratitude. "She never gave up on me, even when I was at my lowest."

"Jo's an incredible sister," Kevin agreed. "But don't sell yourself short. It takes a lot of strength and courage to turn your life around like you have. You should be proud of yourself."

Bridget ducked her head, a slight blush coloring her freckled cheeks. "Thank you. That means a lot." She took a sip of water and then met his

gaze again. “Enough about me, though. What about you? Is your memory getting any better?”

Kevin nodded, a sense of optimism bubbling up. “I think it is getting better, actually. At work, I remembered where I filed some old cases, and when we searched the woods earlier, I knew exactly where we’d found those trees from the photos on the thumb drive.”

Bridget’s eyes widened. “The ones from the serial killer’s burial ground?”

“Exactly.” Kevin hesitated for a moment, a sudden urge to confide in Bridget welling up inside him. He was tired of keeping this secret bottled up, and he knew he could trust her. “There’s something else about that thumb drive, something no one else knows.”

Bridget leaned forward with a mix of curiosity and concern. “What is it?”

Taking a deep breath, Kevin revealed his suspicions. “I think the thumb drive is related to an old narcotics case. I even found the password to open the drive in the evidence for that case.”

Bridget furrowed her brow. “Why haven’t you told Sam and Jo about this?”

Kevin sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Because I used the evidence clue without telling anyone, and I’ve had the drive for so long now. It feels like it’s too late to come clean. I need to figure out what’s on the drive myself first.”

“I get it,” Bridget said softly, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. “It’s a tough situation. But you know what? I’ll help you. And I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

Kevin felt a wave of relief wash over him. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

Bridget smiled, but there was a flicker of something else in her eyes, a hint of vulnerability. “Actually, I have a secret, too, something I don’t want anyone to know.”

Kevin’s eyes widened, but he didn’t pull away. Instead, he leaned closer, his voice gentle. “Bridget, you can trust me. I won’t tell anyone.”

Bridget hesitated, her fingers fidgeting with the napkin on her lap. “When I was an addict on the streets, I was forced to do something terrible,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

“Hey,” Kevin said softly, reaching out to cover her hand with his. “Whatever it is, it’s not your fault. You weren’t in control then.”

Bridget nodded, blinking back tears. “I know that, mostly. But now, I’m afraid that certain people who know what I did are coming for me.”

“Why would they?” Kevin asked, his brow furrowed.

“I have no idea,” Bridget admitted, shaking her head. “Maybe to silence me.”

Suddenly, a realization dawned on Kevin. “The guy at the diner. He has something to do with this, doesn’t he?”

“No, no,” Bridget said quickly. “He’s from my past and knows about it, but he’s helping me. He has contacts.”

Kevin’s mind raced, putting the pieces together. “You had him get you a gun for protection.”

Bridget nodded, her eyes downcast.

Whatever Bridget had done, it must have been serious. He didn’t need to know the exact details, and he didn’t want to press her. As he looked at her, he saw the pain and regret on her face. She wasn’t a bad person. She’d done what she had to do. She was a survivor, someone who had been through hell and come out the other side.

Kevin reached across the table and took her hand in his. “Listen to me. That’s not who you are anymore. You’ve changed. You’ve built a new life for yourself.”

Bridget sniffled, a single tear rolling down her cheek. “I know, but I’m scared. I’m afraid that my past will catch up to me, that I’ll lose everything I’ve worked so hard for.”

Kevin squeezed Bridget’s hand reassuringly. “Don’t worry. You’re not alone in this. If you see anyone or feel unsafe, call me right away. I’ll be there for you, no matter what.”

Bridget’s eyes widened, a glimmer of hope shining through the tears. “Really? You’d do that for me?”

“Of course,” Kevin said without hesitation. “I care about you, and I want to make sure you’re safe. I have your back, always.”

A small smile tugged at the corners of Bridget’s lips. “Thank you, Kevin. That means more to me than you know.”

Kevin returned her smile, his heart swelling with a newfound sense of protectiveness. “And don’t worry about your secret. It’s safe with me. I won’t tell a soul.”

Bridget let out a shaky breath, the tension visibly leaving her body. “I trust you, Kevin. I know you’ll keep my secret, and I’ll keep yours.”

In that moment, Kevin felt like they’d forged another bond, one that couldn’t easily be broken.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jo arrived at Garvin's house just in time for supper. Garvin greeted her at the door with a warm smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Come on in. It's mighty cold out there." He ushered her inside, taking the basket from her. "Something smells delicious."

Jo grinned, shrugging off her coat. "Bridget made shepherd's pie and pecan pie. She insisted I bring them over."

Garvin's face lit up. "Well, isn't that just the sweetest thing. Would you join me?"

They settled at the kitchen table, the shepherd's pie steaming as Garvin served generous portions onto the faded china plates. Jo couldn't help but notice how his hands shook slightly, a reminder of his advancing age.

As they ate, Garvin regaled Jo with stories of his late wife's cooking. "Essie made the best beef stew, you know. She'd simmer it all day, letting the flavors meld together just right."

Jo listened attentively, savoring each bite of the hearty pie. She could almost picture Essie bustling around the kitchen, her apron dusted with flour.

Garvin set down his fork, his expression curious. "Say, how's that stray cat you were talking about last time?"

Jo nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. "He's been staying on the porch more often. I think he's starting to feel at home."

Garvin chuckled, his eyes twinkling. "Well, that's just fine by me. In fact, why don't you invite him inside? No sense in leaving the poor fella out in the cold all winter."

Jo's heart swelled with gratitude. "Really? You wouldn't mind?"

Garvin waved a hand dismissively. "Not at all. I know you're taking good care of the cottage and would fix any damage."

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, the only sound the clinking of forks against plates. As Jo helped herself to a slice of pecan pie, Garvin leaned back in his chair, a wistful look on his face.

"You know, I always hoped my kids would move back here, take an interest in the cottage." He sighed, shaking his head. "But they've got their big-city houses and fancy jobs. No time for our little town."

Jo's heart skipped a beat, a glimmer of hope igniting within her. She leaned forward, her voice gentle. "Have you been thinking more about selling the cottage?"

Garvin nodded slowly, his weathered hands clasped on the table. "I have. I didn't want to let it go, but seeing how much you care for it, how you've made it a home..." He trailed off, his eyes misty. "Maybe it's time to let someone who will truly enjoy it own it."

Jo's breath caught in her throat, hardly daring to believe what she was hearing.

But then Garvin's brows furrowed, a hint of mischief in his eyes. "Of course, there is the matter of that other interested party."

Jo's heart sank, a twinge of apprehension coursing through her. Was she about to get into a bidding war? She studied Garvin's face, trying to discern if there was truly another buyer or if he was simply trying to sweeten the deal for himself.

"Who did you say that was?" Jo asked, her voice measured. "I thought you mentioned Marnie Wilson."

Garvin nodded, a flicker of distaste crossing his features. "Someone from her crew came by. But I wouldn't sell to her. Don't trust her." He shook his head emphatically. "Nope, if I sell, and I'm getting close, I'll sell to you."

Jo felt a wave of relief wash over her, a smile spreading across her face. "Garvin, that means the world to me. I promise, I'll take such good care of the cottage. It'll be cherished, just like it deserves."

Garvin reached across the table, patting Jo's hand with his own. "I know you will. But I'm not quite ready yet. I need to figure out a fair value and let the other party know, of course. I mean, if they want to make a crazy offer, then I might want to hear it."

"Of course." Jo laughed.

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment. Jo couldn't quite believe the possibility of owning the cottage she had grown to love so deeply.

JO ARRIVED HOME, the scent of Bridget's cooking still lingering in the air. She found her sister at the kitchen sink, elbow deep in sudsy water.

"You'll never guess what happened at Garvin's," Jo said, a grin spreading across her face.

Bridget glanced over her shoulder, curiosity sparking in her eyes. "Did he finally agree to sell you the cottage?"

Jo nodded, barely able to contain her excitement. "He said he was getting close, and he gave us permission to let Pickles inside!"

Bridget's face lit up, a squeal of delight escaping her lips. "That's amazing! I know how much you've wanted this."

They made their way to the front porch, where Pickles lay curled up on the worn welcome mat. Jo cracked open a can of tuna, the pungent aroma wafting through the air.

As Jo set the plate just inside the doorway, Bridget leaned against the railing, a contented sigh escaping her lips. "I can't believe my first cooking class starts next week. I've got all my supplies ready to go."

Jo looked up, pride shining in her eyes. "I'm so happy for you, Bridge. You're going to do great."

A comfortable silence settled between them as they watched Pickles eyeing the plate of tuna. The cat stretched, looked up at them, looked at the tuna, looked at the door, and then sat down as if deciding what to do.

"It's strange, isn't it?" Bridget mused, her brow furrowing. "That they haven't found Tammy's remains. Do you think it's possible she's not buried there?"

Jo shrugged, a heaviness settling in her chest. "I don't know. But we can't lose hope. Not yet."

Bridget nodded, her eyes distant. Then, as if remembering something, she turned to Jo with a smile. "How did Garvin like the food?"

"He loved it. I bet Kevin liked it too."

A faint blush crept into Bridget's cheeks, and she ducked her head. "Actually, Kevin invited me over to eat with him."

Jo's eyebrows shot up, a teasing grin tugging at her lips. "Oh, really? He's never invited me over."

Bridget laughed, swatting at Jo's arm. "Stop it. It's not like that."

As they dissolved into giggles, Pickles ventured closer to the threshold, stretching his neck to nibble at the tuna. It was a small victory but a victory nonetheless.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

"Things just don't add up," Sam said the next morning as they discussed the case in his office. Wyatt, Kevin, and Jo stood on one side of Sam's desk. Sam had swiveled around in his chair, and they were all looking at the corkboard. Lucy lay in the sun under the window. Major had decided to join them, too, and was lounging in the doorway.

Wyatt nodded. "Kevin and I did a deep dive into Alex's social media. There's nothing on there that would indicate any enemies."

Jo nodded, her fingers wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee. "The people at the campaign didn't know of anyone that would want to hurt him either."

"The woman at the assisted-living facility said he was a doting grandson. Always visiting, making sure Frank had the best care," Kevin added.

Sam leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowed. "It has to go back to the robbery. Now that we know about that investigation, I think we need to consider that the robbery might have served as a cover-up for that."

"And things were going along just fine and staying covered up until Frank's death," Jo said.

"Alex must have had the money prior to that. He was paying for that top-notch assisted-living facility for months before Frank passed. That's not cheap," Kevin said.

Sam rubbed his chin, his mind whirring with possibilities. "What if Frank confessed to something on his deathbed? Told Alex about the real reason for the robbery?"

Sam spun around in his chair. “Maybe Alex got greedy. If Frank told Alex something about the robbery that he could use for blackmail, he might have been messing with the wrong person.”

Jo nodded slowly. “It’s a possibility. But who is the wrong person?”

Sam shrugged. “The investigation involved a bank loan to Convale.”

Jo snorted. “Plenty of suspects there.”

They all stared at the board for a few beats, then Jo spoke again. “So what did you get out of Beryl? Anything interesting?”

Sam shook his head, a hint of frustration in his eyes. “Not really. She seemed evasive, especially when I questioned her about Victor.”

Jo snorted. “Beryl? Evasive? There’s a shock.”

“Truth,” Sam agreed with a wry smile.

Kevin leaned forward, his brow furrowed. “But how could Beryl possibly be involved in all this? She wasn’t even around when the robbery happened.”

“Who knows? She’s involved in lots of things, and now that she’s hooked up with Victor, I wouldn’t be surprised if the two of them were up to something,” Jo said.

“It’s a long shot,” Sam said. “We need to find more about Frank and that robbery. It’s too bad it was so long ago. None of us were around back then.”

“We should talk to Harry again,” Jo said, tapping her finger against her mug. “He was around back then, and he’s had a while to think about this. Maybe he remembers something else.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully. “Good idea. He might have some insights we missed.”

“And we need to find out who Alex met in that bar,” Kevin added urgently. “That was potentially the last person to see him.”

Wyatt frowned, his brow furrowed. “Why did he never come out? That’s the real question.”

Jo set her mug down on Sam’s desk. “I checked on that. They have no interior surveillance cameras, but they do have a back door.”

“Why would someone take him out the back?” Kevin asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Because they didn’t want to be seen,” Sam said grimly.

Jo crouched to pet Lucy, who flapped an ear and sighed. “We need to talk to Amelia too. I have a funny feeling she might be avoiding us.”

Sam nodded. “Which means she has something to hide.”

“And given what we’ve discovered with her record as a stalker, she might be more adept at lying, avoiding, and hiding things than she looks,” Wyatt added.

Jo nodded. “She was in that bar the night Alex died. Maybe she was a part of what happened to him, or maybe she saw something.”

“Either way, we need to find out. Looks like we’ll have to pay another visit to Marnie’s headquarters, and if Amelia isn’t there, we might have to surprise her at home.” Sam took out his phone. “In the meantime, I’ll give Harry a call and see if I can get him in here.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Harry was more than happy to come in and talk about the case.

He settled into a chair in the squad room, a wistful smile on his weathered face. “That bank robbery case, it was something else. Nothing like that ever happened in our sleepy little town before.”

Sam leaned forward, his eyes intent. “What about Hartman? Do you think he was just incompetent, or was he purposely botching the investigation?”

Harry scratched his chin. “Hard to say for sure. But there was definitely some evidence that went missing. Poof, like it never existed.”

“Interesting.” Sam tapped his pen against the desk. “You think Hartman had something to do with that?”

“I couldn’t prove anything, but it always seemed fishy to me.” Harry’s eyes narrowed. “You reopening the case, Chief?”

Sam hesitated. “We’re exploring all angles. This money showing up in Alex Sheridan’s apartment, it could be connected.”

Harry’s face lit up. “Well, I’ll be. Never thought I’d see the day. If there’s anything I can do to help, just say the word.”

“Actually, I was thinking we could take a trip to the evidence room in the next town over. See if we can dig up anything on the old case.”

“Count me in.” Harry pushed himself to his feet. “I’ve been waiting fifty years for another crack at this one.”

Sam grabbed his jacket and whistled for Lucy. The German shepherd trotted over, her tail wagging. “Looks like it’s going to be a long day, girl.”

As they headed out, Sam glanced at Harry. “What do you say we make a pit stop at Brewed Awakening? I have a feeling we’re going to need the caffeine.”

Harry chuckled. “You read my mind, Chief. A good cup of joe and a fresh set of eyes, that’s what this case needs.”

Lucy hopped into the back of the cruiser, her nose pressed against the window. Sam slid behind the wheel, the weight of the past and the promise of the future hanging in the air. The engine rumbled to life, and they set off, ready to unravel the secrets that had lain buried for half a century.

Ray Child, a cop in his fifties, greeted Sam and Harry as they entered the evidence room. “Well, well, if it isn’t Chief Mason and old Harry Woolsten.” He grinned, shaking their hands.

“Good to see you, Ray,” Sam said. “How’s the family doing?”

“Oh, you know, same old same old. Kids are growing up too fast.” Ray chuckled. “How about you, Harry? Enjoying retirement?”

Harry nodded. “Can’t complain. Keeps me out of trouble, mostly.”

Ray’s eyes twinkled. “Speaking of retirement, mine’s coming up in a couple years. Any advice, Harry?”

Harry laughed. “Just one thing: keep the wife happy. That’s the secret to a long and peaceful retirement.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Ray paused, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. “You know, it’s funny you should mention retirement. Another retired guy was here today, looking at some old evidence.”

Sam’s ears perked up. “Oh yeah? Who was that?”

“Dom Hartman,” Ray replied.

Harry and Sam exchanged a glance. Interesting coincidence.

“Does he come here often?” Sam asked

Ray gave a half shrug. “Not really, but sometimes, guys like to come in and go over their cases that never got solved. Retirement hobby, I guess. Of course, once on the force, you’re always welcome in here.”

Sam and Harry carefully sifted through the evidence boxes, their eyes scanning the faded photographs and yellowed documents. The images showed the aftermath of the heist—the vault blown open, its door hanging off its hinges, and scattered bills littering the water-soaked floor.

“Why didn’t they take it all?” Sam asked, holding up a picture of the remnants of cash left behind.

Harry shook his head. “They didn’t have enough time. The explosion triggered the alarm, and the cops showed up pretty quick. They had to make a run for it.”

He pointed to a photograph showing a gaping hole in the floor. “They escaped through there, into the sewer system. Had to get to the helicopter before the cops figured out their exit strategy.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. “The sewer system? That explains how Frank was involved. They needed his knowledge to navigate the tunnels and ensure they could get out to wherever the helicopter was waiting.”

Harry nodded. “Makes sense. And whoever owned that helicopter, they had to have some serious cash. Helicopters don’t come cheap.”

“Why would someone with a lot of money rob the bank?” Sam’s mind raced, piecing together the puzzle. “Which means there was probably another motive behind the heist. It wasn’t just about the money.”

A bank pamphlet touting high CD interest rates caught Sam’s eye, but it wasn’t the interest rate but the design that drew his attention. “Look at that. Looks like the tree design on that pin we found in the woods.”

Harry squinted at the photo. “Sure does. Yep. I remember now that was the logo for the bank.”

Sam glanced at Harry. “So the pin was from the bank?” The bank had gone out of business decades ago, so it was no wonder no one had recognized the tree design. Looked like this little trip to the evidence room was paying off.

“Looks like it. Ten years of service. Whoever had this pin worked at the bank for ten years.”

“And then robbed it?”

Harry nodded, his eyes distant as he dredged up old memories. “Must have been someone high up. They probably weren’t directly involved in the robbery itself, but they had the power and influence to orchestrate it.”

“And rode in the getaway helicopter. Then dropped the pin when the bag fell out?”

Harry shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe we will never know what happened in that helicopter.”

“If that person was a person in power, then they also might have had the power to bribe Hartman to throw the investigation,” Sam added, his jaw tightening.

Harry frowned, his forehead creasing. “You know, I don’t recall Hartman ever coming into a lot of money after the case. But that doesn’t mean he didn’t get paid off somehow.”

“Frank never flashed his cash around either,” Sam mused. “Whoever was pulling the strings knew how to keep things quiet.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of their realization settling over them. Finally, Sam spoke, his voice low and determined. “So we’ve got a mastermind who’s still out there, someone who found out Alex knew about the robbery and wanted to silence him.”

Harry nodded. “Or maybe Alex got greedy, tried to blackmail them, and they took him out.”

“Whoever it is would have to be around your age.” Sam’s eyes widened as a sudden thought struck him. “Hartman was here today, looking at the evidence. You don’t think he took something, do you? Something that could be critical to the case?”

Harry’s face darkened. “It’s possible. He’s always been a slippery one.”

Sam scanned through the box again. What could possibly have been in here that would tie into the investigation into Alex’s death?

Finally, Sam put the cover on the box and shoved it back onto the shelf. “It seems likely these cases are linked, but I don’t know if the answer is here in the old evidence. I think the answer lies in Alex’s last hours, and there’s one person who might be able to clue us in to who he was with at the Drunken Moose right before he died.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The ride back to the station was filled with comfortable silence, punctuated by the occasional comment from Harry about the old days.

As Sam pulled the cruiser into the parking lot, he turned to Harry, gratitude plain on his face. “I can’t thank you enough, Harry. Your insights have been invaluable to this case.”

Harry waved off the compliment, but a pleased smile tugged at his lips. “It’s my pleasure, Chief. I’m just glad I could help. If you need anything else, just give me a holler.”

Sam nodded, shaking Harry’s hand firmly. “I will. Take care.”

As Harry ambled off to his own car, Sam and Lucy headed into the station.

Jo, Kevin, and Wyatt looked up from their work as Sam and Lucy entered.

“How’d that go?” Jo asked.

“Found something interesting. The design on the pin we found out in the woods matches the bank’s logo. If it fell out of the helicopter during the heist, it points to someone from the bank being in that chopper.”

Wyatt’s eyes widened. “It’s a ten-year service pin, so it would have to be someone who had been there ten years. High enough up the ladder to orchestrate something like this.”

Kevin tapped his pen against his chin. “Maybe the same someone who was at the bar with Alex that night.”

Jo frowned. “But that was fifty years ago. They’d have to be pretty old by now.”

A glimmer of hope flickered in Sam's eyes. "That makes our job easier, don't you think? An older person would stick out in a bar crowd."

Wyatt nodded. "True. But how do we prove the pin fell from the helicopter?"

Sam sighed. "That's the tricky part. We might not be able to. But we still have one person to talk to that was in the bar that night." He gestured to Jo. "Let's go see if Amelia Donovan is in today and willing to talk."

It was a short walk to Marnie's campaign headquarters, and Jo and Sam could see the buzz of activity through the large windows as they approached. Of course, that also meant people inside could see them coming, and Sam wasn't totally surprised to find Amelia's desk empty.

Sam scanned the room. Members of the staff looked up at them, their faces a mixture of surprise and apprehension.

"Where's Amelia Donovan?" Sam demanded, his voice cutting through the tense silence.

A young woman pointed toward the back of the office. "She's in the break room, but I think she was rushing out…"

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance and hurried toward the back, their footsteps echoing on the tiled floor. They reached the break room just as Amelia was slipping out the back door, her purse slung over her shoulder.

"Amelia!" Jo called out, her hand on her holster. "We need to talk to you."

Amelia froze, her eyes wide with panic. She glanced around as if looking for an escape route, but Sam and Jo had her cornered.

"Please," Amelia said, her voice shaking. "Can we do this outside? I don't want to cause a scene."

Sam nodded, his jaw tight. "Fine. But no funny business."

They stepped out into the alley behind the building, the cool air a stark contrast to the stuffy office. Amelia leaned against the brick wall, her arms crossed defensively.

"I know I lied," she blurted, her eyes downcast. "But I swear, I had nothing to do with Alex's death."

Jo raised an eyebrow. "Then why did you lie about being at the bar that night?"

Amelia sighed, her shoulders slumping. "Because of my record. I didn't want it to come out, to cause any trouble for the campaign. I thought if I just kept my head down, no one would find out."

Jo's expression softened slightly. "Okay, so you were at the bar. Did you see Alex there?"

Amelia nodded, her hands twisting together. "Yeah, I saw him. He was sitting in a booth with three or four other guys. I didn't recognize them, but they looked like they were having a pretty intense conversation."

Sam leaned in, his voice low. "Did you hear anything they were saying?"

Amelia shook her head. "No, I was too far away. But I could tell it was serious. But Alex also looked pretty drunk."

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance, their eyebrows raised. "How did Alex look drunk?" Sam asked, his voice sharp.

Amelia shrugged, her eyes darting away. "He was weaving a bit when he walked to the bathroom. His friends had to help him walk. Needless to say, he got cut off."

"Did you talk to him?" Jo pressed, her arms crossed.

Amelia shook her head. "No, I didn't."

Jo narrowed her eyes. "But you must have known him pretty well, though."

Amelia shook her head again. "Not really."

"Are you lying again?" Jo asked, her voice rising. "You mentioned something earlier about Alex smoking cigars with his grandfather. I don't think you would have known that unless you'd been with the two of them. And if you were with his grandfather, you must have known Alex pretty well."

Amelia's eyes widened. "What? I never said I saw him with his grandfather."

Jo frowned. "That's what you told us."

Amelia shook her head vehemently. "No. I might have said he smoked cigars with old men, and you assumed it was his grandfather. That's what he was doing that night in the Drunken Moose, but his grandfather was already dead, so I have no idea who the old guy was."

"One of the guys was an old guy?" Sam asked, thinking of Victor Sorrentino. Victor was only in his late thirties or early forties, but Amelia was young, so she might think he was old.

"Yep," Amelia confirmed, her voice shaking slightly. "Gray hair and the whole bit."

That left Victor out; he had dark hair.

“Could you recognize him if you saw him?” Sam asked urgently.

Amelia hesitated, her eyes darting between Sam and Jo.

Sam leaned in, his voice low. “I know you don’t want to get involved, but this could be important.”

Amelia sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Maybe. It was dark in there.”

Jo stepped forward, her eyes narrowed. “Was Alex still there when you left?”

Amelia shook her head. “No, he left around nine. The others practically carried him out.”

Sam frowned. Sternly, he said, “Amelia, we’ve seen the surveillance of the front door. He didn’t leave at nine.”

Amelia shook her head. “Not the front. They took him out the back.”

Jo placed a hand on Amelia’s shoulder, her voice gentle. “It’s okay. You did the right thing by telling us now. Just don’t run from us next time we have questions.”

Amelia nodded, her face pale. “I won’t. I promise.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sam and Jo went straight back to the station.

"Amelia admitted to lying. She saw Alex at the bar that night, drunk with some guys, including an old man smoking a cigar," Sam said.

Kevin frowned, leaning forward. "Did she say who the old man was?"

Jo shook her head. "No, but she said they took Alex out the back door around nine."

Wyatt's eyes widened. "The back? We only have footage of the front entrance."

Sam nodded, his jaw tight. "Exactly. We need to review the tapes again, see if we can catch anything from the side or back."

They gathered around Wyatt's computer, their eyes glued to the screen as he fast-forwarded through the footage. Suddenly, Jo pointed at the screen. "There! Pause it."

Wyatt hit the space bar, freezing the image. It was grainy and dark, but they could just make out the back of a black car pulling away from the bar.

Kevin squinted at the screen. "Can you enhance that? Get the license plate?"

Wyatt zoomed in, but the image only revealed the last two letters of the plate. "That's all we got," he said, his voice frustrated. "Could match thousands of cars."

Kevin sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Is that even a limo? Hard to tell. And how do we narrow down matches for the plate numbers?"

Wyatt was already cracking his knuckles, a determined glint in his eye. "I'll get to work on some code," he said, his fingers flying over the

keyboard.

Sam clapped him on the shoulder, a small smile on his face. “Good man. Keep at it.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowed. “So if Alex was there acting drunk and they took him out back, seems like they might have planned this. Maybe slipped something into his drink.”

Sam nodded, his eyes narrowed. “Agreed. This was premeditated.”

Jo tapped her pen against her notepad. “Which means they planned to meet him there. This wasn’t some random encounter.”

“Exactly,” Sam said, his voice low. “And that’s why his phone records are so important. Maybe that’s why he had the phones switched to go through one number. He was planning on calling someone about something and didn’t want it traced.”

Kevin’s eyes widened. “And that got him killed.”

Jo sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Yeah, but by whom?”

Jo pressed her lips together, her eyes narrowing. “I can think of one old guy that had to do with that bank robbery, and he is also acting suspicious. Dom Hartman.”

Sam leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowed. “And he’s been asking about the case. Never came in asking about an old case before.”

“You have to wonder what he was looking for in the old evidence files,” Kevin said.

Jo leaned forward, her voice low. “Do you think he smokes cigars?”

They all chuckled, the tension in the room easing slightly.

Wyatt shook his head, a small smile on his face. “But where would Hartman get a limo?”

Sam rubbed his chin, his mind racing. “That could be another clue that this is part of something bigger. Maybe he’s working with someone else.”

Kevin’s eyes lit up, his hand shooting into the air. “I’ve got an idea. The assisted-living place has a visitor log. Maybe I should go look through it and see who visited Frank the week before he died.”

Sam nodded. “Good idea.”

Wyatt’s fingers flew across the keyboard, his eyes glued to the screen. “I’ll get a log of the calls coming out of Marnie’s HQ the day Alex died,” he said, not looking up from his computer. “Might give us some more clues.”

Jo tapped her pen against her notepad, her brow furrowed. “You think we should go question Hartman?”

Sam shook his head, his eyes narrowed. “Not yet. Let’s wait until we have something more to surprise him with.”

KEVIN STEPPED into the assisted-living facility, the scents of antiseptic and fresh linen filling his nostrils. He approached the front desk, his eyes searching for a familiar face.

“Well, hello there, Detective Deckard,” the nurse said, her eyes crinkling with recognition. “What brings you back to our neck of the woods?”

Kevin smiled, leaning against the counter. “Just following up on a few things about Frank Milson. I remember you were quite helpful last time.”

The nurse nodded, her expression softening. “Ah, yes. We sure do miss Frank around here. He was such a character.”

“Did he have a lot of visitors?” Kevin asked, his voice casual.

The nurse tilted her head, thinking back. “Mostly just his grandson, Alex. Such a tragedy, what happened to him.” She shook her head, her eyes sad. “But there were a few times when Frank had a visitor around his own age. I’d find them sitting in the common room, laughing and reminiscing. Not too many left for him to do that with, you know?”

Kevin nodded, his mind already racing. “Would you mind if I took a look at the visitor logs? Just want to check something.”

The nurse hesitated for a moment then shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Just give me a second to grab them.”

She disappeared into a back room, returning a moment later with a thick binder. Kevin flipped it open, his eyes scanning the pages. He focused on the week before Frank’s death, his finger running down the list of names.

“Alex, Alex, Alex,” he muttered under his breath. Then, his finger stopped. “Wait a minute.”

There, scribbled in barely legible handwriting, was a name that seemed to start with H and end with “man.” The time stamp showed the visitor had

only stayed for an hour.

Kevin squinted at the name, trying to make it out. Could it be Hartman? And if so, what had they talked about?

He snapped a photo of the page with his phone then handed the binder back to the nurse with a smile. “Thanks for your help. I really appreciate it.”

As he walked out of the facility, his mind was already churning with possibilities. He needed to get this information back to the team, and fast. If Hartman was involved, they needed to know what he was up to.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sam, Jo, and Wyatt huddled around a desk, poring over the phone logs from Marnie's campaign office. Stacks of paper and empty coffee cups littered the surface, a testament to the long hours they'd spent trying to make sense of the calls.

"This feels like a wild goose chase." Jo sighed, rubbing her temples. "We don't even know if Alex made these calls."

"It was smart of him to switch the phone lines to one central line," Wyatt said. "Which seems to indicate he had reasons for not wanting anyone to be able to know who he had called."

Jo nodded. "Too bad those reasons got him killed."

"Hopefully, we can find something that stands out. Marnie said she caught Alex looking through her address list of big donors. Let's see if any of these numbers match up," Sam said.

They divided the list, each taking a section to cross-reference with the logs. The room fell silent save for the rustling of papers and the occasional scratch of a pen.

"Got one," Wyatt announced, breaking the silence. "Dottie Smalls, that big real estate developer. Several calls to her number."

Jo perked up. "I've got another. Nathan Rickman. Who is he?"

Wyatt typed into the computer, and his eyes widened. "He's on the board of Convale."

Jo tapped her pencil on the desk. "Interesting. So someone at Convale is a big donor to Marnie's campaign? That makes me suspicious."

Sam looked up from his list. “I think he’s the guy that I saw in the cigar bar with Victor Sorrentino.”

Jo narrowed her eyes. “Interesting.”

Wyatt brought up another screen and started typing. “Yep, Rickman has been on the board of Convale since retiring from banking a few years ago. Guess some people don’t know how to just rest when they retire.”

Sam snorted and continued the search, finding two more names that matched both Marnie’s list and the outgoing calls: Thaddeus Blackwell, a wealthy retired businessman, and Evelyn Sinclair, a prominent local philanthropist.

“So what are we thinking?” Sam mused, leaning back in his chair. “Maybe Alex called one of them to meet at the Drunken Moose?”

“Yep, and he had something on one of them? Was he blackmailing them? That would be a reason to kill him,” Jo said.

“It has to tie back to the bank robbery. What else would be enough that someone wouldn’t want anyone to know?” Sam wondered.

Jo nodded. “We know Alex was dragged out into the water at the Thorne Industries property, and Beryl Thorne’s been hanging around with Victor Sorrentino.”

“And Victor smokes cigars,” Sam said.

“And works at Convale,” Wyatt added.

“And hangs around with this Rickman guy,” Jo added.

Just then, a commotion drew their attention. Major had jumped onto Jo’s desk and was batting at her half-eaten tuna sandwich.

“Hey!” Jo shouted, spotting the feline’s antics. “Get away from that, you little thief!”

Major, startled by the sudden outburst, bolted off the desk. In his haste, he knocked the sandwich to the floor, where it landed with a soft plop.

Before anyone could react, Lucy darted forward and gobbled up the fallen sandwich in one swift motion.

The room erupted in laughter, the tension momentarily broken.

“Well, would you look at that.” Sam chuckled. “You’d almost think those two were working together.”

Wyatt grinned. “I don’t know, Sam. We all know Lucy and Major don’t exactly get along. I doubt they’d plan something like this.”

“You know, maybe we’re doing the same thing with this case. Looking for connections where there aren’t any,” Jo said.

Sam nodded slowly, considering her words. “You might be onto something. We’ve been so focused on trying to tie everything together that we might be forcing connections that don’t exist.”

Kevin came into the squad room, his phone clutched in his hand. “Guys, I think I’ve got something.”

“What is it, Kev?” Sam asked.

Kevin held up his screen, which showed an image of the assisted living visitor log. “I went to the assisted living facility to check out Frank Milson’s visitor log. Guess who was there the week before he died.”

Jo leaned forward, squinting at the image. “Is that Hartman? As in, our retired detective Hartman?”

Kevin nodded. “It could be.”

Wyatt stared at it. “It’s a scribble. Could be lots of different names.”

“Including Rickman.” Sam turned to Wyatt. “Does it show anyone calling Hartman from the campaign headquarters in that log?”

Wyatt shook his head.

“Hartman has been all over this case, and he was around back in the day.” Sam looked at Kevin and gestured toward the door. “I think it’s time we pay him a visit. Something tells me he’ll be much easier to get a hold of than Nathan Rickman.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sam and Kevin pulled into the driveway of Hartman's modest ranch home, nestled in an older neighborhood with large, tree-lined lots and neatly manicured lawns. The houses were small but well maintained, with a certain charm that came with age. As they exited the car, Kevin felt a swell of pride at being back out in the field. Sam asking him to ride along was a sure sign that he'd regained Sam's trust after his recent struggles with memory. He patted Lucy reassuringly, and she nudged her cold, wet nose into his palm as if sensing his need for comfort.

"Ready?" Sam asked, glancing at Kevin.

"Yep," Kevin replied, trying to sound confident.

They approached the front door and knocked. No one answered.

Lucy darted around the back of the house, her tail wagging with purpose. Sam and Kevin exchanged a look before following her, their hands instinctively reaching for their weapons.

As they rounded the corner, they saw the reason for Lucy's sudden interest. The back door's glass had been shattered, jagged edges glinting in the sunlight. Sam furrowed his brow, and Kevin felt a chill run down his spine. This was not a good sign.

"Looks like a break-in," Sam muttered, drawing his gun. "Stay sharp."

Kevin nodded, his own weapon already in hand. They carefully stepped over the broken glass, the crunch beneath their feet sounding unnaturally loud in the quiet neighborhood. Lucy sniffed the air, her ears perked and alert.

“Hartman, you in here?” Sam called. When there was no answer, he called out again. “Police! Put your hands up!”

There was no sound. The house was eerily still. Sam and Kevin moved methodically from room to room, their footsteps muffled by the worn carpet. No one else was inside.

As they entered the dining room, they found a scene of disarray. Papers were strewn across the table, some fluttering to the floor as a breeze from the broken door swept through the room. Sam holstered his gun and picked up one of the sheets, his eyes scanning the contents.

“Looks like Hartman was going over the old case files,” he said, his voice low and pensive. “But there are gaps—like someone took some of the papers.”

Kevin leaned in, studying the table. He noticed the empty spaces, the outlines of missing documents visible in the thin layer of dust. A sense of unease settled in his gut.

He took out his phone and took some pictures of the scene.

“Whoever broke in must have taken them,” Kevin mused, his mind racing with possibilities. “Maybe they contained something incriminating, something that could implicate someone in the robbery.”

Sam surveyed the room, taking in the dated but well-maintained furniture and outdated carpeting. Kevin followed his gaze, trying to piece together the puzzle of Hartman’s life.

“Does this look like the house of someone who has a lot of old bank-robbery money?” Sam asked, his voice laced with skepticism.

Kevin shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. Maybe he was saving it or gave it to his kids.”

“We’ll have to look into that,” Sam noted, his brow furrowed in thought. “But maybe he didn’t get any bank-robbery money at all. Maybe he was in the evidence room because he was investigating.”

“But why?” Kevin asked. “He was the investigator back in the day.”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe he figured he missed something and wanted to find out if he could solve the case now.”

Kevin glanced at the table. “Yeah, and maybe he got too close.”

Lucy caught Kevin’s attention. She was standing at a side table loaded with framed family photos. Kevin walked over, picking up a picture of a younger Hartman with two girls.

“Looks like he’s a family man,” Kevin said softly, a twinge of sadness in his voice. As he studied the photo, something clicked in Kevin’s mind. He turned to Sam, excitement building in his chest. “I might have an idea,” he said, his eyes wide with realization.

“What?”

“Remember, there was a photo in the box that Alex had from his grandfather’s belongings. It was a photo of who I assumed was his grandfather and another man. It was from their younger days, and they were sitting around a table with some sort of blueprints in front of them.”

Sam’s eyes lit up with understanding. “Cigars. You think those men might be the ones that were involved in the robbery?”

“Exactly,” Kevin said, nodding eagerly. “If we can identify the other man in that photo, it might give us something to go on.”

Sam surveyed the disarray in Hartman’s dining room once more, his expression grave. “There’s no way Hartman left this mess. And the broken door? Someone took him. We need to treat this like a crime scene.”

Kevin nodded, his mind already shifting into investigative mode. “And that means he must have been on to something. I’ll start processing the scene, see if I can find any clues or evidence that might help us figure out who did this.”

“Good idea,” Sam agreed, pulling out his phone. “I’m going to head back to the station and grab that photo. I have a feeling that other man might be Nathan Rickman.”

As Sam turned to leave, he paused, placing a hand on Kevin’s shoulder. “Good work, Kevin,” he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Looks like your memory is much better. Keep it up.”

Kevin felt a surge of pride and happiness at Sam’s words. It meant the world to him to know that he was regaining his chief’s trust and proving his worth as a detective once more. “Thanks, Sam,” he said, his voice filled with gratitude. “I won’t let you down.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Sam pushed open the door to the police station. “We’ve got a situation. Hartman’s house was broken into, and it looks like someone was searching for something.”

Jo’s eyes widened, her fingers freezing on the keyboard. “What do you mean? Is Hartman okay?”

Sam shook his head, his jaw clenching. “He’s missing, and his dining room was a mess. Files everywhere, and it looks like some are gone.”

