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PRAISE FOR ALISON GOLDEN'S MYSTERY SERIES



For the Inspector Graham series:

“This is a wonderful cozy mystery. Good plot, good sleuthing, good characters, and excellent dialogue.”

“Another great book.”

“I’m in love with him and his colleagues.”

“A terrific mystery.”

“This newest is like seeing old friends again and catching up on the latest news.”

“These books certainly have the potential to become a PBS series with the likeable character of Inspector Graham and his fellow officers.”

“Delightful writing that keeps moving, never a dull moment.”

“I know I have a winner of a book when I toss and turn at night worrying about how the characters are doing.”

“Love it and love the author.”

“Refreshingly unique and so well written.”

“Solid proof that a book can rely on good storytelling and good writing without needing blood or sex.”

“This series just gets better and better.”

“DI Graham is wonderful and his old school way of doing things, charming.”

For the Reverend Annabelle Dixon series:

“Delightful.”

“I read it that night, and it was GREAT!”

“4 thumbs up!!!”

“It kept me up until 3am. I love it.”

“As a former village vicar this ticks the box for me.”

“This series keeps getting better and better.”

“Annabelle, with her great intuition, caring personality, yet imperfect judgment, is a wonderful main character.”

“It's fun to grab a cup of tea and pretend I'm sitting in the vicarage discussing the latest mysteries with Annabelle while she polishes off the last of the cupcakes.”

“Great book - love Reverend Annabelle Dixon and can't wait to read more of her books.”

“Annabelle reminds me of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple.”

“A perfect weekend read.”

For the Diana Hunter series:

“Peter and Diana have a great chemistry.”

“I love the author's writing.”

“A pleasure to read.”

“Really captivating.”

“Fast-paced, well-written, fun stories.”

“I can't wait to read the next book in the series.”

“I'm hooked.”

“Kept me reading until the wee hours.”

“Diana Hunter is becoming one of my favorite characters”

“Super read. Cracking heroine.”

“One of the most enjoyable books I've read in a long time”

“A gem.”

“Diana Hunter is knowledgeable, experienced, quick-witted, and even sexy.”

“Can you write quicker, please?”

For the Roxy Reinhardt series:

“These are amazing books!”

“A great and well told story, it has well-defined characters, a good bit of humor, and a bit of a suspense.”

“Great new series, my personal favorite.”

“Oh my goodness, oh my goodness! I've loved your books since I turned the first page, but this one stole my heart!”

“*Louisiana Lies* was awesome!”

“The story was brilliantly plotted out and wonderfully written, you could barely wait to turn the pages to see where the tale would take you next.”

“Excellent story, very clever.”

“I read your book until the wee hours last night... couldn't put it down!!”

“All the food made me very hungry and really wanting to visit New Orleans!”

STARTER LIBRARY

FOUR BOOK BOX SET

ALISON GOLDEN



A Reverend
Annabelle Dixon
Mystery

chaos
in
cambridge



ALISON GOLDEN
JAMIE VOUGEOT

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



The events in this book take place a few years before *Death at the Cafe*, the first in the Reverend Annabelle Dixon series of cozy mysteries.

Chaos in Cambridge is a subscriber exclusive and not available for sale. I had an absolute blast creating this book—I hope you have a blast reading it too.

Alicia Golden

CHAPTER ONE



“WE’RE SO PROUD of you.” Petronella Dixon clasped her daughter’s arms and stood back to look at her. She smiled and stroked away a hair that had fallen across Annabelle’s face. Annabelle pressed her lips together, her eyes shining with unshed tears. She was so full of conflicting emotions—excitement, sadness, optimism, and fear—that she could barely speak the word “good-bye” out loud.

Annabelle embraced her mother again. They stood in front of the terraced London home in which Annabelle had grown up, a house identical to thousands more that stood in rows and which, when viewed from a plane as it prepared to land at Heathrow Airport, made parts of the British capital look like a maze. On the ground, though, one could only observe Annabelle’s face imprinting itself on her mother’s blue, home-knitted cardigan. A loud sob escaped from the teenage girl’s lips as she let out a breath.

“Come on now, Annabelle,” her mother said, patting

her tall, gangly daughter on the back. "I'll come up with your dad next weekend once you've settled in."

Annabelle wanted to respond. She wanted to tell her mother that she would think of her every day, that she loved her very much, and that she would desperately miss her chocolate cake. She also wanted to tell her that maybe going to university wasn't such a marvellous idea after all. She wanted to say that maybe she should call the whole thing off and stay at home. She was only eighteen; she had plenty of time. Why not put off leaving home a little longer? All this got jumbled in Annabelle's mind, however, and emerged as just another dramatic sob.

As they hugged, Annabelle's father packed the last of her bags into his black cab, then stood beside Annabelle's best friend, Mary, on the quiet London street. He put an arm affectionately around Mary's shoulders and comforted the girl who had for virtually her entire existence been inseparable from his daughter. The two girls had played together since they were babies.

Mary had been born in the back of Annabelle's father's cab, his mad dash to the nearest hospital not quick enough for Mary, who made her appearance amidst a traffic jam outside a grocery store next to Liverpool Street Station. When it had become obvious that Mary wouldn't wait and he would have to take the lead, Annabelle's nervous father reminded himself that if he could memorise London's 25,000 streets and every business and landmark on them, he could remember what had transpired at the births of his own two children, one of whom had been born only a few weeks before.

He rose to the challenge in front of him and improvised, undeterred by the fact that the street teemed with

rush-hour commuters who surrounded his cab like iron filings around a magnet. He steeled himself, rolled up his sleeves, and focused on the job of helping Mary land safely on the back seat. He was aided in his quest by loud and vigorous instructions that assailed him throughout the delivery courtesy of Mary's mother, who had already been through this experience five times before. Mary also helped by making her safe arrival known, clearly demonstrating that she had inherited her mother's ability to make a lot of noise when the situation warranted it.

Raymond Dixon and Mary now watched as Annabelle pulled herself away from her mother and turned to her friend, overwhelmed and confused by her emotions all over again. Beneath her blonde curls, Mary's tender face crumpled sadly. They were an odd pair—Annabelle was a tall and robust brunette, Mary a small and fragile blonde. Whilst Mary was shy and reserved, Annabelle was effusive and loud. Mary was small, graceful, and delicate, whilst Annabelle wielded her gangly frame somewhat wildly. Mary treated everything seriously and with a sense of importance, whilst Annabelle was quick to laugh and act before thinking.

But these differences between the young women were only superficial. They were more like sisters than friends. At heart, they shared plenty. Both were sincere and compassionate and were constantly looking for ways to help others. Both sought adventure and often found mischief instead. They lived their lives somewhat chaotically, and harboured a deeply spiritual streak. "I might become a priest one day, Mary," Annabelle had told her friend when they were six. "I promise to come to all your sermons," Mary had said.

Now though, their adult lives called. Mary, who was

from an enormous family of Irish Catholics, would soon leave her family home to train as a nurse, whilst Annabelle was off to study theology at Cambridge University.

“Oh, Annabelle,” Mary said, looking up at her tall friend. “I will miss you. But I’m sure we’ll see each other soon.”

At a loss as to how to respond, Annabelle hugged her. Mary was five foot three, her little face only coming up to the top button of Annabelle’s soft summer coat.

“I’ll call you as soon as I arrive,” Annabelle said, laying her cheek on the top of Mary’s head.

“And don’t forget to write!” Mary’s words were muffled by Annabelle’s coat.

Annabelle silently nodded and disengaged from her friend. She hurriedly walked to the car before her emotions overwhelmed her again.

“All set?” her father said, opening the cab door for her. “If we wait any longer, we’ll spend half the day in traffic.”

“I’m ready, Dad.” Annabelle looked back and nodded gravely to Mary and her mother. She bent into the taxi and got inside.

Now it was Mrs. Dixon’s turn to wrap an arm around Mary. They watched as the cab moved off, Annabelle turning in her seat and smiling weakly until the cab rounded a corner and disappeared from view.

CHAPTER TWO



“I BOUGHT TOFFEES for the journey. Want one?”

Annabelle shook her head. Her father looked at her. He wasn't like Annabelle to turn down sugary treats. He dropped the bag of toffees on the dashboard. “I'll leave them here in case you change your mind.”

Annabelle sat quietly in the cab, gazing absently at the familiar London streets as they passed by. She felt weightless and detached, memories drifting through her mind randomly.

At nine years old, Annabelle had spent a summer tagging along whilst her mother cleaned a large, four-storey house in Kensington, one of the wealthiest areas of London. The occupants were away, and in between polishing and wiping, Annabelle had found herself in awe of the luxurious interior and fairytale garden.

“This house is wonderful,” Annabelle had said as she and her mother had sat in the garden during a brief break.

Her mother, always smiling, always calm, had replied,

“Study hard, and you might live somewhere like this one day.”

It had been a minor exchange, but it had stuck with Annabelle. Her mother was wise, and Annabelle took every word she said as gospel. Annabelle realised there and then that there was a world beyond her experience, beyond the terraced house she lived in, beyond the square—the only patch of green for a mile, beyond the local school where the plastic chairs got too hot in summer and the bathrooms ran out of paper towels before the end of the mid-morning break.

It was as she sat in that garden full of purple foxgloves, red poppies, and rolling piles of honeysuckle that exploded with scent and hummed with greedy bees that nuzzled on its nectar that Annabelle decided to study as hard as she could. She would steer herself down a path that led to university, so that she could experience the world and all it offered. And perhaps she too, one day, would have a garden full of flowers like this one.

As she sat in the cab, now on the cusp of realising the first part of her dream, her near-decade-old memory was replaced by a more recent one. She remembered how, mere months ago, her father had taught her how to drive in this very taxicab. He was a gentle man, adored by all for his good humour. There wasn't a setback or problem that he couldn't see the bright side to. Like most people, Annabelle was anxious about learning to drive, but her father had made it seem so trivial and appeared to have such fun teaching her that the lessons felt more like recreation than education, more fun than nail-biting, more exciting than intimidating. Encouraged by him, Annabelle had come to relish the challenge.

“Blimey! The way you took that corner, *you* should be teaching *me!*”

“Was I going too fast?”

“Just a tad. I think you rather humiliated that man in a Ferrari a few streets back.”

“Sorry, Dad.”

“Don’t apologise, you’re doing wonderfully, love. You’d make a terrible cab driver though. You drive so fast you’d barely rack up any fares!”

Annabelle had passed her driving test with flying colours. To celebrate, they had gone out for a pub meal. Over pie and mash, her father had said, “I always had a ‘dream car’ when I was a boy. I bet you’ve got one in mind already, haven’t you?”

“Well,” Annabelle had replied, “I always thought those little Minis looked rather cute. I quite fancy owning one of those one day. Perhaps a bit souped-up, you know, go-faster stripes, a decent engine. I want to do things, go places!”

“That’s my girl.” Annabelle’s father raised his pint in salute.

The sound of the car radio snapped Annabelle back to the present as her father clicked a button on the dashboard, and as they idled at a traffic light, she watched a homeless man move fitfully inside his sleeping bag whilst a black dog with a touch of Border Collie in him curled up next to the man’s quilted form in the doorway they shared. Annabelle shifted in her seat and sighed. She knew she was blessed to have such supportive parents. She was far more fortunate than many.

“What do you fancy?” her father asked. “A little classical?”

“Alright,” Annabelle agreed, more to appease him

than anything. She preferred music that was more upbeat, but she wanted these moments with her father to be easy and serene. Classical music would meet both goals.

Raymond Dixon clicked over to a station playing a violin concerto and put his hand back on the wheel. “Never understood classical music—orchestras and the like—but it makes me feel clever to pretend.” Annabelle laughed gently, knowing that her father very much understood classical music, orchestras, and “the like” and only professed to be less intelligent than he was. It was what she loved about him—his street smarts, his humility, his goodness.

Today, Annabelle’s father had dressed for an occasion. He was wearing a freshly pressed flannel shirt and had gelled his hair. She could smell the musky scent of his favourite Old Spice aftershave. She knew he wanted to do her proud, and his effort touched her, making her eyes sting with tears once again.

“You know,” he began, as the taxi sped up to join the motorway, “this might be the first time I’ve ever seen you this nervous.”

“Dad . . .” Annabelle murmured.

“It’s true,” he persisted. “Even that time that policeman took you and Mary to the station—what were you then? Eleven? Anyway, as serious as it was, you didn’t even flinch.”

“The poor cat was stuck on a ledge!”

“Caught red-handed, you were,” her father continued, smiling as he remembered. “Climbing up a drainpipe to the third floor. Little Mary holding her hands out below as if she could catch you.”

“We *had* to do something!”

“And then, when that copper gave you a telling off, you gave him one right back!”

“He deserved it! Would he have preferred that the cat had fallen?”

They glanced at each other before breaking into hoots of laughter. In the more relaxed atmosphere that followed, her father said, “Don’t worry, Annabelle dear. You’re going to do well, make new friends, learn new things. Going to university is something to be excited about.”

“I know, Dad . . . It’s . . .” Annabelle searched for the right words but found her eyes growing a little heavy instead. “Leaving you, and Mum, and Mary, and everyone and everything . . .”

“You’re not leaving anybody, love. We’re all still right here,” he said, pointing a thumb back over his shoulder. “Just a little further away, but still no further than a phone call or a bus ride.”

“You’re right,” she said as the spires of the city of Cambridge appeared on the horizon. There was enthusiasm in her voice—a quality that her father knew well and was happy to hear. “I’m sure it’s going to be great.”

“That’s the spirit.”

“I’m worried about the change, that’s all.”

Her father laughed, and she shot him a quizzical look.

“What’s so funny?”

Mr. Dixon shook his head, and as the city neared, he said with a chuckle and a sigh, “Annabelle, I don’t think you’ll ever change. And that’s why I know you’ll be fine.” He picked up the paper bag that lay on the dashboard and shook it. “Toffee?”

CHAPTER THREE



THE LATE MORNING sun shone over Cambridge as Annabelle and her father passed the wide-open space of Midsummer Common and traversed roads lined with rows of identical terraced houses much like the ones they had left behind in London. As Mr. Dixon urged his taxi on towards the city centre, an awed, attentive silence came over them as they soaked in the increasingly grand surroundings. Spires scored the blue sky. Sunlight trickled across ancient majestic buildings picking out elaborate details—flying buttresses, vaulted roofs, mock fortifications.

“Those are examples of Neo-Gothic and Classical Revival architecture, Annabelle,” her father said. Annabelle nodded. Raymond Dixon was a fount of surprising amounts of knowledge, much of it gleaned from books he read whilst at the taxi rank in between fares.

The Cambridge streets were filled with young, optimistic-looking students, often chattering away in groups or riding their bicycles fearlessly through the cobbled

streets. Annabelle had never thought of London as grey or gloomy, but in comparison, Cambridge most definitely seemed a lively place. If her father hadn't cheered her up, the striking beauty and character of the city would have done so.

Eventually, they had to stop to check their map. Annabelle's father was slow to embrace new technology, and so they stretched out the Cambridge City Ordnance Survey map he had bought specifically for this occasion. They got out of the car for a better look at their surroundings.

"This is the Faculty of Divinity," her father said, pointing at a multi-storeyed, glass structure very different from the sand-coloured, centuries-old buildings they had passed earlier.

"Right," Annabelle said. "My rooms should be nearby."

"Let me see," her father said, continuing to study his map. He'd paid good money for it, and he wasn't going to let it go to waste. "They'll be on here somewhere."

As the pair glanced between the map and the modern brick buildings around them, scanning for recognisable landmarks, a young, handsome man emerged from the faculty building.

"Lost?" he said. "Need some help?" Annabelle thought she detected a slight accent of indeterminate European origin.

"Oh no," Annabelle's father said instinctively. "We're fine, thank you."

Annabelle looked at the young man. He was tall and slim, his brown hair neatly combed to the side, his clothes casual but neat—jeans, T-shirt, trainers—the standard uniform of students the world over.

“Actually, yes, we do need some help,” she countered. “We’re looking for King’s College. It’s on King’s Parade.”

The stranger smiled in recognition as soon as she said the words. “Yes, I know where it is.” He shifted his shoulders, displacing his backpack. He pointed down the street. “You need to turn right on Queens Road, left on Fen Causeway, and left onto Trumpington Road. Follow the street to King’s Parade, and you’ll see the college. You can’t miss it. It’s only one of the most iconic buildings in the world.”

“Oh, that sounds a bit complicated,” Annabelle said, ignoring her father who stood behind her. He’d put his hands on his hips and pursed his lips.

“I could show you if you like,” the stranger said.

“Oh yes, please,” Annabelle said with relief.

“We’ve got the car, though,” her father said, patting the cab before gesturing at the back. “And all your stuff.”

Annabelle looked from the car to her father and then to the stranger before coming to a decision.

“Hop in,” she said, opening the rear door of the taxi and urging the young man inside. “You can direct us from the back seat.”

Without missing a beat, the guy slid his backpack from his shoulders and clambered into the taxi. Once they were all inside, he poked his hand through the window that separated the front from the back.

“My name is Noah,” he said to Annabelle’s dad.

“Raymond,” her father said, twisting to shake his hand before looking in his rearview mirror and driving off.

“Nice to meet you,” Annabelle said. She sat next to him. There were no front passenger seats in London taxis. “I’m Annabelle.”

“If you go down this road, I’ll tell you when to turn,” Noah said. Annabelle looked at him. “So what are you studying, Annabelle? No, let me guess . . . Theology?”

Annabelle gasped. “How did you know that?”

Noah shrugged. “You have the look.”

“The look?” Annabelle said.

“Yes. Soft features, sensitive to the world. Spiritual. Large eyes, expressive and open, indicating a faith-based nature. Your hair in a ponytail, practical and tidy—a student unconcerned with superficialities, someone who seeks to understand things rationally but deeply.”

