

# A Vase in the Window

Kate Collins

Published by Kate Collins, 2025.



Follow Kate Collins Online

[katecollinsbooks.com](http://katecollinsbooks.com)<sup>1</sup>

[Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/katecollinsmysteryauthor/)<sup>2</sup>



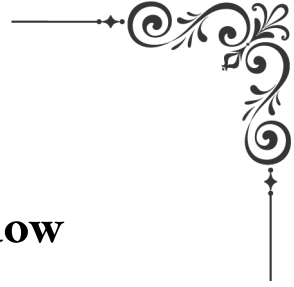
Book cover design by Arash Jahani<sup>3</sup>

---

1. <http://www.katecollinsbooks.com/>

2. <https://www.facebook.com/katecollinsmysteryauthor/>

3. <http://arashjahani.com/>

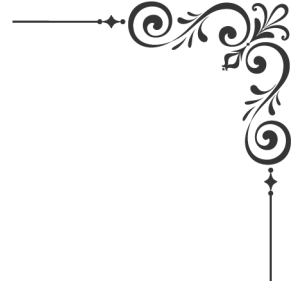


# A Vase in the Window

A Flower Shop Mystery  
Copyright © 2025 Linda Tsoutsouris



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.



## PROLOGUE



**D***ear God. What have I done?*

I swallowed a lump of fear in my throat and gazed down at the gun in my trembling hands. There was blood splattered everywhere – on my fingers, my clothes, my shoes . . .

But it wasn't my fault. He pulled the gun on *me*. He *forced* me to do it.

I just wanted to talk to him, really. Reason with him. But there was no reasoning with that man. I only picked up the bat for self-defense. He was a loose cannon, a maniac, always ready to snap. And I knew he'd be carrying that gun. He always carried that *stupid* gun.

He pulled it on me so fast, I didn't have time to think. He yelled at me to drop the bat. He aimed the gun at my head. I could still see the dark, hollow barrel pointing directly at me. I could feel the cold chill ripple up my spine as the reality sunk in. He could've killed me. With one pull of the trigger, it would've been me on the floor instead of him.

I don't remember what happened after that. I must've lunged at him, attacked him, because the next thing I knew he was down on the ground. And then . . . then *I* had the gun. I was the one pointing the gun at *him*. But he wasn't scared. He wasn't even angry. He was laughing. He was taunting me.

The last thing I remember was his body crumpling to the ground . . . and then the blood. Blood on my face and my hands. Blood on the gun. I blinked a few times and realized I was still standing there, arms extended, gun drawn, hands shaking, the smell of gun powder lingering in the air. My ears were ringing. The gunshot had been so loud that, although the garage was now silent, the splintering, high-pitched tone was still screaming inside my head.

A loud boom from somewhere outside jolted me out of my trance. I took a deep breath and tried to get my bearings as the fireworks exploded in the sky above me, fraying my nerves even more. I peered out the open garage door, expecting to see the red and blue flashing lights of cop cars, or hear their blaring sirens echoing down the street, but all I heard was the continuous booms and accompanying flashes that lit up the backyard and the homes across the street.

Maybe it would be okay. Maybe there was still time to call the police, or an ambulance. Maybe he was still alive. I dropped to my knees and checked for a pulse. But there was none.

*Dear God. I killed him.*



## CHAPTER ONE



May 27<sup>th</sup>, *Memorial Day*

“Don’t forget,” I reminded my handsome hubby, Marco. “We’re going to the fireworks show tonight at the high school.” I pecked his cheek, then bent to pet my little three-legged rescue dog and my big Russian Blue cat, before stepping into the garage.

In front of me were Marco’s silver Prius and next to that my banana-yellow Corvette convertible. I ran my finger across the sleek, shiny hood as I walked around to the driver’s side. The ‘Vette had been a rare find, stored in a farmer’s barn for decades. The interior had been preserved to near perfection, but the exterior had been in bad shape when I bought it. A new paint job had brought it back to life, and a good mechanic had fixed it up to purr like a kitten.

It was my pride and joy. My baby.

I put the top down on the convertible, backed out of the driveway, and headed off to work singing along with a Billy Joel song on the radio. It was a beautiful morning. The sun was shining, the birds were chirping, and I was on my way to Bloomers, my very own flower shop in my charming hometown of New Chapel, Indiana.

Once upon a time, Bloomers had rescued me. After a disastrous nine-month stint of intensive study, I had flunked out of law school and felt utterly lost. Then I remembered working at Bloomers during my summers in college. It had been a delightful, rewarding experience. So, I’d returned to Bloomers to see Lottie, the owner, only to discover she’d put the business up for sale. In that moment, I decided to use the remainder of my college fund to make a down payment on the building, and the rest was history.

Or hysteria.

I parked the 'Vette in the public parking lot one block over from Franklin Street, then hoofed it over to the flower shop, pausing in front of the building to admire the wooden sign above the door: *Bloomers Flower Shop, Abby Knight, Prop.*

I still hadn't had the sign changed to reflect my married name. It was Abby Knight Salvare now. I had married the man of my dreams, Marco Salvare, more than two years ago, and I kicked myself every time I saw the sign. *One of these days*, I told myself, *I'll get it changed*. I paused to check my reflection in the glass pane of the yellow-framed door. Being a five-foot-two, busty, pale-skinned Irish redhead, my clothing choices were severely limited. While I looked best in greens, browns, and some shades of red, I was most fond of wearing yellow, which was my absolute favorite color.

That day, I wore a citrus-yellow polo shirt, knee-length khaki shorts, and cream-colored flats. I thought I looked good, but then I did a double take and ran my fingers through my shoulder-length bob, trying to tame my untamable mane of red hair.

Bloomers occupied the entire first floor of the deep, three-story, red brick structure, and had a coffee parlor on one side of the entrance and our showroom on the other. I opened the yellow-framed door and stepped inside, instantly greeted by the sight and scent of brightly colored flowers mixed with the distinct aroma of coffee.

The bell above the door chimed brightly as I closed it behind me. My assistant Lottie came out of the back room carrying an armload of red roses for the glass display case. Lottie Dombowski was a big-boned, big-hearted, forty-five-year-old Kentuckian, with brassy curls, a laugh that could be heard across town, a feisty personality, and more common sense than anyone I knew.

Before I could lock the door, a dark-haired man stormed in, jabbing a finger at Lottie and bellowing, 'You!' – his eyes wild with rage.

The outburst jolted me, and I stumbled back into the window display as he shoved past.

"Your boys have a lot of nerve threatening *me*!"

"Easy now, Garth," Lottie said, setting the roses onto the counter. "Let's sort this out."

I reached inside my purse for my phone.



"No more talk," the man said between deep breaths. His round face flushed red with anger, dark eyes glaring beneath bushy black brows. He was practically foaming at the mouth as he continued, "*No one threatens me.*"

I pulled up my contacts list where I had the local police number stored. My finger hovered over the send button, ready to call.

"Someone needs to teach those delinquents a lesson in respect, and if you won't do it, I'll give them a lesson they'll never forget."

"That's *enough*," I ordered. "You need to leave right now."

"Stay out of this," he spat at me.

The dark-haired man was stocky, medium height, with big shoulders and thick, hairy arms. His dark blue work polo expanded around his wide waist. His collar was unbuttoned and there was a company logo on the left chest. He stomped into the shop like a ravenous animal. "Your boys want to destroy my property, then I'll return the favor." He stepped up to the round, antique oak table in the middle of the sales floor and swept a glass vase onto the ground. The vase smashed, sending flowers, water, and shards of glass across the shop floor.

Lottie jerked at the noise and stepped quickly behind the counter to distance herself. "My boys respect your property. They would never destroy it."

"Oh yeah?" He reached for another vase, picked it up, and raised it as though he was going to throw it.

"Stop it!" I shouted forcefully. "Get out of my shop or I'm calling the police."

He dropped the vase sideways onto the table with a sharp clatter. More flowers and water flooded out onto the floor. He shook his finger at Lottie. "Be warned. I will retaliate." And with that, he stormed to the door, flung it open – gave me a menacing glance – and walked out.

For a moment, Lottie and I stood frozen, staring at each other with mouths open. Then Lottie said, "I'll get the mop."

I turned my head to see my other assistant, Grace, standing in the parlor doorway, her face a mask of concern. "Who was that?"

I shook my head, still in shock.

"Look at the damage," Grace exclaimed in her crisp British accent as she walked toward the table.

I joined her, watching the water drip off the side, careful to avoid the mess. "Watch your step, Grace. There's glass everywhere."

She stopped in her tracks and called, "Lottie, who on earth was that?"

"My neighbor, Garth Schmidt," Lottie replied as she made her way back onto the sales floor, dragging the wet mop and bucket with her. "I'm so sorry, Abby. I'll get this cleaned up."

"Wait," I told her. "Let me help you. We need a broom and dustpan for the glass."

"Tell us, love. What's going on?"

Lottie sighed heavily and set the mop against the counter. "It's an ongoing battle with him."

I hurried into the back to grab the broom, not wanting to miss the explanation. I swiped the dustpan from beneath the sink and rushed out through the purple curtain that separated the shop from the work room. "What happened this time?"

"I don't know. Something must've happened with the boys."

I knelt in a safe spot and held the dustpan while Lottie swept gently around the table. She had four boys – four quadruplet teenage sons – who were just as raucous and feisty as she. If there was anyone capable of getting someone riled up, it was them.

"Should we call the police? He threatened you."

"What's new," she said softly. The once brassy and boisterous Kentucky mother of four had been immediately reduced to a quiet shell of her former self. I could hear the defeat in her voice. "We stopped calling the police a while ago. They can't do anything, and it just makes Garth mad, as you can see."

"And you have no idea what happened?" I asked.

"We've been fighting with him so long; it could be the smallest thing sets him off now. The last time Herman mowed the lawn too close to his property line and Schmidt threw the bag of grass clippings into our driveway. Now he's going off about the boys parking too close to his mailbox. It's just ridiculous."

"What does Herman have to say about this?" Grace asked.

"Oh, he's not allowed to say anything. Not with his temper. The last thing I need is to bail my husband out of jail."

"It's that bad?" I asked.

She looked up at me and raised an eyebrow. "You have no idea."

"There must be something we can do," Grace insisted. "Barging in like that, he's a madman."

Lottie swept some of the glass across the floor into a pile. "I don't know what we're gonna do."

I thought about how I would handle a situation like that and honestly couldn't think of anything. Nothing legal, at least. Luckily, Marco and I had reasonably quiet, respectful neighbors. "I think we should call the police," I told her. "There needs to be a record."

She knelt next to me, leaning on the broom to help lower herself down. "Please don't, Abby," she said with penetrating sincerity. "It'll just make things worse."

I held the dustpan for her, wanting to respect her wishes, but knowing full well that there was something seriously wrong with that man. No one should be allowed to bully someone like that and get away with it. "If he comes back in," I told her, "I'm calling the police. I won't let him threaten you in my own shop."

Grace took hold of the edges of her lilac cardigan and lifted her chin, her classic lecture pose. She was famous for having a quote for any occasion and that day did not disappoint. "As a wise man once said, 'In prosperity our friends know us; in adversity we know our friends.' In other words, we're here for you, love. Whatever help we can give."

"Thank you, Gracie. And trust me, if I knew how you could help, I'd take you up on that."

"Then, for now, I shall handle the mop whilst you clean the glass."

Grace Bingham was a sixty-two-year-old widow, trim, with short, stylish silver hair, and spoke with a proper British accent. She was an expert barista and tea brewer and loved to bake scones and the little cookies she called biscuits, so that, in addition to the fragrance of the flowers, the shop was also scented with coffee, tea, and baked goods, which really drew in the clients, especially in nice weather, when we opened the door and let the aroma waft out. I'd added the parlor when I bought Bloomers, crafting it out of a large storage room, which had turned out to be a huge boon to my business.

I heard the key hit the lock, and the bell above the front door jingled as Rosa entered. “I hope you haven’t started breakfast without me,” she called happily. The door closed behind her as she came to a halt. “What is everyone doing on the floor?”

Rosa Marisol Katarina Marin, my newest assistant, was a thirty-something Colombian native who had come to us first as a client. Rosa had long, wavy auburn hair, a pretty face, and abundant curves, which she proudly displayed in form-fitting clothing. She strutted into work every day wearing high heels, most of them flaunting bold animal prints—leopard spots, zebra stripes, or snakeskin patterns flashing with each step.

After I discovered that Rosa had a knack for arranging flowers, I hired her part-time, which soon became a full-time gig. Now I couldn’t imagine Bloomers without her sunny personality.

Before Rosa had joined the staff, Lottie would make scrambled eggs every Monday morning. But now Rosa was in charge of breakfast, that day making her famous *huevos Marisol* for us while we finished cleaning up.

Fifteen minutes before the shop opened, Grace and I trooped to the kitchen, loaded up our plates, and headed back to the coffee and tea parlor, a cheerful, Victorian-inspired room full of white wrought iron ice cream tables and chairs, yellow paint on the walls, and pink tulips in vases on the tables. At the front of the room was a big bay window that looked out onto the town square and the big, four-story limestone courthouse in the plaza across the street.

Grace served coffee to Rosa and me, then sat with us at one of the tables. We explained to Rosa what had happened in more detail while Lottie stayed in the work room to check in with her family. After a few minutes, Lottie came out with a plate of eggs and joined us.

“According to my husband, one of Garth’s garbage cans was knocked over this morning. Of course, Garth blames my boys parking their cars too close to his driveway.”

“Why did he come in here to hassle you?”

“Because Herman ignored him, just like I told him. I guess Garth needed to take his anger out on somebody.”

“What a wretched man,” Grace uttered.

"Yeah, well, that wretched man is going to be the death of me. We have four cars and a two-car garage. The boys don't have anywhere to park but the street."

"Why don't you switch things up? You could park your car in the street for a while," I suggested. "He wouldn't dare mess with your car."

Lottie chewed a bite of eggs, thinking. "I wouldn't put it past him, but it might be the best idea for now. Until things calm down."

"*Mi amor*," Rosa said, "I'm so sorry you have to deal with this. It is like a nightmare."

I sipped my coffee as a thought suddenly occurred to me. "Garth said your boys threatened him. Did you ask Herman about that?"

"He didn't mention anything about it," Lottie answered.

I took another sip, going over the facts in my head. Lottie's neighbor seemed much too angry for a simple dispute over a garbage can. "Something's not adding up," I said to the group.

"I have to agree," Grace chimed in. "Perhaps it would help to know what kind of threat was made against him."

"Well," Lottie said assertively. "No reason to dwell on it until I know more. It's about time to open anyway."

I started to suspect there was more to the story that Lottie didn't want to mention, and I very much wanted to dig deeper, but I had to stay out of detective mode. For now. Monday mornings were busy at Bloomers. There were inventories to make, supplies to order, internet orders to take, a calendar to update, the display case to stock, and customers to wait on.

And as soon as I unlocked the front door, I was greeted by a handful of our usual customers, eager for Grace's gourmet brews and scones, today's flavor being almond. The coffee parlor was a big draw for the secretaries and attorneys who worked at the courthouse, as well as customers shopping at the boutiques on Lincoln Avenue, the main street through town.

While Grace waited on tables in the parlor, Lottie watched the sales floor and Rosa and I worked on orders in the workroom. Although the room was windowless, the abundance of blossoms and fragrances made it feel like a tropical garden. Pastel-colored wreaths and brightly hued swags hung on one ivory latticed wall. Vases of all sizes and containers of dried flowers filled shelves above the counter on another wall. A long, slate-covered worktable

sat in the middle of the room. Two stainless-steel walk-in coolers occupied one side, and a desk holding my computer, telephone, and the normal assortment of items sat on the other side. It was my comfort zone, my little slice of paradise.

That was, until the purple curtain parted, and a copper-colored head appeared.

“Good morning, ladies!” my cousin Jillian sang out, stepping through the curtain. As usual, she was dressed in a designer outfit, a mango-colored silk T-shirt and white, super-skinny pants with white flats, a mango-colored purse slung over her shoulder. Her golden eyes gazed at us with a look of keen intelligence, belying the “Space for Rent” sign behind them.

“Morning, Jill.”

“*Hola*,” Rosa responded, offering her cheek as Jillian gave her an air-kiss.

“I’m here to brighten your day!” she announced happily.

Jillian Ophelia Knight-Osborne was my only female cousin, the pampered daughter of my dad’s brother, the pampered wife of my ex-fiancé’s younger brother, Claymore, and now the doting mother of an adorable baby named Harper Abigail Lynn Osborne, whose initials intentionally spelled HALO. We’d grown up as close as sisters, and because Jillian had suffered with severe scoliosis throughout much of her elementary years, I became her protector and counselor, roles she seemed to believe I’d hold forever.

What we had in common were genes. We both had shoulder-length red hair – hers was a shimmering copper waterfall of silk; mine was more of a rust-colored twine – and freckles – hers a soft sprinkle of cocoa powder across her dainty nose; mine a shower of cinnamon. We also had the Irish stubbornness gene, which had resulted in many disagreements as kids and even more as adults. We functioned like sisters, basically, always battling for the seat by the window.

“Hey!” Jillian said, snapping her fingers in front of my face. “You’re daydreaming. Did you hear what I said?”

“Sorry, what?”

“I asked you how you liked my makeup.” She pointed to her face.

I took a good look at her. Jillian had a very pretty face. She had a peaches and cream complexion, her lips were bow-shaped, and her cheekbones were high. But today they looked abnormally high – and bright – and her lips

were dark red. Her golden-brown eyes were shaded with dark gray eyeshadow and outlined in thick black eyeliner. Her eyelashes were heavy and black and extremely long, so long, in fact, that she seemed to blink in slow motion.

But what could I say? She had a happy, expectant look on her face that I just couldn't shatter. "You look . . . great!"

"*Precioso!*" Rosa added.

"Thank you." She slid onto a wooden stool at the worktable and dropped her purse beside her. "It's my new thing."

"What's your new thing?"

"I'm adding a makeup line to my repertory."

Her *repertoire* as she meant to say, was her career as a wardrobe consultant. After graduating from Harvard and marrying the wealthiest bachelor in town, Jillian had gone into business for herself, opening *Chez Jillian* and operating out of her house. She had plenty of clients, most of them either belonging to the esteemed country club in town or working in downtown Chicago, which was just one train ride away.

"Congratulations," I said. "And the French pronunciation is *repertwah*."

My cousin also had the most unfortunate talent of mispronouncing common words and phrases.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"I'm positive, Jill."

"But I took French in high school. I've been saying repertory this whole time and no one ever corrected me."

"I'm sure someone did."

As she unsuccessfully practiced her pronunciation, I grabbed a soaked block of green oasis foam and fit it snugly into a shallow ceramic vase, shaving the edges with a knife to get the shape just right. Water beaded on my fingers as I pressed the foam down into the vase.

"Anyway," she continued. "Don't congratulate me yet. There are some requirements in order to qualify."

I dried my hands on my apron. "Qualify for what?"

"To be a rep for La Meilleure."

"What's La Meilleure?"

"It's French."

I picked up a stray rose petal from the table and rubbed it between my fingers. "French for what?"

"Oh, it means *The Best*. It's one of the most exclusive, high-end makeup lines."

"It must be a very exclusive line," Rosa said. "I have not heard of this company."

"Oh, it's very exclusive! Only the best for *Chez Jillian*."

I looked at her in bewilderment. "Are you sure? I haven't heard of it either."

She looked back at me with pity, wrinkling her nose as she judged my appearance. "I know, Abs."

I rubbed the rose petal so hard it dissolved between my fingers.

"Let me help you," she so kindly offered.

"I don't need help. I'm perfectly happy with my makeup." I turned to work on my arrangement.

"Please? I need to practice."

"Oh, so you need *my* help." After a moment of silence, I glanced at my cousin to see her looking over at me with big, beseeching eyes, pouting pathetically with her dark red lips. "What do you need to practice?" I finally asked.

"My technique."

"Applying makeup?"

"Yes, that, and . . ."

"And what, Jill?"

"My sales technique."

Before I could say no, she pleaded, "Please, Abby. I'm a terrible salesperson. I need to practice and you're the only one who'll tell me the truth."

"Okay, go for it. But I have a lot of orders to do."

"Not *now*," she said. "I have to find somewhere to sell the products first."

I noticed her gaze lingering, watching my expression. There was no way I was about to turn Bloomers into a makeup counter for *Chez Jillian*, so I let her eyes linger a little longer before finally asking, "Where do you plan on selling your new makeup line?"

She then looked down at her nails, answering casually, "Oh, I don't know."



"I'll help you practice, but you can't sell your products here."

"Don't worry, Abs. I have plenty of options." Jillian grabbed her purse and stood up. "Well, I should get going. I just wanted to share my news. Bye, Abs. Bye, Rosa."

"Bye, Jillian," Rosa answered.

"Oh, and one more thing," Jillian said. "Are you going to the fireworks show tonight?"

"I was planning to," I answered.

"Great! Claymore and I will see you there."



At noon, I walked up the block to Marco's bar, Down the Hatch, to have lunch with my husband. The bar was the most popular watering hole downtown and had the advantage of being across the street from the courthouse, drawing in a diverse clientele of attorneys, judges, secretaries, clerks, businesspeople, and college students from the local university.

Marco had purchased the bar three years ago but hadn't touched the décor at all. Last outfitted in the sixties, the bar had a big, polished walnut L-shaped counter that ran down the left side of the building and a row of booths with orange vinyl cushions opposite. A large fisherman's net hung suspended from the ceiling in one corner, and a big blue plastic carp occupied a space of prominence above the row of booths, along with old photographs that ranged from the 1940s to present. I thought the place needed a makeover, but customers seemed to like the ambience, so Marco was reluctant to change a thing.

"Hey, Sunshine," Marco called from behind the bar. "I was just going to text you to see if you were coming down." He came out and met me at the last booth in the row, unofficially known as the "Salvare Seat," where a good portion of our courtship had occurred.

Marco was Italian American and looked it. With broad shoulders and narrow hips, he looked like a life-sized action figure. He had dark hair that just brushed the top of his back collar, olive skin, almond brown eyes, and a light five o'clock shadow which I found extremely sexy. Today he was wearing a light blue long-sleeved T-shirt with the words *Down the Hatch* running

down one sleeve, dark blue jeans, and his favorite scuffed black boots, looking yummy as always.

Marco had enlisted in the army after high school and had quickly advanced to the Army Rangers Special Ops division, where he served for two years. He returned home, attended Indiana University on the GI bill for four years, became a police officer, and a year later decided to retire from regimented life. Now, in addition to owning the bar, Marco had his own private investigation business, the Salvare Detective Agency.

"Guess what?" he asked, sliding onto the bench across from me. "The house across the street from us is for sale. The sign went up this morning after you left for work."

"The DeWitts are moving? They were such a nice couple."

Gert, the waitress who'd worked at the bar for thirty years, stopped by the booth and said in her gravelly voice, "Hey, lovebirds. What'll you have?"

After Gert took our orders, Marco leaned across to grab my hands. "I am not looking forward to new neighbors. We've been lucky so far. What are the odds our luck will hold?"

"Oh, speaking of neighbors, Lottie's neighbor came into the shop this morning and started yelling at her."

"He came into Bloomers?"

"Yeah, and he threatened her and smashed a couple vases."

Immediately, Marco straightened. His eyes grew narrow. "Who is this guy?"

"A big guy named Garth. She's been having major problems with him."

"What was the threat?"

"He was going to teach her boys a lesson."

"What did the boys do?"

"I don't know. She's going to talk to them later today and report back. The guy was nasty, Marco. I'm worried for her."

Still holding my hand, he locked eyes with me. "Next time you see this guy anywhere near Bloomers, you call me. Okay? I'll be right over."

I squeezed his hand. "I will."

"Hey, hot stuff," I heard, and looked up to see Marco's brother, Rafe, scoot in beside me.

Raphael (Rafe) Salvare was ten years younger than Marco. Like his brother, he was broad shouldered and lean hipped, with the same dark, wavy hair, dark eyes, olive skin, and a faint shadow of a beard that Marco had. After dropping out of college one semester short of graduating, Rafe had moved back to New Chapel on orders of his mother, who sent him to Marco to be straightened out. Since then, Rafe had matured quite a bit. He even started handling many of the managerial responsibilities at Down the Hatch, allowing Marco to take P.I. cases when needed.

Rafe rested his chin in his palm and sighed heavily. Clearly something was bothering him.

"What's up?" Marco asked.

"I guess I'm single again."

"What happened?"

"My girlfriend and I were supposed to go to the fireworks tonight. She wanted me to pick her up at seven for dinner before the show."

"What's wrong with that?" I asked.

"I don't have a car, Abby."

Oh yeah, I'd forgotten about that. Rafe had recently made a poor investment decision and lost most of his savings. Marco had ardently argued against his investment, but Rafe was headstrong and cocksure. Two qualities that didn't always mesh. As a result of Rafe's poor decisions, he'd sold his car and moved back in with his mother.

"So, she cancelled the date," Rafe finished.

"Why don't you come to the show with us?" Marco offered. "I'm picking up Mama at eight."

"No, thanks. I think I'd rather be alone. For life."

I put my arm around his shoulders as he slumped over the table. "Why wouldn't you invite your girlfriend to come with us?"

He laughed humorlessly. "It's bad enough I have to live with Mama. I'm not going on dates with her, too."

The door opened and a group of four men walked in headed for the bar. Marco nodded toward them. "You've got customers."

Rafe looked over at them and slid out of the booth. "I guess the pity party is over."

I watched him head up to the bar. "Poor Rafe," I said to Marco. "I wish there was something we could do."

"He has to live with his mistakes," Marco replied. "Give him a few days. He'll be fine."

Gert delivered our food then and Marco immediately picked up his burger and chowed down, Rafe's problem forgotten.

If only I had that ability.



## CHAPTER TWO



At two o'clock, the members of the Monday Afternoon Ladies' Poetry Society flocked into Bloomers to take up residence in the parlor, where they would spend the next hour and a half sipping coffee and tea, munching on biscuits and scones, and reciting original poems to one another, while Grace fluttered among them refilling cups, enjoying every minute of it.

I liked the elderly poetesses, but their rhymes of drooping jowls and sagging breasts, and stiff hairs sprouting from wrinkled chins, didn't do much for me other than giving me nightmares about growing old. But I had no time to dwell on it. There was a stack of orders on the spindle and several more online. I plucked one order and went to the big cooler to collect my blossoms. And for the next hour-and-a-half I immersed myself in what I loved most – creating beautiful arrangements.

By three-thirty, the shop was quiet. The poetesses had taken their leave, and the spindle had been cleared of all orders but one. I entered the walk-in cooler to check out our inventory, selected an array of brightly colored cosmos and zinnia, added stems of laurel leaf, and brought them to the worktable just as the bell over the door chimed and a voice sang out, "Hi ho, everyone!"

My mom had arrived. Right on time.

On weekdays my mother was just an average, mild-mannered kindergarten teacher. She dressed in conservative clothing, wore her honey brown hair in a simple layered bob, cooked healthy meals for my dad, did volunteer work at the animal shelter, and cared for her pet llama, Taz.

Weekend mom was a different story. That was when Maureen "Mad Mo" Knight appeared. Weekends were Mom's creative time, when she would pro-

duce works of – let’s call them art – that she then brought down to Bloomers on Monday for us to sell, believing she was helping to improve our bottom line.

The piece that she was most famous for was her Dancing Naked Monkey Table, a quartet of neon-hued baby chimps prancing in a circle while holding up a glass top. I’d thought it would never sell, but someone had finally bought it as a joke. Of course, Mom never found out. Then there was the baby’s bat mobile, with scary rubber bats hanging from colorful cords, and a tropical palm tree, made of lifelike human arms with palms outstretched. There were many more, but I tried to forget them.

“Hello, honey,” she said as she came through the purple curtain. She gave me a hug, then slid onto a wooden stool at the worktable. “What are you making?”

“A fiftieth anniversary arrangement. What do you think?”

“It’s beautiful!” She picked up a stray fern leaf from the table and began to comb it with her fingers. “So, what’s new?”

“Not much. What’s new with you?”

She sighed. “Nothing. I’m between art projects and I’m bored. I need inspiration.”

“What about painting? You did such a good job on the theater backdrop.”

“I’m out of paint.”

“What about writing? People love your children’s mystery stories.”

“I’m out of ideas. Besides, how many mysteries can be solved in the same small town?”

Was that rhetorical?

“Honey, I want to make something to sell in your shop. Remember all the projects I would make for Bloomers? Remember how well those sold?”

Was *that* rhetorical? I’d never had the heart to tell her the truth, and after all this time, I didn’t have the guts. What my mom didn’t know was that her past art projects hadn’t always sold very well. Especially the heavy sea glasses made from actual sea glass that would cause migraines. Or the heart shaped candies made from beet juice that stained the customer’s teeth bright red. Not to mention the food-scented candles made with spices that would cause customer’s eyes to water uncontrollably.

What I could never tell her was that all her projects that hadn't sold were stored safely – and secretly – in Bloomers' basement, never to see the light of day again.

"I want to create something full of spark and pizzazz," Mom continued. "Something that really catches the eye. Something we can place front and center in your window display that will have the whole town clamoring for a glimpse. Any ideas?"

"Nothing comes to mind, but I'll keep thinking on it."

"Thank you, sweetheart. Would you like help making some arrangements?"

I looked around. "Sure, Mom. Why don't we do this next one together?"

"Oh, are you and Marco going to the fireworks tonight?"

"Yes, should we save you and dad a seat?"

"That would be wonderful."



When I got home from work that evening, my next-door neighbor Theda Coros was outside her house pulling weeds in a flower bed that ran along the front of her porch. Theda was a great neighbor, often watching Seedy and Smoke for us when an emergency called us away. Hinting that she'd once been a CIA agent, the sixty-five-year-old widow now fostered cats and gardened. Description.

"Good evening," she called, rising, brushing off her garden gloves as I walked over.

"I see our neighbors have put their house up for sale."

She tsked. "I sure will hate to see them go. I've already seen several people stop to take a look at the house. I'm sure it will sell fast."

"Let's hope for good neighbors," I said with crossed fingers.

"Oh, I've been meaning to ask. Are you going to the neighborhood bar-becue this Sunday?"

"I completely forgot about it. Yes, we'll be there. Thanks for the reminder."

"No problem at all."

"Have a nice evening, Theda."

“You, too. And give those pets some love from me.”

I walked into the house and was immediately greeted by our two pets, a three-legged dog with big butterfly ears named Seedy, and a large, silver-blue Russian Blue cat named Smoke. I’d first met and fallen in love with Seedy while investigating a murder at the county animal shelter. Because of her appearance, the small “seedy” looking little dog had been scheduled for euthanasia, despite being the mother of an adorable puppy. I had tried my best to find her a home but managed only to place her puppy, Seedling, with my niece, Tara. Then my hero husband stepped in and brought Seedy home as a surprise for me.

We’d decided then that our pet family was complete, but we’d changed our minds after I was attacked in my own backyard by a suspect we were investigating. Somehow Smoke, the giant Russian Blue being fostered by Theda, managed to get out of the house and come to my rescue. How could I not love him, too?

“Okay, my sweet things,” I said to them, “your supper is coming up.” And then I’d have to come up with a dish idea to take to the barbecue, and a super idea for Marco and me.

After feeding the pets, I searched through the fridge, seeing nothing appetizing for dinner. My stomach growled loudly, and then I heard the garage door start to open. *Think, Abby!*

A minute later, Marco came in the door calling, “Hello, hello! I come bearing food.”

I turned for a look and saw him carrying a large brown bag.

He smiled. “I brought tacos.”

“I knew there was a reason I’d married you.”



The Memorial Day firework celebration was held at the football stadium, on the sprawling back lawn of New Chapel High School. The air smelled faintly of grilled hot dogs and sunscreen. Families filled the bleachers on one side while others set up on the field, dotting the grass with mismatched blankets and folding chairs. The growing crowd was buzzing with anticipation as



kids darted between clusters of people, chasing glow sticks and squealing with delight.

While the attendance was only half of the town's Fourth of July celebration, the show was twice as entertaining. The high school glee club sang, the marching band played pop songs, and the baton twirlers performed. And as soon as the sun went down, the fireworks show began.

After unfurling our blanket next to Jillian and Claymore, I sat cross-legged across from them. Marco stretched out next to me, propping himself on his elbows, his dark hair falling into his eyes as he squinted toward the horizon. "It's almost dark. Show should start soon."

A few minutes later, my mom and dad showed up. Marco jumped up to help assist my dad and his wheelchair through the crowd. Rosa set up a blanket behind us with her son, a wiry kid with jet black hair who was already engrossed in a handheld game.

Then Tara showed up, her flip-flops slapping against the grass as she weaved through the crowd. She wore cutoff shorts and a tie-dye shirt that looked like it'd been dug out of a laundry basket, her auburn hair loose and tangled from the breeze. She flopped down next to me a minute later, kicking off her shoes and stretching her legs out. "Hey," she said, glancing my way. "Have you thought any more about my proposition?"

Her proposition—practically a plea at this point—was to work at Bloomers over the summer. Tara had been hounding me about it for weeks, ever since her dad laid down the law. "He's not going to buy me a car until I get a job."

"You poor soul," I teased, leaning back on my hands. "I had to buy my own car when I was your age."

Tara groaned, flinging her head back dramatically. "Bloomers would be so much fun, though. Come on, picture it—me, you, all those flowers. I could totally rock a florist vibe."

"It is fun," I admitted, "but it's also work."

"And I could help with investigations," Tara said, undeterred, her eyes glinting with mischief. Then she perked up, sitting straighter. "Oh, here come the Dombowski boys."

That's when I spotted Lottie and her husband parting the crowded field, three of their four boys trailing behind them. Lottie's red, curly hair was

pulled into a messy bun, and she wore a bright pink tank top that stood out against the muted greens and grays of the evening. Her husband, Herman, carried a cooler in one hand while wrangling one of their boys with the other. They lived in Pine Crest, the neighborhood just beyond the high school's chain-link fence, close enough that the boom of fireworks probably rattled their windows every year. They could've stayed home, watched from their backyard, but I was glad they hadn't. Lottie waved when she saw me, her smile bright and familiar, and I waved back.

The boys were a blur of teenage vigor, all height and sunburned swagger, their voices overlapping in a lively, messy chorus. "I can't tell them apart," I said, squinting as they drew closer. "They're like clones."

Tara grinned, pointing subtly. "Joey's the one with dimples. Second from the left. He's so cute, right?"

I watched as Joey broke away from the group, his dimples flashing as he grinned at something his brother said. He had thick hair shaved close to the scalp, just like his other brothers, but walked with a swagger that suggested he knew he was the charming one. Tara was already smitten, her chin propped in her hand as she stared.

A moment later, she scrambled up, brushing grass off her shorts. "I'm gonna go say hi," she announced, and before I could respond, she was off, plopping down beside the Dombowski boys with an easy confidence I couldn't help but admire.

Overhead, the first firework screeched into the sky, bursting into a shower of gold that lit up the field. My dad whooped, Jillian clapped, and Marco tilted his head back to watch. I glanced at Tara, now laughing with Joey, and smiled to myself. Summer was going to be interesting.

Then I noticed Jillian talking to herself. I leaned over as the sky filled with red, white, and blue sparkles. "Aren't the fireworks beautiful?" I asked her.

"*Repertwar*," Jillian answered.

Over another loud boom in the sky, I leaned closer. "What did you say?"

"*Repertwar!*" she shouted. "I'm practicing."



Tuesday, May 28<sup>th</sup>

At six-thirty a.m., my cell phone on my nightstand rang loudly and my eyelids fluttered open. Startled and groggy, I picked up the phone and saw Lottie's name on the screen. "Good morning. What's up?"

"Herman just informed me that my tires have been slashed. Can you believe that?"

"Oh, no, Lottie. Did you call the police?"

"Not yet. I'm afraid it'll just cause more problems."

"You have to call them."

"Okay, but listen. Herman's already left for work. I'll need a ride to Bloomers. Can you come get me?"

"I'll be there in an hour."

What an awful way to start the morning. I climbed out of bed and headed into the kitchen for a jolt of coffee. Marco was seated at a stool at the kitchen island counter and looked up. "Everything okay?"

"That was Lottie," I said, pouring some hot coffee from the pot. "She parked her car in the street last night and her neighbor slashed her tires. I feel terrible about it."

"Why?"

"Because it's my fault. I'm the one who convinced her to park in the street."

"Did you slash her tires?"

I poured a heavy dose of sweet cream into the cup. "No."

"Then it's not your fault."

"I still feel terrible."

"Want some breakfast?"

I sipped my coffee, giving my husband a perturbed glare. His ability to rationalize and rally was truly frustrating at times. Noticing my ire, he stood from his seat and wrapped his arms around me, giving me a peck on the top of my head. "It's not your fault, but I understand why you're upset."

"I'm sorry. I'm just tired and annoyed."

"Then finish your coffee and I'll make toast."

"I'll take the toast to go. I need to hurry and get ready. Lottie needs a ride to work."

“Make sure she files a police report.”

I stood on tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “Will do.”

After a short drive, I steered my Corvette through the quiet streets of Pine Crest, the neighborhood tucked just beyond the high school’s fenced fields. The area was a patchwork of tidy lawns and mature oaks, their branches arching over the road to form a leafy canopy that dappled the pavement in shadow. Most houses here were older, built in the ’70s or ’80s—two-story colonials and split-levels with brick facades, their shutters painted in muted greens or blues. Porches sagged under the weight of potted plants and weathered rocking chairs, and a few driveways cradled minivans or pickup trucks, their bumpers plastered with faded school pride stickers.

I pulled up across the street from Lottie’s place, a white colonial with black trim that stood out against the morning sun. The second story had a row of dormer windows peering out like curious eyes, and the yard was edged with neatly trimmed boxwoods that gave it a polished, lived-in charm. I pulled into the driveway, killed the engine, and stepped out, the Corvette’s door clicking shut behind me. And there, parked in front of Lottie’s house, was her navy Nissan sedan. My stomach sank. Both of her back tires were flat.

That’s when I noticed a reflection from the house across the street. I turned to see a squat, colorful ranch with peeling siding and a flagpole out front, minus the flag. Standing behind the big picture window was a shadowy figure holding binoculars glinting off the sunlight. As soon as I spun to inspect the voyeur, the curtain dropped.

Walking up to the front door, I noticed two police squad cars parked at the end of the neighbor’s long driveway. The garage was detached and sat some distance behind the neighbor’s house. I waited a moment, eager to find out what was happening, but there was no activity.

“Mornin’, sweetie,” Lottie said solemnly as she opened the door for me. “Come on back to the kitchen. I’m just finishing up breakfast.”

Lottie had a well-known obsession with the color pink, and that morning she’d leaned into it heavily. She sported a pink-and-green plaid shirt, sleeves rolled up to her elbows, paired with crisp white pants that hugged her frame. Her pink sneakers—bright as bubblegum—peeked out beneath the hem, scuffed just enough to hint at her busy life. A cluster of pink bows were clipped into her short, brassy curls.

"I'm sorry, Lottie. I feel like this is my fault. I shouldn't have told you to move your car into the street."

"Never mind that. The only person at fault here is that maniac next door."

"There seems to be some good news, though," I said to her as I wiped my shoes on the mat. "It looks like the police are finally taking some action."

"How's that?" she answered.

"The police must be investigating. I assume you reported the incident this morning."

She stopped halfway down the hallway and turned toward me. "Not yet. Why?"

"There are two squad cars next door."

Lottie walked back to the narrow window beside the front door and looked out. "Something serious must have happened over there."

"You didn't call the police?"

"It's not only the police. An ambulance just arrived."

Coming down the staircase was a tall, good-looking nineteen-year-old wearing a blue plaid shirt, blue jeans, and a backpack on his muscular frame. "Morning, Abby," he said.

"Morning, Jimmy."

"Joey."

"Sorry." I'd taken a chance and gotten it wrong, the reason being that Lottie's four nineteen-year-old sons were quadruplets, who all looked identical.

"Joey, what's going on next door?" Lottie asked.

"Not a clue." Joey stepped up to the front window to see. "Slashing tires is a felony, isn't it? Maybe they're finally gonna lock him up."

"I doubt it's a felony," she answered.

"Hey, Mom, where are my socks?" called one of the boys from the top of the stairs.

"In your sock drawer," Lottie called back as she walked to the kitchen.

"No, they're not."

"Look harder," she demanded.

I followed Lottie into the kitchen where one of the quads was seated at the counter eating a stack of pancakes. "Morning, Abby," he said with a smile.

“Good morning . . . um . . .” I didn’t even try to guess.

“Johnny,” he supplied.

Another boy came into the kitchen next. “And my name is?”

My shoulders slumped as the boy gave me a wide grin and said, “C’mon, Captain. You have a fifty-fifty chance.”

I went over the names in my head. Joey, Johnny, Jimmy, and Karl. Just this past summer, Bloomers had entered a float in New Chapel’s fourth of July parade, and the quads were drafted by their mother to help me build it. The boys had treated the task as though it were a battle, and in turn, had deemed me captain of the crew. Even after nearly two weeks of working closely with all four of them, there really was no way I could tell them apart, so I took a shot in the dark. “Jimmy?”

“Good guess!” he said as he sat next to his brothers at the kitchen island. That left Karl missing in action.

As a mother-to-be, Lottie and her husband Herman had been expecting triplets, and had already chosen the names Jimmy, Joey, and Johnny when the fourth baby appeared. Stunned, and possibly delirious after such a monumental delivery, Lottie had looked up at the light fixture above her head, saw the name Karl stamped on the side, and voilà – the fourth baby had a name.

Lottie slid the last sausage from the skillet onto a plate and set the plate on the counter. “Okay, boys. Eggs and sausages are ready.”

I studied all three as they devoured their breakfasts. They all had the same rectangular face, same broad nose and thick eyebrows above their dark hazel eyes. They also had the same summer buzz cut, and deep voice.

“Maybe it was Punter,” one of the boys said with a mouthful.

“Who?” I asked.

“Old man Punter. Maybe he called the police. He’s always watching out his window like a weirdo.”

“I swear I’ve seen him walking around at night,” Jimmy added.

“He’s a peeper, too,” another boy chimed in. “What a creep.”

Lottie sucked her teeth. “He’s a bored old man in a wheelchair. Leave him alone.” She looked at me and rolled her eyes. “My boys and their conspiracy theories.”

Jimmy swallowed a bite and reached for the sausages. “It’s not a conspiracy, Mom. He’s faking his disability.”

"Enough of that." Lottie said, rinsing out the skillet. "Where's your brother?"

"He's still downstairs getting ready," one of the boys replied, batting his eyes. "Karl has to look handsome for the girls at summer school."

The doorbell rang and everyone stopped talking, but no one moved.

"Will one of you boys please get the door?" Lottie asked.

"Can't," Jimmy started to say with a mouthful of food.

"Eating," Joey finished.

"I'll get it," I said.

"Thanks, hon," Lottie replied. "I'll be right behind you."

I opened the heavy front door to find two police officers standing in front of me, one male and one female. From my work as a private investigator, I knew many of the officers on the New Chapel force, but these two were unfamiliar.

"Are you Lottie Dombowski?" one of them asked.

"No, I am," Lottie said from behind me. She moved forward, drying her hands on a kitchen towel. She stepped up to the screen and slapped the towel over her shoulder. "What can I do for you?"

The male officer held out his phone to show her the screen. "Is this your son?"

"Yes," she replied hesitantly.

"May we speak with him?"

"Which one?"

"Your son," the officer replied.

"I have four of them."

"This one," he said, shaking his phone at her.

"What for?" she asked sternly.

"Just get your son, please, ma'am."

"Boys!" Lottie called. "Could you come to the door, please?"

Grumbling, all three boys from the kitchen tramped up the hallway to the front door. At that moment, Karl came stomping up the stairs from the basement. As they gathered beside their mom, both officers' eyes widened.

"Which one?" Lottie repeated.

The officers turned their backs to confer quietly then the male officer asked, "Which one of you boys had the altercation with Mr. Schmidt yesterday?"

"I suppose he called to complain," Lottie said.

"No, ma'am," the female officer said. "This is a homicide investigation."

"A homicide?" Lottie asked in surprise. "Someone's been murdered?"

"Mr. Schmidt was found in his garage this morning," the officer replied. "And one of these boys was caught on his doorbell camera threatening him."

Lottie and three of the boys' eyes expanded. The fourth boy looked down.

I took one look at his guilty face and turned to my assistant. "Lottie," I said, "I think you need a lawyer."

"Garth Schmidt has been murdered?" Lottie repeated, gaping at the two police officers as though the words weren't making any sense. She turned to fix her boys with a look I couldn't quite interpret. Her gaze moved between each one and landed on Karl, who was still looking down at his shoes.

"We'd like to speak with the boy who threatened Mr. Schmidt," the male officer clarified.

None of them answered. Lottie looked at me with genuine concern.

"If no one speaks up, we're going to need to take all four down to the station to question them," the officer continued.

"Not without their lawyer present," I said, pulling my cellphone out of my purse.

"We have a lawyer?" one of the boys asked.

"We don't have a lawyer," Lottie whispered.

"You will shortly," I said.





## CHAPTER THREE



I stepped away from the door to make a call to Dave Hammond, an attorney I trusted with my life. I had clerked for Dave during my one disastrous year in law school and had learned a lot from him. He was a jack-of-all trades, handling criminal matters as well as civil ones. He was also a public defender and had been my lawyer when I'd been charged with murdering my former college professor.

"He's with a client now, Abby, but I think he's about done. Want me to have him call you back?"

"Yes, please. As soon as possible." I returned to the front door to speak with the officers. "I've got a call into their attorney. He'll get back to me shortly."

"Okay, we'll need to see your boy down at the station within the next two hours," the male officer said. "Otherwise, we'll be back."

"Oh, Lordy," Lottie said as the officers walked away. She turned to her boys. "What in heaven's name were you thinking?"

"It wasn't me," one of them said.

Another held his hands up. "Don't look at me."

"I'm not that stupid," the third boy said.

That left Karl, who was still looking down at his shoes. He stood in silence as Lottie closed the door. "Karl?" she asked.

Finally, he looked up. "Mom, he broke the antenna on my car. I was mad."

"What did you say to him?" she asked.

"I don't remember exactly."

"You better start remembering real quick," she retorted.

"I don't know. Something like, 'You'd better not mess with us again or you'll be sorry.'"

Lottie sighed. "And then he was murdered."

Just then, my cell phone rang. "It's Dave," I said, moving away to answer the call.

"Hey, Abby, what's up?"

After explaining the situation, I asked, "Can you please meet with Karl at the police station this morning?"

"Of course. Have him meet me at ten o'clock. And warn him not to say a word to the police until I've talked to him."

"Will do. Thanks, Dave. You're the best."

I put my phone away and went back to the kitchen where they'd all gathered. "Okay, Karl, Dave will meet you at the police station at ten o'clock. And don't talk to the police if you get there first. In fact, don't talk to the police at all. Let Dave do all the talking."

"I've got to go with him, Abby," Lottie said.

"Of course. We'll handle things without you. You take care of your son."

"I'll have Karl drop me off at Bloomers when we're done, but I'll need a ride home."

"No problem," I assured.

I walked outside to see the neighbor still watching out the window from across the street, but I noticed he wasn't watching me, but rather the commotion next door. Lottie's yard was separated from her neighbor's by a long, thick row of bushes. I walked down to the sidewalk and across to the neighbor's driveway. It was a long, narrow drive that led to a large, two-door, detached garage behind the house. Cop cars lined the driveway. As I made my way closer to the scene, I looked for my friend Reilly's car but didn't see it.

There were several police standing by the garage talking with the paramedics. Both garage doors were closed, so I couldn't see inside. It looked as though whatever happened to Garth Schmidt took place inside the garage, and I wanted to get in to take a look. Maybe if I recognized someone . . .

One of the officers that had come to Lottie's door walked up with her arm out. "Please stay where you are. This is a crime scene."

"Is Sergeant Reilly here?"

"No, Ma'am."

"Detective Corbison?"

"No."

"My name is Abby Knight Salvare. My husband and I are private investigators. I'd like to know what's going on."

"I know who you are," the female officer said. "Your husband is Marco Salvare."

"Yes, and we have a vested interest in what's happening here. Would I be able to take a look around?"

"Well, that's not really true now, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"Your husband is the private eye. He's the one with the license. Isn't that right?"

*Hmm.* I didn't expect to get into a fight this early in the morning.

"And even so, Mrs. Salvare. You wouldn't be able to get into a crime scene before the detective does. I'd lose my job immediately."

Okay. She had a point. I lowered my proverbial fists and thanked her for her time. Although, it didn't change the fact that I badly wanted into that garage.

I hopped into my 'Vette, hopeful that Dave would quickly handle the situation. It was a harmless threat, I told myself, nothing more. A murder in a small neighborhood would have plenty of witnesses. Surely. *Karl is going to be just fine*, I said out loud. But a small voice inside my head was doubtful. What if it wasn't a harmless threat? What if there aren't any witnesses? What if Corbison takes the case? He was known to close cases quickly and with as little evidence as possible. I tried to ignore the little voice. I turned over the engine, turned up the radio, and sped off to Bloomers.