Wyatt leaned forward in his chair, his brow furrowed. “Do you think it’s connected to our case?”

“It has to be,” Sam said. “Kevin is back there processing it.”

“Well, I guess that rules Hartman out as the killer,” Jo said.

“Maybe.” Sam turned to Reese. “Do we still have the boxes from Alex’s place here at the station?”

Reese nodded.

“Good. There’s a cardboard box with some personal effects. Can you get that?”

“Sure thing.” Reese headed toward the area where they kept current evidence.

Sam turned to the others. “Kevin remembered an old photograph that fell out of a book in that box of Frank’s belongings that we found in Alex’s apartment. He thinks the person in it might be our killer.”

“Really?” Jo looked surprised. “What makes him think that?”

Sam shrugged. “Something about Frank didn’t look like he fit in with the other guy.”

“It’s worth a look,” Jo said as Reese returned with the box.

Inside the box near the top was an old photograph with yellowed edges. The photo showed two men, one Sam recognized as Frank Milson from the other photos he’d seen.

“This must be it.” Sam picked up the frame, and Wyatt, Jo and Reese moved in to get a closer look.

Jo leaned in closer, her eyes narrowing as she studied the photo. “What’s that on the table behind the men? It looks like some kind of blueprints.”

The team squinted at the image, trying to make out the details. “What are they blueprints of?” Sam said, his finger tracing the faint lines on the table.

Reese’s brows shot up. “Of the bank? Or the sewer system? Is this a picture of them planning the getaway?”

Sam frowned. “Why would they take a picture of that?”

Reese shook her head. “No idea. And why keep it?”

“Maybe for leverage?” Jo said. “It was in that book. Maybe Frank kept it so he would have something on the other guys.”

“Guys?” Reese asked. “There’s only one guy there.”

Jo shook her head. “Must have at least been three. Someone had to take the picture.”

Wyatt took the photo from Sam, scanning the faces of the two men. “The other guy...” He paused, his brow furrowed in concentration. “I feel like I’ve seen him before.”

Sam nodded, a nagging sense of familiarity tugging at the back of his mind. “Me too, but I can’t quite place him. Whoever he is, he’d be pretty old by now, so he wouldn’t look anything like this.”

“Hold on a second.” Wyatt took out his phone and snapped a quick picture of the photo then AirDropped it to his computer. His fingers flew across the keyboard as he typed away, his face illuminated by the glow of the screen.

A few tense moments passed before Wyatt’s eyes widened and a triumphant grin spread across his face. “Aha! I thought he looked sort of familiar. Check this out.”

Sam hurried over to Wyatt’s desk, Jo and Reese close behind. On the screen was a series of photos, each one showing the same man at different

stages of his life, from a young, fresh-faced youth to a distinguished, silver-haired gentleman.

"The internet had all his photos because he's a prominent figure in town," Wyatt explained, his voice tinged with excitement. "That man is Nathan Rickman. And look." Wyatt pointed to one of the pictures from years ago.

It was from a pamphlet showcasing the bank officers. Nathan Rickman smiled into the camera in his expensive suit, a ten-year service pin just like the one they'd found in the woods gleaming on his lapel.

Sam's mind raced as he processed the new information. "If Alex saw this photo, he must have put two and two together. Or maybe Frank even confessed to him before he died. The old man knew his time was running out and might have wanted to clear his conscience."

Jo nodded, her eyes widening with realization. "And Alex knew Rickman was a big donor to Marnie's campaign, so he knew he could get his contact information from Marnie's planner. Remember that call made to Rickman from the campaign office that night?"

"Alex must have arranged a meeting with Rickman," Sam said, his voice tight with tension. "Smart of him to choose a public place like the Drunken Moose."

"But instead of getting blackmail money, he got drugged," Wyatt added, his face grim.

Sam's jaw clenched, his eyes hardening. "Rickman is wealthy, and Convale has a limo. I bet the license plate's last numbers match the ones on the surveillance video."

Wyatt's eyes widened as another thought struck him. "Hartman must have made the same discovery. Maybe he saw the picture when he visited Frank the week before he died. Frank could have confessed something to him or let something slip."

Sam's heart sank as the pieces fell into place. "And if Rickman found out that Hartman knew..."

"He would have wanted to silence him," Jo finished, her voice barely above a whisper.

"We have to find Hartman before he meets the same fate as Alex," Sam said, his voice filled with urgency. "Maybe Kevin has found something at his house."

Sam put his phone on speaker. “Hey, Kev, we’ve identified the man in that photo,” Sam said, his voice carrying a note of excitement. “It’s Nathan Rickman.”

“That’s huge,” Kevin replied, his voice crackling slightly through the speaker.

“What have you found at the house? Anything?” Sam asked.

“Nothing. Just the mess you saw and the broken glass. Looks like there was a bit of a struggle outside the door, and they pulled the car around back in the grass,” Kevin said.

“We need to figure out where they would have taken Hartman,” Jo said. “I think it’s probably a very long shot that they took him to the same place they took Alex.”

“It has to be somewhere out of the way. He wouldn’t risk taking him to his home or Convale,” Wyatt said.

“What about that Obsidian Enterprises company?” Kevin suggested. “The one that owns the land we searched. Maybe they have other properties?”

Sam smiled. He’d been impressed with Kevin’s progress since his accident and had been trying to give him more responsibility, but still, he’d been hesitant. But this past week, all the contributions Kevin had made, including remembering the photo and Obsidian Enterprises, proved that he was truly back up to speed, his memory sharper than ever.

“Great idea.” Wyatt’s fingers flew across the keyboard. “Got it! There’s another parcel of land owned by Obsidian. Looks like there’s some kind of structure on it.”

“We need to check it out,” Sam said determinedly. “Kevin, we’re heading out now. We’ll pick you up on the way.”

Lucy jumped to her feet, eager to join the action. Sam got her bulletproof vest out of the closet.

When they had all their gear, they headed to the door. Lucy and Sam were in the lead. But this time, they had an addition in the rear. Major had hopped down from the filing cabinet and was following them to the door.

Reese, who had been standing near the desk, scooped up the black cat. “Not this time, Major,” she said softly, stroking his fur. “You’re staying here with me.” She glanced up at the others. “You guys be careful.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The SUV bounced along the dirt road, kicking up dust in its wake. Sam gripped the steering wheel, his jaw clenched. Beside him, Jo scanned the surroundings, her green eyes sharp. Lucy sat at attention in the back.

"There." Jo pointed. "That must be it."

Sam followed her gaze. Nestled on a cliffside, a small cabin came into view. Obsidian Enterprises' property. Remote. Isolated. The perfect place for shady dealings.

He slowed and pulled off to the side. In the car behind them, Kevin and Wyatt did the same. They didn't want anyone in the cabin to know they were there, so they spoke in whispers and kept out of view.

"Someone's here." Kevin nodded toward the car parked beside the cabin.

They approached on foot, steps measured, hands hovering near their holsters. The cabin was a ramshackle affair of weathered boards and peeling paint. But the view—that was something else. Breathtaking vistas of the valley below stretched to the horizon.

Sam gestured to a grimy window. They peered inside.

"Shoot," Jo breathed.

Dominic Hartman, bound to a chair. A young, wiry man pacing nearby—probably one of Nathan Rickman's thugs that he had do his dirty work. And there, in the corner, the unmistakable figure of Nathan Rickman.

Sam's pulse quickened. He met Jo's gaze, a silent understanding passing between them. It was time to move.

“Kevin, Wyatt, take the back,” Sam whispered. “Jo and I will take the front. Wait for my signal.”

Kevin and Wyatt disappeared around the corner, footsteps silent. Sam caught Jo’s eye again. They’d been in tough spots before, but this—this felt different.

Lucy chuffed, her body tense, waiting for the action. Sam laid a hand on her head, a silent reassurance.

“Ready?” he mouthed to Jo.

She nodded, her jaw set. They moved into position, and Sam tried the knob. The door opened, and they rushed through.

“Police! Hands where I can see them!”

Chaos erupted. Shouts, scuffling, the unmistakable bang of gunshots. Sam and Jo dove for cover behind a cabinet as splinters flew.

“Drop your weapons!” Jo yelled, her voice steady.

Across the room, Kevin and Wyatt burst through the back door. More shots.

The thug swung his gun toward them, cool and calculating.

Sam’s heart pounded. He risked a glance around the cabinet. Hartman struggled against his bonds, chair scraping the floor. Rickman, a cruel sneer on his face, had his gun leveled at Jo.

Lucy growled, hackles raised, ready to spring. Sam’s breath caught. In a standoff like this, one wrong move...

He met Kevin’s gaze, a split-second decision. They had to end this, fast, before things spiraled out of control.

But then came the unexpected. Hartman made his move.

The scene unfolded in slow motion. Lucy coiled, ready to spring. Kevin’s finger tightened on the trigger. But before either could act, Hartman sprang into action.

With a grunt of effort, Hartman surged to his feet, the chair still tied to his back. He lunged, slamming into the thug with the full force of his weight.

The two men crashed to the floor, a tangle of limbs and splintered wood. The minion’s gun skittered across the floorboards, spinning out of reach.

“Gun!” Sam barked.

Wyatt, quick as a cat, dove for the weapon. His fingers closed around the grip, and he rolled, coming up in a crouch, the gun trained on the struggling men.

Sam kept his sights locked on Rickman, heart pounding. The man's face was a mask of fury, his own gun still leveled at the room.

But Rickman didn't shoot. Instead, he turned and bolted for the back door.

"He's running!" Jo shouted.

Sam cursed under his breath. They couldn't let Rickman escape. Not now, not when they were so close.

"Kevin, Wyatt, secure the scene," he ordered. "Jo, with me. We're going after Rickman."

Lucy, hackles still raised, fell into step beside them as they raced out the back, hot on Rickman's heels.

Sam's lungs burned as he ran, Jo at his side, Lucy rushing ahead. Rickman was fast for an older man, his desperation fueling his speed.

Low brush whipped at Sam's legs as branches snatched at his clothes. The forest was a blur of green and brown, the ground uneven beneath his feet.

"Where's he going?" Jo panted, her words punctuated by ragged breaths.

Sam's mind raced. The property backed onto the cliff, he remembered. But surely, Rickman wouldn't...

A sickening realization hit him. "The cliff," he managed, his voice tight. "He's heading for the cliff."

They burst from the tree line, the sudden brightness of the open air momentarily blinding. Sam blinked, his eyes adjusting.

The view was breathtaking: a vast expanse of sky, the valley stretching out below like a painted canvas. But there, at the edge, was Rickman.

Sam's heart stopped. The cliff's edge was a jagged thing, all sharp rocks and crumbling earth. It was a long, steep drop to the winding river below, the water churning and frothing over boulders.

Rickman stood at the precipice, his chest heaving. He glanced back, his eyes wild.

"Rickman!" Sam shouted, his hand outstretched. "Don't do it. There's nowhere to go."

But even as the words left his mouth, Sam knew. He saw it in Rickman's face, in the set of his shoulders.

The man was going to jump.

Lucy growled, her body coiled tight. Jo's hand hovered over her holster.

“It’s over, Rickman,” Jo called, her voice steady despite the chaos. “Come back from the edge.”

Rickman’s laugh was a bitter, broken sound. He shook his head, his feet shifting on the uneven ground. “You don’t understand,” he spat. “I won’t go to prison. I don’t have much time left, and I won’t spend it rotting in a cell.”

He took a step back, his heel hanging over the void. Sam’s breath caught in his throat.

Time seemed to slow. Rickman’s eyes met Sam’s.

And then he jumped.

But even as Rickman’s body tipped backward, a blur of fur and muscle shot past.

Lucy leaped, her jaws wide. She seemed to hang suspended in the air, a silent, snarling guardian.

Her teeth closed on Rickman’s sleeve, and the two tumbled to the ground, a tangle of thrashing limbs and snapping jaws.

Sam’s heart stopped. They were too close to the edge, the crumbling rock giving way beneath their struggle. Rickman hung from the edge. The only thing keeping him from dropping was Lucy’s grip on his sleeve.

Lucy’s claws scrabbled for purchase, her powerful haunches straining. But Rickman fought like a man possessed, his free hand clawing at the dog’s face.

“Lucy!” Sam’s voice cracked, fear and desperation warring in his chest.

He lunged forward, his fingers closing around Lucy’s vest. The fabric bit into his palms, his muscles screaming as he heaved backward.

But it wasn’t enough. Inch by terrible inch, they slid closer to the abyss.

Jo appeared at Sam’s side, her hands joining his on Lucy’s vest.

“Hold on,” she gritted out, her face a mask of determination. “Pull!”

Together, they strained against the inexorable pull of gravity. Sam’s heart hammered against his ribs, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Rickman twisted, his hand finding Lucy’s throat. The dog yelped but kept her grip.

“You’ll never take me alive,” he snarled, his eyes wild. “Never!”

With a final, desperate heave, the fabric of his sleeve tore, the sound sharp and sudden in the chaos.

With a scream, Rickman pitched backward into the void.

Lucy lunged, her jaws snapping shut on empty air. Sam and Jo hauled her back, their chests heaving, their hearts in their throats.

They collapsed in a heap, the ground solid beneath them. Sam clutched at Lucy, burying his face in her fur, his body shaking with adrenaline and relief.

But even as they caught their breath, the reality of what had just happened began to sink in.

Rickman was gone, and with him, the answer to many of their questions.

Sam and Jo approached the cliff's edge, their steps cautious on the uneven ground. The adrenaline of the chase still thrummed in Sam's veins, his heart pounding in the aftermath.

They peered over the precipice, the wind whipping at their hair and clothes. Far below, the river churned, its waters white and frothing as it wound through the jagged rocks.

And there, on a narrow ledge beside the raging torrent, lay Rickman.

Even from this distance, Sam could tell the man was dead. His body was splayed at an unnatural angle, his limbs twisted and bent in ways that made Sam's stomach turn. He lay face down, his head at an odd angle. One arm was stretched out, fingers clawing at the rock as if he'd tried to stop his fall at the last moment.

A dark stain spread out beneath him, seeping into the cracks and crevices of the stone.

"We need to call it in," he said. "Get a recovery team out here. And we need to make sure Kevin and Wyatt have things under control."

Jo nodded, already reaching for her radio. She spoke into the receiver as they hurried back to the cabin.

Wyatt and Kevin had the thug tied up in the chair. Hartman had been untied and was sitting at the table, Kevin dabbing at a cut on his face with a tissue.

"What happened to Rickman?" Kevin asked, his voice tight.

Sam shook his head. "Dead. Went over the cliff."

Wyatt let out a low whistle. "Darn."

"Hartman," Sam said, crossing the room. "You okay?"

The old man shrugged, wincing slightly at the movement. "I've had worse."

"That was quite a move." Sam nodded toward the thug, "Rushing him while tied up."

Hartman rubbed his wrists, his eyes distant. “It was the least I could do. I figured it was time I tried to redeem myself. Even if it was just a small chance.”

Sam felt a pang of sympathy. He knew the weight of past mistakes, the burden of trying to make things right.

Sam turned back to Kevin. “He give you anything?” he asked, jerking his chin toward the prisoner.

Kevin shrugged. “Says he works for Rickman. Does whatever the boss tells him.”

Sam crouched, bringing his face level with the thug’s. “That include dragging bodies into the lake?”

The man’s eyes widened, a flicker of fear passing over his face. He licked his lips, his gaze darting between Sam and the others. “I think,” he said slowly, his voice trembling slightly, “I want a lawyer.”

Sam sighed. They’d lost Rickman, but maybe this guy could give them some answers. “Okay, let’s get this guy back to the station and processed. We may have a long night ahead of us.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Kevin reached for a potato skin, piling it high with gooey cheese and a generous dollop of chive-dotted sour cream. “These are nothing like Bridget’s,” he said, taking a bite. The others murmured in agreement, their mouths full of the savory snack.

Holden, ever the voice of reason, chuckled. “Well, we’ll just have to make do with these for now. Can’t expect Bridget to feed us all the time, especially with her starting culinary school.”

They were sitting at a big table at Holy Spirits. Sam noticed the usual group was growing. Tonight, they had Sam, Jo, Kevin, Wyatt, Reese, Holden Joyce, Mick, and Harry. Even Dominic Hartman had joined them to celebrate closing the Alex Sheridan case.

“How is your new class going?” Mick asked.

Bridget’s eyes sparkled, and her voice brimmed with enthusiasm. “It was incredible! The instructor is so knowledgeable, and I learned so much in just a few hours.”

Bridget animatedly described the techniques she had learned and the dishes she couldn’t wait to try. Her passion was infectious, and the group found themselves hanging on her every word.

“I think I’m really going to love it,” Bridget concluded, a contented smile on her face. “It’s like I’ve finally found my calling. And now, if Garvin will sell to Jo, everything will be perfect.”

“He’s getting closer,” Jo said, a smile tugging at her lips. “I’ve got a good feeling about it. I think we might be able to make it our permanent home.”

“And he gave permission for us to bring Pickles in.” Bridget transferred a section of gooey nachos from the main plate to her little dish.

“Pickles?” Hartman looked confused.

“It’s a stray cat,” Harry informed him, and the two men rolled their eyes.

Sam was glad to see that Harry was getting along with his old boss. It had turned out that Hartman wasn’t a bad guy after all. He’d been investigating the case all along, trying to finally solve it, which was why he’d been in the evidence room.

Holden leaned forward, his expression somber. “I heard from my contacts at the FBI,” he said, his voice low. “They’re almost done searching Hazel Martin’s property.”

At the mention of Hazel’s name, Jo and Bridget’s faces tensed, their earlier excitement replaced by a palpable sense of unease.

“They haven’t found Tammy’s body, have they?” Sam asked, his eyes locked on Holden.

Holden shook his head, his shoulders slumping. “No, they haven’t.”

Reese, who had been sitting quietly, looked up, her eyes filled with sympathy. “But then, where is it?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

The group fell silent, each lost in their own thoughts. Sam glanced at Jo, trying to gauge her reaction. She shrugged as if trying to brush off the weight of the situation, but Sam could see the pain and frustration etched on her face.

“We may have to live with the fact that it will never be found,” Jo said.

“Maybe.” Holden nodded. “Hazel sure isn’t talking about it, but we’ll keep trying.”

Everyone was quiet for a beat, then Mick broke the silence. “What about that guy you arrested in the cabin with Rickman?”

“Tommy Soucy.” Sam said. “According to Tommy, Alex had called Rickman to blackmail him.”

“Apparently, Alex did know about Rickman’s involvement in the robbery all those years ago,” Jo added.

“I wonder how he knew. Do you think his grandfather told him?” Kevin asked.

Sam shrugged. “We’ll probably never know about that.”

“Soucy verified that Alex was drugged in the bar, taken out to the storage building site, and dragged into the open water, then pushed under the ice,” Sam said.

Mick shook his head. “That’s cold.”

“It gets worse,” Jo said. “Apparently, Rickman stood back at the limo and smoked a cigar while he watched them push Alex under.”

“It’s a shame we didn’t get to bring Rickman to justice.” Wyatt said.

“At least he won’t be able to hurt anyone else,” Jo added. “I hate to think of some of the other things that guy has done.”

“Somehow, I doubt Alex was his first victim,” Harry said.

Hartman nodded. “I still think he killed Eric Feldman. I sure wish we could prove that.”

Harry nodded then looked at Sam. “Will you be able to open that old case back up? Maybe get justice for Feldman.”

“I’m not sure.” Sam glanced at Jo. “Maybe we could look into some things in our spare time.”

“We owe Dom that much.” Jo smiled at Hartman. “Things might have ended up differently without your quick thinking.”

Hartman blushed. “Just doing what came naturally.”

Harry, who had been listening intently, clapped Hartman on the back. “I heard about your fancy moves out there,” he said, his eyes twinkling with amusement. “Not bad for an old guy.”

Hartman chuckled, shaking his head. “Watch who you’re calling old, Harry,” he said, his tone light and playful. “I’ve still got a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“So, Hartman, what made you decide to get involved in this case after all this time, anyway?” Harry asked, his voice tinged with genuine interest.

Hartman’s expression grew serious, his eyes distant as if lost in thought. “When I heard about Alex Sheridan’s death and the discovery of the robbery money, something just didn’t sit right with me,” he said, his voice low and pensive. “I started digging around because I never got a chance to solve the robbery case.”

The group listened intently, hanging on Hartman’s every word. Sam could sense the weight of the man’s past bearing down on him, the burden of unfinished business.

“Back in the day, when I was investigating the robbery, I always suspected Rickman was involved,” Hartman continued, his voice growing

stronger with each word. “But every time I got close, someone higher up would shut me down, stonewall my investigation.”

Harry’s eyes widened, a look of realization dawning on his face. “You think Rickman had someone in his pocket?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Hartman nodded, his jaw set with determination. “I knew he was dirty, but I could never prove it,” he said, his words laced with a mix of frustration and regret. “But now, with Tommy’s confession and the evidence we’ve gathered, I guess I was right.”

Harry leaned back in his chair. “I have to apologize, because I thought you were throwing the case on purpose back then.”

“I may have been a lot of things in my day, but I was never dirty. I had to take my orders from above, and every time I got close to anything, things happened to turn the investigation another way.” Hartman’s voice was firm and unwavering. “I’ve always been straight as an arrow, and I always will be.”

Harry held up his hands. “I know that now,” he said, his voice warm with genuine respect. “You’re a good man, Hartman.”

Hartman nodded, a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Darn right I am,” he said, his gruff voice tinged with a hint of pride.

As the laughter died down, Jo’s expression grew pensive. “You know, Rickman had a lot of connections to Convale,” she said, her voice low and thoughtful. “I wonder what other secrets he was hiding.”

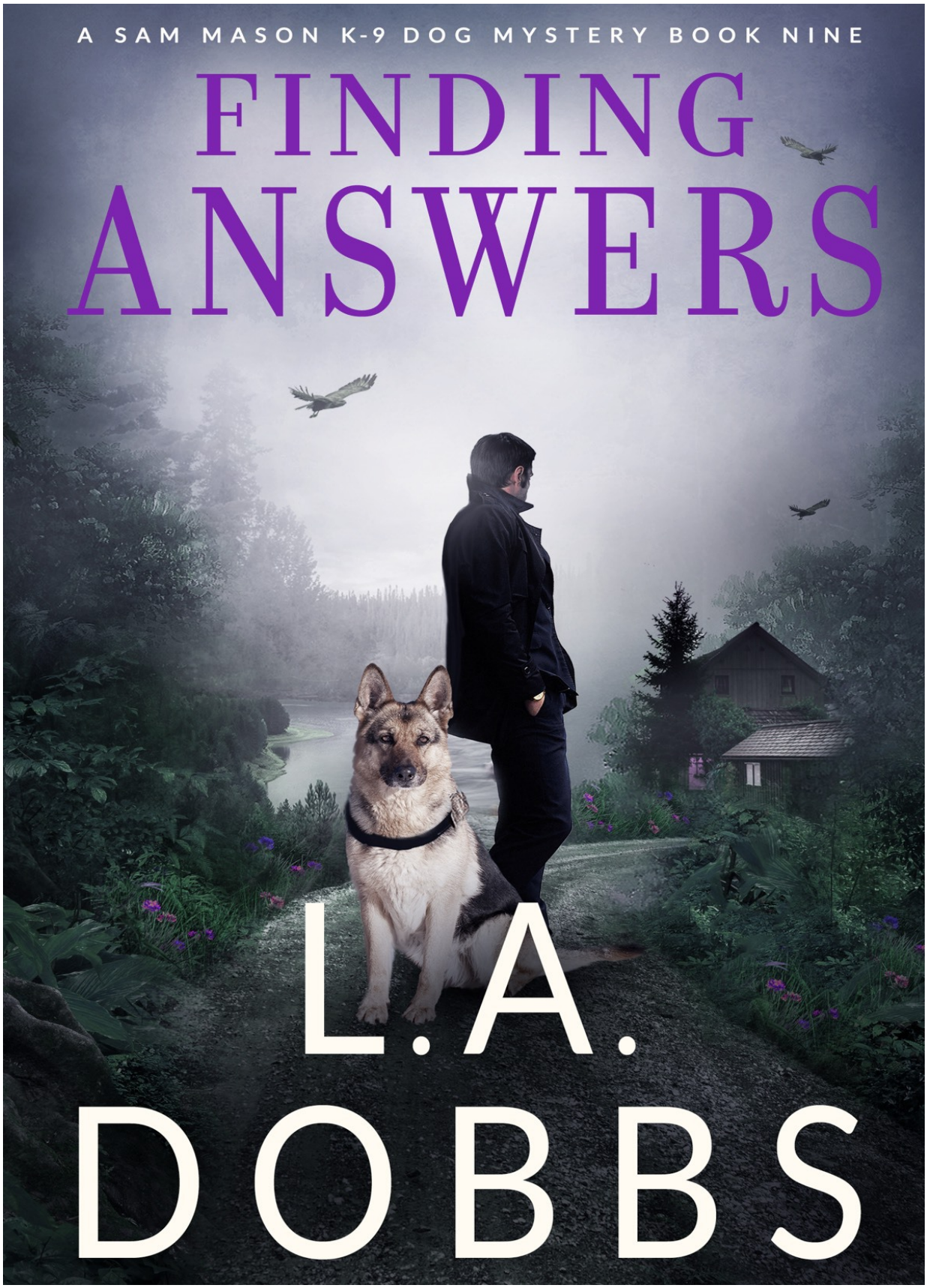
“Seems like a lot of shady things are tied to Convale,” Kevin said, his words heavy with implication. “The robbery cover-up scheme, Alex’s murder... makes you wonder what else they’re involved in.”

Rickman’s death had brought a sense of closure to Alex’s case, but Sam still felt there was more. What other secrets had died with the man?

As the last of the potato skins disappeared and the glasses ran dry, Sam felt a sense of contentment wash over him. Things were good despite everything. His town was safe, his friends were happy, and the future was bright with possibility.

A SAM MASON K-9 DOG MYSTERY BOOK NINE

FINDING ANSWERS



L.A. DOBBS

CHAPTER ONE

The farmhouse door was ajar, a jagged slice of blackness cutting through the snow-bright day.

Jo Harris froze behind the wheel of her truck, her breath fogging the glass. Garvin McDaniels was a stickler for order. Doors shut, paths shoveled, lights on when the sun went down. But now, the front steps were buried under a fresh layer of snow, untouched, the house eerily dark.

Something wasn't right.

She climbed out, her boots crunching on the driveway as the cold bit through her coat. The air was unnervingly still, thick with the kind of silence that makes you question every sound you didn't hear.

Garvin wasn't just Jo's landlord. Lately, she and her sister had been softening him up with casseroles, hoping he'd sell them the cottage. But it wasn't only that—Jo liked him. He was lonely, and their talks had become something she looked forward to. Which made the open door and eerie silence all the more unsettling.

Jo's hand hovered near the holstered weapon on her hip as she grabbed the casserole dish from the passenger seat.

Her pulse kicked up as she climbed the snow-covered steps, her eyes fixed on that gaping door.

"Garvin?" she called, her voice cutting the stillness like a blade.

No answer.

Jo's grip tightened on the dish as she nudged the door open wider and stepped into the shadows.

The smell slammed into her—sharp, metallic, and unmistakable.

Blood.

Inside, the farmhouse was a wreck. Chairs overturned, glass scattered across the floor like glittering shards. Jo's pulse quickened as her eyes tracked the dark stain smeared across the hardwood. A path of destruction led to the living room. To the body.

Garvin McDaniels lay in the middle of it, sprawled across the floor, eyes wide open. Cold. Lifeless.

Jo's stomach dropped. "Garvin!" Her voice cracked in the silence as she rushed forward. She didn't even realize she'd tossed the casserole onto the table.

She dropped to her knees next to him, pressing her fingers to his neck, searching for a pulse. His skin was like ice. The faint metallic scent in the air confirmed what her mind was trying to deny.

No pulse. No life.

Jo pulled back, trying to steady her breath, her hand trembling. It wasn't the first body she'd seen in her career. But Garvin... Garvin was supposed to be alive. He didn't deserve this kind of death.

She fumbled for her phone, hands still shaking. "Reese," she managed when the receptionist picked up. "Garvin's dead. I found him here, at his house. Send the team. Fast."

Reese's voice crackled with shock. "Jo? Are you okay? What happened?"

Jo swallowed hard, her gaze flicking to the bloodstain spreading beneath Garvin. "It's bad. It looks like... murder."

"I'm sending everyone. Ambulance and the team are on their way. Stay put."

"Okay." Jo hung up and exhaled, the air thick and tainted with blood. Her fingers curled into fists as she fought for control. She should be handling this better. She was trained for this. But this... This was different.

Her mind raced, trying to piece together the scene, to make sense of the chaos. Garvin had been reluctant to sell the cottage at first. But after months of coaxing, he'd seemed to come around. Just last week, he'd told her he was almost ready to sign.

Now, he was dead. Why?

A knot tightened in her chest. Did his death have something to do with the property? Jo glanced at the open door, the wind blowing in snow that melted on the blood-streaked floor.

She needed answers.

The distant wail of sirens cut through the silence, snapping Jo back to the present. Her pulse steadied. Time to get to work.

She scanned the room again, this time with the sharp focus of a cop at a crime scene. The overturned chair near the table. A broken lamp. Glass scattered like stars across the hardwood. Every object out of place told part of a story, and Jo was determined to piece it together.

Her gaze landed on Garvin's body, the pool of blood that had already begun to congeal. She crouched again, eyes narrowing as she took in the angle of his limbs, the way his head rested against the leg of the overturned coffee table. He'd been hit with something heavy, but there was no sign of a weapon.

The door was forced, so the killer had broken in, and it must have been sometime before the last snowfall earlier that morning.

She took out her phone and snapped photos. Kevin, one of the deputies, would do this later for the police photos, but Jo knew that every broken item, every smudge on the floor, every piece of disturbed furniture—they all mattered. She'd need them later.

The sirens stopped abruptly as the first responders arrived, a flurry of voices and boots heading toward the porch. Jo rose, stepping back as the crew began spilling into the house. But her eyes never left the room. The details were still sharp in her mind, each one locked away.

She took a deep breath, the icy air burning her lungs. Garvin deserved answers. And she'd make sure he got them.

THE WHITE ROCK police Tahoe and the old Crown Victoria pulled up, tires crunching on the snow. Sam, Wyatt, Kevin, and Lucy piled out, urgency etched on their faces.

Lucy bounded up the steps, her nose twitching, already working the scene. Jo crouched, scratching the German Shepherd behind the ears for a quick second, grounding herself.

"What's the situation?" Chief Sam Mason asked, stepping into the doorway.

“Busted lock. Struggle inside,” Jo said, her voice clipped, professional, though the sight of Garvin still twisted her gut.

Inside, the team moved fast. Wyatt snapped photos, his face grim. Kevin, already gloved up, began collecting evidence, his hands moving with the precision of a surgeon.

“Anything missing?” Wyatt called from the living room, camera still in hand.

Jo’s eyes swept the room. Everything looked as cluttered as usual, and everything was in its place—except for one thing.

“Wait.” Her voice sharpened as she stepped toward the shelf by the window. “Garvin had a bronze sculpture here. Of an elk. His great-uncle made it. He thought it was valuable.”

Wyatt joined her, eyes narrowing as he studied the empty shelf. “Valuable enough to kill over?”

Jo’s gut tightened. “Maybe.”

Sam, standing near the door, gave a quick nod to Wyatt and Kevin. “Check the other rooms. See if anything else is out of place.”

They moved through the house in sync. Jo stood still for a moment, taking in the scene, her mind ticking. Garvin didn’t have much. A couple of antiques, some knickknacks, but nothing anyone would risk breaking in for.

Wyatt reappeared from the hallway, shaking his head. “Nothing. Bedrooms, bathroom—all untouched.”

Kevin followed, glancing around. “Doesn’t feel like a burglary. Just the one thing missing? That doesn’t track.”

“What else would the motive be?” Sam asked.

“Maybe someone didn’t like him.” Kevin nodded toward Garvin’s battered face. “I mean, sure looks that way.”

“Or something he was about to do,” Jo said, suspicion creeping into her voice. “Garvin was about to sell me the cottage I’ve been renting. Remember?”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Yeah, and when he was dragging his feet, you started bribing him with pie and casseroles.” His tone was light, and for the first time that morning, Jo smiled.

She glanced at the table, where she’d stashed the latest casserole, now sitting cold and untouched. She’d started looking forward to those meals. “It worked. Last time I was here, he said he was almost ready to sell.”

Kevin, sifting through broken glass, didn't look up. "Wasn't someone else interested in buying it?"

Jo nodded. "Yeah, but Garvin told me he didn't trust them. He wanted the property to go to the right person, said he thought that person was me."

Wyatt chimed in, "Did you get anything in writing?"

Jo shook her head. "No, nothing official yet."

Wyatt sighed, wiping a hand across his jaw. "That means the other buyer could still be in play. If it's just your word, they'll have a chance."

"His heirs will be in charge of it now anyway," Sam said, looking down at Garvin. He shook his head.

Jo frowned, unsure. "I doubt the other person wanted the property bad enough to kill him to stop him from selling to me. That would be crazy."

But even she wasn't convinced. Not anymore.

"Maybe the bust is more valuable than we know." Sam said.

Wyatt frowned, scanning the room. "Could be they knew exactly what they wanted and went straight for it."

Sam folded his arms, glancing at the broken lock. "But why not just break in and take the bust? Why kill Garvin?" His eyes shifted to Garvin's lifeless body.

"Maybe they thought he wasn't home and he surprised them?" Kevin suggested.

Before anyone could respond, Lucy began whining, pawing at the floor beside the body. Kevin noticed, raising an eyebrow.

"I think she wants us to roll him," he said.

Sam nodded. "ME's on the way, but go ahead. Carefully."

Jo crouched as they turned Garvin onto his side. The back of his head revealed a second wound, deep, matted with blood. The floor beneath him was stained dark red. But that wasn't what had Lucy's attention.

Nestled beneath the body was a small, coiled piece of plastic. A hair tie.

"What's that?" Wyatt crouched down, squinting at it.

Jo's hand went reflexively to her own head, fingers brushing against the familiar spiral holding her hair in a tight ponytail. Her brow furrowed.

Sam, always sharp, caught the movement. "Could it be yours? Maybe it fell off when you found him?"

Jo stiffened. "No, it's not mine. It's still on."

Sam's gaze lingered on her for a second longer than she liked. "Could've been here from a past visit. Maybe you didn't notice. In which

case it really wouldn't be evidence."

Jo's jaw clenched. Was he serious? Was he offering to look the other way? Like it wasn't worth bagging?

Kevin glanced between them, waiting. Jo met Sam's gaze, the weight of the moment heavy between them. Did he think she had something to do with this, or was he trying to protect her from being unjustly accused? Didn't matter either way—the hair tie was not hers.

"No," Jo said, her voice firm. "It's not mine. I'm sure of it. I'd know if it fell out. Let's bag it and run the hairs."

Sam raised an eyebrow, a flicker of something—doubt? concern?—in his eyes. He gave a quick nod to Kevin. "Bag it."

Kevin picked up the tie carefully, holding it up to the light. "Two curly hairs."

Jo's stomach twisted. "They're not mine."

Sam's voice was calm, measured. "Of course not." But the look he shot her said more than his words. He nodded at Kevin. "Bag it and tag it."

The boards on the porch creaked as Medical Examiner John Dudley arrived, his gait slow and steady. The team shifted, giving him space. Lucy wagged her tail at the sight of him, momentarily breaking the tension.

John set to work, his face impassive as he examined the body.

Sam stepped back, glancing at his team. "All right, folks. ME's in charge here. Let's head back to the station, start processing. The sooner we get this evidence logged, the closer we are to figuring this out."

CHAPTER TWO

The heavy glass door of the old post office creaked as Jo pushed it open. The White Rock Police Station smelled of brewed coffee and worn wood, a comforting mix that always made her feel like she was stepping into the past. The reception area, with its brass post office boxes and scratched pine floors, was warm and homey. At least for a police station.

Reese was on her feet before Jo crossed the threshold. Her big blue eyes filled with concern. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm good," Jo said, keeping her voice steady, though her insides hadn't caught up yet.

Reese wasn't buying it. "Bridget said you were getting close to him." Her tone softened, like she didn't want to spook Jo.

Jo nodded, keeping her expression unreadable. Liking someone didn't guarantee they stuck around.

She walked past Reese into the squad room. Major, the station's black cat, sat perched on a filing cabinet, watching the room like he owned it. Lucy trotted over to Jo, and Major leaned down to sniff the dog, blinking slowly and deliberately, as if passing judgment on the dog.

Jo went straight to the Keurig, her hands working on autopilot, setting up coffee for the team. The motions kept her busy, kept her mind from unraveling.

"Garvin have next of kin?" Sam's voice cut through the air. He stood by the window, his face in shadow. His tone wasn't casual. He was already thinking ahead, turning something over in his mind.

“He’s got two kids, but they’re not local,” Jo replied, focusing on the sound of the coffee brewing, anything to steady herself.

Kevin chimed in. “I’ll track them down.”

Sam gave a curt nod. “Wyatt, check his financials. See if there’s anything off.”

Wyatt was already at his keyboard, typing fast, eyes narrowed. The guy worked like he had something to prove.

“Reese,” Sam continued, “download the photos. Get them printed. I want them on the board.” He paused, glancing at Jo. “And see if you can find a value on that bronze bust. Jo can fill you in.”

Jo passed out the coffees, watching Sam out of the corner of her eye. He wasn’t saying everything, but that was typical. There was something lurking behind his eyes, something he wasn’t ready to share yet.

The door swung open, and Marnie Wilson strode in, her heels clicking on the worn floor. Jo’s gaze snapped to her, and that feeling in her gut stirred. Marnie looked too concerned, her perfectly composed face a little too tight.

“Is it true? Garvin McDaniels is dead?” Marnie’s voice wavered, but there was something behind it that Jo couldn’t place. Something that didn’t sit right.

Sam watched her closely, his eyes narrowing. “News travels fast,” he said, voice measured. “Were you close to him?”

Marnie blinked, too quickly. “Well, no, not close. But I spoke to him a few times. You know, I wanted to understand what seniors in town care about. It’s part of my campaign.”

Jo’s stomach twisted. There it was—Marnie’s politician mask slipping back into place. Jo didn’t trust her. Never had.