“Wow . . .” Annabelle sighed, utterly amazed.

Her father chuckled and slapped the steering wheel, his indignation at being given directions by a man less than half his age disappearing.

“Or maybe,” Raymond said, “you know that theology students stand around outside the Faculty of Divinity!”

Noah laughed along with him, not at all embarrassed to be caught out in his little game. “Well, there is that.”

Annabelle went a deep red before allowing herself to find this as amusing as the men who laughed uproariously.

“You’re a student?” her father asked.

“Just visiting,” Noah said. “Take this left . . . Here we are.”

“Would you look at that?” Annabelle’s father parked his cab across the street and stared up at King’s College. The details of the sand-coloured stone building were mesmerising. “I could look at that for hours and not see it all,” he said as he took in the pointed arches and rows of mullioned windows. On top of the building, turrets stood to attention, and a tower displayed a clock with golden

hands. Coats of arms, fleurs-de-lis, and rosettes carved in stone decorated the front of the building.

“You wait, Dad. That’s only the gatehouse.”

Whilst her father unloaded her luggage, Annabelle’s eyes roamed the college walls. She moistened her lips and swallowed. Once more, she felt overwhelmed by what she was facing.

“Here, let me help you,” Noah said to Annabelle’s father, eager to help even though the older man was handling the luggage with ease. Mr. Dixon was built like a featherweight boxer—slight and sinewy, without an ounce of unnecessary body fat. Noah grabbed the other end of a heavy suitcase.

“Thank you,” Annabelle’s father said, rather pleased with Noah’s manners.

“Well,” Noah said, once the bags were on the ground, “I’ll leave you to get acquainted with your new home. I’m sure you’ll love Cambridge as much as I do.”

“Thank you so much for taking the time to help us,” Annabelle said, forcing herself from her thoughts. She beamed at Noah.

“My pleasure,” he responded. “I’m sure I’ll be seeing you around. Cambridge is beautiful, but it’s a lot smaller than London.”

“Oh! We didn’t tell you we were from London.”

“You didn’t need to. I could tell by your accents. And the black cab, of course.”

Noah smiled his goodbye, and Annabelle and her father watched the young man walk away.

After a few silent moments, Raymond Dixon turned to his daughter. Annabelle was still looking down the street. He said quietly, “It’s time to go, love.”

“Yes, Dad.” Annabelle didn’t move.

“Now, Annabelle.”

“Right, Dad.”

Annabelle’s father wheeled a suitcase over to her and parked it at her feet. “Here, follow me.”

“But you don’t know where you’re going.” Annabelle looked down at him; he was a few inches shorter than she. Her height came from her mother’s side.

“Then show me.”

And so the tall, fresh-faced theology student, her ponytail bobbing, and her shorter, wiry father each grabbed a suitcase and crossed the road towards the entrance to King’s College, Cambridge.

CHAPTER FOUR



AFTER CHECKING IN at the porter's lodge, the pair rolled Annabelle's luggage through the grounds of the college. As they walked, Annabelle pointed out various landmarks. "Over there, Dad, is King's College Chapel. That's what Noah was talking about when he called it 'one of the most iconic buildings in the world.'"

"Yeah, I recognise it. I must've seen it on TV or something." Annabelle's father stopped to look at the magnificent Gothic building on the far side of a bright green lawn mown into perfect stripes. It was similar to the gatehouse in style—there were more turrets, spires, carvings, and coats of arms—but the chapel was enormous. Raymond counted twelve immense glass windows that depicted biblical scenes made from tiny panes of stained glass. "They call them the 'great windows,' don't they? And they are, aren't they? Great, I mean. Will you go to services there?"

"Yup. I'm looking forward to that." Annabelle waved at another vast lawn also mown into perfect stripes. It led down to the River Cam. "They call this 'The Backs.' It's a

stretch of land that runs behind the colleges whose grounds border the banks of the river.”

“Blimey, look at that grass. Not a daisy or dandelion in sight.”

“And this is my accommodation, Bodley’s Court. It was built in 1893.”

“Wow, would you look at that?” Raymond Dixon said again. He looked up at the four-storey building dotted with small-paned windows. “Looks like something from Henry VIII’s time. What’s the betting he’ll be in the room next door, eh?”

Annabelle smirked. “Highly unlikely. But I’ll be sure to mind my manners if I meet him in the corridor.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t want to lose your head or anything.”

After talking to a young woman who sat in reception wearing a red scarf with white polka dots tied around her head, Annabelle and her father walked up two flights of stairs and along a hallway to Annabelle’s room at the end of the landing.

The room was small, around the same size as her bedroom back home, but still larger than Annabelle had expected. There was a single bed, a desk, a boxy, free-standing wardrobe with a key in the door, a small sink, and not much else. A window was set in the wall between the door and the bed. Annabelle’s father immediately walked up to it and peered through the glass. It looked out upon a green where young people sat on benches chatting. More gathered on the grass eating their lunch.

“Lovely view you’ve got here,” he said. “Beats the fish and chip shop you had to look at from your bedroom at home, eh?” Annabelle didn’t answer. He turned around to find her frowning. “What’s wrong?”

Annabelle pointed at the desk where books were stacked in a pile. “I don’t think this is my room,” she said. “Somebody’s things are here.”

“You’re right, there are some boxes under the bed too,” her father replied. He nodded at them. “Maybe somebody forgot them? Left them behind?”

Annabelle unlocked the wardrobe and opened the doors. There were items of clothing hanging from wire coat hangers. “Hmm.”

They heard the sound of gentle knocking. A slim, pretty, blonde woman in a pink cardigan over a white T-shirt and blue jeans stood in the doorway, her fingertips in her front jean pockets, her shoulders hunched. Like Noah, she too had a backpack. She grimaced comically.

“Oops, so sorry!” she said in a high, flighty voice. Her accent was clipped, her enunciation perfect. “I was hoping I’d get here before you.”

Annabelle looked confused for a moment, then said, “Um, perhaps we’re not in the right place.”

“You’re not Annabelle Dixon?”

“I am.”

The blonde woman smiled—a broad grin that lit up her blue eyes. “Then you *should* be here.” She stuck out her hand to greet them. “I’m Clara—this used to be my room.”

Before she could reach Annabelle’s outstretched hand, Clara hit her foot against a suitcase. She fell face-first towards the floor and would have taken an awful battering if not for Annabelle, who leapt forwards and caught her by the shoulders.

“Thank you.” Clara laughed, seemingly unfazed as she straightened up and brushed herself down. “I should have introduced myself as Clumsy Clara—that’s what

everyone calls me. You must be Annabelle's dad," she said, turning to face Raymond Dixon who was staring at her, his mouth open. Annabelle gave his foot a little kick, and he closed it.

"That I am. Pleased to meet you," Raymond said, shaking Clara's hand.

Clara slid off her backpack and opened it. "I left some things here. I hope you don't mind if I grab them. I meant to take them this morning, but I ended up chatting away to this person and that person—you know how it is. Lots of people to say goodbye to. Plus, I have *so many things*." Clara paused between each of the last three words and finished with a roll of her eyes.

"I understand," Annabelle said, watching Clara go to the wardrobe and stuff the clothes she had left there into her pack. "Here, let me help you with that."

"Oh, thank you. You're too kind."

Soon Clara had filled her backpack to overflowing and shrugged it back on, clothes trailing from the top of it. In front of her, she clutched a box of yet more belongings. On top of that, she balanced a pile of books. Annabelle shared a look with her father—if Clara was as clumsy as her nickname suggested, this would only end one way.

"You like romance, then?" Annabelle's father remarked, nodding at the stack of books that almost entirely obscured Clara's face.

"Romance? Oh, yes. You should have seen how many I had before I had a clear-out. Heaps and heaps." Clara laughed. "I'm going to donate most of them."

"Shame they don't do degrees in mass-market romantic literature," Annabelle's father quipped.

"If they did, I'd probably be teaching it!" Clara laughed happily again before turning to Annabelle. "I did

my degree in theology. I heard that's what you're studying, too."

"Yes," Annabelle said. "I'm a little nervous about it, to be honest."

"Oh, don't be! Professor Baskerville—he's the head of department—is absolutely lovely. But I'm sure you already knew that."

"Actually, I've not met him."

"No?" Clara said, sounding shocked. "Well, he's in his office now. I've just finished my final tutorial with him. I'll take you there. Introduce you."

"Thank you, but I should unpack," Annabelle replied, pointing to her bags. "I've got so much stuff and—"

"Nonsense. Go with the girl," Annabelle's father interrupted. "Clara, perhaps you could show my angel something of the city. Or at least the parts she'll need to know."

"Absolutely I could. Any chance to hang about a bit longer."

Annabelle's father put his arm around his daughter and kissed her on the forehead. "There, you have a friend already. Clara can show you around, and I can stop cramping your style. Go and explore your new home." Annabelle looked down at the tough, hard-wearing carpet designed to withstand a heap of injurious insults borne upon it by careless students. She took a deep breath. "Okay, Dad."

"We'll speak tomorrow as we arranged. You call us, okay? Don't forget now." Raymond Dixon spoke in a voice altogether too bright and cheerful for the occasion. Annabelle frowned, then wordlessly fell into his arms.

"There, there." Her father's voice was gravelly as Annabelle buried her face into his shoulder. "We'll . . ." He

cleared his throat. "Your mum 'n' me, we'll see you next weekend."

Annabelle lifted her head and wiped her face. Her eyes glittered again with tears. "Yes, Dad. I'll speak to you soon. Tomorrow." She took another deep breath.

"Annabelle, I . . ."

"Go, Dad, go. You're right, I'll talk to you tomorrow. And I'll see you and Mum next week."

"Yes, yes, of course." He turned to Clara, "It was lovely to meet you, Clara."

"You too, Annabelle's dad."

Raymond Dixon jiggled his keys in his trouser pocket, and with a smile that could have been mistaken for a grimace and a wave that was merely a flap of his hand, he left the two women standing statue-like in the room. When he had gone, the pair looked at each other in silence before Clara cried, "Let's go!" She was still carrying all her belongings. As Clara made to leave the room, she hit her foot on another suitcase. The books on top of her box would have gone flying had Annabelle not rushed to save her. "Oops!"

Annabelle took the pile of books from Clara and nestled them under her arm. "Let me carry those?" she said, giving Clara a wink. "You lead the way."

CHAPTER FIVE



“YOU’LL LOVE it here,” Clara said as she led Annabelle across the green Mr. Dixon had spied earlier. “You’ve certainly arrived at a very interesting time for the Theology department.”

“Really? Why’s that?” Annabelle asked.

“It’s hosting a large conference. It starts tomorrow. Last year, several artefacts and manuscripts were delivered to the department scholars for inspection and study. They’ve spent the entire year working on them. Now they’ll announce their findings.”

“Sounds rather exciting,” Annabelle said as they left the green behind and moved towards a battered, faded-blue Westfalia van parked at the side of the road.

“It is. I had the chance to work on some of the studies myself. Now professors, clerics, theologians, all sorts of important people are coming to hear the findings.”

“You’re not staying for the conference?”

“No,” Clara said, stopping in front of the van to put her belongings on the ground. “I’m meeting some friends for lunch and then dropping off some of these at my

favourite secondhand bookshop.” Clara nodded at the books Annabelle was carrying. “I’m setting off for Sussex this evening. My family lives there. I can’t wait. I miss the countryside, the green fields, the birds singing, and the cows. It’s so peaceful.” Annabelle smiled at the scene Clara painted. It did sound lovely. She pictured herself strolling through fields, smelling the fresh-cut grass, and picking wildflowers whilst black and white cows gazed lazily at her—from a distance, of course.

Clara swung open the back doors of the van. Annabelle’s eyes grew wide. Piled high and higgledy-piggledy in the back of the van was an assortment of small furniture items, stuffed animals, cushions, and cardboard boxes. But most of all, there were books, books, and more books. They sat on seats, they lay on the floor, many tumbled out of boxes. Others were crammed into any corner or spot that would take them.

“Gosh,” Annabelle said. “You really do like to read, don’t you?”

Clara laughed. “It’s an addiction! I can’t help myself. The professors were always telling me off for reading in lectures.” Clara stopped herself with a mischievous smile. She leant towards Annabelle. “I developed some pretty creative methods for getting away with that, let me tell you! What do you like to do in your free time?”

“Oh, well . . . All sorts, really,” Annabelle said. “I like sports. I was hoping to play hockey whilst I’m here.”

“How lovely!” Clara cried as she closed the van doors. “I’ll introduce you to Jean Watkins then. She runs the Physical Education department. She also coaches the hockey team. She’s probably in the park now. She’s always out and about, running, or exercising when she’s not teaching.”

Clara grabbed Annabelle's hand and led her away from the van. "Where are we going?" Annabelle asked.

"Parker's Piece. That's where Watters, that's what we call her, likes to run. It's not far. The walk will help you find your way about. Look, over there." Annabelle followed the direction of Clara's pointed finger. She saw a small shop nestled in among a row of houses. The frontage consisted almost entirely of a window that curved outwards and comprised twenty panes of glass framed in black. In front of the black-painted door, there was a stone step. On the step sat a cat—also black. It was like something out of a Dickens novel.

"That will become your third Cambridge home, after your college and the faculty library."

"What is it?"

"It's the secondhand bookshop I was telling you about. Great for novels, textbooks, maps, and anything printed. That's Lavender, she runs the bookshop." Clara pointed to a tiny slip of a woman polishing the windows. "She's a bit scary, so watch yourself. And that's Custard sitting on the step."

"Custard? But it's black."

"She's named after a pub," Clara said as if that explained everything.

They carried on and after another good ten-minute walk, Clara and Annabelle reached a large, flat, grassy area bisected diagonally by two walking paths and bounded by trees. At the corners were enclosures full of bikes. As Annabelle scanned Parker's Piece, she noticed a slim woman in a red tracksuit jogging along a path.

Clara hailed her, and when she drew close, Annabelle could make out the woman's pointed, serious face, her thin lips that formed an "O" as she puffed, her short,

closely cropped grey-brown hair. The woman's red, weathered skin suggested she'd spent many an afternoon on the side of a pitch as she braved the cold, inclement climate that England is famous for. Jean Watkins had probably learnt during those harsh winter afternoons to keep moving because when she stopped in front of the two young women, the PE department head didn't pause. She twisted and leant and bent as if she couldn't possibly stand still.

"Ms. Watkins," Clara said, "this is Annabelle Dixon. She's a fresher, King's."

"Very good," Jean "Watters" Watkins said. She bent over to touch her toes three times.

"Um, nice to meet you," Annabelle ventured, her eyes following the woman's movements as she bobbed up and down. "I was interested in joining the hockey team."

Watters stood up straight, her hands on her hips as she twisted this way and that, huffing forcefully before she finally stood still and scanned Annabelle as if she were a racehorse from nearby Newmarket. She tilted her head as she appraised Annabelle with a frown.

"Hmm," she groaned sceptically. "Tall—good. A little on the soft side. Barely any muscles. Stamina's doubtful."

Annabelle looked hesitantly at Clara as if for an explanation, but the young woman seemed unsurprised and merely shrugged in response.

Jean Watkins finally shook her head. "No, sorry. You've not got what it takes to make the hockey team. Try the croquet club. They're always looking for females with an elevated centre of gravity. Good day." And with that, Jean Watkins left to continue her run around the park.

Clara looked at Annabelle sympathetically and

shrugged again. “She’s always like that. You have to take it on the chin.”

“You don’t say,” Annabelle remarked. She was disappointed and slightly stunned by the woman’s dismissal but shook herself as Clara said, “Come on, let’s go find Professor Baskerville.”

Clara led Annabelle to the Faculty of Divinity building, the strange, circular modern structure of concrete and glass that Annabelle had met Noah coming from earlier. They went inside. Annabelle stared upwards. A huge, multi-storeyed library was built into the rounded walls. It had an airy, spacious feel, and the midday sunlight poured through the mirrored windows.

“This library holds 59,000 books. Heaven!” Clara said with a grin, but she didn’t dally. She took Annabelle’s wrist, drawing her attention away from the magnificent space. “This way.”

They walked up curved flights of stairs and down rounded corridors. Eventually, Clara rapped gently on a plain wooden door. Without waiting for a reply, she pushed it open, inviting Annabelle to follow her.

Professor Baskerville’s office resembled the chaos of Clara’s van. Books dominated the room. Bookshelves lined the walls whilst more books littered the floor. Behind Professor Baskerville’s desk, there was a small window that provided the only natural light. Even this was half-obsured by stacks of books and papers piled on the sill. Incongruously, in between the bookshelves were several display cabinets filled with curios, including what looked like shrunken heads. On several shelves, they sat next to each other, four across, grotesquely wizened and distorted.

When the young women entered the room the

professor was on his feet. He was poring over one of his bookcases.

“Professor Baskerville!” Clara cooed as if she hadn’t seen him in a long time.

“One minute,” he said, irritated. He held up a finger. He didn’t turn around to face them. “Where is the blasted thing?” Baskerville hissed as he pulled yet another book from the shelf before tossing it with a flick of his wrist onto the floor behind him.

Moving through the room was like wading across a landfill. Open boxes in various states of unpacking sat on the small office floor, their contents haphazardly strewn across it. Books, papers, and folders had been tossed aside.

“Is there something wrong, Professor?” Clara said.

He turned to her, his expression red and flustered. He noticed Annabelle and straightened a little. He seemed a rather unremarkable man. His head was bald, the sides shaved down to stubble. His face was round, his features large. He looked to be in his mid-forties. His brown, rather bulbous eyes returned to flicker around the room, still searching, his full lips pursed in disapproval or concentration. He wore brown corduroys and a button-down blue shirt; the sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His top button was undone and the knot of his royal blue tie was loose. Annabelle could see there was a stain on it. Behind his ear was a pencil sharpened to a fine point.