When I walked into the flower shop, Grace was in the coffee-and-tea parlor setting up for the day. "Good morning, love. You haven't heard from Lottie, have you? She's usually here by now."

"There's been a situation," I said. "Let me get Rosa so I can tell you both."

Over cups of Grace's gourmet coffee, I explained the situation at Lottie's house, watching as their expressions went from curious to worried.

"What will happen now?" Rosa asked, getting up for a refill.

"Dave will be with Lottie and her son when the police question him, and he'll make sure Karl doesn't incriminate himself. Then Dave will want to meet with them privately, to get the full story."

"Poor Lottie," Grace said, shaking her head. "She must be sick with worry."

"She'll feel better after she talks with Dave," I assured her. "It's just a case of a young man making a foolish threat." Under the table, I crossed my fingers.



Unfortunately, crossing my fingers didn't help. When Lottie came in after lunch, I could see the worry on her face. "What happened?" I asked, as Grace and Rosa gathered around the sales counter.

"It doesn't look good," she answered. "The detective told us they have an eyewitness who saw one of my boys out by Schmidt's garage yesterday evening. That's where his body was found. That, and the doorbell threat, makes Karl their prime suspect."

"Who was the detective?" I asked.

"Al Corbison."

Of course it was.

"I know you've dealt with Corbison before," Lottie said. "What are we in for?"

Not wanting to alarm her any further, I answered, "I've had bad experiences with him in the past, but he's been more reasonable lately. Did he tell you what the murder weapon was?"

"Schmidt was shot in the chest," Lottie said as she lowered her head and closed her eyes. "And here's the thing. Herman has a gun, and the boys know how to shoot it."

Another strike against Karl. "Did the police find the gun?"

"I don't know, but Dave thinks they may get a search warrant to come look for Herman's gun."

"Have any of the boys fired it recently?"

She raised her head to look at me. "Not recently, but between the gun and the threat, I'm worried."

"Did you find out what Karl's threat was?"

"Yes." Lottie sighed morosely. "Corbison played us the doorbell camera video."

"Oh, no. Is it bad?"

She nodded. "Karl said, 'Bad things happen to bad people. You'd better watch yourself. I don't get mad, I get even.'"

Neither Grace, Rosa, nor I said a word. Karl hadn't just made one threat. He'd made three. The situation had just gone from bad to worse.

The bell over the door chimed as several customers walked in. "Let's talk in the work room," I said to Lottie.

"I will watch the sales floor," Rosa offered.

My thoughts were focused on the murder as I followed Lottie through the purple curtain. I didn't want to scare her, but I knew Corbison would draw a bullseye on Karl's back. He was an easy target, and Corbison loved to close cases quickly. That's when I decided that I had to get involved. Excuse me, Team *Salvare* had to get involved. Once Marco learned of the situation, I was sure I'd be able to convince him to help catch the real killer.

First on my list was to talk to Karl, get his side of the story, and go from there. I'd have to find out when Karl's classes were and schedule a time when Marco and I could go see him.

Lottie sat at the worktable, her face pale, her head in her hands. "Abby, I don't know what I'm going to do. I think Karl's in real trouble here."

"But he didn't do it," I assured her. "We know that for a fact, right?"

She nodded. "He told me he didn't do it, and I know Karl. He doesn't have the capacity. He's my sweet little boy."

"I know, Lottie. He's a good kid. So, we have the truth on our side. We can get through this."

"I haven't talked to Dave about his fees, but I'm afraid it's going to be more than we can handle."

I sat next to her and put my hand on her back. "He'll work with you, and I'll be here, too. The quicker we can solve this case, the better it'll be for everyone."

"Abby, I appreciate the help, but I can't ask you to get involved. It doesn't feel right."

"Not another word," I told her. "I'm going to help you, and once Marco hears about this, I know he'll be on board, too. Besides, you know I can't help but get involved."

At that, Lottie cracked a smile. She inhaled, gathering her strength, and stood. "Thank you, sweetie."

"I'd like to start by talking to Karl. When's the best time?"

"He'll be home all night."

"Marco works late tonight. What about tomorrow?"

"He's home from his classes at noon."

"I'll check with Marco, but that should work."

Lottie wiped the tears from her eyes and leaned over for a hug. I gave her a big, long squeeze, reassuring her that everything was going to be all right. "We can handle things here if you need to take the day off."

"Thanks, Abby. Herman should be able to come get me in the next hour or so."

After Lottie made her way to the sales floor, Rosa came into the work room shaking her head. "I don't know what I would do if my boy was accused of something so horrible. I feel bad for her."

"She'll be okay."

"I remember when *mi pequeño tesoro* was born. I looked into his eyes and knew that I would do anything for him. I would go to any distance to protect him. I would die for my son."

I picked up an order slip. "I can only imagine."

She slammed her hand on the solid wood table. "And I would *kill* for him, too."

I looked at her, wide-eyed. "Okay, Rosa. I get it. If something happened to my Corvette, I'd be devastated."

She shook her head. "No. You don't get it. When you have a child one day, you will understand."

I gave Rosa a minute to cool down. It was true, I didn't know what Lottie was going through, but I knew everything was going to be okay. Until that little voice returned. What will happen if Karl's fingerprints are on Herman's gun? I glanced at the order in my hand, shaking away the thought.

The order was for a woman's sixtieth birthday celebration. The order stated: *Something simple but elegant*. So, I went to the big walk-in cooler on the

left where we stored our fresh flowers and started to browse. I decided on a pink, purple and white theme, so I pulled 'BelAir' freesia in a deep purple, 'Delilah' rose in a deep pink, 'Blizzard' rose in a snowy white, and 'Acapulco' oriental lily in a pink and white combination. With my selection made, I took everything back to the worktable and began to prep the stems.

"I apologize," Rosa said. "I get worked up sometimes. I just can't imagine something happening to my boy."

"I understand, Rosa."

"Or someone accusing him of *murder*!"

"It's okay. Everything's okay. Let's just turn on some music and focus on these orders."

She huffed and shook her head, clearly still worked up. After mumbling a few words in her native language, she turned on the radio and we got to work.

We worked all afternoon, trimming stems and arranging bouquets, the sound of scissors snipping and the hum of the old fridge in the back filling the quiet. Around two, Lottie's husband arrived to pick her up. The shop was slow, so Grace invited us into the parlor for a break. She served us mint tea, which was warm and sharp, and we sipped it slowly while the afternoon light slanted through the windows.

By four o'clock, we'd finished all the orders—eight bouquets, mostly roses and daisies, wrapped in cellophane and tied with twine. Normally, Lottie would load them into the Bloomers van, but that day, the responsibility fell to me. I grabbed the keys from the hook behind the counter, stacked the bouquets in the back of the van, and headed out. There weren't many stops. The streets were quiet, and I drove with the windows down, enjoying the warm air against my skin. Each drop-off was quick—a knock, a smile, a "Here you go," and back to the van.

I made it back to the shop by five-fifteen. The place was silent, just the faint buzz of the fluorescent lights overhead. I locked the front door, flipped the "Open" sign to "Closed," and swept up the bits of leaves and stems scattered across the floor. After removing my Bloomers apron and shutting off the lights, I stepped outside, pulled the door shut behind me, and turned the key in the deadbolt.

Since Marco wouldn't be able to get home for supper that evening, I decided to walk over to Down the Hatch. The bar and grill was located on the town square, just a few shops down from mine. I pushed open the heavy door and stepped inside. The room was dimly lit and absolutely packed. The air hummed with voices, laughter, and the clink of glasses. I noticed Rafe serving drinks to a table full of customers.

I scanned the room for Marco and spotted Chris first. He was the main bartender, tall and broad-shouldered, with dark hair he kept pushed back. I didn't know much about Chris except he was quiet, loyal, and tough enough to act as a bouncer when Marco was away.

"Boss is in his office," Gert said as she passed by with a tray of food.

I waved to Rafe, then walked past the booths and up a short hallway to the office. Inside, Marco was seated at his black and silver metal desk, working on his computer. Marco's office, unlike the bar, was a study in modern design. Painted a soft gray, it had black metal shelving, a black desk and black swivel chair, with two black director's chairs facing the desk, and silver miniblinds on the window. I sat in one of the chairs and waited for him to look up.

"What's up, Sunshine?"

"It's time for dinner. Can you join me?"

He looked at his watch. "I'm waiting for a phone call. Why don't you grab a booth and I'll be right out."

I walked back out to the crowded bar and slid into the last booth while Rafe slid in opposite me. "Marco told me to save the booth for you."

"Thanks, Rafe. I can't believe how busy it is in here."

"Yeah, everyone's having fun except for me."

"Oh, come on now. Are you still depressed?"

Ignoring my question, Rafe reached into his pocket and pulled out a long chain attached to a shiny, silver watch. "How much do you think I can get for this?"

"Is that a pocket watch?"

"It's vintage. Handcrafted in Italy. My dad left it for me after he died. What do you think, five thousand?"

"Rafe, you can't sell a family heirloom just so you can try to impress a girl."



He dropped his head into his folded arms. "It's not just because of the girl. I need money, Abby. I need to get out of Mama's house. I'm desperate."

Before I could give him advice, Marco stepped into the room. Rafe noticed him first, then pocketed the watch and stood, saying before he left, "Don't tell him about the watch."

Marco took Rafe's spot across from me. He set his elbows on the table, still in his black work shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and reached over to take my hand. "You look beautiful today," he said, his voice low, but loud enough to cut through the bar's noise without effort. His dark eyes flicked up to meet mine, steady and sure.

I felt my cheeks heat up. Even after two years, he could still do that to me—say something simple and make my stomach flip like we'd just met.

Gert approached the table. "Okay, lovebirds, let me guess." She eyed me up and down. "You look like you're in a turkey and Swiss kind of mood."

"That sounds great," I told her. "With an iced tea."

"A Hatchburger and a tea for me," Marco added. As soon as Gert was gone, he looked at me with his intense brown eyes. "How is Lottie holding up?"

I filled him in on the latest information about Karl and explained that I wanted us to get involved. "Corbison has already indicated Karl as a suspect, and we know how that goes. I told Lottie we would help."

Marco nodded. "When do we start our investigation?"

I reached out for his hand and squeezed enthusiastically. "Really? No hesitations?"

"Nope."

My smile faltered slightly. "Really, Salvare? No devil's advocate or worst-case scenarios? No qualms or conditions?"

"Not this time."

That was odd. Normally, Marco had reservations when I came to him with a personal case. There was usually something he had to say about it, or a special condition on which he would agree to participate. Why was he so carefree about it now? It didn't seem right. Then it struck me, the one thing that always ruffled Marco's feathers. "Lottie can't pay us," I added. "So, we'll have to do it for free."

He shrugged. "We wouldn't charge them anyway."

I sat back, stumped. Not even one measly ruffled feather. This wasn't like him. Marco Salvare was my rock, and he normally acted like it. Not that I wanted to argue with him, but it just didn't seem as fun without the normal Salvare challenge. "You're rather agreeable today."

Gert came by to drop off our drinks. Marco took a long sip and set his glass down. "I like Lottie and Herman," he said. "And I like the boys. They're good kids. I figured you'd want to get involved so I told Herman we'd investigate for free."

"You did?"

"I sure did."

"Why didn't you let me know earlier?"

"Because I knew you'd meet me here for dinner."

I looked at him askew. "How did you know I'd meet you for dinner?"

"I'm working late and there aren't any leftovers in the fridge."

"Okay, *detective*, but how'd you know I'd want to get involved?"

He just chuckled to himself. Obviously, he knew me very well. "What's our first move?" he asked.

"Okay, we'll talk to Karl tomorrow. We need to know his side of the story, and what kind of questions Corbison was asking. From there we might gain some insight into the detective's investigation. After that, I think we should talk to the victim's wife, any possible suspects she can think of, and take it from there. What do you think?"

"I think it's a great start." Marco raised his glass. "Team Salvare, back in action."

"Cheers to that!"

"Don't forget, I'm closing the bar tonight, so don't wait up."

We clinked glasses. "Don't you know by now? I always wait up."



## CHAPTER FOUR



Wednesday, May 29<sup>th</sup>

Marco greeted me in the morning with a cup of coffee laced with cream, just the way I liked it, and the newspaper with a headline I didn't: **MEMORIAL DAY MURDER.**

*Garth Schmidt, age 49, was found dead in his garage Tuesday morning from an apparent gunshot to the chest. Schmidt's body was discovered by a family member who had grown concerned after being unable to reach him. Authorities have cordoned off the residence, located in a quiet suburban neighborhood, as they begin their investigation into the circumstances surrounding his death.*

*"Preliminary findings suggest the incident occurred sometime Monday evening," said Detective Al Corbison of the New Chapel Police Department. "We're working to establish a timeline and asking anyone with information to come forward." The coroner's office has scheduled an autopsy for Wednesday to confirm the cause of death and gather additional evidence.*

*Police have not yet identified any suspects or determined a motive, though they are exploring all possibilities, including whether the shooting was targeted or random. Investigators are reviewing security footage from the area and interviewing potential witnesses. "At this stage, we're keeping an open mind," Detective Corbison added.*

"Ha," I spouted. "Keeping an open mind. Yeah, right."

Marco set the newspaper down and I noticed a smaller headline: **ROBBERY ON TOWN SQUARE.**

"Who was robbed?" I asked.

"Windows on the Square."

"What?" I grabbed the paper and sat down on a stool at the kitchen island. *Windows on the Square* was the popular women's clothing boutique just across from Bloomers on Lincoln Avenue, one of the four streets surrounding the courthouse. I perused the article while my husband filled me in on the details.

"Back door was broken into. Safe was breached. Expensive purses stolen. Apparently, Windows on the Square doesn't have an alarm system. I'll bet that's why they were targeted. Are you sure you set your alarm at the shop at night?"

"Yes, Marco. We set it every night. I'll have to go to see Nora. She must be a mess."

"Ask her if she needs to update her security system. Tell her I'll give her a discount."

"I'll do that."

"And I'll be updating my building's security, too," Marco added.

I set the paper on the counter. "What needs updating?"

"I'm going to install night vision cameras at the entrances and set up motion sensors on the doors."

"Another late night?"

"Might be."

"Don't forget," I told him, "We're interviewing Karl today at noon."

He wrapped his arms around me and pulled me close for a kiss. "I'll meet you outside Bloomers at eleven-fifty."

Just then, my cell phone rang. I picked it up off the counter and saw my mom's name on the screen. "Abigail! Have you read the paper this morning?"

"Yes, Mom."

"Do you have an alarm system?"

I answered, then heard her say to my dad, "It's okay, Jeffrey. She sets it every night," then to me, "Please be careful, sweetheart. We'd be devastated if anything happened to you or your shop."

"I'll be careful, Mom."

"Love you, Abigail."

"Love you back."

The call ended and my phone immediately dinged to signal another call. This one was from Marco's mother, so I handed him the phone. "It's your mom. I've got to get ready."

Marco answered to a barrage of angry mumbles. "I'm sorry, Mama. I left my phone in the other room."

As I walked into the bedroom, I heard Marco answer, "Yes, Mama. I set the alarm every night."



When I got to Bloomers, Grace and Rosa were in the parlor having their morning coffees. "Did you hear the news about the robbery?" I asked as I walked over to the counter to pour myself a cup.

"I saw the article," Grace answered. "I'm surprised Windows on the Square doesn't have an alarm."

"They will now," I told them. "I just stopped by Windows and spoke with Nora. She's a nervous wreck. Marco offered to install a security system, and she was very relieved to hear it."

The back doorbell buzzed, signaling a delivery. Rosa immediately stood. "I will get it."

Moments later, I heard a key hit the front door lock and the bells jingle as Lottie made her way inside. She sighed as she slipped off her purse behind the sales counter. She came into the parlor and headed straight for the coffee pot, letting out a large yawn.

Normally her curly, dyed-red hair was styled perfectly or pulled back with bright pink bows, but today her hair was wrapped in a bonnet. The fabric was a faded lavender, slightly frayed at the edges, and it sagged over her forehead as if she'd thrown it on in a hurry. Her usual energy—bustling around the shop, chattering about customers or the latest gossip—was nowhere to be found. Instead, her pink sneakers scuffed against the hardwood floor, and her shoulders slumped as accepted a steaming cup of coffee from Grace.

Lottie sat down at the table, and I put my hand on her arm. "How are you doing?"

She took a long sip and set her cup down. "Not good. Detective Corbison came by first thing this morning with two police officers to confiscate Herman's handgun."

"Did he have a warrant?" I asked.

She nodded. "He also wants fingerprints for all my boys, so Herman's taking them to the station this morning." She took another sip. "Why would he need all four boys?"

I tried to think. Why would Detective Corbison want all four boys' prints if Karl was the only one captured on the doorbell cam? "This could be good news, Lottie. If the detective is asking for more prints, there's a good possibility that there are more than one set of prints on the doorbell. That means more suspects for the detective to focus on."

She heaved a substantial sigh of relief. "Wouldn't that beat all?"

It could've also meant that Corbison wanted to make sure it wasn't one of her other boys' prints. And then I started to wonder if more than one of Lottie's boys were involved in the feud. But I didn't tell her that. The last thing I wanted to do was put more weight on her shoulders. Until there was actual bad news, I would stick to telling her the good.

"Lord. I've been so nervous; I don't know what to do with myself."

"Lottie, we have everything covered. Karl will be just fine. Marco and I want to talk to him today. Will he be home this afternoon?"

"I'll send him a message right now and make sure he stays home."

I squeezed her arm. "We'll get through this. I promise."

"Thank you, Abby."

At nine o'clock, I unlocked the yellow frame door and turned the sign to "open". Before I could walk across the room, a group of secretaries from the courthouse across the street came in for their morning coffee, calling a greeting to me as they headed for the parlor. I waved hello then stepped through the purple curtain into my little slice of paradise. Next to the curtain was a set of hooks where we kept our bright yellow aprons with the Bloomers logo across the front. I grabbed my apron, pulled it over my head, and tied the strings around my waist. At the computer, I pulled the orders that had come in overnight, turning on the radio while they printed. Then, armed with an order, I headed for the first big cooler to pull my blossoms.

“Abby, take a look at this delivery,” Rosa said, setting a big box down on the floor. The box was crushed on one side.

I opened the flaps and saw my order of mums flattened and unusable. “I don’t believe it. It happened again.”

“What happened again?” Lottie asked, stepping through the curtain.

“Another damaged order. That’s the third one this month. What’s going on with the delivery service? I’ll have to reorder and have it overnighted. Rosa, next time you see a damaged box, refuse delivery.”

“I am so sorry,” she said. “Next time I will check for the damage.”

“It’s not your fault,” I told her.

We disposed of the ruined flowers in the trash bin behind the shop. On the way back inside, I checked my security. There was a small floodlight above the back door, and a large sticker that notified any would-be intruder that there was an alarm system in place. I couldn’t imagine someone breaking into Bloomers. What would they steal? But I felt good knowing we were protected. I walked inside, closed the door and tried to latch it.

I pulled the heavy door a little tighter, noticing the edges were sticking a little bit. We’d known about the door for a while, but it seemed as though it was getting worse. I’d have to call Marco and let him know.

After finding the perfect blossoms, I laid them out on the worktable—still fresh from the cooler—and stepped to the back counter to hunt for just the right vase. On the upper shelf, I spotted a flute-shaped vase in mother-of-pearl glass, its iridescent sheen catching the light. Perfect. I grabbed a block of floral foam, soaked it in water until it sank, then trimmed it to fit the vase’s narrow neck. With the foundation set, I began placing my flowers. Ten minutes later, I stepped back to admire the arrangement: a mix of red tulips, peach ranunculus, and lavender freesia, accented with Bells of Ireland for height. I tucked in sprigs of baby’s breath and a few feathery ferns for greenery, their delicate fronds spilling over the edge, just enough to soften the look.

I stored the arrangement in the second big cooler and started on the next order. Rosa had pulled her next order, too. She set her supplies down opposite mine on the large, oak table and we got to work.

At eleven-forty-nine, I stepped out of Bloomers and found Marco waiting in his silver Prius at the curb. He was nothing if not prompt. It only took

us ten minutes to drive to Lottie's neighborhood. There was a car already in front of Lottie's house that I assumed was Karl's, so we parked in the driveway and then made our way to the front door.

"Which house is the victim's?" Marco asked.

I stopped just short of the Dombowski's front porch and pointed to the house on our left. "The garage is all the way in the back. That's where Garth Schmidt was found."

Karl must've been waiting for us, because we heard the door open. "Come on in," he said, holding the door.

"Where are your brothers?" I asked as we stepped inside.

"They're out mowing lawns."

Lottie's husband, Herman, had started a lawn care business for his sons, which kept them busy all summer and gave them spending money. Karl had struggled during his first year of college, so he had to make up courses in the summer instead of working with his brothers.

We all sat in the living room, a pleasant room with a grass green sofa, a matching love seat, and two cream-colored recliners worn with age. A double-wide bookcase filled the wall opposite the sofa and a big-screen TV sat on a shelf in the middle. Everywhere I looked there were framed photographs of the family.

"How are you doing, Karl?" I asked as I settled across from him on the sofa.

He sat back into one of the recliners, seemingly calm considering his predicament. "I'm good," he answered cheerfully. He had a full mouth just like his mom. Just like his brothers, he had a broad nose and hazel eyes. All four boys had thick, dark hair shaved close to the scalp, making it nearly impossible to tell them apart.

Marco sat next to me. I took my notebook and pen out of my purse as he began the interview. "Alright, Karl. Tell us about your meeting with Detective Corbison."

Karl shook his head in disbelief. "It was like a movie. The detective came in and immediately started grilling me. He said I killed Mr. Schmidt. I planned it. He said he had proof, and witnesses, and there was no reason to deny it."

"How did you respond?" Marco asked.



"I didn't respond. Dave said to keep my mouth shut, so I did. But it was rough. The detective got really angry."

"It's a tactic," I told him. "I was accused of murder once and the same detective was assigned to the case. But I listened to Dave, and you should, too."

"I will, but I'm done with all that. Right? I mean, I didn't kill the guy, so I shouldn't have to go back to the station."

Marco looked at me as if I were the one who should break the bad news.

"Right?" Karl asked with more concern in his voice.

"Not necessarily," I answered. "He might want to question you again."

"Why?"

"It's an ongoing investigation," I told him. "Until we can prove it wasn't you, the detective might try to prove otherwise. Which means there's a chance you'll have to go back in for questioning."

"But Dave will be there. Right?"

"Yes," I said. "Always make sure Dave is with you, and if for some reason he's not, just keep quiet. That's your right. No one can make you talk without your lawyer present. Okay?"

He nodded. "Okay."

"Did Corbison ask you about the incident on Monday morning?" Marco asked.

Karl nodded again, but he let his head drop. His eyes fell to the floor as he answered, "Yeah."

"Will you tell us what happened?"

He kept his head lowered as he answered. "It's embarrassing."

"That's okay," Marco assured him. "Just answer honestly."

"Okay." He looked up and started his version of what had happened. "When I went to my car that morning, Mr. Schmidt came out of his garage with a baseball bat in his hand, swinging it like he was going to hit me."

"What did you do?"

"I went back inside the house."

I finished writing the note, ready for another question, but Marco sat silently. He waited, making sure he had Karl's attention. Then he said, "We need detailed answers, Karl. No need to be embarrassed or ashamed. We need to know exactly what happened. What started this whole thing?"

Karl was still hesitant, but he answered, "He thought we knocked over his garbage cans."

"Who is we?" Marco asked. "You and your brothers?"

"Yes."

"Did you?"

"No," he answered sternly. "We don't mess with Mr. Schmidt. He always accuses us and it's never true. That's why I was so mad when . . ."

"When what?"

"When I came back to my car, my radio antenna was bent in half. I saw that, and I just lost it. I went right over and started yelling, ringing the doorbell and saying stupid stuff. I didn't mean any of it. I was just so mad."

"What did you say?" Marco asked.

"I told him that I would get even. And he should watch his back."

"Is that all you said?" I asked, remembering that Karl had made three, very specific threats. As Karl nodded, I flipped back a page to where I'd written them down. "From what your mother explained, you said, 'Bad things happen to bad people. You'd better watch yourself. I don't get mad, I get even.'"

He lowered his gaze. "Yeah, that's right."

"Why did you threaten him?" Marco asked.

"I was just mad. I don't know. It was a stupid thing to do. I didn't mean it."

"Did you retaliate?"

"No. I went straight to class, then I came home. I had lunch, played a video game, and then my family went to the fireworks show."

"Did you see Mr. Schmidt at any other time that day?" Marco asked.

"No. I didn't see him the rest of the day."

"Did you leave your house Monday evening?"

"Nope. I had a test the next morning, so I was in my room studying the rest of the night."

Marco gave me a moment to catch up, and once I was finished writing, he resumed his questioning. "You mentioned the detective told you there was a witness. Can you explain that?"

"He said there was a witness who saw me arguing with Garth in his garage that night, which is a lie. I didn't leave my house all night."

“Did you hear anyone arguing with Garth that night?” Marco asked.

“I always hear him arguing with his family, but I didn’t that night,” Karl answered. “If there was someone fighting with Garth, I must’ve tuned it out.”

“Who do you think was the witness?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Dave said it could be a lie. There might not be a witness.”

“What about an alibi?” Marco asked. “Can anyone vouch for you being home all evening?”

Karl ran his hand over his eyes and sighed. “No. Not until my family got home from the show.”

“And what time was that?”

“It was around ten-thirty.”

Marco stopped and looked at me. I knew what he was thinking. Karl didn’t have an alibi witness to corroborate his story – an easy target for Detective Corbison.



## CHAPTER FIVE



“Let’s talk about Garth Schmidt,” Marco said. “What do you know about the man?”

“Not much,” Karl answered “I tried to stay away from him. We all pretty much kept our distance.”

“You said you always hear arguing. Tell us about that.”

Karl ran his hand across the top of his shaved head. “He would fight with his wife all the time. I could hear them from my room.”

“What did they fight about?”

“I couldn’t hear what they fought about, but Mr. Schmidt was strict. I know that much. And I know Isabelle didn’t like him, either.”

My ears perked up. “Who’s Isabelle?”

“His daughter – or stepdaughter – I guess.”

I wrote her name down as Marco asked, “What do you know about Isabelle?”

“Nothing really. I mean, I knew her from high school. She was a year younger.”

“Did you ever hear Isabelle fighting with her dad?”

“Yeah. They would fight all the time.”

“Did it ever get violent?”

Karl shook his head. “I don’t think so. She never had bruises or anything. Her dad wouldn’t let her date, so they fought constantly.”

“How do you know he wouldn’t let her date?” Marco asked.

Karl broke eye contact. “I’ve heard things.”

I looked at Marco and we exchanged glances. There seemed to be more to this story. Marco looked back at Karl. “Heard things from who?”

"Why?"

"Because this could be important," he answered.

"How?"

Marco put his hand out. "Let me rephrase the question. Did you ever date Isabelle?"

"No," Karl answered.

"What about one of your brothers?"

"No," he answered again, shaking his head fervently.

Marco waited until I'd finished writing, then asked, "When did the feud start between your families?"

"Mr. Schmidt was always fighting with us, but it got worse when Dad got our cars."

"Tell us about that," Marco said.

Karl took a deep breath and answered, "Dad found these two used cars at a dealership a few months ago, so now we have four cars. There's only one spot in front of our house, so we started parking one of the cars in front of the Schmidt's house. Everything was fine at first, until he got the boat and made his wife park in the street."

"So, you were fighting over parking spots?" Marco asked. "That's what caused this whole feud?"

He shrugged. "Mr. Schmidt and my dad were always arguing about the lawn and the trees hanging into his yard. One time he threw all his lawn clippings onto our driveway. I think that's the only time we ever called the police on him, but the police didn't do anything."

"Speaking of the police," Marco said, "Abby tells me they picked up your father's gun. Is that correct?"

"Yep."

"When was the last time you shot it?"

"I don't know. Months ago."

"And your brothers?"

"Same," Karl answered. "We haven't been to the range in quite a while."

"I heard your brothers were called in to be fingerprinted," Marco continued. "Do you know why?"

"No idea."

Marco leaned forward. "I want you to be completely honest with me now. Did your brothers have any interaction with Schmidt that day?"

"No. It was just me. My brothers left for work early that morning. They didn't even know what happened."

"What about after they came home from work?"

"I mean, I told them about the fight, but we didn't do anything to retaliate."

Marco leaned forward. "Are you sure?"

Karl raised his hands defensively. "I swear. They all left for the fireworks, and I went down to my room to study. That's it. That's all that happened. The next morning, Schmidt was dead."

"He was shot."

"Yeah."

"Did you hear it?"

"No."

"You didn't hear anything that sounded like gunshots the night Schmidt was killed?"

He shook his head and lowered his eyes. "I didn't hear anything until the fireworks started."

"You never heard a gunshot?"

"Nope."

Marco crossed his arms and thought for a moment, then nodded toward my notebook. "Write that down. No gunshots, only fireworks." Then he asked me, "Do we know the time of death?"

"Not yet."

I continued writing as Marco explained, "The murder must've happened sometime during the firework show because a gunshot would've easily been heard throughout the neighborhood." He turned toward Karl. "Are you sure you were here all evening?"

Karl nodded. "I swear."

"And the only loud noises you heard were fireworks?"

"Yes, and you're right. I would've definitely heard a gunshot."

After I finished writing, Marco continued. "Did you watch the fireworks from your bedroom window? Maybe you noticed someone around the Schmidt's house or garage."

"No, I didn't watch. My room is in the basement."

"Does the basement have windows?" Marco asked.

"Yeah, but they're higher than normal windows. I can't really see the backyard. The window faces the Schmidt's house."

Marco sat back. "I'm still interested in this eyewitness. Someone told the detective that you were arguing with Garth. Maybe one of your brothers was arguing with him."

Karl shook his head, his eyes searching ours. "No. I know it wasn't them."

When we didn't respond, Karl continued with sincere desperation in his voice. "You believe me, don't you? I would tell you if someone confronted Garth that night. I promise you that. Whoever said that is lying."

"Why would someone lie about seeing you?" Marco asked him.

"I honestly don't know."

"Who would make up a lie about you?" I asked.

He looked around, at first, shaking his head as if he had no idea, but then he straightened and looked me dead in the eyes. "Old Man Punter. It's got to be him. He's a nasty old –" Karl gulped back a swear word and said, "Nasty old coot, as mom calls him."

"Why would Punter want to set you up?"

Karl looked away, clearly embarrassed. "We haven't always been kind to him."

"The man in the wheelchair?" I asked in shock.

"No, we haven't messed with him since his accident. We wouldn't do that."

"So, you think the man across the street is making up a lie to get you into trouble," Marco clarified.

"It's just a guess," Karl answered. "I don't know for sure."

I wrote down the name, but the story wasn't adding up for me. Apparently, Marco was on the same page. "Why would he make up a lie about you?"

"Because he hates me. He hates all of us. And there's your proof he's lying. He can't tell us apart. He wouldn't know if it was me over there." Karl pointed to the notebook. "Write that down. If Punter mentioned my name specifically, he's lying."

I wrote it down. Karl had a good point. If his parents couldn't even tell the boys apart, it was very likely that no one else could either, especially from across the street.

"I think we've covered everything for now," Marco said as he stood. "We have a lot of information to go over."

"So, what happens next?" Karl asked, walking us to the front door.

Marco answered, "If anyone calls asking questions, like a newspaper or a blogger, don't say a word."

"That's the same thing Dave told me."

"It's good advice," I said. "Keep your head down. Lay low. No posting on social media. No phone calls to friends, anything like that."

"What about class? I have a big test coming up."

"Then go to class and come straight home," I told him.

Marco turned to shake his hand. He pulled him a little closer to say, "If there's anything you can remember that might help, you better let us know."

"I will," he answered. "I swear."

We walked down the front walk, stopping at the sidewalk to glance back around onto the Schmidt's property. The long driveway was empty. The garage behind the house was dark and both garage doors were closed.

"It sounds like Corbison has all the evidence he needs to start an investigation on Karl."

"We'll have to work quickly," Marco said. "Without an alibi, Karl could be in a lot of trouble. Especially with a witness claiming to have seen Karl arguing with the victim."

"What about this witness?" I asked him. "Do you think the neighbor made it all up, like Karl claims?"

"It seems like a good place to start," Marco said. "The old man across the street. He's watching us right now from his window."

I turned to look. There was old man Punter, as the Dombowski's called him, sitting in the window with his binoculars focused directly on us. As soon as Marco and I had both turned to face him, the glare from the binoculars vanished and the curtain dropped. "He was watching the morning I came to pick up Lottie. Do you think he's the eyewitness?"

"There's only one way to find out. Do you have time for a quick chat?"

I checked my watch. "I really want to, but I should be getting back now."



"Then let's make it noon tomorrow," Marco said as we walked to our car. "This guy could have important information."

"Sounds good."

Marco opened the passenger door for me, then circled the car and let himself into the driver's seat. He started the engine, pulling away from the curb as he asked, "Besides the neighbor, who do you think we should interview next?"

I watched the house across the street as we drove away, waiting for the curtain to open back up, but it never did. "I'd like to speak with Garth's wife. His funeral is Friday, with a visitation tomorrow evening. I'll try to schedule a time to talk."

"And I'll call Sean," Marco said. "I want to know as much as possible about the murder before we go any further."

Sergeant Sean Reilly had helped us with our investigations many times, giving us as much information as he was allowed. As a rookie, he'd worked with my dad and considered him to be one of the finest to wear the badge. On the contrary – although Marco and I had become very good friends with Reilly over the years – he considered me a walking trouble magnet.

I usually let Marco contact him, since he was more open to divulge details to a former officer, but as I walked into Bloomers, I could see the Sergeant sitting in the parlor in his police uniform having a cup of coffee with Lottie.

He stood out without trying. He was medium height, mid-forties, with a steady confidence that didn't need showing off. His hazel eyes showed intelligence, his face had strong lines, and his brown hair had a touch of white creeping in at the sides. He'd worked with us on the sly for years, cracking murder cases while staying off homicide detective Al Corbison's radar, always knowing just when to step in and when to fade back.

"I'll let you two speak," Lottie said as she stood. She gave me a hopeful smile and walked back to the sales floor.

I sat down and set my purse on the wrought-iron table. "Marco and I were just talking about you."

Reilly held his coffee cup in front of his mouth and blew the steam. Before he took a drink, he looked at me. "I heard you were trying to break into the crime scene."

"Who told you that?"

He stared me down.

"I did not try to break in. I simply approached the scene with good intentions."

"And dropped my name?"

*Oops.* "I'm sorry. I hope I didn't get you into trouble."

"No, but it's not a good look for me, Abby. What were you hoping to find?"

"I don't know. Some sort of clue."

Before Reilly could admonish me for being perilously curious, I thought of something he might be able to answer. "You know, Karl said something interesting today."

He finished a sip and set the cup down. "I guess I shouldn't be surprised that you're already involved."

"Yes, Reilly. Lottie is practically family. Of course I'm involved. Listen, Karl said he didn't hear any gunshots, only fireworks, which means the time of death is sometime between nine and ten."

"That's almost exactly what the coroner's report shows."

"Unless the victim was killed somewhere else and dumped at the scene."

He shook his head. "It's clear the incident took place inside the garage."

"How so?"

"Evidence suggests there was a struggle. There was a splintered baseball bat next to the victim. And it appears the victim's gun was used against him."

"So, it wasn't premeditated. That's interesting."

"That's how it seems," Reilly responded.

I pulled my notebook from my purse and began to scribble notes as quickly as I could. "Did they find the gun?"

"Not yet."

"What about Herman's gun?"

"Not the same caliber," Reilly answered.

"What about this witness who saw Karl arguing with Garth? Can you give me the name?"

"No, I can't reveal the name."

"What if I guessed the name?"

"I'd just have to stay silent, Abby."

"Then I'll just have to say the name Nelson Punter and hope you don't have any objections."

Reilly picked up his coffee, took a sip, and said nothing.

That's what I thought. The old man across the street was either very confused, or just plain lying. Either way, it wasn't Karl. I wrote down a note. *Who was arguing with Garth before he was murdered?*

"Thanks for your help, Reilly."

"I'll help as much as I can, Abby, but that's not why I'm here. I assume you've heard about the robbery."

"I have."

"I'd like to take a look at your alarm system, if you don't mind."

I slipped my pen and notebook back into my purse. "My dad sent you, didn't he?"

Reilly finished his coffee and smiled.

"Marco installed a new system last year," I told him. "And I set it every night. You can take a look if you want."

Reilly set his cup down and stood. "If Marco installed it, there's no need. Now, I should be going."

"Again, thank you for your help."

He nodded. "See you around, Abby."

I walked him out through the front door while Lottie watched from behind the sales counter, waiting expectantly. "What did Sean have to say? He wouldn't tell me much."

"It sounds like Garth's death wasn't premeditated, and the gun hasn't been found yet. All good signs, I'd say."

"How did it go with Karl?" she inquired.

"He was very helpful," I said. "But . . ."

"But no one can corroborate his whereabouts Monday evening," Lottie finished.

Except she finished the wrong sentence. I was going to tell her about the eyewitness across the street, but I could feel the stress piling up on her shoulders. So, I simply apologized and said, "We're only starting the investigation. Don't lose hope."



Lottie's husband picked her up just before closing time so she could pick up her car from the shop. As it turned out, having her back tires slashed might've been a blessing in disguise, as all four of her tires were in dire need of replacement. Although, it didn't seem like a blessing to her, being that the additional cost of the tires was not within their budget. Before she left, I repeated that she not lose hope, but I felt that my words were falling on deaf ears.

After I'd closed up and set the alarm, I headed up the street to Down the Hatch. I stepped inside and spotted my husband tending bar. I waved to him and made my way through the bar to the last booth, aka the "Salvare Seat." I slid in and glanced over to see Marco hold up his hand to signal five minutes.

Gert was there moments later. "No, don't tell me. Let me guess." She eyed me up and down as though she were reading my aura. "Now, normally you order a Merlot, but today I have you pegged for something else. A new red blend, maybe?"

I smiled at her, not letting on that all I really wanted was an ice-cold water. "That sounds wonderful, Gert. And a glass of water, please."

She gave a wink. "Loud and clear."

"Gert, I've been coming here for over three years now, and I don't think I've ever seen you sit down."

She pushed the pen behind her ear and folded her arms. Gert must've been around seventy years old, but she had just as much stamina as someone half her age. The skin around her mouth wrinkled as she smiled. "I never made a dime sitting on my rear. I'll be right back with your drink."

A few minutes later, two big men walked in, stood in the doorway looking around as if searching for someone, then sauntered over to the bar and sat on two barstools. They immediately began talking loudly to the people around them. Guessing them to be in their early thirties, I noticed both had massive arms and legs and thick necks. One had light brown hair pulled back into a man bun. The other wore his long and stringy down his back. Both sported heavy beards and wore T-shirts with sports logos on them and gray sweatpants with white athletic shoes.

"Here you go," Gert said as she approached. "One ice water. We can save the red blend for later."

I smiled up at her. "You can read my mind."

Marco slid into the booth opposite me and grabbed the wine list. "We have a new red blend if you want to try it."

"I'll give you two a moment to decide what you want," Gert said and scurried off.

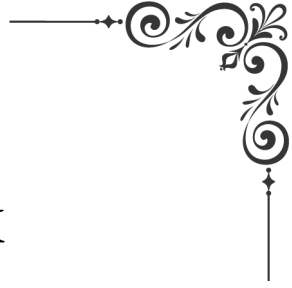
Loud laughter erupted at the bar. I glanced around and saw one of the men slapping someone on the back. "Who are the new guys?" I asked Marco.

"The Oberle brothers. Trevor and Tucker. Their father bought Ascott's shoe store, so they've been coming into the bar a lot more recently"

"I sense trouble, Marco."

"I can handle trouble, Sunshine."

"Are you calling me a liar?" one of the Oberle brothers yelled, shoving off his barstool. He looked ready to throw a punch at one of the patrons.



## CHAPTER SIX



Marco immediately slid out of the booth and walked over to the two burly men. I watched as he talked to them for a few minutes, then came back.

“What did you say?” I asked.

“I told them if they started a fight they’d have to leave and wouldn’t be welcome back.”

“Nice call, bro,” Rafe said, sliding in beside me. “How’s it going, hot stuff?”

“Always better when you’re here,” I retorted with a nudge to his arm.

Rafe pulled a handful of lottery tickets out of his shirt pocket and began using a coin to scratch them off. “Wish me luck.”

“Since when did you start playing the lottery?” I asked.

“Couple days ago,” he answered as he quickly scratched his way through several tickets. “I’m on a roll! Look. I won ten bucks.”

“And how much did you have to spend in order to win that?” Marco asked.

Rafe gave him a dirty look. “I’ll win big eventually. I just have to even the odds.”

Marco scoffed. “Seriously?”

“You can see the odds play out right here,” Rafe explained. “One out of five tickets is a winner. So, I just have to buy more tickets and even the odds. It’s all about the math.”

“You were terrible at math,” Marco said.

“Whatever.” Rafe scooted out of the bar. “You’ll be sorry when I strike it rich. The Powerball is on tonight at eleven. Keep your fingers crossed.”

After Rafe walked away, Marco shook his head. "This isn't going to end well."

"He'll get tired of losing eventually. Let him have some fun."

"Anything happen today?"

"Reilly was at Bloomers when I got back. He verified the time of death was most likely during the fireworks."

"Perfect. Did he say anything else?"

"Herman's gun was tested, and it's not the same caliber. Reilly thinks there was a struggle for Schmidt's gun, which means that his death wasn't premeditated."

"So, it was probably the wife," Marco suggested.

"Why do you say that?"

"Who else would have access to his gun?"

"I guess we'll find out when we talk to her," I told him.



Marco was staying late to update the security at Down the Hatch. So, I left after dinner and returned home to see an unfamiliar car parked across the street. In front of the *For Sale* sign stood a middle-aged couple taking pictures of the house. As soon as they saw me pull into the garage, they came hurrying across the street and up the driveway.

"Hello," the woman said before I had fully exited my car. "We're looking at the house across the street and would like to ask you a question. Do you have time?"

"Sure," I answered as I ushered them out of my garage.

"Do neighbors mind if cars park in front of their houses?" the man asked.

"Not that I'm aware of. Why?"

"It's just that we hold meetings once a week and the driveway isn't that long, so people would have to park on the street."

"How many cars are you talking about?"

"Oh, I'd say thirty or so," the man answered with a shrug.

Thirty cars parked along the street every week? I looked at the man with wide eyes and he looked at me. "It's only for a few hours."

"Maybe you could join us," the woman offered. "We meet every Sunday when the clock strikes seven."

"In the morning?"

"Oh, by the way, what kind of watch do you wear?"

"Why?"

The realtor pulled up in a white sedan and got out of her car. "Sorry I'm late," she called.

"It's about time," the woman answered. She turned back to me. "Thanks for your help. Maybe we'll see you around."

I watched them walk away in silence. Then, as I turned to go into the garage I murmured, "Please, not them."



**T***hursday, May 30<sup>th</sup>*

When I arrived at Bloomers, Grace and Rosa were already in the coffee parlor having their morning coffee. Grace immediately rose to pour me a cup.

A few minutes later, Lottie came in. "I have to thank you for talking with Karl yesterday. He seems much more relaxed now. I'm even feeling a little better, too. I actually slept last night. Lord knows, I needed it."

Rosa stood as the back door buzzed loudly throughout the back room. "That must be our new order. I will get it, and I will check for damages before accepting the delivery."

"Thanks, Rosa."

Grace poured Lottie a cup of coffee and left the pot at the table. "This should put a pep in your step."

"I'm glad you're feeling better," I told Lottie. "I think you'll also be happy to know Marco and I are going to speak with your neighbor at noon today."

"Mrs. Schmidt?"

"No, the neighbor across the street."

"Nelson Punter?"

"That's him."

"Why?"

"He told the police he saw Karl outside of Garth Schmidt's garage the night he was killed."



"It wasn't Karl. I can assure you of that."

"I know. That's why we're going to see him. We need to debunk his eyewitness account."

"Good luck with that," Lottie said with a roll of her eyes.

"Why do you say that?"

"He is one *nasty* man. You're going to need all the luck you can get."

Rosa came back happy to announce that the delivery was undamaged, so we moved on to the day's business. "Any more funeral orders come in?" I asked.

"No," Rosa answered. "Just the two that came in yesterday. And one of those was from Mr. Schmidt's wife."

Lottie took a drink of coffee. "You'd think the people he worked with would send something."

"It is possible," Rosa replied. "The second order is from A-One Construction. Maybe that is where he worked."

"It's going to be embarrassing taking just two floral arrangements to the funeral home," I said. "Hopefully we'll get some more orders this morning."



After we opened the shop for the day, Rosa and I spent the morning making general arrangements to display in the sales room. Our most popular basic bouquets were Roses, Lilies, and Mums. Along with those, I made a special arrangement to give to the Punters. I had honed the art of creating sizeable arrangements that looked extravagant and expensive, while using much of the leftover stock we had lying around. By the time I had finished the Punter's arrangement, only one new order had come in for Garth's funeral, and it was signed, *Dad*.

I took my purse off the back of my desk chair, grabbed the arrangement from the worktable, and stepped through the purple curtain to see Lottie dusting off the shelves in the armoire. While waiting for Marco, I asked her for more information. "What do you know about the Punters?"

She set the duster down and placed her hands on her hips, looking at me sideways. "You know, we've lived across the street from the Punters for almost fifteen years, and I hardly know them. Isn't that terrible?"

"Do they keep to themselves?"

"Mostly, they do. We've tried to get to know them over the years, but I'll tell you what, that man is something else. We've learned to keep our distance."

"What about his wife?"

"The only thing I really know is that Mrs. Punter has been tasked with all the work around the house since her husband's accident. She mows the grass in the summer, shovels the driveway in the winter, and goes grocery shopping once a week."

"That's terrible. She shouldn't have to do all that by herself."

"Don't I know it. But what can you do? I don't know how many times Herman has offered to help, but that horrible husband of hers won't hear of it."

"There must be something we can do. Maybe Marco can talk some sense into him."

Lottie scoffed. "Good luck with that. Ever since his accident, he's been a grouch of the first order."

"When was the accident?" I asked. "What do you know about it?"

"I don't know what happened, but he's been in a wheelchair for at least ten years now."

"Here's Marco. Thanks for the advice, Lottie. I'll let you know how it goes."

"You might want to take off your apron first."

Marco picked me up out front and we headed to Lottie's neighborhood. I filled him in on what little information I'd gathered from Lottie, also explaining how she had nothing but bad things to say about Nelson Punter, especially how he treats his wife.

"Maybe she likes to stay active," Marco suggested.

I glanced at him. "Staying active is one thing, but shoveling the driveway in the dead of winter is something else altogether. It's not right."

"I agree, but we're not here for marital counseling. Detective Corbison has an eyewitness who claims to have seen Karl Dombowski arguing with Garth just before his murder. We need to know if Nelson was that eyewitness, and if he was, we need to know exactly what he saw."

We parked in the street across from Lottie's house, and there was Nelson Punter, watching from his picture window.

I got out of the car and took the arrangement from the back seat, then carried it to his front door. Marco rang the doorbell, and it was soon answered by an older woman wearing a floral print dress and an apron, looking like she'd just stepped out of a photo from the 1950s. Her light gray hair was pulled into a tight bun above her head, and she wore large, oval glasses with thick lenses.

"Mrs. Punter?" I asked. "I'm Abby Knight Salvare. I own Bloomers Flower Shop. We brought you and your husband these flowers."

She covered her open mouth with her hand. "Oh, my! They're beautiful. Who sent them?"

"They're from us," I said. "We're investigating the death of your neighbor and thought maybe your husband had witnessed something."

"Oh, I'm not sure if . . . um . . . maybe this isn't the best –"

"Who's that?" came a gruff, rasping voice.

Mrs. Punter stepped away as the door swung open and Nelson wheeled himself in front of the entrance. "What do you want?"

"Nelson, we have visitors," his wife said.

"I can see that for myself," he snapped. Nelson was dressed in a faded, blue robe, opened in the middle exposing a dirty, ragged tank top. His white hair was stringy, uncombed, the whisps atop his head swaying in the breeze. With a scowl he demanded, "Who are you?"

"I'm Abby Salvare and this is my husband, Marco. I own Bloomers Flower Shop, and I've brought you and your wife a lovely bouquet –"

"What do you want?" he barked again.

Marco stepped forward. "We're investigating the death of Garth Schmidt. I own a private investigating company, and we'd like to ask you some questions."

"Please," his wife said, "come in and have a seat."

"They don't need to come in. I got nothing to say."

"Nelson," his wife chided. "Be kind." To us she said, "Come in."

"Thanks," I said, but as I stepped forward, Nelson refused to move from the entryway. "We promise not to keep you long."

"I don't know nothing about nothing," he groused.

"That's not true," Marco replied. "We know you talked to Detective Corbison."