“What happened? Was it a heart attack? A stroke?” Marnie pressed, her fingers curling tight around the strap of her bag.

Sam didn’t miss a beat. “Can’t comment on an ongoing investigation,” he said, voice cool.

Marnie paled. “An investigation? You mean he was murdered?” Her voice jumped, but there was something in her eyes that Jo caught—fear, maybe. Or something else.

“Like I said,” Sam replied, his tone unchanged, “we can’t comment.”

Marnie took a breath, smoothing her skirt with a practiced hand. The veneer of concern fell back into place. “Of course. It’s just... It’s always

upsetting to see one of our fine townspeople pass away."

Her words were polished, perfect for a campaign, but Jo wasn't buying it. Jo watched Marnie walk out the door, her gut telling her this wasn't merely concern for a local's passing. There was more to it. A lot more.

CHAPTER THREE

Sam stood in front of the corkboard in his office, eyes scanning the crime scene photos, each one a piece of a puzzle he couldn't quite solve. Jo leaned against the desk, arms crossed, the weight of Garvin's death pressing heavily on her.

"All right," Sam said, low and measured. "Let's go over the scene."

Wyatt and Kevin exchanged a glance, the tension in the room thick. Lucy dozed in a patch of sunlight by the window, oblivious.

Jo stepped forward, eyes locked on the picture of Garvin's body. "They broke in, surprised him."

Sam nodded, brow furrowed. "But why? What were they after?"

Wyatt pointed to a shot of a smashed chair and scattered dishes. "He fought back. Not bad for a guy his age."

"Yeah, but whoever it was, they won," Kevin added. "One person? Or more?"

Sam turned back to the board, narrowing his eyes at the chaos. "Hard to say. The snow covered any footprints. But this seems more like a beating than a robbery."

They all stared at the photos for a few beats.

Kevin broke the silence. "I went back after John left. Dusted for prints."

"And?" Sam asked without looking away from the board.

"Only found two sets."

"Garvin's, for sure," Sam said, turning to face the team.

Jo shifted, her stomach tightening. "And mine."

Wyatt cleared his throat, tapping his fingers on the desk. “So all we’ve got is the hair tie unless we find some DNA somewhere else in the house?”

Kevin tapped a pen against his notepad. “Lab’s running DNA on the hairs. We’ll have something in a few days.”

Sam’s eyes flicked to Jo. There was something in his look—concern, maybe, or suspicion. “We need to dig deeper into Garvin’s life. His finances, his relationships. There’s a motive here, buried under the surface.”

Jo bit the inside of her cheek, thinking about the last few times she’d talked with Garvin. She hadn’t seen any trouble on the horizon, but maybe she had missed something.

“Anyone else think Marnie’s visit was strange?” Sam asked, his voice tight.

Jo straightened. “Yeah, especially since Garvin mentioned her as one of the buyers for the cottage.”

Sam frowned. “Right. You said that before.”

The room went quiet, the implications hanging in the air.

Wyatt broke the silence. “You don’t think Marnie killed him?”

Sam shook his head. “Wouldn’t be her style.”

Kevin snorted. “Can’t see her getting her hands dirty.”

Sam’s jaw tightened. “Still puts her on the list.”

Wyatt leaned forward. “She seemed eager to know what happened. Like she was fishing for information.”

“Or making sure we didn’t have any,” Kevin added, suspicion edging his voice.

Sam’s eyes stayed on the board. “I’ll handle Marnie. We need to be careful. She’s too connected in this town.”

Jo’s fingers drummed against her arm. “What about Garvin’s kids? Any luck finding them?”

Kevin flipped through his notepad. “Got their contact info. Both out of state—one in California, the other in Florida. I have calls in to them.”

Sam nodded. “Good. What else?”

Wyatt cleared his throat. “I’m still digging into Garvin’s financials. So far, nothing suspicious.”

Jo pushed off from the desk, pacing. “We need to check with his neighbors too. See if anyone noticed anything unusual.”

“Agreed.” Sam made a note. “Here’s the plan—DNA results are pending. I’ll handle Marnie. Kevin, you’re on the kids and neighbors.

Wyatt, keep at the financials. Jo, you get with Reese and see if you can figure out what that bronze statue was worth."

CHAPTER FOUR

Jo sat down next to Reese at the reception desk, an old green metal relic from the station's earlier days as a post office. Major stretched lazily on the corner of the desk, eyeing them with casual disinterest. Lucy, always alert, sat by Jo's feet, her tail occasionally thumping against the floor.

Reese glanced up from her computer, curiosity written all over her face. "So, tell me about this statue. What exactly did it look like?"

Jo leaned back, thinking. "It was a bronze elk. Tall, regal. Standing in grass. Garvin always said it had been in his family forever, but I don't remember who made it. He was proud of it, though."

Reese nodded, her fingers already tapping at the keyboard. "All right, bronze elk. We'll see what we can dig up."

Major hopped off the desk and sauntered over to Lucy, rubbing against her as if to remind the German Shepherd who was boss. Lucy sniffed him and then laid her head back down.

Jo smiled slightly, watching the interaction. It wasn't that long ago that they were archenemies. Now, they seemed to be coexisting peacefully.

"Bridget's coming by later," Reese added. "She's bringing something from the bakery. Probably those almond croissants you like."

Jo's smile grew at the mention of her sister. Bridget landing that bakery job had been a godsend. "She's doing great there. I'm really happy she's found something she enjoys. It's a good fit."

Reese grinned. "She's a natural. And hey, I'm definitely not complaining about all the free treats."

Jo chuckled softly, feeling a little lighter for the first time in hours. Major leaped back up onto the desk, settling beside the keyboard as Reese clicked through images on the screen. Jo's attention shifted back to the search.

"Okay, let's see if any of these look familiar," Reese said as they scrolled through pictures of bronze sculptures. Some were close, but none quite matched the one from Garvin's place.

Lucy whined softly, sensing Jo's lingering tension. Jo reached down, giving her a quick pat. "None of these feel right," Jo muttered, frustration bubbling up.

They continued searching, Reese typing the keys around Major's tail, which kept making its way onto the keyboard. Jo's eyes caught on an image. She leaned in, heart quickening. "Wait—that one. That's it."

Reese clicked on the image, bringing up the details. The bronze elk stood tall and proud, its legs rooted in a patch of grass, like the one she remembered at Garvin's.

Reese scanned the description. "Stanley Clifton, huh. It says here it's a hundred years old. Clifton's stuff is valuable—really valuable."

Jo frowned. "Clifton... Garvin mentioned his great-uncle made the statue, but I don't remember hearing the name Clifton. Could Garvin have been related to him?"

Reese tapped the screen. "Maybe. Stanley Clifton was apparently a big deal. His original works go for high tens of thousands."

Jo's gut tightened as the implications hit her. "So if Garvin's bust was an original, we're talking pretty good money."

"Exactly." Reese sat back, glancing at Jo. "But it also says that there are replicas that only go for about a hundred."

Jo exhaled slowly, trying to piece things together. "Garvin wasn't flashy. He wasn't the kind of guy to brag about his stuff, but he did always say that statue was special. Maybe he didn't even know how much it was worth… if it even is the original."

Reese clicked through more details about Clifton's work. "We need to figure out if Garvin's bust was the real deal. If it was a Clifton original, we're probably looking at a planned theft, not just some random break-in."

Jo nodded. "That changes things. This wasn't just about taking something off a shelf. Someone knew what they were after."

Reese raised an eyebrow. “You think Garvin’s family would know? Any chance they could tell us if it’s been passed down?”

“Maybe. We’ll have to find out.”

Lucy’s ears perked up two seconds before Sam walked into the area. Lucy immediately went over to stand beside Sam, who gave her a quick pat on the head before looking at Jo and Reese.

“I’m heading over to Marnie’s campaign office,” Sam said, his tone casual but focused. “Figured Lucy could use some air.”

Jo and Reese exchanged a knowing glance, rolling their eyes in unison. Jo leaned back in her chair. “You want me to come along?”

Sam shrugged, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Maybe I’ll get more out of her going in solo.”

Reese snorted softly. “Oh, you’ll get something out of her, all right. But be careful—Marnie’s after more than information.”

Jo chuckled under her breath. There was no love lost between her and Marnie, and she didn’t mind not accompanying Sam.

“Did you guys find out anything about the statue?”

Jo told him what they had found, and Sam nodded thoughtfully.

“So maybe this was about money, then,” he said.

“Maybe.”

“But if so, why was Marnie so interested? Do you think she truly was concerned about a town resident?” Sam asked.

Reese snorted.

Sam smiled. “Lucy and I will do our best to find out.”

With that, he gave Lucy’s leash a light tug, and they headed toward the door. Jo watched him go, a small grin still on her face as she turned back to the screen. “Good luck with that.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Marnie's campaign headquarters buzzed with activity as Sam pushed open the glass door, Lucy padding silently beside him. The sharp scent of fresh paint hung in the air, mingling with coffee. Volunteers huddled over computers, pinning flyers on corkboards. It was a scene of organized chaos.

Something in the back caught Lucy's attention. She trotted off, nose twitching, as she made her way toward the far wall, where a new campaign sign was being painted. Sam's eyes followed her—and that was when he saw him. Desmond Griggs. The town thug, barely out of his teens but already making a name for himself.

What was he doing here?

Sam frowned. He hadn't thought Desmond cared about politics. But then again, maybe it wasn't politics he was here for.

At the center of it all stood Marnie, honey-blond hair catching the overhead light. She was all smiles, gesturing to her team like a natural, drawing them in. Sam paused, watching her. The charm was undeniable—but so was the undercurrent of something darker.

Marnie's eyes found him across the room, and her smile widened. She excused herself from her staff and strode over, heels clicking on the polished floor.

"Sam," she greeted him, her voice warm but with a touch of flirtation. "Twice in one day? I must be lucky."

"Something like that," Sam said, unmoved. "I need a word. In private."

Something flickered across her face—concern, maybe, but gone before he could be sure. Lucy joined them as she led him to a small office off the

main room, shutting the door behind them. Lucy sniffed along the edges, her nose twitching.

Marnie gestured to a chair. “Please, have a seat.”

Sam stayed standing. His eyes scanned the cluttered desk—papers, campaign flyers, a wall covered in polling data. “Thanks for making time, Marnie. I know you’re busy.”

“Always time for you, Sam.” She perched on the edge of her desk. “What can I help you with?”

“I wanted to follow up on your visit to the station. You seemed pretty concerned about Garvin McDaniels.”

Her expression shifted to one of civic duty, brows knitting just enough. “Of course. Garvin was well respected. His loss is a tragedy for the community.”

“Right,” Sam said, his tone neutral. “How well did you know him?”

She hesitated, barely a second. “I told you, I spoke with him about senior initiatives. It’s an important part of my platform.”

Sam took a step forward, eyes narrowing. “There’s talk you were interested in buying some property he owned. A cottage.”

Her smile faltered. “What? I didn’t realize Garvin had a property for sale.”

Sam tilted his head, watching her. “Not officially. But I heard you asked about it.”

Marnie’s voice tightened a fraction. “I’ve been focused on my campaign, Sam. I wouldn’t waste my time with a cottage. There’s too much at stake right now.”

He didn’t blink. “You sure? You seemed upset at the station.”

Marnie straightened, arms crossing over her chest. “As the future mayor, I care about everyone in this town.”

Sam glanced out through the office’s glass wall, catching sight of Desmond Griggs lingering in the back. His mouth tightened. “Even Desmond Griggs?”

Marnie followed his gaze but didn’t flinch. “Of course. I know he’s been in trouble, but he’s turning things around. I’m giving him a chance.”

Sam studied her, wondering if she believed that—or if she just wanted him to believe it. He wished Jo were here. She could read people better than he ever could. If Marnie was really helping Griggs, maybe she wasn’t as bad as they thought.

“All right, Marnie,” Sam said slowly, letting the weight of the conversation settle. “Thanks for your time. I may need to talk to you again.”

“Of course.” The relief in her voice was palpable. “Anything to help. You know where to find me.”

Sam nodded and turned toward the door, Lucy trotting at his side. But as he left, something gnawed at him. Jo had said Garvin told her that Marnie was interested in the property. Marnie said no. One of them was lying—and it wasn’t Jo.

So the question was, was the liar Marnie or Garvin?

CHAPTER SIX

Jo was at her desk, trying to untangle Garvin's family tree to link him to Stanley Clifton, when the door banged open. She looked up as her sister, Bridget, burst in—an anxious whirlwind of energy—along with the sweet smell of freshly baked cookies.

"Jo!" Bridget called, clutching a white bakery box to her chest, apron still dusted with flour. "I heard about Garvin. Are you okay?"

Jo pushed back her chair, scraping the worn floorboards. "I'm fine, Bridge," she said, standing as Bridget wrapped her in a tight hug. The scent of vanilla and cinnamon clung to her clothes.

Bridget pulled back, her eyes scanning Jo's face. "I can't believe it. Garvin... Who would want to hurt him?"

Jo shook her head, her voice low. "That's what we're trying to figure out."

Wyatt and Kevin had been hovering nearby, and Bridget noticed them for the first time. She lifted the bakery box. "I brought cookies. I didn't know what else to do. I just... needed to bring something."

Kevin stepped forward, taking the box. "Thanks, Bridget. We could use something sweet about now."

The group gathered around Jo's desk, opening the box to the smell of warm chocolate chip cookies.

Bridget glanced around then lowered her voice. "What happened? Can you talk about it?"

Jo sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Someone broke into his house. There was a struggle..."

Her words trailed off, the image of Garvin's body flashing in her mind. Wyatt picked up where she had left off, his tone flat. "Could've been a robbery gone wrong. But it sure felt personal."

Bridget's eyes widened, her hand flying to her mouth. "Oh, God. Poor Garvin."

Jo reached over, squeezing her sister's hand.

Silence fell over the group, broken only by the soft crunch of cookies. Bridget scanned the room, her brow furrowing. "Where's Lucy? I brought her a special treat."

"With Sam," Kevin said, brushing cookie crumbs from his shirt. "He's talking to Marnie Wilson."

Bridget's eyebrows shot up. "Marnie Wilson? The woman running for mayor? What does she have to do with Garvin?"

Jo and Wyatt exchanged a look before Jo spoke. "Not sure yet. Sam's just following up on something."

As if on cue, a loud meow echoed through the station. Major sauntered over, his green eyes locking on to Bridget like he owned the place. He stopped in front of her, his gaze expectant.

Bridget smiled, reaching into her apron pocket. "I guess Lucy will have to wait for her treat. You want it, Major?"

The cat meowed again, more insistently. Bridget placed a small dog treat on the floor, and Major snatched it up, trotting off like he'd just caught dinner.

Bridget watched him go, her brows drawing together in confusion. "Where's he going with that?"

Jo smirked, leaning back in her chair. "Not sure. He's got a spot somewhere he's burying them."

Kevin chuckled. "Probably hiding them from Lucy. Smart cat."

Bridget paused, her hands resting on the edge of the table. "I guess I'll have some extra time on my hands now." She glanced at Jo with a small smile. "Maybe I can find someone else who appreciates home-cooked meals."

Jo grinned. "Well, that frees you up to cook more stuff for us."

Bridget laughed softly, but as she said it, her eyes flickered briefly to Kevin, who was reaching for another cookie. He caught her gaze and quickly looked away, a faint blush creeping up his neck.

Bridget checked her watch and stood. “I’d better get back to work. My break’s almost over.”

Kevin stood as well, grabbing his jacket. “I’ll walk out with you. I’m on my way to talk to Garvin’s neighbors, see if they noticed anything suspicious.”

KEVIN HELD the door for Bridget as they stepped out into the parking lot, the winter sun bright but offering little warmth. They both tugged their jackets tighter against the cold.

“So, how’s the new job?” Kevin asked as they walked toward his car. He was using his own today since Sam was out with the Tahoe.

Bridget’s face lit up. “Oh, I love it. The bakery is great—smelling fresh bread and pastries all day, regular customers... It’s helping me feel like part of the community.”

Kevin smiled, genuinely glad for her. “Sounds perfect.”

They paused by the cars, neither in a hurry to leave. Kevin hesitated. “You doing okay? Haven’t noticed anything... strange?”

Bridget’s smile faltered just for a second. “I’m fine. But... I still look over my shoulder a lot.”

Kevin’s heart sank a little. Bridget had shared parts of her past with him, stuff she didn’t talk about with others. It meant something that she trusted him.

“Keep your eyes open,” Kevin said quietly, glancing around the empty lot.

“I will,” Bridget assured him, her smile returning. She changed the subject. “Any progress on that thumb drive thing?”

Kevin stiffened. The thumb drive. It had been haunting him since he found it, tucked in with his things after the hospital. The data on it pointed to an old narcotics case and had led them to the burial grounds of a serial killer. But the way he’d retrieved the password—he couldn’t tell Sam or Jo about that. Not without blowing his cover. And he was sure there was more to the thumb drive than they’d discovered thus far.

“Not much to report,” he said, trying to keep his tone light.

Bridget gave him a look, her brow furrowing. “You still have it, right?”

“Yeah.” Kevin glanced around again, instinctively checking the lot. They were alone, but he still felt like someone was watching. “I’ll be glad when it’s all over. I need to clear the air with Sam and Jo.”

Bridget hesitated then smiled softly. “I could help, you know. Maybe take a look with you? Sometimes, a fresh pair of eyes spots things.”

Kevin felt a warmth spread through him. “That’d be great. You sure?”

“Of course.” She grinned. “Besides, I’ve got to find someone to feed my casseroles to now that Garvin’s gone.”

Kevin chuckled, nodding. “Thursday night?”

“Sounds good.” Bridget winked. “I’ll bring the food. You bring the mystery.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“I’ll walk back to the bakery from here. It’s just a block away,” she said, pointing down the street. She gave him a quick wave before heading down the sidewalk, disappearing around the corner. Kevin watched her go, feeling a strange mix of relief and tension settle over him.

As he headed toward his car, something caught his eye—a folded piece of paper tucked under his windshield wiper. His easy mood vanished. He slowed, frowning.

He yanked the paper free, unfolding it carefully. The words, scrawled in thick black ink, made his blood run cold.

BE *careful what you dig for.*

KEVIN’S PULSE QUICKENED. He scanned the parking lot, eyes darting from car to car, but the place was empty. Too empty. The winter sun, bright just moments ago, seemed harsh now, casting long shadows that stretched across the asphalt.

He crumpled the note in his fist, heart racing. His mind spun with questions, but one thought echoed louder than the rest.

Someone knows.

Kevin shoved the note into his pocket, his hands trembling as he reached for his car door. He quickly slid into the driver’s seat, locking the doors behind him. For a moment, he just sat there, staring straight ahead, his breathing shallow.

Who else knows about the thumb drive?

He started the engine, his thoughts racing as fast as his heartbeat. He couldn't shake the feeling that he had crossed into dangerous territory—territory where someone was watching his every move.

As he pulled out of the parking lot, that sense of unease stuck with him, heavier now. Whatever this was, he was in deeper than he'd ever imagined.

And someone was making sure he knew it.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Later that afternoon, Jo hadn't made any progress tying Garvin to Stanley Clifton when Sam returned with Lucy, her tail wagging as she padded into the station. Jo noticed a streak of blue on her tail.

"Lucy, what did you get into?" Jo asked, crouching down to inspect it.

Sam chuckled, shaking his head. "Marnie's volunteers were painting campaign posters. And guess who was there?"

"Who?" Jo asked, though she already had a sinking feeling she knew the answer.

"Desmond Griggs." Sam's voice carried a note of disdain.

Jo's eyebrows shot up. "Griggs? Really? What's she thinking?"

Sam shrugged. "She says she's giving him a chance."

Jo snorted, reaching for a pair of scissors from Wyatt's desk. "Good luck to her. He's more likely to burn her campaign down than help it." She carefully snipped the painted fur from Lucy's tail. "Any luck with Marnie?"

Sam shook his head, running a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "She's sticking to her story. Says she was never interested in the property."

Jo snorted. "Sure, because pushy's her style."

Wyatt glanced up from his computer. "So Marnie's lying?"

"Seems like it." Sam nodded. "Or Garvin was. But why lie? What's so special about that land?"

Jo's mind raced, recalling her conversations with Garvin. Something about the way he had talked about the property stuck with her. "He told me he didn't trust her—said she was too aggressive."

Sam frowned. “Think he could’ve been confused about who else was interested?”

“Doubt it. He was sharp.” Jo paused, the puzzle pieces still not fitting together. “He mentioned something about the land having ‘potential,’ but I thought he meant the view. What if it’s something else?”

“Like what?” Wyatt leaned forward, interest sparking in his eyes.

“I don’t know. But whatever it is, it’s enough for Marnie to lie.”

The room fell silent as the implications hung in the air. Jo could almost see Sam turning the information over in his head, trying to make sense of it.

Wyatt broke the silence. “You really think she’d kill for it? She’s running for mayor.”

Sam met his gaze. “And since when have politicians been squeaky clean?”

Wyatt smirked. “Fair point.”

Jo crossed her arms. “Marnie wouldn’t be the first official involved in something shady. Might not even be the first one to kill.”

Sam nodded, a flicker of determination in his eyes. “All right. Wyatt, I want you to follow her. See what she’s up to after she leaves her campaign office.”

Wyatt was already grabbing his jacket. “You got it. I’ll keep it low-key.”

Sam sighed. “I’ve gotta call Garvin’s son and daughter. Not calls I’m looking forward to.”

Jo winced. “I don’t envy you.”

Sam glanced at the clock on the wall. “Might need a drink at Holy Spirits after that. You in?”

Jo smiled. “I could be persuaded.”

The soft click of nails on hardwood interrupted the moment. Lucy, who had been dozing in the corner, was suddenly alert. She sniffed the air, padding over to the filing cabinet with growing interest.

“What is it, girl?” Jo asked, watching as Lucy’s tail wagged with excitement.

Lucy pawed at the base of the cabinet, whining softly. Jo knelt down, curious. Her fingers brushed against something small and hard. Pulling it out, she found a bone-shaped treat—the one Bridget had given to Major earlier.

“Well, would you look at that,” Jo said, holding it up.

Major sauntered into the room, his green eyes narrowing at the sight of Lucy nosing around his stash. The black cat's tail twitched with irritation.

"Sorry, Major. Looks like your secret's out." Jo tossed the treat to Lucy, who caught it mid-air with a crunch. Major's look of disdain was almost comical as he turned and leapt onto a nearby desk, his back to them.

Wyatt zipped up his jacket, laughing. "Looks like it's almost quitting time. I'll get a jump on following Marnie, see what she's up to after the campaign HQ."

Jo nodded. "Let me know if she does anything worth raising an eyebrow."

Wyatt flashed a grin. "You know I will."

As he headed out, Jo's mind raced. What was so special about the property? She'd lived in that cottage for years—nice spot, sure, but nothing worth killing over. But Garvin had hinted at something more. Something about the land.

Was Marnie lying about wanting it?

Was Garvin's death about the land or the valuable bronze statue?

Two possible motives and no time to waste figuring out which one was real. If Garvin had died over a piece of land or a bronze elk, it didn't matter—they had to find out fast.

Jo glanced at the clock. Every second counted.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jo pushed open the heavy oak door of Holy Spirits. The bar still held the soul of the decommissioned church it had once been—dim stained glass windows cast slants of red and gold across the floor, and worn pews had been refitted as booths. The altar, stripped of its old role, now served as a bar, rows of liquor bottles lined up like offerings.

The familiar scent of whiskey and polished wood wrapped around Jo like a worn blanket. She slid onto a stool near the bar, drumming her fingers on the scarred wood. "The usual, Pete."

Pete, a burly man with graying hair and a colorful tattoo on his forearm, poured her drink without a word, setting it down with a slight nod. Jo took a long sip, savoring the burn. Garvin's lifeless face flashed through her mind, followed by Marnie's too-slick smile at the station. Something wasn't adding up.

The door creaked, and Sam entered, broad shoulders silhouetted against the dying light from outside. His gaze found her immediately, and Jo gave a quick nod. He made his way over, settling beside her on a stool.

"Rough day," Sam said, ordering a beer. It wasn't a question.

Jo swirled the whiskey in her glass. "You could say that."

Pete returned with Sam's beer, and they sat in silence for a beat, the low murmur of conversation around them blending with the faint strains of classic rock from the jukebox.

"Talked to Garvin's kids," Sam finally said, breaking the silence. "They're flying out tonight and agreed to come to the station tomorrow."

Jo's grip tightened on her glass. "And what do you really make of Marnie saying she never wanted to buy the property?"

Sam shrugged. "Maybe Garvin was confused."

"You don't buy that," Jo said, looking at him squarely. "She barged into the station, practically demanding information. That wasn't just *neighborly concern*."

Sam's jaw clenched, a tell she knew well. "Politicians are good at lying, Jo. We can't go accusing her without proof."

Jo opened her mouth to argue, but the words faded as the door opened again, and Mick Gervasi sauntered in. Dressed in his usual black leather, the private investigator scanned the room with practiced ease before his gaze settled on them. Mick had known Sam since they were kids, and he'd helped them on a case or two when things got murky.

"Hey, Mick." Sam gestured to the empty stool on Jo's other side. "Perfect timing."

Mick slid onto the stool, waving to Pete. "Whiskey on the rocks," he said then turned to Sam and Jo with a grin. "What's got you two looking like somebody died?"

Jo gave a dry laugh. "Somebody did."

Sam gave Mick a rundown on Garvin's death and Marnie's suspicious behavior. "She's denying any interest in his property, but Jo's certain Garvin mentioned her."

"Definitely did," Jo said, her voice hard. "So why lie? What's special about that property?"

Mick's eyes narrowed as he thought it over. "Isn't she tangled up with Convale?"

"No, that's Beryl Thorne," Sam said, frowning. "But Convale's pumped a lot of money into Marnie's campaign."

Jo looked up, her interest piqued. "That's right. I'd forgotten about that."

Mick took a slow sip of his drink, ice clinking in the glass. "Want me to dig around? See what shakes loose?"

Sam nodded. "Wouldn't hurt. Jo's got a gut feeling, and it's usually on point."

Mick leaned in, voice low. "You know, speaking of Convale, my prior research dug up some rumors of an exposé a few decades ago. Journalist

dug into Convale's dealings but never published. Rumor is someone paid to keep it quiet."

Jo and Sam exchanged a look. "Think it's connected?" Jo asked.

Mick shrugged. "Maybe not. But my gut says there's something there."

Sam shook his head. "Doesn't seem tied to Garvin's death, but..." He trailed off, clearly thinking it over.

Jo sipped her whiskey and glanced around. A few regulars sat in booths along the far wall, hunched over drinks, and the occasional laugh or muttered conversation drifted through the space. Jo looked around, the familiar faces adding to the warmth of the bar despite the shadows in her mind.

Mick swirled his ice, breaking the quiet. "What about the Webster case? Feds finally packed up?"

Sam's expression darkened. "Yeah, they're done at Hazel's place. Ricky's there alone now."

Jo shook her head. "Poor kid. He's been through enough."

"Hazel's great-niece is raising hell, saying Hazel was framed," Sam said, lowering his voice.

Jo raised an eyebrow. "Framed? After what they found?"

"Some people can't face the truth," Mick muttered.

A silence fell over them, each lost in thought. Jo's mind wandered to her sister, missing for years. The old ache sharpened, familiar and raw.

Mick caught her expression. "They never found her, did they?"

Jo shook her head, unable to speak for a moment. Finally, she managed, "No. Which means..."

"Hazel might have another dump site," Sam finished, his jaw clenched.

The weight of it settled over them, heavy and dark. Jo took another long sip of whiskey, letting it burn away the chill.

"We'll keep looking, Jo," Sam said, his hand briefly touching her arm. "We won't give up."

Jo nodded, grateful for the support. But the dread gnawed at her. The Webster case, Garvin's murder, Marnie's lies, Convale's money—everything felt tangled, pieces of a larger puzzle she couldn't see.

"One thing at a time," Mick said, reading her thoughts. "We'll start with Marnie and Convale. See where it leads."

Jo managed a nod, feeling a flicker of relief. "Thanks for helping."

They sat in silence, finishing their drinks, each lost in thought. The flickering light from a candle on the bar cast long shadows over them, blurring edges, hinting at secrets hidden in White Rock's past.

Jo's instincts told her one thing—nothing here was ever simple, and with every step they took, something darker loomed.

CHAPTER NINE

Bridget poured hot water over a tea bag, the steam curling into the small kitchen. The scent of chamomile filled the air, soothing, but her fingers froze on the handle as she heard the crunch of gravel. Jo's truck had pulled up, and a familiar prickle of worry stirred in Bridget's chest. She grabbed a second mug, dropped in another tea bag, and went to the door.

Through the window, she saw Jo crouched by the steps, hunched shoulders barely visible in the evening light. Bridget's stomach tightened. Jo looked worn, her tired eyes focused on Pickles, the orange tabby who'd made himself part of their porch. Usually wary of anyone getting too close, Pickles leaned into Jo's hand as if sensing her weariness.

"Hey," Bridget said softly, stepping out with two steaming mugs.

Jo glanced up, a tired smile on her face. "Hey, sis."

Bridget set the mugs on the railing and crouched down beside her, reaching out to stroke the cat's back. "Would you look at that," she murmured, stroking the tabby's soft fur. "Guess he's warming up to us."

Jo nodded, her hand slowing. "Yeah, maybe he'll even come inside one of these days."

"At least he's got the porch," Bridget said, offering Jo her tea.

Jo took the mug, her face tightening as she blew on the tea. "Bridge, we need to talk about the cottage."

A chill went through Bridget that had nothing to do with the temperature. "What about it?"

"Garvin's kids are flying in tomorrow. With him gone…" Jo trailed off, glancing at the cat curled up at her feet.

Bridget's throat felt dry. "They might not want to sell to us."

Jo nodded, her gaze drifting. "We don't know what they'll decide."

Bridget gripped her mug, fighting to steady her thoughts. This place had become her sanctuary, her first real taste of stability in years. The thought of losing it, of being uprooted again, left her feeling untethered. She gestured to Pickles. "And him? If we have to leave…"

Jo reached over, squeezing her arm. "Hey, let's not get ahead of ourselves. We'll figure it out."

Bridget forced herself to nod, swallowing against the knot in her throat. *You just got settled here. Don't let it slip away.*

She shivered as a gust of icy wind swept through the trees, rustling the last of the fallen leaves across the gravel. She tugged her sweater tighter, glancing at Jo. "Let's head inside before we freeze."

Jo nodded, giving Pickles one final pet, then led the way. They stepped into the cottage, a cozy warmth washing over them. Though she'd only recently moved in, the place already felt like home to Bridget. Jo's "cottage chic" style filled every corner: thrifted knickknacks, well-loved furniture, and stacks of books. Jo had spent years scouring yard sales, picking out pieces with the same care she put into everything.

Bridget took it all in, grateful for the warmth and familiarity. The glow of a table lamp cast a soft light over the overstuffed couch, the polished wood floor, and the shelves lined with a mix of Jo's true-crime novels and her own well-worn self-help guides.

In the corner, their goldfish, Finn, swam up to the side of his aquarium, seemingly undisturbed by the chill they'd left behind. Outside, the soft trickling of the stream running through the woods added to the cottage's peaceful hum. Bridget set her mug down, taking in the small details that made the place feel whole.

Jo moved to Finn's aquarium, sprinkling in a flake of food. The goldfish darted up, snapping it in an instant.

"At least someone's happy to see me," she muttered, a faint smile crossing her face.

Bridget leaned against the doorframe, studying her sister's face. "Any leads on Garvin?"

Jo's smile faded. "Not yet. But it was violent, Bridge. Someone killed him, and I can't shake the feeling it's tied to this property."

A chill settled over Bridget as she glanced at the window, the shadows outside feeling deeper, closer. Her hand twitched, her mind flashing to the gun hidden under her bed. She hadn't told Jo about it—or about everything else she'd tried to leave behind. Jo had saved her, pulled her out of that life, given her a chance at something better. If Jo knew the whole truth, would she still look at her the same way?

Instead, she forced a bright smile. "I brought home some bread from the bakery. They were about to toss it. I could warm it up, make some olive oil and balsamic?"

Jo's face softened. "Sounds great."

Bridget busied herself in the kitchen, grateful for the distraction. She sliced the bread with careful precision, her hands steady despite her swirling thoughts. She didn't have to tell her sister everything. Not yet.

As she arranged the bread on a plate, her eyes drifted to Jo, sitting by the fire, her gaze distant. One word, and it could all unravel. Her past felt like a shadow that stretched over everything, threatening the life she'd built here, the peace she'd barely begun to trust.

She brought the bread to the table, trying to focus on the simple comfort of food and warmth. Jo looked up as Bridget set down the plate, a flicker of gratitude in her eyes.

"Thanks," Jo murmured. She took a slice, dipping it in the oil, savoring the simple meal as if it were a feast.

Bridget took a seat across from her, her own slice of bread in hand. The fire crackled softly, casting a warm glow over the room. It was quiet, peaceful—everything she'd ever wanted.

As she looked around, Bridget realized just how fragile it all was. A missing landlord. A violent death. A past that refused to stay buried. She tightened her grip on the bread, her mind racing with what-ifs. But she didn't have to face them alone. Not here, not with Jo beside her.

Jo caught her gaze, a small, reassuring smile softening her face. "Whatever happens, we're in this together."

Bridget nodded, her own smile wavering but determined. "Together."

CHAPTER TEN

The next morning, Sam stood as Derek and Leanne McDaniels entered his office, their faces drawn with grief and something else—tension, maybe even fear. He gestured to the chairs across from his desk.

"Thank you for coming," Sam said, his voice low and respectful. "I'm sorry for your loss."

Derek nodded stiffly while Leanne murmured a quiet "Thank you." They sat, shoulders rigid, eyes darting around the room.

Sam leaned forward, hands clasped on his desk. "I know this is difficult, but I need to ask you both some questions about your father."

"Of course," Derek said, his voice rough. "Anything to help find who did this."

Sam nodded, studying their faces. "When was the last time you spoke with your father?"

Leanne answered first, her voice barely above a whisper. "Three days ago. He called us both."

"Together?" Sam asked, raising an eyebrow.

Derek shook his head. "No, separately. He... He had some news for us."

Sam waited, sensing there was more to come. After a moment of tense silence, Leanne continued.

"Dad told us he was planning to change his will," she said, her eyes fixed on her hands in her lap. "He wanted to leave both his properties to some environmental trust instead of us."

Sam's eyebrows shot up. "Both? Including the cottage?"

Derek nodded, his jaw clenched. “All of it. Said he wanted to ‘protect the land’ or something. He’d been talking like that for months, getting more paranoid about the property.”

“Did he say why?” Sam asked, leaning forward.

Leanne shook her head. “Just kept saying there were people who wanted to ruin the land and he wanted to preserve it. We thought he was being dramatic, or maybe...” She trailed off, glancing at her brother.

“We wondered if he might be getting senile,” Derek finished, his voice hard. “Turns out he was serious.”

Sam nodded slowly, processing the information. “Did he say who these people were?”

Leanne and Derek shook their heads.

“And the will hadn’t been changed yet?” Sam asked.

“No,” Derek confirmed. “He was meeting with his lawyer this week to finalize it.”

The implications hung heavy in the air. Sam kept his face neutral as he asked, “And how did you both feel about this change?”

The siblings exchanged a look. “We were shocked, of course,” Leanne said carefully. “Hurt, even. But it was Dad’s property to do with as he wished.”

Derek snorted, earning a sharp look from his sister. “What?” he snapped. “Are we pretending we were fine with it? That land’s been in our family for generations. It should have stayed that way.”

Sam watched the interplay between them, noting every reaction. “I understand this must be difficult,” he said. “Just a few more questions. Where were you both the night your father was killed?”

Derek straightened in his chair, his face a mask of indignation. “Are you seriously asking us for alibis? We’re his children, for God’s sake!”

Leanne placed a calming hand on her brother’s arm. “Derek, please. I’m sure it’s just standard procedure.” She turned to Sam, her eyes wide. “I was at home in Boston. I had a Zoom call with my book club until about ten p.m. Several people can verify that.”

Sam nodded, jotting down notes. “And you, Derek?”

Derek’s jaw clenched. “I was at a bar with colleagues. We were celebrating landing a new client.” He pulled out his phone, tapping furiously. “I’ve got receipts, time-stamped photos, whatever you need.”

“You can’t seriously think we had anything to do with this,” Leanne said, her voice trembling. “He was our father.”

Sam held up a placating hand. “I assure you, this is standard procedure. We have to rule out every possibility, no matter how unlikely.” He paused, bracing for their reaction to his next request. “I’ll also need to get your fingerprints and DNA samples.”

“What?” Derek exploded, half rising from his chair. “This is outrageous! We came here to help, not to be treated like criminals!”

Leanne tugged at her brother’s sleeve, urging him to sit back down. “Derek, please. Let’s just cooperate and get this over with.” She turned to Sam, her face pale but composed. “Of course, Chief Mason. Whatever you need.”

Derek sank back into his chair, glaring at Sam. “Fine. But I want it on record that we’re only agreeing to this under protest.”

Sam nodded, keeping his expression neutral. “Duly noted. I appreciate your cooperation. It’s crucial in helping us find who did this to your father.”

As he led them to the processing room for fingerprinting and DNA collection, Sam couldn’t shake the feeling that there was much more to this story. The changed will, the secrets Garvin thought needed protection, the tension between the siblings—they all pointed to a motive far deeper than he’d initially suspected.

JO LOOKED up from her paperwork as Sam emerged from his office, Garvin’s children in tow. She watched as he handed them off to Reese for processing, her eyes narrowing slightly at the tension visible in their shoulders.

Sam caught her gaze and gave a subtle nod. After years of working together, Jo could read volumes in that small gesture. Something about the siblings didn’t add up.

As Reese led Derek and Leanne away, Sam made his way over to Jo’s desk, perching on the edge with a sigh.

“So?” Jo prompted, keeping her voice low.

Sam ran a hand through his hair. “Garvin was planning to change his will,” he said, his tone measured. “Wanted to leave the entire property to

some environmental trust instead of the kids."

Jo's eyebrows shot up. "The whole property? Including my cottage?"

Sam nodded. "Apparently. But here's the kicker—he hadn't finalized it yet. Was supposed to meet with his lawyer this week."