“Sorry. It’s nothing. How can I help you, Clara? I thought you had left already.”

Clara laughed gently. “I came back to introduce you to one of your new students—Annabelle Dixon.”

Annabelle stepped forwards shyly and offered her hand. “Nice to meet you,” she said.

“And you,” Baskerville replied, shaking her hand briefly, before gesturing about him at the messy office. “Sorry about all this, you’ve caught me at a hectic time. I . . .”

“Oh, no!” Clara exclaimed. She was looking at her watch. “I was supposed to meet some friends twenty minutes ago! I completely forgot. I must go. Bye Professor. Bye Annabelle. Have fun!”

Clara spun around quickly, reached forwards to open the door, and almost twisted herself into a knot when she over-balanced and nearly clattered right into the door frame. Luckily, Annabelle grabbed one arm as the professor clutched the other. Together they prevented Clara from sustaining a serious injury.

“Oops,” Clara said, extricating herself and laughing over her shoulder before bounding through the door. “Silly me.”

Professor Baskerville shook his head. “Clumsy Clara, we call her.”

CHAPTER SIX



ANNABELLE SMILED AWKWARDLY. She wasn't sure what to say or even whether to stay now that Clara had left.

"Are you looking for something?" she asked, casting her eyes across the room.

Baskerville's shoulders dropped, as did his expression, a sorry look coming over him.

"Yes." He sighed. "Yes, I am. And not just any old thing. I'm looking for the last surviving copy of the writings of a Byzantine monk. Fifth century."

"Gosh."

"Gosh, indeed." Baskerville sighed again. He pulled the pencil from behind his ear and scratched the top of his bald head with the eraser end of it. Short, soft, fine fair hairs covered his head. "I was due to announce my translation of it tomorrow at the conference and give the damned thing back to a museum in Greece, but now . . ."

Baskerville slumped into a battered leather chair in the corner. He winced, then pulled a sharp-cornered

hardback book from behind him. He checked the spine briefly, then tossed it onto the floor with the others. He dropped his head into his hands.

“I’m doomed . . .” he groaned. “They’ll never allow me access to such reputable texts again. I’ll be lucky if they even let me into the next conference!”

Annabelle watched the man hunched over in his chair, glaring at the ground in distress. She pondered how to respond. This was not a situation she had imagined she would find herself in on her first day in Cambridge. She hadn’t even unpacked yet.

She considered her options. The logical thing to do would be to say goodbye and leave the professor to his problems. The polite thing to do would be to offer her sincere condolences, tell him she hoped he would find his book, and return to her room. But there was no way she could see the professor suffering without feeling sympathy for him. She felt duty-bound to help in any way she could. Annabelle was not short on logic or politeness but more than anything, she was enterprising, helpful, and kind.

“When did you last see this text?” she asked.

The professor shot her a glance. Annabelle’s eyes shone steadily back at him.

“Why, just this morning,” Baskerville responded. “I was working on it in my private library next door, but I’ve already turned that over entirely. It isn’t there.”

“What does it look like?”

Baskerville sighed. “That’s the thing—it looks like any other leather-bound tome. The pages were found in relatively good condition several years ago and were rebound before arriving here.” Baskerville got out of his

chair and picked up a book. Markings similar to those down the centre of a road were punched around the edges of the leather cover. On the spine, the book's title was printed in gold leaf. "It looks just like this, only without any embellishment or label. Silly, I know, but then I suppose they didn't suspect anyone would misplace such a priceless book. It was a reasonable assumption." As he said this, Baskerville grimaced. "Oh, but it was handwritten in Ancient Greek. Handwritten! Fifth century! God help me! I don't know what will be worse, the archbishop's forgiveness, the faculty's censure, or that snake Styles' smug chops!"

"Styles?" Annabelle asked. "Who's that?"

Baskerville began to pace the room. "Professor Styles of the Classics department. He's always competing with me. Thinks he's Caesar, but really he's Brutus! He distorts every theological question into one of antiquity. Always looking to one-up me, to outshine the Theology department. Now he'll do so by default. Without me at the conference, his seminar, '*The Power of the Catholic Church: Its Influence and Impact on Norman Battle Strategies*,' will be the headlining event."

Baskerville continued to pace whilst Annabelle considered this for a moment. She said, "Do you think Professor Styles might have taken the book?"

Baskerville froze mid-step, his eyes widening with horror. He turned to Annabelle. "'Taken it?' You mean sabotaged my presentation?"

Annabelle shrugged, then shook her head. "Sorry, I don't mean to cast aspersions. I don't even know who he is. It was just a thought that came to me."

"No, no," Baskerville said, wagging his finger at her.

“You might be onto something. I would never have thought of it, but it makes perfect sense! It’s *precisely* the type of thing he would do. He was here this morning. Yes! Clara came by, then a few visiting students, and after they’d left, Styles dropped in on the way to his office. Come to think of it, he seemed even smarmier than usual.”

Baskerville continued to pace as this idea gained momentum in his mind. Annabelle watched him, still unsure what to do but eager to help.

“Where is Professor Styles now?” Annabelle asked.

Baskerville broke from his pacing to look at her, surprised at this new student’s interest in his problem. “Well . . .” he said, after thinking for a moment, “I suppose he’s eating his lunch about now. He always has it at the Cat and Custard—a little pub close to here. Good pub grub.”

“Maybe I could talk to him.”

“*Talk to him?* Why would you do that? No . . . Wait, I see what you’re getting at. You think you might get him to reveal something.”

“Yes,” Annabelle said. “Since he doesn’t know me, he might let his guard down a little.”

“Yes . . . Yes . . .” Baskerville said, wagging his finger again. “An excellent idea. Styles is a pompous man, proud of himself, precisely the type to let something slip so he can gloat. Would you speak to him, young lady? I would be enormously grateful.”

“I’ll see what I can find out,” Annabelle said, needing no further encouragement. She did so love to be helpful.

She moved to the door. Baskerville called out from behind her. “What was your name again?”

“Annabelle Dixon, Professor.”

“Annabelle Dixon . . . You know, you’re rather enterprising for a first-year.”

Annabelle smiled. “Thank you, Professor, just trying to help.”

CHAPTER SEVEN



ON THE OUTSIDE, the Cat and Custard was a beautiful cream-coloured pub topped with a weathered roof spotted with lichen. Like poorly poured pints, baskets that hung in a row across the front of the building frothed over with brightly coloured flowers—pink and purple fuchsias, blue lobelia, and white petunias. Out back, a terrace overlooked the River Cam. Pub patrons, hearts in mouths, watched as brave beginner punters took their first unsteady steps onto a punting deck and pushed away from the punting post. The pub-goers sipped their drinks and sighed with relief as the punts rounded the corner and drifted away.

The Cat and Custard dated from 1525, and for visiting tourists, it was like going on a journey to a distant, charming past. To locals, it felt comforting and familiar. Inside, it was dark, thanks to the oak wood paneling that lined the walls, the beams that crisscrossed the ceiling, and the small leaded windows that pointed to the significant age of the building. To counteract the lack of natural light, there were reproduction oil lamps on the walls, and

on chilly nights, the roaring fire provided just enough light to see by. All these elements combined to make the pub hugely popular. It was standing room only on most days.

Annabelle had only been in a pub a few times. When the door swung closed behind her, she became engulfed by the noise of a busy bar. She allowed herself a moment to take in the scene and grow accustomed to the sounds of the bustle and hum of chatter and laughter, the clattering of glasses on old wood tables, and the clinking of forks wielded by the famished. Then she weaved between the tables filled with chattering students and tourists and made her way to the bar where she eventually drew the barman's attention.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Professor Styles," she shouted over the din.

The barman smiled. "You must be a fresher—he's in the same spot he's always in at this time of day," he said, nodding towards a small table in a corner that had a view over the river.

Annabelle turned to see a tall, thin man with slick black hair combed back over his head. He wore an inky purple three-piece suit with a blue tie neatly tied in an Oxford knot. The chain of a pocket watch hung across his chest, and on the chair beside him was a vintage leather satchel, the straps hanging loose, unbuckled. Annabelle watched as Styles put down his knife and fork and leant over his plate of food, stroking his wispy goatee into a groovy point.

"Thank you," Annabelle said to the barman. With both hands, she pushed away from the polished wooden counter and approached the seated professor. He was eating a pie, carefully and deliberately cutting small bites

and placing them in his mouth. As he chewed, he twisted his head to one side to read from a stack of papers next to his plate.

“Professor Styles?” Annabelle said once she’d reached his table.

The man looked up, raising a neat, quizzical eyebrow. “Yes?”

“I’m Annabelle Dixon,” she said, offering her hand before pulling it back when she saw that he had no inclination to put his cutlery down. “I’m a . . .” she stopped herself. “I’m a fresher.”

Styles nodded, his face blank. “Nice to meet you,” he said automatically.

Annabelle opened her mouth but found herself lost for words. Styles seemed indifferent to her—possibly because she was interrupting his meal, possibly because he regarded himself too highly to indulge in the company of a first-year student. Annabelle searched for some way of coaxing Styles into a conversation.

“I’m *so* excited to see your presentation at the conference, Professor!” she announced with enthusiasm, nonchalantly seating herself on the edge of the chair where Styles’ satchel lay.

Styles pulled the satchel from behind her and placed it on the floor next to his feet. He allowed himself a slight smile. Annabelle could see her interest pleased him.

“Are you?” he asked.

“Oh, *yes!*” Annabelle said, leaning forwards. “I just *know* your presentation will be *simply* fascinating.” She put a lot of emphasis on her words, hoping her passion would make up for a lack of specifics.

Professor Styles sat up straighter, his pride obvious. He set his cutlery down to straighten his lapels. He gave

Annabelle his full attention. “Oh, I promise it very much will be. I daresay it’s some of the best work I’ve ever done.”

Annabelle giggled. “I knew it! It’s such a shame though,” she said, watching him closely, “that what everyone is talking about is Professor Baskerville and his *translation*.”

Annabelle noticed pink spots appear on Styles’ cheeks. The tiny red spider veins on his nose became more prominent. His pupils constricted. Uh-oh. Perhaps he had a temper.

But then, Styles laughed derisively. “Baskerville? Oh, my dear, after tomorrow, they’ll be talking about him for all the wrong reasons!” Styles chuckled again and picked up his cutlery to resume eating.

At his words, a wave of electricity swept through Annabelle. It travelled from her head, across her shoulders, and down her arms. It left her fingertips tingling. Perhaps it was the emotion of the day making itself known—a mixture of loss, fear, excitement, and anxiety—but she jumped with lightning speed to a conclusion. A big conclusion.

CHAPTER EIGHT



PROFESSOR STYLES MUNCHED the rest of his pie with a hint of humour in his eyes. Next to him, Annabelle bristled. She boiled with fury. A sense of injustice shook her. Glaring at the conceited, pompous Styles, who was still laughing to himself, Annabelle reached down and snatched the professor's satchel from beneath his chair.

Styles almost spat out his food in surprise. "Hey! What do you think you're doing?" he yelled through a mouthful of pie. Crumbs of flaky shortcrust pastry flew through the pub's warm, slightly musty atmosphere.

People at nearby tables turned their heads towards them, but Annabelle focused on only one thing. "I'm doing what's *right!*" she replied, standing up as she pulled the satchel open.

"Hand that back!" Styles said, reaching out clumsily from his chair.

He grabbed nothing but air as Annabelle twisted to shield the bag from him like a child protecting a precious toy. She put her hand inside the satchel and rummaged around whilst Styles stared at her. As she ferreted,

Annabelle's self-righteous rage slowly morphed into feelings of panic, dread, and finally, acute embarrassment. There was nothing in the bag that resembled the missing book. Annabelle sank meekly back into her chair. She closed the bag and held it out at arm's length whilst she chewed her bottom lip with her top teeth and looked down at the worn, shabby carpet. The sounds of the pub were muted now.

Styles took the satchel from her. His eyes regained their twinkle. He appeared to half-marvel at the gall of this strange young student. But he was also enraged. "Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

"Where have you hidden it?" Annabelle whispered, keen to stave off complete humiliation.

"Hidden *what*? Are you mad?"

"The book," Annabelle said, keeping her voice low. "The one Professor Baskerville was translating."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. And I'm starting to wonder whether I should call the police."

"I know you stole it—you've admitted as much," Annabelle said.

"Admitted as much . . ." Styles sputtered. He shook his head in befuddlement, too confused to be angry now.

"They'll be talking about him for all the wrong reasons," Annabelle repeated. "That's what you said. What else could that mean but that you know the book is lost?"

"The book is lost? He's lost the book? Baskerville's lost the last writings of a Byzantine monk? An *actual* Byzantine monk? From the fifth century?" Styles' eyes widened. When Annabelle didn't answer, he whistled through his teeth. "That's one way of stopping it."

"Stopping what?"

Styles sat up straight. He leant over the table, closer to Annabelle, and pressed his forefinger on the tabletop for emphasis.

“The reason I said Baskerville’s presentation won’t go as well as everyone expects isn’t that I knew he’d lost the book—it’s because I know that certain factions of the church will regard what he translated as *blasphemous*.”

Annabelle stared at Styles for several moments whilst she considered what the professor had said. “*Blasphemous?*”

Professor Styles was clearly enjoying himself now. He sat back in his chair and smiled.

“Oh yes. It isn’t, of course,” he said. “Blasphemous, that is. It’s a rather dull doctrine, with little insight, if you ask me. But it *does* conflict with a tenet held by a rather narrow Episcopalian branch in Bavaria. It is irrelevant in the grand scheme of things but the church would rather indulge a small, inconsequential, cultish denomination than some pesky, interfering academic like Baskerville who thinks he’s more clever than he is. They will condemn him.”

Annabelle thought about this for a moment, then said, “Do you think someone from there—Bavaria—might have stolen the text to remove it from the public domain? Or to discredit Professor Baskerville?”

Styles picked up his cutlery again. “Well, it wasn’t *me!* I know Horatio thinks of me as competition—and I most certainly am—but we’re competing for spots *on the same team*. The last thing I want is for him to show up the whole university. And now it looks like he will be doing just that.”

“I’m sorry,” Annabelle said meekly. “It was really my

idea that you might have taken it. A stupid one. I'm very sorry."

Styles cut off a bite of his pie, put it in his mouth, and considered Annabelle as he chewed. "Rather brave of you to confront a professor before you've even completed your first Socratic, don't you think? Not studying Classics by any chance, are you?"

Annabelle smiled shyly. "Theology."

"Thinking of becoming a priest?"

"Well, I . . ."

Styles dabbed his mouth with a napkin and nodded. "One of those 'fire and brimstone' types, I imagine," he said. He leant over the table again, his searching expression forcing Annabelle to meet his eye. "Look, if Horatio really has lost that book, it's in all of our interests that he finds it—and also that nobody else learns that he lost it in the first place."

Annabelle nodded her agreement enthusiastically. "What should we do?"

Professor Styles looked out of the window, alerted by cries from a punt being shakily guided down the river. He frowned as he considered Annabelle's question.

"I am not going to do anything. But my advice to you," the professor said, pulling out his wallet as he prepared to settle his bill, "is to look for anyone from Bavaria who's here for the conference."

"Got it," Annabelle said, feeling new enthusiasm for her mission. "Thank you very much, Professor Styles."

"And one more thing," Styles said before Annabelle could leave. "Perhaps you could act a *little* more subtly. You know, until you find out who the *real* culprit is."

CHAPTER NINE



ANNABELLE WALKED THROUGH Cambridge city centre. She no longer felt nervous or sad about leaving her family and the familiar to live and study in this unknown city. Plunging headfirst into a controversy, a mystery, *and* a vexing puzzle focused her energy. She may have left her family for an unfamiliar environment and a different way of life, but in trying to locate the missing book for Baskerville, she felt very much at home.

The city seemed built for thought. The winding, asymmetrical streets formed a warren that funnelled people together even whilst they believed themselves apart. The narrow alleyways with arches and high walls were ripe for secrets. Even the quaint shops at the ends of curling streets had the power to fill a mere window shopper like Annabelle with a sense of wonder and curiosity. Cambridge was a delightful city to explore.

As she wandered, Annabelle noticed the quiet courtyards with their manicured, bright green lawns and the wilder open spaces dotted with cattle. She admired the centuries-old stone bridges, a combination of art, archi-

ture, and engineering that curved over the clear waters of the River Cam. As she crossed the wooden Mathematical Bridge, she watched the river run beneath her. Despite the hectic events of her day, Annabelle felt herself connect with her new home. She felt a simmering contentment.

Annabelle turned onto a side street and walked back towards the river. She felt hungry for the first time that day. As she contemplated the merits of a sticky bun over a sausage roll, she saw Noah, the young man who had directed her and her father to King's. He strode towards her from the opposite end of the street. Annabelle darted into a doorway.

It wasn't that she was embarrassed to see him, or unwilling to talk, but that a sudden thought struck her: the accent she detected earlier might have been German. Annabelle's thoughts raced. She struggled to tamp them down. Perhaps she was grasping at straws. Or her imagination was running wild. But before she could calm her thoughts, Noah passed her by. Annabelle stepped from the doorway and watched him, wondering what to do. She didn't want to let him walk away. A voice in her mind nagged her. As the distance opened up between them, her mind settled on a plan.

She pursued him through a small park. She hurried across busy roads. She blended into crowds. She trotted through open squares. She ran across walled gardens. She jumped over spiky hedges. She rounded blind corners. She dodged bikes that barrelled along. Eventually, Noah slowed. He checked his watch briefly. Annabelle hid behind a lamppost breathing hard until Noah hastily passed by. It was late afternoon now. The sun cast a

magical glow. Long shadows formed across cobblestone streets. Tourists meandered aimlessly.