"So what?"

"So, we'd like to know what you talked about."

Nelson crossed his arms and squinted as he answered, "We talked about all kinds of stuff."

I could tell by the way Marco inhaled slowly that he was getting annoyed. He squinted back at the man, not saying a word, reminding me of Clint Eastwood in one of his spaghetti westerns. They had a short-lived, wild west standoff in the middle of the Punter's front porch until the old man broke eye contact and looked down at his outstretched palm, patiently signaling his request.

Marco didn't respond. He just stood there, staring him down with narrowed eyes.

"Mr. Punter," I asked. "What would you like in return for your cooperation?"

"Money," the man answered before I could fully finish my question.

Marco was the master of keeping his cool, which was the complete opposite of me. My first instinct was to slap Punter's hand and tell him to buzz off. Especially once the old man sat back in his wheelchair with a cocky grin on his face. The standoff lasted only a few seconds before Marco reached into his back pocket begrudgingly, pulling out his wallet and glancing inside. "How much do you want?"

"How much you got?"

"Fifty," he answered as he pulled out several bills.

Old man Punter shifted himself in his wheelchair and puckered his whiskered lips. "That might buy you one answer."

At that, Marco retracted the cash. "No deal."

Nelson quickly raised his hand to stop him. "But I'm a generous man. Maybe we could negotiate."

"I'll give you ten dollars per answer. That's five answers altogether."

Punter reached out aggressively. "Hand it over then."

Marco gave him the money and Nelson rolled his chair out of the entrance. With a pompous smile, he nodded toward the living room. We entered the house and sat on a golden-brown sofa, clad with delicate doilies

on the arms and headrests. The furniture looked as though it too had come straight out of the fifties. There were hand-knit decorations on the end tables, and what looked to be homemade paintings hanging on the wall.

One of the decorations was a cross-stitched poem in a wooden frame. I picked up the piece and held it for Mrs. Punter to see, who was standing near the entrance to the kitchen. "Did you make this?"

Her eyes twinkled as she stepped forward and nodded. "I wrote the poem, too. Do you like it?"

"You wrote this? I love it."

She nodded, then looked at her husband, who gave her an evil glare. The twinkle faded instantly, and her voice was softer as she asked, "Would you care for something to drink?"

"We have business, woman. Leave us alone." Nelson parked his wheelchair on the opposite side of the coffee table. "Okay, mister, what do you want to know?"

I couldn't help but feel for the woman as she lowered her head and walked into the kitchen. As badly as I wanted to say something, Marco was right. We weren't here to help her. Not just then. But there was no way I was going to let this go. Mr. Punter had just made a serious enemy. I turned my attention toward the wicked old man as Marco began his questioning.

"Did you see the interaction between Karl and Mr. Schmidt the day he was killed?"

I held my pen and notebook at the ready as Nelson answered, "As I recollect, there was a little incident that morning. Seems those no-good kids knocked over his garbage cans again." Nelson chuckled to himself. "Boy, does he hate when that happens. The man came out with a baseball bat, swinging and cursing."

"What happened next?"

"Schmidt stomped off into his house and the boy followed. Stood on the porch for some time then left." Nelson shook his head. "Those boys are scoundrels. They deserve what punishment they get."

"Nelson," his wife scolded as she entered the room. "Be kind."

"Stay out of it, Helen."

She looked at me for a moment, as if she wanted to say something, but Nelson turned in his chair. "I said stay out of it."

Once again, Mrs. Punter left the room defeated. At that point, I wanted to do more than slap his hand. I could feel my ears getting hot, and my hand gripping the pen tightly. Nelson dominated his wife in a manner which I found unbearably repulsive. It was hard to concentrate as Marco continued.

"Did you see one of the boys arguing with Garth near his garage later that day?"

Nelson lifted his chin. "I did, and then I seen him walking away from the garage looking nervous. I'd say that's when he shot Schmidt."

My stomach plummeted. "Did you hear a gunshot?"

"Nope, but my TV was on, so I wouldn't have heard it."

"What time was this?" Marco asked.

"It was before my show, so maybe seven-thirty."

Marco looked at me, then at my notepad. I knew what he wanted me to write, and I nodded. Not only did Nelson admit he didn't hear the shot fired, he even gave a specific time, seven-thirty, just about two hours before the fireworks started. Two hours before Garth was killed.

"Did you see anyone else visit Schmidt's house Monday?" Marco asked. "Day or evening?"

"That seems to be question number six," Nelson said as he held out his hand.

Marco pulled out his wallet to show Nelson that it was empty. I got my wallet out and checked but only had several one-dollar bills and a five. "Sorry," I said to Marco. "I only have eight."

Nelson reached out for the money. "I'll give you a discount. You got one more question."

At that moment, Mrs. Punter stepped into the room. "I've made tea if anyone is interested?"

"Nothing for me, thank you," I said.

Annoyed, Nelson slapped the armrest of his wheelchair and cranked his neck. "No one's talking to you, woman. Get."

"Excuse me," I said firmly. "I'm talking to her."

"I said get! And you all might as well get, too."

Cantankerous old *coot*. I had to restrain myself from reaching across the coffee table and throttling him.

Marco rose, so I followed suit. "Final question," Marco said. "Did you see anyone else visit the Schmidt's house?"

Nelson merely shrugged. "I sure did. I saw a lot of things that night. Why don't you come back when you can afford it."

I followed Marco to the door, but before we could leave, Punter said, "And by the way, my price just doubled."



"I can't even read my notes; my hand was shaking so badly."

Marco had just pulled out onto the street while I tried to review my angry scribbles. "I figured you were upset." He reached over to take my hand. "We've dealt with a whole lot of scumbags, but this guy takes the cake. He really needs to be taught some manners."

"I'm glad you agree."

"For now," Marco said, "let's keep our eye on the ball. We can deal with Punter later. What did you think about his answers?"

"If what Nelson said is true, his eyewitness account should be dismissed. He has no proof that Karl was the one who killed Garth. I need to talk to Detective Corbison."

Marco glanced at me for a split second. "You?"

"Or us," I answered. "He usually more responsive when you're there."

"I think we should talk to Garth's wife before we attempt a meeting with Corbison. We need more information: Possible suspects, enemies. If anyone's going to have the full story, it's her."

"Good point. I'll be dropping off funeral arrangements this afternoon. I hope she's there."



## CHAPTER SEVEN



Maxwell and Delilah Dove owned *Happy Dreams* funeral home, a huge, Victorian, cream-colored clapboard house with dark green and light green trim and accents of mauve – a style commonly known as a Painted Lady. It had a reception area in front and two parlors, A and B, on each side. A curving staircase at the right rear of the foyer lead upstairs to the family's living area, which I'd heard was quite spacious. The basement was where the bodies were prepared.

I pulled the Bloomers van around back and parked in the alley where I was met by Maxwell. "You'll be in Parlor B," he told me, as I carried in one of the arrangements through the back door. Max was a slightly built man with thinning brown hair, a narrow face, and a wide, warm smile. He always wore a red bow tie and a three-piece suit.

His wife, Delilah, was a petite, genteel, Southern lady with a soft-spoken voice and impeccable manners. "Good afternoon, sweetheart," she said kindly. "Need any help?"

I stopped at the reception, resting the large arrangement on the counter, and looked around to make sure no one could overhear. "I only have three to bring in. Have you had any more deliveries?"

Discreetly, Delilah lowered her head and whispered, "Not a single one. Sad, isn't it?"

Outside of Parlor B, I saw a young woman with long, stringy, golden blond hair standing in front of the closed doors, hunched over her cell phone. Her face was long and lean, with high cheek bones and thin lips. She was dressed all in black, but not formally. She wore a black t-shirt that hung past her hips and her dark jeans were ripped and tattered at the hem. She



wasn't tall, but tall enough that she had to look down at me while giving me the once over. "Are you family?"

"No, I'm –"

"Family only."

"I'm the florist. I'm here to make a delivery."

"Oh." She pushed the door open with her foot then stepped backward into the parlor, allowing just enough space to let me through. She then brushed past me, where I watched her walk up to the front row and sit down beside a woman dressed in black. The girl draped her arm around the woman, who was crying silently.

I hauled the first arrangement up the aisle to the casket, its polished wood gleaming under the soft lights. Maxwell followed with the second, setting it opposite mine. By the time I returned with the final piece, a tall, elderly man with a white beard and slicked-back hair stood at the back of the room. Fatigue etched his wrinkled, pale face—dark circles framed bloodshot eyes—but he held a faint, kind smile as I approached.

"Is that one from me?" he asked, pointing to the final arrangement. "It's lovely."

We stood side by side, facing forward, the room empty except for the two grieving women ahead.

"Are you Garth's father?"

"I am."

"I'm so sorry for your loss."

He inhaled deeply, exhaling a slow, steady breath. We lingered in silence, staring ahead. The crying woman in the front row had to be Garth's wife, Celeste. The girl, then, was her daughter, Isabelle.

Moments later, the pastor slipped in, whispering something to Celeste. Heads swiveled toward me, their gazes sharp and unspoken. The air thickened.

"Would you mind if we stepped outside?" I asked the man quietly.

He nodded, holding the parlor door for me.

"I'm sorry to bother you," I began once we were in the lobby, "but I have a favor to ask."

His wrinkled brow furrowed, though his tone stayed even. "What's that?"

"I'd like to speak with Celeste."

"Now?"

"No, I'd like to arrange a time."

"May I ask why?"

"My husband and I are private investigators. We're looking into the events this past Monday. I'm sorry. I know the timing's awful, but it's very important."

"Are you working with the police?" he asked hesitantly.

"We were hired privately by someone close to the deceased."

"Did Celeste hire you?"

"I'm afraid I can't say who hired us, but I can assure you that we all want the same thing."

"Why not let the police handle it?"

"Sometimes we can work a little faster."

It took a few moments before the man's body language changed. His stiff frame loosened a bit. "Okay."

I fished a Bloomers card from my purse, scribbling my cell number on the back. "Will you let her know?"

He took the card, nodding. "I will."



*Friday, May 31<sup>st</sup>*

"Another store was robbed," Marco told me the next morning. "Wee Ones Boutique." He showed me the front page of the newspaper, with a headline that read: **ROBBERS HIT SECOND SHOP.**

"That's concerning," I said, scanning the page. "Any leads?"

"Nada." He popped a bagel into the toaster oven. "No prints, no DNA. And—surprise, surprise—no security system."

I leaned against the island, eyes tracing the article. "Someone's scoping these places out, targeting the defenseless ones." I glanced up. "I need to warn Lottie and Grace to keep an eye out for sketchy customers."

"If you see anything, let me know."

"Tonight will be fun at the country club," I said. "I'm sure everyone will be asking about the robberies."

"I almost forgot about dinner at the club." The toaster popped and Marco pulled out cream cheese from the fridge. "I'll try to stay hungry."



When I arrived at Bloomers, all three ladies were seated in the parlor having their coffee and Lottie had the day's newspaper laid out on the table. Before I had the opportunity to warn the ladies, Grace stood, folding her hands in front of her, posture stiff. "Like the old saying: 'Thieves don't plot, they pounce'; I'm sure someone was just taking advantage of an easy mark."

"Then we have nothing to fear," I told them. "Our security system is top notch, and I set the alarm every night. Just be on the lookout for suspicious customers."

At nine o'clock, I unlocked the door and turned the sign to "open". Within minutes, people began to trickle in, heading for the parlor. With Grace occupied, Lottie began straightening shelves in the shop and Rosa and I went to the workroom to begin working on orders. By ten o'clock, I had created three big arrangements for delivery that afternoon.

I had no sooner stored the last arrangement in the walk-in cooler when the purple curtain parted, and a copper head emerged. "Anyone home?" Jillian asked.

She stepped through the curtain carrying a giant white leather tote bag. She had on a pair of royal blue pants and a white silk blouse with white flats. She carefully set her tote on the floor next to one of the wooden stools, then came over to give me a hug.

"Surprise!" she said. "I'm here. Hello, Rosa."

"*Hola*, Jillian. How are you?"

"I'm just fine," she answered. "And I suppose you're both wondering what I'm here for."

"It did cross my mind," I said.

She pressed her hands together. "Today is your lucky day, Abs. You're getting a makeover!"

"I don't want a makeover, Jill. I like my natural look."

"Where's your sense of adventure? You'll be gorgeous, cuz. I promise."

"Forget it. Tonight is country club night, and I'm not going all made up."

Jillian stamped her foot.

When she resorted to temper tantrums, I knew she was desperate. Still, I wasn't about to show up at the country club with a dramatic new look. I'd never hear the end of it from my brothers. "No, Jill."

Rosa raised her hand. "I will do it."

"Are you sure?" I asked, my expression warning her to reconsider.

She glanced at me, her voice low but biting. "How could you let her down like that? Look at that frown? Family doesn't get to say no. You're supposed to do anything to help each other out." She turned toward my cousin. "Jillian, *mi amor*, I am ready for a new look. Can you do that for me?"

"Can I?" Jillian ran over and gave her a hug. "Of *course*, I can. Thank you." She hurried back over to where she had left her tote bag and opened it up, pulling out bottles, tubes, and small plastic containers. "Oh, this will be so much fun! Come sit over on this stool and we'll get started."

Rosa looked at me, eyebrow raised. "See how happy it makes her? Just a small gesture makes the whole difference."

"Good for you, Rosa," I responded kindly, knowing how badly this was going to turn out. "We've got only a few orders left. I'll work on those while you –"

"Get gorgeous!" Jillian finished.

I went to the first cooler to pull the flowers for my next arrangement and when I came out, Rosa was sitting on the stool with a large white towel draped around her shoulders. Jillian was humming happily as she applied what appeared to be a face primer.

Fifteen minutes later, I was wrapping up the arrangement for delivery and Jillian was applying the finishing touch to Rosa's face – a shockingly bright red lipstick. Rosa's large brown eyes had green eyeshadow on the lids – dark brown in the crease – and her eyes were lined with heavy black eyeliner, top and bottom. Her cheeks were so rosy it looked like she had a fever.

I stored the arrangement in the second cooler and came out to find Rosa studying her reflection in a hand mirror.

"How's that for a new look?" Jillian asked, hovering. "What do you think?"

"It is . . ." Rosa paused while she considered her answer, then repeated herself more slowly. "It . . . is . . ."

"Stunning, right?" Jillian prompted.

Rosa held the mirror closer to examine her eyeliner. "I am certainly stunned," she finally replied.

Jillian took out her cell phone and pulled up the camera. "Let me get some photos to show my supervisor."

"Photos?" Rosa asked.

While Jillian set the scene, Rosa shot me a desperate look. I smiled and continued to work on my arrangement. "See how happy you've made her?"

Jillian posed Rosa and snapped at least a dozen photos, then slid her phone back into her pocket. "Now it's your turn," she said to me.

"Not going to happen."

"Fine." She put the bag over her arm and walked over to the curtain. "But I still need to practice my sales technique at some point."

"And when might that be?"

"Soon, but for now, I have to pick up some more supplies and then I have to get ready for dinner at the country club."

"Jillian, dinner isn't for another seven hours."

She checked her watch. "You're right. I better get moving. See you later!"

As soon as Jillian was gone, Rosa jumped off the stool and headed toward the bathroom. "I cannot go home looking like this. I will scare my son!"



The rest of the afternoon was quiet. No new orders had come in, so Rosa and I spent our time sorting supplies and organizing the shelves in the workroom. Shortly before three, I got a call from Marco. "Hey, Sunshine, I just got off the phone with Sergeant Reilly. He wanted to give us a heads up. Detective Corbison hauled someone in for questioning this morning. He was questioned for four hours and let go. Apparently, he and Mr. Schmidt had an altercation about a week before his murder."

"Four hours? Corbison must've thought he was good for it."

"Apparently not good enough," Marco said. "He didn't have enough evidence to hold the guy, but Dave wants us to check out his alibi."

"What's his name? Maybe I can find out where he works."

"Already on it. His name is Lex Booth, and he's currently employed with the Department of Streets and Sanitation. I just spoke with someone at the department and found out that Booth is at a work site on the north side of town. If you're not busy, we can go talk to him now."

"You're amazing. I'll let the ladies know I'll be gone for an hour. Can you meet me out front?"

"Of course. I'll be outside in five minutes."

At three o'clock, I walked out the front door, hopped into Marco's silver Prius, and we headed north.

"So," I started, "what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking about dinner at the country club tonight," he answered. "I'm so hungry."

I pulled out my notepad and pen. "Didn't you have lunch?"

"I spent the afternoon installing a security system at Windows on the Square. And I had two more calls from downtown merchants who want to update their alarm systems. These robberies really have everyone on edge. But I'll tell you what, we're going to end up making a small fortune installing security systems." He sped up onto the highway. "Speaking of that," he added, "have you tested your alarm recently?"

"I set the alarm every night."

"Yeah, but have you tested it?"

I looked at him, puzzled. "No."

"Then how do you know it works?"

"Marco, why would I assume it doesn't work?"

"You should be testing it once in a while."

"Okay, well, that's good to know. How do I test it?"

He glanced at me with a grin. "You set the alarm and open the back door. If the police show up, it's working."

I sat in brooding silence for a few seconds, staring at my husband while he sat face forward, watching the road.

Finally, he cracked a smile. "I'm kidding. You have about thirty seconds before the alarm goes off. If the alarm is working, you'll hear a set of beeps."

"Then what?"

"Then you run."

"You're funny."

"Then you close the door and set the alarm again. It's easy."

"Okay, smarty pants," I said, changing the subject, "let's talk about Lex Booth. Where do we start?"

"Okay. I'd like to start with his alibi. Apparently, he was at the fireworks show with his family when Garth was killed. That was enough for Corbison to let him go, but Dave thinks we should look deeper."

I wrote it down.

"And I'd like to find out more about this altercation between him and Garth. Hopefully, he'll be reasonable and cooperate. Then we can stop for a sandwich before I go back to Windows on the Square."

"You really are hungry, huh?"

"Starving."

Fifteen minutes later, Marco turned off the main road into a subdivision built around a small lake. We circled the lake and came across two large trucks with lettering on the sides that read: *New Chapel Dept. of Sanitation*. We parked the car and spotted several men digging up the ground, with a large open sewer pipe exposed nearby. We parked near the trucks and walked toward the workers.

"Lex Booth?" Marco called, as we drew closer.

One of the men, a tall, sturdily built man in a blue jumpsuit and tan work boots, straightened. "Who wants to know?"

"I'm Marco Salvare of the Salvare Detective Agency, and this is my partner, Abby."

The man was even taller up close and extremely handsome, with a strong jaw line, dark features, and broad, muscular shoulders. He stood there for a moment before giving a sly smile. "Detective agency?"

"We just have a few questions for you," Marco reiterated.

"Not for me you don't." The man turned to his crew and said a few words. They laughed, then he walked over to the sewer pipe and leaned over the circular opening. "Hey, Lex. You have visitors."

After a few seconds, a man climbed up from the open sewer pipe wearing rubber overalls, thick goggles, and heavy rubber gloves. He stepped up onto the pavement and made his way over to us. Along with him came a smell so pungent, it greeted us before he could.

Even the workers backed up until they were out of earshot, or *noseshot*, if that's a thing.

Lex removed the goggles first, revealing a round, red face with thick, patchy stubble. Inside his nostrils were what looked like rolled up cotton balls. He removed his gloves next, tossing them onto the grass a few feet away. He then pulled a handkerchief from his chest pocket and wiped his hands. "You want to see me?"

"My name is Marco, and this is my partner, Abby –"

A partner who suddenly wished she'd stayed at Bloomers.

"— We're private investigators looking into the death of Garth Schmidt."

An angry look came across Lex's face. "I already spoke to the police. They let me go." His voice was low-pitched but the cotton inside his nose made him sound like he had a head cold. "I have nothing to say to you."

"The thing is, Mr. Booth," Marco started, "we've been asked to look deeper into your alibi."

He crossed his arms, staring at the ground, his every move accompanied by a putrid waft of air. Finally, he looked up. "What about my alibi? I was at the fireworks with my wife and my kids."

"Did anyone else see you there?" Marco asked.

He looked away for a moment, then said, "Why?"

The smell from the sewer was starting to make me nauseous. I couldn't take it anymore. "Can we step over here?" I asked and backed away from the sewer, hoping that would help.

"We can stand anywhere you want. It won't make a difference." Lex pulled a small plastic packet from his chest pocket. "Here. Try these."

I inspected the plastic wrapped packet and saw cotton plugs inside. I pictured myself with white plugs sticking out of my nostrils and shook my head. "That's okay. Thanks anyway."

"As far as the alibi," Marco continued, "In most cases, the wife will vouch for the husband. I'd hate to involve your kids in this process, so I was hoping you'd have someone besides your wife who can corroborate your story."

Lex's eyes shifted back and forth, as though he were thinking. Then, as if a lightbulb went off, he reached inside his rubber overalls. "Here," he said impatiently. "Look here. I have a picture on my phone."



As Lex approached with the phone, I desperately tried to breathe through my mouth. But it was no use. The smell was too overpowering. I looked at Marco, who seemed unbothered by the stench. He leaned in to check the photo as I moved back and said, "I'm so sorry, but I will take those nose plugs, please."

Lex laughed humorlessly as he reached for the plastic packet, then looked at Marco. "What about you, tough guy? You need some?"

"I'm fine," he said stoically, but as he answered, I could see a small quiver in his nostrils.

He was definitely not fine.

After fitting the cotton plugs firmly inside my nostrils, I felt slightly better and could finally concentrate. I balanced my notepad on my palm as Lex continued.

"Here, you can see I'm at the high school with my family. You can see the high school logo right in the back there." He took his phone away. "Happy? Is that enough for you? You can leave my kids out of it."

"That'll do for now," Marco answered. "What about earlier in the evening?"

"What about it?"

"We have an eyewitness who claims to have seen someone arguing with Mr. Schmidt outside of his garage around seven-thirty."

He brushed off the question, looking away as he answered, "Wasn't me."

"Did you stop by Mr. Schmidt's house at any time before going to the fireworks?"

"No."

"What about after?"

"No. Why would I do that?"

Marco let the question hang, giving Lex a few seconds to stew in the silence. Then my husband cleared his throat, and his nose started twitching like Tabitha from *Bewitched* as the sewer stench clawed at him again. How much longer could he stand it? "What about the altercation at the bar?" Marco finally asked.

Lex slipped the phone into his pocket. "I explained all this to the detective. I clocked Schmidt in the mouth. He deserved it. Big deal."

"Why did he deserve it?"

"Because the rat got me fired from my job. He made up a lie, got me fired, and now here I am, up to my elbows in raw sewage. He ruined my life. So, I saw him at a bar, and I punched him square in the nose. He deserved it, like I said. And I tell you what. I'm glad he's dead."

I scribbled notes as fast as I could.

"That's a little extreme, don't you think?" Marco asked.

Lex glared at my husband with alarming fury behind his eyes. "You didn't know this guy. He was a lunatic. He thought I was having an affair with his wife. He showed up one day with his gun hanging outside of his shirt. He always carried that *stupid* gun. He liked to show it off, to scare people. But that day he pulled the gun out like he was inspecting it. He told me to stay away from his wife, and, not in so many words, threatened to shoot me if I didn't."

"Were you having an affair with his wife?"

At first, Lex shook his head, not so much answering the question, but rather indicating that he didn't *want* to answer the question. Finally, he looked at the ground and said, "Celeste Schmidt is a good woman. She's got a good heart. The things she must have endured living with that lunatic . . ." He continued looking down at the ground for a moment before smiling to himself and repeating the phrase, "I'm glad he's dead."

"I think that'll do it," Marco said. "Thank you for talking with us."

"That'll do it? What, you got all the evidence you need to put me away?"

"I'll be honest," Marco answered. "Telling us you're glad he's dead isn't helping."

"You're wasting your time on me, tough guy. I didn't do it. But whoever did probably had a damn good reason. Just remember that."

"We will, Mr. Booth. Have a good day."

As Lex walked back to the open sewer, he cackled loudly and said, "A good day. Yeah, right."

I took the nose plugs out as we headed for the car. "Oh my God, Marco, that smell made me sick!"

"You just have to ignore the smell, Sunshine. That's all."

I laughed aloud. "Oh, is that all?" I knew he was lying, but I let it be. I slid into the Prius and buckled up. As we started for home, I said, "Do you believe him?"

"Lex has a good alibi, but I don't like the fact that he seemed happy Garth was dead."

"Well, you didn't meet Garth. From the unfortunate few minutes I had to witness his behavior, I'd say Lex is probably not the only person who feels that way."

"When I asked him about the eyewitness, he seemed to get nervous. Did you notice that?"

"I did," I answered. "And he never answered about his relationship with Celeste. Do you think they were having an affair?"

"I don't know, but for now, Lex joins her on the suspect list."

"Did you notice what Lex said about Garth's gun? He said he always carried it and liked to scare people with it. What if he was carrying the gun the night he was killed?"

Marco thought for a second. "Someone took his gun and used it on him."

"Yes, I think that's exactly what happened. Reilly said there was a struggle, and a baseball bat lying next to the body. It could be that Lex had an argument with Garth in the garage and Garth pulled the gun."

"That's a good theory. But it could've been Celeste, as well. Have you heard back from her?"

I pulled my phone from my purse and checked. "Nope. No calls. No texts."

"We need to speak with her very soon."

"I know, Marco. I'm not sure what else to do. Today is the funeral. I'm not going to bother her today."

"Then tomorrow we need to schedule an interview with her. Hopefully she can clear up a lot of questions."

"Okay," I said. "I'll keep trying." As we drove closer to town, I spotted a fast-food place. "We can stop there if you still want some food."

"I can wait for dinner."

"Are you sure? They have the best fried egg sandwiches."

Instead of answering, he put his hand over his mouth as his cheeks paled.

I *knew* it.



## CHAPTER EIGHT



At five o'clock, I locked up after the ladies and set the alarm. I stood at the back door for a moment, deciding whether or not to test the alarm. "I swear, if Marco is messing with me," I said under my breath.

I unlocked the back door and pressed my hip against the lever. The alarm started beeping immediately, and a small panic ran up my spine. I quickly entered the code, which turned the system off. Upon locking the door, I set the alarm and breathed a sigh of relief. Everything was in working order.

I locked up and walked to my car parked in the public parking lot one block over. Marco had taken the evening off, so he met me at home to get ready for our dinner at the country club. I donned a light blue silk shirt, black slacks, and black flats, nothing fancy but enough to pass inspection from my sisters-in-law, both of whom dressed to the nines for dinner at the club. I had never been comfortable there, preferring more casual restaurants, but the rest of my family relished it.

Marco looked sexy, as always, in a tan blazer, white shirt open at the neck, and brown slacks.

"Have you regained your appetite, tough guy?" I asked, as I stood in front of the bathroom mirror to give my lips a light coat of lip gloss.

"Barely," he answered.

On the drive to dinner, Marco asked, "Do you have your notebook?"

Luckily, I always kept my notebook in my purse. Marco wanted to go over our interview with Lex, so I found the page and read the notes aloud.

"You know what I'm curious about?" I asked. "The relationship between Lex Booth and Celeste Schmidt. Why would Garth assume they were having an affair? And how did Garth get Lex fired?"

“That’s a good point. There are several obvious questions we didn’t ask Lex.”

“I think the smell of open sewer pipes might’ve had something to do with that.”

Marco put his hand on my knee. “Let’s stop talking before I lose my appetite again.”



New Chapel country club sat on ten acres of land on the eastern border of the city in a beautiful hilly area surrounded by trees and edged on one side by Maple Creek. The golf course was highly regarded in the sporting world, or so my brothers said. The pool was Olympic-sized and surrounded by aqua-colored lounge chairs and umbrella-covered tables. The clubhouse was a tribute to what money can buy.

The long brick and concrete structure sprawled across the top of a hill, with the left wing devoted to banquets, the center span holding offices, washrooms and a coatroom, the right wing containing the kitchen, the bar and two adjoining dining rooms, complete with fireplaces and soaring windows that looked out onto a flower and shrub garden, a patio for outdoor dining, and the golf course just beyond.

My family always chose the main dining room over the patio, even when the evenings were warm and cozy, and the air was fresh. The dining room was the opposite: A huge room of white linen-covered tables, vanilla scented candles, hushed conversations, and air so icy in the summer that you could see your breath. At one end of this room was the bar, a polished oak beauty with brass foot rails and televisions mounted on the end walls.

The table where my brothers held court sat in the corner farthest from the bar, in front of a window overlooking the gardens, and near the fireplace. As Marco and I strolled across the large room, I spotted Jillian and her husband sitting with the Osbornes, my ex-fiancé’s parents, and a shiver ran down my spine. I raised my hand to greet them, and they gave me forced smiles in return, their faces stretched by the finest plastic surgeons money could buy. The Osbornes were part of New Chapel’s elite, one of the wealthiest families

in town, with blood that ran so cold they probably felt right at home in the icy dining room.

"Here's Abby and Marco," my father announced to the group at the long table. I greeted my mom and my two brothers, their wives, then walked over to Dad's wheelchair to give him a hug. My mother stood to hug both Marco and me. Then we sat.

My brother Jordan and his wife Kathy were seated across from us. "Where's Tara tonight?" I asked them.

"At home," Jordan answered.

"She's mad at us because we won't buy her a car," Kathy added.

Tara was my niece, the sixteen-year-old daughter of Jordan, the younger of my brothers, and his wife. Kathy was the more normal of my sisters-in-law. She came from a family of three kids, had a hearty laugh, a healthy size-ten body complete with hips and thighs, and often wore her dark brown hair in a ponytail.

My brother Jonathan and his wife Portia had opted not to have kids. They preferred to spend their time, money, and energy on other pursuits. For Portia that meant finding *the* stylist to care for her fine, long, ash-blond hair. She'd gone through a dozen already. With her delicate frame and hipless, size-two body, I doubted Portia would have been able to stand the rigors of childbirth anyway.

"Champagne, honey?" my dad asked as he held the sparkling wine above my glass. "Jillian ordered a bottle for the table."

At first, I declined the offer. Champagne had been the Osborne's beverage of choice. For the longest time, after being rejected by Pryce and his family, I couldn't stomach the stuff. Coincidentally, as my relationship with Marco strengthened, my aversion to champagne had weakened. "Actually, Dad. I will have a glass."

As though I'd conjured him up, Pryce appeared behind my mom and put his hands on her shoulders. "Hello, Mrs. Knight. Mr. Knight."

"Pryce!" my mother exclaimed happily. "It's been ages." She stood to give him a hug. He shook hands with my father and greeted my brothers and their wives like old friends. It was odd to see my ex-fiancé standing at our table. Out of the dozens of times our family had met at the club for dinner, Pryce had never once approached us.

After greeting my entire family, he turned to offer me a stiff smile. “Abigail.”

“Pryce.”

He peered around me and nodded at my husband. “Marco.”

“Pryce.”

He motioned to someone behind him and a brown-haired woman in a pale-yellow knit dress stepped up beside him. “I’d like to introduce my fiancée, Bess Webb.”

“Hello,” she said, smiling at us.

She received a friendly greeting from around the table.

“I’ve heard a lot about the Knight family,” she said. “All good things. Especially you, Abby.”

Right. I could only imagine what *that* had sounded like. The woman appeared to be a few years younger than me, a few pounds lighter, several inches taller, and looked better in yellow, too. But she seemed nice, with kind eyes and a gentle sincerity behind her words. I almost felt like warning her: *Don’t throw away the receipt for your wedding dress.*

I stood up to shake her hand. “Congratulations. Have you set a date yet?”

She smiled up at Pryce. “We’ve decided to enjoy our engagement. No rush.”

*Good thinking*, I wanted to say. “I hope you enjoy it,” I said instead.

“We’ll leave you to your dinner,” Pryce said, and placed his hand on Bess’s back to usher her away.

As I sat down again, I felt everyone’s eyes on me. “How about that champagne?”

“Bess seems nice,” Jillian said as she joined our table, scooting in beside my mom. “But boy, does she put Pryce on a petal stool.”

“A what?” I asked.

“A petal stool. You know, so he’s standing above everyone else.”

Leave it to Jill to coin a new phrase. “You mean pedestal.”

Jillian waved it away like a pesky fly. “Whatever.”

“A petal stool!” my mom exclaimed. “What a great idea. Abby, I have my inspiration for a new art project.” She turned to my cousin and took hold of her hands. “A petal stool. Absolutely brilliant, Jillian. Thank you.”

Jillian looked at her, clearly stymied. “You’re welcome?”

Once the waiter had filled everyone's glass with Champagne, Jillian rose and clapped her hands. "I'd like to make an announcement. I've decided to add a high-end makeup line to my business and all of you ladies will have first dibs once I'm approved." She looked around at my sisters-in-law, my mom, and me, and said, "I can't wait to show you our products. You'll love them!" She lifted her glass. "Here's to my new adventure."

One by one, everyone around the table raised their glasses.

Hear, hear?



*Saturday, June 1<sup>st</sup>*

Saturday was my day off, and Marco didn't have to be at work until later that evening. Since Celeste Schmidt still hadn't contacted me, we took the opportunity to surprise her at home. It had been two full days since I'd spoken with her father-in-law. I'd asked him to give Celeste my business card and have her call me when she had the chance. I knew she'd been grieving, and I didn't want to rush her, but we couldn't move forward with the case until we spoke with her.

We parked in the street, in front of the Dombowski's house, and walked over to the Schmidt's front walkway. Marco rang the doorbell, and moments later, the door was answered by Garth's father. I recognized the long, white beard immediately, but his hair was no longer slicked back. It was long and loose around his ears. He still had the dark circles under his eyes, and a forlorn look as he opened the screen door.

"Hello, I'm Abby Salvare. We spoke before the viewing on Thursday."

The man nodded. "I remember."

"We were hoping to speak with Celeste today. Is she home?"

"No, she's not here right now."

Marco stepped forward. "I'm Marco Salvare. It's important we speak to her. Do you know where we can find her?"

"She's at a grief counseling session."

"Do you know when she'll be home?"

"Why are you so interested in her?" the man asked. "Celeste is very torn up right now."



"I understand," Marco said. "But our client has some concerns about the detective's handling of the investigation. Since Celeste isn't home, maybe you would be able to help us out. Do you mind answering a few questions?"

He shrugged. "I don't mind. Please, come in."

We stepped into a small front hallway. To my left was a living room decorated in neutral colors with tan-colored carpeting. There was a brown patterned sofa and loveseat positioned opposite each other in front of the fireplace. On the mantle were photographs of Celeste and her daughter from all stages of life. A television in the corner was on low. The curtains were drawn.

We were directed to the sofa, where I took out my pen and notebook. "First, we'd like to share our deepest condolences for your loss," I said, my voice soft but steady.

The elderly man wiped a tear from his eye and bent down, easing himself into a chair with a heavy sigh. "Thank you," he murmured, his gaze drifting somewhere past me.

"Can I get your name, sir?" Marco asked.

"I'm Mel," he answered. "Mel Schmidt. How can I help you?"

"When did you last see your son?" Marco asked.

"Oh, boy," he said, scratching his head. "I'd say it was about two weeks ago when he came out to go fishing with me."

"Did he seem troubled by anything?" Marco asked.

"Not that he mentioned."

I wrote it down as Marco asked, "Did he ever talk about having a dispute with anyone?"

"Again, not that he mentioned."

"When was the last time you talked to him?"

"He called me that morning—Memorial Day. Wished me a happy one. I didn't think . . . didn't know it'd be the last time." His voice cracked, and he paused, staring at his hands. "Celeste said he was planning to surprise me with a fishing trip. My favorite lodge, up north. She said he was so happy about it." He wiped the tears from his face with both hands. After taking a few moments to regain his composure, Mel continued. "But I'll tell you something that struck me as odd. He never said anything to me about it." He looked down and his voice grew thick with emotion. "Maybe he was planning to surprise me."

"Did he ever surprise you like that before?"

"No. That wasn't really like him. But that's the only thing I can think of."

"Celeste told you he was coming to visit?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe her?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I?"

Marco gave him a moment, then asked, "Did Celeste tell you where she was Memorial Day evening?"

"She told me she'd been at a church function," Mel replied. "A rummage sale, I believe."

Marco looked over to see my notes, waited until I was finished writing, then asked, "What about her relationship with your son. Were they having any problems?"

He let out a slow breath. "They were happily married—almost ten years. But I'd be lying if I said there were no problems. Garth was a proud man. Didn't like to admit defeat, and more than that, he hated being wrong. But Celeste—she's a good woman. Christian woman. Took care of him. Loved him deeply."

"Have you noticed any change in behavior lately?" Marco pressed. "Him or Celeste—arguing more than usual? Anything like that?"

He shook his head. "Nothing more than usual."

"What about Isabelle?" Marco asked, shifting gears. "What was her relationship like with your son?"

"Isabelle can be a handful," he said, his tone sharpening. "Deep down, I know she loved Garth like a father, but I think she resented him—her mom remarrying so soon after her dad died."

"Why do you say that?"

"She was only nine when her father passed. A year later, Celeste married Garth. Isabelle didn't take it well. Started acting out—trouble at school, that sort of thing."

"You said she's a handful," Marco chimed in. "Is she still getting in trouble?"

"No, not like that. Just a rebellious teenager now, living at home with strict parents. We've all been there."

"What about her boyfriend?" I asked. "Can you tell us about him?"

"Don't know him myself," he said, frowning. "But Garth didn't like him. Told me the kid's a real loser. He dropped out of high school, drives a loud car that ticks off the neighbors, no respect for his elders."

"Is there anything else you can think of that might help our investigation?" Marco asked. "Anything out of the ordinary? Anyone starting trouble with Garth?"

"I'm sorry, but I got nothing for you. I think Celeste would know more than me."

"Do you know where we can reach her?" Marco asked. "When she's not at home?"

Mel put his head down, as if he didn't want to say, but he looked up and answered, "She works at the furniture store on Morthland Drive. If she's not at home, you can reach her there."

Marco looked at me, but I had no questions, so he reached out his hand. "I think that's all I have, Mel. Thank you so much for talking to us."

We rose and walked to the front door, where Marco handed Mel a business card. "If you think of anything that might aid in our investigation, please give me a call."

"And let Celeste know we're here to help," I said. "If you could ask her to give us a call, too, we'd appreciate it."

As we headed home, I read over my notes. "If Garth was bothered by anything or anyone, he didn't share it with his father."

"I wonder about that fishing trip," Marco said. "If he'd planned to go see his dad, why not tell him?"

"We'll have to hope Celeste knows more than Mel did."

Ten minutes later, Marco pulled into our neighborhood where we saw a giant brown and white RV parked in the street across from our house. It was parked at such an angle that it filled the street. There was no way Marco could get his Prius into the driveway.

"Well," he said. "I've never seen that before."

"Look, Marco. People have been driving onto our lawn to get around the RV."

At that, Marco grunted angrily. He jammed the drive shaft into park. "Wait right here."

"No, no. Let me talk to them." I exited the car, walked across the street and up to the door of the house for sale. I knocked and waited, but no one answered. I knocked again, then tried the door and found it open. I stepped inside, into a small foyer facing a staircase. To my left was a living room. To my right a dining room.

"Hello?" I called after hearing voices coming from upstairs. I impatiently waited a few more seconds before shouting, "Will someone please come move this camper?"

Seconds later, a man came jogging down the stairs. He wore navy pants and a blue plaid shirt and appeared to be in his fifties. "You must be our new neighbor," he sang happily. "Hello, hello, hello, new neighbor."

Behind him trotted several children, then a woman carrying a baby, followed by several more children. They all came down talking loudly over one another, pushing each other through the stairwell, and brushing by me without any recognition. The man remained at the front door as his family fled the house.

My stomach dropped. "You bought the house?"

"Well, no. Not yet." He put his hands together. "But hopefully soon! Soon, soon, soon!"

"Isn't it a beautiful home?" A woman asked as she stepped lightly down the stairs in her high heels. She was wearing a name badge and carrying a clipboard.

"Anything beats living in that old RV out there," he answered. "Anything at all."

"Speaking of that," I said. "It's sort of parked in the middle of the street."

"It's a beast," he chortled. "What can ya do?"

"You could move it so my husband and I could get into our driveway."

"Oh. No problem," he chanted. "No problem. No problem at all."

He moved the RV down the block, allowing Marco to pull into our driveway. "Please don't buy the house," I chanted as I walked into the garage. "Please, please, please."



## CHAPTER NINE



*Sunday, June 2<sup>nd</sup>*

I woke to Smoke climbing onto my chest, where he sat staring down at me. “What are we feeding this cat?” I asked as Smoke rubbed his nose against my chin. “He’s crushing me.” I looked over but Marco’s side of the bed was empty. “You’re going on a diet,” I told our giant Russian Blue, gently moving him off so I could sit up.

Smoke jumped down and waited until I had climbed out of bed, then headed toward the hallway, stopping to look back at me and let out a pathetic little meow.

“What’s wrong?”

He meowed again then scurried away. I followed him up the hallway to the kitchen, where I saw the problem. His water bowl was empty. I filled it from the water pitcher and put it down on the rubber mat against the wall. “Here you go.”

He walked over, sniffed at the dish, and began to lap up the water. Seedy jumped down from the sofa in the living room and came over to see what was happening.

Marco came up the basement stairs and into the kitchen. “You’re up. I was going to let you sleep in.”

“Smoke woke me up. His water dish was empty.”

Marco squatted down to pet the cat. “Sorry, bud.”

“I need to get up anyway. I still have to make the salad for the neighborhood barbecue. It needs to marinate for several hours.”

“First, get this. I called the fishing cabin this morning. There was a reservation for Garth Schmidt, so it seems as though he did plan a surprise trip to

see his dad on Memorial Day. Of course, I'd still like to verify that with Celeste. Any word yet?"

"Nope. And I have a feeling we won't be hearing from her any time soon. She seems to be avoiding us."

"What do you suggest we do?" Marco asked. "We have to talk to her."

"I guess I could call the furniture store to see if she's working."

"It's worth a shot."

After a quick call to the store, I popped my head into the bathroom where Marco was getting ready to shower. "She's working tonight, but not tomorrow."

"Which would you prefer?" Marco asked. "Stop by the store tonight, or her house tomorrow?"

"I think we should try her at home first."

"You got yourself a plan."

Mid-afternoon, I dressed in ankle-length khakis and a light green long sleeve top, cool enough to be comfortable in the sun, and warm enough to be cozy in the shade. Marco dressed casually in a slim fitting black V-neck shirt and light blue jeans, with black boots and dark sunglasses. I'd comment about his always wearing the same style of clothing, but he looked so good in the form-fitting attire, I didn't dare.

"What are we bringing with us?" Marco asked as we gathered at the hallway closet to put on our shoes.

"I made a three-bean salad."

He made a face. "That's a lot of beans."

"And it's delicious. My mom used to make it every summer."

"I'll have to take your word for it," he said. "Should we bring a bottle of wine?"

"Probably a good idea." I set down my tan flats and headed to the kitchen. "You're the wine expert," I called. "Should we bring a red or a white?"

"How about white? We should have a bottle in the back of the fridge"

"Perfect."

As we made our way down the sidewalk, I turned to see Seedy sitting on the back of the chair watching us from the window. I gave her a wave, instantly wishing we were back inside. "Let's make this a short afternoon," I said to Marco.

"Feeling antsy today?"

I held the bean salad in one hand, and Marco's hand in the other as we walked across the street. "I don't know the neighbors here yet and you know how much I hate making small talk. Thank goodness Theda will be there."

Marco squeezed my hand. "Have a glass of wine, eat some good food, and try to enjoy yourself."

As we neared the neighbor's house, we could hear music coming from the backyard. A white picket fence encircled the back yard, and a handwritten sign on the gate instructed us to take the path around to the back.

The backyard was fairly large, with a wide, cement patio off the back of the house outfitted with a long outdoor table and plenty of folding chairs. I spotted several women from the Busy Bees book club sitting around the table chatting. Beyond the table was a large grill where some of the men were already standing, holding beers and laughing. A group of children played on a swing set at the back of the property, with a little brown and white beagle barking at them excitedly.

The grass was very green and pristinely maintained. The shoulder-height, white wooden fence ran the perimeter of the large backyard, just tall enough to keep their small dog from jumping over. There was an unlit firepit in the middle of the yard surrounded by more chairs. I looked around at the somewhat familiar faces and spotted Theda talking with a woman around my age.

Theda raised her hand in greeting as we walked over. "Here they are now. Abby, Marco, meet Claire Dunning. Claire is our hostess."

"Hi Claire," I said, as Marco shook her hand. "You have a beautiful back yard."

Claire laughed. "You should have seen it last week. It was a jungle back here. Fortunately, my husband can work miracles." She eyed the perspiring wine bottle in Marco's hand. "Speaking of miracles, I hope you intend on sharing that. With all the preparation madness, I completely forgot to chill the wine."

Marco handed over the bottle. "Enjoy."

"Marco," she said, "there's beer and soft drinks in the cooler by the grill. Help yourself."

With that, he gave me a wink and walked away.

Claire moved in to tighten the newly formed triangle and whispered, "Theda was just telling me about a potential new neighbor with some potentially *unneighborly* attributes."

I looked at Theda. "The campers?"

She nodded. "They came to see the house again today."

That put a knot in my stomach, but I didn't like to gossip, especially in front of unvetted acquaintances, so I kept the conversation convivial. "Hopefully, they won't leave the camper parked in the street once they move in."

"They have seven children," Theda said, "And that's a two-bedroom, one and half-bath ranch with no basement. Where do you suppose all those children are going to sleep?"

Claire nodded as if Theda had made a good point.

I tried to stay positive. "Maybe they'll get bunk beds."

Theda raised an eyebrow but kept her thoughts to herself.

Several other women walked through the gate and waved happily when they saw Claire. She excused herself and headed across the patio to greet them.

"I did a little research," Theda told me. "Mr. *Camper* was fired from his factory job last year in northern Michigan. He was caught submitting false insurance claims upwards of ninety-thousand dollars. He and his family were forced out of their home and into the RV where they've been living ever since. Apparently, they've recently received a hefty inheritance from a relative, a story which still hasn't been corroborated."

"Theda, for Heaven's sake, how do you know all of this?"

She gave me a reserved smile. "I ran the plates from the RV through an old detective friend of mine. He filled me in on the rest."

"A detective from where? The CIA? The FBI?"

Her smile turned coy once again. "That's top secret."

"What about the other family that was looking at the house yesterday? The wife mentioned something about holding meetings and needing parking space."



"That's Mr. and Mrs. Horatio Anderson, both devout members of the Church of Our Father Eternity."

"The church of *what*?"

"Apparently, this so-called church is a breakaway group of nonconformists who worship father time as a deity."

"You're kidding."

"Upon further research I learned the group was founded by Mr. Anderson, who owns a small watch repair shop in Maraville. I'm guessing the group is just a clever ruse to garner more business, but there are quite a few members. And they meet every Sunday at seven in the morning."

"That's why she was asking about my watch," I said. I could just picture the street full of cars every Sunday evening.

"Wait until you hear why the clock worshippers were kicked out of their last meeting place."

"Because of the parking problem?"

"No. The rent was never paid on time," Theda answered. "Kind of ironic, wouldn't you say?"

Marco came striding over holding a beer in one hand and a glass of white wine in the other. Offering me the wine, he said to Theda. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Nothing for me at the moment, thank you."

"Theda was filling me in on the potential new neighbors," I told him.

"And?"

I sighed. "It doesn't look promising."

The rest of the afternoon went by quickly. Marco, Theda, and I took seats at the long table and got to know more people from the neighborhood. The food was good, the company was fun and refreshing, and the small talk wasn't unbearable. I couldn't help but watch Theda as she made conversation with new people. I listened carefully to the questions she asked.

To the unwitting, her questions seemed harmless enough. *What do you do for a living? How long have you lived in New Chapel?* But the follow up questions were often a bit more involved. *Why did you decide on that as a career? Where did you go to college?* I listened as she had a seemingly charming and unassuming conversation, all the while gathering info on them, or so I guessed.

Even though I'd known Theda for over a year, I still couldn't get a fix on her. Had she really once been part of a covert government agency, as she'd hinted, or was she just a highly intelligent nosy neighbor? Either way, I was glad she was on my side – until I started to wonder what kind of dirt she'd dug up on me.

"Ready to go?" Marco asked, jolting me back to the present. He glanced at the sky. "Looks like rain."

"Let's go say goodbye to our host and hostess and collect the salad bowl," I replied.

We said our goodbyes and headed home. As we reached our house, I glanced at the house across the street, which was dark. "I have a bad feeling about that house, Marco."

"Sunshine, you always find something to worry about. We had good neighbors before. We'll have good neighbors again."

I wished I had his confidence.



### **M**onday, June 3<sup>rd</sup>

Mondays were my favorite day of the week. The fresh start. The new beginning. I stepped into Bloomers at eight o'clock and sniffed the air. Yep, there it was, the beautiful scent of flowers: roses, lilies, gardenias, peonies. They never failed to brighten my day. I walked through the shop, past the purple curtain into the workroom, up a short hallway past the bathroom and into the small kitchen at the back of the long brick building where Rosa was preparing breakfast.