"Let me guess," Jo said, leaning back in her chair. "Bruce Benedict?"

"Got it in one," Sam confirmed. "We'll pay him a visit, see what he knows."

Jo nodded, her mind already racing with the implications. "The kids can't have been happy about the change."

"Understatement of the year," Sam muttered. He glanced around the office then lowered his voice further. "Listen, something's off with those two. I can feel it."

Jo watched as Sam stood and casually made his way over to Wyatt's desk. She couldn't hear what was said, but she saw Sam slip Wyatt a piece of paper, speaking in low tones. Wyatt nodded, his face serious as he immediately turned to his computer.

Sam returned to Jo's desk. "I've asked Wyatt to dig into Derek and Leanne. Phone records, recent travel, anything that might tell us if they've been in town lately."

"Good call," Jo agreed. She hesitated then asked, "Any word on Marnie?"

Sam shook his head. "Wyatt tailed her for a few hours last night. Said it was mind-numbingly boring. She went home and stayed there."

Jo frowned. "That seems... too easy."

"My thoughts exactly," Sam said.

Reese strode in, her normally cheerful face creased with a mix of exasperation and determination. "Derek and Leanne are processed and gone," she announced, her tone clipped.

Jo looked up from her desk, noticing the slight furrow in Reese's brow. "Everything okay, Reese?"

Reese sighed, holding up a small, colorful packet. "Look what I found in the supply closet, buried behind a stack of printer paper. Again." She shook her head, clearly annoyed at the disruption to her orderly domain.

Sam leaned back in his chair, a knowing look crossing his face. "Let me guess. Another one of Major's secret stashes?"

"Exactly," Reese confirmed, her eyes scanning the room for the culprit. "I swear, that cat thinks he's running some kind of underground treat

operation in my supply closet."

As if summoned by the mention of his name, Major stretched atop the filing cabinet, his green eyes laser focused on the treat in Reese's hand. His tail swished back and forth with barely contained anticipation, one paw stretching out demandingly.

Lucy, who had been dozing near Jo's desk, lifted her head, suddenly alert to the possibility of snacks.

Jo shot the German Shepherd a warning look. "Don't even think about it, girl. That's definitely not for you."

Reese, despite her annoyance, couldn't resist Major's silent plea. She took a treat out of the little bag and tossed it onto the top of the cabinet. The cat stopped it from sliding off with surprising dexterity and immediately settled down to enjoy his prize.

"I don't know how he keeps getting into the treat drawer," Reese muttered, straightening a stack of papers on her desk.

"Sorry, Reese," Sam said, though his amused tone suggested he found the whole situation more entertaining than problematic. "We'll try to keep a closer eye on his treat-hiding activities."

Reese nodded then seemed to remember something. Her face brightened slightly. "Oh, there is some actual case-related news. The lab results came back on that hair tie we found at the crime scene. There were roots attached to the hairs."

The atmosphere in the room shifted, all attention now on Reese.

"That's great," Jo said, leaning forward. "Any matches?"

"I'm running it through CODIS now," Reese replied, her efficiency shining through despite her earlier frustration. "It could take a while to get a hit, if we get one at all. But it's a solid lead."

Sam nodded, standing up. "Good work, Reese. Keep us posted on that. Jo, Lucy, and I are heading out to talk to Bruce Benedict about Garvin's will. Let us know immediately if anything comes up with those DNA results."

At the mention of an outing, Lucy's ears perked up, but her eyes remained fixed on Major, who was making a show of enjoying his treat atop the filing cabinet.

"Come on, Lucy," Sam called, grabbing his jacket. "Time to go."

Lucy whined softly, clearly torn between her duty and the possibility of Major dropping some crumbs.

Sam sighed, a hint of a smile on his face. “All right, how about this? We’ll swing by Brewed Awakening. I think they just got a fresh batch of those doughnut holes you love.”

The magic words “doughnut holes” had Lucy on her feet in an instant, suddenly the picture of a dutiful police dog ready for action.

Jo chuckled, reaching for her own jacket. “Well, that did it. Let’s go see what Bruce has to say about Garvin’s sudden change of heart.”

As they headed for the door, Reese called after them, “I’ll let you know as soon as we get anything on those DNA results. And Sam?”

He turned back.

“Maybe we should think about getting a lock for that treat drawer.”

Sam nodded, his expression a mix of amusement and resignation. “Add it to the budget request, Reese. Though something tells me Major would find a way around that too.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The law offices of Benedict & Associates occupied a stately Victorian on Elm Street, complete with gingerbread trim and a wraparound porch. Jo eyed the building as Sam pulled the cruiser to a stop, wondering how many of White Rock's secrets were locked away behind those heavy oak doors.

Lucy's tail thumped against the back seat, nose pressed to the window. Sam glanced at her in the rearview mirror, grinning. "This is it, girl."

"She'll think you're taking her for treats," Jo said, giving Lucy a quick scratch before stepping out of the cruiser.

The squeak of the porch steps brought Bruce Benedict, tall and silver haired, to the door. His gaze softened when he noticed Lucy.

"Chief Mason, Sergeant Harris. It's been a while," Bruce greeted them, his usual warmth tinged with worry. His eyes landed on the dog. "And who's this beauty?"

Sam gave Lucy a gentle pat. "This is Lucy, our police K-9. She's one of the team."

Bruce nodded approvingly, scratching Lucy behind the ears. "Well, she's a fine-looking officer," he said with a small smile before waving them inside.

The office smelled of polished wood and old leather, an atmosphere that somehow suited Bruce. Jo settled into one of the leather chairs in his office, surrounded by walls of legal tomes and a desk that seemed too big for any one person.

"Thank you for seeing us on such short notice, Mr. Benedict," Sam began, leaning forward.

Bruce nodded, taking a seat behind his desk. “I’m glad to help. Garvin was more than a client—he was a friend. This has shaken the whole town.”

“We’re trying to make sense of everything,” Jo said, choosing her words carefully. “We know Garvin had been thinking about changing his will.”

Bruce’s expression sobered. “He had, but it was still up in the air. Garvin talked about wanting to leave a legacy, something that would protect the land.”

“Protect it how?” Sam asked.

Bruce sighed, flipping through a file on his desk. “He wanted to prevent development on his property, make sure it stayed wild, untouched. We discussed him leaving it to a preservation committee instead of his kids.”

Jo’s eyebrows lifted slightly. “Did he give a reason?”

“Not directly,” Bruce replied, his gaze thoughtful. “But he hinted at wanting to ‘preserve something for future generations.’ Said he didn’t want his land turned into ‘some developer’s playground.’”

Jo’s mind turned to Marnie’s recent interest in the land. “So the will wasn’t finalized?”

Bruce shook his head. “No, he wanted to sort out a few things before making a final decision.”

“Like what?” Sam asked, his eyes narrowing.

Bruce closed the file and clasped his hands, looking uncertain. “One of the properties—on River Road. Garvin was debating whether to sell it before he signed anything. He had an interested party that he knew would take care of it and just wanted to be sure he was making the right decision.”

Jo’s heart lifted. River Road. Her cottage. Garvin really *was* going to sell to her.

“Did he mention who he might sell to?” Sam’s voice was steady, but his gaze was sharp.

“No,” Bruce replied, shaking his head. “He only said he was doing some research.”

Jo leaned forward, her curiosity piqued. “Research? About what?”

“It was odd.” Bruce’s eyes took on a distant look, as if recalling Garvin’s exact words. “He kept talking about the history of the land. He mentioned... old rumors. Said he wanted to ‘verify some things’ before he made any decisions.”

“Rumors?” Jo repeated. “Did he say what kind?”

Bruce shook his head, looking frustrated. “No, but he was unusually cryptic. That wasn’t like him. It was as if he’d discovered something he didn’t trust.”

Sam exchanged a loaded look with Jo. “And did he say who he might have been talking to about all this?”

“No names,” Bruce said, drumming his fingers on the desk. “But he did mention meeting someone soon. Said it was important.”

Lucy, who had been lying patiently by Jo’s side, pressed her head against Jo’s leg as if sensing the tension. Jo reached down, her fingers absently scratching Lucy’s ears.

Bruce took a deep breath, his gaze drifting to the window. “He was really determined to do this right, to make sure the land wasn’t just another piece of real estate. That was the last time I talked to him.”

Jo shifted in her seat, processing. “So he didn’t fully trust whatever information he had yet?”

Bruce nodded. “Exactly. I got the feeling there was something he hadn’t told me. He was always straightforward with his wishes—until recently.”

Sam glanced at Jo, his brows furrowing. “Bruce, would there be any records here at the firm—anything that might show what he was researching?”

Bruce shook his head. “Garvin kept most of his personal documents close to the chest. He only brought in what we needed to update the will. So any additional information would likely be in his own files or with... whoever he was planning to meet.”

Jo’s mind was whirring, piecing together a picture that felt more sinister by the minute. Marnie’s denial, Convale’s donations, and Garvin’s cautious approach. The land on River Road wasn’t just real estate. To Garvin, it had become something worth protecting.

She caught Sam’s eye, and he gave a small nod. He sensed it too—this wasn’t just about family estates or preservation societies.

“Thank you, Bruce,” Sam said, standing. “You’ve been a big help.”

Bruce rose, showing them to the door. “Chief, Sergeant”—his gaze softened on Lucy—“and Lucy. I hope you find who did this.”

“We’re going to try,” Jo replied, her voice a little tight. “Thanks again, Mr. Benedict.”

As they stepped outside, a gust of cold air hit them, and Jo took a long, deep breath.

Sam was quiet as they made their way to the cruiser then finally muttered, “You thinking what I’m thinking?”

Jo’s jaw tightened as she glanced back at the old Victorian. “I think Garvin knew something about that land. And somebody didn’t want it getting out.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sam steered the cruiser into the drive-through lane at Brewed Awakening, rolling up to the speaker, where Zoe's cheerful voice came through loud and clear.

"Welcome to Brewed Awakening! What can I get for you today?"

Sam leaned out the window. "Hey, Zoe. Two coffees, the usual. And a box of doughnuts for the station." He glanced at the back seat. "And doughnut holes for Lucy."

Zoe laughed. "As if I'd forget Lucy's order. That dog has a memory like a bank vault."

Lucy gave a soft woof, pressing her nose to the glass, tail wagging.

"See that?" Jo asked, smiling. "She knows."

They pulled up to the window, and Zoe leaned out with their order. She handed Sam a tray with the coffees, a big box of doughnuts, and a smaller bag for Lucy. "Here you go, Chief. And Lucy, there's your special delivery."

"Thanks, Zoe," Jo said, taking the treats and passing the bag to Lucy, who carefully pulled out a doughnut hole, crunching it with satisfaction.

"You two look serious," Zoe said, eyeing them as Sam passed the tray to Jo. "Everything okay?"

Sam gave her a polite smile. "Nothing a little coffee can't fix."

They pulled out, the cruiser filling up with the smell of coffee and sugar. Lucy nosed the bag, looking for seconds, but Jo gently tucked it aside.

"Save some for later, girl," Jo said.

They drove a few miles in silence before Jo spoke up. “So… about the cottage.”

Sam’s eyes flicked toward her, his tone easy but direct. “You’re worried about losing it?”

Jo nodded, tightening her grip on the coffee cup. “It’s not just a place to live, Sam. It’s home. For me, for Bridget, even for Pickles. Losing it would be…” She trailed off, shaking her head. “Not an option.”

Sam gave a small nod. “If Garvin didn’t finalize his will, that leaves his kids in charge, right? And neither of them lives in White Rock?”

Jo’s lips curved into a hint of a smile. “Exactly. They might be open to selling.”

They stopped at a red light, and Sam glanced at her. “But?”

She sighed, her gaze drifting to the storefronts of White Rock sliding past. “But there’s still that other interested party. What if they don’t want me to be the buyer?”

“Marnie?” Sam’s voice hardened. “Convale?”

Jo shrugged. “Could be anyone with a stake in this. They see something in that property Garvin never talked about.”

Sam’s jaw tightened. “We’ll deal with that if we have to. Right now, let’s stick to what we know.”

The light turned green, and they moved forward. Jo found herself staring out the window, thinking of Bridget, Pickles, the garden Bridget had been dreaming up. She’d carved out a life here. Losing it wouldn’t just be moving houses; it would be uprooting her entire peace of mind.

“You know,” Sam said, breaking into her thoughts, “whatever happens, you’ve got people in your corner. Bridget, the team, and me. We’re here.”

Jo gave a quick nod, her smile small but genuine. “Good to know, Sam.”

SAM PULLED the cruiser into the parking lot, the old post office-turned-police station coming into view. The familiar sight should’ve been reassuring, but Jo’s mind was elsewhere—on Garvin, the will, and what it all meant for her cottage.

Reese was at her desk in the reception area, busy with the latest small-town issue.

"No, Mrs. Deardorff, the police department doesn't handle goat-related property disputes," Reese said, her voice a mix of patience and amusement. "Maybe you could talk to your neighbor about Bitsy's taste for petunias?"

Sam raised an eyebrow at Jo, a faint smile on his face. Some things in White Rock never changed. He stepped inside, the scent of doughnuts wafting ahead of him.

Reese's eyes lit up as she spotted the doughnut box. She mouthed a quick "Thank you" as she reached for a glazed twist, finishing her call with Mrs. Deardorff before turning to them.

In the squad room, Kevin and Wyatt perked up at the sight of the doughnuts. "Help yourselves, guys," Sam said, setting the box on the table. "We've got news."

As Wyatt and Kevin dove in, Sam gave a rundown of their meeting with Bruce Benedict. Garvin's plans to change his will. His research into the River Road property. And the other interested party—who might or might not be Marnie Wilson.

"So Garvin was digging into the land's history?" Wyatt asked, wiping a trace of glaze from his fingers.

Jo nodded. "Benedict didn't have details, but whatever Garvin found, it sounded like he was meeting someone about it."

"A few of his neighbors weren't home when I went up there yesterday. I'll revisit them." Kevin leaned back in his chair, tapping his pen on the desk. "But we still don't know if that other buyer is Marnie?"

"Not officially," Sam said. "But her interest lines up a little too well, especially with Convale throwing money her way."

A weight settled over the room. Lucy padded over to Jo, resting her head on Jo's knee. Jo scratched behind the dog's ears, appreciating the comfort.

The quiet shattered when Reese burst in, her face flushed with something close to alarm.

"What is it?" Sam asked, standing up.

Reese took a deep breath. "We got a hit on the DNA from the hair tie we found at Garvin's."

A spark of hope flashed in Jo's eyes. "Someone we know?"

Reese hesitated, glancing between Jo and Sam. “It wasn’t a match in CODIS. But…” She paused, the words catching. “It matched someone in law enforcement.”

Silence fell. Sam’s voice was measured, careful. “Who, Reese?”

Reese swallowed. “It matched Jo.”

The room went still. Jo felt like the floor had dropped beneath her. Lucy pressed closer, her warm weight the only thing steadying her in the shock.

Sam was the first to break the silence, his tone direct. “Jo, you were over there often, bringing him meals. Could you have left it behind?”

Jo shook her head firmly. “No way. I never took my hair out of the holder there.”

Wyatt cleared his throat. “Maybe you took it down for a minute, adjusted it?”

“No,” Jo said, her tone steady. “I’m sure of it.”

“Maybe one fell out of your pocket?” Wyatt suggested.

Jo considered it but shook her head. “Unlikely. I don’t carry extras on me.”

An uneasy silence fell. Jo could feel her teammates’ eyes on her, their minds working through the implications. The unspoken question was clear: if she hadn’t left the hair tie, then who had?

Sam ran a hand through his hair, his frustration barely contained. “Look, we all know Jo wouldn’t hurt Garvin. But we also can’t ignore this. We have to do this by the book, Jo. No shortcuts.”

Jo straightened, meeting his gaze head-on. “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Wyatt leaned forward, his eyes narrowed in thought. “When was the last time you saw him, Jo?”

Jo took a steadying breath, recalling. “Four days before he died. Brought him some of Bridget’s soup. We talked on the porch, but I didn’t go inside because he was a little under the weather.”

“And you’re sure you didn’t leave anything behind?” Sam pressed.

Jo looked him in the eye, her voice unwavering. “Positive. I checked in the mirror before leaving that day. My hair was tied back, and it stayed that way.”

Kevin tapped his pen on his desk, brow furrowed. “So if you didn’t leave it… someone planted it.”

The realization hit them all at once. Reese broke the silence, voicing the conclusion they'd all reached. "Someone's framing Jo."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Later that afternoon, Jo sat at her desk, her mind still reeling from the revelation that someone was trying to frame her. She'd gone through several emotions since finding out, but now, she was just plain mad.

Sam approached, his footsteps heavy with concern. He pulled up a chair, sitting down beside her. "How are you holding up?" he asked, his voice low and gentle.

Jo looked up. "Fine. Angry. More determined than ever to find who did this."

"Right. And why. I mean, is it something against you? What was the reason for leaving something that points to you. Or maybe they just happened to find the hair tie and used it to muddy the waters?"

Jo's hand instinctively went to her ponytail, which was tied with the very same ties. "I doubt it. It's not like I take it out much, and when I do, I put the tie around my wrist."

"Are you missing one?"

Jo shrugged. "Don't think so. Hard to tell, though. I buy them by the package and don't exactly keep an inventory or anything."

Wyatt and Kevin, who had been hovering nearby, exchanged glances before joining the conversation. Wyatt leaned against a nearby desk, his arms crossed. "We need to figure out where they could have gotten your hair from," he said, his tone analytical. "It might give us a lead on who's behind this."

Kevin nodded in agreement. "Any ideas, Jo? Have you noticed anything strange at your place lately? Any signs of a break-in?"

The thought sent a chill down Jo's spine. "God, I hope not," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "The idea of someone being in my house, going through my things..." She shuddered, unable to finish the sentence.

Sam's jaw tightened, his protective instincts kicking in. "Let's not jump to conclusions. There might be a simpler explanation."

Wyatt nodded, his brow furrowed in thought. "He's right. Think about it, Jo. Your hair is probably all over this station. Near your desk, in the cruiser..."

"Not to mention the countless places around town where you might have lost a few strands," Kevin added. "It wouldn't be hard for someone to collect a sample without breaking into your house."

Jo felt a small wave of relief wash over her. "That... That actually makes me feel a bit better," she admitted. "But that means they'd have to work hard and with intention to just find some hairs."

Sam placed a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "We'll figure this out, Jo. Whoever's behind this, we'll find them."

"I still have some of Garvin's neighbors to talk to who weren't home when I went there earlier. Hopefully, one of them saw something, and we'll get a lead," Kevin said.

Just as Jo was starting to feel a glimmer of hope, the squad room door swung open. Mayor Henley Jamison strode in, his face set in a grim expression. The room fell silent, tension crackling in the air as the mayor approached.

"Afternoon, everyone," Jamison said, his voice clipped and formal. His eyes landed on Jo, and she felt her stomach drop. "Sergeant Harris, I need to speak with you. Chief Mason, you should be present for this as well."

Sam stood, his posture stiff. "What's this about, Mayor?"

Jamison glanced around the room, noting the curious faces of Wyatt and Kevin. "Perhaps we should step into your office, Chief."

"Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of my team," Jo said, rising to her feet. She squared her shoulders, meeting the mayor's gaze steadily.

Jamison hesitated for a moment then nodded. "Very well. Sergeant Harris, in light of recent developments, I'm afraid I have to relieve you of duty, effective immediately."

The words hit Jo like a physical blow. She heard Sam's sharp intake of breath beside her, felt the shock ripple through the room. "What?" she

managed to say, her voice barely audible.

"Mayor, this is completely unnecessary," Sam began, his tone sharp with anger. "Jo is a victim here, not a suspect. We believe someone is trying to frame her."

Jamison held up a hand, cutting off Sam's protest. "I understand your position, Chief. But the fact remains that evidence linking Sergeant Harris to the crime scene has been found. It would be highly improper for her to continue working on this case."

Jo felt as if the floor was tilting beneath her feet. She gripped the edge of her desk, steadying herself. "Mayor Jamison, I assure you, I had nothing to do with Garvin's death. I would never—"

"I'm not accusing you of anything, Sergeant," Jamison interrupted, his tone softening slightly. "But we have to consider the optics of the situation. If word gets out that you're still on the case despite this evidence, it could compromise the entire investigation. Not to mention..." He trailed off, looking uncomfortable.

"Not to mention what?" Sam pressed, his voice tight with barely contained anger.

Jamison sighed. "Not to mention the potential impact on my reelection campaign. Marnie Wilson would seize on this in a heartbeat, using it to paint my administration as corrupt or incompetent."

Jo felt a surge of bitter disappointment. Of course, it all came down to politics. She opened her mouth to argue, but to her surprise, Sam beat her to it.

"With all due respect, Mayor," Sam said, his voice low and dangerous, "if you think I'm going to let you sacrifice one of my best officers for the sake of your campaign—"

"Sam," Jo interrupted, placing a hand on his arm. She could feel the tension thrumming through him, knew he was on the verge of saying something he couldn't take back. "It's okay."

Sam turned to her, disbelief etched on his face. "Jo, you can't be serious. This isn't right."

Jo met his gaze, trying to convey her resolve. "Maybe not, but the mayor has a point. We can't risk compromising the investigation." She turned back to Jamison, her voice steady despite the turmoil inside her. "I understand, Mayor. I'll step down for now."

Jamison nodded, looking relieved. “Thank you for your understanding, Sergeant. I assure you, this is temporary. Once this matter is cleared up—”

“Save it,” Sam growled, still glaring at the mayor.

Jo moved to her desk, pulling out her badge and gun. She held them for a moment, feeling their familiar weight in her hands. Then, with a deep breath, she held them out to Sam. “I guess you should take these,” she said softly.

Sam stared at the offered items, his face a mask of conflicting emotions. For a moment, Jo thought he might refuse. Then, with a barely perceptible nod, he took them from her, his fingers brushing hers in a gesture of silent support.

As the tense scene unfolded, movement from the top of the filing cabinet caught Jo’s eye. Major had been observing the proceedings with his usual air of feline indifference. Now, as Jamison stood near the cabinet, Major leaned forward, snaking his paw out slowly. With one quick swipe, he jabbed Henley in the shoulder.

“Ouch!” Henley whirled around. The cat simply sat there, looking all innocent. “Did you just scratch me?” Henley brushed at his shoulder.

“I didn’t see anything, did you?” Kevin looked at Wyatt and Sam, who all shook their heads.

“I’ll clear out my desk,” Jo said.

“There’s no need for that,” Jamison said quickly. “As I said, this is temporary. Just... take some time off. We’ll sort this out.”

Jo nodded.

Jamison looked relieved to end the uncomfortable scene. “I’m sure Chief Mason will keep you informed of any developments.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jo may have been relieved of duty, but that didn't mean she'd sit around while someone framed her for murder. She drove home fast, her mind set on how to fight back.

When she parked, she noticed Pickles under the porch rocking chair, tail flicking. "Hey, Pickles," she said, scratching the cat's head. "At least you're not out to get me."

Inside, she tossed her keys on the counter, grabbed a can of cat food, and spooned it into a dish. "Here you go, buddy." She glanced at Finn, her goldfish, circling his bowl, oblivious. "Must be nice, Finn. No setups in your world."

Jo set the dish on the porch for Pickles, watching as he approached. "Listen, buddy," she murmured, settling into the rocker. "I don't know how much longer we'll be here. So think about coming inside so I can take you to the next place." She ran a hand over her face, frustration simmering. "One step at a time, right?"

She stood, feeling the weight of the investigation. Inside her bedroom, the old armoire stood like a fortress, holding a mix of memories and the skeletons she'd rather leave untouched. But she needed space for a new investigation board, one focused on clearing her name. She opened the armoire, her gaze brushing over a box marked with her youngest sister's name.

"Tammy." Her chest tightened, but she shook it off. "Not now," she whispered, pushing the box aside.

Instead, she started tacking notes and timelines to the inside of the doors. What had Garvin found, and who wanted her out of the way?

An hour later, Jo stepped back, staring at the bare beginnings of her board. She needed an outsider's perspective—someone who could dig around, no questions asked. She pulled out her phone, scrolling to Mick's number.

It rang twice before she heard his familiar, gruff voice. "Gervasi."

"Mick, it's Jo. I need a hand."

A pause. "I heard what happened. You holding up?"

"Not going down without a fight," she replied. "Can you come over?"

"Twenty minutes." Mick hung up, no more questions asked.

While she waited, Jo paced the living room, mind racing. Who had the access to frame her? Who'd gain from Garvin's death? She had to break this open, fast.

Twenty minutes later, the rumble of Mick's truck pulled her from her thoughts. She opened the door as he climbed out, his gaze scanning her yard with a practiced eye.

"Thanks for coming," she said.

He nodded. "You know I've got your back." His gaze was sharp, searching, as he stepped inside.

Jo led him to the bedroom, motioning to her makeshift investigation board. "It's not much," she said, but he was already studying it.

Mick crossed his arms, his brow furrowed. "All right. Walk me through it."

For the next hour, she recounted everything—the body, the hair tie, the DNA match. Mick listened without interrupting, occasionally jotting a quick note.

"So, whoever it is got ahold of your hair. That's personal." Mick leaned against the wall, eyes narrowing. "Any ideas?"

Jo shook her head, frustration biting into her words. "None. Sure, I've crossed a few people, but this feels different. This feels... close."

"What about Marnie Wilson?" Mick asked. "She's got eyes on Garvin's land, right? And a detective on the hook for murder would make her campaign look a lot cleaner."

Jo frowned. "Maybe. But there's got to be more to it. It doesn't add up."

"Or his kids," Mick added. "They'd lose a payout if Garvin went through with that will change."

Jo considered it, frustration sparking. “But I don’t know them, and they don’t know me. How would they get ahold of my hair?”

“Maybe they didn’t,” Mick said. “Could be someone working with them. Someone with access to you.” He shook his head. “We’ll get to the bottom of it.”

Jo felt a surge of gratitude, the weight in her chest easing for the first time all day. “Thanks, Mick. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

He waved it off. “What are friends for?”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kevin pulled up to the bakery, his heart rate picking up slightly as he caught sight of Bridget through the window. He took a deep breath, reminding himself that he was only here for cookies. At least, that was what he'd tell her. The truth was, he couldn't stop thinking about Bridget, and any excuse to see her was good enough for him.

As he pushed open the door, the bell chimed softly. Bridget looked up, a smile spreading across her face when she saw him. Kevin felt a warmth in his chest at her reaction.

"Hey, stranger," Bridget called out. "What brings you by?"

Kevin shrugged, trying to appear casual. "Oh, you know, just had a craving for some of your famous chocolate chip cookies." He approached the counter, his eyes scanning the empty bakery. "Slow day?"

Bridget nodded, brushing a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Yeah, it's been pretty quiet. But that means I get to experiment with some new recipes." She gestured to a tray of brownies cooling on the rack behind her. "I'm putting together a care package for Jo. Reese told me what happened."

Kevin's mood sobered at the mention of Jo. "Yeah, it's a mess. The mayor relieving her of duty... It's ridiculous."

"I can't believe anyone would think Jo had anything to do with Garvin's murder," Bridget said, her voice laced with concern.

Kevin leaned against the counter, lowering his voice even though they were alone. "Of course, we don't think for a minute she had anything to do with it. We'll investigate officially, and then unofficially, we'll help with whatever she needs."

Bridget smiled, a mischievous glint in her eye. “If I know Jo, she’s probably already out there tailing suspects.”

Kevin chuckled, picturing Jo staking out potential leads from her car. “You’re probably right. She’s not one to sit idle, especially when her reputation is on the line and I just got a lead that might help her.”

Bridget raised a brow, and he continued, “I just got back from talking to a neighbor. A red Prius was seen near Garvin’s property around the time of the murder. The neighbor thinks they remember a few numbers on the plate.”

Bridget’s brow furrowed. “A few numbers? Can you really figure out who it is from that?”

“Maybe,” Kevin replied. “Reese is running it through the database along with the car description. We’re hoping for a match.”

“Let’s hope,” Bridget said.

As Bridget continued to pack the brownies, Kevin found himself watching her hands move deftly, wrapping each treat with care. He couldn’t help but admire her dedication to her sister, her kindness evident in every gesture.

“You know,” Kevin started, his voice hesitant, “I’ve been thinking. Could this be related to your situation?”

Bridget paused, her eyes meeting his. “I don’t think so. This feels different. But I appreciate you thinking about it.”

Kevin nodded, but he couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that everything was connected somehow. He must have let his worry show on his face because Bridget stopped what she was doing and gave him a searching look.

“Kevin, what’s going on? You’re acting weird.”

He hesitated, torn between his desire to protect Bridget and his need for her help. Finally, he sighed. “I got a note on my car. It was a warning telling me to be careful what I dig for. I think it has to do with the thumb drive. Someone’s watching us, Bridget. Maybe we shouldn’t be seen together so much.”

Bridget’s eyes widened then narrowed with determination. “What? No way. Don’t forget; you saved my sister. I’m in this thing. Don’t shut me out now!”

Her fierce loyalty both touched and worried Kevin. He didn’t want to put her in danger, but he also knew he couldn’t solve this alone. “All right,

all right," he conceded. "But we need to be careful."

"So, what's our next move?" Bridget asked, leaning in closer.

"Listen," Kevin said, glancing at his watch, "we probably shouldn't talk about this here. You still coming over tomorrow night?"

Bridget nodded. "Yep, and I have a turkey meatloaf recipe I've been dying to try. I'll bring that over for dinner."

Kevin felt a flutter in his stomach at the thought of sharing a meal with Bridget. "That sounds perfect," he said, trying to keep his voice steady.

As he prepared to leave, Kevin found himself lingering, reluctant to end their conversation. He watched as Bridget finished packing the care package for Jo, admiring her thoughtfulness.

"You're a good sister, you know that?" he said softly.

Bridget looked up, a hint of vulnerability in her eyes. "I'm trying to be. After everything Jo's done for me... I just want to be there for her now."

Kevin nodded, understanding all too well the weight of past mistakes and the desire to make things right. "Well, I think you're doing a great job."

As he finally turned to leave, Kevin's mind was racing. He was excited about the prospect of spending more time with Bridget, but he couldn't shake the feeling that they were getting into something bigger than they realized.

Walking to his car, Kevin made a mental note to double-check his home security system before Bridget came over. He couldn't risk anything happening to her. As he drove away, he caught sight of Bridget in his rearview mirror, still visible through the bakery window. She was smiling, and that made Kevin smile too.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Wyatt shifted uncomfortably in his seat, his eyes fixed on Marnie's campaign headquarters across the street. The clock on his dashboard read 9:47 p.m., and he'd been parked in the same spot for over an hour. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, his other hand absently tracing the outline of the tattoo hidden beneath his sleeve.

The tattoo was a constant reminder of the secret he carried, a burden that weighed heavily on his conscience. Wyatt often wondered if his colleagues suspected anything. He knew Kevin had skeletons in the closet, but Wyatt doubted they were as dark as his own.

A movement caught his eye, pulling him from his thoughts. Marnie Wilson emerged from the building, her honey-blond hair gleaming under the streetlights. Wyatt straightened in his seat, adrenaline coursing through his veins as he watched her climb into her car.

As Marnie pulled away from the curb, Wyatt counted to ten before starting his engine. He eased into traffic, maintaining a careful distance as he followed her through the quiet streets of White Rock.

The chase gave Wyatt a rush, reminding him of his younger days when he'd first discovered his talent for computers. Back then, it had been about the thrill of pushing boundaries, seeing how far he could go without getting caught. Now, those same skills were put to use for a greater purpose, even if the methods weren't always strictly by the book.

Marnie's car turned onto a familiar street, and Wyatt's eyebrows rose as he recognized her destination. The Thorne residence loomed ahead, its imposing facade a stark contrast to the more modest homes surrounding it.

Wyatt pulled over, killing his headlights as he watched Marnie park in the driveway. She exited her car and strode purposefully to the front door, which opened before she could even knock. Beryl Thorne's petite figure was silhouetted in the doorway for a moment before both women disappeared inside.

As he waited, Wyatt's mind wandered to the case at hand. Jo's suspension had hit the team hard, and he couldn't shake the feeling that Marnie was somehow involved. But how? And what was her connection to Beryl Thorne?

A few minutes later, the front door opened again. Marnie emerged, clutching a thick manila envelope to her chest. She hurried to her car, glancing around furtively before getting in and driving away.

Wyatt waited a beat before following, his curiosity piqued by the mysterious envelope. What could be so important that Marnie would make a late-night visit to Beryl Thorne to obtain it?

They drove for about fifteen minutes, leaving the residential area and entering a more industrial part of town. Marnie finally pulled up in front of a nondescript building with a small, unassuming sign that read Parker Studies.

Wyatt parked a block away, watching as Marnie entered the building with the envelope. He glanced at his watch—10:32 p.m. An odd time for a meeting, especially for someone running for mayor.

With Marnie out of sight, Wyatt pulled out his laptop. If there was one thing he excelled at, it was digging up information that others wanted to keep hidden. His fingers flew across the keyboard as he began his search on Parker Studies.

To his surprise and frustration, he found... nothing. No website, no business listings, not even a mention on social media. It was as if Parker Studies didn't exist at all.

Wyatt's brow furrowed as he dug deeper, employing some of his more questionable skills to breach firewalls and access restricted databases. Still, he came up empty-handed. Whoever was behind Parker Studies had gone to great lengths to keep their operation off the grid.

Two hours crawled by, each minute feeling like an eternity as Wyatt alternated between watching the building and attempting to uncover any information about Parker Studies. His eyes were starting to burn from

staring at the computer screen when movement at the building's entrance caught his attention.

Marnie emerged, her face partially obscured by the shadows. Wyatt noticed immediately that she no longer carried the manila envelope. Whatever had been inside, she'd left it at Parker Studies.

As Marnie's car pulled away from the curb, Wyatt discreetly followed at a safe distance. He followed her to her home, noting the moment when the lights in her house flickered off one by one. Sighing, he decided it was time to call it a night.

On the drive back to his own place, Wyatt's mind buzzed with new questions. What exactly were the Parker Studies, and how did they connect to Marnie Wilson? And did this have anything to do with Garvin McDaniels's murder?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next morning, Sam arrived at the station early, his mind still churning over Jo's suspension. In the reception area, Reese was hunched over her computer, her brow furrowed in concentration.

"Morning, Reese," Sam called out. "You're here early."

Reese looked up, her eyes bright with excitement. "Chief! I've got something. The program spit out a match for that partial plate and car description that Kevin got from the neighbor."

Sam's pulse quickened as he moved to stand behind Reese's chair. "What have you got?"

"It's registered to a Clara Hartwell," Reese reported, pulling up the information on her screen. "She's a local land surveyor and historical researcher."

Sam leaned in, studying the details. "Good work, Reese. Any priors?"

Reese shook her head. "Nothing. Clean record. She's been a resident of White Rock for over twenty years."

Sam straightened, his mind already formulating a plan. "All right, I'm going to pay Ms. Hartwell a visit. Can you send her address to my phone?"

"Already done, Chief," Reese replied with a smile.

Sam turned to Lucy, who was sitting quietly, watching their conversation as if she could understand them. "Looks like we're heading back out."

Once in the car, Sam pulled out his phone and dialed Jo's number.

She answered on the second ring. "Harris."

“Jo, it’s Sam. We’ve got a lead on a car that was seen near Garvin’s property the day he died.”

He could hear the rustling of papers in the background as Jo spoke. “That’s great news. What have you got?”

Sam filled her in on Clara Hartwell as he navigated the streets of White Rock. “Does the name ring any bells?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line. “No, I don’t know her. Why would she be trying to frame me?”

“That’s what we’re going to find out,” Sam replied, his voice grim. “I’m heading over to interview her now. I’ll keep you posted.”

“Thanks, Sam,” Jo said, her voice softening. “Be careful, okay?”

“Always am,” Sam assured her before ending the call.

As they pulled up to Clara Hartwell’s modest Cape Cod, Sam noted the red Prius in the driveway. The gardens were tidy, neat as a pin, like Clara’s reputation. He climbed out, Lucy padding beside him, tail wagging.

A woman answered the door, looking from Sam to Lucy with mild curiosity.

“Ms. Hartwell?” Sam held up his badge. “Chief Sam Mason. I was hoping to ask you a few questions.”

Clara Hartwell’s brows lifted. “Chief Mason,” she said, her tone polite but guarded. “Of course. Come in.”

She led him into a cozy, book-lined living room. History texts and old maps covered the walls. Clara gestured to a chair as she took her own seat, eyeing Lucy.

“This is our police K-9, Lucy,” Sam said.

Clara smiled down at Lucy as the dog sat on the floor beside Sam’s chair.

“All right, then,” Clara said, settling in. “How can I help you?”

“Were you at Garvin McDaniels’s place two days ago?”

She nodded, a slight frown creasing her brow. “Yes, I was very sorry to hear about his passing. I had an appointment with him that afternoon, in fact. He’d asked me to look into some old land records for a property on River Road.”

“Any idea why he suddenly got interested in the property?” Sam asked.

Clara’s gaze drifted as she thought it over. “He said it was land he’d inherited years ago but never paid much attention to. Then, recently, he got

the impression it could be valuable." She glanced back at Sam. "He didn't say why. Just wanted to know if there was anything of historical interest."

"Did you find anything?" Sam prompted.

She rose, moving to a nearby bookshelf and pulling out a large folder. "Some old surveys show unusual features on the land. Nothing confirmed, but he was intrigued." She opened the folder, revealing faded blueprints and yellowed documents. "I gave Garvin copies of these."

Sam looked over the maps and documents, his mind racing. He hadn't seen anything like this in Garvin's house. "Any chance you remember where he put them?"

"He took them back to his place, said he'd look them over. But…" She paused. "You think they're missing?"

"It's possible." Sam tucked away that thought for later. "Did you notice anything unusual around the property? Strange activity?"

Clara thought for a moment then shook her head. "Nope, just the normal property map. Garvin was fine when I left."

"What time was that?"

"Four o'clock."

Sam nodded, making a mental note. "Thank you, Ms. Hartwell. This has been helpful."

She walked him to the door, giving Lucy a quick scratch behind the ears. "Let me know if you need anything else, Chief."