Annabelle followed Noah to The Backs where the river ran behind colleges. One by one, they passed them—Queens', King's, Clare, Trinity Hall, Trinity, St. John's—their architecture imposing and dominant. As they reached the final college, Annabelle risked exposure as she followed Noah across the wide lawn, hoping that he wouldn't see her. Oblivious to her presence behind him, Noah trudged on. He weaved his way through a row of stone archways and stopped in the shadow of one. Annabelle moved closer. She crouched between stonework spotted with moss and a laurel bush shrouded in shadow. The tinkling of a pond's fountain taunted her. What, it seemed to ask, was Noah doing there?

An older man walked across the lawn. He strode confidently towards Noah's hiding place. His salt and pepper hair set off his tan. His eyes were sparkling blue. He was what Annabelle's mother called "a silver fox," but that wasn't the extraordinary thing about him. The man was a priest, a man of the cloth. His shirt was black. He wore a clerical collar.

The two men spoke. Annabelle's heart pounded. She darted over a column the better to hear them. She held her breath. She listened intently. The men were speaking German.

Annabelle studied German at school, but she couldn't make out the men's words. After talking earnestly for a couple more minutes, the men ended their conversation. The priest clasped Noah's shoulder. They shook hands warmly. Noah patted his backpack. He gave a thumbs-up sign. The older man nodded and waved as he bid Noah goodbye.

Annabelle's stomach, empty since breakfast, loudly grumbled its distress. Annabelle winced and suppressed a shudder. Noah glanced in her direction. Annabelle counted to ten and held her breath. Footsteps crunched on the gravel. As she cast her eyes skywards in silent prayer, she caught sight of the pond's reflection. In it, she saw the priest walk away towards the sinking sun. Noah emerged from beneath the arches, mere feet away from Annabelle. He rejoined the path that tracked the river-bank and he too walked away. As she watched Noah's retreating figure, Annabelle pondered what she'd just seen. What did it mean? Who were the men? Where was the missing text?

When enough distance had opened up, Annabelle took off after Noah. She felt closer to the truth but in some danger. A flutter of fear rippled through her. Despite the cooling temperature, she wiped a slick of moisture from her brow. She continued to trail her quarry. She wouldn't give up. This was now a matter of faith.

CHAPTER TEN



ANNABELLE FOLLOWED NOAH to a small, whitewashed cottage at the end of a lane. A black metal sign hung from an ornate wrought iron post drilled into the side of the cottage told her in crisp, white letters, that it was a bed-and-breakfast. A sign in the window announced there were “No Vacancies.” A low, grey stone wall marked the boundary of the cottage garden, which spilled over with colourful, blooming flowers and shrubs in distinct shades of green.

Noah opened the gate and made his way up the worn, paved path. Annabelle stood a few houses down. The lane was narrow; it was hard to hide. Instinctively, she stood still and crouched slightly. A passing dog walker gave her a funny look and a wide berth.

Ignoring the dog walker, Annabelle watched Noah enter the bed and breakfast. He left the front door open. She sighed with frustration. Circling the cottage, she studied the windows for any sign of movement. One of the smaller panes was open. She could just make out the shadow of a figure behind the curtain.

Once again, Annabelle crouched behind a bush, reviewing all the “evidence” in her mind. Everything pointed towards the idea that Noah had stolen the book from Professor Baskerville. But how could she prove it?

“Annabelle?” came a voice behind her.

Annabelle stood up hurriedly, blushing. She quickly brushed off leaves that clung to her, picking a few from her hair. “Clara! Fancy bumping into you here,” she said with an enthusiastic smile.

Clara, a slight frown creasing her forehead, looked at Annabelle, then at the bush from which she had arisen.

“What are you doing?” Clara asked.

“Oh, here?” Annabelle said, pointing at the bush, her eyes wide. “I was . . . um . . . I was inspecting this lovely bush. It’s really very pretty, don’t you think? Not a lot of greenery in London. Gosh, Cambridge is lovely! What are you doing here?”

Clara laughed, happy enough with this answer. “I was about to head back to Sussex when I realised I’d forgotten to drop my books at the secondhand bookshop. I’m on my way there now. I saw you, so I thought I’d stop.” She nodded over to her van. “Thank you so much for helping me load those books into my car.”

“Oh, no problem. Thank you for showing me around, you know, getting me started.”

Clara looked at her watch. “Hey, I must go. Gotta get those books to the shop before they close.” The two young women hugged briefly, and after promising to catch up when Clara was next in Cambridge, she left Annabelle standing in the lane. Annabelle turned to look at the cottage, her eyes narrowing. She straightened up and gritted her teeth.

With her expression resolute, her jaw clenched, Annabelle marched over to the cottage. Her hands curled into fists. She walked through the open front door into a small dining room. A counter separated it from the kitchen where an elderly lady sat in a chair drinking a cup of tea and reading a newspaper. She looked up slowly, pulling off her tortoise-shell glasses and allowing them to dangle on a piece of string around her neck.

Smiling at Annabelle, she said, "Hello dear, can I help you?"

"I'm looking for Noah. He's staying here, I believe."

"Are you a friend of his?"

"Um . . . Yes. Something like that."

The old lady smiled and put her glasses back on.

"Up the stairs, second door on the left."

Annabelle looked around. "Um . . ."

"Through that door."

Annabelle saw a door set into the wall and suspended a foot off the ground. Opening it carefully, she found a flight of tiny, narrow stairs behind it.

"There's a stool in the corner if you need a leg up," the old woman said.

Not needing the stool, Annabelle hoisted herself onto the first step, but she had to move slower now. It wasn't easy for someone Annabelle's size to negotiate the narrow tread of the stairs. She had to watch her head. It wasn't a very big cottage.

Standing in front of Noah's bedroom door, Annabelle took two deep breaths and thought of what she should say. Nothing came to her so she decided to wing it. She knocked loudly, waiting only a few seconds, before impatiently knocking again.

With her knuckles in mid-air, the door swung open. The young man whom Annabelle had met upon first arriving in Cambridge stood in front of her. Noah squinted, his confusion clear as he scanned his memory to determine from where he recognised the young woman standing before him.

“Yes?” he said. “Who are . . .? Wait, you’re the girl who arrived with her father in the black cab this morning.”

“Hand it over,” Annabelle demanded, holding her palm out.

Noah looked about him as if Annabelle were talking to someone else. “Excuse me?”

“Hand it over. The book.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand . . .”

Annabelle’s frustration with the sneaking around, the hiding in bushes, and the public humiliations she had endured overflowed. She pushed Noah aside and marched into the small bedroom. It was no larger than her room at Bodley’s Court and equally sparse. There was a bed, a desk, a wardrobe, a chair, and a window through which a breeze blew gently, making the net curtains flutter. She looked about her at the clothes tossed on the chair, and the paper and writing tools on the desk. There was nothing that resembled the leather-bound text of the last writings of a Byzantine monk. Nor could she see Noah’s backpack.

Still standing in the doorway, Noah offered a lop-sided smile. He seemed amused by Annabelle’s strange behaviour.

“I think you *do* understand,” Annabelle scolded, putting her hands on her hips and turning to face him. “The text Professor Baskerville was translating.” Noah continued to look at her with a bemused expression. He

shook his head and opened his eyes wide. He lifted his hands and opened them reflexively. “He was to announce his findings at tomorrow’s conference.” Annabelle’s voice shook. “It’s missing. I . . . well, I think you took it.”

Noah raised an eyebrow in surprise. “*Me?*” he said, pressing a palm to his chest. “Why would I do that?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



“BECAUSE YOU THINK it’s blasphemous. You’re from that Bavarian church.” Annabelle was sweating and her face flushed. She felt very uncomfortable and suspected Noah was mocking her. “A denomination that thinks the text goes against your interpretation of gospel.”

Noah dropped his smile and his raised eyebrow. He looked at Annabelle seriously. After what felt like an age, he said, “Do you believe in Christ?”

“Very much so,” Annabelle said.

“You study the Bible? Practice the Lord’s teachings?”

“I do my best,” Annabelle said cautiously. “I’m thinking of becoming a priest when I finish my studies.”

Noah folded his arms, dipped his chin, and raised both his eyebrows this time. Annabelle was sure he was mocking her now. “Then you must surely have a distaste for blasphemous content?”

“Well . . .” Annabelle mumbled, feeling nothing like the assured, striding, self-righteous heroine she imagined herself when she first burst into the room. “Of course I do. But that doesn’t mean I would steal a precious histor-

ical artefact and jeopardise a professor's career. I believe in free speech and robust discussion. I have a willingness to listen to another's point of view." She ended confidently, her chin thrust in the air, her gaze direct and assured.

"Is that so?" Noah said. His eyes narrowed again and his expression hardened. "Then perhaps you misunderstand what I mean by blasphemous content."

Noah darted towards her, and Annabelle almost shrieked before realising he was making a beeline for the wardrobe. She dodged out of his way and watched him as he yanked open the closet door. He tugged out his backpack and dug around inside it furiously, eventually pulling out a small, leather-bound book.

Annabelle's eyes went from the book to Noah and back to the book again. "Is that it?" she whispered.

"Yes," Noah answered, holding it aloft, "this is it."

"How did you get it?"

"I was in Baskerville's office, pretending to be one of his adoring students. I found this "text" when he went to the bathroom. It wasn't difficult. It was sitting right in the middle of his desk."

"Give it back!"

"No," Noah said grimly. "I will destroy it. But first, you should know what devilish and impious desecration your beloved Professor Baskerville is engaged in."

"He's not my beloved. I've only just met him," Annabelle protested.

"Never mind! Listen to this!"

Bewildered, Annabelle stood in front of Noah and watched as the young German opened the book and searched for a passage to read to her.

"*Consumed by passion,*" Noah read spitefully. He was

almost spitting. “*Gielgud swept his executive desk clean of all objects. Then, his muscles bristling beneath his fine Italian shirt, he lifted the gasping Beatrice onto it, and—I cannot read further! It is obscene!*”

Annabelle gawped at the angry young man, her thoughts struggling to make sense of what he had just read.

“Um, that’s not the text . . .” she murmured slowly.

“What do you mean?” Noah said fiercely. “Of course it is!” He flicked to another page. “*Beatrice, her heaving . . .*”

“No, look, it can’t be,” Annabelle said. “First, it wouldn’t be in English.”

Noah froze, his wide eyes darting from Annabelle to the book in his hands as he sought an answer. Then, having been caught off-guard by her words, he was also caught off-guard by her actions. Annabelle’s hand shot out and snatched the book from him. “Hey!”

“And look,” she said, gesturing at the open book, “the words are printed. They didn’t have printers in the fifth century.”

“That—That means nothing! It’s the words themselves. They are satanic!” Noah sputtered. His mouth twisted with anguish, his cry sounded feverish and desperate.

“The original text is in Ancient Greek. A Byzantine monk wrote it by hand,” Annabelle explained. “That’s the whole point, the whole reason Baskerville was tasked with translating it. This isn’t it.” Quickly, she inspected the leather-bound book, turning it in her hands. She began to pick and tear at its cover.

“Stop! You can’t do that!” Noah reached for the book, but Annabelle had a firm hold. She braced her body

against his, straining against Noah's grip as he fought to wrestle the book from her.

"You said you would destroy it. Isn't this what you want?" she said. Just then, the book fell apart. The leather cover came away in Annabelle's hand. The book dropped onto the floor between them with a thud. "Oh!"

Annabelle and Noah looked at the floor in surprise. There lay a thick paperback, the shiny cover adorned with a bare-chested man, his ruffled shirt hanging from the waistband of his trousers. A woman in a long red dress, all bust and bustle, clung to him with longing, her raven-coloured hair flowing to her waist, her lipstick as scarlet as her dress. The letters of the book's title spread in large type across the top of the cover: *The CEO's Secret—Book Seven of the Red Dress Chronicles*.

"What kind of demonic trickery is *this!*?" Noah exclaimed.

Words Annabelle had heard not so long ago echoed in her mind. "*Reading in lectures . . . I developed some pretty creative methods for getting away with it.*"

Clara. Annabelle spun around and ran out of the room.

"Wait! What's going on?" Noah shouted after her. Annabelle left him behind.

CHAPTER TWELVE



IT OCCURRED TO Annabelle, as she sprinted across the city that confronting a professor at a popular pub, pursuing a suspected thief, and trying to catch someone before they left with a priceless artefact was a rather effective way of getting to know a place. She doubted it was what her father had had in mind when he had suggested that she explore the city, but she also doubted that had he known how she'd spent the hours since, he would have been much surprised.

As she ran, Annabelle recalled every unique landmark, all the patches of green, and each of the alleys she had navigated earlier. Dodging and weaving, she ran past students and tourists. She skidded around corners. She leap-frogged bollards. She jumped over a cat.

Annabelle ran to the secondhand bookshop that Clara had shown her earlier, but when she got there, there was no sign of her friend. Working on a hunch, Annabelle continued on. Eventually, she reached the green she had helped Clara carry her books across—the one outside her Bodley's Court window. She saw the funky, pale-blue

Westfalia van parked as it had been earlier on the side of the road. Annabelle slowed to a jog, pink-faced and panting through a relieved smile, until to her horror, the van began to manoeuvre from its spot. Annabelle's smile vanished. Once again she set off, her long legs carrying her at head-turning speed.

By the time she reached the other side of the green, the van had gone down the street and was about to disappear around a corner. "Clara!" Annabelle called, waving her arms as she ran, hoping Clara would notice her in her rearview mirror. "*Clara!*"

For half a mile, Annabelle chased the van, running down the middle of the streets, drawing the attention of everyone she passed, causing at least one bystander to comment, "Freshers grow nuttier by the year." Another bystander, a startled student, recognised Annabelle from her altercation with Professor Styles at the Cat and Custard, and silently hoped that she wasn't in his class.

Annabelle had never much cared for the opinions of others, however, and certainly not when accomplishing a goal. Unfortunately for her though, the small streets were mostly clear of traffic, and Clara drove on without hindrance. It took another half-mile of wild, flat-out, lung-bursting sprinting to catch up with the van. Finally, when Clara stopped at a T-junction, Annabelle drew up close.

"Clara!" Annabelle called out. She slammed her palms against the back of the van before rushing around to the driver's window.

"Oh! Annabelle? You scared me!" Clara exclaimed clutching a hand to her chest. "What's the matter? Did I hit something again?"

"No, no," Annabelle said, bending over as she caught

her breath. “The book . . . Professor Baskerville’s book . . . When we went to his office today, he was looking for a book . . . A text he was translating for the conference tomorrow. It was the last surviving copy of the writings of a Byzantine monk from the fifth century.”

“Gosh. But what does that have to do with me?”

“I think you’ve packed it away with your belongings.”

Clara frowned but parked and got out of the van. Together, they moved to the back and opened the doors.

“Where did all the books go?” Annabelle cried. The van’s interior was still a jumbled mess full of small furniture items, bags of clothes and bedding, and stuffed animals, but there were very few books.

“I took them to the secondhand bookshop. But I still have loads. These are my favourites. I can’t give these away.” Clara opened up a cardboard box, then another, and another.

“Right then, we’ve got to search every box,” Annabelle commanded.

The two women clambered into the back of the van, sifting through the boxes in search of Baskerville’s text. It was hot, hard work. There was little space to move around. Annabelle, especially, was too tall and had to hunch over as she steadied herself against a headrest, her knee on a seat. She had to duck her head to avoid hitting it on the sunroof.

“It’s not here,” Clara wailed when they had gone through every box. She wiped her face. Her hand left a streak of dust that ran from her eyebrow to her jaw. She looked close to tears. “Do you really think I have it?”

“I think you *had* it. Are you sure we’ve looked through all the boxes?” Annabelle was close to tears herself. It had been an interminable day.

“Well, what do you think?” Clara responded. She gestured at the van. It looked like someone had let off a grenade inside a library. There were books *everywhere*—on the floor, on the seats, on the dashboard, on the roof, on the ground outside. Clara had even removed the spare tyre to make more room. There were books in the spare tyre well.

“What about the secondhand bookshop? I bet you dropped it off there. We need to look for it there.”

“Oh my, it closes in five minutes!”

“Then let’s go!”

They jumped into the front of the van. Clara put the van into gear and took off in a jerky movement that would have shamed a learner driver. She drove to the little black bookshop and parked at an angle to the kerb. Custard still sat on the step outside the shop.

“Stop, Lavender, stop!” Clara cried. The bookshop owner held a key in her hand and was about to lock the door. “We have to get inside. I gave you a priceless historical book by mistake!”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



LAVENDER LET CLARA and Annabelle in the shop. “But I ‘ave a meetin’ in an ‘our. You’ll ‘ave to be done by then. I’m missin’ my tea as it is,” she said in her rural Cambridgeshire burr. Now that she was up close, Annabelle saw that Lavender wore round rimless glasses. She carried a crocheted patchwork bag over her arm.

“Have you already shelved the books I brought in earlier?” Clara asked.

“Course I ‘ave. What do you take me for? A tortoise?”

Annabelle looked around the shop. It was a lot larger on the inside than it looked from the street. Shelves of books lined every wall that Annabelle could see. It was clearly a former home whose rooms had been transformed for the book shop's purposes, but Annabelle knew the floor plan intimately. She knew that beyond the room she was standing in—the “posh” front room that back in the day was used only when guests visited—lay a second reception room and a long narrow kitchen at the end of a long narrow hallway. Upstairs there were two, maybe three bedrooms. The house was identical to hundreds of

thousands built during Queen Victoria's reign to accommodate the needs of the growing British population.

"I bet you've got books in every room, haven't you?"