"*Huevos Marisol*, coming right up."

After putting my purse away, I made my way to the coffee and tea parlor where Grace and Lottie were chatting. "Good morning, ladies," I called.

"Good morning, love," Grace replied. "You're looking chipper today."

"It's Monday, and you know how I love the beginning of a brand-new week."

"Like opening the cover of a new book," Grace said.

"Or a blank canvas," Lottie added. "Just waiting for the first, bold stroke."

*How did they know me so well?*

"Did you talk to Celeste Schmidt on Saturday?" Lottie asked me, as I sat down at the table.

"She wasn't at home. She had a grief counseling session."

"The poor woman. I can't even imagine."

The back door buzzer sounded, announcing a new delivery. I rose from my seat and made my way to the rear of the building, squeezing past Rosa in the cramped galley kitchen. Reaching the sturdy fire door, I pushed it open, revealing the alley beyond. At the far end, a massive Coast-to-Coast delivery truck idled, while directly before me sat a sizable cardboard box, its side noticeably crumpled. I dragged the damaged package inside and secured the door behind me. Grabbing a box cutter, I sliced through the tape, unveiling the contents: eight glass vases, half of them reduced to jagged shards.

"What did we get?" Lottie asked, coming through the kitchen.

"Smashed vases," I answered, as she peered over my shoulder for a look. "That's the third order that's been damaged since we got that new delivery driver. I'm going to have to call the company and complain."

"I've got time right now," Lottie offered. "I'll make the call. And I'll ask for a full reimbursement for the vases while I'm at it."



Shortly after noon, I rang the doorbell on Celeste Schmidt's front porch and turned to smile at my husband. "Are you ready to turn on the charm?"

"Always."

The door opened and there stood the same young woman I'd seen at the funeral home. She had large hazel eyes, high cheek bones, and long, stringy blond hair. Her blue jeans and graphic T-shirt looked old and worn, her white athletic shoes scuffed and dirty with age. She gave us a quick up and down scan and raised her eyebrow at me. "Why are you here?"

"We're here to see your mother."

"She's not home."

As the door started to close, I held out the bouquet. "I brought you flowers."

Isabelle kept the door open a crack and gave me a suspicious glare. "For me? Why?"

"For you and your mom. As a gift."

She reached out slowly to accept the flowers, inching the door open slightly as she did.

"We'd like to ask you a few questions, too," Marco said.

"About what?"

He stepped forward. "We're conducting our own investigation into the death of your dad."

"Stepdad," she quickly corrected.

Marco politely offered his condolences. He tried to make eye contact with her, but she wouldn't reciprocate, so he continued, "We want to find the person responsible for his death and we'd really appreciate it if you'd give us five minutes."

She pursed her lips and hardened her expression, then looked up at my husband and studied him thoroughly. I wondered if the Salvare charm would work on her. I hadn't often doubted my husband's abilities, but this young woman was definitely putting up a fight. After a few seconds, though, her eyes softened, and she sighed. "I'm not supposed to answer questions. I'm not even supposed to answer the door."

"Can you tell us why?" Marco asked.

The door inched opened slowly. She looked down at the bouquet cradled in her arm, studying each flower. "There's just been a lot going on."

"Like what?" he asked.

"Obviously, my stepdad. And then . . ." Her head snapped up and her mouth opened, but she didn't speak. The look in her eyes was that of shock, as though she couldn't believe she'd decided to trust us.

I couldn't blame her. But I also couldn't help but wonder who gave her the instructions not to speak, and why. Could it have been Detective Corbison perhaps?

"And then?" Marco persisted.

She shook her head. "I'm not supposed to say anything."

Marco shot me a narrow-eyed glance, not only conveying his annoyance, but also – as I interpreted it – asking for help.

"Why can't you say anything?" I asked as I pulled out my notebook and pen.

"Because of the investigation."

"Who told you not to talk? The detective?"

She nodded softly.

*I knew it.* "The detective is focusing on Karl," I explained. "And we both know Karl isn't a killer."

"I don't know that."

"Isabelle," I said matter-of-factly. "You know Karl from high school. Do you really think he's a killer?"

She scoffed. "Did he say we knew each other in high school?"

"Yes."

She rolled her eyes. "Right."

"Regardless. You know him. You know he didn't do it, and if we don't find out who did, Karl could go to prison for a long time. You know that's not right."

Isabelle looked away as if she didn't want to admit it.

"Do you have something against Karl?"

"No," she answered sharply.

"Then help us."

She cradled the flowers in one arm and slipped her other hand behind the door. I thought she might shut it, but she froze, as if something held her back, as if words were caught on the tip of her tongue.

"You said there's a lot going on," I prodded. "What else is going on?"

She exhaled sharply. "Someone's been harassing us."

"Harassing you how?" I asked.

"Coming to the house, banging on the door. I'm supposed to call the cops if he comes back. I almost called the cops on you, but I recognized you from the funeral home."

"Who's been harassing you?" Marco asked.

"There's this guy Garth used to work with. Mom thinks he's the one who . . . you know."

"Why does she think that?" Marco continued as I jotted notes.

"Because the guy was upset about being fired, and he blamed Garth."

I knew immediately that she was talking about Lex Booth. From what we'd learned, Booth was a little more than upset about losing his job. I definitely wouldn't have put it past him to come to Garth's house looking for revenge.

Apparently, Marco had the same idea. "What more can you tell us about this guy?" he asked.

"I don't know. I never saw him, but Garth seemed really scared every time the guy would come by. I've never seen him so scared before."

"Has he been back recently?"

"No, not since . . ." Her voice faded, and I noticed her chin tremble slightly.

I hoped Marco would pause to let her gather herself, but he pressed on. "Did this man come to the house the day your stepdad was killed?"

She flinched at the word "killed," and I felt a pang of sympathy. Her stepdad's death had clearly shaken her deeply, though she fought hard to hide it. She dropped her gaze to the flowers, absently picking at a leaf with her short fingernail.

"I'm sorry," I said. "We're not trying to be blunt, or rude, but it's important we know what happened."

"He did come to the house that night." Her lower lip continued to tremble as she answered, "I was the only one in the house when he started banging on the door. Mom was at work and Garth was in the garage."

"What time was that?"

"Around seven."

"What did you do?"

"I locked myself in my room, and I stayed there until the banging on the front door stopped."

"Did he confront your stepdad in the garage?"

"I don't think so."

"Did he come back that night?"

"I don't know. After the guy left, I called my boyfriend to pick me up."

"What time did you leave the house?" Marco asked.

She shook her head, seemingly searching her memory. "I don't remember."

"Please try to remember," he said.

A tear ran down her cheek. She wiped it away and shook her head again.

"Was it before dark?" he asked.

She looked up at us with a frightened look in her eyes, but didn't answer.

"What's your boyfriend's name?" I asked, feeling that she was going to slam the door any second.

"I think you should leave now." She backed up into the entryway, still cradling the flowers in her arm.

"Wait," I said. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. I just . . . I need to go."

Marco held out his hand before she could shut the door. "Will your mom be home soon?" he asked.

"She's at work all night."

He handed her a business card. "Can you ask her to call us, please?"

Isabelle was hesitant to take the card, her fingers hovering uncertainly as she glanced between it and Marco's steady gaze.

"We're trying to help," he said calmly. "You can trust us."

She accepted the card without a word, then shut the door and turned the deadbolt.

"She seems scared," Marco said as we returned to the car.

"I'd be scared, too. Especially with this mystery man harassing them."

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

I nodded. "Lex Booth."

"We'll have to talk to him again."

"But she didn't stop the conversation until we mentioned the boyfriend."

"I noticed that, too," Marco acknowledged. "I think she's hiding something." He opened the car door for me and added, "She also said her mom works all night."

"That's right. When I called yesterday, the person on the phone said she didn't work today."

"Let's go to the furniture store tonight to find out."

After we got into the car, I tried to make sense of our new information. "If Lex was pounding on the front door, then Detective Corbison should have proof from the doorbell cam. Just like he had proof of Karl making threats."

"Maybe that's why Corbison picked up Lex in the first place. The only problem is, Lex has an alibi and Karl doesn't."

"Then Lex couldn't be the killer, if he has an alibi."

"We don't know that for sure," Marco responded.

I sat in the passenger seat thinking, as Marco did the same. Then I turned to him. "Lex was at the high school watching the fireworks. You saw the picture of him with his family."

"Right, but the picture was taken in daylight. The murder didn't happen until after it got dark."

"Then what's your theory?"

"It's a loose theory," he started, "but hear me out. Lex comes to the house looking for Garth. He's pounding on the door, yelling, but Garth doesn't answer because he's in the garage. Isabelle hears the pounding, gets scared, and calls her boyfriend who then picks her up. Nelson Punter across the street sees Isabelle's boyfriend and confuses him for Karl Dombowski. Meanwhile, Lex takes his family to the fireworks show, takes a picture in front of the high school to prove his alibi, then comes back to the house after dark to confront Garth."

I sat quiet for a second. "Okay. You've clearly put some thought into this."

"Thank you."

"But the murder wasn't premeditated, remember? Garth's gun was used against him. Why would Lex come back at night to confront Garth, knowing full well that he always carried a gun?"

"That's a good question," he answered. "Maybe we should ask Lex."

Marco started the engine, but before he could drive away, I stopped him. "Let's talk to Nelson Punter. You can run your theory by him and see if it lines up."

"Now?"

"We're right here," I said. "I'm sure Nelson's home. How much money do you have on you?"

Marco took a deep breath and sighed.





## CHAPTER TEN



We crossed the street and walked up the cement path to the Punter's front door. As before, Nelson Punter was sitting in his wheelchair in the window.

"Well, hello again," his wife said as she opened the door.

"We're sorry to bother you," I told her, "But we'd like to speak to your husband again. We promise not to stay long."

"Of course," she replied, and held open the screen door. "Please come in."

She led us into the living room, where Nelson had swiveled his chair away from the window. "You're back," he grumbled. His thin, white hair remained uncombed, perched messily atop his head, and he still wore the same torn, stained robe. "I hope you came prepared. It's twenty dollars a question now."

I looked at Marco, whom I could tell was already stiff with anger.

"Please have a seat," Mrs. Punter said, gesturing toward the sofa. "Can I bring you something to drink?"

"They ain't staying long," Nelson grunted.

"Here, sit on the sofa. I'll bring you some tea."

We sat side by side on the sofa with Punter across from us. Marco pulled out a hundred-dollar bill and set it on the coffee table. Punter's eyes widened as he turned his wheelchair to face us, but before the old man could swipe the money from the table, Marco grabbed it. "This buys me five minutes. I'm not paying per question. The faster and more honest you answer, the quicker we'll get out of here. Deal?"

Punter sat back in his chair and folded his arms. He rolled his tongue around inside his mouth and squinted one beady eye at my husband. "You don't make the rules."

"Take it or leave it," Marco answered rigidly.

"Two hundred."

"No."

"One fifty."

Marco shook his head. "One hundred for five minutes."

Punter reached his hand out. "You got three minutes."

Marco set the hundred-dollar bill back onto the coffee table. "What can you tell us about a man who's been harassing the Schmidts recently?"

Nelson leaned forward and snatched the bill. "There's a big ole black Mercedes been coming around. Big man gets out and pounds the door. That's all I know."

"What does he look like?"

After being enthralled in the negotiation, I had completely forgotten to start taking notes. I quickly grabbed the notebook and fumbled around inside my purse for the pen.

"Big guy. Dark hair. Tattoos. Next question."

I wrote it down and looked at Marco. A big guy with dark hair and tattoos? That did not match the description of Lex Booth. I could tell Marco was thinking the same by the furrow in his brow. There went his theory.

"Did this guy come to the house the day Garth was killed?" Marco asked.

"Yeah. He came by that night."

"Was he the man you saw arguing with Garth in his garage?"

"No. You know who it was? That Dombowski boy. I seen him with my own eyes."

"Are you sure about that?" Marco asked.

"Seen him plain as day."

I had just caught up writing notes when Marco paused. "Funny you should say that."

Punter looked confused. "Say what?"

"Plain as day," Marco answered. "Which would indicate that you saw Karl before the sun set."

"So what?"

"You just said Karl came back that night."

"You know what I'm trying to say."

"I know what you said previously," Marco replied. "You saw Karl at seven-thirty, which means you're wrong about Karl being the killer. Garth Schmidt was killed after nine o'clock."

"Maybe the kid came back after dark."

"Now you're speculating."

"So what if I am?"

Marco shook his head, his eyes narrowing. "I think you lied to the detective about Karl. I think you made the whole thing up because you don't like those boys."

"Give me a break," Punter scoffed. "Your three minutes are up."

"We haven't even started," Marco countered. "I think you're lying about this whole thing. You didn't see anybody arguing with Garth by the garage, did you?"

"I did see someone!"

"But you can't prove it was Karl."

"So what?"

At that, Marco sat back quietly. I scribbled down notes as fast as I could.

"The person you saw by the garage was Isabelle's boyfriend," Marco finally said. "Isn't that right?"

Nelson chuckled. "That'll be fifty bucks. For overtime."

"You have all my cash," Marco told him.

"That's a shame." He turned his gnarled gaze toward me. "How about you?"

That's when I realized what Marco was trying to do. He was accusing Nelson of lying, hoping that in Nelson's defense he would give up the truth. But the old coot was smarter than that. Or just greedier. "I don't have any money on me," I answered.

From the hallway, I noticed Mrs. Punter waving me over. "I'm sorry to interrupt," she said softly, "but would you help me with something, dear?"

"Don't bother," Nelson grunted. "They're leaving."

"Please, dear?" she asked me again. "I have a question about the flowers you brought last time."

Marco nodded at me, "Go ahead. We're done here."

I stood and followed her into the kitchen, at that point remembering she'd offered to make tea. As I looked around the small kitchen area, I no-

ticed there was no tea. No kettle on the stove. No teacups. Nothing. In fact, the kitchen was spotless. The counters were bare. The sink was clean. Even the kitchen table had nothing on it except for the flowers, placed neatly inside a tall, crystal vase.

As she showed me the flowers, she said, "They seem to be wilting."

"Already?" I asked, but then I examined the flowers more closely, none of which seemed to be wilting at all.

Before I could say anything, Mrs. Punter grabbed my arm with one hand and said quietly, "Something is wrong."

"With the flowers?"

She looked me dead in the eyes. "I spoke with a friend of mine who gave me some advice about keeping flowers fresh, but, as you know, you can't always trust people." She momentarily shifted her gaze to the living room. "Do you understand?"

I lowered my voice, "Your husband?"

Just then, Nelson rolled himself into the kitchen. "What are you two talking about in here? The flowers look fine to me."

I nodded to Mrs. Punter to let her know that I understood. Although I didn't exactly know what she meant, I knew she had important information. His wife smiled and thanked me for the advice. I smiled back, thinking I was the one who should be thanking her.

"You know, I was thinking about the poetry you wrote. There's a group called the Ladies' Poetry Society that meets at Bloomers every Monday at two o'clock. They're meeting today, in fact."

"She don't need a society to write poetry," Nelson said coarsely.

"I wasn't talking to you."

"She ain't going. So, you can go ahead and leave."

I tried to make eye contact with Mrs. Punter, but she stood at the table with her arms by her sides, staring down at the flowers.

On the drive home, I told Marco about the cryptic message she'd given me.

"What do you think she meant by that?" he asked.

"Obviously, her husband is lying about something, and she's terrified to talk about it."

Marco rubbed the dark scruff forming under his chin. "We'll have to find a way to get her to talk."

"Lottie mentioned something about Mrs. Punter leaving the house once a week for groceries. I'll try to get more info."

Marco had other matters on his mind. He shook his head, clearly frustrated. "I can't get a grasp on Nelson Punter. I don't know if he's lying about his eyewitness account, and I've tried every trick I can think of."

"Let's say he's telling the truth. What does that mean?"

Marco eased the car to a stop at a red light, his fingers tapping the steering wheel. "I'd say it means that someone who looked like Karl was arguing with Garth in his garage."

"It's not Karl," I disputed. "It would have to be Isabelle's boyfriend."

"Then maybe we should find the boyfriend and see what has to say."

"Okay," I said, opening my notebook. "That's step one. Find the boyfriend." After writing it down, I asked, "What about this big guy with tattoos? What does that mean?"

He sighed. "It means my theory about Lex is wrong and there's a mystery person out there who could be our killer."

"Okay, if Punter's telling the truth, then this mysterious tattooed guy is the person whose been harassing Garth and his family. He would've been caught on Garth's doorbell cam the day he was killed. All we have to do is verify that with Corbison."

Marco looked at me sideways. "You make it sound so easy."

"Well, Corbison won't be easy, but the verification should be. Either this guy was caught on camera, or he wasn't."

"True," Marco responded.

"Step two, talk to Corbison."

"Step three," Marco added. "Don't make him mad."

I punched him playfully. "Step four, find the identity of the tattooed stranger."

"Let's see if Celeste is at work tonight," Marco suggested. "She should know where to find her daughter's boyfriend, and she might even know something about the tattooed stranger." He chuckled. "Who knows. Maybe they're one in the same."

"I'm off at six," I said. "Want to go after dinner?"

"I'll have to ask Rafe to close the bar."



Back at Bloomers, I stepped into the workroom to find Rosa elbow-deep in a vibrant floral arrangement. She swayed slightly, humming and singing along to the upbeat tune from a Spanish radio station, her voice weaving in the air thick with fresh-cut flowers. I complimented her work, dropped my bag onto the cluttered worktable, then headed out to the sales floor to track down Lottie.

"Were you able to get any information from Celeste?" she asked as I walked toward the register.

"She wasn't home."

Lottie raised an eyebrow, adjusting a stack of receipts on the counter. "Maybe she *is* avoiding you."

I nodded. "We're going to the furniture store tonight. Hopefully she'll be there."

"If she is avoiding you," Lottie mentioned, "she won't be happy about being ambushed at work."

"I know, but we don't have a choice at this point."

"Then all I can do is wish you the best of luck." She gave a small shrug.

I shifted my weight, glancing toward the window. "We also spoke with the Punters today. Something very strange happened."

"What?"

"Mrs. Punter cornered me in the kitchen. She was trying to tell me something, but she seemed scared."

Lottie leaned in; her elbow propped on the counter. "Scared of what?"

"Her husband."

She then leaned back and put her hands on her hips, the faint jingle of her bracelet filling the pause. "I coulda told you that."

"No, she was talking in code. She said you can't always believe what you hear. And I know she was talking about her husband."

"What did she mean?"

"I don't know yet, but I intend to find out."

"Do you think Mrs. Punter saw something?" Lottie asked.

"I'm not sure. Nelson rolled himself into the room the minute we started chatting. He wouldn't let her out of his sight until we left."

"If she knows something that could help Karl, she better start talking."

"I need to get her alone first." I grabbed a pen from the counter, twirling it absently. "You mentioned Mrs. Punter goes grocery shopping every week. Do you know what day she normally goes?"

"I'll have to speak with Herman. He's the one who told me." Lottie pulled a notepad from her apron pocket and reached for the pen. "I'll make a note to ask him tonight and let you know."

"Thanks, Lottie."

"By the way," she said, flipping the notepad shut, "I called Coast to Coast Deliveries and told them about our ruined boxes. The woman I spoke to said the delivery driver has already had several complaints. She also asked to send a bill for the damaged items, and they would reimburse us."

"That's great." I reached for a blank invoice from the stack nearby. "I'll do that right now."

"And don't forget today is Monday. You know what that means."

"A visit from my mom."

"And also, the poetesses," Grace reminded as she glided out of the coffee and tea parlor. "They'll be here shortly, and I haven't any scones left." She grabbed her purse from behind the sales counter and rushed for the door. "Let's hope the bakery hasn't been slacking and all."

I joined Rosa in the back room where I found a stack of orders waiting for me. I had just stepped out of the cooler with an armload of pink and white tulips when the purple curtain parted, and Jillian stuck her head through. "Hello there, you two."

"*Hola*, Jillian," Rosa called cheerily as she turned down the volume on her radio.

"Hi, Jill."

"Hello, Rosa. Hello, my favorite cousin in the whole wild world."

I set the flowers on the worktable and rolled my eyes. "Whole *wide* world."

"That's right! And it's your lucky day."

As she sidled up to the worktable, I said, "If you're here to give me a makeover, my answer is still no."

"Oh, come on, cuz! You saw Rosa the other day. You saw how beautiful she looked; how incredibly happy she was." Jillian shot Rosa a flashy smile, to which Rosa kindly reciprocated.

"I'm perfectly happy with my makeup," I told her.

"Fine. Don't help me." Jillian spun dramatically, hoisting her purse higher onto her shoulder, then flounced through the curtain with a sharp huff.



At three o'clock, I wrapped the arrangement I'd just finished and carried it up front for a pickup order. As I passed by, I peeked into the parlor and stopped short. Jillian was perched at one of the ice cream parlor tables, her makeup supplies—lipsticks, a small palette of eyeshadow, a few brushes, and a handheld mirror—neatly spread out across the surface. She was chatting brightly with the poetesses, explaining her technique as she gently applied blush to an elderly lady's cheeks.

*Oh, no.*

A few other women sat in the curved chairs, cucumber slices resting over their eyes, looking oddly serene. One poetess, her gray hair tucked into a loose bun, had a soft pink lipstick that seemed a touch too bold, her smile fluctuating as she nodded at Jillian's advice. Another, a frail woman with a string of pearls, wore a subtle shimmer of green eyeshadow that caught the light, her expression calm and content as she sipped tea between applications.

From where I stood, it looked like a bizarre experiment gone wrong. Jillian dipped a brush into a pot of pale powder and dusted it across the elderly lady's face. The woman's cheeks glowed faintly, and she beamed, clearly delighted, though the rosy hue made her look like a porcelain doll. A third poetess, clutching her notebook, had a thin line of charcoal eyeliner that wobbled slightly at the edges. Jillian reached for a tube of gloss, dabbing it on with a flourish, and the group murmured approvingly.

"It's about bringing out your spirit!" Jillian said, her voice giddy as she handed the mirror to the lady in front of her.

Grace stepped out of the room to say, "The women seemed thrilled by Jillian's presentation."



"I'm shocked."

"You should be proud, love. She seems to be enjoying herself."

"Grace, doesn't it strike you as odd that she has to pass a test in order to sell the company's makeup?"

Grace thought for a moment. "I'd imagine she'd have to know the company's product line. As for having to actually apply it? Yes, it does seem a bit odd."

"Have you ever heard of La Meilleure makeup before?" I asked.

"No, but I'm not familiar with high end brands."

Lottie came through the curtain carrying carnations for the glass display case. "Your mom just called to make sure you were here. She should be here shortly. I wonder if she'll have a new art project with her."

That question was answered at three-thirty, when my mother came in carrying a large-sized cardboard box, which she carried into the workroom and placed on the table. "Wait till you see what I made," she said excitedly, lifting the flaps of the box.

I braced myself.

She set an object on the table that looked like a large pink rose with its petals open. It was about eight inches in circumference and five inches high and had a flat space in the middle. "It's a petal stool!" she announced proudly. She reached into her tote bag and produced a fat, white, three-wick candle, which she placed in the center of the stool.

"What do you think?" she asked Rosa and me.

"I like it," I answered honestly. "It's pretty and useful." Which wasn't something I often said about her art projects.

"It's *precioso*, Maureen."

"Good, because I made four dozen of them for you to sell. How much do you think I can get for them?"

"Four dozen?"

"Oh, I know. It does seem like a lot, but once I started, I couldn't stop. I have all sorts of color combinations."

*Four dozen?* "Where am I going to put them all?"

"You have room on the sales floor and maybe put some in the window for display."

"Where are the rest?" I asked her.

“They’re in the van.”

My dad was in a wheelchair, so their van was specially modified to accommodate him. Inside, the seats were removed to give him plenty of space to roll in and stay secure, which also meant plenty of space for rogue projects.

“Mom, we can’t keep them here. I don’t have the space. You’ll have to take some back home.”

“Oh, I can’t do that. I promised your father I would have them all gone by today.”

My shoulders slumped. “I don’t know what to do.”

“It’s no problem. We can store some in the basement. You have a nice, big storage room down there, don’t you?”

I did have a big storage room, but what my mom didn’t know was that I’d stored many of her older, failed art project attempts down there.

“I’ll help you bring them down,” she offered. “I could use the exercise.”

“No,” I exclaimed. “Rosa and I will bring them down. Why don’t you park in the alley and start unloading at the back door.”

“Okay, I’ll meet you back there.”

After a few minutes, I pushed into the back door, expecting it to swing open like usual, but it barely budged. Frowning, I leaned my shoulder into it, pushing harder. The hinges groaned, stiff and uncooperative, as if the door had shifted since I’d opened it that morning. A faint scrape of metal on concrete echoed in the alley as I finally forced it ajar.

I examined the door frame more thoroughly, the hairs on my neck prickling slightly. Something about it wasn’t sitting right with me, especially with the break-ins happening around the square, but I shook it off for the moment, making a mental note to tell Marco as soon as I got inside.

My mom pulled the van into the alley and parked. I slid open the side door, peering inside, and felt a wave of relief. Not all the stools were as bulky as the ones she’d hauled in earlier. Some were more compact, and a few were tiny—barely bigger than a small succulent pot.

Rosa came out to help. “These are adorable, Maureen.”

“They are, Mom. You didn’t say there were different sizes.”

“Come, if we all take a box downstairs, we can get this done in three trips.”

I stood at the top of the narrow staircase, my stomach twisting as I watched Mom edge closer to the steps, her hand brushing the railing. How was I going to stop her from going downstairs? My mind raced for an excuse, anything to keep from raising her suspicion. I looked at Rosa, and she looked back at me.

My mom narrowed her eyes. "What's going on?"

Then, like a whirlwind cutting through the tension, the purple curtain at the front of the room flew aside with a dramatic whoosh. Jillian burst through, her makeup box swinging from one hand. Her voice rang out, bright and commanding as she looked down the hallway at us. "Aunt Mo! Just the person I wanted to see."

I turned, noticing the spark in my mom's smile, and let out a heavy sigh of relief.

My cousin set down her bag on the worktable and walked toward us. "Today is your lucky day." She strutted down the narrow hallway to take my mom's hand, her boots clicking on the hardwood, oblivious to the crisis she'd just interrupted.

I smiled. Jillian to the rescue.



## CHAPTER ELEVEN



At five o'clock, I was just about to shut down the computer when I heard the notification for a new order. It was music to my ears. I checked the order, and my mouth dropped open. "Ladies," I called out to the sales floor. "Come here, please."

One by one the ladies filed in and gathered around the computer.

Rosa leaned in first. "Does that say fifty?"

Lottie leaned in next. "By tomorrow?"

"Yep." Fifty floral pieces were needed for a luncheon at the Maraville conference center by noon. Not only was that a tall order, but the conference center was at least a twenty-minute drive. Luckily, we did not have to set up the arrangements. All we had to do was deliver them by noon. I looked at my associates. "There's no way we can get this done tomorrow."

"No," Rosa agreed. "We will have to start on them tonight."

"Do we have enough inventory?" Lottie asked.

I was already on my way into the cooler. "We might have to get creative. But we should have enough. I'll call Marco to let him know I'll be late."

Lottie set her purse next to the computer. She rummaged through to find her phone. "I'll call Herman."

Rosa sat on a stool at the worktable and kicked off her leopard-spotted high heels. "My son is with his *abuela* tonight, so I will stay, too." She rubbed her feet and added, "but I will not wear these shoes one more minute."

Grace made her way out through the curtain, calling as she left, "I'll put on a pot of half-caf to get us through."

And it did get us through another hour and a half. By six-thirty we had more than half of the orders completed and stored in the second cooler. Lot-

tie had put in a next-day delivery order so we would have inventory left to sell at the shop, and Rosa had squeezed her heels back on with a wince. Grace masked a yawn as I set the alarm, and we all left together through the front door.

I thanked the ladies and strolled up the street to Down the Hatch for dinner with Marco. Since it was later in the evening, the bar buzzed with more noise and energy than I was used to, but I spotted the last booth still open in the back. As I approached, I noticed a "Reserved" sign resting on the table. Marco, stationed behind the bar with Rafe, caught my eye and flashed a quick wave. With a gesture, he signaled he'd join me in five minutes. I slid into the booth, settling in to wait.

From the back corner, I could see the whole establishment. Closer to the windows sat a group of men and women dressed in business attire. I recognized them from my days clerking for Dave Hammond at the courthouse. There were college-aged kids sitting at the bar, an older couple sitting in the booth in front of me, and several members of the staff at Windows on the Square sitting at a table across from me. I waved to them and then noticed Gert walking by with a tray full of nachos and glasses filled to the brim with beer.

"I'll be right with you, dear," she called over the commotion.

I was looking over the menu when Rafe slammed down a lottery ticket. "Look. I won again." He smiled. "I'm on a roll!"

Marco walked up to the booth and leaned in to see his ticket. "And again, how much did you spend to win twenty bucks?"

Rafe stuffed the winning lottery ticket into his pants pocket. "You have no sense of adventure."

"Common sense is worth more," Marco replied. "Thanks for taking the shift tonight."

"What else am I going to do with my life?" Rafe asked, then shot his brother a glare and strode back to the bar.

Gert darted past, calling, "I'll be right back for your order."

"No rush," he called back.

"Marco, there's something wrong with my door," I said, raising my voice over the hum of the crowd. "The back-alley door at the shop—it's sticking bad. I had to wrestle it open this afternoon."

He took a sip of his tea. "Is it serious?"

"Not yet."

"I can take a look tomorrow afternoon."

"Okay, you two," Gert said as she blew a strand of grey hair from her face. "What'll it be?"

After a hot ham sandwich and a crisp glass of wine, Marco and I left Down the Hatch and headed to his Prius for the short drive to the furniture store. We needed to see if Celeste was working—and, more importantly, if she'd talk. The engine hummed softly as I pulled out my notebook, flipping it open to a fresh page.

"Okay, what do we need to know?" I asked, pen poised.

Marco kept his eyes on the road, one hand resting casually on the wheel. "We're in a unique position here," he said. "Usually, the wife is the first person we speak to. Since she's been avoiding us, we've had time to dig up a whole lot of information we can use to corroborate whatever she tells us. We should know right away whether Celeste is a person of interest."

I nodded. Even though I believed Celeste was truly grieving, I couldn't argue with Marco's point. If she was hiding something, the cracks would show fast. I scribbled down the first question: Have you been avoiding us?

"First," Marco went on, "we need to verify some things. Let's go over our notes and pin down information that can't be challenged—hard facts. Time of death, murder weapon, the fishing trip, stuff like that."

I flipped back a few pages, scanning. "Time of death was sometime between nine and ten. The murder weapon is most likely Garth's gun, and it hasn't been found yet. We can ask her why Lex Booth was fired."

Marco raised an eyebrow. "And who was the guy harassing them? Big guy? Tattoos? We need to nail that down."

I nodded, jotting it quickly. "And how and when did Celeste find the body?" I tapped the pen against the page. "Then there's Isabelle's boyfriend. I'd like to know where to find him."

Marco glanced over at my notebook. "Good. Now we just have to hope she's still at work."

The New Chapel Furniture Store sat on Morthland Drive, a major thoroughfare that made the southern border of the city. The building was large and well-lit, with a huge space to display carpet samples from the major brands, another large space to shop for area rugs, and a room at the back for floor tiles.

Celeste stood with a customer just inside the main entrance, her frame slight and wiry. She was average height, but her posture slumped faintly, as if her shoulders carried an invisible load. Her dark blond hair hung in a limp ponytail, strands fraying at the ends. Her brown eyes – wide and restless, etched with fine lines – hinted at a woman in her late forties who'd seen too much.

Her outfit showed her circumstances: a worn navy cardigan with pilled elbows over a blouse, its faded floral print outdated by a few years. She wore no makeup. Any trace of lipstick or mascara was gone, leaving her looking plain and unguarded—a woman who either couldn't afford to keep up appearances or had stopped trying. She looked up as we approached, her lips parting in a shaky breath, and for a moment, her eyes locked on mine. "I'm assuming you're not here to shop for a sofa."

"Actually," I said, "we've been trying to contact you about your husband's death."

She pressed her lips together as though holding back a retort. She then folded her arms and kept her gaze focused on the rug beneath our feet. "The death of my husband has been extremely hard on me. I don't know what I can do to help."

"I understand," I told her. "I can't imagine what you must be going through."

She looked at me. "It's been hard for my daughter, too. That's why I don't appreciate you showing up at my house and forcing my daughter to answer questions."

"We didn't force her," Marco said.

She made ice-cold eye contact with him. "She told me you held the door open."

"That's not true," he replied. "Your daughter was very helpful and informative."

"She was in her room crying the rest of the night."

"I'm truly sorry," I told her. And I was sincere. I could feel the pain and anger resonating from her and was suddenly filled with regret for coming on too strong.

Marco, on the other hand, decided to press her further. "We want to solve your husband's murder. The longer we wait, the harder it'll be. Please believe that we take your feelings into consideration, and we will handle ourselves with more grace in the future."

I looked up at my husband with a sense of pride. Not only did he have the Salvare charm when needed, he also had a way of speaking that sent a warm sensation through me. But as I looked back at Celeste, I could see she wasn't feeling as warm and cozy. Just like her daughter, she somehow possessed the ability to fight off the Salvare magic.

"I don't need you to solve anything," she said firmly. "Detective Corbison assured me that he would find the man responsible."

"Corbison is a good detective," Marco replied. "But he's looking at the wrong man. That's why we need your help."

She unfolded her arms and positioned her hands on her thin hips. "Who is the wrong man?"

"Your neighbor, Karl Dombowski."

At that, she looked confused. "The detective told me Lex Booth was a serious person of interest."

"He was," Marco answered. "Until Corbison cleared him."

"Seriously?"

"Believe me," I told her. "We wouldn't be here if it wasn't serious."

A few customers entered the area while we were talking. After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, the customers wandered away.

"What do you need from me?" Celeste asked in a hushed voice.

"We need answers," Marco replied.

"Okay," she finally conceded. "Let's talk in private."

Celeste guided us through the large, open store until we were practically huddled into a corner. I readied my notebook as Marco began.

"Do you know who's been coming to your house looking for your husband?"

Celeste shook her head. "Garth wouldn't tell me who it was."

"Did your husband ever mention that he was in danger?"



"He never came out and said that specifically, but I can tell you that he'd become really paranoid. He would always make sure the shades were pulled when we were home, and he wouldn't answer the door. He said not to answer the door for anyone."

"You don't know why?" Marco asked.

"No, but I assumed he was afraid."

"Afraid of who?"

"The only person I can think of is Lex. He was fired recently and blamed my husband."

Marco asked her to explain. He didn't mention that we'd already gotten the full rundown from Lex Booth earlier that week. We needed her version—unfiltered—to see if the pieces lined up or if cracks would start showing.

Celeste looked down as though embarrassed. "Garth believed there was an – attraction – between Lex and me."

"Was there?"

Her shook her head but avoided eye contact as she answered. "No. Not at all."

"Did you explain that to your husband?"

"It was impossible to reason with Garth once he had something in his head," she replied.

"So, why did he get Lex fired?"

"Lex was making advances toward me, and Garth found out."

"Did Lex work with you?"

"No, he worked with my husband."

"Then how did Lex make advances?"

"We go to the same church. I've worked with Lex and his wife at several church functions."

So far, her answers matched up, but I was still interested in learning more about these so-called advances.

Apparently, Marco wasn't as interested. "What's the name of Garth's boss?"

"Mike Williams."

I wrote it down as he continued, "There may have been someone else at your house on the day your husband was killed. He's been described as a large man with dark hair and tattoos. Does that ring a bell?"

"Not at all."

"It doesn't fit the description of Lex Booth."

Celeste crossed her arms and gave Marco an inquisitive glare. "No. It doesn't."

"Did you see anyone on your doorbell cam video that matches that description?"

She shook her head as she answered, "I didn't see anyone on video. My husband had the video program on his phone. Not me. The detective used my husband's phone to search the doorbell video footage."

I put my hand out to stop her. "Has the detective shown you the videos?"

"No. Why would he?"

"There were several people who had allegedly visited your house that day. He should be reviewing these suspects with you." My voice started to rise as my internal temperature followed suit. "Instead, he's focusing on one person. He's focusing on the wrong person, and he's not even being honest with you." Marco put his hand on my shoulder, but I shrugged it off. "No, this isn't right. He should be telling you who came to your house that day, and he should be working with you to find your husband's killer."

Celeste seemed confused, but she nodded her head. "I agree."

"Then maybe you should have a talk with him."

Once again, Marco tried to calm me down by rubbing my shoulder. I took a few breaths to bring my temperature down, all the while writing a scathing critique of the detective that I would vocalize personally once the interview was over.

"Can you describe what your daughter's boyfriend looks like?" Marco asked as I stewed internally.

She looked confused. "Why?"

"We know Isabelle's boyfriend came to the house to pick her up that day. Does he have tattoos?"

She nodded. "But he's not a large man."

"Dark hair?" Marco continued.

"Yes, but Dillon doesn't have anything to do with this."

"What's Dillon's last name?"

"Listen, I know Dillon. He's a good kid. He's been good for my daughter. Lex Booth is the man you're after. If the detective can't find the proof, then maybe you can. I would appreciate you concentrating on him."

"We will," Marco assured her. "He's still a suspect. But we need to speak with Dillon."

Celeste looked away, her posture tense, her features hardened. I got a shiver up my spine as the thought of Celeste possibly covering for her daughter's boyfriend sent alarm bells off in my head. She knew something, and she wasn't very good at hiding it.

I decided to try a different tactic. "We don't believe Dillon is guilty," I explained. "But it's possible he saw something, or someone, maybe even Lex."

"I don't know where to find him," she said firmly.

I made a note about her suspicious actions. Not only did she try to convince us to go after Lex instead of Dillon, but she refused to answer our questions honestly. After I'd finished writing, Marco moved onto a new topic, "Take us through the events of Monday evening."

She heaved a sigh, as though not wanting to relive the situation. She closed her eyes and rung her hands together as she told the story. "I worked at the church rummage sale until ten, then came home and went to bed."

"You didn't find it strange that Garth wasn't at home?" Marco asked.

"No. He was supposed to go out to his dad's place to go fishing Monday evening."

"His dad said he wasn't aware that Garth had planned a fishing trip. Is that normal?"

"I stay out of . . . or I should say . . . I stayed out of my husband's business. He didn't like me asking questions."

"Do you know why he was going on a fishing trip? Was it to surprise his dad?"

After a long moment of silence, while her eyes wandered around the room, she finally shook her head. "Garth did not share things with me. I don't know how else to get this point across."

"I understand," Marco said in a more soothing tone. "That's okay. Now, I'd like to ask you a more personal question about the night your husband died. Is that alright with you?"

Celeste took a deep breath, as though bracing herself. "Go ahead."

"How did you come to find his body?"

At first, she looked down. I thought she was trying to avoid the question, but then she brought the back of her finger up to her face and wiped under her eyes. "I called him Tuesday morning. When he didn't answer, I called his dad and learned Garth had never made it to the lake. That's when I decided to check the garage." She paused for another breath. In a trembling voice, she said, "That's where I found him."

We gave her a few moments to compose herself, which gave me a chance to finish writing, then Marco proceeded. "I know this is hard for you, but if you could answer just a few more questions, we'll leave you alone."

She looked up at him and nodded.

"What can you tell us about the feud between Garth and the Dombowskis?"

She shrugged helplessly. "It started when those boys threw eggs at our house. They denied it, of course, but it set my husband off. That's just how he was. He fought with everyone. It didn't matter who it was or why, Garth would find a reason to fight."

"Who else did he fight with?"

"Everyone. All of our neighbors. Everyone he worked with. People at church. He was just an angry man."

"Why did you stay with him?" I asked.

Again, she shrugged. Her eyes lowered as she answered, "He was my husband."

Marco waited a few moments while I wrote down notes. Then he continued. "Where was Isabelle when you got home Monday evening?"

"She was at the movies with Dillon."

"Do you have any proof she was at the movies?"

"Why would I need proof?"

"Is it possible," Marco countered, "that your husband had a confrontation with the boyfriend?"

Tears welled up in her eyes. "I don't want to think about that."

Marco had struck a nerve. Was it possible Dillon killed her husband? If so, why was she so determined to cover it up? Especially, after seeing how genuinely her husband's death seemed to have affected her. I could tell Mar-

co was going to continue his questioning, so I put the pen behind my ear and held his arm, asking him to wait. The last thing I wanted to do was make her cry. Even though I thought she was hiding something, I truly believed she was in pain. If we pushed her too far, she might shut down completely.

“Why are you so interested in Dillon?” she finally asked.

I answered her question, hoping that I could handle it more gently. “We have an eyewitness who saw someone arguing with your husband in his garage just hours before his death. We think it might be Dillon. Even though we don’t think Dillon is involved, it’s possible he saw something that could help us. Can you tell us where to find him?”

Her response came slowly, without eye contact. “I don’t know.”

“Maybe your daughter would know.”

A tear ran down her cheek. “I don’t want her involved in this. She’s gone through so much already.”

“Then tell us where to find him,” Marco insisted.

It took her a few moments, but she finally relaxed and said, “He works at Birch’s Body shop.”

*Oh, no.* That was a name I’d hoped to never hear again.

“I need to go,” she said, “Is there anything else?”

“We might need to speak with you both again,” Marco said. “I’ve already given Isabelle a card, but I’d like you to have one, too. If there’s anything you remember that might help, please reach out.”

“We’re going to do what we can to bring justice for your husband,” I told her. “Thank you for talking to us.”

She took the card, gave us a pained smile, and walked away.

When we got back into the car, Marco asked, “Are you buying the whole grieving widow routine?”

I looked at him in shock. “You think it’s an act?”

“I’m not sure yet.” He put his keys into the ignition and started the engine. “There’s something off about her. What’s she hiding about her daughter’s boyfriend?”

“I don’t know. It seems like she’s trying to protect him.”

“Celeste seemed adamant about leaving her daughter alone, too,” Marco added. “Maybe there’s more to their story.”

"I agree, but I'm more interested in her story about Lex. I'd like to know why Garth had assumed his wife was having an affair. She never answered that question."

"Because I didn't ask," Marco said. "If there was an affair, I doubt she'd have answered honestly. That's why I got the name of Garth's boss. He should have more information about Garth and Lex. I'll try to set up a meeting with Mike Williams for tomorrow."

"Good idea."

"Would you be able to call the church tomorrow, try to verify Celeste's alibi?"

"I can do that."

"And then I'll visit Birch's Body Shop tomorrow morning. Maybe Isabelle's boyfriend will be there."

"What about me?" I asked.

"Are you sure you want to go?" Marco chuckled to himself and fastened his seat belt. "You might run into your ex."

"Shush."

Birch McMahon was *not* my ex.



## CHAPTER TWELVE



Tuesday, June 4<sup>th</sup>

I was in a great mood Tuesday morning. Our investigation was finally starting to ramp up. It was a beautiful, sunny day, so I put my hair up, put the top down in the ‘Vette, and felt the sun on my skin as I drove downtown. On the way there, I started to make a mental list of our top suspects.

Celeste was definitely giving me strange vibes. Unlike Marco, I didn’t feel as though her grief was an act. I truly believed she was devastated by the loss of her husband, but still, something was nagging at me. She seemed to be hiding something. Or someone.

Was she protecting her daughter, Isabelle? Or possibly Isabelle’s boyfriend? Celeste was very upset that we’d talked to her daughter, but she didn’t get defensive until we asked about Dillon.

Then there was Lex Booth. Could it be true he was having an affair with Celeste? Was it possible they planned Garth’s death together?

When I got to Bloomers, Grace greeted me with her usual, “Good morning, love. Come enjoy a cup of coffee with us.”

I followed her into the parlor where Rosa and Lottie were already seated.

“*Buenos Días*,” Rosa called cheerfully, holding up her cup in salutation. “The coffee is *delicioso* today.”

I walked to the serving station, poured myself a cup – loaded it with cream while no one was watching – then sat down at the table. I set my purse in my lap and blew the steam from the mug, noticing Lottie’s appearance as I did.

She looked like she’d stepped back into her old self, the version we’d always known. Her dyed-red curls were pinned back by a pair of bright pink

barrettes. She wore a soft pink sweater paired with a crisp white blouse that gave her a polished edge. Even her cheeks had a faint rosy flush, matching the pink hoop earrings dangling from her ears. The way she carried herself—shoulders squared, a small smile tugging at her lips—felt familiar and steady. She was very happy to hear we had spoken with Celeste and our investigation was finally moving forward.

“Speaking of that,” Lottie mentioned. “I have good news and bad news. The good news is that I spoke with my husband about Mrs. Punter. He thinks she goes to the grocery store every Tuesday morning.”

I took a steaming hot sip and set the mug down. “Today?”

“That’s the bad news.”

I let out a frustrated sigh. “We still have twenty orders to create for the Maraville conference center event, and a big delivery today.”

“Why don’t you finish your coffee and head on over to the grocery store right now,” Lottie said. “We’ll work on the orders while you’re gone.”

“There are too many orders. We don’t have time.”

“Sweetheart,” Lottie stated firmly, “if you need to speak to her, you better do it while you can.”

“Okay,” I answered. “Which grocery store?”

Lottie was about to take a sip but stopped to look at me. “I didn’t think of that.”

After a few minutes of silence, the four of us sipping our coffees, deep in thought, I finally had an idea. “What about Karl? He could watch from the living room window. Once she leaves, he can follow her. If she’s alone, I can go talk to her.”

“That won’t do. Karl has class till noon today.”

I put my hand to my chin, thinking. “Who could help us stakeout the Punter’s house?”

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t be of much help,” Grace mentioned.

“We need you here, Grace, I said, still thinking, crossing off potential cohorts one by one. “Maybe Jillian,” I said out loud.

Lottie reached out to grab my arm gently. “Maybe not.”

“If we did not have all the orders, I would go to the stakeout,” Rosa offered.



"Thank you, Rosa," I said, suddenly realizing who would make the perfect little junior sleuth. "But I think this might be a job for my niece."

"Tara?" Rosa asked.

"Tara," Lottie said fondly. "She's perfect."

"And she always wants to help. I'll give her a call now."

We adjourned our morning meeting. Lottie headed over to the sales floor to prepare for opening, Grace assumed her duties in the coffee parlor, and Rosa dashed off to the workroom, leaving me seated at the parlor table, dialing my niece, praying she was available for the day.

When she answered, all I heard was a groggy, "What?"

"Hello?" I asked.

"Huh?"

"Tara?"

"Aunt Abby?" After a few seconds of silence, I heard her clear her throat. "What time is it?"

I held my mouth close to the receiver and whispered, "It's stakeout time."

After giving Tara a few more seconds to fully wake up, I filled her in on the mission at hand. Before the phone call was over, Tara had already dressed. She was extremely excited and called to check in when her parents dropped her off at the Dombowski's house. Lottie had informed Tara where they kept their spare key hidden in the backyard, which made the whole event even more exciting for her.

Rosa, Lottie, and I were kept busy with our massive floral order all morning. At eleven-thirty, we carefully placed all fifty arrangements in the delivery van and wished Lottie good luck driving to Maraville.

The shop was quiet after Lottie left. Rosa watched the salesfloor while I focused on Karl's case for a while. Most importantly, I wanted to verify Celeste's alibi. I sat at the worktable in the back room and called the church to speak with the receptionist. She gave me the names of several people who worked with Celeste at the rummage sale on Memorial Day.

After making a few calls, it was clear that Celeste had been telling the truth. There were multiple accounts of her staying until ten that night. By the time I'd spoken to the last person on the list, it seemed that Celeste was in the clear.

"Although," the voice on the other end wavered, "there was something odd that I noticed around seven that evening."

"Odd?" I asked, holding the phone closer to my ear. I quickly opened my notebook and said, "What struck you as odd?"

The woman's name was Dana, and she seemed reluctant to speak, so I tried to reassure her. "It's okay. What we talk about is private. Celeste won't know."

Finally, Dana exhaled and said, "I saw a white car pull up around seven. The windows were dark. I couldn't see who was inside, but the car idled for a while in the parking lot."

"Why is that odd?"

By the hesitation in her voice, I could tell she felt uneasy about her next words. "I saw Celeste enter the car."

I waited a few moments, but the woman on the other end didn't continue, so I asked her to explain. A few more seconds passed before she said, "Celeste entered the passenger's side, and the car drove away. She wasn't gone for more than ten minutes, but it seemed strange at the time."

"Did anyone else see this?" I asked.

"I don't think so."

"Do you remember what kind of car?"

"No, just a normal, white sedan."

*White sedan*, I wrote quickly. "Why did it seem strange at the time?"

"I recognized the car," she said, again extremely hesitantly. "It wasn't her husband's."

"Whose car was it?" I asked, steadying my pen above the notebook.

"A man who goes to our church," she answered. "A man named Lex Booth."

I nearly dropped my pen.



Twenty minutes later, I was standing in the cooler with an armful of daisies when I heard my phone buzz. It was a text from my niece.