Back in the car, Sam's mind raced. If those blueprints and documents were missing, it could mean they held the key to the motive behind Garvin's death. He'd have to recheck the house, this time with a sharper eye.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sam filled his coffee mug and turned to face the squad room. The absence of Jo felt like a missing limb. Lucy must have felt it too. She padded over to Jo's empty desk and sniffed at her chair, letting out a soft whine.

"I know, girl," Sam said softly, his voice tinged with a mixture of frustration and determination. "We'll get her back soon."

As if on cue, Major sauntered across the room and leapt onto Jo's desk. The black cat circled once before settling into a patch of sunlight, his green eyes surveying the room with regal indifference.

"All right, team," Sam began, his voice cutting through the heavy silence. "We've got a lot to cover, and time isn't on our side. Let's start with what we know."

Reese spoke up first. "Chief, I've been digging into Clara Hartwell's background. She checks out clean and was at work at the time Garvin died."

Sam nodded, processing the information. "Good work, Reese. So she's not the killer, but is the information she was looking into the reason he was killed?"

Kevin leaned forward, his brow furrowed. "Why would that get him killed? It doesn't make sense."

"Maybe it does," Wyatt interjected, his fingers tapping rapidly on his laptop keyboard. "If the land has historical value, it could interfere with someone's plans to exploit it somehow."

Sam's eyes narrowed. "Maybe. We're missing something crucial here." He turned to face the team fully. "When I spoke with Clara, she mentioned

leaving blueprints and historical documents with Garvin. But we didn't find any of that during our initial search of his house."

Wyatt tapped his pencil on the desk. "We weren't necessarily looking. We were focused on clues to the killer."

Reese's eyes widened. "You think the killer took them?"

"It's possible," Sam replied. "Or Garvin hid them somewhere we didn't think to look. Either way, we need to go back and search his place again, this time with a focus on finding those documents. Has that bronze statue Jo mentioned turned up anywhere?"

Reese shook her head. "I've been searching eBay and Marketplace, called antique dealers and auctioneers, but have nothing."

"John Dudley says the way the wounds were on the body indicate Garvin could have been killed by something like that, but he'd need the actual statue to say for sure," Kevin said.

"I found something interesting about Marnie Wilson," Wyatt said. "I tailed her last night, and things got weird fast."

Kevin raised an eyebrow. "Weird how?"

"She made a late-night visit to Beryl Thorne's place," Wyatt explained, his words coming out in a rush. "Left with a manila envelope then drove to some place called Parker Studies. Stayed there for a couple of hours, left without the envelope."

Sam's brow furrowed. "Parker Studies? Never heard of it."

"That's because it doesn't exist," Wyatt said, his voice tinged with frustration. "At least, not officially. I couldn't find a single trace of it online or in any business registries."

Reese leaned in, her curiosity piqued. "A front for something illegal?"

Sam nodded slowly, his mind racing. "Could be. But what's the connection to Garvin's murder and Jo's frame-up?"

Kevin stood up, pacing the room as he thought out loud. "Okay, let's break this down. We've got Garvin, who's considering selling his land. Then he finds out it might have historical significance and gets cold feet. Next thing we know, he's dead, and Jo's being framed for it."

"And now we've got Marnie Wilson, who's running for mayor, making secret late-night visits to Beryl Thorne and this mysterious Parker Studies place," Wyatt added.

Sam's eyes narrowed as he pieced it together. "It all comes back to the land. Whatever's on that property, it's valuable enough to kill for."

“But how does Jo fit into all this?” Reese asked, her voice laced with concern.

Sam shook his head, frustration evident in his voice. “I don’t know yet. But I’m willing to bet those missing blueprints and documents hold the answer.”

As Sam spoke, Lucy suddenly perked up, her ears twitching. She trotted over to a corner of the room where a stack of old case files had accumulated over the years. With determined focus, she began to dig, sending papers flying.

“Lucy, what are you doing?” Sam called out, moving toward the dog.

The German Shepherd pulled her head out of the pile, and to everyone’s surprise, she had the station’s infamous octopus toy clamped firmly in her jaws. It was the same toy that had been the source of an ongoing feud between Lucy and Major.

Kevin chuckled, shaking his head. “So that’s where she hid it. Clever girl.”

Major, who had been lounging on Jo’s desk, sat up straight, his green eyes narrowing as he watched Lucy trot to the sunny corner of the room. The dog settled down, placing the toy protectively between her paws, looking quite pleased with herself.

Sam couldn’t help but smile at the canine’s antics but quickly refocused on the task at hand. “All right, Lucy, don’t get too comfortable. We’re heading back to Garvin McDaniels’s place.” He turned to Kevin. “You up for a second look?”

Kevin nodded, already reaching for his jacket. “Absolutely, Chief. Maybe we’ll spot something we missed the first time around.”

“Good,” Sam replied then shifted his attention to Wyatt. “I need you to keep digging into this Parker Studies angle. There’s got to be something there. Check property records, shell companies, anything that might give us a lead.”

Wyatt’s fingers were already flying across his keyboard. “On it, Chief. I’ll let you know the moment I find anything suspicious.”

“Reese,” Sam continued, “I want you to go through our records. See if there are any other cases involving land disputes or historical property claims in the area. Maybe we’ll find a pattern.”

“You got it,” Reese replied, her voice filled with determination.

As Sam and Kevin prepared to leave, Lucy reluctantly got up, still clutching her prized toy. Major watched from his perch, tail twitching in annoyance.

“Sorry, Major,” Sam said to the cat. “Looks like Lucy won this round.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sam pulled up to Garvin McDaniels's house and glanced at Kevin in the passenger seat, noting the determined set of his jaw. "Ready for round two?" Sam asked, killing the engine.

Kevin nodded, his eyes already scanning the property. "Let's hope we find something this time."

As they exited the car, Lucy bounded out, her nose immediately to the ground. Sam watched her, a small smile tugging at his lips. If anyone could find something they'd missed, it would be Lucy.

"All right, girl," Sam said, patting her head. "Show us what you've got."

They approached the house, their footsteps crunching on the icy remnants of snow. The crime scene tape fluttered in the breeze.

Sam took a deep breath as they entered, the familiar scent of the house hitting him. It was a mixture of old wood, dust, and the lingering metallic tang of blood. He pushed aside the twinge of discomfort, focusing on the task at hand.

"Let's start in the study," Sam suggested, leading the way down the narrow hallway.

The study was small, dominated by a large oak desk and floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. Lucy immediately began sniffing around the baseboards while Kevin moved to the desk.

"If I were hiding important documents," Kevin mused, running his hands along the underside of the desk, "where would I put them?"

Sam started examining the bookshelves, pulling out volumes at random and flipping through them. “Maybe between the pages of a book? Or behind them?”

After thoroughly combing through the study and coming up empty-handed, they moved on to the bedroom. It was sparsely furnished, with just a bed, a nightstand, and an old wardrobe.

Lucy jumped onto the bed, her nose working overtime as she sniffed the pillows and blankets. Sam couldn’t help but chuckle at her enthusiasm.

“Easy, girl,” he said, gently pulling her off the bed. “Let’s try not to disturb things too much.”

Kevin was already rifling through the wardrobe, pushing aside old coats and sweaters. “Nothing here but mothballs,” he said, wrinkling his nose at the musty smell.

Sam knelt down, peering under the bed. “Nothing here either,” he sighed, standing up and brushing dust from his knees.

They continued through the house, methodically searching each room. The kitchen yielded nothing but expired cans of soup and a drawerful of takeout menus. The bathroom was equally unproductive, though Lucy seemed particularly interested in sniffing around the toilet.

“Come on, Lucy,” Sam called, gently tugging her leash. “I don’t think Garvin hid any maps in there.”

As they made their way back to the living room, Sam felt a growing sense of frustration. They’d been so sure they would find something, but the house seemed determined to keep its secrets.

“Maybe the killer did take those maps,” Kevin suggested, running a hand through his hair.

Sam nodded, considering the possibility. “You might be right. If someone took them after killing Garvin, we’re not going to find them here.”

“And that gives us motive.”

Lucy, seemingly sensing their disappointment, let out a soft whine. Sam reached down to scratch behind her ears, grateful for her unwavering support.

“It’s okay, girl,” he murmured. “You did your best.”

As they prepared to leave, Sam took one last look around the living room. The crime scene markings were still visible, stark reminders of the violence that had occurred here. He shook his head, trying to clear the image of Garvin’s body from his mind.

“Let’s head out,” he said to Kevin.

They stepped out onto the front porch, the cool air a welcome relief after the stuffiness of the house. Sam was about to descend the steps when Lucy suddenly stiffened, her ears perking up.

Before either man could react, Lucy darted forward, barking excitedly. She began pawing at a patch of melting snow near the base of the porch steps.

“Lucy, what is it?” Sam called, hurrying down to join her.

Beneath the layer of fluffy snow that had fallen after Garvin’s death was another layer of icy snow, and in that icy snow was a footprint. The killer’s? It was only a partial, and there was something else. The snow was tinged blue. Sam’s heart rate quickened as he knelt down for a closer look.

“Kevin, get a photo of this, and grab an evidence bag,” he called over his shoulder, carefully brushing away more snow.

Kevin was by his side in an instant, evidence bag at the ready. Kevin took a few pictures of the partial shoe print, and then Sam gently scooped up a small amount of the blue-tinged snow, making sure to get some of the surrounding area as well.

“What do you think it is?” Kevin asked, peering at the bag as Sam sealed it.

Sam shook his head, his mind racing with possibilities. “I’m not sure. Dye from what the person was wearing? Might not be the killer’s, but if Lucy thinks it’s important, we’d better take it seriously.”

“You mean like when you don’t sort your laundry and the dye from the darks runs all over your white T-shirts,” Kevin said.

Sam chuckled. “Exactly. Maybe the killer had new shoes.”

As they walked back to the car, Sam’s mind was buzzing with questions. What was that blue substance? How did it relate to Garvin’s murder? And most importantly, could it help clear Jo’s name?

He glanced at Lucy, who was trotting alongside him with her tail held high, looking immensely pleased with herself. Despite the lack of maps, Sam couldn’t help but feel a renewed sense of hope. They might not have found what they came for, but thanks to Lucy, they’d found something potentially even more valuable.

“Let’s get this back to the lab,” Sam said as they climbed into the car. “And Kevin? Make sure Lucy gets an extra treat when we get back to the station. She’s earned it.”

Kevin grinned, reaching back to ruffle Lucy's fur. "You got it, Chief. One extra-large treat coming right up for our star detective."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sam strode into the station, Lucy at his heels, with Kevin following close behind. The disappointment of not finding the maps at Garvin's house still weighed heavily on his mind, but the discovery of the mysterious blue substance gave him a glimmer of hope.

Wyatt looked up from his computer as they entered, his eyebrows raised in expectation. "Any luck at Garvin's place?"

Sam shook his head, sighing as he sank into his chair. "No maps, but Lucy found something interesting in the snow outside. We bagged it for the lab."

Kevin nodded, holding up the evidence bag. "It's some kind of blue substance. We're hoping it might give us a new lead."

Wyatt leaned back in his chair, his fingers steepled in front of him. "Well, I wish I had better news on my end, but this Parker Studies place is a ghost. It's like they've gone out of their way to hide what they do."

Sam frowned, his mind turning over the implications. "That's not a good sign. If they're that determined to stay off the radar, they must be involved in something shady."

"And with Marnie Wilson making secret visits there..." Kevin trailed off, the unspoken conclusion hanging in the air.

Sam stood up, pacing the room as he thought out loud. "It doesn't look good for her, that's for sure. But what could she be involved in? And how does it tie into Garvin's murder?"

Wyatt shrugged, his expression grim. "I don't know, Chief, but if she becomes the next mayor, it could be a real problem for the town."

“All the more reason to figure out what she’s up to,” Sam said, his jaw set with determination. “I might have to pay a visit to Parker Studies myself, see what I can dig up.”

Lucy, who had been curled up under Sam’s desk, suddenly perked up, her ears twitching. Sam glanced down at her, a small smile tugging at his lips. “What do you think, girl? Ready for another adventure?”

Lucy’s tail thumped against the floor in response, her eyes bright with eagerness.

Kevin chuckled, shaking his head. “I think that’s a yes, Chief.”

Sam nodded, his mind already planning his next move. “All right, let’s see what the lab comes back with on that blue substance. In the meantime, Wyatt, keep digging into Parker Studies. There’s got to be some way to find out more.”

“On it, Chief,” Wyatt replied, his fingers already flying across his keyboard.

Sam turned to Kevin. “And Kevin, I want you to take another look at the evidence from Garvin’s house. Maybe there’s something we overlooked, some clue that might tie into this Parker Studies angle.”

Kevin nodded, his expression serious. “I’ll go over everything with a fine-toothed comb, Chief.”

With his team set to their tasks, Sam retreated to his office, Lucy following close behind. He closed the door, leaning against it for a moment as he collected his thoughts.

His eyes fell on the framed photo on his desk, a candid shot of him and Jo at last year’s Fourth of July picnic. They were both laughing, their faces lit up with joy. The memory brought a bittersweet smile to his face.

“We’re going to get you out of this, Jo,” he murmured, his fingers brushing the frame. “I promise.”

Lucy whined softly, as if sensing his mood. Sam reached down to scratch behind her ears, drawing comfort from her steady presence.

A sudden movement caught his eye, and he looked up to see Major sauntering into the office, his tail held high. The black cat leapt onto Sam’s desk, green eyes blinking slowly as he surveyed the room.

“Hey, Major,” Sam said, a wry smile tugging at his lips. “Come to offer your expertise?”

Major meowed in response then promptly curled up on top of Sam’s paperwork, looking quite pleased with himself.

Sam shook his head, chuckling softly. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

With a sigh, he reached for his phone, scrolling through his contacts until he found Jo’s number. He hesitated for a moment, his thumb hovering over the call button. What if she didn’t want to hear from him? What if she blamed him for not finding the evidence to clear her name?

Pushing aside his doubts, Sam hit the call button, holding the phone to his ear as it rang.

“Sam?” Jo’s voice was tinged with surprise as she answered. “What’s going on?”

Sam took a deep breath, steeling himself. “We’ve got a new lead, Jo. Something called Parker Studies. Marnie Wilson’s been making secret visits there, and Wyatt can’t find any information on what they do.”

There was a pause on the other end of the line, and Sam could almost hear the gears turning in Jo’s head.

“Parker Studies?” she repeated, her tone thoughtful. “I’ve never heard of them. What do you think they’re involved in?”

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted, frustration coloring his voice. “But whatever it is, it doesn’t look good for Marnie.”

Jo sighed, the sound heavy with weariness. “What about Clara Hartwell?”

Sam filled her in on how Garvin had been working with her on maps of the property and how they’d gone back to search Garvin’s place for them.

“Did you find anything at Garvin’s house?”

Sam hesitated, not wanting to disappoint her. “No, we didn’t find the maps. But Lucy did find something interesting in the snow outside. We’ve sent it to the lab for analysis.”

“Do you think Clara could be lying?” Jo asked, her voice sharp with suspicion. “Maybe she sent us on a wild-goose chase with those maps.”

Sam shook his head even though Jo couldn’t see him. “No, I don’t think so. She seemed genuinely concerned about the historical significance of Garvin’s land. I think she’s telling the truth.”

Jo was quiet for a moment, and Sam could picture her pacing in her living room, her brow furrowed in thought.

“All right,” she said finally, her voice filled with determination. “What’s our next move?”

Sam glanced at his watch, an idea forming in his mind. “Let’s meet at Holy Spirits after supper. We can bring Mick in, get everyone on the same

page. Maybe he'll have some insight into this Parker Studies thing."

"Sounds good," Jo agreed, a hint of relief in her voice. "I'll see you there."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jo pushed open the heavy doors of White Rock Town Hall, her footsteps echoing in the marble foyer. The building had the bones of a bygone era, with its high ceilings and polished floors. She found the office directory and quickly scanned it.

Town Land Surveyor - Room 14.

A few strides later, she knocked on the surveyor's door.

"Come in," called a woman's voice.

Inside, Jo found a cluttered office filled with old maps, blueprints, and stacks of files. A woman in her fifties looked up, her salt-and-pepper hair pulled into a no-nonsense bun.

"Clara Hartwell?" Jo asked, offering her hand. "Sergeant Harris, White Rock PD."

Clara nodded, shaking Jo's hand with a firm grip. "Chief Mason was at my house this morning. Told him everything I knew."

Jo hesitated for a moment. She didn't feel good about omitting the fact that she was currently on leave, but she wanted to ask her own questions. She'd tell Sam tonight as she didn't want him to think she was going behind his back. Of course, Sam had done a great job, but Jo was looking at this from a little different perspective, and sometimes, it was better to ask the questions yourself.

"Thanks for that," Jo said, keeping her tone light. "I just had a few follow-ups. I understand Garvin McDaniels was interested in maps of his River Road property?"

Clara nodded slowly, sympathy flashing in her eyes. “Yes. Such a tragedy, what happened to him.”

Jo kept her focus, pressing gently. “Did he say what he was looking for? Anything unusual?”

Clara’s brows furrowed. “No. He was interested in the property lines but nothing specific. Just typical maps, as far as I knew. Same thing I told his son last week.”

Jo blinked. “Garvin’s son?”

Clara looked mildly surprised. “Yes, he stopped by last week too.”

Jo felt a flicker of surprise. Sam hadn’t mentioned the son. “So his son was here last week? You’re sure about that?”

Clara looked momentarily unsure. “Well, yes. I remember because he asked about the property boundaries too.”

Jo kept her tone steady. “Strange you didn’t mention him to Chief Mason.”

Clara’s cheeks flushed slightly. “Maybe I was nervous. Or maybe I forgot.” She frowned, as if annoyed with herself. “Chief Mason didn’t ask if anyone else had been here.”

Jo noted the slip-up, deciding to let it rest for now. “Did Garvin or his son look over anything specific? Mark anything?”

Clara shook her head, her gaze distant, as if trying to recall. “Not that I remember. Just property lines and abutters.”

“Who are the abutters?”

Clara flipped open a file, glancing down. “Let’s see... Horton family to the north; they’ve had that land forever. Whitfield estate to the east—been in probate for years. And to the south...” She looked up. “Convale Energy.”

Jo’s eyebrows shot up. “Convale?”

Clara nodded. “They own a significant chunk of land bordering Garvin’s property.”

Jo leaned back, taking that in. Convale Energy had been muscling in on White Rock for years, but she hadn’t realized they were that close to Garvin’s land.

“Interesting,” Jo murmured. She watched Clara’s reaction carefully. “Think they’d be interested in Garvin’s property?”

Clara gave a small shrug. “Who knows with a company like that? They’re always expanding.”

Jo let the silence sit for a beat, her mind ticking through possibilities. Finally, she stood, nodding to Clara. “Thanks. You’ve been a big help.”

Clara walked her to the door. “I hope you find what you’re looking for, Sergeant.”

Jo slipped out, her mind buzzing with new questions. So, Garvin’s son had shown up at the surveyor’s office—something Sam hadn’t known. And Convale land abutted Garvin’s, giving them a possible motive. She needed to share this with Sam—and soon. Luckily, she wouldn’t have to wait long. It was almost time to meet at Holy Spirits.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Bridget set a steaming dish of turkey meatloaf on Kevin's kitchen table. "Dinner's ready," she announced.

"Smells incredible," Kevin said, pulling out a chair for her. "Seriously, you didn't have to do all this."

Bridget shrugged, brushing off the compliment. "You've been working hard, and I like cooking. Besides, you could use a good meal."

They ate in companionable silence until Bridget couldn't hold back her curiosity. "So," she asked casually, "any leads on the case?"

Kevin paused mid-bite, setting down his fork. "Nothing concrete, but we found the car I mentioned. Belongs to a land surveyor. Turns out Garvin was looking into the property where Jo's cottage is."

Bridget's brow furrowed. "Why would he be looking at that land?"

"Good question." Kevin took another bite, chewing thoughtfully. "Could be something about the land's history, maybe an ownership issue. We're still digging."

"Jo's been doing some digging of her own," Bridget said, smiling. "She even called Mick for backup."

Kevin chuckled. "I wouldn't be surprised if those two get to the bottom of it before we do."

Bridget smiled, pride flickering in her chest. Jo had always been the tough one, always looking out for everyone else. And even with her career on the line, here she was, still working to get to the truth.

"So," she ventured, "about that note. The one about the thumb drive. Any leads on who left it?"

Kevin's face darkened. He set down his fork, sighing. "No idea who left it or why."

Bridget reached across the table, resting a hand on his. "You'll figure it out."

Kevin nodded, his eyes lingering on hers for a beat. "I just can't shake the feeling that the thumb drive's bigger than we thought. What if the bodies at the Webster property had nothing to do with the thumb drive?"

"Or," Bridget said, leaning back, "what if we got the coordinates wrong?"

Kevin's eyes sparked. "Maybe. Or maybe they weren't coordinates at all. We just assumed because that's where we found the bodies."

They chewed over possibilities as they ate, lost in the thrill of the mystery until the plates were cleared. Bridget rinsed the dishes while Kevin dried them, the rhythm between them easy, like they'd been doing this for years.

Kevin broke the silence. "If those numbers aren't coordinates, they could be anything. A code, maybe?"

Bridget handed him a plate, considering. "Or dates? Maybe reference numbers?"

He nodded, intrigued. "All good options. What's our next move to figure it out?"

"Make a list of possibilities," Bridget suggested. "We check them off, see if they tie to that old narcotics case."

A grin broke across Kevin's face. "That's brilliant. Start with the most obvious, work our way down."

Bridget felt a surge of excitement. It felt good to be useful, to be part of something.

When the dishes were done, Kevin tossed the towel aside. "You know," he said, his voice quieter, "I appreciate the help. It's… nice having someone to work this through with."

Bridget's smile softened. "Glad to help. And it's good to feel… like I'm doing something real."

For a moment, it seemed like he might say more. But he cleared his throat, turning to grab a notebook from the counter. "So, let's get started on that list."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Jo spotted Sam and Mick as soon as she walked into Holy Spirits. They'd claimed their usual spots at the bar. Jo slid onto the stool beside Sam, who'd already ordered her a Coors Light. The place felt like a sanctuary, even with the low buzz of Friday night chatter around them.

"Hey, Harris," Mick greeted her, tipping his whiskey glass in her direction. "You're looking suspiciously well rested."

"Not having to work for an ogre does wonders," she shot back, giving Sam a grin. "But you look like you've seen better days."

Sam smirked, though his gaze held the weight of all they'd been dealing with. "Maybe I should try getting suspended. How's it working for you?"

"Only means I'm working for free now," she replied, taking a pull of her beer. "Met with Clara Hartwell today, the town surveyor. She mentioned something that could be a lead." She let the words hang, drawing both men's attention. "Garvin's son came by the surveyor's office last week asking about the River Road property too."

Sam's eyebrows shot up, and he set his glass down. "Did he now? Funny he didn't mention that to me. When I talked to Derek, he barely acted like he cared his father was looking into that land."

Jo's jaw tightened as she thought it over. "Seems like the son has a knack for leaving out details."

Sam took a slow sip of his drink. "Why would Derek go snooping around with a surveyor?"

Mick chimed in. "Kid's got money problems. I did some research. Got turned down for some loans."

Jo leaned in, lowering her voice. “The elk bronze. Garvin thought it was valuable—real valuable. Maybe Derek thought so too. If they argued, Derek could’ve tried to take it. If he needed money right away, he might not have wanted to wait for an inheritance.”

Sam’s gaze sharpened. “Or maybe he tried to hasten that along. But why look into the land?”

Jo thought back to her meeting with Clara. “Maybe he was trying to figure out the property’s true value. If he thought Garvin was planning to sell, he’d want to know what it was worth. He wouldn’t have known about the will change yet, so he was probably angling for inheritance. More property value, more to gain.”

Mick gave a low whistle. “So, Garvin’s looking into Convale, trying to figure out if he could get a better price on his land? His son starts sniffing around, trying to learn the same. It all sounds too close.”

“More than close,” Sam agreed.

Jo could feel the pieces shifting, each one clicking into place. “So Garvin’s making inquiries—quietly, but he’s doing his research. And if Convale caught wind of it? Could be they wanted him gone because they want that property.”

Mick’s mouth tightened as he set down his glass. “Or maybe they don’t want someone to find out something about the property.”

Jo’s gaze drifted to the rows of bottles behind the bar, the colored light casting them in rich reds and blues. “But what? And if Derek is the killer, how did he get my hair to plant at the scene?”

The three of them sat in silence for a moment, the noise of the bar fading into the background. Jo took a long pull of her beer, letting the chill bite in her throat sharpen her focus.

“So,” Mick said, swirling his whiskey thoughtfully, “what’s the next move?”

Jo leaned back on her stool, crossing her arms. “We keep pulling the threads. Garvin’s son was in town last week but didn’t tell anyone, and now, his dad ends up dead. Seems like we need to talk to him.”

Sam nodded. “Funeral’s day after tomorrow. I’ll leave him be until after that.”

Mick raised his glass in a toast, his grin more sardonic than cheerful. “To the truth. May it dig itself up, sooner or later.”

Jo clinked her bottle against his glass, feeling the steely edge of determination settle over her. “And to getting answers before any more bodies turn up. I’m getting back to my job even if it kills me.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

It was already dark when Bridget pulled into the driveway of their little cottage. Jo's car wasn't there. She tugged her coat tighter against the chill as she approached the front steps. The porch light flickered above, casting a dim glow over the wooden boards, and Pickles, usually waiting at the door to greet her, was nowhere in sight.

A frown tugged at her lips. That was odd.

She was halfway to the door when she saw it. Her breath caught in her throat.

A single white sheet of paper, fluttering slightly in the breeze, was taped to the door. Large block letters scrawled in black marker. It was crude but unmistakable. A threat.

Secrets always come out.

Her heart pounded in her ears. It had to be for her. Someone knew. Someone had dug into her past—what she'd done. She stumbled forward, fingers trembling as she reached for the note, desperate to tear it down before Jo saw it. If Jo found out…

Just then, headlights illuminated her and froze her in place. Jo was pulling into the driveway. And she'd seen Bridget reaching for the note.

Bridget's fingers brushed the corner of the note, but it was too late. Jo was already out of the car and walking toward her, her gaze fixed on the note.

There was a beat of silence, and then Jo's body went rigid. Her eyes flicked from the note to the dark woods behind them, scanning the shadows with a tension that set Bridget's nerves on edge.

Jo's voice was low, dangerous. "This is about me."

Bridget's pulse quickened. No, no, it wasn't—Jo had it all wrong. But Jo's interpretation was immediate, her mind already racing. Her suspension, the frame job—of course, Jo would think the note was tied to that. Bridget felt a pang of guilt, a sick twist in her stomach that she couldn't confess her real fear, her real secret.

Jo's jaw tightened as she ripped the note off the door. "Whoever left this is trying to scare me off the case. They're desperate."

Bridget swallowed hard, trying to find her voice. "Jo… we don't know that. It could be—"

"Pickles," Jo interrupted, glancing around suddenly. "Where's Pickles?"

Bridget froze, her gaze darting around the porch. Now that Jo mentioned it, the cat still hadn't shown up. Someone had been here, and now, Pickles was gone. Anxiety gnawed at her insides.

"I… I don't know," she said, her voice barely above a whisper. "He's usually right here."

Jo's eyes darkened, and she pocketed the note. "Stay close."

Without waiting for a response, Jo stormed across the yard, scanning the area with sharp, deliberate movements. Bridget trailed behind her, her nerves fraying with each step. The trees loomed ominously around them, the wind picking up, rustling the branches like whispered threats.

Bridget's heart hammered in her chest, a mix of guilt and terror swirling inside her. Was this about Jo? About her suspension? Or was it for Bridget? The past she'd worked so hard to bury seemed to be clawing its way back to the surface, and the fear of it unraveling made her legs weak.

Jo crouched by the edge of the yard, her eyes scanning the ground. "No blood. No signs of struggle."

Bridget bit her lip, forcing herself to stay calm. But a gnawing panic kept rising inside her. Pickles wasn't merely a cat to her. He was a tether to something safe, something normal in a world that constantly threatened to rip her apart.

Jo stood, her face set in a hard line. "He could just be hiding… Or someone took him."

The words felt like a slap. Bridget stumbled forward, desperate to keep up with Jo's pace. "What… What do we do?"

Jo's eyes flicked toward the dark tree line again. "We'll find him. But first, we need to check inside. If they left the note, they might've been

inside the house. Could be the person that tried to frame me."

Bridget swallowed hard, her throat tight. The thought of someone being inside their home made her skin crawl. She followed Jo back to the porch, her mind racing through every possible scenario. The note. Pickles. The things she hadn't told Jo. It was all colliding, and Bridget felt herself drowning in it.

Jo moved quickly, unlocking the front door and stepping inside with a controlled, quiet urgency. Bridget followed, her heart pounding louder with each step.

The house was dark and still, exactly as they'd left it. No signs of forced entry, no sign of anything out of place. But Bridget couldn't shake the feeling that something—someone—had been there. Watching. Waiting.

Jo's sharp gaze moved from room to room, and even without a word, Bridget could feel the rising tension in her sister's shoulders. It was the same tension she'd seen countless times before, the kind that came just before Jo made an arrest or kicked down a door. Jo was on edge, ready to spring into action.

Finally, Jo stopped in the middle of the living room, her eyes narrowing as she studied the note again.

"They're trying to scare me off," Jo said, more to herself than to Bridget. "But they're not going to get away with this."

Bridget stood frozen, her throat tight with unsaid words. Jo might be right. But if she wasn't, whoever left that note knew things that could ruin Bridget's new life.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jo didn't sleep very well that night and woke early. She wrapped her arms around herself as she stepped out onto the porch, her breath fogging in the crisp air. She glanced around, hoping—praying—for a glimpse of Pickles curled up on the porch, waiting for breakfast like he always did.

But the porch was empty. The box and blankets, usually occupied by the scruffy tabby, were empty.

She blew out a frustrated breath, her eyes darting over the yard. Pickles hadn't come back last night. She thought of the note still sitting ominously on the kitchen counter—*Secrets always come out*. It hadn't left her mind for a second. And now, with Pickles missing, she couldn't shake the feeling that the two things were connected.

Behind her, the door creaked as Bridget stepped outside, pulling her coat tight around her thin frame. Jo didn't have to ask to know that her sister had barely slept either.

"Still nothing?" Bridget asked, though the answer was obvious.

Jo shook her head. "No. And it's not like him to stay gone this long. He's been on the porch every night since it got cold."

Bridget rubbed her arms, her face pale in the cool morning light. "You think... You think the person who left the note did something to him?"

Jo's gut twisted at the question. It was the same fear that had gnawed at her all night. Whoever left that note—they weren't just trying to scare her. They wanted to send a message. And maybe Pickles had been part of that message.

“I don’t know,” Jo said finally, her voice low. “But we need to find him.”

“I can’t just sit here anymore,” Bridget muttered, already stepping off the porch, her eyes scanning the edge of the woods. “I’m going to look for him. Now.”

Jo nodded, slipping her phone out of her pocket and hitting Sam’s contact. He’d said he would come by this morning to pick up the note as evidence. Maybe he could help them search. The phone rang twice before he picked up.

“I’m on my way,” Sam said, his voice brisk but warm. “I’m about five minutes out. Just getting Lucy loaded into the truck.”

Jo glanced back toward the woods, the trees casting long shadows over the yard. “Can you meet us in the woods behind the house? Pickles is still missing. I think... I think something’s wrong.”

There was a brief pause, then Sam’s voice dropped, concerned. “I’ll be there. Don’t go too far in without me.”

Jo hung up and turned to Bridget, who was already several steps ahead, pacing along the tree line.

“Sam’s on his way,” Jo called after her, jogging to catch up. “Let’s start searching while we wait.”

Bridget barely nodded, her eyes fixed on the trees, worry etched into her every movement. The two of them stepped into the woods, the morning light filtering weakly through the branches overhead. The air was damp, and the smell of wet earth clung to everything.

Jo’s instincts kicked in as they began to search, her eyes sweeping the ground, looking for any sign of tracks, broken branches, something that might indicate someone had been there or where Pickles had gone. But there was nothing. No sign of him at all.

“Pickles!” Jo called out, her voice cutting through the silence.

Bridget echoed her call, but the woods remained still. Too still. Jo could feel the weight of the trees pressing in around them, the quiet making her skin prickle with unease.

Minutes stretched into what felt like hours as they moved deeper into the woods, their footsteps crunching on the underbrush. Jo’s mind kept circling back to the note, to the possibility that someone had taken Pickles to send a message. Her frustration grew with each passing moment, the silence of the woods only feeding her anxiety.

Just as Jo was about to suggest they head back and wait for Sam, she heard it—a faint, almost imperceptible meow in the distance.

She froze, her heart skipping a beat. “Did you hear that?”

Bridget’s head whipped around, her eyes wide. “Pickles?”

Jo strained to hear, her pulse quickening. There it was again, a soft, pathetic meow—fainter this time but unmistakable.

Jo started toward the sound, adrenaline spiking through her as she and Bridget weaved through the trees, the meows growing louder, more desperate. But before they could get too far, the rumble of an engine caught Jo’s ear. She glanced over her shoulder and saw the familiar White Rock Police Station Tahoe pulling into the driveway. Sam.

The moment Sam stepped out of the truck, Lucy leaped out behind him, her tail wagging but her ears pricked up, alert. Sam gave Jo a nod, and she waved him over, her heart pounding with the urgency of the situation.

“We heard him,” Jo said as Sam jogged over. “He’s close.”

Sam glanced down at Lucy, who was already sniffing the air, her keen senses immediately kicking in. “Lucy can help. Let’s follow her lead.”

Without waiting for further instruction, Lucy’s nose hit the ground, and she moved swiftly into the trees, her body low and her focus sharp. Jo felt a flicker of hope as they fell in behind her, Lucy guiding them deeper into the woods.

The meows were louder now, more frequent but still distant, as if they were coming from somewhere hidden. Jo’s stomach twisted with the thought of what they might find—what could have happened to Pickles.

Lucy moved with purpose, weaving between trees and over fallen branches, her nose pressed close to the ground. Her ears flicked with every sound, and Jo knew the dog was picking up something.

“Good girl, Lucy,” Sam muttered as they followed her deeper into the woods. “Keep going.”

Bridget’s face was tense, her eyes darting from tree to tree as the meows grew louder, more insistent. Jo could feel the tightness in her chest as they pressed on, her mind racing with possibilities—none of them good.

Lucy suddenly stopped, her head jerking toward an old, rotted tree just ahead. Jo saw it before the others did—the mouth of a well, its crumbling stone rim barely visible beneath layers of overgrown moss and vines.

The meows echoed up from the darkness, faint but unmistakable.

“Oh no,” Bridget whispered, her voice trembling. “He’s down there.”

Jo rushed forward, her flashlight beam sweeping over the well's edge as she knelt beside it. The dark hole yawned beneath her, and as she peered down, her breath caught in her throat.

There, huddled at the bottom, was Pickles—his fur matted, his eyes wide with terror. He let out another pathetic meow, his body trembling with fear.

"We need to get him out of there," Jo said, her voice tight with urgency.

Sam was already moving, pulling out his phone to call for backup. "Stay calm. We'll get him."

But even as the relief of finding Pickles washed over her, Jo couldn't shake the feeling that something darker was lurking just beneath the surface.

Had Pickles simply fallen into the well, or had someone thrown him in?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Jo peered into the well at Pickles. The little cat looked terrified but seemed to be okay physically.

"Poor thing," Bridget whispered, her voice tight with worry. "How are we going to get him out of there?"

The well was deeper than Jo had expected, though thankfully, it was dry. The stone walls stretched down at least twenty feet, their surfaces slick with years of moss and decay. Pickles crouched on a small patch of earth at the bottom, his fur matted with dirt. He looked up at Jo, letting out another soft meow, as if begging her to come down to get him.

"We'll need a ladder," Sam said, his voice tense. He was already stepping back, scanning the area for anything that could help.

"There's one in my shed," Jo said, pulling herself away from the edge of the well.

They hurried back toward the house, veering toward the old shed near the edge of the property. The structure was weathered, its roof sagging from years of neglect, but it was still standing.

Sam pushed the door open with a creak, the hinges groaning in protest. Inside, the shed was filled with tools—rusted shovels, cracked flowerpots, and stacks of old wood. Jo's eyes scanned the cluttered space until they landed on an old ladder, leaning against the far wall.

"Perfect," Sam muttered, already grabbing it. He hefted the ladder over his shoulder with ease and turned back to Jo and Bridget. "This should do it."

They rushed back to the well, the cold biting at their skin. Jo's hands were shaking as she helped Sam set the ladder down into the well. It was almost too wide to fit, but thankfully, they managed to get it to the bottom.

Pickles hadn't moved from his spot at the bottom, his eyes still locked on them.

"I'll go," Sam said, his voice firm as he stepped over the rim of the well onto the first rung. He glanced at Jo, his expression unreadable. "You ready up here?"

Jo nodded, her breath puffing out in short, sharp clouds. "Yep."

Bridget hovered behind them, her hands clutched tightly together, eyes fixed on Pickles.

Sam began to climb down, his boots scraping against the slick stone walls. Jo gripped the top of the ladder, steadying it as he descended. The air inside the well was damp, musty, the smell of earth and moss rising up around them.

"Almost there," Sam called up, his voice echoing off the walls.

Jo leaned over the edge, watching as Sam reached the bottom. He crouched beside Pickles, speaking softly to the frightened cat. For a moment, Jo held her breath, praying that Pickles wouldn't dart away or make things harder. But the cat seemed too exhausted to put up a fight.

"It's okay, boy," Sam murmured, reaching out a hand. "Come here."

Pickles let out another pitiful meow, his body trembling as he took a tentative step toward Sam. Jo watched, her heart pounding, as Sam carefully lifted the cat into his arms. Relief washed over her. They had him.

But then, Sam froze.

Jo's grip on the ladder tightened as she watched him go completely still. "Sam?" she called down, her voice edged with concern. "You okay?"

There was a beat of silence before Sam responded, his voice low, almost hesitant. "Yeah… but, uh, Pickles isn't the only thing down here."

Jo's heart lurched in her chest. She leaned farther over the edge, her knuckles white as she clung to the rim of the well. "What do you mean?"

Sam shifted, adjusting Pickles in one arm as he knelt down. "There's something else… under the dirt. I can see… bones."

Jo felt the blood drain from her face. "Bones?"