"Stuffed to the gunnels," Lavender said.

"How many books do you think?"

"Ooh," Lavender breathed in through her nose and rocked on her heels. "Thousands."

Annabelle and Clara looked at each other and sighed simultaneously. "I'll take downstairs, you do the bedrooms. We'll meet on the stairs," Annabelle said.

An hour later, Annabelle and Clara sat side by side on the bottom stair, their chins in their hands that were propped on their elbows. Custard watched them from the doorstep. She flicked her tail, her smooth, glossy black coat a striking contrast to the disheveled state of the hair belonging to the humans in front of her. Clara rubbed her nose. The dusty bookshop was making it itch. Annabelle stared straight ahead, thought now beyond her.

"Right, you two, you've had your time. I've got to go to my meetin' now." Lavender shooed the women out of the shop. After she'd picked Custard from the step and dropped her in the hallway, Lavender locked the door behind her and scurried away down the street.

Clara wearily unlocked the van and leant against it, cooling her forehead on the window. Annabelle opened the passenger door and sat on the running board, her back slumped against the seat. "Oof, I've got a headache." She leant forwards and put her head in her hands.

"I've got some painkillers. You can have one. They're above you, behind the sun visor," Clara said.

Annabelle reached up and pulled down the hinged flap above the windshield. "Ow!" Something heavy hit

her on the nose before landing in her lap along with a small bottle of painkillers.

“Uh, sorry. I got that one out for the journey. There’s a lay-by I like to stop in. A good book, a mug of tea, and a bacon butty from the roadside café—perfect.” Clara took the leather-bound book from Annabelle’s lap. “I’m looking forward to reading this. *The CEO’s Secret*.”

Annabelle sat up straight. “Open it up!” she demanded.

“What? Hey, you don’t think . . . Are you saying . . . ?” Clara flicked the book open. She turned it to show Annabelle. Barely legible symbols and hieroglyphs crossed the page in orderly rows. The edges of the pages were brown and feathery. The paper was transparent in places.

“It’s the text Professor Baskerville was looking for!” Annabelle exclaimed. She reached over to embrace Clara. “We found it!”

“I must have got this mixed up with one of my romances,” Clara said. “You know, I used to put leather covers on them so the professors wouldn’t catch me reading in class. And the cover for this text looks exactly like the one I used for *The CEO’s Secret*. I must have grabbed it from the professor’s office after my tutorial instead of my romance novel.”

“And Noah went in after you and took your book thinking it was the text. Well,” Annabelle said, taking the book from Clara with her thumb and forefinger, “I’ll return this to Professor Baskerville.”

“Oh . . . yes . . . please don’t . . .”

“I won’t, don’t worry. It was an accident. I won’t tell him anything, he’ll be happy enough just to have it back.”

“Thank you, Annabelle.” Clara smiled. “I’d best be off. I hope you enjoy your time in Cambridge.”

“Don’t worry,” Annabelle said, waving happily. “I already love it.”

Again, Clara showed that clutch control was not a skill she had yet mastered. She drove off as jerkily as she had last time and only narrowly avoided hitting a student on a bike. Annabelle winced as she watched the van drive away. She was contemplating her walk back to Professor Baskerville’s office when behind her, a voice called out.

“Dixon, wasn’t it?”

Annabelle turned to see the track-suited figure of Jean Watkins running over to her, eyeing her with a little less disdain than she had earlier in the day.

“Yes.”

The hockey coach and PE department head paused before speaking. “I heard about an impromptu display of your athletic abilities from one of my scouts. I understand you were, ah, running through the streets,” she said. “I won’t say the word ‘impressive’ was used, but they recommended I reconsider your potential. Parker’s Piece, Tuesday morning, seven a.m. Got it?”

Annabelle stood up straight and beamed. “Yes, Ma’am,” she answered. She felt like saluting.

Jean Watkins nodded primly and set off again on her run. Annabelle set off too, but in the direction of the Faculty of Divinity. She had to return the text to Professor Baskerville. Then she had a call to make. My, she had a lot to tell Mary.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



THERE WAS A smart rap at Annabelle's bedroom door. "Mum! Dad!" Annabelle hugged both her parents tight. She was enormously pleased to see them and had been preparing for their visit all week. "Why don't you sit down?" Annabelle's mother and father stared at the seating arrangement before making a choice—a vintage, high back, wing chair upholstered in a brown fabric printed with a hunting theme for her father, a tall-legged but low-backed stool covered with pink fur for her mother. Annabelle took the lime green beanbag in between.

In the days since her father had dropped her off, Annabelle had transformed her room from a drab, spartan space to one that announced her personality loudly and clearly. Since she wasn't permitted to paint the walls, she had draped them with large, soft scarves. Above her bed was a baby pink one with silver tassels. On another wall was a similar scarf but in lavender and grey. A cross hung above her bed. A Bible sat on her bedside table.

From their vantage point, Annabelle's parents admired the room, cooing over the photographs that seemed to cover every available surface and marvelling at the size of the textbooks that lay open on Annabelle's desk.

"Looks lovely, darling," her mother said. "Very homey." She handed Annabelle a chocolate sandwich cake filled with buttercream. "Here, I made you this. Your favourite." Annabelle swooned and took the plate from her. "Mary sends her love," her mother added.

"I see you've broken the habit of a lifetime and made your bed," her father said. Annabelle snorted. "Not just for our benefit, then?"

"No, of course not." Annabelle grinned.

"All that nagging wasn't for nothing, Raymond," her mother said. "Eventually."

"Oh! I'm forgetting myself. Would you like a cup of tea? I've laid a tray out specially. I thought you might be thirsty after the drive. I got your favourite biscuits in, Dad." Annabelle's words tumbled out in a rush. She so wanted to show her parents how grown-up she was. Annabelle pointed to a plate of custard creams on a tray next to three mugs, a box of tea bags, a carton of milk, and a kettle.

"Let's do that later. I'd like to have a look around. Will you show us? I really liked the look of that chapel when I was here last week," her father said.

And so it was that Annabelle gave her London born and bred parents a tour of the city of Cambridge. She showed them the glass Faculty of Divinity building shimmering in the bright morning sun and its circular library, where she would spend many hours studying. They walked carefully by the cows grazing on

Midsummer Common and admired The Backs as they walked down the towpath next to the river. For a minute or two, they listened to a speaker who was shouting about the end of the world outside King's College, its grand, ancient spires contrasting with the speaker's modern-day soapbox that comprised two plastic milk crates taped together. Annabelle nodded with approval at the passion with which the speaker made his proclamations, even if he wasn't making much sense. At lunchtime, after admiring the vast vaulted ceilings of King's College Chapel, they ate a ploughman's followed by sticky toffee pudding on the terrace at the Cat and Custard.

"Next time we come, you could take us on one of those," Raymond Dixon suggested, pointing to a punt gliding along the water in front of them. A look of abject horror crossed his wife's face. "Oooh, yes!" Annabelle lit up. "I'll make sure to get in some practice so I don't tip us in the water. I'm training with the hockey team now, you know, that's sure to help. And I'm cycling everywhere. I'll be as fit as a fiddle." On her third day in Cambridge, impatient to get around quicker than even her long legs would carry her, Annabelle had bought a secondhand bike from a former student.

After lunch, Annabelle took her parents through the quiet back streets. They passed the bed and breakfast cottage to which she had tracked Noah. They also walked by the black-painted secondhand bookshop. Custard still sat on the step, her jet-black fur gleaming, her yellow eyes staring.

"These look like our houses back home," her mother said.

"Yes, they're very similar."

“So what have you done this week besides decorate your room?” her father asked.

“Oh, you know, this and that. I met my professors and there were lots of orientation activities. I got to know some of the students.”

“So everything was perfectly normal? Nothing out of the ordinary?”

“Pretty much.”

“Doesn’t sound like you, Annabelle,” her mother said. “No disasters, accidents, or chaos?”

“Mum!”

“She’s all grown up now, Petronella. Look at her,” her father said. “We’re as proud as punch to have you as our daughter, aren’t we?”

“We are. Proud as punch. You’ll have a wonderful time here, I know it. Cambridge seems very nice, very sedate.”

Annabelle smiled to herself. “You’d be surprised, Mum.”

Later that afternoon, the tour of Cambridge complete and the custard creams all gone, it was time for Annabelle’s parents to get back to London. Annabelle gave them a big, squeezey hug. She’d been dreading them leaving, but now the time had come, she found that she was also excited. Life was an adventure, wasn’t it? And it was for enjoying, she was quite sure of that. What would the next days, weeks, and years have in store for her? She didn’t know. But she knew it would be thrilling. She could hardly wait.

“Look after yourself, Annabelle.”

“I will, Dad.”

“Don’t work too hard, love.”

“I won’t, Mum.”

“Watch out for Henry VIII, now. He was a rascal.”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine, Dad.”

“Laundry. Do laundry.”

“Right-o, Mum.”

“Come on, Petronella, let’s leave the girl.”

“Alright, alright, I’m coming. You sure you’ve got enough clean knickers, Annabelle?”

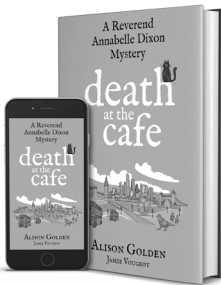
“Yes, Mum.”

“You can’t have enough clean knickers, you know.”

“Call us in the week, Annabelle.”

“Will do. Bye Mum, bye Dad. Speak to you soon.”

* * *



Thank you for reading this subscriber exclusive, *Chaos in Cambridge*! I hope you love Annabelle as much as I do. *Chaos in Cambridge* is a prequel to a series that starts in earnest a few years later with Annabelle, now a new vicar, overseeing an urban parish in

London.

In *Death at the Café*, Annabelle is meeting Mary, now a Catholic nun, at a cafe for tea and cake. What she gets is a double helping of murder. Can Annabelle unravel the mystery, find the killer, *and* save Mary from jail? Order *Death at the Café* from Amazon and find out! *Death at the Café* is FREE with Kindle Unlimited.

Turn the page for an excerpt from the next in the Reverend Annabelle Dixon series, *Death at the Cafe...*

DEATH AT THE CAFÉ



DEATH AT THE CAFÉ

A Reverend
Annabelle Dixon
Mystery

death
at the
cafe



ALISON GOLDEN
JAMIE VOUGEOT

CHAPTER ONE



NOTHING BROUGHT REVEREND Annabelle closer to blasphemy than using the London public transport system during rush hour. Since being ordained and sent to St. Clement's church, an impressive, centuries-old building among the tower blocks and new builds of London's East End, Annabelle had been tested many times. She had come across virtually every sin known to man, counselled wayward youths, presided over family disputes, heard astonishingly sad tales from the homeless, and still retained her solid, optimistic dependability through it all. None of these challenges made her blood boil, and her round, soft face curl up into a mixture of disgust, frustration, and exasperation. Yet sitting on the number forty-three bus to Islington, as it moved along at a snail's pace, was almost enough to make her take her beloved Lord's name in vain.

On this occasion, she had nabbed her favourite seat: top deck, front left. It gave her a perfect view of the unique streets London offered and the even more varied types of people. Today, however, her viewpoint afforded

her only a teeth-clenchingly irritating perspective of a traffic jam that extended as far as the eye could see down Upper Street.

“I know I shouldn’t,” she muttered on the relatively empty bus, “but if this doesn’t deserve a cherry-topped cupcake, then I don’t know what does.”

The thought of rewarding her patience with what she loved almost as much as her vocation—cake—settled Annabelle’s nerves for a full twenty minutes, during which the bus trundled in fits and starts along another half-mile stretch.

Assigning Annabelle, fresh from her days studying theology at Cambridge University, to the tough, inner-city borough of Hackney had presented her with what had been an almost literal baptism of fire. She had arrived in the summer, during a few weeks when the British sun combined with the squelching heat of a city constantly bustling and moving. It was a time of drinking and frivolity for some, heightened tension for others. A spell during which bored youths found their idle hands easily occupied with the devil’s work. An interval when the good relax and the bad run riot.

Annabelle had grown up in East London, but for her first appointment as a vicar, her preference had been for a peaceful, rural village somewhere. A place in which she could indulge her love of nature, and conduct her Holy business in the gentle, caring manner she preferred. “Gentle” and “caring,” however, were two words rarely used to describe London. Annabelle had mildly protested her city assignment. But after a long talk to the archbishop who explained the extreme shortage of candidates both capable and willing to take on the challenge of an inner-city church, she agreed to

take up the position and set about her task with enthusiasm.

Father John Wilkins of neighbouring St. Leonard's church had been charged with easing Annabelle into the complex role. He had been a priest for over thirty years, and for the vast majority of that time had worked in London's poorest, toughest neighbourhoods. The Anglican Church was far less popular in London than it was in rural England, largely due to the city's disparate mix of peoples and creeds. Father John's congregation was mostly made up of especially devout immigrants from Africa and South America, many of whom were not even Anglican but simply lived nearby. The only time St. Leonard's had ever been full was on a particularly mild Christmas Eve.

But despite low attendance at services, London's churches played pivotal roles in their local communities. With plenty of people in need, they were hubs of charity and community support. Fundraising events, providing food and shelter for London's large homeless population, caring for the elderly, and engaging troubled youths were the churches' stock in trade, not to mention they provided both spiritual and emotional support for the many deaths and family tragedies that occurred.

The stress of it all had turned Father John's wiry beard a speckled grey, and though he knew his work was important and worthwhile, he had been pushed to breaking point on more than one occasion. Upon her arrival, he had taken one look at Annabelle's breezy manner and fresh-faced, open smile and assumed that her appointment was a case of negligence, desperation, or a sick prank.

"She's utterly delightful," Father John sighed on the

phone to the archbishop, “and extremely nice. But ‘delightful’ and ‘nice’ are not what’s required in a London church. This is a part of the world where faith is stretched to its very limits, where strong leadership goes further than gentle guidance. We struggle to capture people’s attention, Archbishop, let alone their hearts. Our drug rehabilitation programs have more members than our congregations.”

“Give her a chance, Father,” the archbishop replied softly. “Don’t underestimate her. She grew up in East London, you know.”

“Well, I grew up in Westminster, but that doesn’t mean I’ve had tea with the Queen!”

Merely a week into Annabelle’s assignment, however, Father John’s misgivings proved unfounded. Annabelle’s bumbling, naïve manner was just that—a manner. Father John observed closely as Annabelle’s strength, faith, and intelligence were consistently tested by the urban issues of her flock. He noted that she passed with flying colours.

Whether she was dealing with a hardened criminal fresh out of prison and already succumbing to old temptations, or a single mother of three struggling to find some composure and faith in the face of her daily troubles, Annabelle was always there to help. With good humour and optimism, she never turned down a request for assistance, no matter how large or small it was.

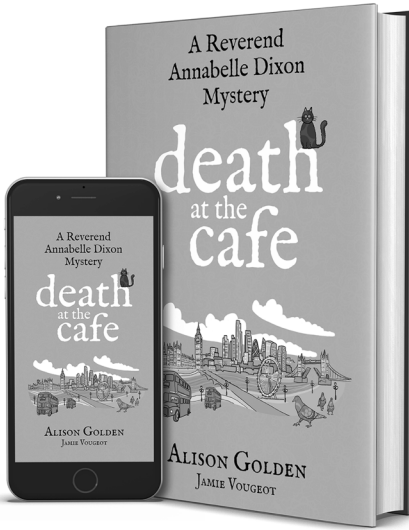
When Father John visited Annabelle a month after the start of her placement to check on a highly successful gardening project she had started for troubled youth, he shook his head in amazement “Is that Denton? By the rose bushes? I’ve been trying to get him to visit me for a year now, and all he does is ignore me. You should hear what he says when his parole officer suggests it,” he said.

CHAPTER ONE

“Oh, Denton is wonderful!” Annabelle cried. “Fantastic with his hands. He has a devilish sense of humour—when it’s properly directed. Did you know that he plays drums?”

“No, I didn’t know that. He never told me,” Father John said, giving Annabelle an appreciative smile. “I must say, Reverend, I seem to have misjudged you dreadfully. And I apologise.”

“Oh, Father,” Annabelle chuckled, “it’s perfectly understandable. You have only the best interests of the community at heart. Let’s leave judgement for Him and Him alone. The only thing we’re meant to judge is cake contests, in my opinion. Mind those thorns, Denton! Roses tend to fight back if you treat them roughly!”



To get your copy of Death at the Café visit the link below:
<https://www.alisongolden.com/death-at-the-cafe>



REVERENTIAL RECIPES



Continue on to check
out the recipes for
goodies featured in
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PETRONELLA DIXON'S CHOCOLATE CAKE



For the cake

10 oz (285g) soft brown sugar
1 oz (30g) cocoa powder
3 fl oz (85ml) water
8 oz (230g) flour
2 tsp baking powder
1/2 tsp bicarbonate of soda
1/2 tsp salt
4 oz (115g) butter
1 tsp vanilla essence
2 eggs, separated
1/4 pint (140ml) sour cream

For the frosting

4 oz (115g) butter, softened
8 oz (230g) icing sugar, sifted
4 oz (115g) plain chocolate, broken into
pieces
1 tbsp milk

PETRONELLA DIXON'S CHOCOLATE CAKE

1 oz (30g) chopped nuts (hazelnuts,
almonds, walnuts), to finish

Put 85g/3 oz of the sugar in to a pan with the cocoa powder and water. Bring to a boil and simmer gently for a few minutes until smooth, stirring constantly. Leave to cool.

Sift the flour and remaining dry ingredients into a mixing bowl. Cream together the remaining sugar and the butter until fluffy, then beat in the vanilla essence and the egg yolks until the mixture is light. Stir in the cooled cocoa mixture and fold in the dry ingredients alternately with the soured cream. Beat the egg whites until stiff, then fold into the cake mixture until evenly mixed.