Tara – *Garage is opening*

Abby – *Is Mrs. Punter alone?*

*Tara – . . . Nope. The old guy is with her*

*Abby – Dang!*

*Tara – If I had a car I could follow them*

*Abby – Your mission is complete for now. Thank you!*

Tara – ☺

At noon, Marco called to say he'd arranged a meeting with Mike Williams, Garth's boss. I walked out the front door and climbed into Marco's Prius for the trip to A-One Construction on the east side of town. As soon as I'd fastened my seatbelt, Marco passed me a neatly wrapped sandwich. "Turkey and Swiss with mustard," he announced.

"Yum." I unwrapped the sandwich and took a bite. "I have big news," I said, "*big* news about Celeste's alibi."

"Finish chewing," Marco said with a smile. "I can wait."

I swallowed hard and said, "I think Celeste and Lex were having a fling."

"Why do you say that?"

I explained what the church's secretary had told me, then took another bite and watched Marco's reaction, which wasn't as shocked as I thought it would be.

"This happened the day Garth was killed?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And they go to the same church?"

Before answering, I bit into the sandwich, chewing slowly, trying to figure out where Marco was going with this line of questioning. My mind was blank, so I answered. "Yes."

"Why do you assume they're having a fling?"

"Okay, detective. What would you assume?"

"Hold on, Sunshine. I'm not saying you're wrong. I just want to know how you came to that conclusion."

I chewed another bite, trying to decipher whether Marco was testing me. I swallowed and said, "Lex was fired for making advances toward Celeste. Then she's seen getting into his car? What would you conclude?"

"I'd verify that it was Lex's car first."

"Marco, based on what we've learned so far, can't we just agree that this seems suspicious?"

"Yes, I agree, but it doesn't mean they were having an affair."

"Then what are you thinking?"

"Lex wanted Garth dead. Maybe Celeste wanted the same thing."

"You think they were plotting Garth's death together?"

"It's a possibility."

I finished my sandwich in silence, thinking about the different possibilities. Even though I had a strong feeling that there was some kind of secret relationship between Celeste and Lex, I couldn't argue with Marco. Not until we verified a few things. Hopefully, our visit with Garth's boss would help my case.

"Did you talk to Isabelle's boyfriend this morning?" I asked.

"No. I stopped by Birch's Body Shop, but Dillon doesn't work today."

"I guess we try again tomorrow."

"I do have some good news, though," Marco said, as he stopped at a red light. "The Downtown Merchants' Association president called me and asked if I would investigate the robberies on the square. He said the police were doing a poor job of it. So, I told him I would."

"That's great, Marco. How much did they offer you?"

"Not much, but the price doubles if I solve the case."

"Okay. What's your plan?"

The light turned green. Marco stepped on the gas as he answered, "It seems like the thieves are targeting stores without alarms. So, I'm going to go talk to the business owners who were robbed, see if they noticed anyone suspicious in their shops. Then I want to canvass the other shops on the square and find out which ones don't have security systems."

"Let me know if you need any help."

He reached over to grab my knee. "Thanks, Sunshine."

We drove east across town toward an industrial stretch bordering New Chapel. I'd just polished off my sandwich when Marco veered off the road onto a gravel driveway. Ahead stood a long, low redbrick building, home to a cluster of businesses. A sign reading "A-One Construction" caught our eye, and Marco eased into a parking spot right out front.

We stepped through a glass door into a small reception area where a young woman was seated at a desk pushed against the far wall. She led us down a short hallway to a door at the end, gave two quick knocks, and pushed it open. Stepping aside, she ushered us in. A silver-haired man in a

T-shirt with the A-One logo and worn jeans stood from behind his desk. "Come in," he said, voice steady. "Have a seat." He gestured to two chairs across from him, then settled back into his own, hands clasped in his lap. "How can I help you?"

"As your secretary told you," Marco began, "we're investigating the death of Garth Schmidt. We understand there was a conflict between Mr. Schmidt and Lex Booth, resulting in Booth being fired. Can you fill us in on the details?"

"Tell me again. You're with the police?"

"No, we're investigating privately for a client. Have you spoken with the police?"

"I have," he answered casually. "I talked to one of the detectives. He was asking about Lex, as well."

"What did the detective want to know?" Marco asked.

"About the incident."

"Can you explain?"

Mike leaned across his desk to pick up a cup of coffee. "Garth stormed into my office a few weeks ago claiming that Lex was hounding his wife. I talked to Lex, and he denied the whole thing. The next week, Garth brings in his wife and makes her recount how Lex came on to her at a church picnic. Gritty details and everything. She was shaking with nerves, the poor thing. Garth demanded that I fire Lex, or he'd take his story to the newspaper. My back was against the wall at that point, so I let Lex go."

"How did Lex react?" Marco asked.

"He was furious. He said Garth made it all up. But I had Mrs. Schmidt's own statement, so I had no choice but to fire him."

I wrote it down, then asked, "Do you think Lex and Celeste were having an affair?"

Williams leaned back in his chair. "No, I don't. I think Lex was telling the truth."

"Why do you think that?"

"Because Garth immediately applied for Lex's position." Williams shook his head. "I knew right then that Garth and Celeste had both lied."

"Did you give Garth the position?"

"He wasn't qualified. So, he asked for a raise instead. Actually, he begged for a raise. Told me all about his financial trouble."

I wrote down *financial trouble* and underlined it.

"Did you give him the raise?" Marco asked.

"No. Not after what he did to Lex. I didn't have enough proof to fire Garth, but I sure as heck wasn't about to give him a raise."

"What can you tell us about his financial trouble?"

Mike leaned forward and rested his elbows on his desk. He interlaced his fingers and said, "Garth accepted a sizeable loan recently and couldn't pay it back."

"How do you know that?" Marco asked.

"Some of the crew meet up on the weekends to play poker," Mike answered. "I've heard stories about Garth putting up high stakes and losing big."

"And where did he get the loan?"

At that, Mike grimaced and put his hands up as if to halt the questioning. "I don't think I should say anymore."

My antenna immediately went up. "Why?"

He shook his head. "It's not exactly legal."

"What's not legal?" I asked.

"They play poker in the backroom of a bar," Mike answered.

"Gambling for profit is illegal in Indiana without a license," Marco explained. "Did you tell any of this to the police?"

After a bit of hesitation, he answered, "No."

"You should've told them," Marco said as he crossed his arms. "That could be considered withholding evidence."

Mike sat back and blew out a deep breath through pursed lips, but didn't answer.

Marco tried to reason with him. "Look, Mr. Williams, this could be important information."

"I don't want any of my guys involved in this. You understand?"

"We're only interested in Garth."

After a few seconds of internal debate written all over his face, Mike answered, "There's a guy who hangs out at the poker games and lends money to those down on their luck."

“Do you know his name?”

“His first name is Pauly. That’s all I know.”

“You know what he looks like?”

“Not really. I know he’s big. I know he’s dangerous. And you should be careful around him.”

“Where can we find him?”

“He hosts the poker game every Saturday night at a bar off highway 30. It’s called The Lost Weekend. You know the place?”

“I do,” Marco answered.

Mike Williams sat back. “I think you’ll find your answers there.”



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“I think we found our tattooed stranger,” Marco said. He opened the passenger door for me. “Care to join me this Saturday at *The Lost Weekend* for a drink?”

“We should take this info to the detective first. He needs to know there’s another suspect.”

Marco closed my door and made his way around the front of the car. He entered the Prius and said, “Detective Corbison already knows.”

I cranked my neck toward him. “How do you know that?”

“If this Pauly character is the same guy harassing the Schmidt’s, his image was captured on the doorbell cam. Chances are, Corbison already questioned him.”

“Then we should find out what he knows. Or at least try.”

Marco started the car. “Why are you so eager to speak with Corbison?”

I didn’t want to tell him that I was scared, but Pauly seemed to be more trouble than we could handle. “It seems a little dangerous to confront this guy, don’t you think? I mean, Garth didn’t seem to be afraid of anybody, but he was terrified of Pauly. Remember what Isabelle said? Garth would keep the shades pulled when they were home and wouldn’t let them answer the door.”

Instead of arguing, Marco pulled out of the parking lot and then reached over to grab my knee. “I understand. Why don’t you go speak to Corbison while I take a look at your shop’s back door.”

“You don’t want to come with me?”

“I don’t have a whole lot of time before my shift, and I want to make sure your door is intact before you close tonight.”



"Okay. Thank you, Marco."

"No problem. And remember step three. Don't make Corbison mad."



Detective Al Corbison was sitting at his desk on the second floor of the police station, located at the rear of the county courthouse building across the street from Bloomers. I hadn't called ahead. I'd just shown up at the desk downstairs and asked if I could talk to him. The officer at the desk phoned upstairs and told him I was there and, luckily, he'd agreed to see me.

He watched me from across the room, a scowl etched on his face, as I came to a stop in the doorway. His office was a mess—papers spilled over the edges of his desk, dusty blinds hung crooked with a few slats cracked open, and a faint smell of stale wood lingered in the air. A wooden chair sat opposite his desk, so I came in and sat down.

"Please," he said sarcastically. "Have a seat."

"Thank you for seeing me."

"My curiosity got the better of me. What do you want?"

Corbison looked haggard as usual, his face lined with exhaustion. His brown suit and tie blended into the dull room, muted and unremarkable. He wore glasses, peering over them at a file spread out on his desk.

"As you may have heard, Marco and I are conducting our own investigation of the Garth Schmidt murder case —"

"Yeah, I know."

"— and I thought we could trade information."

He tapped his pen on the desktop and studied me. "How many times do I have to tell you? I can't reveal the facts in an ongoing investigation."

"We've worked together before."

"That was an exception."

"What if I have knowledge that will help you?"

He lowered his eyebrows and glowered at me. "What do you know?"

"I know there was another man caught on the Schmidt's doorbell cam. It wasn't Lex Booth, and it wasn't Karl."

"So?"

"I know who it is."

He leaned over his desk. "Who?"

"Pauly."

He pulled out a pad of paper and started writing down the information.

"Pauly what?"

"Well, I don't know his last name."

Corbison dropped his pen, removed his glasses, and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"But I know he runs a poker game at The Lost Weekend bar every Saturday night."

"And?"

"And I know that Garth Schmidt was in debt to this man. If you have him on camera, then you should know that he was coming around to collect Garth's debt in the days before his death."

"What's your point?"

"Why isn't this guy your main suspect?"

He leaned back and let out a long sigh. "We have an unidentified suspect on the security cam footage. You're right about that. But he's not in our system. He has no criminal record that we know of."

"And now he's identified. Thanks to Marco and me. And he is most definitely a criminal."

"What do you want me to say, Ms. Knight?"

*Thank you, maybe?* I wanted to say . . . loudly . . . but I didn't. I took a deep breath and tried to focus on Marco's words. *Try not to make Corbison mad.* After a few seconds, I responded calmly. "You don't have to say anything. But I'd like you to consider looking into Pauly."

"Not until we have more information." He picked up his pen, jotted a quick note, and looked up. "Is that all?"

*Try not to make Corbison mad, Abby.*

"No. That's not all. Why are you focusing on Karl? What do you have on him?"

He looked around as though checking for witnesses, like he was finally going to fill me in on some secret, then leaned toward me and said quietly, "I'm not focusing on Karl."

"Come on, Detective. I know you're still considering him a main suspect."

"We have an eyewitness who saw him back by the Schmidt's garage Monday evening, and we have him on video making threatening remarks."

"Your *eyewitness* is Nelson Punter," I shot back, "and I happen to know that he saw a young man who *resembled* Karl."

Corbison tapped his pen on his desktop and stared at me for a long minute before finally saying, "Karl had motive."

"So did Pauly. So did Lex. And Celeste. Did you know Lex and Celeste are possibly having an affair?"

"You're wasting your time, Ms. Knight."

With that, I stood, no longer able to keep my promise to Marco. "You're wrong about Karl, Detective, and we're going to prove it."

"Good luck with that," he said without looking up.

I stopped just outside the door, turning to him to say, "And it's Mrs. Salvatore now. You know that."

I was steaming on my trek across the courthouse lawn. How many times was Corbison going to ignore the evidence. Doesn't he know by now that he's almost always wrong? How many cases are you going to mess up before you start giving me a chance? Aren't you tired of being one-upped by an amateur? Who do you think you are?

Yeah, that's what I should've said.

I walked across the street and around the block to the back alley, where I saw Marco a few stores down.

"How did it go with Corbison?" he asked as I approached.

"You were right about Pauly being captured on the doorbell cam, but the detective hasn't brought him in for questioning."

"Why?"

"He can't identify him. Apparently, no one knows who this guy is."

"Now he does," Marco said. "That's a shame. I was hoping to question this guy myself."

"Well, you might get that chance. Corbison's not going after him until he has more information."

Marco laughed incredulously. "Are you serious?"

"Yep. So, I guess you get to question him after all."

"Then we have a date this Saturday night at The Lost Weekend."

"I wouldn't call it a date."

"Check this out," Marco said as he pointed to the corner of Bloomers' back-alley door. "It looks like the frame has warped. That's why it sticks when you close it."

"Can we fix it?"

"Yeah, but there's something else that concerns me. Look." He pointed to the floodlight above the back door. "The lightbulb is broken. Looks like someone smashed it."

"What? Was someone trying to break in?"

"I don't think they were trying to break into Bloomers. Follow me."

As we walked down the alley, we passed the back exits for several businesses on my block. Each lightbulb had been removed, and every security floodlight had been smashed or dismantled, until we got to the end of the alley.

"It looks like someone was trying to make sure this whole alley was dark," Marco explained.

"Why this alley?"

Marco pointed to the last store at the end of the block. "Every store has a security system except for this one. I'll bet the thief was planning a break-in sometime this week." Marco put his hands on his hips and took a deep breath. "I'll go talk to the store owner, and I'll have to stake out this alley tonight."

"What about my back door?"

"The door frame is a little loose, probably just old, but it works. It locks securely and the alarm system is intact. I'll have to replace the light bulbs in your floodlight, but the door should hold up until I can get someone out here to replace the frame. Did you test your alarm system?"

"Yes, it works."

"Good."

"Marco, who would go to all this trouble to break into these small businesses downtown?"

"I don't know," Marco said with gritty determination, "but I'm going to find out."



That night, Marco got out his night vision goggles, two water bottles, and camera, then dressed in a black T-shirt and jeans, preparing for his stakeout. "Wish me luck," he said.

"Be careful," I answered and gave him a kiss. "You don't know who you're dealing with. He, or they, could be armed."

"I called Reilly. The station's on alert and there will be a patrol car in the vicinity. I'll be just fine."

"I still worry."

He leaned down to the couch where I was lounging with Seedy and Smoke. "No need to worry about me. I can handle myself."

But worry, I did, until I finally crawled into bed and dozed off sometime after midnight. The next thing I knew, my alarm was going off and Marco was crawling into bed beside me.



*Wednesday, June 5<sup>th</sup>*

"Good morning," he said, and leaned over to kiss my forehead.

"Did you have any luck?"

"Nope. No activity all night. I'm going to catch a few hours of sleep then start canvassing the shops that were robbed, see what I can learn from them."

"Want to go interview Dillon today at noon?"

"I'm not sure. It depends on how tired I am."

"Then get some sleep." I climbed out of bed and found Seedy at my feet, her tail wagging. "Did you let Seedy out?"

"All done. Pets are fed, and there's fresh coffee waiting."

"You're my hero, Salvare."

I ate breakfast, got ready for work, and peeked in the bedroom to see Marco fast asleep. I closed the door so Seedy and Smoke couldn't get in then left for Bloomers.

After our usual morning meeting in the coffee parlor, I headed back to the workroom with Rosa to work on orders that had come in overnight. We had a productive, peaceful morning, with no interruptions from my mom or Jillian. Rosa was in a good mood, dancing and humming along to the radio, and Grace was keeping busy in the coffee and tea parlor.

Lottie popped her head through the purple curtain around ten that morning. “Abby, we just sold four of your mother’s petal stools. Can you believe it?”

I stepped onto the sales floor to see the table where we’d displayed her stools was nearly empty. “That’s wonderful. She’s going to be so excited. I’ll bring some more up from the basement.”

At noon I walked into *Down the Hatch* to see Rafe standing behind the bar. He noticed me, pointed to the last booth, then held up his finger as if telling me to wait. I made my way through the people standing at the bar and slid into one of the bench seats in the booth. A few minutes later, Rafe joined me.

“Marco’s not here,” he said, sliding into the booth. “Probably still sleeping. Hungry?”

“Always.”

Rafe motioned for Gert as she came out of the kitchen. She sidled up next to the table, glanced at Rafe, and did a double take. “For a second, I thought you were your brother.”

He gave a rakish grin. “Except way more handsome, right?”

She raised an eyebrow, cracked a dry, wrinkled smile then looked at me. “What’ll it be?”

“Ham and cheese. Sweet tea.”

“You got it.”

“Nothing for me, sweetie,” Rafe added.

She jammed the pen behind her ear and walked away. “I wasn’t asking.”

“Here, I need your help.” Rafe emptied his pockets onto the table and spread out a dozen lottery scratch-off tickets. “Take this quarter. It’s a lucky quarter. Scratch some of these off with me.”

“How many of these things did you buy?”

“Don’t worry about that. Just start scratching.”

I took the quarter and looked at the ticket nearest me. Under the dim lighting, it was hard to read the instructions, and the more I focused, the more confused I became. “What do I scratch?”

“Here.” He quickly scratched off the top of my ticket and said, “Just try to match your numbers with that one.”

So, I did as he instructed, slowly revealing a little number with every couple of scratches until all of the numbers were uncovered. "Not a single match. Now what?"

"No matches at all? That's okay. Try again." He pulled out several more tickets from his pockets. "I have a bunch."

"It's a good thing Marco's not here. This is like a hundred dollars you're wasting."

He kept his head down with his tongue slightly sticking out. He scratched slowly and with purpose, completely focused on his task. "It's not a waste. Trust me."

After ten more tickets, I had only won five dollars. I watched as Rafe grew more frustrated with every ticket. When he was finally finished, he ruffled through each card, double checking for a winner. All in all, he came out with twenty dollars.

"Do you think it's a waste now?" I asked.

"Yeah, the scratchers aren't always a good investment." He smiled as he reached into his back pocket. "That's why I got these."

My mouth nearly dropped open as he fanned out what looked like hundreds of Powerball tickets. "How much did you spend on those?"

"Don't worry about that. Just wish me luck."

"That's a lot of money, Rafe."

"You have to spend big to win big."

"I wouldn't tell your brother."

Rafe put his finger against his lips. "It's our secret." He looked up, saw Marco coming our way, and slid out of the booth. "See you around."

"Is he playing the lottery again?" Marco asked as he approached.

"I'd say the lottery is playing him."

He bent at the waist to give me a kiss on the cheek. "I'll have to sit him down. He's going overboard with this nonsense."

"Why don't *you* sit down? Have a quick lunch with me. We still have time to visit Birch's Body Shop to interview Dillon."

Marco checked his watch. "How about we go right now? I'll put in an order to go."



Ten minutes later, Marco pulled into the lot and parked, then we finished our sandwiches. The building had started as a small mechanic's shop, then turned into a gas station, and finally had gone out of business. After inheriting a small fortune from his father, Birch had purchased the shop and refurbished the entire property. It still had the two original garage doors on the front that led to the mechanic bays. One of the doors was up and a Ford Taurus was hoisted on a rack inside.

Standing under the car was Birch McMahon, dressed in a gray coverall and yellow work boots. He looked just as I remembered from our previous investigation, tall and lanky with long, dirty blond hair.

Marco sensed my apprehension and laughed. "So, tell me what happened again. You asked him on a date?"

"Not exactly a date," I answered.

"But he thought it was a date."

I nodded. "And he was a little upset about it."

"A little?"

Birch turned to see Marco's car idling in the parking lot and pulled a rag from his back pocket to wipe his hands. Then he spotted me. "Well, well," he said as he approached my window, "look who we have here. The married woman with the yellow Corvette. Are you here to humiliate me again?"

I exited the car, my cheeks turning red. "I've apologized for that, Birch. I was investigating a murder."

"And you thought I was the killer."

"No," I replied, "but we had to rule you out."

"By asking me on a date."

"It wasn't a date."

"Yeah, well, do you need your car fixed or are you here to cause trouble?"

"We're here to talk to Dillon Fine," Marco said. "Is he here?"

Birch turned toward the car on the rack. "Yeah, he's here somewhere. But listen, he's my only mechanic right now, so please don't –"

Dashing out from the rear of the Taurus, a young man wearing a dark hoodie made a break for it, racing across the parking lot, heading for the side street. Marco took off after him. I watched my husband sprint across the lot and then around the corner.



“That must be Dillon,” I said to Birch.

He looked at me straight-faced, then shook his head and walked toward the garage.



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



A few moments later, Marco came striding around the corner pulling Dillon by the neck of his hooded sweatshirt.

"You're gonna get me fired," Dillon whined.

Marco stopped in front of me and said to Dillon, "I'll let go if you promise not to run."

"Okay, okay!"

Marco let him loose and Dillon distanced himself. He was tall and lanky, with scruffy, dark hair and dark tattoos covering his neck. He had the same build as Karl, so I could understand how Nelson would've confused the two boys. "Am I under arrest?" he asked nervously.

"Why did you run?"

"I don't talk to cops."

"We're not police," Marco told him. "We just have a few questions."

"You're not here to arrest me?"

"We're private investigators," he said. "Why? What did you do?"

Dillon ran his fingers through his dark brown hair. "Nothing."

"Then why did you run?"

"No reason."

Marco and I stood across from Dillon in the middle of the parking lot. Cars were going by on Lincoln behind us. "Why don't we go talk under the shade," I said, pointing to an old, weathered park table under a tree next to the mechanic's bay.

Marco spoke first. "We need you to answer some questions about the death of Garth Schmidt."

Dillon blinked a few times then wiped the sweat from his forehead. I could see the wheels turning inside his head. He took a calming breath and straightened his sweatshirt. "I don't know anything about that."

"Are you sure?" I asked, pulling my notebook from my purse. "Because we have an eyewitness who saw you arguing with Garth before he died."

He folded his arms and looked down at the table, shaking his head. "I don't have to answer you."

"That's true," Marco said. "You don't have to answer us." He pulled out his cell phone. "But you will have to answer to the police. I'm assuming you've already talked to the detective."

"Yeah."

"Does he know about the fight you had with Mr. Schmidt the night he died?"

Dillon looked away and ruffled his hand through his hair.

"I'll take that as a no," Marco said as he started to dial.

Before Marco could finish, Dillon held out his hands. "Wait. Wait. Okay, I'll talk."

"Then tell me about the fight," Marco said. "Did Mr. Schmidt pull a gun on you?"

Dillon finally made eye contact. "No."

"But you were in his garage."

He ruffled his hair again. "I was in the garage for a second."

"Tell us the whole story," Marco insisted.

Dillon breathed in deeply and started to explain. "Isabelle and I were supposed to go to the movies, so I came to pick her up, but I didn't know her stepdad was in the garage. When I walked up the driveway, he came out and threatened me."

"With a gun?"

"No. He picked up a baseball bat and threatened to kill me if I ever came back."

"Why did he threaten you?"

After a few seconds, Dillon seemed a little more comfortable. "Garth hated me," he answered. "He said I was sneaking into her room at night, which was a lie. And then told me I wasn't allowed to see her anymore."

"You must've been pretty angry at him," Marco said. "He threatened you with a bat, told you he was going to kill you."

Once again Dillon nervously ran his hand through his hair, as though it were a tell. Each time he was faced with a tough question, he fidgeted with his hair. I started to take note.

"So, you didn't go to the movies that night?" I asked.

"No, we did. We went later is all."

"How did you get around Mr. Schmidt?" Marco asked.

"Isabelle texted and told me to park down the street, then she cut through the backyards and met me a block down."

"Why park down the street?"

"Because my muffler's loud. Garth would've heard me come back."

"What time was that?"

"Eight o'clock."

I wrote down the time and underlined it. If they truly went to the movies at eight, then Dillon and Isabelle were in the clear. I wasn't so sure about that.

"Which movie did you see?" Marco asked, trying to verify his shaky alibi.

At that, Dillon looked away and shrugged. "I don't remember."

"You don't remember?" Marco prodded. "You seem like you have a pretty good memory."

He hesitated and then repeated, "I don't remember. It was a chick flick. That's all I know."

"What time did the movie start?"

"I don't know. We got there after it started."

"Huh," Marco grunted, indicating that he didn't believe him. "Let me help you remember. There are two theaters close by. One here in town and one in Maraville. Which one did you go to?"

"Come on, man."

"Which one?"

"Maraville."

Marco retrieved his phone, at that point clearly annoyed and determined to chip away at Dillon's story. "Okay, there are eight movies playing at the

Maraville cinema.” He handed the phone to me. “Which one of these would you consider chick flicks?”

I checked over the list of movies and found two.

After reading the titles aloud, Marco repeated, “Which one?”

Dillon shook his head stubbornly and messed with his hair again. It was obvious he was struggling with his answers.

The tone in Marco’s voice became more authoritative as he persisted. “One movie starts at eight and the other starts at ten. I’m assuming you’ll want to use the movie as your alibi, which would be the eight o’clock show. Does that sound right to you?”

“Yeah, sounds right.”

“Okay, then there should be some proof. You should have a ticket stub or a receipt from the box office on your phone.”

“I don’t.”

“Then I’ll go to the theater and check the security cam footage.”

At that, Dillon grew quiet. His eyes shifted back and forth, as though thinking hard. I could tell he was uneasy. Apparently, so could Marco. “I can go to the theater, or you can show me the ticket stub. Either way, I’m going to find out if you’re lying. And if you are lying, you’ll be our number one suspect in the death of Garth Schmidt.”

Dillon kept his gaze far from Marco’s. He swallowed a lump in his throat.

“What’ll it be, Dillon?” Marco asked.

“We snuck in through the exit,” Dillon finally answered. “Okay? There’s no proof.”

At that, Marco was stumped. He watched Dillon for a moment before asking, “Is that why you’re so nervous, because you snuck into the movies?”

“Why? Are you going to turn me in?”

Marco let out a deep breath and looked over at me, clearly annoyed.

Would Dillon really be nervous about sneaking into the movies? It didn’t seem right. And how would we prove it? Do theaters have cameras at their back exits? Would they even allow us to view the security footage? It seemed like a dead end. But then I thought of something. “Show us the text messages,” I said.

“What?”

"There should be a record of text messages between you and Isabelle. Show us the text she sent you."

"I - I deleted them."

I looked at Marco skeptically. I didn't know anyone who deleted their text messages. Dillon's story didn't hold up under scrutiny.

"What time did you get back to Isabelle's house after the movie?" I asked.

Dillon thought for a minute. He looked down at the ground as though trying to recount his story. "We went to the movies, got out a ten, and I dropped her off around ten twenty."

"Did she go in through the front door?"

"Yeah," Dillon answered.

"How can you be sure if you parked down the street?"

He didn't respond. Instead, he stood with his mouth open, trying to figure out the logistics of his next answer. By the look in his eyes, Dillon had realized he'd made a mistake. The only way he could've known Isabelle went in through the front door was if he'd seen her himself. That meant driving his loud car back to her house, something he wouldn't risk unless he was certain Garth was already dead.

"Oh, wait. I dropped her off down the street."

"I don't think you did," I said. "Are you lying because you know who killed Garth?"

"I'm not lying," he demanded. "I just wasn't thinking is all."

"Did you kill Garth?" I asked.

"No!"

"Did Isabelle tell you to lie?"

"No. She didn't tell me anything."

"Did Celeste?" I fired back.

He ran his hand through his hair. Then he stood and left the table. "I'm done answering questions," he said as he walked away. "Call the police. I don't care."

"You better get your story straight," Marco responded, "because that's exactly what I'm going to do."

Dillon continued to head back to the garage.

"Let's go," Marco said to me. "I think we've gotten all the information we can."

We walked back to his car and climbed in. "What's your assessment?" he asked as we sat in the parking lot, watching as Dillon continued his work in the mechanic's bay.

"I don't think Dillon and Isabelle went to the movies that night."

"I don't either," Marco said. "In which case, they might've plotted Garth's death instead."

"You think those two kids plotted his murder?"

"Well, maybe plot is the wrong word. It could've been a very impromptu plan. Maybe Dillon knocked the gun out Garth's hands and Isabelle shot him."

"And *then*," I continued, "Isabelle and Dillon both spent the rest of the night cleaning their fingerprints from the crime scene?" I shook my head. "I don't see it."

"Okay," Marco responded, "but I do think that's how it went down. I think someone used the bat to attack Garth, knocking the gun from his hands, then the killer picked up the gun and shot Garth."

"Then it could've been anyone." I pulled out my notebook and groaned angrily. "We haven't narrowed it down in the least."

"No, but we have a credible account of how his death occurred. That's something."

"It's not enough."

Marco took a beat. He rubbed the scruff under his chin and said, "In the event that someone grabbed Garth's bat to threaten him, I think the most likely suspects are Lex and Pauly. They probably would've been smart enough to clean up the crime scene as well, but I'm not giving up on Dillon and Isabelle."

"Why?"

"You made a great point earlier. The text messages between Isabelle and Dillon would have been vital to proving their alibi. Maybe we can take this to Corbison. He could get a warrant to check Dillon's messages."

"What if Dillon actually deleted them?"

"He probably did, but the phone company should still have a record."

"I really don't want to visit Corbison again. We didn't leave on good terms."

Marco thought for a moment. "I'll talk to Reilly, see what he can do."

Marco's theory was well thought out, but I still wasn't convinced. After a few minutes browsing through my notebook, I changed the subject. "Did you notice Dillon kept messing with his hair?"

"I noticed he was jittery."

"When I asked him if Celeste told him to lie, he didn't answer. It seemed like he knows something."

"What are you thinking?"

Just then, Birch McMahon came out of the mechanic's bay to see what we were doing. He glared for a moment, then turned around and walked away.

"What if Celeste came home and found her daughter and Dillon in the garage cleaning up?" I asked.

Marco looked at me. "That's not a bad theory. She could be covering for them."

"That's why she would be coaching them both on what to say."

He grabbed my knee, with a glint of excitement in his eyes. "I think you might be onto something here."

"We need to get our hands on their text messages. That might be our best lead."

I watched Dillon as he lowered the car from the hydraulic rack. He saw that we were still parked in the lot and ducked back into the shadows. "What if you go talk to him, convince him to show his phone, see if he really did delete his messages?"

"He must have," Marco responded. "Corbison would've checked his phone messages first thing. Isabelle would've been deleted hers, too. And Celeste, if she's involved."

I huffed in annoyance. "Then what do we do? We don't have weeks to wait for phone records."

Marco started the engine. "Try to get in touch with Celeste. Maybe if we pressure her with the facts, she might confess. In the meantime, why don't you go through your notes and check their interview answers, see if you can find a discrepancy or something to help make our case. And then Saturday



we'll go have a talk with Pauly." He reached over to hold my hand. "One way or another, we're going to solve this case."



Back at Bloomers, I filled in Lottie on the case updates, then called Celeste only to reach her voicemail. Instead of leaving a message, I decided to try again later.

I stepped back onto the sales floor with a watering can, and a little grin crept onto my face when I saw the round table in the middle of the shop. More of my mom's petal stools had sold. I watered the small pots resting atop the stools, then moved to the large display window facing the square. The potted plants there—ferns and begonias mostly—were thirsty. I tilted the can, letting water seep into the soil, watching it soak in while sunlight poured through the glass.

I set the can down and turned to the petal stools still on display in the window. The little round seats, painted in soft pinks and yellows like flower petals, were all over the place. I moved them around, grouping them by color and turning them so they'd catch someone's eye from the street.

I went to the back and down the narrow basement stairs. The air hit me, cool and a little damp, smelling like concrete. A stack of petal stools sat in a nearby corner, far from my mom's old art projects stored way in the back. I grabbed three and tucked them under my arms, then climbed back up, turning the light switch off with my elbow. Up top, I wiped off some dust and set them on the table with the others. I stepped back to check it out. Mom would be happy.

At five o'clock, Bloomers sat quiet and empty, the ladies already gone for the day. I figured I'd give Celeste one last shot before locking up. I dialed her number, listening as it rang three times, then it clicked over to voicemail. Same as before.

I had just ended the call when Roger Ascott came barreling in through the front door. The bell jingled above his head as he noticed me standing behind the counter. "I'm in trouble, Abby. I need your help."

Roger Ascott was a sweet older man with a round face and an even rounder belly. He was always dressed to impress, that day wearing a tailored

navy blazer with a pale blue button-up shirt and a striped tie in shades of gold. He and his wife Elma had recently taken ownership of the town's playhouse theater after the previous owners died under mysterious circumstances. The couple had embraced the new responsibilities with enthusiasm, and so far, the playhouse was thriving—sold-out shows, glowing reviews—which made the sickly pallor on Roger's face that evening all the more alarming. "I'm such a fool," he gasped, his voice thin and shaky.

"What's wrong, Roger? You look awful."

He ran a hand through his thinning hair. "I ordered a new stage curtain for the playhouse. Elma's been on me to replace the old one, and I thought I had it handled. But it's the wrong size—way too big. They dropped it off an hour ago, and it's just sitting there on the stage."

"Can you return it?" I asked, already sensing it wasn't going to be that simple.

"Return it?" He let out a short, frantic laugh. "I can't even lift it! Do you know how much a theater curtain weighs? The supplier won't take it back unless I ship it, and the fees are hefty. Elma's going to tear me up for this."

I leaned on the counter, thinking. "Did they send the wrong one, or did you order it wrong?"

"I gave them the measurements—forty feet wide, twenty high," he said, tugging at his tie. "This thing's gotta be sixty. I don't know where it went wrong, but it's a disaster. Elma's gonna have my head."

"Then they should cover the return fees. You make sure to call them up and let them know that you ordered the correct size. I'm sure they have your order on hand. Have them read it back to you."

Roger forced himself to take a few calming breaths. "Okay. I can do that. But for now, I need a dozen roses. Elma's going to be at the theater in thirty minutes and I'll need something to soften the blow. You know how much she loves roses."

I glanced at my watch and Roger noticed. "I know it's late. I'll pay extra."

"You don't have to pay extra," I told him as I made my way over to the display case. "We have a beautiful arrangement right here. She's going to love it."

He wiped the sweat from his forehead and smiled. "Thank you, Abby."

---

It was unusually warm for early June, so there were lots of people out and about after work. I walked down the block to find the Oberle brothers standing right in front of Down the Hatch. One of the brothers opened the door for me, staring intensely as I walked by, making me feel incredibly uncomfortable. I ignore their gazes, waved to Chris and Rafe standing behind the long, wooden bar, and went to sit in the last booth. In a minute, Marco scooted in across from me.

"I called the Maraville Cinema. They don't have cameras on their back exits, so there's no way to prove Dillon's alibi. Reilly said he can get the phone records to check Dillon's text messages, but that's going to take a while."

"Hello to you, too."

"Sorry, it's been a long day."

Loud voices interrupted us, and I looked over to see one of the Oberle brothers standing in front of another patron, chest puffed out, ready to throw a punch. Marco immediately came out of the back. I watched him get between them and then take one of the brothers by the arm and lead him to the door. He opened the door and pointed to the sidewalk. The other brother slid off his barstool and followed them outside, loudly protesting their eviction.

Marco returned to the booth shaking his head. "You can't believe how many fights I've prevented. Those men are nuisances."

"Why don't you ban them?"

"That'll be my next step."

After Gert took our orders, I asked Marco about his stakeout that night.

"I'll be set up in the alley behind Bloomers," he answered. "If someone's planning to rob a store tonight, they'll have to deal with me first."

"How about they deal with the police first?"

He flashed a crooked smile. "That's what I'll do."

When he agreed with me that easily, I knew his mind was already made up. "Just be careful, please," I said, my voice softer than I'd intended.

Back home, Marco had sprawled out on the couch for a nap, his soft snores filling the living room. Smoke lay curled up in his lap while I took the chance to tackle some housework. I put away the clean dishes and swept the

kitchen floor while our little three-legged dog hobbled around my feet, her scraggly tail wagging. By the time I'd folded a load of laundry, the clock was creeping toward eleven and Marco was still sound asleep. I'd nearly dozed off in the recliner, the TV murmuring in the background, when Marco's alarm blared from his pocket, causing us both to jump.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes, his dark hair sticking up in odd directions. "Time to get moving," he muttered to Smoke, who meowed back caustically.

I got ready for bed while Marco prepared for his stakeout. Before he left, he came into the bathroom. "Don't wait up. It could be another long night."

"Are you sure you'll be okay out there?" I asked, toothpaste still foaming inside my mouth.

"I've got my phone, my flashlight, and a bat in the trunk if it comes to that." He grinned, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "Don't worry, Abby. I'll be back before you know it." Marco zipped up his bag, gave me a quick kiss on the forehead, and headed out of the bedroom.

Then the doorbell rang, sharp and sudden. I froze, toothpaste still on my lips. I rinsed and spit, then hurried to meet Marco at the front door, pulling my robe closed as I approached. "Who could that be?" I asked, half whispering.

He frowned, set his bag down, then walked to the door and yanked it open. "Rafe?" His voice spiked with surprise. "What are you doing here?"

Marco's brother stood in the doorway with a cracked smile and a wild, startled look in his eyes.

"Rafe, what's wrong?" I asked.

"What's wrong?" he nearly shouted. He stepped inside and charged toward me. "What's wrong?"

"Rafe," Marco said. "You're scaring us. Tell us what's going on."

His smile widened and his eyes were large as he turned toward Marco. "I'll tell you what's going on, brother." He started laughing madly with tears welling up in his eyes. "I'll tell you what's going on!"

"What?" Marco shouted. "Tell us."

"I just won the *Powerball*. *That's what's going on!*"



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“Five. Hundred. Thousand. Dollars! *I’m rich!*” Rafe grabbed Marco in a big hug and spun him around in circles. He let go and waved his hands in the air uncontrollably. “Five hundred thousand dollars! Can you even believe it?”

“Five hundred *thousand?*” I asked, practically matching his enthusiasm. “That’s half a million dollars, Rafe!”

He howled with excitement as he jumped up onto the sofa and repeated, “Half a million dollars!”

“Get down,” Marco shouted. “You’ll ruin the couch.”

Rafe cackled hysterically and jumped off with a loud thud. “I’ll buy you a new couch. I’ll buy you whatever you want. I just won the *freakin’ powerball!*” After a few more minutes of self-indulgent celebration, Rafe calmed down, but his wide smile was permanently etched into his cheeks. “This is going to change our lives. I still have to tell Mama and Gina. No one’s going to believe I actually won!”

I looked at Marco, who was standing in the middle of the living room with his arms folded and an unapproachable scowl across his face.

“Well?” Rafe asked his brother with an overly expectant smile. “Aren’t you going to say anything?”

While Marco contemplated his answer, I asked, “How did you win? I mean, how do you know you won?”

“They just called the numbers,” he answered, “I got four numbers right plus the powerball! It’s a guaranteed win. You should’ve seen me at the bar. I was practically doing backflips. I still can’t believe what’s happening. It’s like a dream.”

"Congratulations, Rafe! I can't believe it either."

"You told everyone at the bar?" Marco asked.

"Well, yeah. We were all watching the drawing. I needed help scanning all my tickets." He looked at me. "See, Abby, I told you it was just a matter of time."

"Your mom's going to flip when she finds out."

Rafe enveloped me in a hug and picked me up off my feet, laughing. Seedy stood in the dark hallway, growling, while Smoke jumped up onto the couch to see what was going on. Rafe set me down and turned to Marco. "I'm going to surprise Mama, so don't say anything. I'm going to show up with a brand-new car and take her to the finest restaurant in town. You'll have to help me pick out a suit and a tie, and I don't have to sell my watch now."

"You were going to sell Papa's watch?"

"Marco," Rafe responded. "What is wrong with you? This is a wonderful thing that's happened. Not just for me, for all of us."

"After taxes, it won't be as much money."

Rafe walked over to his brother and grabbed him by the shoulders. "Just celebrate with me for two minutes. I won the *lottery*, Marco."

"Good for you, Rafe," was all he said.

Marco walked down the hallway into the bedroom and Rafe looked at me. "Can you believe it? I win the biggest jackpot of my life, and he acts like I just robbed a bank. How do you stand this guy?"

"Give him some time. I think he's in shock that you actually won."

Rafe laughed again. "Me too. And thanks for the support. I'll get you something extra nice."

"You don't have to get me anything. Just be smart and drive carefully on your way home. Keep that Powerball ticket somewhere safe."

"Oh, I did. And tell that brother of mine to lighten up."

After one final giant hug, Rafe left, and Marco came out of the bedroom looking gloomy as ever.

"You could've at least celebrated with him. This is going to change his life."

He still had a scowl. "Not for the better."

"You don't know that."

"He's going to blow it all. Rafe knows nothing about money management."

"All of that can be discussed later. This is a once-in-a-lifetime thing that's happened. Next time you see him, you should apologize. Tell him you're happy for him."

My grumpy husband grunted and walked into the kitchen. "I wouldn't be surprised if he misread the numbers on his ticket. I'll just wait and see what happens."

"Be safe," I called one last time as he strode toward the garage door.

"Always do," he replied.

I crawled into bed, set my alarm, and was out like a light. My dreams that night consisted of floating Powerballs and ticket scratch-offs and Rafe jumping on our living room furniture. The next thing I knew, Marco was slipping into bed beside me. I turned to look at the clock on my nightstand.

*Thursday, June 6<sup>th</sup>*

*3:30 a.m.*

"Any luck?" I asked.

"No luck."

I yawned. "Sorry."

"G'night, babe." He kissed me gently on the forehead as I drifted back off to sleep.

That morning, I left Marco sleeping soundly in the bedroom and tiptoed around the house trying not to make noise. I fed the pets, took Seedy for a walk, ate toast while I read the morning paper, then slipped out the door and into my yellow Corvette. I got to work at eight o'clock and found the women in the parlor having their morning coffee and conversation. Somehow, everyone knew about Rafe's lottery winning.

I leaned back in my chair, still trying to catch up. "Hold on—how do you already know this? He just found out last night."

Lottie finished a sip of coffee. "You know how quickly news travels around here."

"What do you think he will do with all that money?" Grace asked.

"I think he will buy a mansion," Rosa spouted. "Or a yacht on Lake Michigan. I heard he won a million dollars."

“Herman told me it was ten million,” Lottie said.

It was true that news traveled quickly in New Chapel, but it seemed as though rumors traveled much quicker.

Grace cleared her throat, setting her teaspoon down with a delicate clink. “Well, I’ll tell you what I think. Striking it rich sounds grand until you realize it’s a gilded cage. Didn’t Mark Twain say, ‘I am opposed to millionaires, but it would be dangerous to offer me the position’? Rafe’s got a long road ahead if he wants to keep his head on straight.”

Rosa rolled her eyes, grinning. “He is not doomed. He is loaded! He can hire someone to keep his head on straight.”

“Exactly,” Lottie chimed in. “He’ll be fine. I bet he throws a big party first thing.”

I shook my head, a laugh slipping out despite my confusion. “He didn’t win a million dollars. That’s just a rumor.”

Grace sipped her tea, her lips pursed. “Rumor or not, money changes people. I’ve seen it. My cousin won a scratch-off once – fifty grand, nothing like this – but he was insufferable within a week. Started wearing sunglasses indoors.”

Rosa sat up straight and adjusted her bosom. “I could use a new pair of sunglasses.”

“You just wait, love,” Grace said to me, her tone dry. “Rosa may be joking but wait until the vultures swoop in, family he hasn’t seen in years, ‘friends’ with big ideas. Twain had it right, wealth’s a double-edged sword.”

Rosa waved her scone in the air. “Oh, let him enjoy it, Grace. I am dying to know what he will buy first.”

“Let’s hope he makes a sound investment and saves for his future,” I suggested.

The three of them erupted again—Rosa plotting Rafe’s dream vacation, Lottie dreaming up jet skis, Grace muttering about Twain and taxes. I just sipped my coffee, watching them, wondering how Rafe – always down on his luck, always dreaming of a better life – was handling his newfound fortune.





After we'd opened for the day, I printed out orders that had come in through our website and Rosa worked on orders that had come in over the phone. I was working on a thirtieth anniversary order when the purple curtain parted, and Marco walked in carrying a tote bag.

"Good morning, Salvare. Did you get some sleep?"

He gave me a kiss, his breath still minty fresh. "A little."

Rosa came out of the cooler with a large armful of flowers covering her face. She set them all down on the worktable and looked up, surprised to see Marco standing there.

"I won't disturb you," he said. "I'll get the light bulb changed out back and be out of here in no time. Hi, Rosa."

"*Hola*, Marco. How is your brother doing today?"

"Rafe? He's fine. Why?"

"Tell him I said *hola*," she chirped, her voice lilting with a giddy, school-girl squeak.

My husband looked at her with the most peculiar expression. It wasn't anger, and it wasn't confusion. It seemed more like Marco had instantly put together that everyone in town knew of his brother's big win, and he wasn't happy about it. Instead of answering her, he turned to me. "Is that ladder still in the basement?"

"It's still there," I said.

He walked through the workroom and down the short hallway to the little galley kitchen at the back of the building. On the opposite end of the kitchen was a small hallway that led down to either the basement or out the back-alley door. A few moments later, I heard him come up the stairs with the ladder, then out the back door.

I began to work on the first order I'd pulled. The work room was quiet, just me and Rosa, and the snip of my shears as I trimmed the stems of a handful of vibrant sunflowers. I nestled them into a low vase, weaving in some delicate purple statice for a pop of color, the cool glass fogging slightly under my fingers. It wasn't anything fancy—just enough to catch a customer's eye—but the rhythm of it steadied me after all the lottery chatter.

I had been so invested in my floral design that I almost forgot Marco was outside. I was snapped out of my trance when I heard the loud screeching of tires. Rosa and I hurried out to the sales floor to see what was happening.

Lottie was standing by the big bay window that faced the courthouse. "I heard it, too."

Grace joined us and we all watched for a few seconds until we heard the loud roar of an engine, and then saw a bright red Ferrari zoom down the street. "Oh, no," I said under my breath and quickly made my way into the back room, past the kitchen, and out the alley door. Marco was on the ladder next to the door with his hands raised above his head and a screwdriver between his teeth.

"Almost done?"

"Almost," he mumbled. After taking the screwdriver from his mouth, he continued, "You now have a motion-activated floodlight over the door and a camera with night vision. That way, if someone decides to tamper with the lights again, we'll get them on video."

"That's amazing, Marco. Why don't you come inside now."

He made his way down from the ladder. "As far as the door goes, it's still sticking a bit when you close it, but the frame is solid, so you should be okay until I get someone out here to fix it."

"That's great. Grab the ladder and come inside. Hurry."

Suddenly, the loud rumble of an engine drowned out Marco's response. I looked up the alley and saw the car fly past. With a screeching of tires, it stopped, backed up, then turned down the alley and came toward us at break-neck speed.

"Abby, get back!" Marco said and threw his arm out to back me up against the door.

The bright red car came to a sudden stop in front of us, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Stay here," Marco said in a deep, angry voice. "I'm going to have a word with this clown."

"Marco, wait."

That's when the tinted driver's side window rolled down. "There you are," Rafe shouted over the engine. He pulled down his sunglasses and peered over the frames. "Pretty sweet ride, huh?"

"What are you thinking?" Marco yelled.

He chuckled and revved the engine.

"Rafe, we could hear you from a mile away," I shouted.

"How much did this stupid thing cost you?" Marco asked.

Rafe cut the engine. "Relax, brother. I'm just testing it out."

"Test it out somewhere else."

Rafe slid the sunglasses back up his nose. "Buzzkill."

"You know you have to be at work in thirty minutes," Marco reminded him.

"I'll be there. Geez. And to think I was going to get one for you, too." Rafe started the engine, rolled up the window, and drove slowly to the mouth of the alley. After a few seconds, he stepped on the pedal and peeled out onto the side street, the sound of the engine quickly trailing off into the distance.

Marco let out a string of swear words under his breath. I knew better than to say anything. I simply rubbed his back and thanked him for updating my building's security.

"He's going to blow the whole thing," Marco muttered. "I mean, after taxes, what has he got?"

"Maybe in a few days we can try to talk some sense into him."

"He won't have anything left in a few days." Marco let out a sigh as he folded up the ladder.

Bloomers was bustling when I got back inside. The coffee parlor was full, and there were five people in the shop. Lottie was at the cash counter checking out a pair of customers, so I helped her through the morning rush. Then I headed on back to the workroom, where Rosa was busy putting together a floral centerpiece.

"Everything going well?" I asked her.

"I'm just finishing up an arrangement," she replied. "Six more orders have come in since this morning."

That was good news. I printed out another order and set to work. Just as I started to place my roses in the green foam, the curtain parted, and Jillian stepped through.

"Hello, ladies," she said, giving us a little wave. As usual she was dressed in a chic outfit – a pink, purple, white and aqua print top with aqua-colored pants and white flats. Over her shoulder was a white patent leather bag.