Sam's voice was steady but grim. "Yeah. Human."

"Are you sure?" Jo called down.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” Sam said. He was crouched now, running his hand carefully over the ground. “Looks old. Part of the skull is exposed… and there’s more buried beneath the dirt.”

Jo swore under her breath, adrenaline spiking through her as she processed what this meant. A body in the well. How long had it been down there? And, more importantly, who was it?

She straightened, her mind already racing ahead. This was a crime scene now. They needed to call in forensics, secure the area. But first, they had to get Sam—and Pickles—out of the well.

“Okay, let’s not touch anything else down there,” Jo said, her voice steadying as she slipped back into professional mode. “Just bring Pickles up, and we’ll deal with the rest.”

“On it,” Sam called back, his voice tight. He shifted again, making sure Pickles was secure in one arm as he began to climb back up the ladder. Jo watched him carefully, her hands still gripping the top of the ladder as he made his way up, slow and steady.

As Sam reached the top, Jo extended her arms, helping him lift Pickles over the edge and into Bridget’s waiting hands. Bridget held the cat close to her chest, tears shining in her eyes as she whispered reassurances to him.

Jo barely had time to feel relieved before her attention snapped back to Sam, who was pulling himself out of the well. His jaw was tight as he straightened and dusted the dirt off his jacket.

“Definitely human,” he muttered, wiping his hands on his jeans. “We’re going to need a full team out here. Whoever that is down there... they’ve been dead a long time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Wyatt's breath fogged the cold air as he snapped another picture of the bones lying at the bottom of the well. The flash bounced off the damp, moss-covered stone, throwing brief glimpses of the skeletal remains back up at him. A human skeleton, of all things, tangled in the mess of dirt and roots.

"This is going to be a real pain in the butt," John Dudley, the medical examiner, muttered as he surveyed the scene. "We'll need to haul it up piece by piece."

Wyatt grunted in agreement, but his attention wasn't fully on the logistics of retrieving the bones. His mind had been drifting ever since Sam mentioned the note earlier, when they were still back at the station.

Secrets always come out.

The words had sounded innocent enough when Sam first relayed them, but Wyatt had caught something—a flicker in Kevin's eyes, the way he glanced at Bridget as soon as Sam said the words. It wasn't long—just a moment—but Wyatt had been a cop long enough to know when people were hiding something.

He looked over at Kevin, who was standing a little apart from the group, hands jammed in his pockets, staring down at the well. Bridget was nearby, too, her arms wrapped around herself, her face pale as she watched the others work. They hadn't said much to each other, but there was something off in the way they were acting today. Something private.

Wyatt wasn't sure what to make of it, but the exchange between them had stuck with him. Was the note about Jo? Was Kevin involved in

something he hadn't told anyone? What did Bridget have to do with it? He watched as Kevin walked over to help Sam with the ladder, his face tight with concentration, but Wyatt could see the tension in his movements. He was holding something back.

Wyatt shook the thoughts from his head, snapping another shot of the scene. Who was he to judge? He had his own secrets, things he hadn't shared with anyone. Secrets he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to talk about.

Subtly, Wyatt pulled his phone from his pocket and glanced down at the screen. He did it quickly, keeping the movement out of view of the others. No messages. Not from his mom, at least.

The last text she'd sent had been two days ago—a vague, guilt-laden message about needing money and how she "wasn't doing too good." He had ignored it. He didn't want to deal with her right now. Not after everything. But it had been eating at him ever since.

He couldn't ignore her forever.

Sam's voice pulled him back to the scene. "Wyatt, we need to rig the pulley. Let's get these bones up without damaging anything."

Wyatt moved to help Kevin, who was already securing the ladder into place, his movements quick and deliberate. Wyatt could feel the tension rolling off him—something more than the gruesome task of retrieving the bones.

"You all right?" Wyatt asked casually, his eyes on Kevin as they set up the pulley system.

Kevin gave a stiff nod, barely glancing at him. "Yeah. Just want to get this done."

Wyatt didn't push. He turned back to the well, watching as John Dudley directed the process. It was delicate work—noting the placement of everything before pulling the bones out carefully. Dudley was already snapping pictures from above, cataloging the position of each bone before they began the slow process of extraction.

"This skeleton's old," Dudley muttered as he knelt near the edge of the well. "Can't say how long it's been down there yet, but it's not recent. Not by a long shot."

Wyatt stepped back, watching as Kevin and Sam carefully hoisted the first set of bones out of the well. A femur, long and brittle, coated in dirt and rot. They moved slowly, methodically, passing the bones to Dudley,

who placed them in an evidence bag with the kind of reverence usually reserved for the dead.

The process took time, each bone hauled up inch by inch, Wyatt's camera clicking every few minutes to capture the scene.

Finally, the last piece of the skeleton was pulled out—a cracked skull, yellowed and worn from years underground. The empty eye sockets stared up at Wyatt, hollow and silent, as if waiting for someone to ask the right questions.

Wyatt's grip tightened on his camera as he snapped another picture. This wasn't just a random body. This was connected to something bigger—Garvin, Convale, maybe even Marnie. And whatever it was, it was about to get a lot more complicated.

Dudley took a final set of pictures and stood, wiping his hands on his pants. "We'll get this to the lab, run the tests. I'll let you know if I find anything."

Sam nodded, his eyes fixed on the skull. "Let's hope this gives us some answers."

Wyatt wasn't sure it would. Every new discovery seemed to raise more questions than answers. But something told him they were getting closer. And that wasn't always a good thing.

As the others began packing up, Wyatt's gaze drifted back to Kevin and Bridget. Kevin was staring at the ground, lost in thought, while Bridget hugged Pickles to her chest, her face tight with worry. Whatever secret they were keeping, Wyatt was sure it wasn't going to stay hidden for long.

And neither would his.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"Definitely male," Wyatt said, rubbing the back of his neck as he leaned against the wall, his shadow stretching across the squad room in the fading afternoon light. "Probably mid-thirties, give or take. But here's the kicker—John Dudley said there were scraps of fabric with the body. Decayed, but it looks like part of a suit."

"A suit?" Reese's voice cut through the quiet, sharp with disbelief. She sat perched on the edge of her desk, coffee mug in hand, her eyes narrowing as she processed the detail. "That doesn't scream accidental fall down a well to me."

"No wallet, no ID," Wyatt added, tossing a photo onto the table. "Whoever this guy was, someone went out of their way to make sure he stayed a John Doe."

Sam sat at his desk, leaning forward, arms crossed, his eyes fixed on the corkboard as if it held the answer. The room felt heavy, the weight of too many unsolved mysteries pressing down on all of them. Lucy lay quietly at his feet, her ears twitching.

"No DNA," Wyatt continued, his tone grim. "Nothing left to work with, and dental records aren't going to do us any good unless we figure out who this guy was and where he got his dental work done first. Dudley says even that's a long shot as most dentists that practiced decades ago would be retired and records purged."

Sam rubbed his jaw, the knot of frustration tightening. "No ID, no DNA, no dental records." His voice was low, measured, but there was an edge to it. "Any luck with missing persons?"

“Already started the search,” Reese said, setting her mug down. “But so far, nothing that matches. It’s been decades, Sam. Whoever this guy was, someone went to a lot of trouble to erase him.”

Wyatt pointed to the photo on the table, his expression grim. The faded pinstripes on the deteriorated fabric were just visible, a faint echo of what must have once been an expensive suit. “Dudley’s best guess? This guy was dressed to impress—probably someone important or at least someone trying to look the part.”

Sam studied the image, his mind flashing back to a conversation with Mick months ago. Late-night talks about White Rock’s buried secrets, the whispers that never made it past the town line.

“Mick mentioned something once,” Sam said, sitting back in his chair. “A reporter. Tommy Callahan. Went missing twenty, maybe thirty years ago. Rumor was, he was digging into something big. Corruption, land deals, maybe even Convale. But he vanished, and the story went with him.”

Reese straightened, her curiosity piqued. “A reporter? Disappearing in White Rock? What was he looking for?”

“That’s the thing,” Sam said, his gaze shifting to the whiteboard. “Nobody knows. But Mick said Callahan was onto something. Something someone didn’t want getting out.”

“Sounds like a motive to me,” Wyatt said, crossing his arms. “If this is him—and that’s a big if—it means somebody wanted that story buried. Literally.”

“Could explain Garvin,” Reese added, her voice thoughtful. “If Callahan’s investigation tied into something Garvin stumbled onto, it could’ve put him in the crosshairs too.”

Sam nodded slowly. It made sense. Garvin had been poking around, digging into land records, properties, boundaries—the kind of work that could uncover secrets no one wanted found.

“Garvin was looking into the property where Jo’s cottage is,” Sam said, his tone sharper now, the pieces clicking into place. “The land around it. Convale owns a lot of it. If Callahan was onto something back then, maybe Garvin was getting close to the same truth now.”

“Which means it’s still dangerous,” Kevin said, his voice tense. He’d been quiet until now, his eyes fixed on the photo. “If someone killed Callahan back then, they’d have no problem doing the same to Garvin. Or anyone else who gets too close.”

The room fell into a heavy silence, each of them lost in their own thoughts. Lucy stirred at Sam's feet, her ears pricking up as if sensing the tension in the air. Major leapt down from the filing cabinet, landing gracefully before padding to the door, his tail flicking dismissively.

Wyatt broke the quiet first. "I saw Marnie leave Beryl's house with that envelope. She took it straight to Parker Studies. What if Convale's using that place for something off the books? And Garvin found out?"

Reese folded her arms, her expression darkening. "Beryl's always in the middle of something shady. I don't trust her as far as I can throw her."

Sam leaned back in his chair, his gaze drifting to the whiteboard again. Beryl Thorne. Marnie Wilson. Convale Energy. The names circled in red ink felt like a noose tightening around the truth.

"We press Beryl," Reese said, her tone firm. "She's protecting herself, but she knows more than she's letting on."

Sam's jaw tightened. Beryl was a problem. She always had been. And confronting her meant more than just digging for answers—it meant dealing with the past he and Mick had spent years trying to bury. But he couldn't avoid her forever.

"I'll pay her a visit," Sam said finally. "But first, I want more on Parker Studies. What exactly is going on there?"

"I'll dig deeper," Wyatt offered.

"Good," Sam said, glancing at the clock. "Let's call it for now. Fresh eyes tomorrow."

The team began gathering their things, the tension in the room easing slightly as they prepared to leave. But Sam lingered, his eyes fixed on the photo of the suit pinned to the whiteboard.

A man in an expensive suit, dumped in a well. A reporter chasing the truth. An old man murdered. A missing bronze statue.

Whoever thought they could bury their secrets had made a mistake.

Sam didn't intend to let them get away with it.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The flickering glow from the stone fireplace filled the cozy space of Sam's cabin, casting warm shadows on the log walls. The cabin was small but homey, nestled on the outskirts of White Rock, where the pine trees pressed in close, giving it a sense of seclusion. The air inside carried the faint scent of pine and burning wood, mixing with the rich aroma of beer. It was a place built for quiet and solitude, though tonight, it buzzed with conversation.

Sam leaned back in his worn leather armchair, his fingers absently rubbing Lucy's ear as she sat beside him, ever alert. The German Shepherd's tail thumped gently against the wooden floorboards, her head tilted in that curious way, as if she was also taking in the conversation between Sam and Mick. On the coffee table in front of them, two beers sat, condensation trailing down the sides of the bottles.

"You sure about this?" Mick asked, eyebrows knitting together as he leaned forward, his own beer untouched. "You think the skeleton in the well might be that reporter I told you about years ago?"

Sam took a slow pull from his bottle of Mooseneck Ale, the local brew he favored. "That's what it's starting to look like. Missing reporter, unmarked grave, skeleton turning up after decades... The timelines match."

Mick leaned back, rubbing the stubble on his jaw as he absorbed Sam's words. "That was a long time ago, Sam. The guy just disappeared. Never found a body. People wrote it off as him skipping town after the story he was working on ruffled the wrong feathers."

“What kind of story was he working on again?” Sam asked, his gaze shifting to Lucy as she quietly padded across the room to her usual spot by the fire. She circled once then lay down, keeping one eye on the door like she always did.

Mick chuckled, his eyes following the dog for a moment before refocusing on Sam. “Oh, it was something big. A real bombshell exposé on Convale Energy. You know how it goes—corporate greed, environmental destruction, all that.” He took a sip of his beer, savoring it. “The reporter, Tommy Callahan, was digging into some illegal dumping Convale was doing. Supposedly, they were dumping waste into a stream running through White Rock, contaminating the water.”

Sam frowned, his mind churning. “The stream that runs behind Jo’s cottage?”

Mick nodded, raising his eyebrows. “Yeah, that’s the one. Funny thing, though—Garvin owned that property back then, didn’t he? That’s where Callahan was snooping around before he disappeared.”

Sam sat up straighter, leaning forward. “You think Garvin was involved? Maybe he knew about the dumping and was part of it? Could be why he never sold the land.”

Mick’s eyes narrowed as he considered it. “It would make sense. If Garvin was involved or even just knew too much, it would explain why he was always so reluctant to sell the land. But it doesn’t seem that way from his actions. He wouldn’t be looking into the property and getting maps at the town hall; he’d already know.”

The sound of Lucy’s tail thumping against the floor caught their attention. She was sitting up now, alert, staring at Mick with those sharp, intelligent eyes. It was as if she knew the conversation was getting heavier.

“I don’t know, Mick,” Sam said, rubbing his temples. “There’s a lot we don’t know yet. But if Garvin had stumbled across some evidence that could hurt Convale, that might have been the motive for his murder.”

Mick nodded slowly, taking another swig of beer. “Could be that’s why Callahan was sniffing around there in the first place. If he found something damning, something that could have blown the whole thing wide open, maybe that’s why he ended up dead too.”

Sam exhaled sharply, his fingers tightening around the neck of his bottle. “So, we’ve got two bodies—one in the well, the other fresh—and

both might be tied to Convale's dirty dealings. That's a hell of a lot of secrets for one piece of land."

Mick shook his head. "Small towns, man. They've always got the deepest secrets."

A comfortable silence settled between them as they let the implications sink in. The fire crackled softly, and Lucy settled back down by Sam's feet, her ears twitching every so often as the wind howled against the cabin windows.

After a few moments, Sam glanced at Mick, his voice softer. "How's Jo holding up? Have you guys come up with anything?"

Mick raised a brow, a smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Jo? You know she's a pro. She's not letting this suspension get to her. We've been working some angles… but nothing really solid. Naturally, we'd share with you if we came up with anything."

"Of course. I'm sharing my info with her too." Sam leaned back in his chair, the fire's warmth taking the edge off the chill outside. But Mick, ever observant, didn't miss the way Sam's jaw clenched slightly or the way his gaze drifted to the window, as if he was looking for something—or someone.

Mick chuckled quietly, shaking his head. "Didn't know you were so worried about her."

Sam shot him a look but said nothing, the unspoken tension hanging in the air. He took another long sip of his beer, hiding behind the bottle, while Mick watched with an amused glint in his eyes.

"Look," Mick continued, leaning forward, "Jo's tough as nails. She's handling it just fine. Wouldn't surprise me if she cracks the case before you do."

Sam laughed. "Well, she does have the benefit of knowing what I know. I updated her earlier on the findings on that note she found and what we know about the skeleton so far."

Mick nodded. "I know. She said she's going to Garvin's funeral to size up the suspects—his kids."

"Yep, I'll be curious to see her take on that." Sam sighed, running a hand through his hair. "Just doesn't sit right with me, her being sidelined like this. She's got skin in the game."

"Sounds like she's only officially sidelined. She's still working the case for all intents and purposes." Mick raised his bottle in a mock toast. "To Jo,

always playing it her way.”

Sam clinked his bottle against Mick’s and took a sip, though his mind was still on Jo. Mick’s subtle smile hadn’t gone unnoticed, and Sam knew the PI had picked up on something he hadn’t quite admitted to himself.

Outside, the wind howled louder, and Lucy shifted, her ears pricking up again. Sam reached down, patting her head, grateful for her constant, steady presence.

CHAPTER THIRTY

The cold winter air bit at Bridget's skin as she stepped onto the porch. The trees surrounding Jo's cottage stood still, bare branches scraping against each other in the wind. The world felt eerily quiet, like it was holding its breath. She could see her own breath in front of her, little wisps that dissolved into the darkness.

Jo had left the door to the house open. She crouched just inside, holding a small piece of leftover chicken out toward Pickles, who was stubbornly perched on the edge of the porch. His fur was puffed up against the cold, and he eyed Jo suspiciously.

"Come on, Pickles. I would think after you ended up in a well, you'd welcome staying inside," Jo murmured, holding the chicken out further. The orange cat sniffed it but stayed put, his tail flicking dismissively.

Bridget shifted, glancing around at the dark woods surrounding them. The thought of Pickles wandering around in the cold with someone dangerous possibly lurking nearby made her uneasy. She tucked her hands into the pockets of her hoodie, the chill creeping in from the cold porch floor.

"I still think we should just carry him inside," Bridget muttered, eyeing the cat. "It's freezing out here, and with everything going on—"

Jo straightened, shaking her head. "No, it has to be his idea. Otherwise, he won't like being in there and will run off at the first chance. For now, he's enjoying being difficult."

Bridget gave a short laugh, but her unease remained.

Jo turned to her, brushing a strand of hair away from her face, her expression tight. “I heard from Sam today,” she said. “They got the results on the note.”

Bridget’s heart thudded faster as Jo’s words hung in the cold air. “And?”

Jo sighed, a cloud of her breath visible in the dim porch light. “No prints. No DNA. Of course. Whoever left it knew exactly what they were doing.”

Bridget swallowed hard, her chest tightening. Of course there was nothing. She hadn’t expected anything different, but hearing it made everything feel that much more real—that much more dangerous.

Jo looked out into the night, her eyes narrowing slightly. “I don’t want to wait around for them to make the next move.”

Bridget frowned, feeling a cold knot settle in her stomach. “What do you mean?”

Jo turned back to her, folding her arms across her chest. “I think if they *thought* I wasn’t here, they’d come back. Maybe leave another note. This time, I’d be secretly waiting for them and could catch them in the act.”

Bridget stiffened, a wave of anxiety crashing over her. “Jo, you can’t be serious. What if it’s not just a note next time?”

Jo shrugged, but her jaw was set, the determination clear on her face. “I’m not just going to sit around and let them mess with me, Bridge. If I can draw them out, maybe I can figure out who they are.”

Bridget’s throat tightened. *You’re not the one they want.* The words echoed in her mind, over and over, louder than anything Jo was saying. But she couldn’t bring herself to say them. She couldn’t tell Jo the truth—not yet. But what if the note wasn’t about Jo at all? What if the danger was meant for her?

She glanced down at Pickles, his eyes now squinting against the cold wind. What if this person had put him in the well on purpose? Anyone who would do that to a small cat might do worse things to a human.

Jo exhaled, the frustration in her movements clear. “Look, Bridge, this could get dangerous. You should stay at a motel for a few days. Just until I figure this out.”

Bridget’s eyes snapped up to meet Jo’s. “You want me to leave?”

Jo nodded, her gaze softening. “Just for a few days. There’s someone running around out there, leaving notes—and for all we know, they put

Pickles in the well. I don't want you in the middle of this. I'll pay for the room; it's no big deal."

Bridget felt a flash of panic. Leave Jo alone? Here? When there was someone out there leaving threats? Jo might be ready to risk her own safety, but Bridget couldn't walk away. She couldn't let anything happen to her sister.

"No," Bridget said, shaking her head, her voice firmer than she expected. "I'm not going anywhere."

Jo's brow furrowed. "Bridge, it's for your own safety."

Bridget shook her head again, more forcefully this time. "You don't even have your service gun anymore, Jo. What are you going to do if someone shows up? Talk them into giving up? No way I'm leaving you here by yourself."

Jo's expression darkened, but Bridget didn't stop. "If you're staying here, then so am I. I'm not going to some motel while you put yourself in danger."

A tense silence stretched between them, and Bridget could feel Jo weighing her options. The fire in her sister's eyes hadn't dimmed, but there was something else there now—surprise, maybe? Or something else.

Finally, Jo sighed. "All right, but I don't want you getting involved if things go sideways."

Bridget bit her lip, fighting the urge to mention the gun she kept hidden under her bed. She couldn't bring it up now, but knowing it was there gave her a small sense of control—a way to protect them both.

Jo stepped back toward the door, and Bridget followed, the air between them still thick with unspoken tension. She glanced back at Pickles, still sitting on the porch, his fur ruffled by the cold wind.

"Pickles, come on," Jo called, but the cat ignored her completely. With a sigh, she opened the door, and they both stepped inside, leaving the stubborn cat to keep watch on the porch.

The warmth of the house hit Bridget immediately, the faint smell of rosemary and garlic still lingering in the kitchen. Jo walked past her and went straight to the fish tank on the side table, dropping a few flakes into the water for Finn.

"I'll keep the porch light on," Jo said, her back to Bridget, her voice softer now. "To deter anyone from going in there."

Bridget watched as Finn's orange scales shimmered under the light, her thoughts swirling. She couldn't shake the feeling that everything was closing in. She needed to talk to Kevin. Maybe he could help her make sense of all this. But for now, she had to keep Jo safe. No matter what.

Bridget stood her ground, arms crossed, as the tension in the air settled between them. The low hum of the heater and the faint splashing from Finn's tank filled the quiet room. Jo's eyes softened, the fire in them dimming slightly.

Bridget broke the silence, her voice low. "So… what's next? If you aren't just sitting around waiting, what will you do?"

Jo hesitated for a moment, glancing out the window as if weighing her next words. "I'm going to Garvin's funeral tomorrow morning. Figured I'd pay my respects. I did like the guy."

Bridget frowned. "Is that a good idea? With everything that's going on?"

Jo shrugged. "It's not just about paying respects. Sam's going to be there too. We'll meet up afterward—he can fill me in on any updates with the case. Besides," she added with a dry smile, "I wouldn't miss seeing how his kids act. If there's any animosity or guilt, I might be able to notice."

Bridget's worry deepened, but she kept quiet, watching Jo carefully. "Just… be careful, okay? Funerals bring out all kinds of emotions. And people."

Jo offered a small, reassuring smile, though her eyes were clouded with something deeper. "I will. But don't worry about me. It's just a funeral."

Bridget bit her lip, her anxiety gnawing at her. "I'm still not going anywhere, though."

Jo chuckled lightly, heading toward the kitchen. "Didn't think you would."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sam stood at the edge of the cemetery, the crisp morning air heavy with the silence that followed funerals. The lingering scent of damp earth filled his lungs as he scanned the crowd thinning around Garvin McDaniels's grave. It wasn't an overly large gathering—Garvin had kept to himself for the most part—but his kids were here, which was all Sam really cared about.

His eyes drifted to Derek, Garvin's son, who was standing a little too stiffly near the grave. Leanne, on the other hand, was making no attempt to hide her fury. Her voice, sharp and biting, carried over to Sam despite the respectful distance he kept.

"You should have found who did this by now!" Leanne snapped at one of the younger officers standing nearby, her arms crossed tight over her chest. Her eyes blazed, cutting through the cool air like a knife. "And that statue—why is it still missing? Do you people even know how to do your jobs? How do you lose something so valuable?"

Sam could see the officer's discomfort from where he stood, but Leanne wasn't letting up. Sam had thought she would be calmer, but grief and anger had her wound tight, like a spring ready to snap.

He shifted his weight, keeping his attention focused on Derek, who hovered behind his sister. Derek wasn't saying much, his hands shoved deep into his pockets, his shoulders hunched forward. He seemed uncomfortable but kept his head down, mumbling something to Leanne as she ranted.

Sam watched the dynamic between them with interest. Derek was the one Sam was here to observe. He'd lied about being in town, and they knew he was desperate for money, his divorce draining whatever was left of his savings. And with that missing bronze statue—a piece worth a lot of money—Sam couldn't help but wonder if Derek's silence was covering something darker. Did Derek kill his father for that statue, or was he just another grieving son trying to hold himself together?

Leanne's voice rose again, her frustration palpable. "It's been days! And we still don't know who killed him! What are the police doing? Waiting for clues to fall out of the sky?"

The younger officer stammered an apology, but it did nothing to cool her anger. "I swear," Leanne continued, her voice cracking, "if you don't find whoever did this soon, I'll—"

"Leanne, enough," Derek interrupted softly, stepping closer to her. He placed a hand on her arm, trying to pull her back. "This isn't the time."

Leanne jerked her arm away, glaring at him. "When is the time, Derek? When? After they let the case go cold? When we've lost everything, just like you did?"

Sam shifted his weight, his sharp gaze catching the way Derek winced. Leanne might be angry at the police, but Derek... Derek looked like a man carrying the weight of something else entirely. Guilt, maybe?

Jo was there too. She'd arrived separately, blending in with the small crowd and keeping her distance from the family. Sam knew she was watching like he was—taking note of every little detail, every crack in the family's facade.

Leanne stormed off toward her car, the last of the mourners dispersing behind her. Derek lingered near the grave, his gaze directed at the black hole in the earth. He seemed smaller now, his face hidden in the shadow of his coat collar.

Sam stepped back, turning toward his truck parked just outside the cemetery gates. As he approached, he heard a familiar voice call out softly behind him.

"I see you've still got Lucy keeping you company," Jo said, pulling her coat tighter around her as she stepped toward the truck. A soft smile played on her lips as she glanced into the back seat, where Lucy sat, her ears perked and her tail wagging as she noticed Jo.

“She misses you,” Sam replied, opening the driver’s door and letting Lucy hop out to greet Jo. The dog bounded toward her, nuzzling Jo’s hand, and Jo knelt to give her a good scratch behind the ears. “Probably as much as you miss being in the squad room.”

Jo chuckled, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “Yeah, well, sitting on the sidelines has never been my style.”

Sam gestured to the passenger side of the truck. “Got doughnuts from Brewed Awakening. If that’s any consolation.”

Jo grinned, already moving toward the door. “Now you’re talking.”

They climbed into the truck, Lucy hopping into the back seat again, where she curled up on the blanket Sam kept there. Jo immediately reached for one of the doughnuts, tearing off a piece and chewing it like she hadn’t had a doughnut in months. The tension between them lightened a little, though both their minds were still on the case.

Sam’s eyes flicked back to the graveyard as they ate in silence for a moment. Derek was still standing by the grave, his face tilted down, his hands at his sides. Tears streaked his face now, but it wasn’t the crying that bothered Sam—it was how he seemed frozen there, almost too still, like he didn’t know how to leave.

“You think it’s an act?” Jo asked around a bite of her doughnut, following Sam’s gaze.

Sam didn’t answer right away. “Hard to tell. He’s grieving, sure, but... there’s something off about it.”

Jo licked some sugar off her thumb. “You think he’s guilty? Or just feeling the pressure?”

“I don’t know,” Sam admitted, his gaze never leaving Derek. “He’s desperate. That much we know. The guy’s drowning in debt, going through a nasty divorce, and now his dad’s dead. Maybe that’s all it is.”

They watched Derek wipe his eyes, his head still bent toward the grave.

“I’m not convinced,” Sam said, his voice low. “But I think Derek knows something more than he’s letting on.”

Jo brushed off her hands and folded her arms. “Maybe we push him. See what cracks.”

“Maybe. But let’s give him some rope. He might hang himself without us having to do a thing.”

Jo sighed, her eyes lingering on the now-empty graveyard. “And Leanne?”

“She’s angry, but I don’t blame her. We need to find that statue. And when we do, we’ll find our killer.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The police station was unusually quiet for a winter morning. Kevin sat at his desk, the faint hum of the heater in the background, tapping a pen against the edge of the table as his eyes flicked back to his screen. The station felt emptier than usual with Sam at Garvin's funeral, Wyatt out on a call about Nettie Deardorff's goat, and Reese handling some paperwork in the next room.

It was the perfect moment for Kevin to look into something that had been bothering him all morning.

He slid the two notes closer, carefully comparing them. The first note was the one left on Bridget and Jo's door, taunting, ominous in its simplicity. The second was the note that had been left on Kevin's car, warning him about the thumb drive—two seemingly unrelated messages, but now, he wasn't so sure.

His gut had been nagging at him ever since Bridget mentioned the note they'd found on the door of the cottage. What were the odds of him getting a note on his car and one showing up on Jo's door? Something didn't feel right. If these two threats were connected, the implications were terrifying. He couldn't shake the feeling that the person behind these notes knew more than they were letting on.

Kevin bent closer, eyes narrowing as he studied the handwriting on both notes under the glow of the desk lamp. The letters—sharp, precise—looked eerily similar. He leaned back, his mind racing. No… it couldn't be.

He grabbed his phone and snapped a photo of each note, pulling up a document on his computer that analyzed handwriting. His heart started to

pound as the software compared the two. The results popped up on the screen almost immediately—ninety-nine percent match.

Kevin froze, his pulse quickening. Had the same person written both notes?

His fingers hovered over the keyboard as a chill crept down his spine. What did this mean? Could the person threatening him about the thumb drive be involved with Bridget's past somehow? Or did they have some connection to Jo's cottage and the skeleton in the well?

He pushed back from the desk, his mind spinning. Bridget needed to know about this. She'd been worried the note was meant for her, and now, Kevin thought she might be right. The fact that the same person had written both notes changed everything.

Kevin stood abruptly, grabbing his jacket and calling out toward Reese, who was busy in the other room. "I'm going to pop out for a bit."

Reese popped her head around the corner, raising an eyebrow. "Everything okay?"

"Yeah," Kevin said, though his voice was tight. "Just... something I need to check on."

Without waiting for her to respond, Kevin bolted for the door. The cold air slapped him in the face as he stepped outside, the brisk winter wind biting at his skin. He glanced at his watch—Bridget should still be at the bakery. If he hurried, he could catch her before the lunchtime rush.

KEVIN PARKED his car a block away from the bakery, the warm smell of freshly baked bread and pastries wafting through the air as he approached. The small bell above the door jingled as he stepped inside, and Kevin's eyes immediately scanned the counter for Bridget.

She was there, tying up a box of muffins for a customer. She looked... tired. The weight of the past few days had taken its toll on her. She glanced up as Kevin stepped in, and her face lit up slightly when she saw him.

"You're just the person I wanted to see," she said with a small smile, wiping her hands on her apron.

He hadn't expected her to say that, and it made his heart jump in a way that was unfamiliar—but not unpleasant. He smiled back, hoping his voice

sounded steady when he replied. “Glad to hear that.”

“Give me a second,” Bridget added, gesturing for him to wait.

Kevin nodded, his heart still racing, and he shifted nervously by the door. His mind whirled with the urgency of the news he had to tell her, but it also warmed him that Bridget seemed genuinely happy to see him.

A few minutes later, Bridget untied her apron and waved over to her coworker before slipping out from behind the counter and walking toward him. “I’m on break. Come outside with me?”

They stepped out into the cold, the quiet street offering them privacy. Bridget hugged her arms around herself, blowing into her hands to warm them as they walked around the corner to where Kevin’s car was parked.

Kevin glanced at her, his mind still on the notes but curiosity piquing as he remembered her greeting. “So, what did you want to see me about?”

Bridget sighed, the puff of her breath visible in the chilly air. “It’s Jo. I’m worried she’s going to do something drastic. She’s convinced the note was meant for her, and she’s planning to set a trap or something to try to catch whoever left it.” She shook her head. “I’ve been thinking... I can’t let her go on thinking it’s all about her. I need to come clean. Tell her about my past. But I wasn’t sure how or if I should. And…” Bridget hesitated for a moment, glancing up at Kevin before continuing. “I also thought I should tell her that you know about it too. I didn’t want it to get awkward.”

Kevin blinked, feeling a warmth spread through him despite the cold wind cutting through their coats. She’d thought of him, considered his feelings about Jo knowing he was involved. That small detail meant more to him than he expected. “I appreciate that,” Kevin said, his voice softer now. “It’s fine by me. In fact…”

He hesitated, knowing he was about to drop a bombshell on her. “Actually, I came here to talk to you about telling Jo something too.”

Bridget frowned, curiosity flickering in her eyes. “What is it?”

Kevin took a deep breath. “I checked the handwriting on both notes—the one left on your door and the one I found on my car.” He paused, watching as Bridget’s expression shifted to something between confusion and apprehension. “The handwriting has a ninety-nine percent match. The same person wrote both notes.”

Bridget’s eyes widened, her face paling. “What? But how? How could they be connected?”

“I don’t know,” Kevin admitted, running a hand through his hair. “But they are. And this changes everything. Whoever left those notes knows more than we thought.”

“What does this mean?”

“It means we have to come clean,” Kevin said firmly. “You need to tell Jo everything—about your past, the thumb drive, all of it. She’s walking into something dangerous, and if she doesn’t know the full picture, she could get hurt.”

Kevin was right. Jo deserved the truth. And if these notes were connected, they were all in more danger than they realized.

Bridget bit her lip, glancing up at Kevin. “But… how do we explain the thumb drive? I don’t want Jo to know about how you got it from the evidence. That’s the last thing you need, getting caught up in this mess.”

Kevin frowned, nodding. He hadn’t quite figured that part out either. “We can’t tell her everything. But… there’s another way. The drive was in my bag when I got out of the hospital. That’s true. And when I looked at it, I found the coordinates.”

Bridget raised an eyebrow. “And then what? Jo’s going to wonder why we were out there that night.”

“We tell her we found the coordinates and followed them. She doesn’t need to know everything. Besides,” Kevin added with a small smile, “Jo doesn’t exactly play by the rules all the time either. She’ll understand.”

Bridget considered that, her mind whirring. He was right—Jo often bent the rules when she needed to, and she trusted them both. If they gave her enough of the truth, she’d likely let the rest slide.

“You’re right,” Bridget said softly. “It’ll be fine. We’ll explain it in a way she’ll accept.”

Kevin nodded, relieved to see her coming around. “I’ll come over tonight. We’ll tell her together. You don’t have to do this alone.”

Bridget looked up at him, gratitude and relief softening her expression. “Thank you. I’m really glad you’re in this with me.”

“Of course. We’re in this together.”

Bridget smiled, and for a moment, the cold around them didn’t seem so biting. They had a plan now—a way forward. And tonight, they’d finally come clean.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Jo sat in her car and watched as Derek McDaniels stood by his father's grave . He'd been there the whole time she'd been talking to Sam, and she was starting to wonder how long he might linger. She took out her phone and snapped a few pictures of him.

When Derek finally turned and walked toward his car, Jo's pulse quickened. As much as she'd told herself that grief was messy and complicated, something about the way Derek hung back, staring at the grave like it held more secrets than closure, made her uneasy.

As Derek's taillights flickered on and his car rolled away from the cemetery, Jo shifted her car into drive, keeping a safe distance as she followed him.

The winter air was crisp, and the early-morning sun struggled to break through the gray clouds that hung over White Rock. Jo's breath fogged the windshield for a moment before the defroster kicked in. She tightened her grip on the wheel, her eyes fixed on the road ahead. *Where are you going, Derek?*

Derek took a turn, heading out of town. Where in the world was he going?

She'd hoped she could catch Derek visiting a pawn shop and catch him with the bronze statue. But this road led away from the shops… and toward Thorne Construction.

Derek pulled into the dusty Thorne Industries construction site sprawled across the horizon like a half-finished fortress—steel beams reaching skyward, piles of gravel and lumber scattered like discarded toys.

Jo pulled into a dirt side road, parking behind thick evergreen shrubs. She could peek through the leaves and see Derek, but hopefully, no one could see her car.

Derek himself stepped out of the car, smoothing his tie as he scanned the area. Nervous, Jo thought. He looked like a man who didn't belong and who knew it.

Her gaze shifted to the far side of the lot. There was Beryl Thorne, hard hat perched on her head. She stood near a stack of steel beams, talking to a man Jo recognized immediately: Desmond Griggs.

Jo's jaw tightened. Of course Beryl would have Griggs working for her. One of them was just as shady as the other, and Beryl had a reputation for keeping her hands clean by letting others do the digging.

Derek made his way toward them, his steps hesitant. Jo raised her phone, snapping a photo as he approached.

Beryl greeted Derek with a firm handshake, all business. Jo couldn't make out their words, but the body language said plenty. Derek was deferential, almost anxious, while Beryl exuded her usual icy confidence.

Jo shifted slightly, angling for a better view. Griggs stood off to the side, arms crossed, watching the interaction like a guard dog. He said something that made Derek glance his way, his expression tightening. Jo captured the moment, the three of them framed together in the fading light.

Derek shook his head. Beryl gestured with her hands. Whatever they were discussing, it didn't seem very friendly.

Derek headed back to his car. Griggs and Beryl exchanged a few final words before splitting up. Griggs moved toward the workers. Beryl walked back to her trailer.

Her phone buzzed in her hand. Sam.

She hesitated, glancing back at the site. There was no sign anyone had noticed her, but she wasn't about to risk it. She answered quietly.

"Yeah?"

"Hi… sounds like you're up to something?" Sam said.

"Aren't I always? I just saw something odd. Check your phone in about ten seconds."

Before he could press further, Jo hung up and sent him the photos. Then she started the car and headed toward town. She had an idea about how to prove that Derek McDaniels had been lying to them all along.

JO'S PULSE quickened as she stepped into Clara Hartwell's cluttered office, the dim light from the single desk lamp casting long shadows on the walls. Maps, blueprints, and rolled-up surveys crowded the space, giving it an air of controlled chaos. The faint smell of old paper and coffee grounds lingered in the air.

Previously, Clara had said that Derek came to the office before his father died, but she'd never shown her a picture of him to be certain. Now, she could get that certainty.

Clara, seated behind her desk and squinting at a handwritten ledger, looked up, startled but composed. "Oh, Sergeant Harris. Back again?"

Jo forced a small smile, tapping her phone to wake the screen. "I need you to take a look at something." She leaned across the desk, holding out the photo she'd snapped at the construction site. "Is this the man that came in last week about the McDaniels blueprints? Garvin's son?"

Clara leaned forward, her reading glasses perched on the edge of her nose. She studied the image, her eyes narrowing as recognition dawned. "That's him," she said, her tone definitive.

Jo felt a surge of vindication. Derek. She knew he was lying, and now she had proof.

"You're sure?" Jo pressed, her eyes locked on Clara.

Clara nodded, her hand drifting toward the desk to steady herself. "Yes, that's the man who came in asking about the blueprints for Garvin's property."