Pour the mixture into a deep 18cm/7-inch round greased cake tin. Bake in a moderate oven 175°C/350°F/Gas Mark 4 for about 1¼ hours or until a skewer inserted in the centre comes out clean. Remove the cake from the oven and leave to cool for about five minutes. Transfer to a wire rack to cool completely.

To prepare the icing, beat the butter with an electric beater or wooden spoon until light and fluffy. Gradually beat in the icing sugar until thoroughly mixed. Put the chocolate pieces in a heatproof bowl with the milk and stand over a pan of hot water until melted, stirring occasionally. Stir into the butter and icing sugar mixture.

Cut the cake into two layers. Spread the bottom layer with three-quarters of the frosting and re-shape the cake. Spread the top with the remaining frosting and sprinkle around the edge with chopped nuts.



PETRONELLA DIXON'S CHOCOLATE CAKE

All ingredients are available from your local store or
online retailer.

You can find printable versions of these recipes at
www.alisongolden.com/ccrecipes



BOOKS IN THE REVEREND ANNABELLE DIXON SERIES



Chaos in Cambridge (Prequel)

Death at the Café

Murder at the Mansion

Body in the Woods

Grave in the Garage

Horror in the Highlands

Killer at the Cult

Fireworks in France

Witches at the Wedding

COLLECTIONS

Books 1-4

Death at the Café

Murder at the Mansion

Body in the Woods

Grave in the Garage

Books 5-7

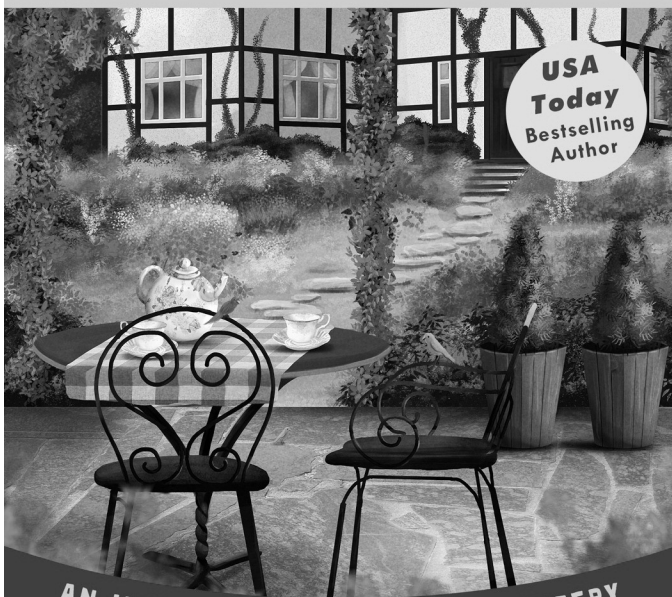
Horror in the Highlands

Killer at the Cult

Fireworks in France

ALISON GOLDEN

Grace Dagnall



USA
Today
Bestselling
Author

AN INSPECTOR DAVID GRAHAM MYSTERY

The Case of the
**Screaming
Beauty**



NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR



The events in this prequel take place a short while before *The Case of the Hidden Flame*, the next book in the Inspector David Graham series of mysteries. It is set in the beautiful countryside of Southern England.

The Case of the Screaming Beauty is a classic prequel to the other books in the series, all of which are complete mysteries. They can be read and enjoyed in any order. I've made sure not to include any spoilers for those of you who are new to the characters. Any existing fans of Inspector Graham's investigations will still find plenty of fresh action and mystery, as well as a little background detail on some of the major players in the Inspector Graham universe. All in all, there is something for everyone.

I had an absolute blast creating this book – I hope you have a blast reading it.

Alice Golden

CHAPTER ONE



AMELIA SWANSBOURNE STRAIGHTENED up, wincing slightly, and admired the freshly weeded flower bed with an almost professional pride. It was, she mused, as though she were fighting a continuous, low-level war against insidious intruders whose intentions were not only to take root and flourish, but whose impact on the impeccably arranged beds and rockeries of her garden was as unwelcome as a hurricane. Amelia was ruthless and precise, going about her work with a methodical focus that reminded her of those “gardening monks” she’d once seen in a documentary. Perhaps, she chuckled, moving onto the next flower bed, weeding would be her path to enlightenment.

As she knelt on her cushioned, flower-patterned pad and began the familiar rhythm once more, she let her mind go where it wanted. How many other women in their early sixties, she wondered, were carrying out this basic, time-honoured task at this very moment? She pictured those quiet English gardens being lovingly tended on this very temperate Sunday morning, silently

wishing her fellow gardeners a peaceful and productive couple of hours. It must have been true, though, that she faced a larger and more demanding test than most. The gardens of the Lavender Inn were spread over an impressive and endlessly challenging four and a half acres.

Guests loved walking in the gardens. They had become a major attraction for many of the city folk who retreated from London to this country idyll. Among the visitors were those all-important ones who checked in under false names, and then, after their visit was over, went back to their computers to write online reviews, the power of which could make or break a bed and breakfast like the Lavender. The gardens appeared often in comments on those review websites, so Amelia knew her work was an investment, however time-consuming it could be. Keeping the gardens in check—not only weeded but watered, constantly improved, pruned, fed, and composted—would have been a full-time job for any experienced gardener, but Amelia handled virtually all of the guesthouse's horticultural needs on her own. She preferred it this way, but it did take its toll. Not least on her knees.

The gardens had proved such a draw and the satisfaction of their splendid appearance was so great that Amelia had long ago judged her efforts to be very much worthwhile. Besides, it was a fitting, ongoing tribute to her late Uncle Terry, who had bequeathed Amelia and her husband this remarkable Tudor building and its gardens. The sudden inheritance had come as quite a shock. Cliff, in particular, was worried that he was entirely unready to be the co-host of a popular and high-end B&B. However, Terry had no children and had been as much a father to Amelia as had her own. It made her proud and happy to

believe that the place was being run well and that the gardens had become the envy of the village of Chiddlinghurst, and, judging by those reviews, beyond.

A bed of roses formed the easterly flank of the main quadrangle, within which Amelia had spent much of the morning. They were looking particularly lovely; three crimson and scarlet varieties found their natural partners in the lily-white species which bloomed opposite on the western side. By the house itself, an imposing Tudor mansion with all its old, dark, wood beams still intact, there were smaller beds and a rockery on either side of a spacious patio with white, cast-iron lawn furniture. Further over, against the western wing of the inn, was a bed of which Amelia was particularly proud: deep-green ferns and low-light flowering plants, their lush colours providing a quick dose of restful ease among the brighter hues around them. Amelia took a moment to let the greens sink into her mind, soothing and promising in equal measure. She indulged in a deep, nourishing breath and began truly to relax and enjoy her morning in the garden. Which was why the piercing scream that burst from the open window of the room just above the bed of ferns turned Amelia's blood as cold as ice.

Dropping her trowel and shedding her heavy work gloves, Amelia dashed across the immaculate lawn of the quadrangle and up the four stone steps that led to the patio. Peering through the conservatory doors, she could see nothing out of place. She was quickly through and into the dining room and then the lobby. She took the stairs as fast as her ailing knees would allow, and within seconds of hearing the scream, she was knocking at the door of a guest room.

"Mrs. Travis? Can you hear me? Is everything

alright?” Amelia panted, her mind already racing ahead to the horrors that might accompany some kind of tragedy at this popular house.

“Mrs. Travis?” she repeated, raising her hand to knock once more.

The door opened and Norah Travis was smiling placidly. “Hello, Amelia. Whatever is the matter?”

“You’re alright!” Amelia observed with a great sigh of relief. “Good heavens above, I feared something awful had happened.”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Norah assured her. “It’s been a pretty quiet Sunday morning, so far.”

There was nothing about Norah which might raise any kind of alarm. As usual, there wasn’t a blonde hair out of place, and her bright blue eyes were gleaming. If anything, Amelia decided, she looked even younger than her twenty-seven years.

“I could have sworn,” Amelia told her, gradually regaining her breath, “that I heard a scream from the window there,” she pointed, “whilst I was outside in the garden. Clear as day.”

“Oh, I’ve nothing to scream about, Amelia,” Norah replied. “Could it have been someone else? I don’t think I heard anything.”

Cliff won’t let me hear the end of this. He’ll say I’m losing my marbles, that I’ve finally gone loopy. And who’s to say he’s wrong? “It must have been, my dear. I’m so sorry to have disturbed you.”

Amelia bid Norah a good morning and returned downstairs, distracted by the chilling memory of the sound, as well as its mysterious origin. She could have sworn on a stack of Bibles....

CHAPTER TWO



AROUND ELEVEN O’CLOCK, Cliff Swansbourne returned along the gravel path to the front entrance of the Lavender in his battered but supremely reliable Land Rover Defender. A Sunday morning ritual as old as their tenure at the inn, Cliff’s forays to the farmers’ market in nearby Dorking were legend, both for his chipper, sunny banter with the stall-holders, and for the bewildering array of local produce with which he returned. Cliff was not, his wife had often observed, a planner. The dinner menu seemed to compose itself, in his head, during the course of an hour’s purposeful striding around the market, and he always managed to return with ingredients for something sumptuous and appealing that would arrive on the dinner table a few hours hence. From the distinctive fragrance wafting from the back of the Landy, Amelia suspected fish.

“Did you know,” Cliff began, handing a brimming tote bag of supplies to his wife, “that salmon can fly?”

Amelia gave him a quizzical look. *Which of us, just*

remind me, is going bloody loopy? “You don’t say,” she replied noncommittally.

“The bloke said this salmon had flown down from a Scottish loch first thing this morning. Freshest fish you’ve ever seen,” he promised. “I got a damn great forest of dill, too. We’ve still got those cedar planks, haven’t we, dear?”

Amelia carted four large bags of groceries into the kitchen and set them down on their sturdy, traditional wooden table. “They’re in the pantry somewhere, I think,” she said. “Look, this is going to sound a bit silly, but...”

“You?” Cliff mocked. “Silly? Never in a million years...”

“Just hold your tongue for half a second, you impossible man,” she said, bringing him to a halt in the middle of the kitchen and hugging him. “Thanks for going shopping. The salmon is going to be wonderful. I know it.”

“Certain as Christmas,” Cliff replied. “Now, what’s going to sound a bit silly?”

Amelia shook off her reservations and put it plainly. “Have you ever, whilst I’ve been out...”

“Never,” Cliff replied, his back straightening defiantly. “And you can’t prove that I have. I was nowhere near the scene of the event.” He paused. “Whatever the event was,” he added, less certainly. “Not guilty, I’m saying.”

“Will you shut up and listen?” Amelia demanded, punching him on the shoulder as she had done many times during moments of frustration over the thirty years they had been married. “Have you ever heard Norah Travis, or any of our other guests, scream?”

Cliff raised an eyebrow.

Classic Cliff. He won’t take this seriously until I make him.

“Scream, you say?”

“I did.”

“What kind of scream?”

“Does it matter, you daft bugger? A scream, you know, an explosion of sound caused by pain or anxiety or...” She stopped. Cliff would need no encouragement, she felt quite sure.

“Or... nookie?” he said, wiggling a raised eyebrow.

“Calm your ardour, Romeo. It wasn’t that kind of scream,” Amelia told him.

“Ah,” he replied, a little deflated. “Well, no, if I’m honest, I haven’t heard such an ejaculation.”

“Cliff, for the love of God...”

“Not once, seriously. Why?”

“Well, I was out in the garden, and I could have sworn there was this sudden, piercing scream from Norah’s room. You know, over on the west corner.”

“I know the one, darling. I work here too if you remember. But why would she be screaming on a Sunday morning? Realised she’d woken up too late for church? Doesn’t seem the type.”

Amelia shrugged. “Hardly. And that’s just the thing. I ran to her room to make sure she was alright...”

“Ran?” Cliff said. The eyebrow returned skyward. “You *ran* somewhere?”

“I mean, yes,” Amelia replied, sensitive to these jabs about her age and her increasingly perfidious knees. “I’m no Olympic sprinter or anything, but I got there in record time. And Norah denied having made or heard any such sound.”

They sat around the kitchen table, the overflowing bags of produce temporarily forgotten. “Tricky,” Cliff observed. “Very mysterious.”

“So what do you think?” Amelia asked, stumped.

“I think,” he said, taking her hand fondly across the table, “that it’s time we called the men in the white coats.”

Amelia stood and lambasted him, just as he’d hoped. “Now listen here, you rotten little sod! I’m not the one losing it. I’ve never claimed, for instance, that salmon can fly! And what about that time you went into town to get the newspaper in your underpants?”

Cliff defended himself. “It was half-past five in the morning, there wasn’t a soul to be seen, and I was trying to save time,” he explained. “All about efficiency.”

“Codswallop.”

“Suit yourself,” Cliff remarked, standing to begin finding homes for the groceries, “but I’m not the one imagining screams out of thin air.”

Amelia shook her head. “I didn’t imagine it, Cliff. It’s not like I was smelling toast whilst having a stroke. I’m of sound mind,” she said, wagging a finger at his sceptical smirk, “and I know what I heard.”

“Darling,” Cliff began, “there are a number of things a lady might do, by herself, in the privacy of her room, on a lazy Sunday morning, which might make her scream. And once confronted with the evidence that she had been overheard,” he added, “what makes you so sure that Norah Travis would be comfortable sharing such intimacies with her landlady? She’s been here a grand total of two nights. It’s not as though you’re sisters.”

“True,” Amelia had to concede. “But, as I say, it wasn’t that kind of scream.”

“Everyone’s different. It’s the twenty-first century, my sweet. People get their jollies in all manner of ways. We mustn’t judge, especially paying guests, and we

mustn't harass people who are simply enjoying some alone time."

Amelia bent over and aggressively shoved a sack of potatoes under the bottom shelf of the pantry. "Impossible man," she said again before wrenching open the door that led to the gardens and stomping away.

CHAPTER THREE



THE SALMON WAS no disappointment. Grilled to perfection and carpeted with flavourful dill, it was preferred to their standard alternative Sunday evening offering of Beef Bourguignon. Vegetarian lasagne also remained untouched in the fridge. Once Cliff and Amelia had cleared away the tables and loaded the dishwasher, they poured themselves their customary glass of dry white wine and sat around the kitchen table once more. These routines gave their lives a pleasing structure, but also provided a vital time to stop, talk, and exchange news of the day. With so much hurrying around and their reservation book pleasingly full, this was a quiet oasis of time which both cherished.

“Did you notice that Norah Travis entirely demolished her salmon?” Cliff said, sipping his wine. “Damn near ate the bones it came on.”

“Well done, chef,” Amelia said, raising a glass in salute.

“Didn’t hear her scream once,” Cliff noted.

“Oh, for heaven’s sake. I told you what I heard. And you can believe whatever you want.”

Cliff chuckled easily and reached over to a side table for their reservations book. “I believe, oh co-proprietor of mine, that the Lavender Inn is just about fully booked, from September through to the New Year. And,” he added, flicking forward a good number of pages, “in decent shape beyond then. I don’t know how we’ve managed it.”

“Bloody hard work,” Amelia told him. “My knees have paid for that garden with their very lives. And you’re doing wonders with the kitchen and all the supplies. Not to mention keeping Doris on the straight and narrow.”

Like a good matron on a hospital ward, a good housekeeper was critical to their success. Doris Tisbury was second to none. “She needs no help from me,” Cliff demurred. “I’d trust her with everything from a double-booking to a Jihadist insurgency.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I’ve just got the garden looking splendid,” Amelia replied, deadpan.

“You have indeed, my sweet,” Cliff said, acknowledging her comment with a salute of his wine glass. “What I’m saying is, you know, with business being so good, we might revisit the idea of, you know...”

“Sodding off to Mexico?” Amelia quoted. “Isn’t that how you put it? Seriously, that old plan again?”

“It’s not old, but it’s certainly a plan. And a good one,” Cliff said, topping off both their glasses. “Think about it. White sandy beaches,” he said, his gestures becoming expansive, “hammocks slung between two palm trees... Tell me you don’t daydream about it. Because I most certainly do.”

Amelia couldn’t resist. “When you’re not

daydreaming about what might make the delectable Norah Travis scream.”

“A man is permitted his fantasies,” Cliff replied. “But I’m serious, darling. We’ve worked bloody hard, as you so rightly observed, and there’s going to be plenty of money coming in, especially once the rates go up for the festive season. I mean, you’ve seen the bookings...”

“I’ve seen them, and they’re fantastic,” Amelia replied, leaving the important and inevitable ‘but’ unsaid.

“Not now,” Cliff concluded. “You’ve said that before. More than once.” His disappointment was real, and he refused to hide it. Forty years of work as a structural engineer, then an assessor, then a trainer and mentor to the young ’uns.... He was ready to put aside ownership of the Lavender and get on with his master plan for retirement by lying on warm, dry sand, dipping his toes in the Pacific, and having someone bring him martinis on the hour. But month by month, he could feel it slipping away.

“We need more time, and we need more money,” Amelia told him, ever the practical one of the pair. “Even if we sold up tomorrow, how long do you really think the money would last?”

“Depends if you let me blow the whole lot on coke and strippers,” Cliff joked.

She took his hand. “Darling,” she began, still deadpan, as was their way, “I know it’s your life’s dream to snort Bolivian marching powder off some pretty girl’s unmentionables, but I need you here, with me, on planet Earth. Just for a couple more years.”

Cliff was deflated, despite his fooling around. “Well, bugger.”

“I’m sorry. Soon, I promise. All the strippers in Tijuana.”