"*Hola*, Jillian," Rosa said.

Jillian set her purse on the counter and slid onto a wooden stool next to where I was working. "How are things going?"

Jillian never asked how things were going, which meant she was probably here to ask me another favor. A favor to which she knew the answer would be no. How long would it take her to get to the point? "Just fine," I said slowly. "What's up?"

"Oh, nothing much." She toyed with her purse strap. "But I'd like to give you a makeover today."

That didn't take long.

"I've been practicing and I'm getting pretty good."

"No, Jill."

"Please?"

I shook my head and locked eyes with her. "No."

"You said you would help me."

"I'd be happy to help you practice your sales technique. That's what I agreed to."

"Forget it, then," she said casually, still toying with her strap.

Jillian also never let things go that easily. Was she trying to manipulate me? Was she that clever?

"Instead of a makeover, maybe you'd be interested in stocking La Meilleure at Bloomers."

Bingo.

"Please, Abs. I won't be able to represent the company if I don't have a place to sell the product."

"First of all," I said, "Not interested. Second of all, I thought you had to pass a test to be a representative."

"Well . . ." she said quietly, as she looked down at her purse.

I knew her strap couldn't have been that interesting, and I was getting tired of playing games. "Come right out and say it, Jill."

She huffed and dropped her purse strap. "I didn't pass the test."

"What?"

"But it doesn't matter as long as I have a place to sell the product."

"I don't get it," I told her. "How could you possibly fail a test to sell beauty products?"

She looked away and shrugged her shoulders. At first, I thought she was embarrassed. But then it all started to make sense. "You never had to pass a test, did you?"

She kept her eyes averted, her shoulders low.

"Why would you lie to me?"

"Because I knew you wouldn't help."

"Why do I have to help you sell *your* beauty supplies?"

"Because I have nowhere else to sell them. Part of the job is having a place where people can come in and try out the stuff."

"You said you had plenty of options."

"Forget it. I knew you wouldn't help."

I walked over to her and placed my hand on her shoulder. "You thought you could trick me into helping you?"

"Just forget it."

"You don't have to lie to me, Jill. Or trick me. You're allowed to ask me for help."

She smiled brightly. "You'll help me?"

"Wait a minute. You're allowed to ask, and I'm allowed to say no. That's how it works."

"So, you won't help?" She looked at me with big doe eyes, reminding me of when we were children. Jillian had severe scoliosis as a child and was very fragile. I was her protector at school until surgery corrected her spine, but I never lost that feeling of protectiveness.

"I'll think about it," I told her.

She slid off the stool and wrapped her long arms around me, her doe eyes and sad cadence instantly gone. "I knew you'd help. I'll let Gemma know when I talk to her this afternoon."

"Who's Gemma?"

"My supervisor. Oh, it'll be so much fun! Working in the same shop!"

*Fun?*

Jillian slid her purse strap onto her shoulder. "Okay, I'll let you get back to work. See you at the country club tomorrow night."

I spun to look at Rosa, who looked just as confused as I felt. Was it possible? Could it be? Did Jillian just outsmart me?



At five o'clock, I set the alarm and locked up after the ladies. I felt so much safer knowing Marco had updated my security. I then headed to my 'Vette parked in the public lot on the next street. Once I was home, I took Seedy out for a walk, then searched through the cupboards, cursing myself for not stopping at the grocery store. Finally, I found a box of spaghetti noodles and an almost expired jar of pasta sauce.

"Something smells delicious," he said, his voice carrying from the doorway as he kicked off his boots. He stopped to pet Seedy, who'd hobbled over to greet him. Then he straightened up and glanced at the table. "Looks delicious, too. Let's eat."

After a few bites, Marco looked up. "Did you get in touch with Celeste?"

"I tried calling her several times today," I said, twirling some noodles onto my fork. "Keeps going straight to voicemail."

He nodded, chewing slowly. "Looks like she's avoiding us again."

We kept eating, the conversation drifting to small things—Seedy's latest obsession with chasing shadows, a strange smell coming from the basement. All night, though, there was this weight hanging over us, something neither of us brought up: Rafe and his lottery win. It was like we'd made a silent deal to dodge it, even though I could tell Marco was itching to say something. I didn't push it either. Too much had happened lately, and I wasn't ready to unpack that mess over spaghetti.

Later, after the dishes were stacked in the sink and the candle had burned low, Marco started getting ready for his third stakeout. He pulled on his dark hoodie, grabbed his keys, and checked his phone one last time. I watched him from the couch, Seedy and Smoke curled up beside me. "Be safe out there," I said, leaning up to give him a quick kiss. "I mean it."

"I will," he assured. "See you in the morning."

He was out the door before I could say anything else, the Prius rumbling off into the night. I stayed up for a while, flipping through channels, but my

eyes kept drooping. Eventually, I fell asleep with Seedy on the couch cushion above my head and Smoke curled up in my lap.

The garage door creaked open around four in the morning, pulling me out of a shallow sleep. Marco trudged in, his shoulders slumped, exhaustion written all over his face. He dropped his keys on the counter and sank into the chair across from me, where I'd sat up, rubbing my eyes. "No luck?" I asked, my voice raspy.

He shook his head. "Nothing. There hasn't been any activity the past two nights. Just me sitting in the dark, watching an empty alley."

I could hear the frustration in his tone. I got up and guided him into the bedroom. "We can talk more tomorrow," I said, trying to cover a yawn. "I'm too tired to think straight right now."

"Yeah," he muttered, running a hand through his hair. "Tomorrow."



**F**riday, June 7<sup>th</sup>

I had just turned the sign in Bloomers' door to "open" when my phone rang, and Sean Reilly's name showed on the screen.

"Hey, Sarge, what's up?"

"I wanted to give you a heads up, Abby. Detective Corbison is on his way over to the Dombowski's house with a search warrant."

"Oh, no. I've got to get over there. Thanks, Reilly."

I took my purse off the back of my desk chair and hustled from the workroom to the shop, where Lottie was rearranging a group of crystal figurines in the cabinet against the wall.

"Lottie, is Karl at home?"

"As far as I know. Why?"

"Get your purse. We've got to get to your house. Now."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



We practically jogged to my car parked a block over, and then I raced to Lottie's house, where two police cars were parked in front. We entered the front door and found Karl – his face white – standing in the living room, while a police officer stood watch.

"Who are you?" the officer asked.

"This is my house," Lottie said in a voice trembling in anger. She brushed past the officer and held her arms out to embrace her son. "Karl, what's happening?"

"I don't know, Mom."

"Where is Detective Corbison?" I asked the officer.

He nodded toward the floor. "Downstairs."

"Stay here," she said to Karl. Then Lottie charged up the hallway to the kitchen with me right behind. The door to the basement staircase was open and the light was on. I followed her down to the basement where another officer was standing guard.

"Let me through," Lottie said. "I own this house."

The officer stepped aside, and Lottie and I entered Karl's bedroom to find Corbison and another officer turning the room inside out.

"What in Heaven's name?" Lottie cried. "What are you looking for?"

"Step back, ma'am," the other officer said.

We watched helplessly as Karl's bedsheets were yanked off and the mattress lifted, drawers were emptied, and the closet was searched. When they were finished, the room looked like a tornado had hit it.

Corbison handed Lottie the search warrant with a flick of his wrist, the paper creasing as it passed from his gloved hand to hers. His eyes slid toward



me for a heartbeat, a quick, cutting glance that felt more like a challenge than a greeting, then he turned and strode past, his coat brushing the air an inch from my shoulder. The officers trailed him up the steps, their boots thudding in unison.

Lottie handed me the warrant, her hands shaking badly. I tried to make sense of it –

legalese twisted into knots, something about “items pertinent to an active investigation.” No details, no clarity, just a blank check for Corbison to rummage through Karl’s life. My pulse quickened. This wasn’t about evidence; it was about me. I’d pushed him too hard about chasing other suspects, and now he was pushing back.

Corbison was halfway to his cruiser when I caught up to him. “Hey!” I shouted, my voice cracking the quiet. He didn’t stop, but I caught up just as he reached for the handle. “Why are you doing this?”

He turned his head slightly. “Doing my job, Mrs. Salvare.”

“What are you looking for?” I asked, stepping into his space.

“It’s all in the warrant.” He nodded toward the paper still clutched in my hand, his tone flat and dismissive.

I shook it at him. “You’re not looking for evidence. You’re doing this to prove me wrong, aren’t you?”

He opened the cruiser door, slow and deliberate, like he was savoring the moment. “Don’t get cocky.” He slid inside, but I grabbed the edge of the door before he could close it.

“If you come back here with another one of these,” I said, holding up the warrant, “you better have something real. Karl’s innocent, and I’ll prove it.”

He yanked the door closed and stared straight ahead. “We’ll just see about that.” The engine growled to life, and he pulled away.

Back at the house, Lottie put her hands over her face and wept. I walked into the living room and put my arms around her. “I’m so sorry.”

“They’re harassing my son!”

“But they didn’t find anything incriminating, so that’s good.”

She took a deep breath and wiped the tears off her face. “I need to call Herman and tell him what happened.”

“You need to be with Karl, too. Stay home the rest of the day. We’ll manage.”

Before leaving, I cast a glance across the street at the Punter's house. A faint glint caught my eye—binoculars, flashing briefly in the window. Old Nelson Punter was at it again. I crossed the road, my shoes crunching on the gravel, and knocked on the front door. No answer. But there it was again—a face, pale and fleeting, peering through the glass before vanishing behind the curtain.

I knocked harder until finally, the door creaked open, and Nelson Punter sat there in his wheelchair, brooding.

His eyes narrowed as they met mine. "What do you want?" he growled.

"I'd like to talk to your wife."

"What for?"

"I want to invite her to the Ladies' Poetry Society this Monday."

He snorted. "She's not going."

"I'd like to speak to her myself."

Nelson squinted at me, his lips curling into a crooked chuckle that didn't reach his eyes. Then, without a word, he slammed the door in my face. The thud echoed down the quiet street.

I stormed back toward my car, my blood boiling. Nelson Punter had just chosen the wrong day to make me angry. My first duty was to clear Karl – that was the priority. But once he was in the clear, my sights would lock onto Punter. I didn't know what I'd do yet; I wasn't thinking straight. All I could feel was a white-hot itch for revenge clawing at my thoughts.

Before leaving the scene, I dialed Marco and put him on speaker. I filled him in on the search warrant and his attitude echoed mine. "At least they didn't find anything."

"I won't be able to come down for lunch today," I told him. "Lottie's taking the rest of the day off and then I'll have to make the deliveries this evening. It's going to be a long day. We might be late to the club for dinner."

"Then I'll come down to Bloomers and drop off lunch," he offered. "And take your time tonight. They won't start dinner without us."



The parking lot was full when we pulled into the club. We had to park in the back, and we were already late, so by the time we joined my family in the main dining room, they'd already ordered drinks.

"Here you are!" my mom called, standing up to give me a hug. "I was getting worried."

"Sorry," I said to the group. "It was a very busy afternoon."

"Come sit by us," Mom said, indicating the vacant seats next to her and my dad.

"How are the petal stools selling?" she asked excitedly as I sat down.

Normally, that question sent shudders of guilt through me, but luckily, this time her art project was a true success, and I was happy to tell her how many we'd sold already.

"That's wonderful!" she said, clapping her hands together. "I'll get started on a new batch right away."

"No," Dad said immediately. "No more stools."

"We still have plenty of the large ones, Mom. Why don't you work on the smaller ones for now. What do you say, Dad?"

He didn't look happy, but he knew better than to argue with the both of us. "That's fine. Just keep them small."

"We're here!" I heard and turned to find Jillian and Claymore carrying baby Harper walking toward us. "Sorry we're late," Jillian said. "Harper was napping, and we didn't want to wake her." She raised her hand in the direction of a waitress walking by. "I'll have a Pinot Grigio. Oh, and can we have a highchair, please?"

Ten minutes later, we four latecomers had our drinks and Harper had her highchair. Just as I was about to take a sip of my Cabernet, Jillian rose from her seat and lifted her wine glass.

"Attention, everyone! I'd like to make a toast."

At that, my parents, brothers, and sisters-in-law raised their glasses hesitantly.

"Here's to my new makeup line at *Chez Jillian*," she called. "I was approved by La Meilleure to sell it!"

Everyone congratulated Cousin Jill, then cheered and raised their glasses to their lips.

"Oh, one more thing," she said.

The glasses were lowered.

"I'd like to make this a very special toast because my wonderful and so, so generous cousin has invited me to sell my products at her shop."

*Invited?*

A round of cheers went around as everyone's glasses were once again raised to their lips.

"And one more thing."

The glasses were lowered, revealing the collective glare from the table.

"I'm going to have a makeup launch party at my house this coming Wednesday evening and all of you ladies are invited!" Jillian paused as though expecting more cheers, and when that didn't happen, she said, "Cheers!" and took a sip of her pinot.

After the waitress had gone around the table to take our orders, my dad leaned forward to ask, "How's the murder investigation going?"

"Not good," I answered. "Detective Corbison ransacked the Dombowski's house today for no reason."

"What did he find?" Dad asked.

"Nothing. Thank goodness. But it doesn't sit well with me. Why is he still going after Karl?"

My Dad rubbed his freshly shaved chin, saying, "I'd bet Corbison has some pretty strong evidence against Karl. Otherwise, a judge wouldn't sign off on a search warrant."

"It's just a threat. What more could he have?"

"There must be more," Dad answered. "Keep digging."

My mom leaned in. "I can't imagine what Lottie must be going through." She shook her head. "If something like that happened to you, Abigail, I would be beside myself with worry."

"You don't have to worry about me, Mom."

She reached out to take hold of my arm. "All I do is worry. Ever since your brother was born, I knew my only job in life was to protect my babies. It's a feeling that never goes away. One day, honey, when you're a mother, you'll understand."

"So set your security alarm every night," my dad added. Then he turned to my husband, "Marco, how's the robbery investigation going?"

He shook his head. "Not good either. I've done a few overnight stakeouts with no luck. I've talked to the downtown business owners, but no leads. Unless I can catch this guy in the act, I might not solve the case."

"Well, keep at it, son."

"Thank you, sir."

"One thing I might suggest," Dad said, "if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

"If you're not having any luck, switch things up. Start patrolling during the day and take note of any cars or people hanging around the alleys or sitting on the benches around the square."

Marco nodded. "We did find a whole alley full of broken floodlights. And I was watching that alley all night. Maybe you're right. Maybe he's been setting things up during the day."

"There you go," Dad said. "You get a good night's sleep tonight and start your patrol tomorrow afternoon."

"It's a good plan, but I'll have to check with Rafe. I'm not sure he'll want to work long hours anymore."

My dad sat back in his wheelchair. "I heard the good news," he said. "Rafe is quite the lucky one. That's a lot of money to land in a young man's lap. Let's hope he comes in to work at all."

I held my breath.

Marco nodded and reached for his wine. "My thoughts exactly."



*Saturday, June 8<sup>th</sup>*

It was my day to work – Rosa had the day off – so I woke early to the sound of Marco breathing heavily beside me. As usual, Smoke was curled up in between Marco's legs and Seedy was nestled along his back. He was in need of some sleep, so I slid carefully off the bed and quietly coaxed Seedy from her slumber. As soon as we were in the hallway, Smoke came galloping out of the bedroom, meowing hungrily.

I fed our pets, took Seedy for a walk, ate my breakfast, and made it to Bloomers by eight o'clock, arriving just as Grace and Lottie took seats in the coffee parlor.

"Morning, ladies," I said as I headed back to the coffee bar. "Lottie, how is Karl?"

"He's depressed and frightened," she answered. "He stayed in his room all day cleaning up and listening to music. He ate very little at dinner and was still asleep when I left this morning."

"Poor guy," I said. "I remember what it feels like to have a target on your back."

"He must have courage, my dears." Grace rose and cleared her throat; a sure sign she was about to give us a quote. She took hold of the edges of her cardigan and lifted her chin. "As that most famous author Mark Twain once said, 'Courage is resistance to fear, mastery of fear - not absence of fear.'"

"Thank you, Gracie," Lottie said.

We opened the shop at nine and I headed back to the workroom. I sat down at the counter where my computer was and logged onto the Bloomers website and downloaded five orders.

Half an hour later, I was working on an order when I got a notification that there was a delivery at the back door. I went up the hallway and through our tiny galley kitchen to the heavy steel door at the back of the building, where I found two large boxes waiting. Both were in perfect shape.

"Your call to the delivery company worked, Lottie," I said, when she came back to the workroom later. "We got a perfectly delivered order."

"Good. The driver must've finally learned how to do it right."

My cell phone rang, and Marco's name popped onto the screen. "You're awake!"

"You can thank Smokey boy for that. I woke up to him kneading on my stomach."

"I'm sorry. I forgot to close the door. What are you doing now?"

"I'll probably come into work for a while. Rafe was supposed to open the bar today, but he won't answer his phone."

I could hear the anger in Marco's voice. So, I said calmly, "Don't be too hard on him."

"Anyway," he answered, ignoring my suggestion. "Are we still going to The Lost Weekend tonight?"

"I guess we don't have a choice," I told him. "I can't get ahold of Celeste, and Corbison doesn't seem willing to look at anyone other than Karl."

"Why don't you come by at noon? We can go over our questions."

"I can't. We have a lot of orders and Rosa is off today."

"Okay, I'll bring you a sandwich. See you later."

But it wasn't Marco who showed up at noon. It was Rafe, and he was grinning from ear to ear. "Here's your lunch," he said, setting a takeout container on the worktable. He stretched out his arms and kept looking down at his wrist and then up at me.

"Is that a new watch?" I asked, lifting his wrist so I could examine the timepiece. It was gold, with a large gold face and bold numbers.

"It's a Rolex!" Rafe announced. "Can you believe it? I own a real Rolex!"

I wasn't sure whether to congratulate him or scold him. Rolexes cost tens of thousands of dollars. But if that was how he chose to spend his winnings, who was I to squash his elation. "It's beautiful, Rafe."

"Thanks. And check out my new shoes." He held out a foot so I could see a pair of brown leather dress shoes.

From the back room, Rosa appeared, eyeing Rafe as she sashayed toward us. "*Hola, Raphael*. You are looking very handsome today."

He turned, surprised, with a blushing grin spreading across his face. "Hi, Rosa."

Oh, brother. Here we go.

"Have you shown your new things to Marco?" I asked.

"No way. He wasn't in a great mood, so I decided to wait."

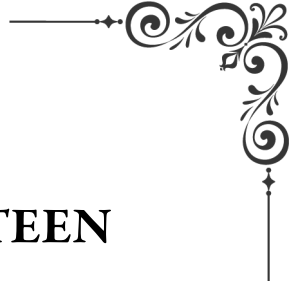
Rosa put her hand on his shoulder. "He is just jealous. Do not worry about your brother. He will come around."

"Speaking of the grouch," I said.

"He went over to Churchill's department store," Rafe answered. "Apparently, Mr. Churchill has some security footage of someone sneaking around in the alley behind the building."

"Well, thanks for the food," I said to Rafe as I turned for the backroom. He hadn't responded as I approached the purple curtain, so I turned to see Rafe and Rosa staring into each other's eyes.

Interesting.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



At five, I locked up the shop, set the alarm, and headed home to feed the pets and grab a bite to eat. Saturdays were busy at Down the Hatch, so Marco had called in extra hands to work the bar since we had to leave for part of the evening. We left the house at seven-thirty and drove south through town.

"Anything new with the robbery case?" I asked.

"Not really."

"Rafe said you were at Churchill's."

"I checked out the security footage, but it wasn't anything. I'm really having no luck with this case, and I don't know what to do."

"Why not patrol during the day like my dad suggested?"

"Because the robberies were all done at night. It seems like a waste of time."

"Okay, but my dad knows what he's talking about."

He reached over to squeeze my knee. "So do I."

I didn't want to argue, so I just put my hand on his and said, "I trust you."

"Thanks, Sunshine."

"Now, let's go over our game plan."

Marco stopped at a red light. "First, we need to verify that this Pauly is the same man who came to the Schmidt's door. But we need to keep it casual. We don't want to draw attention. So, I'm going to try to get into the game and lose a few hands. What I need you to do is get a photograph of him."

"What if he's playing poker all night?"

"He'll have to come out of the back room at some point. Turn your flash off and snap a photo when he comes out. I'd also like to see if there's a black Mercedes Benz SUV in the parking lot and get a photo of that, too, especially



the license plate. Then we can give Corbison the info so he can run the plate and get Pauly's full name and address."

"Why do you need to get into the game? Let's hang out by the back room and wait for him to come out."

"It's more complicated than that."

"How?"

The light turned green. Marco rubbed the scruff and checked his rear-view as he stepped on the gas.

"What aren't you telling me?"

"Gus is a friend of mine," he explained. "If we involve the police, there's a good chance they slap him with a large fine, or worse, shut his bar down. If I can get in that poker game and talk to Pauly, I might be able to scare him into shutting the game down for good."

"I don't like it, Marco."

"Sunshine, if it gets dangerous, we'll let the police handle it."

We drove down Route Two about two miles until we reached a long, one-story building with faded brown paint and an old-fashioned brown mansard roof, with a sign on the front that said, *The Lost Weekend*. We pulled into the gravel parking lot and weaved through the rows of cars looking for Pauly's Mercedes. After circling the lot for a third time, Marco finally gave up. He found an open spot and parked the car.

"Maybe he's not here," I said.

"He'll be here," Marco responded as we exited the car.

The nineteen seventies style bar looked worn-out and rundown, and when we stepped inside, we had to blink to see through the haze of smoke in the large, dimly lit room. I wrinkled my nose at the stale smell. Thank goodness Down the Hatch was smoke-free and always smelled clean.

There were a handful of men and women sitting down at the bar on the right side of the room, some with their heads down, others watching the television hanging above the mirrored wall. Near the back were two women playing pool. There was even a small linoleum dance floor where a couple was slow dancing to a song playing over the speakers.

We walked up to the long wooden bar and Marco shook hands with the bartender. Behind him was a mirrored wall lined with shelves and liquor bot-

bles, some dusty and faded, some turned upside down with spigots on the ends, and a line of beer taps across the entire bottom row.

"Abby, you remember the owner, Gus," Marco said.

"I do," I said. "Nice to see you again."

His full gray mustache fanned out as he gave me a broad smile. "You, too, gorgeous." He lit up a cigarette and took a drag. "You're just in time. Poker game starts in five minutes."

"Is he here?" Marco asked. "I didn't see his SUV outside."

Gus nodded, his cigarette bobbing between his lips, then shifted his gaze toward the front door. Pauly stood in the doorway, a hulking figure who filled the frame. He stood well over six feet, broad and bulky, a wall of muscle wrapped in a faded black t-shirt that strained at the shoulders. Tattoos sprawled across his thick arms inked in deep blues and reds. His hair was dark, slicked back from his forehead with a sheen of grease, exposing a square, blocky head that looked carved from granite. His jaw matched it, sharp and unyielding, but his eyes – black, cold, and bottomless – that's what scared me the most.

Pauly didn't say a word to anyone, didn't even glance at the handful of regulars hunched over their beers. He moved with purpose, his heavy boots thudding against the warped wooden floor as he cut through the room. He passed the pool tables, where a couple of guys froze mid-shot, and crossed the small linoleum dance floor.

Beyond the bathrooms, tucked in the shadows, was an unmarked door—plain wood, scratched and dented, no sign or handle to hint at what lay behind it. Pauly reached it in three strides, his meaty hand dwarfing the knob as he turned it. He stepped inside; his bulk briefly silhouetted against a flicker of yellow light from within, leaving the door ajar.

"What do you know about Pauly?" I asked Gus.

"Not much. He showed up a couple months ago and set up shop in my back room. The only thing he ever said to me was to keep my mouth shut, and then proceeded to tell me what would happen if I called the cops."

"Has he ever been violent?"

"Last week, some poor guy got on Pauly's bad side. I heard the guy ended up in the hospital."

I looked at Marco to get his reaction, but he didn't seem fazed.

"This is too dangerous," I told him. "Are you sure you want to do this alone?"

"He won't be alone," Gus said as he retrieved a baseball bat from behind the bar. "I'll be right here if things get out of hand."

That wasn't as reassuring as he thought it would be.

"I know how to handle myself, Sunshine. I'll be alright. You find a seat by the back room and have your camera ready. Okay?"

"Let me get you something to drink," Gus said. "On the house. It'll help calm your nerves."

He poured me a glass of cabernet then led Marco to the back of the bar, where he disappeared into the dimly lit room. I sipped my wine and swiveled on the barstool to keep a close eye on the back. Unfortunately, the view was obstructed by two women playing pool, and there really wasn't anywhere else for me to sit.

"Hello, beautiful," I heard, and turned to see a grinning man slide onto the stool beside me. "I haven't seen you here before."

The man was tall and skinny, with a long brown beard and short, thick hair. He was wearing a navy Chicago Bears T-shirt, faded blue jeans with holes in the knees, and scuffed white sneakers.

"I'm waiting for my husband," I said politely.

"While the cat's away," he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

I picked up my glass and slid off the stool. "I don't like mice." I walked over to the women at the pool table and positioned myself close to the doorway. "Mind if I watch?" I asked them.

"Suit yourself," a short blonde said as she leaned over to make a shot.

I tried to tune into what was happening beyond the doorway but all I could hear were indistinct murmurs.

"Want to join us for a game?" the other woman said to me. She was brown-haired, heavy set, and had a friendly smile on her face.

I politely turned down her offer and stood quietly in the corner, watching the door, sipping my wine. After about fifteen minutes, my wine glass was empty, and my nerves were tingling. Nothing had happened since the poker game had begun. No one had come in, and no one had come out.

"Come on, sweetie," one of the women said. "You look lonely. Why don't you join us?"

I declined again, but the woman insisted. She handed the pool cue across the table and said, "You take my spot, and I'll get us some more drinks."

"It's been a while since I've played," I told her as I accepted the pool cue, which was the truth. I hadn't played billiards since I was a teenager, when my dad had installed a pool table in our basement. I used to play with my brothers, and I hadn't been too bad at it. But that was years ago.

"I'll be back with our drinks."

The shorter woman racked the balls for me. "My name's Margie. That's Annie."

"I'm Abby. Nice to meet you."

"Go ahead. Take the first shot."

As a leftie, I leaned over the table and balanced the stick on my right hand, then aimed at the cue ball and let the stick go. The cue ball scattered the other balls, sinking a solid orange and knocking a solid blue near the side pocket. I aimed the white ball again and hit the blue ball straight into the pocket.

"Good shot," Annie exclaimed.

"Pure luck," I told her.

We played for about fifteen minutes, with my head on a swivel toward the doorway, waiting for Marco to emerge. Two of the poker players had come out to use the restroom, but so far, no sign of Marco.

"You know someone back there?" Margie asked me.

"My husband. It's his first time."

"I hope he don't mind losing," Annie said. "Those guys are good."

"Just don't borrow any money from Pauly," Margie added.

I had just lined up my shot when my concentration broke. I looked up at the woman. "What do you know about Pauly?"

"He's a flirt," Annie said with a cute smile.

"He's a shark," the other corrected. "He shouldn't be allowed in here."

"No, he's just generous. He's a big teddy bear."

"More like a grizzly."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Margie set her pool stick down to light a cigarette. Then she explained, "I mean he's generous, sure. He throws his money around like a big shot, trying to impress the ladies –

tips the bartenders well, keeps them happy – but he also lends money to the poker players when they're down on their luck. And guess what happens when they can't pay him back?"

I shook my head. "What?"

"I think you can guess."

"He kills them?"

She burst out laughing. "Honey, you can't collect from a dead man. No, he just beats the money out of them."

"How does that work?"

She took a drag and lifted her shoulders. "You beat someone hard enough, they'll come up with the money somehow. You just make sure your husband doesn't borrow any money. The interest doubles every week."

"How do you know all this?"

"You're not the only one waiting on her husband." She let the cigarette rest between her lips as she lined up her shot and sank the eight ball. "Sorry, honey. You lose."

I set my pool stick down just as Pauly emerged from the poker room and headed to the restroom.

"Thanks for letting me play," I told the women, and hurried toward the ladies' room. The restrooms were up a short hallway where, fortunately, I could hang out and not be seen. I took my phone out of my purse and pretended to be on a call, and when Pauly emerged, I raised the phone higher, snapped a photo, and quickly lowered it again. He paused to look at me, his cold, dark eyes staring me down, and I felt my heart race as I chatted away to no one.

He lingered a moment, then continued up the hallway and out into the bar.

I waited a minute then checked the photo. It was dark, Pauly's face was barely visible. I needed a better shot. I looked up to see Marco emerge from the back room, shaking his head. He gave me a quick, sharp glance and headed toward the bar. I followed, catching up as he slid onto a stool and dropped his head into his hands.

I kept my voice low. "What happened?"

"Play along," he whispered, barely moving his lips.

At that moment, Pauly emerged from the back room and sauntered toward us. He was even bigger up close, with hulking shoulders and bulging biceps. He stopped behind our stools, his heavy hand landing on Marco's shoulder. "Not having much luck, huh?" he asked in a deep voice with a quiet edge.

Marco let out a long sigh and answered solemnly, "Nope, and I could've used that money, too."

"Tell you what, I'm going to pull my car around to the alley. Meet me outside in five minutes. We'll get you back in that game."

At that, Marco lifted his head, looked up at Pauly and nodded. "Sounds good."

Pauly lumbered across the bar and left out the front door. Gus came up to where we were seated to hear what had happened.

Marco smiled. "I've got him right where I want him."

"You are not going out in that alley alone," I demanded.

"It's okay. I can handle him. You stay put. I'll be back in a few minutes."

I didn't answer my husband because I didn't want to lie to him. There was no way I'd stay put. Gus offered me another glass of wine, but I declined and excused myself. Within seconds, I was out the door and sneaking my way around the building.

The alley stretched dark ahead, the only light a dim glow above the back door casting long, uneven shadows. I searched the dark but couldn't see Marco. Then an engine rumbled behind me. I stepped back into the shadows as Pauly drove his large, black Mercedes into the alley.

The tires crunched along the gravel until the SUV came to a stop near the back door. The red brake lights faded as Pauly turned the engine off. I moved forward into the alley as Pauly exited the car. Marco stepped into the light, and they began to talk.

Slowly, I made my way down the backstreet, careful to step lightly across the gravel. While Marco had him distracted, I decided to capture a picture of Pauly's license plate. I retrieved my cell phone quietly from my purse and inched my way further, hidden from sight by Pauly's vehicle. I sidled up to the back of the SUV, where I could finally hear the two talking. Without making a sound, I looked around the corner.

Pauly opened the driver's-side door and took out a black leather briefcase. "What'd you lose? Two hundred?"

"Yep," Marco said.

Pauly pulled out a stack of hundred-dollar bills and started counting. "Here's your two plus five more so you can stay in the game."

"I can't accept that," Marco said.

"It's not a gift," Pauly said. "It's a loan. You'll pay me back." He held it out. "Come on, man. You don't want to quit playing this early, do you?"

"I'm assuming you charge interest on this loan," Marco said.

Pauly shrugged. "What kind of businessman would I be if I didn't?"

I quietly reached into my purse to retrieve my phone, hoping I could make a quick exit. My other hope was that Marco would hurry, make his deal, and get out of there. But, from what I could hear, it wasn't going to be that simple.

"So, this is a business?" Marco asked.

There was a moment of silence before Pauly answered, "Let's just call it a sideline."

"Do you only lend money to strangers?"

Pauly's eyes narrowed. "What's with the questions?"

I leaned back, sensing the shift. Time was running out. I steadied my phone, framing the license plate in the dim light. My finger hovered, then tapped, and – to my absolute and utter devastation – the flash went off, lighting up the alley, giving away my cover.

Gravel scraped as Pauly's heel swiveled. "Who's there?" he shouted, his voice cutting through the dark.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Marco tried to divert Pauly's attention, but he strode quickly toward the back of the SUV. "What the hell are you doing? Did you just take a picture of me?"

I backed up, getting to my feet, ready to run when Marco jumped in. "That's my wife. We don't want any problems. We just want to talk."

"Why did she take my picture?"

"I didn't take your picture," I told him.

"You were taking my picture inside, too, weren't you?"

"Don't worry about her," Marco demanded. "Talk to me."

He stepped closer to Marco, standing several inches taller and fifty pounds heavier. "You a cop?"

"I'm not a cop, but I'm not here to play poker either. My wife and I are private detectives."

Pauly glanced from Marco to me. "You better destroy that picture, or I'll destroy the phone."

"Look at me," Marco said. "Don't worry about her. I want to know about Garth Schmidt."

At that, Pauly swung around with a look on his face like he could kill. "What did you just say?"

"Garth Schmidt. How much did he owe you before he died?"

"I'm starting to get angry. And when I get angry, people get hurt." Pauly's voice dropped low, a growl rumbling from his chest as he loomed over Marco. His tattooed fists clenched, and the air around us thickened with the promise of violence.

"Were you angry when you confronted Garth in his garage?"



“What?”

“You came back that night to get your money, didn’t you?”

“I don’t have time for this,” Pauly said in disgust and started toward his SUV.

“If you don’t talk to me, then you can talk to the police.”

Pauly’s jaw tightened, the scruff on his face bristling as he bared his teeth in a snarl.

“The detective has you on the Schmidt’s doorbell camera the day Garth died,” Marco continued. “He doesn’t know your identity, so he hasn’t been able to arrest you. Until now.”

He swung back around, his face red. “Are you threatening me?”

Unflinching, Marco pressed on. “Did you go back to Garth’s house that night?”

Pauly strode forward – right into Marco’s face – and said, “None of your damn business. Now get out of here before I get really angry.”

“That’s not how it works,” Marco said, stepping back. “I’m not leaving until you answer my question.”

Pauly stepped closer, again getting right into Marco’s face. “You got a death wish or something?”

This time, Marco didn’t step back. He stood his ground, his nose just inches from Pauly’s and said, “Answer the question.”

Pauly ratcheted his shoulder back, balling his fist and swinging with all his might. Marco dodged the angry brute and grabbed his wrist, twisting his arm behind his back and pushing him across the alley until he was face-first against the brick wall. “Now, how about you answer my question?”

“Let go!” Pauly bellowed. “You’re messing with the wrong guy.”

Marco twisted harder, drawing a howl of pain. “Okay, okay! I went to his house. I just wanted to reason with the guy, but he wasn’t there.”

“Did you come back that night?”

“No.”

“Did you kill him?”

“Why would I kill him? He owed me money.”

“Maybe you didn’t go there to kill him,” Marco said. “Maybe you just went to threaten him. He pulled a gun on you. Things got out of hand.”

“No, I didn’t go back.”

"Where were you that night?"

"None of your business."

Marco tightened his grip and twisted the man's wrist.

"At home. I was at home."

"Can anyone verify that? A wife? A girlfriend?"

He shook his head. "No."

Marco released him. "Your days at this bar are done. Do you understand? If you want to continue this little operation, I suggest you do it somewhere else."

Pauly turned, rubbing his wrist, his mouth twisting in fury. "You just made a big mistake." He turned to growl at me, "And you better destroy that picture, or I'll find you." Then he jumped into his SUV and took off.

Marco walked up to me in the dark, his face being revealed as he got into the light. "Your flash was on."

"I know. It's on auto. I'm sorry. I didn't even think about it."

"And why were you taking pictures in the dark?"

"I wasn't taking pictures of him. I got a picture of his license plate. I'll show you."

He shook his head slowly and put his arm around me as we walked into the parking lot. "No, you won't."

"What do you mean?" I asked as I pulled up my photos to show him.

"License plates are photo reflective."

As he explained it, I noticed the photo I'd taken was completely white.

"The flash reflects the light back to the lens, basically blinding the camera."

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay. I saw the plates before he took off."

As we walked back to the car, I said, "Pauly clearly has the capacity to harm someone. And he has a temper. If Garth pulled a gun on him, things could've gotten out of control pretty quickly."

"It's a good theory. Unfortunately, we don't have much to go on."

"Then what do we do about Pauly?"

"We might have to leave him for the detective."

"I hate this, Marco. Another dead end. What am I going to tell Lottie?"

"Corbison will definitely have to take a look at Pauly now. So hopefully that will take the heat off Karl."

"With Corbison," I said, "I wouldn't bet on it."

"At least it gives us time to talk to Celeste again. Has she responded to your voicemails?"

I checked my phone as we approached his car. "Nope."

Marco opened the door for me, and I slid into my seat. I watched as he circled the front of the car. His form-fitting t-shirt was still tucked into his dark jeans. His hair was still slicked back from his forehead, and as he opened the door and sat down, I couldn't take my eyes off of him.

He started the engine and looked over at me with raised eyebrows. "What?"

"You didn't even break a sweat back there."

"Ranger training," he said coolly, lowering his lids.

"Those were some pretty nifty moves you put on him. You roughed him up pretty good."

"Yeah?"

"How about you teach me some of those moves?"

Marco put his hand on the shift gear and put the car into reverse. "Sure, whenever you want."

I placed my hand on top of his. "How about tonight?"



*Sunday, June 9<sup>th</sup>*

Marco and I were supposed to have Sunday off, but a phone call at noon changed our plans for the day.

"Rafe isn't coming into work today," Marco said angrily, slamming his phone onto the kitchen counter. "He's taking Mama to Chicago for a shopping trip."

I didn't know what to say. It was getting harder and harder to defend Rafe. I wanted to say something hopeful, like "He'll settle down," but the words stuck in my throat. Truth was, I wasn't sure anymore. "I'm sorry you have to go in, but I'll come by for dinner and help cheer you up."

"Thanks, Sunshine."

Instead of spending the day with my husband, I spent it with our pets. When Seedy realized I wasn't leaving with Marco, she flopped onto the rug, her tongue lolling out, waiting for me to scratch her ears.

Smoke, on the other hand, watched from his perch on the windowsill, his Russian Blue bulk spilling over the edge like a furry storm cloud. He weighed a solid eighteen pounds, mostly muscle and attitude, and when he jumped down—silently, despite his size—the floorboards creaked under him. He rubbed against my leg once, then sauntered off to bat at Seedy's tail.

I let them distract me for hours. Seedy dragged her favorite rope toy across the living room, and I tossed it until my arm ached, her lopsided gallop making me laugh despite myself. Smoke sprawled on the couch, occasionally swatting at a sunbeam, his purr a low rumble I could feel in my chest. It wasn't the Sunday I'd planned, but it was a good day, nonetheless.

The bar was fairly busy when I arrived that evening, with most of the bar stools full and half of the tables seated. As usual, Gert was floating between tables with a pen behind her ear and a tray under her arm. Chris was stationed behind the bar. And in about ten minutes, Marco came out from the kitchen with two plates of food. He set the plates down and slid in across from me.

"Have you heard from Rafe?" I asked, hoping I wasn't starting trouble. By my husband's expression, I regretted my decision.

"He said he couldn't come into work tonight because he had *important* business to attend to. Which means he's probably off buying some fancy sports car."

"Have you talked to him yet?"

"No, and I'm not sure he'd even listen."

The door opened and I looked over to see one of Marco's regulars walk in. He spotted Marco and came straight over.

"Hi, Hank," Marco said.

"Hey, look what I found at the shoe store." He opened his hands and there was Marco's brass bell. "I recognized it right away."

Marco picked it up. "Thank you, Hank. I didn't even realize it was gone. You said it was at the shoe store? Ascott's shoe store?"

"You got it. Displayed front and center like it was some kind of prize. I was about to buy me a new pair of loafers, but I saw that thing, I snatched it,

and I came right over. The Oberles took ownership of that store. Those boys stole it for certain. They aren't getting my business anymore."

"Chris," Marco called across the bar, "get this man a drink on the house."

"Thanks, Marco," Hank said, turning red. He took a seat at the bar and ordered a beer.

"Why would they steal it and then display it at their father's store?" I asked.

"Probably to see what they could get away with."

Gert appeared at our booth. "No consequences," she added. "My guess is neither one of them ever had to account for their actions. And I'll bet Rafe was right about them being responsible for all the break-ins around here."

"Well," Marco said. "They're going to face the consequences this time. The Oberle brothers are now officially banned from Down the Hatch."

"Oh, please," Gert said with a twinkle in her eye. "Please let me be the one to tell 'em."

"We'll tell them together."

As Gert walked away, I couldn't help but wonder if Gert and Rafe were right. "Do you think the Oberle brothers are robbing stores? They don't need the money. Why would they do it?"

"Again, maybe they just want to see what they can get away with."



**M**onday, June 10<sup>th</sup>

Mondays at Bloomers started out with our traditional weekly morning breakfast prepared by Rosa, *huevos Marisol*, an egg dish named after her grandmother. Grace, Lottie, Rosa and I gathered in the coffee parlor to eat and discuss our weekends. Lottie reported that Karl had never left the house, fearful that the police would pick him up. I assured her that Sgt. Reilly would certainly give me a heads up if that were the case.

We finished our coffee and opened the shop to a handful of people eager for their morning coffee and scone, which today's flavor was raspberry. I headed back to the workroom and got on the computer to print out the orders that had come in. There were fourteen, I was happy to see, so I put them

on the spindle, pulled one and set to work. Rosa took another and that's how our day started.

Mid-morning, the curtain parted as Jillian stepped through followed by a woman in a pink suit. "We're here!" Jillian announced cheerfully. "I hope you have time for us."

I was in the middle of wrapping an arrangement. "Time for who?"

"Gemma Stone," the woman said as she stepped through the curtain with a bright smile, shaking my hand. She was a little taller than me, with medium brown hair cut short, brown eyes heavily made up, bright pink blush, and bold pink lips. "It's nice to meet you at last. I've heard so much about you."

"Her voice had a faint, brassy lift, slipping into an accent I couldn't quite place—something hovering between New Jersey's quick clip and New York's sharp edge."

"We at La Meilleure are very happy that you'll be selling our products," Gemma said. "It's our goal to get our name, as well as our lipstick, on every woman's lips." She paused to study me. "I have the perfect lipstick shade for you. It's called Tangerine Tulip. Perfect with that wild, red hair."

Did she just say . . . *wild*?

Jillian went around to the other side of the worktable where Rosa was standing and put her arm around her. "Rosa loves our makeup. She's wearing it now. Isn't she gorgeous?"

"Stunning," Gemma said, tapering her eyes to study her.

Rosa blushed.

"Let's get down to business, Abby. All you have to do is sign for the shipments right here and you'll receive the products in three days." Gemma slid the papers my way and held out a pen, waiting patiently with a large, lip-sticked smile.

Jillian was waiting as well, just not as patiently. "Go ahead, Abby."

Feeling very ill at ease, I accepted the pen and read through the paperwork as quickly as possible while Gemma went on.

"You won't be sorry," she said. "So, where will our makeup be displayed?"

"Right this way," Jillian announced, avoiding eye contact with me altogether, and led Gemma through the curtain into the shop.

I signed the shipping order, then followed them out to the big round oak table in the middle of the store as Jillian showed Gemma where the makeup would go.

"Perfect!" Gemma cried, pressing her hands together. "Front and center. I love it. We'll have to place the two end caps on either side of the table."

*Endcaps?*

"And the easel will have to go on the sidewalk because this shop is so small."

"Easel?" I inquired.

"For the marketing and price points," Gemma answered. "It's not very heavy, maybe twenty pounds. You shouldn't have any problem carrying out every morning."

"Carrying it out?"

She raised an eyebrow at me. "And carry back in at night, of course. We don't want anyone stealing our advertising. Especially with all this talk of a downtown crime wave."

I caught myself growling under my breath.

"We'll have to move all these . . . um . . . trinkets from the table."

"They're not trinkets," I said in a low register.

"They're petal stools," Jillian added.

"They're hideous," Gemma chuckled.

"They're staying," I said in an even lower register, "but you're not."

I was so angry, I couldn't tell if my final words were internalized, until Gemma turned her head curiously and said, "Excuse me?"

"Gemma!" Jillian cried, "you *must* try some of Grace's gourmet coffee. Right this way. Follow me. Come now." She clutched onto Gemma's arm and guided her out of the room, looking back at me with a pair of wide eyes and pursed lips. She returned alone moments later. "You *promised*."

I held the signed paperwork in the air between us. "I did *not* promise that you could take over my shop. That was not our deal."

"I'll take care of everything," Jillian pleaded. "It's not as bad as it sounds."

"Really? You're going to come every morning and put the easel outside?"

"Yes."

"And then come back at night to bring it back in?"

"Of course."

"Jillian, this is getting ridiculous."

"Here," she said, handing me a bright pink envelope with the *La Meilleure* logo on the front. "Come to my party on Wednesday and you can see how popular this product is. By the end, you'll be thanking me instead of scolding me."

Instead of letting go of the invitation, she held out her other hand, as if to accept the signed paperwork in return.

I handed over the paperwork begrudgingly. "I hope you're right."



At noon, Marco met me in front of Bloomers, and we headed across the street, making our way to the rear entrance of the courthouse where the police station was located. We stopped at the security window to check in. Fortunately, the officer on duty always remembered me.

We went through a security gate and up the staircase to the second floor. Beyond the door was the detective bureau, a large room with desks around the perimeter. Across the room I saw Corbison eating a sandwich. He had on a long-sleeved, white button-down shirt and navy pants with navy loafers, and his thinning brown hair was combed over to one side.

"You're back," he said to me as we approached his desk.

"We have new information about Pauly," I replied.

He indicated the chairs across from him and we sat down.

"We found him," I started. "And before you scold us for taking matters into our own hands, we have information that may help your investigation."

Corbison tapped his pen on his desk. "And just what might that be?"

"We're not trying to step on anyone's toes," Marco told him. "But it's our theory that Pauly returned to Schmidt's home Monday evening to confront Garth and things got out of hand."

"Your *theory*," Corbison said pointedly.

"He has a motive," I said, "and he can't prove where he was that evening. Wouldn't you say that makes him a suspect?"

Corbison tapped his pen a few more times, then leaned back. "We'll have to bring this guy in for questioning. Where did you find him?"



"At The Lost Weekend Bar," Marco answered. "But I doubt you'll find him there anymore." Marco pulled out a piece of folded up paper and handed it across the desk.

Corbison reached out to grab it, then unfolded it, asking, "What's this?" "Pauly's license plate number. Michigan plates."

The detective picked up his glasses from the desk, read over the numbers, then looked up at Marco. "That's good work. Thank you."

Of course, *Marco* got a thank you. I rolled my eyes heavily.

"Anything else to report?" Corbison asked.

"No," Marco answered. "That's all the information we have for you." He rose and I followed suit.

"Wait a minute. I have something to share with you."

"You do?" I asked in complete surprise. Detective Corbison had rarely ever shared information with us, and never willingly. What was he up to?

"Look, I know you're doing your darndest to prove Karl isn't the killer, but we found his prints."

"That's not new information. We knew his fingerprints were on the doorbell."

"It wasn't just the doorbell, Mrs. Salvare."

*Now* he calls me Mrs. Salvare.

"His fingerprints were found on one of the bedroom windows, too."

"Bedroom window?" I asked. "Whose bedroom window?"

Detective Corbison pulled his glasses off and set them on his desk, looking at me with a small, mischievous grin. "The daughter's bedroom window."



## CHAPTER NINETEEN



We left the station and headed back across the courthouse square to Franklin Street, where Marco walked me to Bloomers. “Why would Karl’s fingerprints be on Isabelle’s window?”

“Why do you think?”

“No.”

Marco put his shoulder on my back as we crossed the street. “They’re both the same age. They live right next door. She has strict parents.”

“You think he was sneaking into her room?”

“That’s what it sounds like to me.”

I shook my head. “How would that implicate Karl?”

“I’m guessing Corbison thinks Karl and Isabelle were having a secret relationship. Garth interfered. And Karl killed him. Except we know it was Dillon who had the fight with Garth that night, not Karl.”

I stopped in front of Bloomers. “Wait a minute. Do you remember what Dillon told us about the bedroom window?” I reached into my purse, pulled out the notebook, and flipped through until I found Dillon’s interview notes. “Here. Listen. Garth accused Dillon of sneaking into Isabelle’s room. Dillon denied it.” I looked up at my husband. “Maybe Dillon was telling the truth.”

“Maybe he was.”

“Do you really think Karl and Isabelle could’ve had a secret relationship?”

He raised his eyebrow and tilted his head. “Possibly.”

“What am I going to tell Lottie?”

“Don’t say anything yet. Tell her we need to speak with Karl. Immediately.”



At three-fifteen, the alarm I'd set on my phone went off. I made my way downstairs to retrieve a few more petal stools so my mom wouldn't ask to go down there. Even though her old art projects were stored all the way in the back, I still couldn't risk her finding them. As soon as I'd come back upstairs, the bell over the door jingled and I heard a familiar, "Yoo hoo!" Minutes later the curtain parted, and my mom stepped through, a big smile on her face.

"Hello, sweetheart," she said, coming to give me a hug. She looked at her petal stools resting on the worktable and smiled. "I brought more. Shall I help put them on display?"

"You're in a good mood today," I said as we gathered the stools and walked to the sales floor.