Jo exhaled slowly, satisfaction spreading through her chest. She straightened, pulling the phone back and locking the screen. "Thank you, Ms. Hartwell. You've been very helpful."

"Always happy to assist," Clara said, though her expression was tinged with unease.

Jo didn't notice. Her thoughts were already miles ahead, crafting her next steps.

Outside, the late-afternoon light was already dimming, casting long shadows across the parking lot as Jo leaned against her car. The cool air bit at her skin, but she barely felt it. She tapped Sam's number on her phone, her other hand gripping the car door.

Sam picked up on the second ring. "What's up?"

“Just left Clara Hartwell’s office with that photo I took,” Jo said, unable to keep the edge of triumph out of her voice. “She confirmed it. Derek was the one asking about the blueprints.”

There was a pause, then Sam’s voice came through, steady and cautious. “Good work. But you know I can’t use that. You’re on leave. I’ll need to follow up and get her statement myself.”

Jo sighed, frustration creeping into her tone. “I know. But you’d better move fast. Derek’s lying, Sam. He’s in this up to his neck.”

“We’ll soon find out. I happen to have him coming in in about ten minutes,” Sam said.

“Excellent. Hopefully, you can get the truth out of him.”

Sliding into the driver’s seat, Jo placed her phone in the console and stared out the windshield, the weight of the case pressing down on her.

She should feel triumphant. This was a solid lead, something Sam could use to pressure Derek. But the satisfaction was dulled by the nagging feeling in the back of her mind.

What’s Beryl’s angle in all this?

Jo drummed her fingers on the steering wheel, thinking back to everything they’d uncovered so far. Beryl had handed that envelope to Marnie, who’d delivered it to Parker Studies. And now, Derek was mixed up in the blueprints. Beryl Thorne was always in the middle of things, always finding a way to skirt accountability.

Jo clenched her jaw. She couldn’t let Beryl slip through the cracks again. If Beryl was tied to Convale, to Garvin’s death, to Derek’s lies, then Jo needed to figure out how it all connected.

Her eyes flicked to her phone. She’d already called Sam and sent him the photo. He’d take it from here. But that didn’t mean Jo was ready to sit back and wait.

Marnie took that envelope to Parker Studies.

The thought settled into her mind like a stone in still water. Jo hadn’t followed up on that thread yet, but it was time. Whatever was in that envelope, whatever connection Parker Studies had to this mess, it might be the key to unraveling everything.

Jo checked the time—plenty of daylight left. Her stomach rumbled, and she realized she hadn’t eaten since breakfast. She’d grab a quick sandwich and head over to Parker Studies.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

"I didn't kill him, okay?"

Derek McDaniels sat across from Sam, his hands gripping the arms of the chair so tightly his knuckles had turned white. His eyes darted nervously around Sam's office, like a man looking for an exit. The slight tremor in his voice wasn't lost on Sam, who leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, keeping his expression neutral.

"Then I need to know where you were that day," Sam said calmly. "The sooner you're clear, the sooner we can figure out what really happened to your father."

Derek swallowed hard, his gaze flicking to the window behind Sam's desk, where the winter light filtered weakly through. The room seemed to press in on him, his nerves stretched tight. He shifted in his chair. "I told you, I was back home. At a bar. O'Malley's Tavern. I'm a regular there. I bet they have surveillance footage that can prove I was there."

Sam nodded slowly, watching Derek's fidgety behavior. It wasn't only the standard nervousness of being questioned about a murder—there was something deeper, a current of fear running beneath the surface. "We'll look into that," Sam replied.

Sam leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, eyes fixed on Derek. "Your father ever talk about the bronze statue he kept?"

Derek blinked, his expression blank for a moment before recognition flickered. "Oh, that old thing? Yeah, he used to brag about it all the time. Said it was some big-deal piece of art. I always figured it was just one of those things old folks like to exaggerate about."

Sam kept his tone casual, his gaze steady. “So you didn’t know it was worth a lot of money?”

Derek hesitated, scratching the back of his neck. “I mean, I guess. I never really thought about it. It’s just been there, you know?”

“Do you know where it is now?” Sam asked, his voice calm but probing.

Derek shrugged, trying to look indifferent. “Probably still in the house somewhere. On the mantel, maybe?”

Sam leaned forward, his voice low. “Afraid not. It’s missing. We think the killer took it.”

Derek’s eyes widened, his composure slipping for a second before he forced a nervous laugh. “Took it? Why would anyone want that thing?”

Sam didn’t blink. “Because it was the murder weapon.”

Derek paled visibly, his body stiffening. “The statue? You’re saying someone used it to...” He shuddered, shaking his head.

Sam studied him closely, watching every twitch, every shift in his expression. Derek was putting on a good act, no doubt about that. The question was, was it all an act? Could he really not know anything about the statue—or his father’s murder?

“I’m telling you, Chief,” Derek continued, his voice shaking just enough to seem authentic, “I had no idea about any of this.”

“Did you know your father was planning to change his will?”

Derek shook his head. “Not before this, no.”

Sam let the silence stretch, watching Derek closely. “He was going to leave the property to an environmental trust. Not to you and your sister.”

Derek’s jaw tightened, and Sam saw a flicker of anger in his eyes. “That’s what his lawyer said, but he never told me that.”

“Would that have made you angry?” Sam asked quietly. “To find out he wasn’t leaving you anything?”

Derek looked down at his hands, his leg bouncing under the desk. “I’m not gonna lie. It would’ve pissed me off. But I wouldn’t kill him over it, all right? If he wanted to leave everything to a bunch of tree huggers, that’s his business.”

Sam gave a slow nod then leaned forward, narrowing his eyes slightly. “Then why did you visit the town surveyor’s office?”

Derek’s brow furrowed in confusion. “What?”

“You were asking about maps of all your father’s land,” Sam continued, his gaze fixed on Derek. “Why?”

Derek blinked, shaking his head quickly. “I didn’t visit any surveyor’s office.”

Sam didn’t buy it. He leaned in, his voice dropping slightly. “Are you sure? Or was it something Beryl asked you to do?”

Derek’s leg bounced faster now, his eyes darting nervously to the door before he met Sam’s gaze. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. I didn’t ask anyone about maps.”

“I find that hard to believe, Derek. You’re scrambling for money, your father’s properties are valuable, and maybe Beryl offered you a way out. I think you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

“I don’t!” Derek snapped, his voice rising with panic. “I don’t know anything about maps or surveyors or whatever the heck you’re getting at.”

“Then help me understand,” Sam said, leaning forward, his tone sharp but measured. “Because I’ve got witnesses placing you here in town last week. And I know you met with Beryl Thorne after the funeral. So why don’t you explain what that meeting was about?”

Derek shifted in his chair, visibly uncomfortable. “She called and asked me to meet her at that construction site. She wanted to make an offer for that piece of land my father has on River Road.”

Sam raised an eyebrow, skepticism etched into his face. “And what did you say?”

“I told her I’d have to discuss it with my sister. We both own it together now.”

Sam leaned back, his expression unreadable, but his mind was already racing.

Was Derek telling the truth?

Why would Beryl be interested in that land? Beryl had ties to Convale through Victor Sorrentino. And then there was the envelope Beryl had given to Marnie. Marnie had taken that straight to Parker Studies.

Beryl was tangled in this mess, that much was certain. Sam couldn’t shake the feeling she was orchestrating something, pulling strings from the shadows as she always did. And Parker Studies—it was time to pay them a visit. But first, he needed to verify the picture Jo sent to Clara Hartwell and have Reese check on Derek’s alibis. Jo had asked Clara, but he needed to do it officially.

He made a mental note to head to the surveyor's office after he was done here. For now, he needed to wrap this up.

Sam's gaze locked back onto Derek. "All right, you can go."

Derek blinked, surprised by the abrupt dismissal. "That's it?"

"For now," Sam said, standing. "But don't get too comfortable. I'll be checking your alibi. In the meantime, if you want to change your story, feel free to give me a call."

Derek bristled, his face tightening with barely concealed anger. "I'm not changing anything because it's the truth." He stood quickly, grabbing his coat.

"Good," Sam said, his tone cold. "Then you've got nothing to worry about."

After Derek left, Sam watched the empty doorway for a long moment, his thoughts churning. Was Derek truly not involved? His reaction felt genuine, but Sam had seen plenty of liars put on convincing acts before.

He glanced at the clock and grabbed his jacket. First stop: Clara Hartwell's office to confirm Jo's photo. After that: Parker Studies. It was time to start untying the knots Beryl was trying to keep hidden.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Sam stepped into Clara Hartwell's cramped office, the smell of aged paper and dust heavy in the air. The hum of the overhead fluorescent light buzzed faintly as she looked up from her desk, her reading glasses perched low on her nose.

"Chief Mason," Clara said, setting down a stack of maps. "Didn't expect to see you today. Sergeant Harris was just here."

"Oh, right… I'm just double-checking that I have things straight." Sam pulled his phone from his pocket and scrolled to the photo of Beryl and Derek.

Clara adjusted her glasses, leaning in to examine the picture. "This is the same picture she showed me."

"It is," Sam said, keeping his tone even. "Just double-checking that this is the man that came in last week looking for maps of Garvin's land." He enlarged the image to show Derek McDaniels.

Clara squinted at the photo, her brow furrowing. "Him? Oh, no. Not him." She pointed to the back of the image, her finger landing squarely on a figure just visible near the edge. "That one. The man in the background."

Sam's eyes shifted to where she was pointing. Desmond Griggs.

His gut tightened, though he kept his face neutral. "You're sure?"

"Positive," Clara replied, straightening in her chair. "That's the man who came in asking about the blueprints. He seemed particularly interested in the property lines between Garvin's land on River Road and the adjoining parcels."

Sam nodded, slipping the phone back into his pocket. “Thanks, Clara. That’s helpful.”

Clara smiled faintly. “Glad to assist. Let me know if you need anything else.”

“I will,” Sam said, already heading for the door.

Outside, Sam paused on the steps, letting the cold air clear his head. Griggs. The man was a known troublemaker, but what the heck was he doing asking about Garvin’s land? And how did he connect to Beryl Thorne? Did he work for her? He’d been at Marnie’s campaign office. How did it all tie in?

The picture was shifting. Sam replayed his earlier conversation with Derek in his mind. Maybe the son was telling the truth after all. He hadn’t been the one poking around the surveyor’s office. Sam would still check Derek’s alibis, but now, he suspected they might pan out.

Sam exhaled sharply and headed for his car. One thing was certain—Beryl Thorne’s fingerprints were all over this mess. From her meeting with Derek to the envelope she’d handed Marnie, it all circled back to her. She was the common denominator.

Sliding into the driver’s seat, Sam made a mental note. Next stop: Parker Studies. Whatever Beryl had her hands in, it started there. And this time, he wasn’t walking away without answers.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Jo stood in front of the side door to Parker Studies, hidden away behind a row of shrubs. The faint smell of cigarette smoke lingered in the air, the ground littered with butts, as if someone had taken a break here recently. Her hand hovered over the door handle, her heart racing.

The other two entrances to Parker Studies had been locked tight. No phone number, no website, nothing. It was as if the place didn't exist. She'd tried to dig up something—anything—before coming here. No contact information, no way to schedule a meeting. Nothing.

Her gut told her there was something off about this place. Convale Energy was tied up in all of this somehow, and whatever Parker Studies was doing here, it wasn't out in the open. It reminded her of one of those secret government facilities in the movies, the kind you weren't supposed to know about. The kind that dealt with things people weren't supposed to see.

When she'd found this side door, tucked away in the shadows, she'd been shocked to see it was slightly open. Not fully ajar but not latched either. A small twig caught underneath had kept it from closing.

Jo's hand tightened on the handle, and she hesitated for a moment. She wasn't supposed to be here.

But her instincts as a cop wouldn't let her walk away. There were answers inside this place, and she wasn't leaving until she got closer to the truth.

With a deep breath, Jo slipped through the door and into the building. She bent down to remove the twig so no one would know the door had been left open.

The inside was cold. Sterile. She paused just inside the side door, unsure of what to do next. She hadn't told Sam she was doing this. She'd left him in the dark. She was officially off the case, and the less he knew about her rule bending, the better it would be for him.

The hallway stretched out in front of her, long and narrow, and it hit her immediately that something was weird about this place. There was no reception desk, no lobby area—just a maze of sterile corridors, all lined with white doors that were shut tight. It didn't feel like a normal business.

She paused by one of the closed doors, pressing her ear against it. Faint sounds—machines whirring, maybe? But no voices. The whole place felt wrong.

She continued down the hall, glancing over her shoulder every few steps, coming up with what she would say if someone was going to come out of one of these rooms and confront her.

That was when she heard the voices.

"...a breach?" A woman's voice, low and professional, echoed from a corridor ahead. "The door was left open longer than it should've been. We need to check the east wing."

Another voice, this one male, replied, "Make sure no one's inside. If someone's here, lock it down."

Jo's heart leapt into her throat. Breach? Were they talking about her? Her eyes darted around for somewhere to hide. Footsteps echoed down the hall, getting closer. She didn't have time to think—she spotted a door marked Restroom a few feet away and darted toward it, slipping inside.

The bathroom was small, as sterile as the rest of the building, but it offered her a place to catch her breath. She leaned against the door, trying to calm her racing heart. She was trespassing. If they caught her, she had no explanation.

Her mind whirled with the implications. Convale, Marnie Wilson, and now this place—Parker Studies. What were they hiding?

Then she heard it—a quiet shuffle behind her. A soft exhale.

Jo whipped around, eyes wide, her breath catching in her throat. Standing in the corner, his expression as shocked as hers, was Sam.

"What are you doing here?" Jo hissed, keeping her voice low.

Sam straightened, stepping out of the shadows. His mouth twitched, almost a smile, but the tension between them was unmistakable. "I could ask you the same thing," he whispered back.

Jo stared at him, her mind racing. Of course Sam would be here. He'd been working this case just as hard, but she hadn't told him she was coming here. And judging by the look on his face, he hadn't planned on her showing up either.

Before she could fire back, the footsteps outside grew louder. They were right outside the door now. They were going to be found.

Sam moved closer, his hand lightly pressing against her arm, his breath warm on her skin. "Stay quiet," he murmured.

Jo's heart hammered in her chest as she felt him lean in closer, the air between them thick with tension. There was something about being this close to him, pressed together in the small space. She tried to focus on the danger outside, but it was impossible to ignore the heat of his body next to hers.

They didn't move, standing frozen, listening to the footsteps pass. The steps stopped just outside the door, and Jo could feel the tension in Sam's body, inches away from her own. His face was so close to hers, his breath brushing against her cheek. Her mind flashed with memories of long hours spent together on cases, the unspoken connection that had always been there.

Then the door swung open.

A security guard stepped inside, his sharp eyes taking in Sam and Jo standing awkwardly by the sinks. His gaze lingered on the pair then darted to the door as if questioning why they were both inside.

"What are you doing here?" the guard asked, his tone skeptical.

Sam straightened, recovering quickly with an easy smile. "Chief Sam Mason," he said, flashing his badge. "This is Sergeant Harris. We're here following up on a call about a break-in."

The guard frowned, his eyes narrowing. "Break-in? We don't usually involve law enforcement for something like that. We have our own security measures."

Jo folded her arms, meeting the guard's gaze without blinking. "Well, we got a call, so here we are," she said evenly, backing Sam's play.

The guard's suspicion softened slightly. "This area's supposed to be restricted. What are you doing in the bathroom?"

"I understand. This is a bit of a sensitive facility, isn't it?" Sam asked, avoiding the question about why they were in the bathroom.

The guard nodded, his suspicion melting away. “Yeah, the research we’re doing is very hush-hush—high success rate, cutting-edge treatments. But that also means other companies try to steal our protocols, so we keep everything locked down. Only staff and patients are supposed to be inside.”

“Treatments?” Sam asked.

The guard frowned. “Cancer treatments.”

“Of course,” Sam said.

Jo exchanged a glance with Sam, her mind racing with this new information. A cancer research facility? High cure rates? This wasn’t at all what she’d expected, but it raised even more questions. What did Marnie Wilson have to do with a place like this?

“You’d better come with me. We’ll find out who called this in.”

Sam gestured for Jo to go first, his calm demeanor unshaken, but inside, Jo could feel the tension rising. The guard was suspicious—rightly so—and they needed to be careful.

The guard escorted them down the hallway to a small room, his steps brisk, his eyes constantly flicking over his shoulder as if to catch them doing something. The visitor station was a sterile corner of the building, manned by a receptionist who barely glanced up as they approached.

“Who called for outside help with a break-in?” the guard asked her sharply.

The receptionist frowned, confused, and shook her head. “No one’s mentioned anything to me.”

Another guard nearby, an older man with a clipboard, chimed in. “Maybe it was Dr. Leavitt,” he muttered, scratching his chin. “That guy’s always complaining about security issues.”

The first guard rolled his eyes but didn’t press further. He turned back to Sam. “I’ll need you both to sign in for the record.”

Jo went straight to signing the log book, which had all the visitors’ names. A name jumped out at her. Marnie Wilson. “Marnie’s been visiting here a lot, huh?” she asked, keeping her tone light. “Running a campaign and dealing with a sick family member—it’s a lot for anyone.”

The receptionist barely looked up, but a nurse walking by hesitated, her clipboard clutched to her chest. “Oh, Marnie’s mother is doing so much better,” the nurse offered brightly, eager to share. “Practically a miracle.”

Jo shot Sam a quick glance, and his face stayed neutral, but she saw the flicker of realization in his eyes. “That’s good to hear,” he said, his voice

steady.

As they stepped outside, Jo exhaled, the cold air cutting through the tension still clinging to her. She turned to Sam. “Thanks for backing me up in there.”

“Let’s just hope no one mentions you pretended to be here officially and I played along.”

Jo grimaced. “I know. Sorry about that. It was worth it, though. Marnie’s mother is here. That envelope Beryl gave her—it’s gotta be about paying for her treatment. She’s funding all of this.”

Sam’s expression hardened, his jaw tightening. “Which means Beryl isn’t just involved—she’s pulling the strings. And Marnie’s doing her dirty work.”

Jo nodded, the pieces clicking into place in her mind. “Marnie must be desperate to keep her mother alive. But what does this have to do with Garvin’s death and the land?”

“That’s what we need to find out. Let’s stop by Holy Spirits for a drink and figure out exactly how to do that.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Jo nursed her Coors Light as she leaned against the bar at Holy Spirits, watching the amber glow of the stained glass windows cast a warm hue over the room. The converted church buzzed with the usual Friday crowd, but the noise felt distant. Her thoughts churned, circling everything they'd uncovered at Parker Studies.

Sam sat beside her, sipping his Mooseneck beer. He placed the bottle down with a muted thud and turned to her. "Marnie's mother being there changes things," he said, his voice low enough to blend with the hum of conversation.

Jo nodded, her fingers tracing the condensation on her bottle. "Beryl's payments weren't just about buying land or keeping her quiet. She's paying for treatment. Marnie's wrapped up in this because she's desperate."

Sam's jaw tightened. "Desperation doesn't absolve her. But it does mean we need to handle Marnie carefully."

Jo exhaled slowly, her frustration simmering just below the surface. "Right. She'll do what she has to do to get her mother treatment."

Sam frowned, his gaze narrowing. "It all points to Beryl. I don't think she'd go this far without a bigger motive. She's not just petty—she's calculating."

Jo took a long sip of her beer, letting the bitterness ground her. "So what's her endgame, Sam? What does Garvin's land have to do with all this? And why is Griggs suddenly in the mix?"

Sam's hand froze mid-reach for his beer. "Griggs," he murmured, his tone shifting.

Jo raised an eyebrow. “What about him?”

Sam leaned back, staring past her like he was piecing together a puzzle. “I saw him at Marnie’s campaign office a few weeks ago. I didn’t think much of it then—just assumed he was another hired hand—but when I went to question Clara Hartwell about Derek being there, she identified Griggs in the photo.”

“What?”

Sam explained how he went to Clara’s office so he could have her officially identify Derek. “And when I pointed to Derek in the photo, she said not that guy… the other guy.”

Jo sighed. “And the other guy in the photo was Griggs. I never specified which man I was talking about.”

Sam nodded. “Griggs doesn’t just show up somewhere unless there’s trouble. And if he’s tied to Beryl and Marnie...”

Jo’s stomach twisted. “Then whatever this is, it’s bigger than just land disputes or campaign favors.”

Sam nodded slowly, his expression hardening. “I need to confront Beryl. If anyone knows what Griggs is up to and how it ties back to Garvin’s murder, it’s her.”

Jo smirked faintly. “Good luck with that. You know she’s going to dance around every question you throw at her.”

“Maybe,” Sam said, his voice steady. “But I’m not letting her walk away this time. Though maybe I should have Wyatt follow him just for good measure. Wyatt’s pretty good at tailing people.”

Jo felt a pang of admiration for his resolve. Sam’s patience and methodical approach were a stark contrast to her own gut-driven style, but it was moments like this that reminded her why they made such a good team.

Her phone buzzed against the bar, pulling her from her thoughts. She glanced down, her stomach knotting when she saw Bridget’s name and the message.

Meet me at the cottage. It’s urgent.

Jo’s first instinct was to tell Sam. She opened her mouth—but then stopped herself.

A cold thread of guilt coiled in her chest. Parker Studies. If anyone found out Sam had let her pretend she was there officially, it could cost him his job. And the trap she wanted to set for the note leaver at the cottage? If

Sam showed up and got tangled in that, it could look like he was involved. She couldn't drag him down with her rule bending.

But as she stared at the message again, another worry gnawed at her. What if the note leaver had Bridget? What if her plan to flush out whoever was behind the threats had put her sister in danger?

Her pulse quickened, and she downed the rest of her beer, trying to push the panic down. She couldn't afford to lose her focus now.

"Everything okay?" Sam asked, catching her hesitation as he stood and slipped on his jacket.

Jo forced a tight smile, sliding her phone into her pocket. "Yeah, Bridget wants to go over something tonight. Probably garden plans or something," she lied, her voice deliberately light.

Sam studied her, his brow furrowed slightly, but he nodded. "All right. If she needs anything, you call me."

"I will," she promised, the weight of her unspoken fears pressing heavy on her chest.

Sam finished his beer. "I'm off to deal with Beryl. I'll let you know how it goes."

"Good luck," Jo said, managing a small smile.

She watched him leave, waiting until the door swung shut behind him before grabbing her coat. Her fingers brushed against her phone as she hurried outside, her heart pounding.

Bridget's message replayed in her mind like a warning bell. If the note leaver had Bridget, she'd never forgive herself.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Jo pulled into the driveway, her truck's headlights sweeping across the porch. Her chest tightened at the sight of Kevin and Bridget sitting on the steps with Pickles stretched out lazily beside them. The tension in their posture sent a ripple of unease through her.

She barely killed the engine before stepping out of the car. "What's going on?" Jo asked, her boots crunching against the gravel as she hurried up the steps. Her eyes darted from Kevin's somber expression to Bridget's faintly guilty one. "What's wrong? Is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine," Bridget said quickly, too quickly. She glanced at Kevin, who gave her a slight nod. "But we have something we need to tell you."

Jo raised an eyebrow, folding her arms. "I'm listening."

Kevin stood and gestured toward the front door. "Maybe we should go inside for this."

Jo's unease deepened. She followed them into the living room, where the warmth of the cottage clashed with the knot forming in her stomach. Bridget hovered near the arm of the couch, fidgeting, while Kevin stood near the fireplace, his hands in his pockets.

"All right," Jo said, breaking the silence. "What's this about?"

Kevin exhaled and pulled a folded piece of paper from his jacket pocket. "This."

Jo unfolded the note, her breath catching as she read the familiar blocky handwriting.

Secrets always come out.

Her eyes snapped to Kevin. “This… This is similar to the one on my door. Where did you get this?”

Kevin hesitated, glancing at Bridget before answering. “I found it on my windshield a few days ago. Before you found yours.”

Jo’s brow furrowed. “Why would someone leave this for you?”

Kevin shifted uncomfortably. “Because of the thumb drive.”

Jo stared at him. “Thumb drive?”

Kevin looked down. “When I got out of the hospital, they gave me a bag with things in it, and a thumb drive was in there. I had no idea what it was from.”

Jo’s gaze narrowed. “And you didn’t think to tell anyone about this?”

Kevin winced. “I didn’t know what it was at first, and I was embarrassed because of my memory issues. I thought it was blank or just junk. But then…”

He glanced at Bridget again, as if seeking permission, and she nodded slightly.

Kevin continued, “When I was on evidence room duty, recovering, I found this old notebook in the evidence room, tied to one of Lucas Thorne’s narcotics cases. There were these weird codes scribbled in the margins, and on a hunch, I tried one on the encrypted part of the thumb drive.”

Jo was all ears. She didn’t blame Kevin for holding back about the thumb drive. She understood how hard his memory issue had been and how much he’d worked to recover. Besides, she’d done things much worse. “And it worked?”

Kevin nodded. “There were numbers that looked like GPS coordinates. Those led us to that field behind Hazel Webster’s house.”

Jo blinked, her mind spinning. “Wait. You mean… that’s how you two just happened to be there the night Hazel grabbed me?”

“Yes,” Bridget said quietly, stepping closer. “But Kevin didn’t tell anyone because he was already worried about keeping the drive. He didn’t mean for it to go this far, Jo. He was—”

Jo held up a hand, stopping her. “You thought I’d be mad?” She laughed, the tension in her chest easing slightly. “Kevin, Sam and I have bent the rules more times than I can count. You don’t need to hide stuff like this from me. But what does this have to do with what’s going on now?”

Kevin’s expression darkened. “The notes.” He gestured to the one Jo still held. “The handwriting matches. Whoever’s leaving these knows about

the thumb drive and whatever's tied to it."

Jo looked between them, her mind racing. "And you think… what? That something's still out there? The FBI dug that place up. Wouldn't they have found it?"

"Maybe not," Kevin said. "If it was buried deep enough, they wouldn't have gone that far. Think about it—if whoever left these notes is desperate enough to connect the thumb drive to Garvin's case, there's something out there they don't want anyone to find."

Jo's grip on the note tightened, the weight of his words settling over her. "All right," she said, her voice firm. "We're going back to that field."

Before they moved, Bridget cleared her throat, drawing Jo's attention.

"There's something else," Bridget said, her voice hesitant.

Jo turned to her, raising an eyebrow. "What is it?"

Bridget hesitated, glancing down at her hands. "When the note was left on our door, I thought it was for me."

Jo froze, her chest tightening. "For you? Why would you think that?"

Bridget took a deep breath, meeting Jo's eyes. "Because of my past. Before I came here… I wasn't exactly living on the right side of the law. I ran with a crew. We pulled jobs—small ones, mostly. But one wasn't so small. Someone got killed. Anyway, I got out, but I'm worried someone from back then might be looking for me."

Jo stared at her, the weight of the confession hitting like a punch. "Bridget… why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't want to drag you into it," Bridget said, her voice cracking slightly. "You've done so much for me, Jo. I didn't want to ruin the life I've built here—or worse, put you in danger."

Jo's gaze softened, and she reached out, gripping Bridget's hand. "Bridget, we're in this together. All of us."

Kevin nodded, his voice steady. "That's why we came to you, Jo. This isn't just about the thumb drive or the notes anymore. It's all connected—Garvin's murder, the body in the well, Convale. Whatever's hidden at those coordinates could blow this whole thing wide open."

Jo stood, determination hardening her features. "Then let's not waste any more time."

Bridget and Kevin exchanged a look before grabbing their jackets. As they stepped out into the cold night, Jo's mind was already racing ahead.

Whoever had gone to such lengths to hide the truth was about to have their secrets dragged into the light.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Sam parked his truck at the edge of the construction site. He glanced at the lights on in the rusted trailer ahead, the temporary office for Thorne Construction, and felt the familiar weight of frustration settle in his gut. When Beryl hadn't been home, he'd come here, hoping she was working late. Lucy sat beside him in the passenger seat, her ears perked, her posture stiff, her dark eyes fixed on the trailer.

"You don't like it here either, huh?" Sam muttered, giving Lucy a quick scratch behind the ears. "Can't say I blame you."

Lucy huffed softly, her nose twitching as she looked toward the trailer. She seemed reluctant to go inside, and Sam didn't blame her. Every interaction he had with Beryl Thorne felt like walking through a field of land mines.

"Hopefully, this will be quick," Sam said, though he didn't really believe it.

He climbed out of the truck, Lucy hopping down after him, her tail low but alert. As they approached the trailer, the cold wind bit at Sam's face, a reminder of the winter chill that never seemed to leave White Rock.

Sam knocked on the metal door, the sound echoing sharply across the construction site. A moment later, the door creaked open, and there stood Beryl Thorne, a smirk already tugging at the corners of her lips.

"Sheriff," Beryl drawled, leaning against the doorframe with her arms crossed. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Sam met her gaze evenly. "Garvin McDaniels's murder."

Beryl's smirk widened, though her eyes held no humor. "Murder? What would I know about that?"

Sam stepped forward, the wind picking up behind him. "You tell me, Beryl. You've been meeting with his son."

For a split second, something flickered across Beryl's face—something she quickly masked with a nonchalant shrug. "Derek? Sure, I've spoken to him. He's broke. What's the harm in listening to someone trying to sell their daddy's property?"

Sam didn't move, didn't blink. "I'm more interested in why you're interested."

Beryl's smirk deepened, and she pushed the door open wider. "Come on in, Sheriff. Let's talk."

Beryl settled behind her desk and looked up at Sam. Lucy chuffed as if to say "Let's get out of here."

"You know as well as I do, Sam, we've got bigger problems than Garvin's murder."

Beryl Thorne's voice was cold, each word clipped as she tapped a pen against the open ledger on the desk in front of her. Her gaze was steely, almost daring Sam to challenge her. The cramped trailer smelled faintly of coffee and motor oil, with piles of paperwork scattered across the small table where Beryl sat.

Sam stood just inside the door, arms crossed, his expression tight. Lucy sat obediently at his side, ears still perked up but silent. Sam could feel the tension between them, thicker than the cigarette smoke that lingered faintly in the air. He'd been prepared for Beryl's usual stonewalling, but this… This was something new.

"Bigger problems?" Sam asked, his voice carefully measured. "You're telling me there's something bigger than the murder of a man like Garvin McDaniels?"

Beryl's eyes flickered with amusement, a cold smile curling at the corners of her mouth. "Lucas."

At the mention of Lucas Thorne, Sam's pulse quickened. He had almost forgotten how dangerous that name could sound coming out of Beryl's mouth. Lucas, sitting in prison for his crimes, was still a looming shadow over everything. And now, Beryl was bringing him up?

"Lucas is still in jail," Sam said, his voice flat. "And that's where he's staying."

“Not for long,” Beryl shot back, her voice icy. “His appeal is about to be approved. And when he walks out of that courtroom, I want you to remember this conversation, Sam, because if he gets out of jail, it’s not going to be good for you.”

Sam’s jaw tightened, his fists clenching at his sides. “You think I have any control over that? Lucas is in prison because he belongs there. The law decides if he stays or goes.”

Beryl’s laughter was sharp, cutting through the tension like a blade. “Oh, don’t play dumb, Sam. You and I both know the law can be... flexible. You’ve bent it before. And I’m telling you now, if Lucas walks, you’ll regret it. I have a way of knowing things that you don’t want getting out.”

The warning hung in the air like a noose tightening around his neck. Sam didn’t flinch, but inside, anger burned hot. He didn’t want to think about the past Beryl was hinting at. Not now. Not with everything else on the line.

He exhaled slowly, reining in the fire that threatened to erupt. “I didn’t come here to talk about Lucas, Beryl. What do you know about Garvin McDaniels?”

Beryl’s expression shifted, growing guarded as she leaned back in her chair. “Garvin was a stubborn old man. He was sitting on prime land, and I made him a fair offer. Simple as that.”

“I’m not talking about land deals,” Sam said, his voice low, edging toward frustration. “I’m talking about his murder.”

Her lips curled into a smirk. “You think I had something to do with it?”

“I think you’ve got more connections than you let on,” Sam replied, meeting her gaze without blinking. “You and I both know you had a conversation with Derek McDaniels. And it wasn’t just about the property, was it?”

At that, Beryl rolled her eyes, dismissive. “Oh, please. Derek came to me. He’s broke, and his daddy wasn’t about to leave him a penny. He was looking for a way out. I just showed interest in buying the land, like any good businesswoman would.”

“And you didn’t try to bribe him?” Sam asked, watching her closely.

Beryl let out a soft laugh, waving her hand dismissively. “Bribe him? For what? I don’t need to bribe a man who’s already drowning in debt. He would have sold to me eventually. I was just waiting for the right moment. The idea of me bribing him is absurd.”

Sam studied her for a moment, searching for any cracks in her facade. Beryl was smooth—too smooth. But her casual tone and lack of hesitation were enough to make him doubt Derek's version of the story. Still, there was something off here. Something that didn't sit right.

"And Marnie Wilson?" Sam pressed. "What's going on between the two of you?"

For the first time, Beryl hesitated, her expression tightening. She glanced away briefly before meeting his gaze again, her eyes sharper now. "Marnie? We're acquaintances. Friends, if you can call it that. I supported her campaign, just like any other concerned citizen would."

Sam didn't buy it. He remembered Wyatt's report. The envelope he'd seen Marnie carrying from Beryl's office couldn't have just been a campaign contribution. Sam had a creeping suspicion that Marnie was involved in something deeper than a mayoral race. "Friends, huh?" he asked, his tone skeptical.

Beryl's eyes narrowed. "What are you getting at?"

"Just curious," Sam said, shrugging lightly, though his gut told him there was more to dig into. "If you're just acquaintances, then why are her name and yours tangled up in all this mess?"

Beryl's smile faded, replaced by a cold, unreadable look. "You're barking up the wrong tree, Sam. Marnie and I have nothing to do with Garvin's murder. If you're smart, you'll focus on the real threats."

Sam held her gaze for a long moment, weighing his next words carefully. He knew he wasn't going to get much more out of her—not now, anyway. But he'd be back. He wasn't done with Beryl Thorne, not by a long shot.

"Thanks for your time, Beryl," Sam said finally, his voice edged with sarcasm as he stood. "I'll be in touch."

CHAPTER FORTY

The old dirt road twisted through the woods like a scar, rutted with years of neglect. Kevin's truck bumped along the uneven terrain until the path narrowed to little more than two tire tracks swallowed by grass and underbrush. Jo leaned forward, gripping the dashboard, her eyes scanning the dense forest pressing in on either side.

"This is it." Kevin pulled the truck to a stop. The engine cut out, and the quiet of the woods rushed in. Jo climbed out first, her boots crunching in the snow.

The land ahead was a mess. Large swathes had been dug up, the ground churned and scarred by bulldozers during the FBI's investigation of the Webster property. Piles of loose dirt and clay were scattered around like forgotten monuments to a gruesome past.

"This place gives me the creeps," Bridget muttered, stepping out and crossing her arms against the chill in the air.

Jo nodded. She couldn't blame her. The memories of what had been unearthed here lingered like the stench of old secrets refusing to fade. And it still left a hole that the body of their sister, abducted all those years ago, wasn't one of the ones found. "At least we'll be able to dig. The ground would be frozen if not for being recently disturbed."

Kevin grabbed three shovels from the back of the truck and handed one to Jo and another to Bridget. "You think we should call Sam?" he asked as they started toward the woods.

Jo paused, weighing the decision. "Not yet. Might be better if he doesn't come out. We wouldn't want anyone to think he's letting me investigate

while I'm suspended. Let's find out if anything's here first, then we'll call him."

Bridget glanced around nervously, her eyes darting toward the tree line. "I don't like this, Jo. What if whoever left those notes is watching us right now?"

Jo rested a hand on Bridget's arm, her voice calm but firm. "Stay close. We're not splitting up. If anything feels off, we leave."

They moved carefully across the uneven ground, stepping over deep grooves and patches of overturned soil. Kevin checked the GPS app again, adjusting their path slightly to the west. The coordinates led them to a small clearing where the ground had been freshly dug and partially refilled.

"Right here." Kevin stabbed his shovel into the ground, the blade slicing through the soft dirt with ease. Bridget and Jo followed, their movements swift and methodical. The scent of damp earth filled the air as they worked in silence, each shovelful revealing more of what lay hidden beneath.

Kevin grunted as his shovel hit something hard. "I think we've got something."

Jo dropped to her knees, brushing dirt away with her hands. A metallic edge glinted in the faint light filtering through the trees.

"It's a box," Kevin said, excitement creeping into his voice.

Bridget leaned in and pulled the box out. It was a stainless steel document box. Her fingers found the latch and pried it open with a sharp *snap*. She hesitated for a moment, then she lifted the lid.

The contents were preserved despite the years underground. Jo reached in carefully, pulling out a worn leather wallet. She flipped it open, revealing an ID card.

"Tommy Callahan," she murmured, reading the name aloud.

Bridget stepped closer, her voice uncertain. "Callahan? That's… the skeleton in the well?"

Jo nodded slowly, her mind racing. The implications hit her like a punch to the gut. "That's him. The reporter Mick told us about. The one who disappeared decades ago."

Kevin leaned on his shovel, his face tight. "But what's his wallet doing here, in this box, buried on the Webster property? This box has to be as old as he is."

"Decades," Jo agreed, her voice quiet but firm. "Which means whoever killed him put his wallet here on purpose."

“Trying to send a message, maybe?” Kevin asked.

“To who? I don’t think anyone else dug this up before us,” Jo said.

“Maybe someone put it here to gain some sort of leverage, but they never needed to use it,” Bridget suggested.

“Or were killed and couldn’t use it,” Kevin said.

Jo rifled through the rest of the box, pulling out a small stack of photographs. One of them was a surprise. It showed an image of a young Beryl Thorne shaking hands with a man Jo didn’t recognize. Another photo showed Beryl near what looked like a construction site.

“This connects Beryl to something,” Jo said, her voice tinged with disbelief.

“To what?” Kevin asked.

“I’m not sure, but it must be something important,” Jo said.

“And something someone wouldn’t want anyone to see,” Bridget added.

Jo’s mind raced ahead to the implications of what they’d found as she closed the box.

She stood, brushing dirt from her hands. “Now, it’s time to call Sam.”

Kevin straightened, glancing toward the trees. “We should get out of here first. This place doesn’t feel right.”