Cliff finished his wine and gave his wife a smile laden with subtle meanings. “I love you and I trust you. We’re a team, and this is where I belong. Just don’t promise paradise and then deliver another four years of fishing the pin-bones out of salmon and chopping up mountains of dill. I couldn’t take it.”

They finished their wine and Amelia headed to bed. Cliff sat in the kitchen for longer than he would have chosen, picturing the simple, relaxed life he had worked so hard for. *She’s right, again. As always. Why did she have to be so damned pragmatic?*

It was Amelia who had steered him away from those expensive and alluring mid-life distractions, twenty years ago: the sports car, not unexpected but certainly expensive; the mad, medically inadvisable plan to hike from Lands’ End to John O’Groats *and back again*; and his simmering, exotic pipe-dream of a beach retirement in Mexico.

The arguments had been fierce, but once he understood that she loved him and wanted to help, he realised that he had floated a little adrift as he hit forty-five. They needed a solid plan, not a high-end fancy pair of wheels worth four years of his old salary. It was then that a peaceable calm returned to the Swansbourne household. Amelia had stood by him as he’d shrugged off the “bloody nonsense,” as he’d taken to calling it and risen to the top of his profession. She would stand by him now, he felt sure.

Remarkable woman, he reflected as he turned out the lights and headed upstairs. For a second, a noise from

THE CASE OF THE SCREAMING BEAUTY

outside pierced his consciousness but he shook his head and turned back to his musings. *Wouldn't trade her in. Not for anything. Not even for a luxury yacht full of strippers.*

CHAPTER FOUR



DORIS TISBURY WHEELED her cart, piled high with towels and sheets, along the second-floor hallway of the Lavender, humming a tune which had been stuck in her head all morning. Was it Tchaikovsky? Or from an opera? She couldn't remember, but it was a jaunty, upbeat tune that fitted her mood. There was cleaning to be done. Each time Doris closed the door on a room she knew now to be immaculate, there was a tiny jolt of satisfaction. The world was as it should be, everything was in its place. Doris made emphatically sure of it.

Approaching sixty and with the sturdy forearms of an artisan baker, Doris was originally a “Yorkshire lass” and currently a no-nonsense housekeeper. She had infinite patience for the tedious chores with which she was tasked but absolutely none whatsoever with people who “mucked about,” as she put it. Her children and grandchildren knew this expression far too well. The penalties for “mucking about” were the forfeiture of dessert, or pocket money, or—horror of horrors—additional household chores. Doris was no brute, but rather a disciplinar-

ian. She believed that quality and rigour and getting things done without fuss or delay was what was required for an upstanding life. She brought a forthright thoroughness to the Lavender, and the inn thrived, in good measure, due to her firm dedication to duty.

Most of the Lavender's guests were early risers. They might wish to travel to one of the attractions close by or in London or enjoy one of Cliff's massive, traditional, cooked breakfasts. Some took in the gardens with an early morning stroll. On the odd occasion this might not be the case, however. Doris would knock, wait a polite interval, enter the room, and find the guest either still asleep, or doing something they'd rather Doris had not seen. She'd have dared to boast that, during her years at the Lavender and at other hotels previously, she had been exposed to just about every sordid human pastime, whether it was happening right in front of her, or through the casual discarding of incriminating evidence. Nothing could shock Doris, she would claim. Not even that business last year with the Maltese businessman and his suitcase full of...well, let's not think about that.

Norah Travis' door was next. Doris knocked her accustomed three times, calling through, "Housekeeping!" in as bright a tone as she could manage and knocked again. She counted to five, as she always did—just to lessen the frequency of those awkward encounters—and then used her master key to open the door.

Doris peered into the room. The bed had not been slept in, there was no doubt about it. Even if Norah had, for some reason, chosen to make it herself, there's no way she'd have matched the precise, geometrical perfection that Doris brought to her work. There was certainly no sign of the young lady.

Doris patrolled the room, emptying the rubbish and giving the dresser a little squirt of furniture polish. The room smelled slightly musty, so Doris opened both of the windows to air the place out. Then she stepped toward the bathroom, anticipating the usual towels on the floor. Instead, she was shocked to look down and see the soles of a pair of shoes. As Doris pushed the door further open, she saw that the shoes were attached to Norah Travis and that the woman was sprawled on the bathroom floor, immobile.

“Ms. Travis?” Doris breathed. “Oh, goodness, I’ll get help, dear...” But as she turned, she saw that Norah’s once-pretty face and long blonde hair were thickly coated with blood that was staining her blue blouse and that the skin of her exposed neck and shoulders was an unearthly, alabaster white.

CHAPTER FIVE



CLIFF LOOKED UP from tossing a giant bowl of salad as Doris rushed into the kitchen. He knew at once that something terrible had happened.

“It’s Norah Travis,” Doris managed to say, hands to her mouth, but then the grim news stuck in her throat and wouldn’t come out.

“Doris?” Cliff said, dropping the salad tongs and walking across the kitchen to his dumbstruck housekeeper. “Doris, what’s happened? Is something wrong?” The awful truth was etched on Doris’ face so clearly that Cliff needn’t have asked.

“She’s dead, Mr. Swansbourne,” Doris said, finding her voice at last. “In the bathroom. On the floor.”

“Jesus.” Cliff was away, taking the stairs two at a time. When he arrived at the door of Norah’s en-suite, one glance told him everything. The attractive blonde was beyond all help and had been for some hours. A guest of the Lavender dead. Cliff gasped, recoiling from the sight, and seized the wooden doorframe for support. “Oh, no.” Amelia had gone to the local nursery, one of her

favourite places, for seedlings. There was no telling when she would be back. The weight of the responsibility that bore down on Cliff as he stared at Norah's body frightened him.

"Cliff? What's wrong?" Cliff looked up to see a familiar face. It was Tim Lloyd, a guest so regular he was almost a family friend. "Oh, God, is it Norah?" Tim asked, brazenly stepping past Cliff into the bathroom to survey the tragedy for himself. "Christ, Cliff...Have you called anyone?"

"Just... Just now found her," Cliff said, his heart racing worryingly. "Doris found her first. Amelia's in the village." Cliff made himself look down. "Norah, she's... I mean, there's no hope, is there?"

"Call 999," Tim told him, taking charge. "I'll stay here with... the body." Tim was fresh from the shower after his morning walk in the garden. He pushed black hair out of his eyes as he leant over Norah.

"Alright. Don't let anyone else in. I'll be right back." Cliff gathered his resolve and headed downstairs to the lobby phone.

Tim could hear the call going through, Cliff's sombre relaying of the events, his sadness as he told the dispatcher that CPR would be of absolutely no use at this stage. The body at his feet was Tim's first, and he found himself remembering how he'd always assumed it would be a grandparent or old neighbour, not a lovely blonde woman in her twenties. Downstairs, Cliff was quiet for a moment before Tim heard him confirm the address and some other details that Tim didn't catch. Perhaps Cliff was responding to instructions about not moving the body or keeping people away until the police arrived.

"It's done, Tim. They're on their way," Cliff told him

as he returned to the doorway of Norah's room. "You haven't touched anything, have you? I wouldn't want your fingerprints all over this."

"Oh, no," Tim replied. "But I want to help in any way I can. This is such a... a terrible tragedy," he said, eyes downcast.

Cliff kept his distance, staying by the bathroom doorway, whilst Tim stood over the body, not two feet from Norah. "I think it's better if we leave this one to the professionals, don't you?" Cliff advised the younger man. "They're sure to want to interview you and our other guests." The spectre of negative publicity gave Cliff an unpleasant shudder but he pushed it away, remonstrating silently with himself as he remembered that a young life had been snuffed out.

"I feel a little responsible," Tim was saying. He stared at the body again in a way that at least to Cliff in those anxious moments seemed rather odd.

"Guilt is a natural response to something like this," Cliff cautioned, shaking his head. "You had nothing to do with it, I'm sure."

"But I recommended that she stay here, you see. Norah needed a place to go. A safe place," Tim said. His eyes were fixed on the dead woman, almost as though in hope of sudden reanimation.

Cliff took a step closer to Tim. "Are you saying she was in some kind of trouble? In London?" he asked. Norah had mentioned that, like Tim, she was from the nation's capital.

Tim pursed his lips. "There was a divorce. Very messy. And the husband's not a nice character at all. He threatened her, followed her around. Norah needed a quiet place to collect her thoughts, figure out what to do next. I

thought the Lavender was perfect for her. It's just," he said, welling up, "so sad that it ended this way. Do you think it was an accident? That she slipped and fell?"

Cliff watched Tim leaning over Norah's body, inspecting the terrible impact at the back of Norah's skull. "There's no way to say until the professionals get here, is there? Look, I'm going to wait in the lobby and bring them up. Please," Cliff said sincerely, "don't touch anything. I don't think you should even be in here."

But Tim was still staring at the awful wound, his eyes flitting from the basin to the bathtub, figuring out how Norah might have met her end. Tim Lloyd, investigative journalist, Cliff remembered as he descended the stairs in a strange, unpleasant fog. Tireless seeker of the truth, then. Or maybe just a juicy story.

CHAPTER SIX



CLIFF OPENED THE front door and looked up at a tall, burly police sergeant. “Thank you for coming so quickly,” Cliff said. “This is just dreadful.”

Sergeant Harris removed his uniform cap and stepped inside. “I’m sure it’s been a difficult morning,” he said in a low baritone. “But we’ll take care of it. We’ve got one of our very best on the way here. Happens to live in Chiddinghurst, as a matter of fact.”

Cliff showed Harris upstairs, but even before they reached the room, there was another knock at the front door. Cliff returned downstairs and opened the door. “Good morning, Mr. Swansbourne.” Cliff looked up at the man standing on the doorstep. “Detective Inspector Graham.”

After peering briefly at the badge which Graham held up for his inspection, Cliff said, “Yes, of course,” and invited him in. The DI was in his thirties, in a grey suit, and was already scrutinising the establishment with the air of one very much accustomed to doing so. Graham was silent for a moment as he took in details, his eyes

moving quickly among the paintings by the stairs, the ornaments on the side tables, the Persian rug on the floor. The DI seemed to be absorbing the scene as though he'd be called upon later to describe its every feature.

Graham reached the top of the stairs and confirmed the basic details with Cliff. "Our housekeeper, Doris Tisbury, found her at about 9:45 this morning," Cliff reported.

"And has anyone else been in the room since then?" Graham asked, notebook open.

"Only myself and Tim Lloyd, a guest," Cliff replied. Although he felt sure that Tim had acted inappropriately, Cliff knew it was important to tell the police every detail.

DI Graham reached Norah's room and continued his careful visual survey of everything in the vicinity. Cliff watched him, finding something of the savant in the way Graham drank in the colours and shapes around him. The detective turned to look into the bathroom, noticing the same pair of shoes on the victim's feet that Doris had first seen. Beside them was Tim Lloyd, kneeling by the body, as if in the middle of carrying out his own examination.

"Sir, stand up, please!" Graham said at once. Tim paused where he was for a moment, and Graham was about to repeat the order when Tim rose, rather nonchalantly, Cliff felt, given the circumstances.

"I'd say she's been dead for about twelve hours," Tim opined, rubbing his chin.

Graham took a firm grasp of Tim's arm and led him from the bathroom. "You are Mr. Lloyd?" Graham asked.

"I am."

"You understand that this is a potential crime scene?" Graham said, his rising colour the only indication that he was holding onto his temper with some effort.

“I’ve assisted in police investigations as part of my work. In New York,” Tim explained. “As a journalist.”

“A journalist. But not a medical investigator. Or a coroner. Or a police officer,” Graham said mildly. He stared intently at Lloyd.

“No,” Tim admitted.

“Or, indeed, as anyone remotely linked to the professional business of solving crimes.”

Despite his appearance, Graham’s anger was still only barely under control. If there was one thing Graham couldn’t abide, it was nosy people contaminating crime scenes with their unschooled amateurism, however well-intentioned. Six months before, with less restraint than he was currently showing, Graham had flown completely off the handle, yelling into the face of a terrified volunteer who’d had the misfortune of finding the body of a missing bank teller in the woods during a massive search. Graham had initially thanked the man for his efforts—the woman had been partially buried in a remote copse and was difficult to see—but once Graham learnt that the volunteer had moved strands of the woman’s hair from her eyes upon finding her, he’d virtually exploded. With all the popular CSI-type shows on TV, Graham had thundered to Sergeant Harris later, you’d have thought people might have learnt to keep their bloody hands to themselves.

“Return to your room, Mr. Lloyd. And stay there. Do you understand?” Tim understood and was gone in moments. After watching him leave, Graham turned to Cliff. “Mr. Swansbourne? Tell me everything you know about the deceased. Was she a regular guest?”

Cliff related what he knew and was feeling woozy enough to consider sitting on the edge of the bed, but he

quickly rethought the notion in light of DI Graham's rigorous crime scene attitude. "It was her first time staying with us. A friend of Tim Lloyd, as it happens. He said something about her being recently divorced and her husband being a nasty character."

Graham's pen filled two pages of his notebook with what seemed to be Egyptian hieroglyphs but were actually a finely honed set of abbreviations combined with old-fashioned shorthand. Graham was more than a trifle behind the times in some ways, but his note-taking was far more efficient, he felt certain than typing anything into one of those tablets for which he felt considerable disdain. "Alright, then." Graham closed his notebook. "Thank you, sir. You did everything right." Cliff's reply was to give the DI a lopsided smile. "I'm going to call our pathologist, a top man, and we'll see if Mr. Lloyd's crime-fighting enthusiasm has left any trace of what might actually have killed this poor woman."

CHAPTER SEVEN



GILBERT HATFIELD—BERT to his friends—struggled simultaneously with London’s Monday morning traffic and the knowledge that shedding light on whatever had befallen Norah Travis would almost certainly mean his having to miss the afternoon game. Life as a Charlton Athletic fan was tough enough without being stuck in a morgue whilst your team kicked off their first home game of the season.

As he gradually left the busy city streets behind, entering the far more pleasing landscape of the rural county of Surrey, the pathologist who was heading reluctantly into his sixties, negotiated the tight lanes with special care. After narrowly missing a fellow motorist who wasn’t paying enough attention, he turned right, then left, then straight on at a crossroads before rolling down a gently sloping street into the almost too picturesque Chiddinghurst. It reminded Bert of those preserved villages from the nineteenth century that were transplanted brick by brick to create a museum celebrating times past. High-end cars in driveways and the

range of satellite dishes mounted as discreetly as possible on the sides of centuries-old dwellings were the only signs of encroaching modernity.

The Lavender Inn, for its part, could very well have been plucked from the past, its shining white paintwork, and deep black beams a pleasing contrast. And the gardens...even a person lacking green-thumbs like Bert was apt to be staggered. The planning and hundreds of hours of hard work that had gone into them were instantly obvious. It was an unfortunate fact that a guest had either chosen or been obliged to come to the end of their lives whilst overlooking the gardens' formal splendour.

Apparently overwhelmed—or perhaps simply understaffed—on this busy Monday morning, the local ambulance service arrived only minutes before the pathologist. Bert found them glum and feeling a little pointless as the crews sometimes did when there was so obviously nothing to be done. Mostly in these circumstances, the paramedics kept the firefighters company or talked things over with the police. This case was an exception. Everyone stood silently. DI Graham was on his own. Bert knew from experience that the police officer was waiting for him and preparing to note down as much medical data as Bert was prepared to give him.

“Still refusing to join the twenty-first century then, Detective Inspector?” Bert asked, poking fun at Graham’s notebook.

Graham was in no mood to have his idiosyncrasies pointed out and gave as good as he got. “Still scraping around at the bottom of the league table?” Graham shot back, his mischievous grin proving that the DI wasn’t *all* business.

Bert thumped his chest with a stern fist. “Charlton ‘til I die, DI Graham, as you well know. It’s just a run of bad form. They’ll be back in the premiership in no time.”

Graham scoffed. “Codswallop. We’ve got more hope of solving this one by dinner time.”

At that moment Cliff Swansbourne walked up and Graham’s professional centre returned. He introduced the still slightly ashen innkeeper. “I want you to meet Dr. Bert Hatfield. One of the best pathologists in the business. He’ll make his initial inspection of the body and the scene. We will make arrangements to move the body after that. Sergeant Harris will take photos and we’ll both be conducting interviews,” Graham explained to Cliff, “but then we’ll be out of your hair. Another forensic crew will be along this afternoon to clean up. Standard procedure.” Cliff left them to it, thankful to return to the kitchen and the routine of preparing dinner. Whether anyone would feel up to eating it was another question entirely.

Half an hour later, there was a rap at the kitchen door. “The medics are all done here, Mr. Swansbourne,” Sergeant Harris said. Cliff followed him outside to where DI Graham and Bert Hatfield stood chatting. The ambulance crew slammed the back doors to their vehicle.

Cliff offered his thanks to Dr. Hatfield as the ambulance drove away. It had only been an hour since Doris had found Norah’s body. Amelia had missed the entire incident. Perhaps it was better that way. With no mobile phone, she had been out of reach. Cliff shuddered as he imagined the effect of a death—possibly a murder, at that—would have on her.

Bert spoke briefly with Cliff, offering condolences for the morning’s tragic events and returned to his old BMW. The pathologist followed the ambulance down the

winding country lanes. The area around Chiddinghurst was an unashamedly rural part of the country, undisturbed by the spate of house-building on “greenfield” sites that had blighted the verdant areas surrounding London. Tall hedgerows flanked the lanes. Smart, white signposts gave distances to the half-mile, indicating places so tiny and hermetic that few non-locals would ever have cause to visit. The local hospital at Carrowgate was twelve miles away and just large enough to be suitable for the postmortem.