"I'm just happy to see my petal stools are selling so well! It's like the good old days. And to think I'd just about given up hope last week."

"How many more did you bring?" I asked and held my breath.

"Oh, just a dozen more. All small. Just as agreed."

I exhaled. Twelve, small stools I could handle.

After my mom left, Lottie came into the backroom speaking quietly. "Celeste Schmidt is here to see you."

I looked at Lottie in shock. "I've been trying to get in touch with her for days. I wonder why she decided to come into Bloomers instead of calling me back."

"I don't know, Abby, but she's standing in the shop waiting for you."

I steadied myself, slipping back into detective mode, and stepped out of the back room. Celeste stood near the front window, clutching a dark red purse tight against her chest. She wore a long black skirt and matching blouse, her dark blond hair styled neatly, her makeup light and fresh. She didn't look like a grieving widow anymore, except for the somber clothing.

"I've been calling you," I said firmly as I approached. "Why haven't you called me back?"

"Listen," she answered matter-of-factly, "I know you talked to Isabelle's boyfriend, but you're wasting your time."

"How do you know it wasn't him?"

"I've told you who killed my husband, Abby, but you refuse to believe me."

"Who?"

"Lex Booth."

I shook my head. "You're right. I don't believe you."

She looked down, as if embarrassed, then dropped the purse she'd been clutching, as though dropping the barrier she'd held between us. "Because I haven't been honest with you," she finally replied.

"Honest about what?"

She stepped closer and lowered her voice. "Lex never made any advances toward me. Garth made the whole thing up, and he forced me to go along with it."

"How does that make Lex the killer?"

"Lex was angry, Abby. He was harassing us at our home, scaring my daughter. He was following my husband and making threats. He followed him to a bar and assaulted him." She put a hand on my shoulder and looked me dead in the eyes. "I know Lex Booth killed my husband. Why won't anybody believe me?"

I felt for her. I could sense her desperation, but I didn't believe her anymore. If she was so determined to blame Lex, then why was she seen getting into his car only hours before her husband was killed? I decided not to lead with such a loaded question. Instead, I thought I would pick apart her narrative, bit by bit. "It wasn't Lex harassing your husband at home."

She tilted her head, clearly confused. "Then who?"

"I think we should have a seat. Come with me." I guided her into the coffee and tea parlor, where Grace stood by the coffee station, fussing with a stack of to-go cups, trying a little too hard to seem like she hadn't been eavesdropping.

I offered Celeste a drink, but she declined, so we sat near the window in the empty parlor. "Do you know anything about your husband's gambling habits?"

"Gambling habits?" She shook her head.

"I don't know how often he went, but he'd recently been playing poker at a bar off route 30. Did he ever mention it?"

"No."

"Your husband was in debt to a man who ran the poker game. This man would lend money with a high interest rate and then harass the people until they paid up. He came to your house on Memorial Day. He was the man your daughter heard banging on the door. He'd come to collect."

"It can't be," she said.

"He was caught on the doorbell cam. Detective Corbison has confirmed it. There's no doubt."

"The detective never mentioned anything to me."

"I know," I explained. "Because Corbison couldn't identify the man, but my husband and I did."

"Do you think he's the man who killed my husband?"

"I'm not sure."

"That doesn't make sense. Lex was so angry."

"Celeste, it wasn't Lex. He has an alibi. We checked it out. The detectives have cleared him."

She sat across from me with a numb, lifeless expression. Her leg was shaking beneath the table, and her eyes were searching mine. "Okay, then who is this man? What do I need to know?"

"Detective Corbison is looking into him. We should know very soon whether he had anything to do with your husband's death."

She looked perturbed. Her head shook as if she couldn't believe what was happening. She'd been so sure that Lex was the man who'd killed her husband, but *how* could she have been so sure?

"I have a question for you," I said gently.

"What's that?"

"Do you know what kind of car Lex drives?"

She immediately cleared her throat and readjusted her seated position. She shook her head and responded, "What do you mean?"

"I mean what kind of car does he drive?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Do you know what color it is?"

"No. Why are you asking?"

Celeste was good. She was believable. But I knew she was lying. "Lex and his wife both go to your church, correct?"

"They do."

"And you've never seen the outside of his car?"

"No."

"What about the inside?"

She stiffened, her foot stopped bouncing, and she narrowed her eyes.

"Why are you asking, Abby?"

I studied her expression. "Someone saw you enter Lex's white sedan just hours before your husband was killed. Would you like to explain why?"

She absorbed the question without a flinch. Her expression didn't change. Her entire body remained still. Her eyes were affixed to mine, staring me down, unblinking.

I was terrible at staring contests, so I went in for the kill. "Were you having an affair with Lex Booth?"

Her foot started bobbing again, her eyes still deadlocked onto mine. Even though her expression hadn't changed, I could see a sheen form over her eyes. After a few more seconds of silence, a tear ran down her cheek. "Who told you?"

"It doesn't matter. I need you to tell me the truth."

"Was it Lex?"

"Celeste, tell me what happened. Why did you get into Lex's car?"

Another tear formed and she wiped it away. "He asked to meet with me."

"Why?"

"He wanted me to get his job back," she said, wiping away more tears. "He was so angry. He said I betrayed him. But I didn't have a choice. I had to lie. I couldn't say no to my husband. I wouldn't dare. You don't understand what it's like living with someone so cruel."

"Is that why you killed him?"

Again, without flinching, she answered, "I didn't kill him, Abby. Lex did."

"Do you have proof?"

"No, but Lex was so angry when I met with him. He was shaking. He was out of control. I know he did it."

"Why did he think you could get his job back?" I asked. "Why come to you?"

Her eyes lowered. She reached into her purse seated on her lap, searching for a tissue. When she found one, she dabbed her eyes, and answered in a soft,

low voice. "We had an affair. It was years ago. I ended it right away. I was so ashamed and riddled with guilt. I just couldn't keep it going."

"Did he threaten to tell Garth?" I asked.

At that, she dabbed her eyes again and nodded lightly. "The way he spoke to me. The words he said." She choked back a wave of emotions and straightened. "He said he would tell Garth about our affair if I didn't get his job back. I told Lex no. I told him I couldn't do it. That's why I'm sure he killed Garth."

"He has an alibi," I told her.

"He's *lying*," she fired back.

"There's no proof. We would need something more to go on. Was there anything else you caught on the doorbell camera that night? Anything that could help prove Lex was there?"

She shook her head. "The camera only activates when there's motion at the front door."

"Did you get a look at any of the videos from that day?"

"No. Garth had all the videos saved on his phone. I don't have access."

Another dead end. I took a minute to think about the logistics of Lex showing up at Garth's house, killing him, then rushing back to watch the fireworks with his family. Not only that, but he'd have to come back that night and clean up. It didn't add up.

"What time did you get home from the rummage sale?"

"It was after ten. Why?"

"Did you hear anything that night?"

Her eyes wandered but it didn't help her memory. "I'm sorry, Abby. I just don't know." She made eye contact with me. "You don't believe it was Lex, do you?"

"Not really."

Her expression twisted, indicating a slight panic. Her hands clasped together. "What if it wasn't him?"

"Don't worry. We'll keep searching until we find who it was."

"What about Dillon?" she asked. "He told me about the fight he had with Garth. Could he have done it?"

"We haven't ruled him out."

"But there's no evidence."

"Not yet." I looked at her more closely, studying her expression. "Not unless you know something."

She looked down at her wringing hands. "No, but I'll talk to Izzy. Maybe she knows something."

"If she knows anything that will help our investigation, please let me know."

"I will," she said as she stood. "Thank you for listening to me."

"One more thing," I said. "What do you know about your daughter and Karl Dombowski? Have they ever had a . . . relationship?"

She scoffed heavily, allowing a disgusted look to sweep across her face. "Never. She's never had a relationship until Dillon."

Never had a relationship until Dillon. *Hmm*. Had she been willingly ignorant, or had Marco been right? Had Isabelle been sneaking around without her mother knowing? Either way, I decided not to tell Celeste about Karl's fingerprints on her daughter's bedroom window. If Corbison hadn't told her, I wasn't going to either. Not yet.

I walked Celeste to the front door where she and Lottie exchanged tense yet cordial greetings. As soon as the bell above the door chimed, Lottie rushed over. "Well, what did she have to say for herself?"

I straightened my Bloomers apron and tried to compose myself. "She thinks Lex is the killer. She doesn't want to admit otherwise."

"As long as she's not blaming my boy."

"Lottie, can we talk for a minute?"

She looked at me askew. "Of course. Do you really need to ask?"

"What do you know about Celeste's daughter, Isabelle?"

"Not much. She's quiet. Keeps to herself mostly."

"Has Karl ever mentioned her?"

"No. Why would Karl have mentioned her?"

"It's nothing. I'm just working on a theory."

"Abby, I get the sense that you're keeping things from me."

If Detective Corbison's information was correct, it was Karl who'd been keeping things from all of us. But I couldn't let Lottie know yet. Marco wanted to speak to Karl first, so I had to come up with a reason to meet with Karl that wouldn't put Lottie on high alert. "I'd like to know more about Isabelle. She went to the same high school as the boys, right?"



"I think so."

"Will the boys be home tonight?"

"Sure, why don't you come by after supper? I'd invite you to eat with us, but I don't think you're ready for that kind of madness."

I laughed, feeling a sense of relief after the stressful conversation with Celeste. "I'll talk to Marco and let you know."



At five, I flipped the door sign to "closed", punched in the alarm code, and locked up after the ladies. It was warm for early June, the kind of day that pulled people outside, and the streets buzzed with chatter and footsteps. I headed to Down the Hatch, gave a quick wave to Marco and Rafe behind the long wooden bar, and slid into the last booth.

Gert appeared a moment later to take my order. "What'll it be this evening, sweetie?"

"Hey, Gert. There seems to be quite a few more people in here than usual."

She looked around with a snickering smile. "Rafe has gone from rags to riches, and apparently the local sororities just found out." She bent down; her head turned. "Here comes your husband. He's not in the best mood, just so you know."

I looked around, spotting Marco approaching. I also noticed that most of the new customers were female, and all of them were facing the bar – or should I say – bartender.

Marco slid into the booth across from me, letting out a heavy huff as he settled against the cracked vinyl. "I don't know if I should be mad or irate," he said, his voice edged with exhaustion.

I tilted my head to gain his full attention. "He's bringing in business."

He leaned forward and rested elbows on the table. "He's becoming a nuisance."

"Hush, Marco." I kept my tone soft but firm. "Have you told him you're happy for him yet?"

He didn't answer right away. Instead, he dragged a hand down his face, rubbing tired eyes with his fingertips, and mumbled something under his

breath—too quiet for me to catch, but I could make an educated guess. I let the silence sit for a beat, watching the lines deepen around his mouth.

“Will you be able to get away this evening to interview Karl?” I asked, shifting the subject.

He sighed, leaning back again. “I’m sorry, Sunshine. I need to catch a few hours of sleep before my stakeout tonight.” He paused, meeting my gaze. “Besides, Karl might be more open to speak with you alone.”

“No need to be sorry.” I offered a small smile, though my mind was already turning. “I can do it myself. I’m just... not sure how to approach the topic.”

“Give him the facts,” he said. “He can’t argue with the fingerprint evidence. And try to get him away from his folks—somewhere quiet, where he won’t clam up.”

Before I could respond, Rafe’s voice cut through the hum of the bar. “Drinks on me!” he shouted from behind the counter, and the place erupted—cheers, clinking glasses, a sudden swell of laughter.

I glanced at Marco and saw his face flush red, the muscle in his jaw ticking. “Calm yourself, Marco,” I said, keeping my voice steady. “Let him enjoy it.”

He mumbled again, the words lost under the rising noise of the crowded bar.

I leaned closer, trying to catch his eye. “Promise me you’ll be nice,” I said.

He glowered, not at me exactly, but at the thought of it, his brows knitting together. I reached across the table, covering his hands with mine.

“Promise me,” I repeated, softer this time, giving his fingers a gentle squeeze. “Let him have some fun.”

He didn’t say anything at first. I rubbed my thumbs over his knuckles, waiting. After a few seconds, his shoulders loosened, the tension easing out just a little. “I promise,” he said finally, his voice gruff but resigned, and he squeezed my hands back just enough to mean it.



## CHAPTER TWENTY



Before heading over to the Dombowski's house, I went home to take Seedy out for her walk. Across the street, I saw an elderly couple standing on the sidewalk in front of the house for sale, watching me. I held up a hand in greeting and they both waved. Before I could start our walk, they came across the street toward me.

"Hello!" the man called.

"Hello, honey," the woman called.

They strode toward us, and the woman immediately bent down to pet Seedy. "What a little darling! Look, Henry, she has only three legs." The woman looked up at me. "What happened? Cancer? Hit by a car?"

"I don't know," I replied. "I adopted her from a shelter."

Seedy licked the woman's hand. "Aw! What a little sweetie," she said. She straightened with a smile. "My name is Evelyn. This is Henry. And you are?"

"Abby," I said. "Nice to meet you."

"We're seriously considering buying this house," Evelyn said. "And now that we've met you, we're even more serious about it. Oh, we could have so much fun! You, us, your hubby?"

"Yes, I'm married."

"Children?"

I felt she was being a bit nosy, but I answered her question with a smile. "Not yet."

"Don't worry. It'll happen." Evelyn pressed her hands together. "You'll have to come over for dinner! We'll have a cookout every Saturday and Henry here is a marvelous chef. Oh, and Sunday brunch! My omelets are to die for."

"Our kids live far away," Henry explained. "But with you and your husband here, it'll be like having family around." He put his arm around his wife's shoulders. "You can even call us mom and dad if you want."

I took a step back. Seedy followed my lead.

"Do you work, honey?" Evelyn asked.

Seedy was tugging on her leash. "Yes, I own Bloomers Flower Shop."

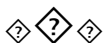
"Oh, how wonderful! But that means you're a busy lady. I'll be happy to bring you home-cooked meals every night. You'll love my food. Won't she, Henry?"

He gave her shoulders a squeeze. "Best cook in town."

Seedy turned around to give me an imploring look. "I've got to get moving," I said. "It's been nice chatting with you."

"Keep your fingers crossed for us," Evelyn called as they walked backward across the street. "If we can get a fair price, this house is ours."

Heaven help us.



I sent Lottie a text to let her know I would be coming over alone. She replied with a thumbs up. Thirty minutes later, I pulled into the Dombowski's driveway and adjusted my rearview mirror. Just as expected, the window curtain across the street had been pulled back and a shadowy figure sat behind the glass.

I noticed both boy's cars had been parked in the street. One was parked in front of the Dombowski house, and the other in front of the Schmidt's house. I walked over to check how closely the boys had parked to the Schmidt's driveway. I wanted to test a theory that maybe the boys were a little less than courteous when it came to their neighbors.

But I was surprised to see that the car was parked perfectly, right at the curb, and far enough from the driveway so that Celeste could exit easily. Well done, boys.

I looked over my shoulder to see Nelson still watching. It was certainly an uneasy feeling. It made me shudder at the thought of new neighbors across the street from us. Would we be constantly brushing off our persistent, elderly busybodies, or trying to drown out the cries of six rowdy children playing

in the street, or was it the watch maker who would buy the house, lining the streets with twenty cars every week?

I sighed. Maybe we'd just move.

After ringing the doorbell, I heard heavy footsteps up the hallway, then the door swung open. "Howdy, Captain. Come on in!"

"You must be Jimmy."

He smiled. "How'd you guess?"

"You're the only one still calling me captain."

"Abby!" I heard from the hallway, to which Jimmy stepped aside. Lottie walked up and held the door. "You're just in time for dessert."

"Chocolate chip cookies," Jimmy said. "Fresh out the oven."

I was all at once welcomed by the family of six. Jimmy ushered me into the dining room where the table was being cleared by one of their boys, and dessert plates and silverware were being set by another. Herman sat at the head of the table, asking for his decaf. I noticed Karl was suspiciously absent.

"Good to see you again, Abby," Herman said as he stood to greet me, always the gentleman. That evening, Herman was dressed in a blue button-down, with his short, salt and pepper hair parted and combed. "What brings you over? I'm guessing it's not the cookies."

"I wouldn't be surprised," one of the boys said as he carried in a plate overflowing with large, buttery chocolate chip cookies. "These are the best you'll ever have." He held the plate in front of my face and smiled. "Try for yourself."

"Where's my decaf, John?"

"Coming, Dad. Geez. Let her try a cookie."

I plucked a cookie from atop the pile. "Thank you."

I was about to answer Herman when another boy came in with a pot of coffee. "Do you have news about the murder?"

"For heaven's sake, Jim, let her try the cookie."

If I didn't know the Dombowski's so well, I would've definitely been suspicious of these cookies. As I set it on my plate, the cookie practically melted in half. I pulled off a piece and bit into it, immediately losing my train of thought.

Herman started to chuckle, then reached across the table and pulled the plate toward him. Three of the boys sat down and passed the plate around. We sat in silence for three full minutes as we savored every last bite.

“Told ya,” Johnny said.

“The secret,” Lottie started as she came in to join us, “is brown sugar and butter. Lots of butter.” She pulled out the chair next to mine and plopped down. “Now, what would you like to talk about?”

I gave the family an update, laced with a few minor details, not letting on about my real mission. “Where’s Karl?”

“He’s downstairs studying.”

“I’d like to talk to him.”

“Sure, come on. I’ll go down with you.”

“Actually,” I said slowly, “I’d like to talk in private.”

Lottie stopped herself and sat back down, a look of confusion on her face. “In private?”

“What’s going on?” Jimmy asked.

“Is he in trouble?” Johnny added.

“It’s not a big deal. Don’t worry. He’s not in trouble.” There was no way to sufficiently explain why I needed to speak in private, so I just let my vague answer linger, hoping the family would leave it be.

The boys looked around the table at each other. Lottie kept her suspicious gaze on me, while Herman took a loud sip of his coffee.

“I’ll be right back,” I said.

Lottie picked up the plate with only two cookies left and handed it to me. “Why don’t you take these down.”

I accepted the plate and made my way to the basement stairs, feeling the eyes on the back of my head as I descended. Once I made it downstairs, I noticed the basement had been remodeled to include two bedrooms and a full bathroom.

To my left was a small bathroom with a shower, and next to that was Karl’s room. The door was slightly ajar with the waning sunlight entering the window above his desk. I knocked on the door and it opened. Karl was sitting at his desk with his back to me.

“Something smells delicious,” he said as he turned. “Hi, Abby. I thought I heard you come in. What’s up?”

The room was decorated like any normal teenager's bedroom, with posters on the wall and clothes thrown randomly across the bed and floor. He closed his laptop and swiveled his desk chair to face me. "Is everything okay?"

I made some space on his bed and sat, placing the cookie plate on his nightstand between us. Instead of beating around the bush, I decided to go for it. "I have a question for you, Karl, and I need you to be honest."

He had reached for a cookie while I spoke, but my tone must've spooked him. He pulled back his hand and gripped the armrest. "Okay."

"Have you ever dated Isabelle?"

His answer came immediately. "No."

"Have you ever snuck into her bedroom?"

His answer came much more slowly. "No."

I sat for a minute, watching as Karl twisted in his chair. "Because the detective has your fingerprints on Isabelle's window."

His face paled and then his cheeks blushed. His knee bounced as he responded, "Fingerprints?"

"Tell me the truth, Karl."

He chewed his lip nervously, then turned to look out his window. I looked out the window, too, noticing the basement window was higher than a normal window, with an upward angled view of the Schmidt's house next door.

"He has my fingerprints?"

"Yes, and he's named you his number one suspect in the death of Garth Schmidt. I suggest you tell me the whole story so we can figure out how to get ahead of this."

He kept his gaze lowered as he spun in his chair to face me, his knee still bouncing erratically. "I went over there once, but that was it."

"What happened?"

"Nothing. We'd been talking online for a while, and she asked to come over."

"She asked you to come to her window?"

"Yeah, but I didn't go in."

"Don't lie to me, Karl."

"I'm not! I couldn't go in. I heard her dad in the living room yelling at the tv, so I told her I couldn't come in. It was terrifying. I couldn't be caught in her room. Alone. The guy would've killed me."

"What happened then?"

He looked away. "Nothing."

"Tell me what happened."

He shrugged his shoulders defensively. "Nothing. I told her I couldn't do it. She got mad and stopped talking to me."

"Do your parents know?"

"No." He looked up at me with a look of terror in his eyes. "Are you going to tell them?"

"They need to know."

"No. I'll tell them. It should come from me." He picked up a cookie and ate nervously, probably to avoid answering any more questions.

But I had more. "Did you see Isabelle after that?"

"No," he said with a mouthful. "We stopped talking."

"So, you just went over for one night and then stopped talking to her?"

He took another bite as if to delay the answer. He chewed for a moment then swallowed. "Yes."

"Out with it, Karl."

He wiped a bead of sweat from his forehead, not looking at me as he answered, "That's it. She started dating Dillon a few weeks later."

"Don't you think this is something you should've told me sooner?"

"I didn't think it was important."

"Well, it is. You're going to have to tell your parents, and then you'll have to call Dave Hammond so he can speak with Detective Corbison, because if you don't, Corbison will have the prosecutor build a really strong case against you. You need to get ahead of this. Now."

He nodded, stuffing the second cookie into his mouth. "Okay. I'll tell my parents tonight."

"You better."

"I will."

"Don't mind me," I heard as Lottie entered the room. "I just came to pick up the cookie plate."



As she came in, I handed her the empty plate and stood, smiling to myself. Lottie was clever. She'd wanted a reason to come downstairs, and the cookie plate was the perfect excuse.

"So," she said, lingering, "what are you discussing down here?"

I looked at Karl, who was still pale and perspiring. After he declined to speak first, I said, "Karl has something to tell you. Isn't that right, Karl?"

He exhaled defeatedly.



## CHAPTER TWENTY- ONE



I couldn't fall asleep that night—too many thoughts churned in my head, a restless tangle I couldn't unravel. Marco was out on a stakeout, leaving me alone in the dark, staring at the ceiling. My mind wouldn't stop. Mrs. Punter. Celeste. Isabelle. Dillon. Or maybe Celeste and Lex together? No—on second thought, it felt more like Pauly, storming in to collect his debt from Garth and pulling the trigger when it went south. I turned over every angle, every possibility: Celeste playing both sides, Isabelle and Dillon scheming, or Pauly's brute force. Too much was happening—too many threads—and I needed a clear, sharp picture of what fit.

My gut twisted, telling me Corbison was piecing it together too, but he'd locked onto the wrong target. Karl wasn't the killer, and it gnawed at me. I gritted my teeth. We needed a decent lead, or solid evidence—something to shove in Corbison's face. Without it, Marco and I couldn't pin down the real killer, and Corbison would have a solid case to railroad the wrong boy.



**T***uesday, June 11<sup>th</sup>*

My morning at Bloomers began with a coffee, thick with cream, warming my hands as I sipped it. My eyes felt heavy, worn out from a sleepless night, but my mind wouldn't quit spinning. Lottie shuffled into the coffee parlor to join Rosa, Grace, and me, her mood dimming the room. She didn't say much as we started hashing out the day's business. A shipment was due in that afternoon, needing a check for damage; six orders had popped up

overnight—nothing Rosa and I couldn't tackle; and the kitchen sink had another faucet leak. All in all, a typical start—busy but manageable. Thank goodness.

I dismissed the ladies, but before I could stand, Lottie stopped me. "Can I talk to you real quick?" She looked at Grace and Rosa. "Alone?"

After an awkward moment, the ladies left, and Lottie started. "Karl told me about the fingerprints." She leaned across the table. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I'm sorry. I had a hard enough time trying to get Karl to tell the truth. I figured it would be even harder if he had to do it in front of you."

"Karl and I are going over later this afternoon to talk to Dave. But why would it matter if his prints were on her window frame?"

"I'm guessing it helps prove a motive," I told her. "Marco and I have a theory that Isabelle and Dillon are somehow responsible for Garth's death. The detective probably has a similar theory, only with Karl."

Lottie pulled nervously at her Bloomers apron, wringing her hands in the material. "I'm sorry, Abby. I'm so disappointed in him."

"It's okay, Lottie. We know the truth now. Dave can handle it."

An hour later, I finished an arrangement as the bell jingled above the door. Seconds later, I looked up to see Jillian poking her head through the curtain. "Hey, Ab. *Hola*, Rosa," she said, letting out a heavy sigh.

"Hi, Jillian," I replied.

"What is wrong, *mi querida*?"

She dropped her purse on the worktable and plopped onto the wooden stool next to mine, staring straight at me. "Care to take a guess?"

Her tone was grim. "I give up."

"None of our family's coming to my makeup party tomorrow. Not one. Not even your mom."

*Yikes.* That wasn't good. I could understand why they wouldn't want to come, especially my mom who has no need for fancy makeup, but I wasn't exactly sure how I was going to cover for them. I tried to think quickly. "That's just three people, Jill. You must've invited others."

"I asked Tara, too. She said no."

"Did you invite your clients?"

"Abby, I can't sell to clients yet. This is my first gig. I don't even know if I can handle a big group. I invited family because I thought they'd back me up." She buried her face in her hands. "Guess I was wrong."

"Then invite your clients," I said. "Sink or swim."

"Gemma's coming, though. She wants to watch me work. I am almost guaranteed to sink! I need someone there for support, especially if I have to invite my clients."

I knew where this was going. "I'm sure your husband will support you."

"No," she said, her eyes affixed to mine.

"Your housekeeper?"

"Abby . . ."

"There must be someone else."

"Abby," she said, her voice low and serious. "Will you come?"

I didn't want to go—every instinct screamed no—but I couldn't abandon her. "Okay," I said. "I'll be there."

"You swear?"

I raised my right hand. "I swear."

She leapt up and hugged me tight. "I knew I could count on you." She grabbed her purse, slung it over her shoulder, and turned to Rosa. "You're welcome, too."

"I would love to, but I have to watch my son. *Lo siento*."

"No problem. See you tomorrow night, Abs. Adios, Rosa!"

"Bye," Rosa called back.

My tall, copper-haired cousin disappeared through the curtain. I stared at the empty space, already dreading my promise. "There goes my Wednesday night – sacrificed to the goddess of guilt trips."



At noon, I walked to Down the Hatch and found my husband in his office at his desk talking on the phone.

"Thanks, Sean. I really appreciate the heads up." He ended the call and sat back in his chair, folding his arms as he said, "Hello, Sunshine."

"Uh oh," I replied, sitting across from him. "I know that tone. What happened?"

"Detective Corbison brought Pauly in for questioning. Sergeant Reilly found out his full name is Pauly Scavuto. He's from Chicago, and he has no prior criminal record."

"Well, at least Corbison is investigating him."

"He just let him go."

My shoulders slumped. "Why?"

"Not enough evidence to hold him." Marco rose from his desk chair and came around to meet me. He lifted me up and gave me a kiss. "It's okay. We still have some good leads. It's not over yet. Let's go get some lunch."

I kissed him back, hopeful that he was right.



Shortly before five o'clock, Lottie came into the workroom. "Sweetie, Mrs. Gable is on the phone. She is asking for a big favor, a birthday arrangement for a dinner she's going to this evening. She said she'll pay double if she can have it before six o'clock."

Mrs. Gable was a long-standing customer and a truly nice person. I knew I could put together an arrangement in about twenty minutes, so I said, "Tell her I will do it, and I'll even drop it off on my way home today."

"Great," Lottie said with a smile. "I know she'll be grateful. I'll write down her order and bring it back to you before I leave for the day."

"Do you want me to stay and keep you company?" Rosa asked, as she swept the floor.

"No, but thank you. Go home to your son."

A little after five, I turned the sign in the door to "closed" and locked up as soon as all three women had gone. I went back to the workroom, turned the radio to my favorite station, and studied the order Lottie had written down. It said simply, *A beautiful vase filled with flowers in pink and purple shades.*

I went to the first cooler and examined my stock. Roses, carnations, and gerberas would do the trick. I began to pull my stems. "Santa Monica" and "Lavender Minuet" spray roses. "Moondust" and Moonshadow" miniature carnations. Standard pink gerberas and "Pink Monarch" asters finished it off.

I placed the armful of blossoms on the worktable and went to the back of the room to select a vase from the shelf that ran across the wall. I spotted a ruby-colored glass bowl on a glass stem and took it down. Then I set to work filling the bowl with green foam and prepping it for the flowers. Using my clippers, I trimmed each blossom stem and carefully placed it in the bowl, working from the center out, the longest stems in the middle and down the sides to the shortest. The bowl was so full of lovely flowers that it didn't need any greenery. I hoped Mrs. Gable would be pleased.

I tore off a large piece of wrapping paper from the roll and set it on the table when I heard a noise coming from the direction of the kitchen. I stepped over to my desk, turned down the radio, and listened. The buzz of the air-conditioned walk-in coolers behind me filled the room with cool, ambient noise. I took a step toward the small kitchen, only hearing the occasional, rhythmic drip from the water faucet. Hearing nothing more, I continued back to the worktable.

At another loud thud, the hairs on the back of my neck rose. I moved quickly to the kitchen doorway to listen again. The basement stairwell was dark. The back hallway was quiet. The back door was locked.

Or was it?

I waited, standing perfectly still while every other sound faded out, my focus solely on the back door. I listened. I waited longer. Nothing. Eventually, my muscles relaxed, and I laughed to myself. Was I hearing things?

I approached the back door to make sure it was closed securely when I heard a soft, metallic scratching sound, then a loud bang against the door. I backed up in fright. Someone was trying to break in.

"Who's there?" I shouted powerfully, choking back a wave of fear. I hoped my voice would discourage any would-be burglar from breaking in.

My fears doubled as another bang against the door shook the frame. Thinking the door would be knocked in, I fled through the workroom, snatching up my purse and then running through the purple curtain into the shop, unbolting the front door and racing up the sidewalk to Down the Hatch. I pushed open the door and squinted as my eyes adjusted to the dim light. "Marco!" I cried, not caring about the disturbance I was making.

Rafe came around the bar, his face a mask of concern. "What's wrong?"

"Where's Marco?"

"He's in his office. Abby, what's wrong?"

I didn't stop to explain until I was in front of Marco's desk, nearly out of breath. "Someone's . . . trying to break into Bloomers. The alley entrance."

Marco was up from his desk in an instant. "Stay here," he told me. "Call the police," he said to Rafe, who was standing in the doorway.

"Tell the police there's a break-in at Bloomers' back alley," I explained as I rushed after my husband, who was already down the back hallway, pushing open the door that led into the alley.

I caught up with him just in time to hear the roar of an engine and the tires peel out against the gravel. Marco backed up against the building, nearly tripping as a white van sped by, kicking up dust in its wake. Marco dashed back into the middle of the alley, trying to catch a glimpse of the fleeing vehicle.

As the dust cleared, Marco said, "Damn! I couldn't get his plate number."

Rafe stepped up behind us, on the phone with the police. "That's right," he explained. "In the alley behind Bloomers Flower Shop. I'll stay on the line." To me, he asked, "What happened?"

"I don't know. I couldn't tell what it was at first, but then it sounded like someone was trying to kick the door down."

"I'm going to take a look," Marco said as he started up the alley toward Bloomers.

"No, Marco, wait until the police arrive."

But my stubborn husband continued on. By the time Rafe and I joined him, he was inspecting the door, which was still standing, but the frame was off-kilter and splintered near the lock.

"Looks like someone was trying to break in with a crowbar," Marco said.

"A big crowbar by the look of it," Rafe added. "Check out these indents here."

Marco tried the handle, but it didn't budge. The door was still locked from the inside. He rammed his shoulder against the door and the frame shifted. "We'll have to replace the whole door frame." He shook his head in disgust. "Unbelievable. On top of everything else, now we have to deal with this."

"Who do you think was trying to break in?" Rafe asked.

"I'll tell you who it was," Marco answered angrily. "The same downtown thief I've been hired to find. The same guy I've been chasing for a week. Right in front of my nose."

"Why would he target Bloomers?" I asked. But then another thought occurred to me. What if it wasn't the same guy?

"Police are here," Rafe said as two cars pulled into the alley. "I'm going back to the bar. Do you need anything?"

"I'm okay," I told him. "Thank you."

As Rafe walked back toward Down the Hatch and the police cars approached, I turned to Marco. "What if it wasn't the thief? What if it was Pauly? What if he's been following me and found out where I work?"

"I doubt it. He has no reason to hurt you." Marco put his hands on my shoulders and looked up at the newly installed security camera. "Whoever it was, we'll catch him. I can promise you that."

"What's going on?" I heard and turned to see Sean Reilly exiting his patrol car.

"A break-in attempt," Marco said. "Could be the same guy responsible for the robberies around the square."

"Or it could be Pauly Scavuto," I told him.

"You get a look at him?" Reilly asked me.

I shook my head and Marco answered, "No. And he left before I could get his plate."

"What kind of car?"

"White van," Marco said. "Nondescript. No identifying markers as far as I could tell. He drove away pretty quickly."

The officer from the second patrol car got out to inspect the damage around the door. Reilly looked up at the security cam attached to the brick above the frame. "Does that thing work?"

Marco nodded. "Just installed it. We can go check the footage right now if you're interested."

"Go ahead and set it up," Reilly said. "I'll check out Bloomers." He turned to me. "Front door open?"

"Yes," I answered. "I left in a hurry."



"As you should. Glad you're safe."

Marco and I walked around the building and up the sidewalk to Down the Hatch. In his office, Marco sat at his desk, and I stood behind him, watching over his shoulder as he opened the security app on his desktop. He clicked on the Bloomers back door feed and the image of the alley behind Bloomers popped up. Marco scrolled back in time until we saw the white van, then he hit PLAY.

It was a crystal-clear picture with a wide-angle lens, but, unfortunately, the intruder parked just out of view, with only half of the rear end visible. Marco paused the video and tried to enlarge the license plate. Only several letters were readable, and even then, the image was blurry.

"Okay, there's strike one," Marco said. "I might be able to enhance the image, but I think we've only got a partial license plate number."

Reilly knocked on the office door and let himself in. "You're in luck," he said to me. "The only damage seems to be superficial, but the frame needs replacing. One more kick and the whole door could come down. I'll put up some police tape so if the guy decides to come back, he might think twice before trying something stupid."

That made me feel a little better. "Thank you, Sean."

"But make sure you get that door boarded up tight."

"Will do," Marco said. "Now, take a look at this."

Reilly stood next to me while Marco let the video play. We could see a large man step into view. He had a black hooded sweatshirt on with the hood pulled over his head and what appeared to be a blue bandanna covering his mouth and nose. He was carrying a heavy-duty crowbar in one hand with a duffel bag hanging over one shoulder.

"Marco, who does that look like to you?" I asked.

"I have to admit, it does look like Pauly. He's tall enough, and he's got the big, muscular build." Marco looked over his shoulder at Reilly. "Not much to go on."

Reilly leaned closer to study the image. "I wish we could see that license plate number."

"I'll work on that," Marco told him. "I may be able to get a partial plate."

"Let me know," Reilly said. "In the meantime, I'll drop by Pauly's place and have a little chat with him. See where he was today." He put a comforting

hand on my shoulder. "I'm off at seven. Why don't I meet you two back here with the police tape and we get that alley door boarded up."

A sense of relief washed over me, and I could feel the adrenaline starting to wear off. "That would be great, Reilly. Thank you."

After Reilly left, Marco stood and hugged me close. "Are you feeling any better?"

Feeling weak in the knees, I sat down in his chair and rubbed my temples. "I'll feel better when I know who tried to break in."

"We'll find him, babe." He tilted my head up to look into my eyes. "Let's go sit at our booth and order some comfort food. Then we'll go over to the hardware store and get supplies to board up the back door."

I hugged him. "Thank you, Marco. But I have to make a delivery first."

"Right now?"

"It's for a special client."

Marco grabbed his keys from the desk. "I'll drive."

I took the arrangement out of the cooler, set the alarm, and locked up Bloomers. Then we headed to the downtown parking lot to get Marco's Prius. After we'd made the delivery, we went back to the bar and took a seat in the last booth.

"Here's to a better day tomorrow," Marco said, lifting his beer mug to toast.

"And to finding the driver of the white van," I added.

After a hopeful cheers, I noticed Kenton Lang slide off his stool at the bar. He walked over to talk to us, the collar of his army jacket pulled up and his green ballcap pulled down to shade his eyes. Kenton was a tenant in one of the apartments above the bar. He was an army veteran, very anti-social, who rarely left his apartment.

"Rafe told me what happened," he said to me. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," I told him.

"Get this," Kenton said as he looked around the bar. "I think I know who did it."

"You do?" I asked.

"Look around. What do you notice?"

Marco and I looked around. Everything seemed the same to me. The tacky blue carp was still hanging above the bar. An old fisherman's net draped

across the ceiling. Televisions in the corners playing baseball games. The normal crowd for a Tuesday afternoon.

"I don't see anything different," I said.

He leaned in closer. "It's not what you see. It's what you don't see. You get it?"

Perplexed, I looked around again.

"I don't get it," Marco told him.

"Think about it. When was the last time the bar was this quiet?"

Marco wasn't in the mood for quizzes. "Spit it out, Kent."

"The Oberle boys, man. They've been here every night for the past two weeks. Why aren't they here tonight?"

Kenton had a point. The Oberle brothers were both large men who easily matched the person we saw trying to break into Bloomers. But Marco wasn't so sure. "There was only one man caught on the security footage."

"Of course," Kenton explained. "That makes sense. One guy breaks in. The other drives the getaway car. Makes perfect sense."

"Why target Bloomers?" I asked. "We don't have much cash on hand, and there's nothing of value to steal."

Kenton shrugged. "Maybe they thought it was an easy score. I don't know."

"Whoever it was," Marco said to me, "he would've set off the alarm. It's strange that all the other places that were targeted didn't have security systems, but yours does."

"Exactly," I said. "That's why I think it could be Pauly."

"Just be careful," Kenton whispered. "Things are crazy out there."

"In any event," Marco said after Kenton left, "we've got to meet Reilly at seven to repair that door frame. Let's eat and then head over to the hardware store to pick up what we need."

After dinner, Marco and I made a quick trip to the hardware store to buy wooden boards and nails. On our way, I couldn't help but think about the possible suspects. Was it Pauly? Was it a pair of robbers? Could the Oberle brothers be responsible for the downtown robberies? Whoever it was, it seemed like a targeted attack.

"I think I'm going to close Bloomers tomorrow, just until I know for sure that no one is in danger."

“Sunshine, whoever it was isn’t going to try to break in during business hours. And if that person tries again tomorrow evening, he’ll have to deal with me. I don’t think you need to close the shop.”

My next concern was about my employees. Would they feel safe coming to work knowing that someone had tried to break in? I decided to call each one to explain what had happened, and to my surprise, Lottie, Grace, and Rosa had unanimously agreed that we should open the shop the next day.



That night, Marco sat on the sofa with his laptop, trying to enhance the image of the white van’s license plate. He worked on it for a while, then turned the computer so I could see it. “What does that look like to you?”

I was lounging on the other end of the sofa petting Seedy in my lap. We scooted closer to him, and I squinted at the screen. “A L A?”

“I see an H 1,” Marco said.

“This is hopeless. We don’t have enough.” I continued to pet my cozy, little dog, but then I took a closer look at the screen. There was a blue and gold border around the license plate with a blurry emblem that I recognized. “Look, Marco. This looks like a rental car logo.”

He zoomed in on the plate frame. “You’re right. This could be a rental van. Good eye. Tomorrow, I’ll visit the rental car places in town to see if anyone can identify the van. We might have our suspect in custody by tomorrow night.”

“You might have your case solved, too.”

He shook his head. “If I would’ve done my job, none of this would’ve happened.”

“It’ll be okay,” I told him.

“It’s not okay,” Marco replied, rubbing the dark bristle on his chin. “This is my fault. If I would’ve been canvassing the alleys during the day like your dad suggested, we wouldn’t be in this mess, and you wouldn’t have been put in danger.”

“It’s not your fault,” I said, still trying to calm him. “Remember when I told Lottie to park in the street and Garth slashed her tires? I felt responsible, but you told me that it wasn’t my fault.”

"It's not the same," Marco said. "Slashing tires is not the same as someone trying to break into Bloomers. You could've been killed."

"The point is, it's not your fault."

Marco sat up. For a minute I thought he'd found something on his computer, but he closed the laptop and looked at me. "Abby, we messed up. Get Lottie back on the phone."



## CHAPTER TWENTY- TWO



“I think we missed something big,” Marco said.

“What?” I asked as the phone rang. “Tell me what’s going on.”

Marco rubbed his brow uneasily. “Lottie and her family were at the fireworks when Garth was killed. Ask her who drove to the high school.”

“Hello,” Lottie answered.

Even though I wasn’t sure where Marco was going, I set the phone on speaker and asked her who drove, to which she replied, “I drove my car, and the boys drove theirs. Why?”

“Garth was killed during the fireworks,” he answered. “He couldn’t have slashed your tires because you were at the high school.”

Lottie didn’t answer, and neither did I. It took a moment for that to sink in, but he was right. Why hadn’t we thought of that? Lottie had just assumed it was Garth, but that was before we knew he was dead.

“Then who did?” I asked.

“Lottie,” Marco replied. “Are you sure the boys never messed with Garth?”

“I’m sure.”

“They never knocked over garbage cans, or threw rotten eggs at the house?”

“No,” she answered. “Why?”

“Because I don’t think Garth was instigating the fights either. I think it was your neighbor, Nelson Punter.”

There was silence on the other end of the phone. I looked at Marco, immediately understanding the implications of what he was really trying to say.

He looked back at me and nodded, then he said, "Lottie, your boys were right. Nelson Punter can walk. He was the one who created the feud between your families. He was the one who slashed your tires. I'm sure of it."

"How can you be sure?" Lottie asked.

"It's the only thing that makes sense. Garth was already dead by the time you got home from the fireworks. But Nelson Punter didn't know that. He must've gone out sometime later that night and slashed the tires."

"I don't believe it."

"Talk to your boys," Marco said. "We need proof Nelson Punter can walk."



**W***ednesday, June 12<sup>th</sup>*

When I arrived at Bloomers the next morning, I noticed Sergeant Reilly's squad car parked in front of the shop. I took a quick peek inside, but the car was empty. I found him sitting in the coffee parlor with Grace, Lottie, and Rosa. "Good morning, ladies," I said. "Hey, Sarge. Any news?"

"I was just informing the ladies about the extra protection I've set up until we find the owner of the white van. We'll have a squad car parked out front with one of our deputies patrolling the square on foot. If any of you see anything suspicious, give us a call."

"Marco is visiting the rental car company," I told the group. "Once he's done, he'll be heading over here for the day. He wants to keep an eye on things."

Reilly stood and smiled. "That's what I figured."

"Do you have time for a cup of tea?" Grace offered.

"Sounds good, but I should be going."

"One black tea to go. Coming right up."

Lottie leaned across the table to say. "I spoke with the boys last night. They think Marco's right about Nelson Punter. Jimmy even has a photo of Nelson walking up his driveway. He printed it off for me this morning." She slid the photo across the wrought-iron table. "But you can't see much."

I looked closely at the picture. It was dark and grainy, but it was definitely a photo of Nelson Punter's house, and a man walking up the driveway. He

looked thin, possibly wearing a robe, but that was about all you could see. "You're right. It's not much."

"It's all they have," Lottie answered.

Just then I heard my phone ring and saw Jillian's name on the screen. "Hi, Jill."

"Hi, Abs. Listen, I need you to come over a little early for my party tonight."

"How early?"

"I – um. I don't know. Maybe six? I have something to show you."

"Can you just tell me?"

"I could . . . but . . . it's better to just show you."

I was in no mood to argue. "Okay, I'll be there at six."

"Thank you, cuz. You're the best!" And without a goodbye, she hung up the phone.

Marco came into Bloomers about an hour later. I could hear him chatting with Lottie up front before he parted the purple curtain and flashed a handsome smile. "Hello, Beautiful. I see Reilly set up a squad car out front."

"Every little bit helps," I said as he pulled me in for a quick kiss.

His eyebrow raised as he reached into his back pocket and pulled out a small, keychain-sized pepper spray. "My thoughts exactly." He held the canister between us and proceeded to show me how it worked.

"I've used pepper spray before," I told him.

"You have?"

"Of course. Don't you remember? All you do is push the safety lever to the side, aim, and spray."

His face contorted as if impressed. "That's right. And, in the rare case you need to use it, make sure you back away and leave the scene immediately. This stuff is powerful. You don't want it backfiring on you. Keep it in your purse. Just in case."

I nodded, accepted the gift, and gave him a kiss. "You strive to be my hero, even if you're not around."

He accepted my kiss and gave me another, changing the subject in between smooches. "I found the rental van."

I held him at arm's length, all at once shocked and thrilled. "You did?"



He nodded. "I tried both rental companies in town and hit paydirt on the second one. The manager said he'd rented out a white Chevy van on multiple occasions, including yesterday. But he wouldn't release the customer's info to me. So, Reilly's heading over to the rental company this afternoon to get the driver information. We should have a name by dinner time. All because of you."

"All because of us," I corrected. "Team Salvare. At least we're making progress on one case." I handed Marco the photo Lottie had brought in and tried to explain. "This is the only evidence they have that Nelson can walk."

Marco wasn't impressed either. "I can see it's Nelson's house, but there's no way to prove that's him."

"I know. Another dead end."



Shortly before five, Bloomers was empty, and Lottie had arrived back from her deliveries. As we were about to leave, Marco knocked on the big bay window and motioned for me to unlock the front door.

"Reilly found him," Marco said excitedly as he came in with his laptop. He set it down on the sales counter while the ladies gathered around.

"Found who?" I asked.

"The guy who tried to break into Bloomers. I've got a picture and a name."

Rosa clapped. "That is wonderful, Marco!"

Grace leaned in. "Let's have a look, then."

Lottie rolled up her sleeves. "Let me at him."

Marco clicked a few buttons, then rotated his laptop so we could see. "His name is Danny Wilson, and he works for Coast-to-Coast Deliveries."

My mouth dropped when I saw who it was.

Rosa gasped dramatically.

Lottie muttered a swear word under her breath.

Grace looked around at us, utterly perplexed.

"Do you know who this is?" Marco asked.

"That's our new delivery driver," I answered.

"And he started right about the same time as all the robberies," Lottie added.

I laughed in disbelief. "He must be casing the stores to rob when he makes deliveries. That's how he knows which stores have alarm systems. Let's call Reilly and have him arrested."

"I talked to Sean already. He says all we need is a witness to confirm this is the guy and he can issue a warrant for his arrest."

A small round of cheers went up and Marco accepted a number of hugs and kisses to the cheek. I beamed at my husband, proud and relieved that he had solved his case, and downtown would soon be free of this dastardly delivery driver.



At six, I parked in front of Jillian's house, a sprawling two-story mansion with a three-car garage, a tall wooden fence around the property, and a perfectly landscaped lawn. The place stretched wide across the lot, all sharp angles and fresh white siding. Never satisfied with the color, every time I came to her house, it looked different. This time, red shutters framed the windows, and a curved stone path led to the double front doors, also painted red. The garage doors gleamed, spotless, and the lawn was mowed into crisp lines, not a weed in sight.

"I'm in trouble," Jillian told me. "I've been waiting all day for my first shipment to arrive. I was afraid I wouldn't have enough product." She motioned for me to follow her. "I don't think that will be a problem."

We went through her big kitchen to a door that led to the garage. She opened the door, and I followed her down a small set of stairs. It was a spacious, three-car garage with shelves on the side and back walls. Every shelf was loaded with boxes, and one whole bay was stacked nearly to the ceiling.

"Do you see all that?" Jillian asked. "That's what La Meilleure sent me. That's what I have to sell."

My mouth dropped open as I stared around in shock. "You have to sell all that? Did you know that before it arrived?"

"Gemma didn't mention how much product would be delivered. Claymore is going to be furious when he finds out. What am I going to do, Abs?"

I didn't know what to tell her, other than that I was getting a very bad feeling about that company. "I guess you'll have to store it until you can sell it."

In the distance, I heard the doorbell ring.

"Sell all of *that*?" she spouted. "How am I supposed to sell all that, Abby? I'm a terrible salesperson."

"This is what you wanted, Jill."

"I wanted a high-end line of beauty supplies to offer my clients. I didn't want to host makeup parties for the next twenty years of my life!"

The doorbell rang again.

"People are starting to arrive," Jillian said. "I've got to go."

For the next ten minutes, her guests arrived, along with Gemma Stone, wearing bright pink lipstick, pink bracelets, and a pink dress with pink high heels. I was sensing a theme.

When all the women were seated around Jillian's spacious living room, some in chairs that had been brought in from the dining room, Jillian introduced Gemma, who proceeded to give a spiel about the wonders of La Meilleure. Then it was Jillian's turn, so she asked for a volunteer sit on a chair in the center of the room while she gave a makeup demonstration.

When no one volunteered, Jillian's eyes drifted over to me. *Well*, I resigned internally, *she finally cornered me into a makeover*.

To be honest, Jillian did a great job. Her nervousness came off as endearing, and once she really got into it, she had the ladies laughing and asking for their own demonstrations.