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Sam stood at Jo's door, tension settling in his shoulders. She'd called, said she had something to show him, but hadn't given any details. Beside him, Lucy waited, alert, as if she could sense the unanswered questions hanging in the air. Jo opened the door, her expression a mixture of excitement and worry. But it wasn't only Jo's expression that caught him off guard—it was the presence of Kevin sitting on the couch, his posture rigid, with Bridget leaning forward beside him.

"Kevin," Sam said, stepping into the warmth of the cottage and shutting the door behind him. "Didn't expect to see you here."

Kevin gave him a nod, his expression unreadable. Lucy trotted in and made a beeline for Kevin, her tail wagging.

"Lucy," Jo said, scratching behind the dog's ears briefly before motioning to the coffee table.

Sam's gaze shifted to the stainless steel box sitting on the table. It looked ordinary enough, but the way everyone was looking at it told him it was anything but. He unbuttoned his coat and approached, his eyes darting between Jo and Bridget. "Is this what you called me about?"

Jo gestured for him to sit, her tone businesslike. "We dug it up at the coordinates linked to a thumb drive Kevin has. And before you ask—I didn't call you before we went because I didn't want you tied to it officially."

Sam sank into the armchair, eyeing the box warily. "Thumb drive?"

They took turns explaining how Kevin had come into possession of the thumb drive and had figured out the code to get the coordinates.

Bridget leaned forward, her voice firm. “Kevin got a note on his car, same handwriting as the one left on Jo’s door. We think this box and the skeleton in the well are related to Garvin’s murder somehow.”

Kevin stood, grabbing the box and flipping the latch. “Inside is what changes everything.” He opened it, revealing its contents: an old leather wallet, a stack of grainy photographs, and some documents Sam couldn’t quite make out.

Jo picked up the wallet and handed it to him. “The skeleton in the well? This ID belonged to him. Tommy Callahan.”

Sam’s stomach tightened as he flipped the wallet open, his eyes scanning the faded license. “So Callahan was digging into something he wasn’t supposed to, and someone made sure he stayed quiet.”

“Exactly,” Jo said, her tone clipped. “And it all goes back to Convale somehow.”

Sam set the wallet down and sifted through the stack of photos, frowning as he flipped through them. One image froze him.

It was *Beryl Thorne.*

Younger, maybe in her late twenties, standing beside a man Sam didn’t recognize. She was at what looked like a construction site—wearing a sharp blazer and a hard expression that didn’t match the picture of an innocent housewife she’d painted.

“Is this…” Sam started, holding the photo up so the others could see.

“A young Beryl,” Jo confirmed, leaning in to study the photo again. “Looks like she was involved in something back then.”

Bridget frowned, her voice low and careful. “I thought Beryl took over Thorne Industries after her husband went to jail—just an innocent housewife stepping in to save the family name.”

Kevin snorted, crossing his arms. “Doesn’t look so innocent to me. She’s right in the thick of whatever this was.”

Jo’s eyes narrowed, her mind clearly running at full speed. “Someone put those photos in this box for a reason. They prove something. Beryl wasn’t just along for the ride—she was part of it. Maybe even the mastermind.”

“And someone knew it,” Jo added. “They buried the truth with Callahan, but they didn’t destroy it. They locked it away—like they were saving it as insurance.”

“We know Beryl Thorne is the key to Garvin’s murder, but she wouldn’t admit to anything when I talked to her earlier. She’s in tight with Convale, and now, we know Convale is mixed up somewhere in all of this. Callahan was onto something all those years ago. This box could change the power dynamic with Beryl,” Sam said.

“What about Marnie Wilson?” Jo asked.

Sam nodded. “Yep, now that we have leverage over Beryl, we can use that to get Marnie talking.”

“Marnie’s the weaker link. This”—Jo tapped the box lightly—“could come in handy later to keep Beryl in line.”

“What about the person that left the notes?” Bridget chimed in, her voice steady but laced with concern. “They seem to know our moves. They might already know we have this.”

Sam exchanged a glance with Jo. “True,” he admitted. “But maybe that person wants us to have it. What if those notes weren’t threats? What if they were breadcrumbs? Whoever left them might be trying to help us.”

Jo frowned, leaning forward. “Or they could be playing us. Leading us right into a trap.”

Kevin cleared his throat. “Either way, we don’t have enough to figure out who they are yet, so I agree our next move is to see what we can get out of Marnie.”

Jo leaned forward, her tone skeptical. “Marnie’s shifty. She’s good at wriggling out of tight spots. All we’ve got is that envelope from Beryl and her visits to Parker Studies. It’s not enough to stick in court. We need something solid.”

Sam nodded, rubbing the back of his neck. “You’re not wrong. It’s thin. But if we push—”

“What’s this?” Bridget interrupted. She had been quietly petting Lucy, her fingers idly brushing through the German Shepherd’s thick fur. Now, her hand froze, her brow furrowing. “What’s this on your tail, girl?”

Sam turned as Bridget lifted Lucy’s tail, revealing a few stray hairs faintly tinged with blue underneath.

“Oh, I thought I cleaned all that off. Guess I’m not much of a cleaner,” Jo said.

“What is it?” Sam asked.

“Some kind of blue paint or something. She had it on her tail at the station, before I got relieved of duty.” Jo made a face.

Something clicked. “Was that right after we went to Marnie’s campaign headquarters? I remember they were working on a poster for the campaign. It was blue. And Griggs was standing next to it.”

Kevin’s head snapped up, his expression sharp. “Wait a minute. The blue liquid at Garvin’s cabin.” His voice dropped into a hard edge. “The lab said it was diluted paint.”

Jo’s eyes widened, her mind racing. “If that’s the same paint, then that ties her directly to Garvin’s cabin.”

Kevin grinned, the first real smile breaking across his face all night. “Now, that’s solid. She can’t explain her way out of that.”

Sam nodded, the weight of the discovery settling over him. “You’re right. But we need to test them to see if they are the same. Though Marnie doesn’t need to know we haven’t done that …”

“If we bluff and say they tested the same, she’ll fold. Unless she’s totally innocent.” Jo grabbed an evidence bag. She happened to keep a stash in the drawer under Finn’s tank. She carefully cut the hairs, bagged them, and handed them to Sam.

Sam stood, his decision made. “Okay, looks like we have some work to do. Including paying a little surprise visit to Beryl and Marnie. I don’t think any of this can wait until tomorrow.” He glanced toward Kevin. “You want to come?”

Kevin straightened, a flicker of surprise crossing his face before he nodded. “Yeah, I’m in.”

Lucy let out a soft woof from her spot by the door as if sensing the shift in energy. Sam reached down to give her a quick scratch behind the ears. “Let’s go.”

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Sam left Kevin at the station to submit the paint analysis request and headed to confront Beryl. He'd already decided that Kevin's presence would only make Beryl clam up. This was a conversation best handled alone.

By now, Beryl would be home. Her towering brick house loomed in the distance as he turned onto her driveway. Lights spilled onto the manicured lawn, every bulb precisely placed. The house was as calculated as its owner—intimidating, unyielding.

Sam parked and glanced at Lucy in the back seat. Her ears perked up, and she let out a low, restless whine.

"Not this time, girl," he said, closing the door behind him. He almost smiled at the dramatic huff she gave in reply. But this wasn't a moment for smiles. Beryl Thorne required every ounce of focus he had.

The brass knocker had barely sounded before the door swung open. Beryl stood there, tall and immaculately dressed, the epitome of grace under fire. Except her eyes—sharp and calculating—betrayed the irritation she didn't bother to mask.

"Chief Mason," she said coolly. "What brings you to my door at this hour? Trouble in paradise?"

Sam didn't answer, stepping inside uninvited. The icy gust of winter air followed him in. "We need to talk."

Beryl shut the door, her gaze narrowing. "And here I thought you knew how to use a phone."

Sam didn't rise to the bait. Instead, he scanned the pristine foyer, taking in the marble floors and glittering chandeliers. Everything about the place screamed untouchable wealth. But everyone had something to lose. Even Beryl Thorne.

She led him into a sitting room that felt more like a museum exhibit than a living space. Sam caught sight of a decanter of whiskey on a tray.

Beryl poured herself a whiskey, neat, and left the second glass empty. Message received.

She swirled the amber liquid in her glass. "So, why are you here?"

Sam pulled out his phone, swiping to the photo of the younger Beryl they'd found in the box. He held it up, watching her face carefully. Her reaction was subtle, but it was there—a quick tightening of her jaw, a flicker of her eyes toward the screen. Then it was gone, buried under her trademark calm.

"Where'd you find that?" she asked, her tone dismissive, but there was a faint edge to it.

"You tell me," Sam said. "It's you, isn't it? Younger, sure, but still you."

Beryl's lips curved into a faint, amused smile. "And what exactly do you think that proves?"

Sam took a step closer, his voice dropping. "I think it proves you're not just the long-suffering wife who picked up the pieces of your husband's empire. You were in the thick of it all along. Whatever game you and Lucas were playing, it didn't end with his conviction, did it?"

Beryl took her time, lifting her glass and sipping her whiskey. When she finally spoke, her voice was like silk wrapped around steel. "You don't know what you're talking about."

Sam didn't need to. He just had to make her think he did. "What I do know is that you've been holding something over my head for years. You think that gives you the upper hand." He held up the phone again, his voice hard. "This changes that."

For the first time, the mask slipped. Her knuckles whitened around the glass, just for a moment. Then she recovered, her tone icy. "If you think a photograph is going to scare me, you're more naive than I thought."

"This isn't just a photograph," Sam pressed. "This is proof of what you've been up to. You want to keep that skeleton in the closet? Fine. But if you try to use what you have on me, I'll make sure this sees the light of day."

Beryl's eyes narrowed, and for the first time, she seemed truly unnerved. "You're bluffing."

"Am I?" Sam asked, his tone flat. "You want to test me?"

The room felt colder, the weight of the standoff pressing down like a physical force. Beryl set her glass down with deliberate precision, her poker face cracking enough to show her unease.

"Fine. So it's checkmate then?" she asked, her voice quieter now, almost resigned. "Is that all you came for?"

"No, there's something else. Garvin McDaniels," Sam said. "What happened to him? What's so important about that land?"

Beryl turned to the window, one hand gripping the curtain. "How would I know?"

"Because I think you're behind it. You and your friends at Convale."

She didn't answer immediately, staring out at the dark lawn. Finally, she spoke, her voice low. "You're looking at the wrong woman."

Sam frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Beryl turned back to face him, the light from the window catching in her pale-blue eyes. "It's not me you should be after. It's Marnie Wilson."

"Marnie?" he repeated.

Beryl nodded, slowly, deliberately. "Your future mayor. She's been circling that property for years. I thought Garvin was paranoid, but he was right about one thing—Marnie is dangerous. Her campaign? Funded by people who don't give a damn about White Rock."

Sam took a step closer. "Who? Convale?"

Beryl's lips curved into a faint smile. "You could say that. But Marnie isn't just taking their money. She's in deep. Everything she's done, every move she's made—it's all been about that land. Even her bid for mayor."

Sam took a step closer, his gaze locking with hers. "You're saying she's the mastermind?"

Beryl raised a single brow, her smile faint but mocking. "I'm saying you're wasting your time here when the real culprit is sitting in her campaign office, pulling strings."

Sam watched her carefully, gauging every word, every flicker of her expression. Beryl was good—too good. She wouldn't crumble under pressure, and she'd never willingly implicate herself. If she was pointing the finger at Marnie, it wasn't because she wanted justice. It was because she was hiding something.

“Why would I believe you?” Sam asked.

Beryl shrugged. “You don’t have to believe me. I have proof.”

But as the pieces clicked into place, a different picture emerged. The envelope from Beryl, the payments, Marnie’s mother tucked away at Parker Studies—none of it screamed mastermind. It screamed pawn. Manipulated. Used.

Sam’s jaw tightened as realization struck. Beryl wasn’t pointing a finger at Marnie because Marnie was in charge. She was doing it because Marnie was the loose thread that could unravel everything.

“You always have proof,” Sam said, his voice flat. “Convenient how it only shows up when it serves you.”

Beryl’s smile didn’t falter. “Believe what you like. But if you want the truth, Marnie’s your next move. Don’t waste time with me, Chief.”

Sam didn’t respond, letting the silence stretch. She’d overplayed her hand, trying to redirect him. But she’d also given him the one thing he needed: the perfect angle to push Marnie to talk.

“You think you’re untouchable,” Sam said finally, slipping his phone back into his pocket. “But leverage works both ways, Beryl. Don’t forget that.”

Her smile tightened just a fraction. A crack but not one she’d ever let him see fully. “Goodbye, Chief Mason.”

Sam turned on his heel and walked out, the cold air slicing through him as he stepped onto the stone porch. Lucy waited in the truck, her nose pressed against the glass. He climbed in, giving her a quick pat as she leaned against him.

As he started the engine, his mind raced ahead. Beryl thought she’d steered him into a trap, but she’d miscalculated. And now, thanks to Beryl, Sam had what he needed to make Marnie talk.

“Let’s see how much she’s willing to say once she finds out you’ve thrown her under the bus, Beryl,” Sam muttered as he drove off into the night, determination settling in his gut.

Marnie had answers. And Sam was going to get them.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Kevin logged the paint analysis request, his fingers punching the keys harder than necessary. He didn't know why the system had to ask him three times if he wanted to confirm a sample.

Yes, dammit. That's why I'm here.

He leaned back, exhaling. The monitor blinked its green confirmation. Paint sample? Done.

Next up, Lucy's fur. Kevin glanced at the small plastic evidence bag beside the keyboard. Inside, the faint blue streak still clung to the hairs they'd trimmed from Lucy's tail earlier at Jo's place. Whatever it was—paint, dye, who knew—it had smeared onto her when she got too close to something.

Too late to send it to the lab tonight, but first thing tomorrow? It'd be out the door.

Kevin typed in the case file, pausing to double-check the chain-of-custody notes. His name. Sam's. All clean. Evidence logged, bag sealed, chain intact. He tapped the enter key and watched the details lock into place on the screen.

He sat back, glancing around the quiet squad room. It felt weird to be here alone. Well, not quite alone. Major, the station cat, slept sprawled across the top of a filing cabinet like he owned the place.

Kevin didn't mind the quiet. It let him think.

Sam had gone to see Beryl Thorne alone tonight. Kevin didn't know why, and he didn't need to. There was history there—anyone with eyes could see that much. Sam kept his past locked up tight, but heck, didn't they

all? Kevin had his own history too. Things he didn't talk about. Things he wasn't proud of.

Sam didn't ask about any of it. And Kevin didn't ask about Beryl. That was how trust worked. You earned it, piece by piece, until it didn't matter where you'd come from—only where you stood now.

And for the first time in years, Kevin felt like he stood in the right place.

Sam hadn't even been angry about the thumb drive. He'd stared at Kevin long enough to make him sweat, sure. But when Kevin explained why he hadn't mentioned it sooner—his memory issues and that he hadn't been sure what he was looking at—Sam had just nodded. Said something about good instincts. Told him to trust his gut next time.

Kevin hadn't been able to shake that moment. Sam *trusted* him. Not a lot of people had. Not back then.

Now? Kevin felt like part of the team. Like he belonged here, in this rundown station with its creaky floors, stale coffee, and a cat with an attitude problem.

The phone on his desk buzzed, jolting him upright. He grabbed it. Sam.

"Yeah?"

"I'm done here," Sam said, his voice steady but clipped. "Heading to Marnie's. Meet me out front in ten."

The line clicked dead.

Kevin stared at the phone then at the clock. He was already moving, shoving his chair back and grabbing his jacket in one fluid motion. He was out on the sidewalk waiting when Sam pulled up.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

The warm glow of Marnie Wilson's living room spilled faintly onto the cul-de-sac as Sam parked the cruiser at the curb. The modest colonial looked almost too picture-perfect—tidy flower beds, a pristine porch, and curtains drawn tight. Kevin adjusted his seat belt as Lucy shifted restlessly in the back.

"You ready?" Sam asked, his tone low.

Kevin nodded. "Let's see what she's hiding."

Sam stepped out. Lucy hopped out, too, her ears pricked as if sensing the tension. Sam glanced back at her. "Stay sharp, girl."

The doorbell chimed, its cheerful sound at odds with the gravity of their visit. Inside, the sound of hurried footsteps approached then hesitated. The door creaked open, revealing Marnie's cautious face.

"Chief Mason?" Her brows furrowed as she spotted Kevin and Lucy. "What's going on? It's late."

"Evening, Marnie," Sam said, his tone firm but polite. "We need to talk. It's important."

Marnie frowned, gripping the doorframe. "Can't this wait until morning? I have early meetings—"

"No, it can't," Sam interrupted, stepping forward enough to signal this wasn't a request. "This is serious."

Marnie hesitated then sighed, opening the door wider. "Fine. Come in."

The inside of the house was tidy, almost sterile, as if Marnie lived more for appearances than comfort. She motioned them toward the living room but remained standing herself, arms crossed defensively.

“What’s this about?” she asked, her voice sharp.

Sam kept his tone measured. “We’ve been looking into Garvin McDaniels’s murder, and your name keeps coming up.”

Marnie laughed. “My name? That’s ridiculous. Why would I have anything to do with that?”

“No idea. Beryl Thorne thinks you did,” Sam said.

Marnie’s eyes narrowed. “What do you mean?”

Sam kept his gaze steady. “She said you’ve been interested in Garvin’s property and that you’re the one who made things happen.”

Marnie stared at him, disbelief flickering across her face. “No,” she said finally, her voice trembling. “No, Beryl wouldn’t—” She stopped herself, her expression shifting as if the weight of something unspoken was pressing down on her. “She wouldn’t say that.”

“She did,” Sam pressed, his voice calm but firm. “And she claims she has proof.”

Marnie looked skeptical.

Kevin crossed his arms, his tone laced with skepticism. “She’s protecting herself, Ms. Wilson. She doesn’t care about you. If throwing you under the bus keeps her out of trouble, she’ll do it in a heartbeat.”

Marnie’s eyes darted to Kevin then back to Sam.

“She’s blaming you for this, Marnie. If you know something that can clear your name, you better speak up,” Sam said.

Marnie hesitated, her breathing uneven. She looked away, her gaze fixed on some distant point on the floor. “I thought we were on the same side,” she said quietly. “Beryl and I. She’s been helping my campaign, supporting me. I thought...”

Sam stepped closer, his voice softening enough to edge past her walls. “You thought she had your back. But she doesn’t, Marnie. Not when it comes to saving herself. She’ll pin it all on you and walk away clean.”

Marnie swallowed hard, shaking her head. “She wouldn’t do that. Not to me.”

“She already has,” Sam said. “She pointed the finger at you. Said you were the one pulling the strings.”

Marnie’s head snapped up, her face pale. “She said I was pulling the strings? That’s not true. I’m not—” She cut herself off again, her eyes narrowing. “You’re lying. Trying to get me to confess to something I had no part of.”

“Blue paint, Marnie,” Kevin said, his voice cutting through her excuses. “Same shade as your campaign posters. Found at Garvin’s cabin. Care to explain that?”

Marnie’s composure wavered. She opened her mouth, closed it again, then shook her head. “Anyone could’ve tracked that paint there. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Sam leaned in slightly, his voice quiet but firm. “We can tie it directly to you. You were there, Marnie. And if you keep denying it, you’ll only make it worse.”

Her breath hitched, and she stepped back, clutching the back of a chair for support. “This is insane. You’re trying to railroad me—”

“No, we’re trying to get the truth,” Sam said, his voice rising enough to cut through her protests. “And here’s the truth. If we take this to a jury, they’ll see the evidence and convict you. When you’re sitting in prison for murder, who’s going to take care of your mother?”

The words hit like a hammer. Marnie froze, her face paling. Her hands trembled as she gripped the chair, her breath shallow. “What do you know about my mother?”

“I know about Parker Studies,” Sam said.

“I didn’t kill him,” she said, her voice barely a whisper.

Sam didn’t let up. “Then tell us who did.”

Tears welled in her eyes, and she sank into the chair, shaking her head. “You don’t understand. Beryl… She made me do it.”

Kevin crouched slightly, his tone calm but insistent. “What did she make you do, Marnie?”

Marnie’s chest rose and fell with uneven breaths. “Beryl wanted the property. She gave me money. I needed it for my mother. She told me to make sure Garvin sold the property to one of her shell companies. I just wanted to scare Garvin. To push him into selling. I didn’t know—” Her voice broke, and she buried her face in her hands.

Kevin took a step forward, his tone steady but firm. “You didn’t know what?”

“That it would go that far!” Marnie’s head shot up, her eyes wet with tears. “I hired Desmond Griggs. He’s... He’s dangerous, but I didn’t think he’d actually kill Garvin. I thought he’d pressure him, make him give up the property. That’s all.”

Sam exchanged a glance with Kevin, his mind racing. “When was this? Did you know Garvin was changing his will?”

Marnie shook her head vehemently. “No, I didn’t even know about the will. I just... Beryl said we needed the property. She said it was important.”

Sam narrowed his eyes. “Important how?”

“I don’t know,” Marnie admitted, her voice small. “She never told me why. Just that it had to be done.”

Kevin crouched down slightly, leveling his gaze with hers. “What about Griggs? Has he contacted you since?”

“No,” Marnie said, shaking her head. “I haven’t heard from him. I don’t know where he is.”

Sam straightened, pulling his phone from his pocket. He sent a quick message to Wyatt, who was tailing Griggs, then turned his attention back to Marnie.

“Stay put,” he said, his tone hard. “If Griggs contacts you, call me immediately. And don’t think about skipping town, Marnie. We’re watching.”

Marnie nodded weakly, her shoulders slumped in defeat. As Sam turned to leave, Lucy let out a soft growl, her ears flattening slightly. Sam reached down to scratch behind her ears, his jaw tight.

“You ready?” Kevin asked as they stepped back into the night air.

“More than ready,” Sam replied. “Time to finish this.”

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Sam parked the cruiser a block down from Griggs's house. Lucy shifted in the back seat, her ears perked, alert as always. Sam grabbed his flashlight and gun, motioning for Kevin and Lucy to follow.

Wyatt's unmarked car sat ahead, its silhouette blending into the quiet neighborhood.

Wyatt rolled his window down as they reached the car. "He's been inside for hours. Lights on, TV going. Looks like he's comfortable."

Sam glanced toward the small house, its curtains drawn tight, shadows flickering from the television's glow. It wasn't much—a sagging roof, peeling paint, a porch that looked ready to collapse—but inside was Desmond Griggs, their key to unraveling the tangled web around Garvin McDaniels's murder.

"Here's the plan," Sam said, his voice low. "I'll go to the front. Wyatt, you take the back. Kevin, cover that door on the side. Lucy stays with me."

Wyatt grinned. "You got it, boss."

Kevin nodded, gripping his flashlight.

They moved in silence, splitting off to their positions. Sam approached the front door cautiously, Lucy at his side, her ears swiveling to every sound. The door was locked, as expected. Sam leaned closer, listening for movement inside. The muffled sounds of an action movie filtered through, explosions and gunfire masking their approach.

He gave a subtle nod to Kevin, stationed by the side. Sam turned back to the door and knocked sharply.

“Desmond Griggs,” he called, his voice firm. “White Rock Police. Open up.”

Inside, the sounds of the TV abruptly stopped. Sam’s hand tightened on his gun. Lucy let out a low growl, her stance shifting as she prepared for action.

Wyatt’s voice crackled softly through Sam’s earpiece. “He’s moving. Back of the house. Looks like he’s grabbing something.”

Sam knocked again, louder this time. “Griggs! We know you’re in there. Open the door!”

A beat of silence passed, then the lights inside went out.

“Move in!” Sam barked into his mic.

Wyatt surged toward the back door, Kevin covering the side. Sam kicked the front door hard, the frame splintering as it burst open. Lucy shot ahead of him, her growl echoing through the small, cluttered house.

“Police!” Sam shouted, sweeping his flashlight across the room.

Griggs was already bolting through the kitchen, a bronze statue of an elk tucked under his arm. He turned briefly, a glint of metal in his hand—a gun.

Sam ducked as Griggs fired, the shot slamming into the doorframe behind him.

“Lucy, go!” Sam commanded.

Lucy launched herself forward, her powerful frame hitting Griggs as he aimed again. Her teeth clamped onto his arm, forcing him to drop the gun with a clatter. Griggs roared in pain, twisting violently as he tried to shake her off.

Sam rushed forward, but Griggs managed to throw Lucy off, the dog landing hard but springing back to her feet with a snarl.

Griggs made for the back door, statue still in hand.

“Wyatt, he’s coming your way!” Sam shouted.

The back door burst open as Griggs barreled through, colliding with Wyatt. They hit the ground hard, rolling in the dirt. Griggs swung the heavy statue, striking Wyatt’s shoulder. Wyatt grunted, trying to wrestle the weapon away.

Sam and Kevin sprinted out after them. Lucy was right behind, her growls filling the air.

“Get off me!” Griggs snarled, raising the statue for another swing.

“Don’t even think about it!” Sam bellowed, his gun trained on Griggs.

Griggs froze, his chest heaving, the statue poised in his hands.

"Drop it," Sam ordered, his voice ice-cold.

Griggs hesitated, his eyes darting between Sam's gun and Wyatt beneath him.

"Now!"

With a growl of frustration, Griggs let the statue fall to the ground. Wyatt shoved him off, scrambling to his feet with a glare that could've melted steel.

Kevin darted forward, kicking the gun away and cuffing Griggs as Sam kept his weapon trained on him.

Lucy circled Griggs, her tail high, her growl low and menacing.

Griggs sneered, blood dripping from the bite marks on his arm. "You don't know what you're messing with," he spat.

Sam stepped closer, his eyes locked on Griggs. "Oh, I think we do. You killed Garvin McDaniels. You thought you'd get away with it, but you were wrong."

Griggs glared, his chest heaving.

Wyatt dusted himself off, wincing as he rolled his shoulder. "You hit like a wimp," he muttered, tightening the cuffs on Griggs.

Kevin picked up the bronze elk statue, examining it. "This thing matches the murder weapon perfectly." He looked at Griggs. "What, you thought you'd pawn it later once things cooled down?"

Griggs stayed silent, his eyes burning with fury.

Sam crouched slightly, meeting Griggs's glare head-on. "You're going to tell us everything. Who hired you, why you did it, and what you know about Garvin's land. Or you can rot in a cell for the rest of your life. Your call."

Griggs's jaw tightened, but he said nothing.

Sam straightened, holstering his weapon. "Let's get him out of here. We'll see how long he keeps quiet."

Wyatt yanked Griggs to his feet, his grip iron tight. Kevin followed with the statue, his expression grim.

Lucy stayed close to Sam as they headed toward the cruiser, her tail wagging slightly, her job done.

But Sam's mind was already racing ahead. They had Griggs, and the evidence was mounting. But there was someone higher up that had orchestrated this. Someone higher than Beryl Thorne even. Hopefully,

Griggs would tell them who it was. Otherwise, they might never know the truth of who was really behind this and why they wanted that land so much.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The glow of the television cast flickering light across Sam's office as he leaned back in his chair, arms crossed, watching Marnie Wilson's live press conference. Jo sat on the edge of the desk, arms resting on her knees, her badge clipped to her belt—a silent reminder of her reinstatement.

Marnie stood at a lectern, the White Rock mayoral seal prominently displayed behind her. Her face was pale, drawn tight with the weight of the decision she was being forced to make. She gripped the edges of the podium as though it was the only thing keeping her upright.

"After careful consideration, I have decided to withdraw from the mayoral race," Marnie announced, her voice steady but brittle. "This has not been an easy decision, but due to personal family matters, I must focus my attention where it's needed most."

Jo snorted softly. "Family matters. Sure, that's the reason."

Sam's eyes didn't leave the screen. "Her people wrote that for her. Probably took them hours to get the tone just right."

Marnie continued, forcing a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I want to thank my supporters for their unwavering dedication and passion. White Rock deserves a leader who can give one hundred percent to this community, and at this time, I cannot do that."

"She's trying to salvage her reputation," Jo said, shaking her head. "But let's face it—her career's over."

Sam finally glanced at Jo. "That's the deal. She bows out gracefully and no charges are pressed. It's a win for her people."

“And a win for the rest of us too,” Jo muttered. “Jamison might not be the best mayor, but at least he’s not shady like Marnie.”

On the screen, Marnie stepped back from the podium as reporters shouted questions, microphones thrust toward her. She didn’t answer a single one, disappearing behind the curtain with the efficiency of someone who’d practiced the exit a dozen times.

Sam muted the television and rubbed his jaw. “She got off easy. But you saw her back there—she’s finished. She won’t recover from this.”

Jo stood, pacing the small office. “And Beryl? She just walks away too?”

“She was smart. Didn’t leave any evidence pointing to her.” Sam leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “At least I’ve got leverage now. That photo in the box? It levels the playing field. Beryl won’t risk using what she has on me, not if she knows I can hit back just as hard.”

Jo stopped pacing, her expression hard. “It’s not enough. She’s still in the game. Still pulling strings.”

“Yeah,” Sam admitted. “But for now, she’s neutralized. That’s the best we can hope for.”

Jo didn’t look convinced, but she didn’t argue. Instead, she turned toward the door. “I’m heading out. Got a meeting with Garvin’s kids. Signing the Purchase and Sale for the cottage tonight.”

Sam nodded. “Good luck.”

She offered him a small, genuine smile. “Thanks, Sam. For everything.”

As Jo left, Sam turned the volume back up, the muted hum of reporters filling the room. He leaned back, staring at the screen but not really seeing it.

Marnie was out of the picture. Beryl was temporarily contained. But Griggs’s silence haunted him. Someone powerful and ruthless was still out there, pulling strings, and Sam didn’t like how close they’d come to losing control of the game.

THE WARM GLOW of the fireplace flickered across the room, painting the walls of Jo’s cottage with a golden light. Outside, the snow whispered

against the windows, a muffled backdrop to the low hum of voices and laughter inside.

Jo stood near the kitchen, leaning against the counter, her eyes sweeping the room. Kevin was setting snacks on the coffee table. Beside him, Bridget was laying out plates, her movements practiced and efficient. Every now and then, their shoulders would brush, and Kevin would glance at her, quickly looking away before Bridget noticed.

Except she noticed. Jo could see it in the small, satisfied smile Bridget gave when she thought no one was looking.

In the corner, Mick was nursing a whiskey, one arm draped casually over the back of his chair. Lucy had claimed the rug in front of the fireplace, her head resting on her paws but her eyes flicking to each person in turn, her ears perking up at the occasional clink of glass or burst of laughter.

Wyatt was slouched in the armchair by the window, one boot resting on his knee, spinning a bottle cap between his fingers like he didn't have a care in the world. Except when he was checking his phone, which he seemed to be doing quite regularly.

Sam leaned against the mantel, his gaze flickering over the room, but Jo could tell he wasn't entirely at ease. He never was.

This was it, Jo thought. Her people. Her home.

Jo rose to her feet, lifting her glass in one hand and motioning for quiet with the other. The room settled, the hum of conversation fading as everyone turned their attention to her. She glanced around, meeting the eyes of each person present, her gaze lingering a little longer on Sam then Mick before finally settling on Bridget.

"I just wanted to say thank you," Jo began, her voice steady but warm. "Thank you for helping me get my badge back and for finding Garvin's killer."

She paused, letting the words hang in the air. It wasn't just gratitude she felt but relief—a deep, unspoken weight finally lifted from her shoulders.

"Griggs may not be talking," she continued, her tone hardening slightly, "but we've got the murder weapon. That's evidence enough to close the book on this part of the case. And none of it would've happened if it weren't for all of you."

Her gaze shifted to Mick, a faint smile tugging at the corners of her lips. "And Mick, I owe you a special thank-you. You stepped in when I was

suspended and made sure I didn't lose my mind sitting on the sidelines."

Mick leaned back in his chair, a smirk playing on his face. "You're welcome, Harris. But in case you didn't notice, I didn't do much helping. You're so damn stubborn, you didn't let me."

A ripple of laughter moved through the room, breaking the tension. Jo rolled her eyes, but she couldn't help the grin that followed. "Seriously, though. Thank you—all of you. For having my back. For being here. It means everything to me."

Bridget disappeared into the kitchen, Kevin trailing after her. Jo watched them for a moment then wandered over to the fireplace where Sam was still leaning, his expression unreadable.

"Not bad for a little place in the woods," he said, his voice low.

"It's perfect," Jo replied, her gaze following Kevin and Bridget as they worked together in the kitchen.

Sam followed her gaze, one eyebrow quirking up. "Think those two are finally going to figure it out?"

Jo smirked. "Who knows."

The sound of a knock on the door pulled Jo's attention.

"I'll get it," she said, moving toward the door.

Before she reached it, the door creaked open, and Reese stepped inside, her cheeks flushed from the cold.

"Sorry I'm late," Reese said, brushing snow off her coat. "I got caught up at the station—"

Before she could finish, a blur of orange darted past her legs.

"Pickles!" Jo exclaimed as the cat bolted into the room, tail high and confident.

The entire room turned to watch as Pickles leaped onto the couch, circling once before curling into a ball like he owned the place.

"Well," Sam said, his voice dry, "looks like someone's finally decided to come inside."

Jo shook her head, a laugh bubbling out of her. "Took him long enough."

Bridget appeared in the doorway to the kitchen, her expression softening as she watched Pickles settle in. "Guess he knows this place can really be his."

As the laughter and conversation picked up again, Jo stood by the door, taking it all in. This wasn't just a house anymore. It was a home. And for

the first time in what felt like forever, she knew she was exactly where she was meant to be.

Lucy padded over and nudged her hand, and Jo scratched behind her ears. “We did it, girl,” she said softly. “We finally did it.”

WYATT LEANED back in his chair, nursing his beer and letting the warmth of the room settle over him. The soft murmur of conversation and the occasional burst of laughter reminded him of something he hadn’t felt in a long time: belonging. He glanced around the cozy space—Jo’s smile as she stroked that oddball cat, Kevin and Bridget standing a little closer than necessary by the kitchen, Sam and Reese swapping dry remarks by the fire.

They’d included him, and it felt good. Because of his past, always moving, it was hard for him to make friends, and he wasn’t used to being included.

Wyatt still wasn’t sure how he’d ended up here, but he wasn’t about to ruin the moment by overthinking it.

His phone buzzed on the cushion beside him. He hesitated. Checking it felt rude, like breaking the unspoken rule of the night—no work, no worries, just this fragile sense of normalcy. But it could be important.

The screen lit up with a message from his mom.

I’m okay. Nothing to worry about.

Relief washed over him. She’d been through enough. Her being okay was all that mattered. He was about to set the phone down when the second message came through.

Keep your eyes open. Your father might have found you.

His stomach dropped.

Wyatt stared at the screen, the words blurring slightly as the firelight flickered against it. He wanted to dismiss it, convince himself she was just being overly cautious. But his mom didn’t send messages like that lightly.

He glanced up, forcing himself to look at the others. Kevin was laughing at something Bridget said, his face lighting up in a way Wyatt rarely saw. Jo looked at peace for the first time in months, the tension finally easing from her shoulders. Sam was sitting in the chair next to the

fireplace, scratching Lucy behind the ears, his expression thoughtful but calm.

Wyatt wanted to stay in this moment, to let it wrap around him like a safety net. But the message on his phone whispered to him, pulling at the edges of his thoughts.

His father. The man they'd escaped all those years ago. If he'd found them...

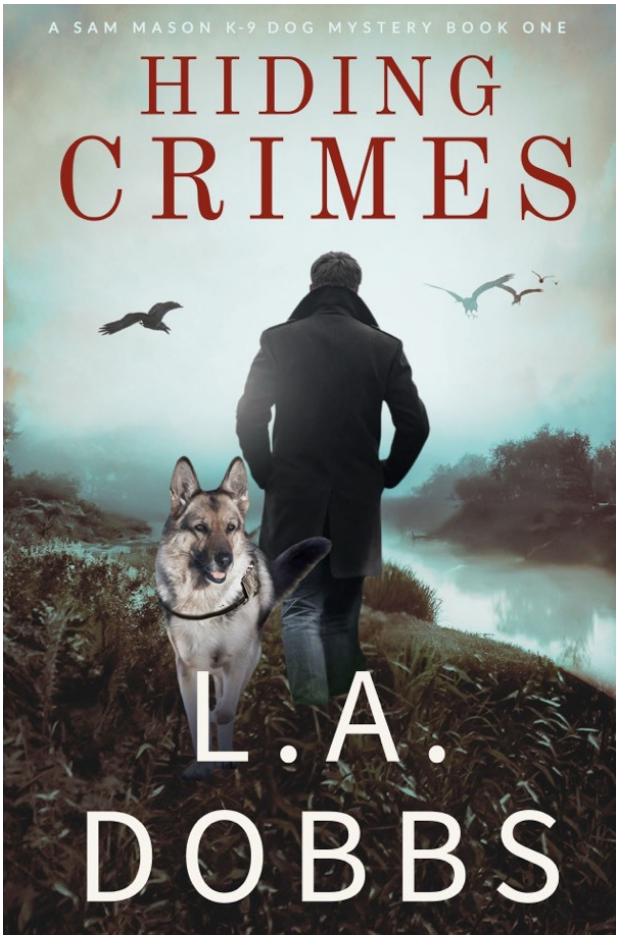
Wyatt's jaw tightened, and he shoved the phone into his pocket, willing the bad feeling away. He didn't want to ruin this. Not now.

But as he watched the firelight play against the walls of Jo's cottage, he couldn't shake the thought that something in his life was about to change—and not for the better.

****

DID Wyatt's father find him? If he did, what does he want?

Find out in book 10 - *Hiding Crimes*!



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L. A. Dobbs also writes light mysteries as USA Today Bestselling author Leighann Dobbs. Lee has had a passion for reading since she was old enough to hold a book, but she didn't put pen to paper until much later in life. After a twenty-year career as a software engineer, she realized you can't make a living reading books, so she tried her hand at writing them and discovered she had a passion for that, too! She lives in New Hampshire with her husband, Bruce, their trusty Chihuahua mix, Mojo, and beautiful rescue cat, Kitty.

Her book "Dead Wrong" won the "Best Mystery Romance" award at the 2014 Indie Romance Convention.

Her book "Ghostly Paws" was the 2015 Chanticleer Mystery & Mayhem First Place category winner in the Animal Mystery category.

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