At the conclusion, Jillian started her pitch. She talked slowly, with great clarity and confidence. Then she mentioned the price. That's when the excitement died.

Not one woman asked for an order slip. Once again, Jillian turned to me. What in the world was I going to do?

That's when Gemma stood and started to hand out sales forms. She spoke loudly in her east coast accent, and pushed hard for the women to try at least one product from the makeup line. Knowing how much Jillian needed the sales, I filled out a slip for a light pink blush and a bottle of moisturizing body lotion. I signed my name and waited in line until it was my turn to pay.

Before handing my paperwork back to Jillian, I noticed there was a small section of fine print just after the signature line. Very fine print. I held the paper close and squinted, reading carefully. My inner radar began to buzz as I read. My ears began to ignite as I finished, and I was about to boil over by the time I dragged Jillian into the kitchen.

"Jillian, you've been conned. This company is a scam. I read the fine print on my receipt. By signing it, I agreed to monthly deliveries with a large fine if cancelled. Did you know any of this?"

"No." Jillian stared at me in surprise. "But Gemma surely would've told me –"

"Gemma Stone is a scam artist, Jillian."

Before my cousin had time to react, Gemma strutted into the kitchen with a sweet smile on her pink lips. She was talking a mile a minute about how excited she was to meet Jillian's clients. "Oh, hello, Abby," she said, her smile faltering when she saw my frown. "Is something wrong?"

"Why didn't you tell Jillian that her clients would be receiving boxes of products every month?"

"It's on the receipt," she said lamely.

"In the fine print," I shot back. "You deceived my cousin, and me, and you're trying to deceive everyone at this party."

"It wasn't intentional," she said with no conviction.

I tore up the order slip. "I'm not buying anything," I told her. "I'm going to call your company tomorrow and have them come pick up all those boxes that were delivered to Jillian's house."

"She signed a contract!" Gemma argued angrily. "It's legal and binding."

"Oh, really? What do you think will happen to your company when I call my reporter friend at the newspaper and tell him what's going on?"

Her eyes widened.

"What will happen to your sales when I post on my social media account what happened here? What about everyone else who bought something at Jillian's party tonight? Do you think they'll have something to say once I tell them about the scam you're running?"

"Okay, okay!" Gemma said, holding up her hands. "I get it. Let me go out to my car and get the return forms."

Jillian and I watched her walk out of the kitchen. "I don't think I want to sell La Meilleure products anymore."

"I think she got the message," I said.

Jillian and I walked back to the living room to explain our situation to her clients. From the front window, we could see Gemma walking quickly on pink high heels to her car parked in the street. Just as Jillian was about to speak, we heard tires squeal against the pavement and watched as Gemma Stone sped away.

"Jillian," I said quietly, with a smile at her guests. "Kitchen. Now."

She followed me. "Did Gemma just ditch us?"

"Yep, and I doubt you'll be hearing from her again."

Jillian's mouth fell open. "What do I do? I have fifteen people expecting to purchase amazing products. I can't tell them it's a scam. I'll be humiliated."

"Then finish your party. You have a garage full of makeup. Get out there and sell it. Offer a discount. Make it special. And whatever is left, I'll make sure you get a full refund for it, even if we have to sue the company."

She wrapped her long arms around me in a quick hug. "Thanks, Ab. I'd be lost without you." Then she grabbed her tray of hors d'oeuvres and marched into the living room, satisfied that I'd make everything okay.



*Thursday, June 13<sup>th</sup>*

All three of my assistants were chatting excitedly when I came into work that day. "What's up?" I asked.

"We got a flood of orders for a funeral," Lottie said. "I've printed them out and put them on the spindle."

"And we have a group of women coming in soon for a birthday celebration," Grace added. "No time to dawdle this morning."

Rosa and I worked the next two and a half hours in quiet rhythm, churning out orders, the radio humming in the background. The day felt bright, promising.

Then came the first crack of thunder.

I hurried to the sales floor and looked out the big bay window facing the courthouse. Dark clouds piled up overhead, flashing with lightning that streaked between them.

“I don’t like the look of those,” Lottie said. “I’d better make the deliveries now.”

I stayed up front while she loaded the van, watching for customers. I stepped to the coffee parlor doorway and peeked in—Grace was pouring coffee for four women seated near the bay window. I waved to her and turned back just as Lottie burst through the curtain, clutching her cell phone, her face tight with fear.

“Abby, I need your help. Karl found a loaded handgun in his room.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



“Karl just got home from school and found a gun in his bedroom,” Lottie said, her voice tight. “I don’t know what to do.”

Her hands shook, her eyes wide with panic. I’d never seen her like this. “I’ll drive,” I said, grabbing my keys.

We rushed to the public parking lot, climbed into my yellow ‘Vette, and sped across town toward the high school. Lottie clutched her phone, trembling so hard I could hear her breath rattling. At a stop light, I pulled my phone out and speed dialed my husband.

Marco answered, “Hey, Sunshine.”

“Karl found a gun in his room. Meet me at the house.”

“I’ll be there,” he said as the light turned green.

Just past the school was Lottie’s subdivision. I turned the corner and started down the street. Lottie was breathing heavily.

“Calm down,” I offered evenly. “We don’t know it’s the murder weapon.”

“It has to be, Abby.” Her words tumbled out fast. “Herman’s gun was confiscated. Karl doesn’t own one. Someone’s setting him up.”

I gripped the wheel tighter. A setup? By who? I didn’t have an answer. “Call Herman,” I said. “Let him know.”

“Okay.” She fumbled through her purse, pulled out her phone, and dialed. As she spoke to him—short, clipped sentences—my mind raced. A gun in Karl’s room. Not Herman’s. Planted, maybe. The murder weapon? If we tell the police, Karl’s done—guilty or not.

I parked in front of their house as the rain started to come down lightly. The sky was dark overhead, promising a downpour any second. Lottie bolted

out before I cut the engine, sprinting to the front door. I followed, jogging through the living room, down the basement stairs. Karl sat on his bed, head in his hands.

He looked up as Lottie burst in, then leapt to his feet. "It's right there," he said, pointing next to his backpack. "It's not mine."

On the desk under the basement window sat a large handgun—black, heavy, out of place on the scratched wood. My stomach dropped.

"Tell me what happened," Lottie said, stepping closer.

Karl pointed at the desk. "I got home from school, dropped my bag there. Then I saw the gun on the floor, under the window."

"Where, exactly?" I asked, moving to his side.

He gestured to a spot beneath the window frame. "Right there."

Lottie's voice sharpened. "How did it get in your room?"

Karl's eyes flicked to the open window. The screen was gone.

"What?" Lottie pressed. "What aren't you saying?"

Karl's voice cracked. "I think someone took out the screen and tossed it in."

Lottie inhaled deep, then let it out slow. "Why would anyone throw a gun in here?"

He shrugged, looking away, shoulders stiff.

"Tell me the truth," she said. "Did you buy it?"

"No!" His answer came quick.

"Do you know whose it is?"

He swallowed hard. His face flushed red, but he didn't speak.

"Karl," Lottie said, slow and steady, holding back her rising suspicion, "do you know who took out the screen and threw it in?"

He stared at the floor.

"We're telling your father," she warned. "He won't ask this nicely."

Karl took a shaky breath. "I think it was Isabelle."

"Isabelle?" Lottie's brows shot up.

He nodded. "She's the only one who knows."

"Knows what?"

Karl slumped onto the bed, head hanging low. "She knows about the broken screen."

"Explain," Lottie snapped.



"You're going to kill me."

"You'd better explain, Karl, because you're in deep trouble." Her voice climbed, sharp now. "Talk. Now."

"Okay, okay." He rubbed his hands together nervously. "The latches on the screen are broken. This morning, I opened the window before school—the screen was still in. When I got home, it was out, and the gun was there."

Lottie cut in. "How does Isabelle know the latches are broken?"

Karl bit a fingernail, eyes darting. "I broke the screen so I can leave without anyone knowing," he mumbled. "Isabelle's the only one who knows."

Lottie shook her head, anger flashing. "I don't believe it. You sneak out of this house at night and visit Isabelle?"

"No." Karl dropped his head lower. "Sometimes she—" he sucked in a breath "—sneaks in."

Silence hit the room hard. Lottie breathed in and out slowly, then shut her eyes. "We'll deal with that later with your father. Right now, the gun."

She reached for it. I grabbed her arm. "Don't touch it. If it's from Isabelle's, it could be Garth's murder weapon. Fingerprints might still be on it."

"Why would she throw it in here?" Lottie asked, pulling back.

"To make me look guilty, Mom," Karl said, voice rising. "She hates me since I dumped her."

Isabelle framing Karl? My mind spun. Revenge fits. But if that's the murder weapon, we're in deep. I ran through the options quickly. If we reported the gun, Corbison would nab Karl immediately. There wouldn't be much we could do unless we could prove Isabelle killed her stepdad. On the other hand, not reporting the gun would be even more damaging if the detective were to find out. "We need to call the police," I said finally.

"No," Lottie's demand was desperate. "They'll arrest him. We have to get rid of the gun."

"Lottie, it's evidence," I said firmly. "We can't hide it."

Her eyes were wild, pleading. "Abby, I have to protect my son!"

"What's going on?" a deep voice cut in. I turned. Herman stood in the doorway, broad and stern, staring us down.

Herman Dombowski was a big teddy bear of a man, with light brown hair combed back from his wide forehead, a strong nose, and an infectious

smile. But today he wasn't smiling. Dressed in a blue work shirt and navy pants, he was dead serious as he entered the room. "What did you do, son?"

"I found a gun, Dad. That's all. And I think Isabelle put it in my room."

"I was just telling Lottie," I said, "that we need to report it to the police. It could be evidence."

Lottie grabbed her husband's hand. "We can't, Herman. We'd be putting our boy in jeopardy! They'll say he used it to kill Schmidt."

Herman looked at me with an expression I couldn't determine. I suddenly felt trapped, like I could be the one responsible for Karl going to prison. I didn't want to push the subject, but there was no way I could let Lottie and Herman bury the evidence.

From far off, I could hear heavy pounding. "What's that?"

"It sounds like someone's at the front door," Herman said. "I'll go see what's going on."

No one spoke as Herman left the basement room. Lottie was wringing her hands; Karl was sitting on the bed with his head in his hands; and I was pacing. I wanted to assure Lottie that calling the police was the right thing to do, but I worried about Corbison's reaction.

I heard heavy footfalls coming down the hallway and suddenly two police officers entered the room, followed by Herman. "Where is the weapon?" one of the officers demanded.

"On the desk," Karl said, standing up.

"How did you know there was a weapon here?" I asked the officer, watching as he put on a glove, picked up the gun, and slid it into an evidence bag. He didn't answer.

"Are you Karl Dombowski?" the second officer asked.

"Yes, sir."

"You're going to have to come down to the station with us," he ordered.

Lottie stepped in front of Karl. "Why? All he did was find the gun in his room."

"We have information that he was brandishing a weapon outside the house," the officer said. "Please step out of my way."

"That's not true," Lottie said, as the officer forcefully moved her aside. "He found the gun in his room."

"That's not for us to decide," the officer answered.

"Who told you he had a weapon?" I asked.

"Anonymous tip," the officer replied.

As the officers led Karl from the room, Lottie called, "Don't say a word, Karl. I'll be right behind you."

"Mom?" he cried as he was led upstairs.

"Don't say another word, Karl." Lottie nearly collapsed into my arms.

"Lottie," I said, "call Dave Hammond and tell him what's going on."

"Abby, I can't. My head is spinning. I'm going to be sick."

"Okay, I'll call Dave. Sit down. Catch your breath. He'll probably want to meet you and Herman at the station when the police question Karl."

I sat on Karl's bed with Lottie, holding her hand as Dave answered on the third ring. "What's up, Abby?"

"I've got an emergency situation here, Dave. A gun was found in Karl's bedroom just now. It appears to have been dropped through an open window. It might be the gun used in the Schmidt murder."

"You'll have to call the police, Abby."

"It's too late for that. Someone reported that Karl was waving a gun outside. Someone is setting him up."

"Okay. I'll wrap things up here and head down to the station," he said. "I'll get back to you."

"Thanks, Dave. I appreciate it."

I ended the call and turned to Lottie. "He's going to meet Karl at the station."

"Okay," Lottie said, her hand trembling in mine. "Let's go."

I followed her upstairs and out through the garage where Herman was waiting. "I'll talk to Sergeant Reilly and see if I can find out more information. Please let me know what happens."

Before she entered the passenger side of Herman's car, she wrapped me in a hug. "I'm so nervous, Abby. I think Karl's in real trouble."

"Don't give up," I whispered as she let go. "It's not over yet."

The rain was coming down in droves, so I rushed down the driveway just as Marco pulled up alongside the curb. I stepped off the cement into the wet grass before opening his passenger door and jumping in.

"What's going on?"

“Karl thinks that Isabelle dropped the gun through his window. Apparently, she’s climbed through his window before and knows how to take the screen out. And someone reported that Karl was brandishing the weapon outside their house. I think Isabelle killed her stepdad and now she’s trying to frame Karl.”

“I don’t think so.”

I looked at him, eyes wide. “Why not?”

Marco turned his head toward the house across the street. “I think it was Nelson Punter.”



## CHAPTER TWENTY- FOUR



Marco laid it out. “Punter likes to stir up trouble and watch the fallout from his window. I’d bet Garth found out about his little game. So Punter killed Garth, shot him with his own gun, and he’s been waiting for the right time to plant the weapon.”

“How would Nelson know Karl’s screen was broken?” I asked.

“Let’s go find out.”

Marco and I exited his car as the storm eased for a moment. Just then, the Punter’s garage door rumbled open, and a car backed out, Mrs. Punter at the wheel. She leaned out the window, shouting to us, “I’m leaving him! You hear me, Nelson? For good!”

I edged closer to the house. The Punters’ front door hung open, the inside pitch black. I turned to the car. Mrs. Punter sat behind the wheel with big glasses perched on her nose and a scarf knotted tight under her chin. “What happened?” I asked.

“He’s a liar and a fraud,” she said, her voice hard. “And I’ve finally had enough. He’s faked his disability for years. Lied to you too. He’s been messing with the neighbors just to watch them squirm.”

“He can walk?” I asked.

“Yeah, his legs work just fine. His hands do, too.” She tugged her scarf down. A purple bruise spread across her cheek, stark and ugly.

My blood surged. “He can’t get away with that.” I spun toward the house. Nelson Punter stared from the shadowed open doorway, scowling.

“He won’t,” she said. “I’m heading to the police station to report him, then staying with my sister.”

"Good," I said. "You're doing the right thing."

"Abby, thank you. I don't know how long I'd have stayed with that monster if you hadn't pushed me to stand up."

"I'm sorry he hurt you."

"Not your fault," she said.

Marco stepped up. "Before you go—did Nelson have anything to do with Garth Schmidt's death?"

She shook her head. "Yesterday, I'd have said no. But after I called him out and he hit me..." A tear slid down her cheek. "I don't know who he is anymore."

"Why'd you call him out?" Marco asked.

"I saw the police take that boy away. I told Nelson it was wrong. He laughed—said the kid deserved it and if I kept talking, he'd shut me up."

"He's threatened you before?"

"Plenty. Never followed through until today."

"Go to the station," I said. "Ask for Sergeant Reilly. Tell him Abby sent you."

"Thanks again," she said.

Marco turned to me. "Now we talk to her husband."

Rain picked up as we crossed to the porch, but the door slammed shut before we could make it up to the front door. Mrs. Punter called out, "See you Monday for the Poetry Society!"

I waved as she drove off. Good for her.

We knocked hard three times. Rang the bell twice. Finally, Nelson opened the door, slouched in his wheelchair, hair wild, still in that tattered blue robe, scowling like always. "No amount of cash gets you in here, so leave."

"We know you can walk," I said.

"Who says?"

Marco pulled a photo from his coat and held it up. Nelson leaned forward, squinting at it. "That's not proof."

"Not alone," Marco said. "But we also have a reliable witness."

"Who?" Nelson's voice sharpened.

I laughed, short and bitter. "She just left."

He grunted, sneered, and rolled his chair back. "Fine. Come in. Let's negotiate."



"So, Nelson," Marco started as we sat down across from him, "Do we have the police look at you for Schmidt's murder? Because I'm sure they'll be very interested when they find out you've been perpetrating this feud."

"I had nothing to do with his death!" Nelson shouted, pounding the arm of his wheelchair.

"And you didn't drop the gun into Karl's bedroom to pin the blame on him?" I asked.

"What? That's utter nonsense."

"I doubt the police will think so," I said.

"You're wrong!" Nelson shouted. "I didn't murder Schmidt. *She* did!" He pointed toward Schmidt house. "That woman!"

"Who?" I asked. "Mrs. Schmidt?"

Nelson looked out the window. "She killed him."

I pulled out my notebook as Marco took over the interrogation. "Tell us what you know."

Nelson continued to stare out the window for a moment before answering. "I saw that woman's car parked up by the garage when I went to close my curtains Monday night. The garage door was up, and the light inside was on. I could see Schmidt's truck inside, so I knew he had to be home. And her car was still parked outside the garage the next morning, long before the cops came. So, I asked myself, why didn't she park inside the garage like she usually does?"

I wrote it down.

"Then she moved it out front before the cops came. See what I'm sayin'? She's guilty as all get out."

"Why didn't you tell the police this?" I asked in frustration.

Nelson shrugged. "I didn't want to get caught."

"Caught doing what?" I asked.

"He didn't want to get caught slashing Lottie's tires," Marco answered. "You knew you screwed up, so you had to blame someone."

Nelson snarled. "Who better to blame?"

"You'd let an innocent young man take the rap for her?" I asked.

"Those boys are always up to no good. They need to be taught a lesson."

I was ready to throw my pen at him. "What is wrong with you?"

"Abby," Marco said. "Let's go." He turned back to Nelson. "You're in a lot of trouble."

I put away my pen and notebook and followed Marco to the door. Neither one of us said goodbye. We simply walked out.

The rain was heavy, pounding the roof of Marco's car as we entered. Both of us sat in silence for a while, thinking our own thoughts while we watched the Schmidt's house next door.

"Let's just say for the moment that Nelson is telling the truth," I said. "If Celeste came home at ten o'clock, the fireworks show was already over. So, she couldn't have murdered her husband. And here's another thing. If Garth was killed between nine and ten p.m., why did Celeste wait until morning to call the police?"

"Good questions. Maybe Celeste didn't call the police because she was cleaning up the crime scene. And if it wasn't Nelson or Celeste who shot Garth, that leaves Isabelle."

"It has to be her," I mused. "Someone took out the screen in Karl's room and dropped the gun through his window. Wouldn't it be more likely that it was Isabelle?"

"That's what makes the most sense. Let's contact Detective Corbison and tell him what we found out. Let him sort it out."

"After Karl was arrested with the murder weapon? I say we go across the street and have a little chat with Isabelle first. We need to get her to tell us what happened."

Marco looked at me, a little smile creeping across his face. "So, you want a confession?"

"Don't you think that's a smart move?"

"Walking into a killer's house? Probably not."

"If we don't get a confession, Karl goes to prison. It's that simple."

"Then let's go get a confession."

We ran up the sidewalk and onto the porch where I rang the doorbell. In a minute, the door opened, and Celeste appeared behind the screen door.



She was wearing a light blue, long-sleeved shirt and black slacks with black flats. Oddly, her eyes were red and filled with tears. With a glare she said, "What's going on?"

"I think you know what's going on, Celeste. The police arrested Karl."

Her jaw tightened. I watched her hands twitch at her sides. "I don't know anything about that."

"We need to talk to Isabelle."

"She isn't here."

The storm growled again. Wind shoved at the screen door making it tap the frame.

"Where is she?" I asked.

At that moment, a lightning bolt streaked across our heads, followed instantly by a loud crack of thunder around us, shaking the ground. Celeste opened the screen door. "Come in before you get drenched."

We stepped into a small foyer facing the staircase. The air inside felt stale and close like the house hadn't breathed in days. To the left, a taupe living room stretched out dull and quiet. Shadows clung to the corners where the storm's dim light couldn't reach. Next to the staircase were two suitcases. Was Celeste about to leave town?

"I'd invite you to have a seat," she said, wiping tears off her cheeks, "but I'm in a hurry. Why do you want to talk to Isabelle?"

"You seem upset," I said. "Can I ask what's wrong?"

She waved it away as if it were nothing. "Izzy and I had a fight."

The way she brushed it off didn't sit right. Her eyes were too raw for a simple spat. "Sorry to hear that."

She looked at her watch. "I have to get to work. What about my daughter?"

"We'd like to talk to her about the night your husband was killed."

"I've already told you. My daughter and her boyfriend were at the movies that evening."

"We have new information," Marco told her. "We have an eyewitness who saw you parked in front of the garage at ten o'clock that night, with the garage door open."

Thunder rumbled outside rolling long and deep. Celeste's hands closed into fists at her sides. "That's not true."

"We have a witness who says otherwise."

She huffed defensively. "I don't know what to tell you. Someone's lying."

Marco nodded and leaned in, his voice low. "You're right. Someone's been lying this whole time."

Hearing that, Celeste's face contorted as though she'd been slapped. Before she could defend herself, Marco continued. "Did you know Nelson Punter was having a feud with the Dombowski boys?"

"What? No. What does that have to do with me?"

"Nelson was the one spilling garbage on your driveway and throwing eggs at your house."

"Why?"

"For his own twisted entertainment," I answered. "He hated your husband, but even more so, he hated those boys. Nelson would sneak out at night to mess with them. He admitted it just minutes ago. He caused trouble so he could watch the show."

"How is that possible?" Celeste asked. "He can't walk."

"He can," Marco said. "He's been lying about his disability for years. We have proof that he can walk, and when we confronted him, he confessed."

"Confessed to walking?"

"And to lying about seeing you."

Her eye began to twitch. A shadow crossed her face as lightning flashed outside. "You need to go."

"He saw you, Celeste," Marco pushed.

"No, you've got it all wrong. I got home late and left my car parked by the garage." Her tone was very convincing, but her eyes told a different story. They shifted from side to side, blinking quickly as she spoke, as though trying to think fast. "In the morning, I moved my car before the police came so they'd have a place to park."

"Why didn't you park in the garage that night?" Marco asked.

Celeste rubbed her forehead nervously. "I – I sometimes leave my car outside – when I have to be at work early."

"Were you scheduled to work early the next morning?" I asked.

She looked around the room, her eyes starting to well up.

"We can check with the furniture store to see if you were scheduled," I added.

She didn't answer. Her silence screamed louder than words. I could tell by her reaction that she was about to break. We were so close to getting a confession.

Marco continued. "Look, Mrs. Schmidt, we don't think your husband's death was a murder. We think it was an accident, and we believe Isabelle was involved. Do you want to tell us what really happened?"

She closed her eyes and lowered her head. "You wouldn't understand."

"Isabelle shot Garth, didn't she?" Marco pressured.

Tears slid slowly down her face.

"Tell us the truth, Celeste," I said. "Let us help you."

She sighed and gestured toward the sofa. "You might as well have a seat."

Marco and I followed her into the living room and sat side by side on the sofa. Celeste sat on an easy chair across from us, twisting her fingers nervously.

I pulled my notebook and pen from my purse. The storm's gray light caught the empty page as I opened it. Marco started. "Monday night. What happened?"

Celeste took a deep breath and said, "I did it. I killed Garth."



## CHAPTER TWENTY- FIVE



I sat back stunned. “*You* killed Garth?” I looked at Marco as his eyes narrowed, and we shared a knowing glance. It didn’t add up. Celeste was lying, still covering for her daughter.

“How did it happen?” Marco asked.

She rubbed her forehead as if she were thinking. Then she took a deep breath and began. “Like you said, it was an accident.”

“How?” Marco repeated.

“We fought. I grabbed the gun and shot him.”

“Then what?”

“Then I – I don’t know. I tried to clean up. I took the gun. And then I came up with a plan to frame Lex.”

“Why Lex?” Marco asked.

“I figured Lex would be an easy target. My husband had just gotten him fired. They had a fight just a week before. I didn’t think anyone would question it.”

“Was it your idea to frame Karl, too?” Marco asked.

She nodded and tried to steady her breathing, still wiping away the tears. “I didn’t have a choice. The detective was only interested in Karl, so I came up with the plan to frame him instead.”

“How did you come up with that plan?” I asked.

“How did I come up with the plan?” she repeated, stuttering as she tried to remember. “I – I just knew about the threat, and that he lived next door, and I could easily plant the gun in his room.”

“So, *you* planted the gun?” I asked, still not believing her story.

At that, Celeste closed her mouth and nodded.

“Did Isabelle help you?”

She looked at me with bloodshot eyes. “Leave her out of this. She doesn’t know anything.”

Marco looked at me with a flash of concern. He quickly readjusted his focus back to Celeste, but I could tell he had caught something. But what?

“Are you saying Isabelle doesn’t know that you killed Garth?” he asked.

“She doesn’t know anything.”

Marco shifted and set his hand near mine. It was a small adjustment, but I understood. He was telling me to pay attention. So, I steadied my pen, my attention focused on her every movement. “What time did you get home from the rummage sale?” he asked.

“I told you before what time. I left the rummage sale at ten and got home around ten-fifteen. That’s when I shot Garth.”

“Celeste,” he said slowly, “your husband was killed before ten o’clock, during the fireworks show. That’s why no one heard the gunshots.”

She blinked repeatedly then rubbed her bloodshot eyes. “Then I must’ve gotten home before the show ended.”

“Your story isn’t adding up,” he said.

“You have to believe me. I shot my husband out of fear. He was a bad man. He abused me and my daughter. Isabelle had nothing to do with it.”

“Tell me how you got into Karl’s room to plant the gun?” Marco asked.

“I threw it through his window.”

“How did you know where Karl’s room was?”

“I just know.”

“What about the screen?”

She looked startled. “What screen?”

And there was more proof she was lying. Marco shook his head. “You didn’t put the gun in Karl’s room. Isabelle did. She knew about the broken latch on the screen.”

“No. You’re wrong. I just forgot about the screen.”

"Celeste, it's okay," I said. "We know you're covering for your daughter. We don't blame you. We know she put the gun in Karl's room. And we know she killed Garth. If you let Isabelle confess, she might get a lighter sentence."

Her eyes widened. "No! I'm confessing to you right now. *I* shot Garth. And I'll confess to the detective, too."

"We know you're only trying to protect her," I said. I pointed toward the foyer. "Is that her suitcase? Is she going to leave town?"

Celeste folded her fingers together in a pleading gesture. "You don't understand. You didn't know Garth. He made life miserable for both of us."

"The courts are lenient to victims of abuse," Marco said. "But Isabelle needs to confess."

Celeste sat still with tears streaming down her cheeks. She looked up at the fireplace mantle. "She used to be so happy."

On the mantle were several framed photographs, a few decorative tall candles, with a long, carved, wooden keepsake box in the middle. Celeste stood and walked to the fireplace to stare at a picture of her daughter. The storm's hum grew steady outside. Rain tapped the glass behind us. Celeste ran her hand lovingly over the photo and stared at it for a moment before saying, "This was my Izzy when she was eight years old, before her father died, before Garth came into our lives. Look how happy she was." She sighed deeply, moaning as though it hurt to breathe. "I failed her. I failed to protect her from that monster."

My chest tightened. I could feel her pain. She was about to break. "Celeste," I prodded gently, "please tell us what happened the night your husband was killed."

She opened a carved wooden box next to the photo, and before I knew what was happening, she'd pulled out a handgun and swung to face us. "I won't fail her again."

Marco held up his hands. "Celeste, you don't want to make things worse."

"I will not let my little girl go to jail. She did what she had to do to protect herself. She did what I never had the courage to do. And now that you know the truth" – Celeste raised the gun – "I'll have to set things right for both of us."



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Thunder boomed dull and heavy. Shadows jumped on the walls at the accompanying jolt of lightning. The rain picked up outside, tapping harder on the glass. Marco stood and stepped in front of me, his hands raised. “We won’t force you to go to the police.”

Celeste motioned toward the sofa with the gun. “Sit back down.”

*What now, Abby?* I shot Marco a frightened glance, but his eyes were deadlocked onto Celeste, watching her every move like a hawk. She was clearly unhinged. Her motive was clear. She wasn’t going to let us leave. I looked at Marco again, knowing his instinct was to pounce, to put himself in front of me. That’s when I remembered the pepper spray.

“Mom, stop!” we heard from the hallway. I looked over to see Isabelle step out from the shadows. “What are you doing?”

“Izzy, I told you to stay in your room. I’m handling this.”

“By killing two innocent people?” She started to cry. “What happened to you? Why are you acting like this?”

Celeste lowered the gun, but only slightly. “Izzy, please don’t cry. I can’t let you go to jail for murder. It isn’t right. You were defending yourself.”

I set my pen and notebook aside, then stood up beside Marco. “Celeste, I know you feel trapped, but there’s a way out. If Isabelle shot your husband in self-defense, she won’t be tried for murder.”

Celeste laughed harshly. “Who’s going to believe us now?”

“I know a good defense lawyer,” I said. “He’ll know what to do.”

Celeste turned toward the hallway, looking into the eyes of her daughter. Celeste was still for a moment, making me think I’d reached her, but then she turned to face me. “I can’t take the chance.”

Isabelle wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. "Mom, listen to her. Don't make this worse."

"Izzy, they know too much. Just trust me and let me handle this."

"No. I want to tell them what really happened that night."

"Isabelle."

"No, Mom. I need to confess."

While Celeste's head was turned toward her daughter, Marco inched forward, his eyes intensely focused on the barrel of the gun. I reached out and grabbed his arm, stopping him. It was too dangerous to approach her with the loaded gun aimed right at him. Marco cranked his neck as I looked down at my purse hanging from my shoulder, hopeful that he would remember the gift he'd given me.

"Dillon came to pick me up that night," Isabelle explained, "but Garth caught him. He threatened him. He told Dillon to leave and then he took my phone."

Marco looked down at my purse and wiggled his fingers, indicating that I hand him the pepper spray.

Suddenly, Celeste turned toward him and put a second hand around the revolver's grip. "I said sit down! Both of you!"

Marco and I both held up our hands to indicate surrender, hoping to calm her down. I sat next to my husband, and as I did, I positioned my hand just above the purse zipper.

Isabelle walked further into the room as though she wanted to come between her mother and us, but her mom halted her with a forceful, almost primal shout. "*Isabelle Renee Miller*, you stand back this instant!"

Isabelle stepped back in alarm. "*Please* don't do this, Mom."

I unzipped my purse and slowly inched my hand inside as Celeste's attention was momentarily diverted. My fingers slid carefully between my keys and lip gloss, my wallet, hair ties, and snack bar, until I found the small bottle of pepper spray. I looked over to see Marco give me a quick nod.

"Izzy, get my keys out of my purse," Celeste ordered. Her voice was completely flat. "Get your suitcase and take my car. Go to your grandfather's cabin. There's a map and directions in the trunk."

"No, Mom. I'm not going."



Her eyes were fastened to ours. Her hands locked at the elbows. The gun leveled. She spoke slowly to her daughter. "You need to leave right now."

"I won't let you do this."

Celeste turned her head and made eye contact with her daughter. "I said *go. Now.*"

I lifted the pepper spray out of my purse as quietly as possible and held it by my side.

Isabelle wiped the tears streaming down her cheeks. "It's too late, Mom. I already called the police. I'm sorry."

Celeste lowered the gun. "You *did what?* Why?"

"I'm tired of blaming everyone else," she wept. "I didn't mean to kill Garth. It was an accident. I just want to explain myself."

At first, I was relieved at the idea of the police coming, but relief was quickly followed by the realization that Celeste would be even more determined to carry out her plan before they arrived. My grip tightened around the spray. I didn't know if I'd have an opportunity to use it, so I had to stall Celeste. "Isabelle, what happened after Garth took your phone?"

"You leave her out of this," Celeste said in a tone so hollow and desperate that I felt a cold chill run up my spine. The woman had nothing left. She had no more fear, no remorse, only instinct. I thought of what Rosa had said. I thought of what my mom had said. I thought of what Lottie had said. A mother would do anything to protect her child.

Isabelle sniffled back tears. "I went out to the garage to talk to him, try to reason with him. I just wanted my phone back. But he was so mean. That's when I picked up his baseball bat. I swung it at him, and he took out his gun and pointed it at me. He pointed the gun at my head." She started crying harder. "I thought he was going to shoot me. He was going to kill me."

As Isabelle told her story, her mother stood still, her arms trembling as she stared down the barrel of the revolver. Tears were streaming down her cheeks. "That's enough, Isabelle."

"I don't remember what happened after that," Isabelle said between deep sobs. "I must have attacked him. I must've picked up the gun. And the gun went off." She could barely speak at that point; she was letting out all of her emotions at once. "It happened so fast."

"Not another word, Izzy."

*"I didn't mean to kill him, Mom."*

"I know, sweetheart."

I slid the safety off and gripped the pepper spray firmly in my palm.

Celeste's hands were shaking at this point. Both she and her daughter were crying uncontrollably. Celeste slowly rested her thumb onto the hammer of the revolver. "I'll make it all go away."

"You have the most amazing mother," I said to Isabelle, although my words and eyes were focused on Celeste. "She loves you so much."

Isabelle stepped into the living room. "I know. Mom. Please. I know you love me. Please don't do this."

"I have to," Celeste responded in a shaky voice. "One day, when you're a mother, you'll understand." She took a deep breath and pulled back the revolver's hammer. Before I even had time to lift the pepper spray, Isabelle lunged for Celeste and grabbed the gun. They wrestled for a moment. Then a deafening shot rang out, and for a split second, no one moved. My ears were ringing as I watched both women standing still, their arms wrapped around each other. Then Celeste collapsed onto the floor.

"Mom!" Isabelle cried.

Marco sprung forward immediately, rushing to where Celeste lay. He grabbed the gun and took a step back while Isabelle crouched over her mother.

"Mom, are you okay? Are you hurt?"

Celeste didn't answer.

Marco quickly unloaded the revolver and pocketed the loose bullets. He then placed the gun back on the mantle. "Check her pulse," he called over Isabelle's loud cries.

But all Isabelle could do was rock back and forth with her mother in her arms. "Mom, please. Answer me."

There was a heavy pounding on the front door and a man's voice called, "New Chapel Police."

With an overwhelming sense of relief, I went to open the door. "In there," I pointed. "She's been shot."

"She's okay," Isabelle responded loudly. "Thank God. She's okay."

As the two officers stepped inside, Marco and I moved out of their way. Sergeant Reilly stepped in next and made eye contact with Marco, then me. "Are you two okay?"

I could feel my legs shaking, my knees weak, but Marco held me close. "We're fine now," he answered.



That evening, as Marco and I sat in our booth at Down the Hatch eating our dinner, drinking our well-deserved wine, and going over the events of the afternoon, Reilly walked into the bar, spotted us, and came over. "I thought you might be here."

"Join us," Marco said. "We were just talking about you."

"Me?" Reilly was still dressed in his police uniform. He slid into the booth next to Marco. "What about me?"

"You always believed in us," I told him. "We couldn't have solved the case without you."

Reilly blushed. "Aw, come on."

"It's true, Sean," Marco added. "You always come through."

"Unlike Corbison," I muttered.

"Well," Reilly said. "Speaking of the detective. He's not too happy with you."

"With me?" I asked incredulously.

"With both of you. Listen, Corbison is in the doghouse with the D.A. because they've already brought up charges on Karl. Now they have to admit he was wrongly charged. And, as you know, this isn't the first time it's happened. Now there's talk of an investigation into the detective's actions and poor decision making over the last few years.

I wanted to slap my hand on the table, I was so happy. But I remained calm, jumping for joy only on the inside. "It's about time someone stood up to that man."

"And your friend Dave," Reilly continued. "He's calling on the detective to issue a public apology to Karl and the Dombowski family."

"Wow."

"This isn't going to help our relationship with Corbison," Marco said.

"You're right about that," Reilly agreed. "He's pretty angry."

"He should be embarrassed," I said. "Maybe he'll listen to us now."

Reilly chuckled to himself. "I doubt that. But on the other hand, I do have some good news to share. So far, Celeste is being charged with attempted murder, obstruction of justice, and intimidation. And Isabelle is being charged with manslaughter."

"How is that good news? I was hoping the D.A. would go easy on Isabelle, since it was self-defense," I said.

"I think he did go easy on her," Reilly responded. "Hopefully a good defense lawyer will get her off with a light sentence, possibly even probation."

Gert stopped by our booth to check on us. "Can I bring you anything, Sarge?" she asked.

"Nope. I'm on duty, but thanks." He slid out of the booth. "I've got to get back. Have a nice evening. And good job solving the case."

"Thanks for the info," I said.

"See you soon, Sean," Marco added.

As soon as Reilly had left the building, my phone rang. I answered to hear Lottie's loud, hearty laugh. "Thank the Good Lord, Abby. You've done it!"

Marco finished his wine while I shared in the excitement, and after the phone call, I filled him in. "She's invited us over for a celebration this Saturday. She wants our whole family over, along with Tara and the Bloomers crew."

"Sounds like a good time."

I laughed. "Sounds like a full house."

"I don't know if I'll be able to join the celebration." Marco looked around at the bar. "I'll have to convince Rafe to come back to work."

"Speaking of Rafe," I said, suddenly realizing that Chris was the only one working behind the bar. "Isn't he supposed to be here today?"

My husband nodded, a look of disappointment washing over his face. "He called off. That's the second time this week. I told you he was going to be irresponsible with this lottery win."

"Did he tell you why he called off?"

"Nope, just said he had important business to attend."

"Well, we have business to attend, too. Seedy needs to be walked and both pets need their dinner."

Marco swallowed his last gulp of wine. "Then let's go."

We drove home separately, and as I came up to our driveway, a large moving van was parked across the street. I pulled into the garage, got out of the car, and waited as Marco pulled in. When he exited his car, I said, "Looks like someone bought the house across the street."

"Who do you think it is?" he asked.

"I don't know. I don't recognize the car."

We watched for a moment as movers carried a sofa into the house. "Should we go over and introduce ourselves?" Marco asked.

"That would be the neighborly thing to do."

We walked across the street and up the sidewalk to the front door, which was propped open. Marco rang the doorbell, and we waited.

The movers came out on their way to the truck, so we stepped out of their way. That's when we heard a familiar voice. My jaw dropped as I realized who it was.

"*You* bought the house?" Marco asked.

It was the last person in the world I'd expected, Not the campers with their monstrous RV. Not the mom and dad with their noisy brood. It wasn't the elderly couple who wanted to cook for us. And it wasn't the couple who ran their own church.

It was Rafe, standing in the doorway with a big smile on his face. He stepped onto the front porch and stretched out his arms. "Hello, neighbors!"



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



I would like to thank my son, Jason Eberhardt, for his immense talent in bringing this book to fruition. His editing skills are spot on and his ability to format and publish deeply appreciated. We have worked together on many books, but this one may be the most extensive.

To my daughter, Julie—your unshakable support and radiant positivity light up everything I do. Thank you for being my cheerleader and my rock.

And, of course, to you, my amazing readers and devoted fans of *The Flower Shop Mysteries*—I owe you everything. Your love for our feisty, red-headed heroine, Abby Knight, as she navigates her wild adventures and hilarious misadventures, keeps me going. I couldn't do this without your enthusiasm and loyalty. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for sticking with us!



## FLOWER SHOP MYSTERY SERIES

Mum's the Word<sup>1</sup>  
Slay it With Flowers<sup>2</sup>  
Dearly Depotted<sup>3</sup>  
Snipped In the Bud<sup>4</sup>  
Acts of Violets<sup>5</sup>  
A Rose from the Dead<sup>6</sup>  
Shoots To Kill<sup>7</sup>  
Evil In Carnations<sup>8</sup>  
Sleeping With Anemone<sup>9</sup>  
Dirty Rotten Tendrils<sup>10</sup>  
Night Of the Living Dandelion<sup>11</sup>  
To Catch a Leaf<sup>12</sup>  
Nightshade On Elm Street<sup>13</sup>

- 
1. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/mum-s-the-word>
  2. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/slay-it-with-flowers>
  3. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/dearly-depotted>
  4. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/snipped-in-the-bud>
  5. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/acts-of-violets>
  6. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/a-rose-from-the-dead>
  7. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/shoots-to-kill>
  8. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/evil-in-carnations>
  9. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/sleeping-with-anemone>
  10. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/dirty-rotten-tendrils>
  11. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/night-of-the-living-dandelion>
  12. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/to-catch-a-leaf>

Seed No Evil<sup>14</sup>  
Throw In the Trowel<sup>15</sup>  
A Root Awakening<sup>16</sup>  
Florist Grump<sup>17</sup>  
Moss Hysteria<sup>18</sup>  
Yews With Caution<sup>19</sup>  
Kick the Bouquet<sup>20</sup>  
Roses are Dead, Violets are Blue<sup>21</sup>  
Missing Under the Mistletoe – Christmas Novella<sup>22</sup>  
Tulips Too Late – Spring Novella<sup>23</sup>  
A Frond in Need – Summer Novella<sup>24</sup>  
Till Death Do Us Pot – Fall Novella<sup>25</sup>



## 4

## AUDIOBOOKS

Mum's the Word<sup>26</sup>  
Slay it with Flowers<sup>27</sup>  
Dearly Depotted<sup>28</sup>

---

13. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/nightshade-on-elm-street>

14. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/seed-no-evil>

15. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/throw-in-the-trowel>

16. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/a-root-awakening>

17. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/florist-grump>

18. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/moss-hysteria>

19. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/yews-with-caution>

20. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/kick-the-bouquet>

21. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/roses-are-dead-violets-are-blue>

22. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/missing-under-the-mistletoe>

23. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/tulips-too-late>

24. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/a-frond-in-need>

25. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/til-death-do-us-pot>

26. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/audiobooks>

27. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/audiobooks>



Statue of Limitations<sup>29</sup>  
A Big Fat Greek Murder<sup>30</sup>  
Big Trouble in Little Greektown<sup>31</sup>  
Gone but Not for Garden<sup>32</sup>  
Roses are Dead, Violets are Blue<sup>33</sup>



HALLMARK MOVIE COLLECTION<sup>34</sup>  
Flower Shop Mysteries<sup>35</sup>



GODDESS OF GREENE ST. MYSTERIES  
Statue of Limitations<sup>36</sup>  
A Big Fat Greek Murder<sup>37</sup>  
Big Trouble in Little Greektown<sup>38</sup>  
Gone but Not for Garden – Flower Shop Crossover<sup>39</sup>

---

28. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/audiobooks>

29. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/audiobooks>

30. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/audiobooks>

31. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/audiobooks>

32. <https://katecollinsbooks.com/audiobooks#anchor-7>

33. <https://katecollinsbooks.com/audiobooks#anchor5>

34. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/hallmark-movies>

35. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/hallmark-movies>

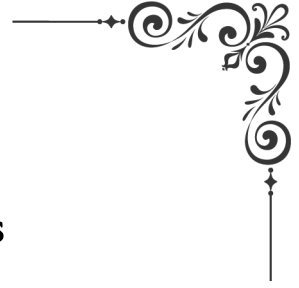
36. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/statue-of-limitations>

37. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/a-big-fat-greek-murder>

38. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/big-trouble-in-little-greektown>

39. <https://www.katecollinsbooks.com/gone-but-not-for-garden>

Keep reading for a preview of Kate Collins' next Flower Shop mystery  
BEST LAID PLANTS



# **Best Laid Plants**

A Flower Shop Mystery



Kate Collins

*Three years ago*

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee swirled around me, mingling with the soft hum of jazz in the air. I sat at one of the small round tables in the back of The Daily Grind, a bustling coffee shop just a stone's throw from New Chapel University, where I'd recently been a law student. Across from me was Pryce Osborne II, my fiancé. As always, he looked polished—today in a tan blazer, light blue shirt, and brown pants, paired with brown oxfords that complemented his light brown eyes and neatly parted brown hair.

"Abby?"

He reached across the table, taking my hand between his large, soft palms. It was a tender move, one he rarely made, which should've set off warning bells. But this was Pryce, my fiancé—I was certain he had something sweet to say. I smiled. "Yes?"

He took a deep breath. "We need to talk."

The coffee shop chatter faded, and the light around me seemed to dim as his words hit me. *We need to talk* never kicked off anything good.

It was June. The school year had just ended, and I'd recently learned that after one year of law school, I was being dismissed. Apparently, I wasn't cut out to be an attorney. So, I'd turned to the man I was set to marry in two months, a man whom I'd thought would comfort me, hold me, tell me everything was going to be fine. Instead, Pryce had been floored by the news—so much so that I had to remind him to breathe. And when I asked for a hug, the most he could muster was a pat on the back. I'd even reassured him everything was going to be fine, instead of the other way around. "It'll be okay," I promised. "I'll find something else to do."

What that might be, I had no idea. Everything I'd banked on had vanished. I'd been drifting in a daze ever since. And now Pryce wanted to "talk."

Okay, *think*, Abby! Maybe he had career advice. Maybe it was a job I wouldn't like, but I could hear him out. I lifted my latte for a sip.

"I've been talking with my parents," Pryce started. He cleared his throat. "They feel—well, *we* feel—that marriage isn't a good idea."

I swallowed hard, and the hot coffee went down the wrong way. Coughing, I thought I must've misheard. "It's not a good idea?" I rasped.

"Plan, then," he said. "Not a good plan. Not at this time."

"So, you want to postpone the wedding?"

He leaned back, folding his arms over his crisp blue shirt. "Cancel, actually."

I was stunned. Speechless. Sick to my stomach. "You don't want to marry me at all? Why?"

He rubbed his forehead. "You see, my parents feel . . . I should say, the Osbornes go back generations in New Chapel—one of the founding families. We've always been leaders, pillars of the community. And as such"—he cleared his throat again—"we have a reputation to uphold." He paused, letting it sink in.

And it sank in fast. My failure was a blemish on their pristine name. The Osbornes couldn't have that.

My mind spun. My future was collapsing right in front of me. The invitations were mailed, the hall booked, the gown bought. I looked up at the face I'd imagined gazing at for the next fifty years and saw—nothing. No pity, no love. Just him watching, waiting for me to break.

Would I let him see me crack? Not a chance. Not this freckle-faced, fiery redhead.

I pushed my coffee cup aside and stood, slinging my purse over my arm. Words to capture my shock, hurt, and betrayal escaped me. So, I turned and walked out. It was the abrupt end to a chapter in my life I'd thought was only the beginning. As I crossed the courthouse lawn, fighting back tears, I vowed to move on. And I did.



**P***resent day*

*Monday, 9 a.m.*

Was I crazy? Here I was, sitting across from Pryce Osborne in the same coffee shop where he'd shattered my heart, reliving that brutal day four years ago when I'd wondered how to keep going. Back then, my dreams of being a lawyer were dead, my wedding was off, and I had no clue where to turn.

Who could've guessed that a few months later, I'd be the proud owner of Bloomers, a charming little flower shop? Or that within a year, I'd marry Marco Salvare, a former Army Ranger turned private eye and bar own-

er—the real man of my dreams? My life had turned out better than I'd ever hoped, no thanks to the guy now sitting across from me. So why was I here?

Pryce sipped his coffee, his gaze locked on mine the whole time. As always, he was impeccably dressed—today in a light blue blazer, white shirt, navy pants, and navy loafers. His expensive cologne wafted over, tugging at memories of our dating days. On the phone, his voice had been shaky, his tone jittery. He hadn't said why he wanted to meet, but I knew it had to be serious.

He set his cup down with a firm thud. "Abby, we need to talk."



## About the Author



Kate Collins is the author of the best-selling Flower Shop Mystery series. Her books have made the New York Times Bestseller list, the Barnes & Noble mass market mystery best-sellers' lists, the Independent Booksellers' best-seller lists, as well as booksellers' lists in the U.K. and Australia. The first three books in the Flower Shop Mystery series are now available on audiobook.

The first four books in Kate's, *GODDESS OF GREENE ST. MYSTERIES* are available now.

In January of 2016, Hallmark Movies & Mysteries channel aired the first Flower Shop Mystery series movie, *MUM'S THE WORD*, followed by *SLAY IT WITH FLOWERS* and *DEARLY DEPOTTED*. The movies star Brooke Shields, Brennan Elliott, Beau Bridges, and Kate Drummond.

Kate started her career writing children's stories for magazines and eventually published historical romantic suspense novels under the pen name

Linda Eberhardt and Linda O'Brien. Seven romance novels later, she switched to her true love, mysteries.



Follow Kate Collins Online

[katecollinsbooks.com](http://www.katecollinsbooks.com/)<sup>1</sup>

[Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/katecollinsmysteryauthor/)<sup>2</sup>

---

1. <http://www.katecollinsbooks.com/>

2. <https://www.facebook.com/katecollinsmysteryauthor/>





## **Don't miss out!**

Visit the website below and you can sign up to receive emails whenever Kate Collins publishes a new book. There's no charge and no obligation.

<https://books2read.com/r/B-A-JBYMB-TQQEG>



Connecting independent readers to independent writers.