Once he got to the morgue, Bert’s first tasks, as ever, were to establish the time and cause of death. With no other marks on her body except the scars from a childhood appendectomy, the blunt-force trauma to the back of Norah’s skull was the leading, perhaps obvious contender for the cause of her death. Bert drew blood for toxicology screens and requested a full workup of the lab results, which would show whether Norah was pregnant, taking drugs, drunk, or poisoned.

Dr. Hatfield generally operated under guidelines that discouraged the shaving of the victim’s head, but in Norah’s case, it proved necessary. The impact wound was just to the right of the base of her skull, a rectangular indentation. There was another mark on her left temple; Bert suspected that she’d hit the bathtub on the way down. Using his phone, the pathologist checked his own photos of the crime scene and began to piece together the violence that had deprived the world of the lovely Norah Travis.

Computing the time of death was straightforward. Coagulation and other factors showed that at least twelve hours had passed; Norah’s death had occurred late on Sunday night. Bert returned to the wound and exam-

ined it closely. There was a marking—parallel horizontal lines. He leant closer and searched his memory for similar patterns. It took a moment or two, but before long he was comparing the breadth and height of the wound to those of a very familiar object. Bert looked up some example dimensions online and within moments, he could say with certainty how Norah Travis had been killed, his interest in the fortunes of his beloved Charlton Athletic briefly forgotten.

CHAPTER EIGHT



SERGEANT HARRIS WAS an experienced, dedicated officer. He had long since developed an immunity to the strange, tragic fragments of life left behind when someone dies violently. But in this case, there was an unavoidable sadness. Norah Travis had been young and beautiful. If she had been murdered it was probably over nothing of any real consequence. Harris finished taking the last photos of the crime scene, and just as he was packing away his camera, Doris Tisbury appeared in the doorway. “You asked to see me, Sergeant?” she said. She was all business, with a touch of defiance in her tone from the outset.

“Yes, thanks,” Harris said, far more mildly. He’d got further in investigations using charm and wit than he ever had with threats and intimidation. “I’m sorry you had to be the one to find Ms. Travis this morning,” Harris continued. “It’s never an easy thing, but you did everything right.”

Doris accepted the praise gracefully. “But all the prudence in the world won’t bring her back, will it?”

Harris took one more look at the spattered floor and took his leave, beckoning for Doris to follow. They went to the room next door and took seats in the armchairs by the window. Harris brought out his tablet. "Can you tell me exactly what happened when you found Norah?" he began.

Doris relayed the events as clearly as she could. How she saw Norah's feet, worryingly still and lifeless, and then her entire prostrate body. How she quickly realised that Norah had been dead for some time. "Several hours," Doris estimated with a sad frown. "I'd say she probably lay there all night. No one to help her."

Recognising the need to push on, Harris asked, "Did you touch or remove anything from the crime scene?"

"Of course not," Doris answered at once. "I know better than that. Watch endless police dramas on TV, I do. You know, *CSI* and all those. Love a good mystery, me."

Harris tapped the tablet. "As do I, Mrs. Tisbury."

"Besides, I don't meddle where I needn't. My back wouldn't tolerate it," Doris said, reaching for an obviously troubled spot at the base of her spine.

Harris nodded compassionately. "Only one more question, and it's just routine," he said, his usual pacifying preface for what was about to be an awkward inquiry. "Where were you between dusk yesterday and dawn this morning?"

Doris inflated slightly. "Me?"

"Just routine, like I say," Harris assured her.

"I was at home," she almost snapped. "With my husband and two of our grandchildren. We played Trivial Pursuit. Then I watched some telly with Dennis and went to bed."

“Thank you, Mrs. Tisbury. I didn’t mean to intrude. I’ll let you get back to your work, now.”

Doris brightened quickly. “Not at all, Sergeant. You’ve got a job to do.”

Harris stood and escorted Doris to the door. “Would you do something for me? Let Mr. Lloyd know that I’d be grateful for a minute of his time.”

* * *

If Doris was a plain-spoken, straight-talking interviewee, then Tim Lloyd was as slippery as an eel. Harris found his answers evasive and short, the signs of someone with a secret. Harris thought Lloyd looked like a lawyer, maybe, or a schoolteacher, slightly pale, with that foppish black hair swinging around his eyes as his head turned. He struck Harris as nervous, maybe even just a touch guilty.

“So, when did you first meet Mrs. Travis?”

Tim blew out his cheeks. “Would you mind if we call her Norah?” he asked. His hands were fidgety, as though he were aching for a cigarette.

“When did you first meet Norah, Mr Lloyd?” Sergeant Harris repeated.

“Why do you need to know that?” In reply, Harris raised his eyebrows a tad. “We worked in the same building near Marble Arch,” Tim said.

“And...? Harris prompted again.

“We got coffee from the same machine sometimes and struck up a kind of friendship.”

“And how close did you become?” Harris asked. He might have put it more delicately, but he had tired of Tim’s evasiveness.

“I don’t know that has anything to do with...”

“Please, Mr. Lloyd,” Harris said, for the third time that interview. “Just answer the question, would you?”

“We’d had coffee a few times, outside of the office,” Tim explained. “But that’s all.”

“And you recommended that she stayed here,” Harris prompted.

“Yes. The Lavender is my home away from home. I like to get away from the stresses of city living and my job. My parents brought me here first when I was seven, you know. Lots of memories. Besides, Amelia and Cliff are just brilliant.”

“I’m sure,” Harris said. “And where were you yesterday evening?”

“I had dinner with the others. The salmon was delicious. Then I went to bed.”

“Were you alone, sir?”

“I don’t see how that is any business of yours.”

Harris sighed. “Just answer the question, sir.”

Tim sniffed. “Yes, yes I was, if you must know.”

“Thank you. That’s all I need for now, sir. You can go.”

“Look, I’m as determined as you are to find out who did this,” Tim blurted. “I’ve worked on criminal cases before.”

Harris towered over Tim. For a strange second, Tim wondered if Harris’ uniform might burst open to unleash a Hulk-like, bear-monster within, but the sergeant simply glared at him. “I believe DI Graham has already given you direction on that matter.”

Tim gulped slightly. “He has.”

“Leave well alone,” Harris said, just for a little reinforcement. Then, he was once more the helpful bobby with a solemn duty. “Thank you for your time, sir. We’ll

be in touch if we need you further,” he said, tapping the mobile phone in his breast pocket.

* * *

Harris caught up with DI Graham at the reception desk. The DI was on the phone.

“Thanks, Bert. Good work.” Graham ended the call and turned to Harris. “Well, Sergeant, the postmortem is over, and the results are in. Now, who had “golf club” as their answer for the murder weapon?”

“Not me,” Harris admitted, rather surprised. “Doesn’t really belong in a bathroom.”

Graham shrugged. “That’s the thing about murder, isn’t it? They never quite happen as one would prefer. For the most part, they’re crimes of passion, committed suddenly and with little planning.”

“Indeed, sir,” Harris told him. “All we need now is to *find* the blessed thing.”

CHAPTER NINE



“I’VE INTERVIEWED THE housekeeper, the one who found the body, and the other guest, Tim Lloyd. That leaves the owners. There was no one else here last night.” Harris turned the guest register around to show his boss. “Just the two guest rooms were occupied, Lloyd’s and the victim’s. A group of pensioners checked out the day before yesterday, something to do with a bowling competition.”

Graham’s eyebrow rose in curiosity. “Bowling? With the lanes and strikes and what have you?”

Harris saw the funny side but kept his laughter in check. It wouldn’t do for Graham to believe he was being made fun of. “Crown green bowls, sir. With the little white one and the...”

“The jack,” Graham told him. Harris gave him a quizzical look. “Just pulling your leg, Sergeant. My grandparents played. Got pretty good, too.”

Harris checked his tablet, which seemed as indispensable to him as a pen and notepad might have been to an officer from two generations earlier. Or even one,

Graham reflected. It was easy to appear a dinosaur these days if you hadn't handed over the running of your life—and the basic duties of your profession—to a couple of gadgets. As he'd explained to a young officer the other day, Graham was more "old school." The younger man had simply shrugged and returned to his phone.

"Shall we interview them together? Mr. and Mrs. Swansbourne," Harris asked.

"Let's do 'Mr.' first," Graham told him. "He was in the house when the body was found, right?"

"Right, sir."

Under their questioning, Cliff confirmed his earlier version of events and added some details including how he'd warned Tim to keep away from the body. "I also think I may have heard something as I lay in bed last night."

"From which direction did the noise come, Mr. Swansbourne?" Graham enquired.

Cliff shrugged, "I couldn't really say. Outside? Or perhaps from across the lawns, from the other side of the building where the guest rooms are. This place is quiet at the moment and noise carries. It wasn't shouting or anything untoward." Cliff blushed now. "It could even have been animals. I can't be specific. I was falling asleep. Oh, I wish I could be more helpful, Inspector," Cliff said.

Amelia was much more emphatic.

"A scream?" Graham wanted her to confirm.

"Clear as day," Amelia promised him. "From Norah's room, or close thereabouts. But I could have *sworn*," she said, fist in her palm for emphasis, "that it came right from her room."

"What kind of scream?" Harris asked.

Puzzled for a second, Amelia said, "An uncontrolled shout."

"Could it have been 'Help'?" Harris asked.

"No, I don't think so. More like, 'Aha!' Like a discovery or a surprise of some kind," she continued.

"A good surprise or a nasty one?" Graham asked.

"Hard to say," Amelia replied. "It's difficult to think of it as a happy sound, now that she's..."

Harris had learnt to quickly recognise when his interviewees needed a little re-direction. "You were out in the garden, you say, when you heard the scream?"

"Yes," Amelia said. "Sunday morning's a big gardening time for me. Not that you'd be able to tell, today." She cast a rueful glance at a cluster of wayward leaves, though Harris thought the gardens damned near perfect.

"I went to her room to check if she was alright, but she opened the door as right as rain. I went away with egg on my face, none the wiser. I can't really help you any more than that."

"Alright, Mr. and Mrs. Swansbourne, thank you for your time." The police officers finished their notes and stood to take their leave.

"The gardens look spectacular," Graham told Amelia. "A real achievement."

"Thank you, but I didn't win in any of the categories at the Horticultural Society last year," Amelia remembered bitterly. She struggled to accept compliments at the best of times. And with the cloud of a murder investigation swirling around her, now wasn't the best of times at all.

Graham waved away the concern. "Those things are always fixed. It's a racket. Decades of domination by

organised crime syndicates,” he added with a wink. “It’s like a mobster’s ball.”

The two police officers enjoyed watching Amelia laugh herself silly for half a minute, all of them grateful for the welcome respite from the heaviness of their situation.

After Amelia composed herself she said, “Do you really think Norah was murdered?” Violence was an incongruity entirely unwelcome in the quiet, restrained world of the Lavender Inn.

“I’d say so,” Graham replied. “I know it’s not what you want to hear, but everything’s pointing that way at the moment.” Shaking her head at the callous interruption to their quiet lives, and the definitive end to another’s, Amelia left the two men to their work. But something bothered Graham. “It makes me nervous,” he told Harris, “when there isn’t even the whiff of a suspect. Tends to mean that there’s a juicy back story I haven’t heard yet.”

Harris saw his cue. “Should I invite Mr. Lloyd to join us again, sir?”

CHAPTER TEN



BACK IN THE guest room neighbouring Norah's own, Tim Lloyd was becoming even less co-operative now that he had two officers to contend with. "Her husband wasn't a nice guy," Tim was explaining. "He wasn't good for her."

Graham let Harris do most of the talking. Harris' natural gruffness and gravity gave the questions an edge, and his tone was one that warned Tim that lying was inadvisable. "So why did Norah marry him?" Harris asked.

Tim shrugged theatrically. "There's no logic to some women, Sergeant."

"Hang on," Graham interjected. "Your earlier statement makes Norah sound like someone you occasionally had coffee with. Who knows, maybe a quick taxi back to your place to play hooky for an afternoon. And now," Graham continued, raising a silencing hand against Tim's objections, "you're an expert on her marriage, its trials and tribulations. It sounds like you were acting as some kind of amateur marriage guidance counsellor."

“I never said I was an expert. She just told me a lot about her situation, and I saw her need to get away from it all. So I recommended this place.” He stopped, eyes down. “And now she’s dead.”

Harris gave Tim a moment before asking his next question. “What can you tell us about her husband?”

Tim took a deep breath and seemed to space out for a few seconds, glancing out of the window. Then, he spoke with sincerity. “Nasty piece of work, like I said. She should have divorced him years ago. Should never have married him in the *first* place, she sometimes said.”

“Go on,” Harris said, typing continuously.

“He was never happy with anything she did. Always wanted her to change her appearance, her hair, you know, always looking for the next model to upgrade to. And he’s a *nobody*,” Tim said, the frustration giving his voice a serrated edge, “a layabout, a benefits cheat. A con artist, and not even a very good one.”

“Sounds a real charmer,” Graham commented, wryly. *Also sounds like the pot calling the kettle black. After all, the towering Adonis that is Tim Lloyd is hardly catch of the day, either. Especially considering Norah’s looks. She could have had any man in the world....*

“He’s *scum*,” Tim Lloyd told them with surprising vehemence. “I’d bet my goddamned *house* that he did this.”

“Steady on there, Mr. Lloyd,” Harris said. “This will go more easily if everyone remains calm.” Another standard pacification line, straight from the manual, but it nearly always worked.

Graham pushed slightly away from the doorframe against which he had been leaning. “Do you play golf, Mr. Lloyd?” he asked.

“Golf?”

“Yes, sir. You know, little white ball, St. Andrews, the Ryder Cup, nineteenth hole....”

“Of course I play golf,” Tim snapped. “Just about everyone who stays here does. We’re right next to a great golf course. What of it?”

“Your clubs. Where are they?” Graham persisted.

“In the clubhouse,” Tim told him. “Why do you ask?”

“Merely routine,” Graham replied. “And a final question, Mr. Lloyd, if you don’t mind. Can you account for your whereabouts on Sunday evening?”

Tim gave them both a sheepish look, and then said, “I already told your man here. I was in my own room, across the hall.”

“Not with Norah, then?” Graham wanted to confirm.

Tim gave a timid shake of his head. “I was... How shall I say?” Tim said. “In the dog house. Said a couple of stupid things. All my own fault. I slept on my own, at Norah’s request.”

Graham jotted down his usual detailed notes and made to leave. “I see. So you confirm that you were in a relationship with the victim?”

“Well, of a sort. Not a very stable or established one, obviously.” Tim looked up. “But I was trying. I’m not a cad. Norah was a very...free. And I *didn’t* kill her.”

“Got it. Thank you for your time, Mr. Lloyd. Sergeant, shall we?”

The two policemen walked out together, Harris closing the door behind them. It was nearly 4 p.m. and neither man had found time for lunch amidst the interviews, photos, speculation, and conjecture they’d spent their day dealing with. Harris got his phone out and got directions to a pub in a neighbouring village where DI

Graham was less likely to be recognised, where they could mull things over in peace. Fifteen minutes later, they found the *Fox and Fable* to be just about perfect and not at all busy. Over a quiet drink and a bowl of Mary-Anne's famous hand-cut homemade chips, the two officers weighed the case so far. They found it very thin.

"We'll have to wait until Bert tells us more about the cause of death," Graham told his colleague. "But I can tell that you're keen to pursue the jealous husband."

"I am," Harris agreed, chewing a fry, "but don't crazy ex-husbands normally beat up the new boyfriend as well?"

Graham was nodding. "He shows up, finds them together, perhaps even *in flagrante*, and then boots him out before smacking his ex-wife on the head with a golf club. Simple."

"What? Lloyd doesn't stay and defend her?" Harris argued.

"Nope, how about he turns tail and clears off, leaving the defenceless Norah to the jealous rage of the incensed husband," Graham said, continuing the thread.

"And Lloyd doesn't report the murder or call an ambulance? He just hangs out at the B&B until poor Mrs. Tisbury finds Norah the next morning?"

Graham sighed. "It's a bit thin, isn't it?"

Harris nodded. "It's a bugger. And then, for Lord knows what reason, Lloyd tramples all over the crime scene like he's some kind of amateur Sherlock-bloody-Holmes," Harris added. "Contaminating the evidence."

"Bert will be able to tell us if anything is amiss," Graham said. "He's a thorough man. I'm suspicious of Lloyd, too. Norah could have rejected him and in a fit of rage, he might have bashed her over the head. Remember

how Mr. Swansbourne thought he heard noises from over in their direction?”

Harris finished his pint. “Well, first things first. We need to talk to the husband.”

“Yes,” Graham said, finishing his own drink. “But I don’t think for a second that he’ll be pleased to see us.”

Harris felt his phone vibrate. “Oh, lovely jubbly,” he said. “Background check on the aforementioned Mr. James Arthur Travis of picturesque Peckham in south London.” Harris summarised the report for the DI. “Two convictions for driving offences, license currently suspended owing to a second conviction for driving whilst intoxicated.” Harris tutted like his grandmother used to. “Three arrests and two cautions for fighting in the neighbourhood, one charge of assault on a police officer, later dropped. Served three months for affray and breach of the peace, but the other cases didn’t go to court.”

“Lovely fella,” Graham said brightly. “I’ll take him home next weekend to meet my mother.”

Harris continued reading. “Currently address is blah-blah, phone number, you know the drill... Ah, what’s this?” Harris said, tilting the phone slightly. “Suspected involvement in the Hatton Garden jewellery heist,” he read, eyebrows raised, “either as an advisor or accomplice to some degree. No charges brought.’ What a scintillating and varied career the young man has had. Wife stated as Norah Taylor, twenty-seven, ‘estranged.’”

“They need to update that last bit,” Graham added sadly. “Fancy a trip into foggy London town tomorrow, Sergeant?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN



“I SUPPOSE YOU’D better come in.” The house was an identical copy of all those around it, neat but just a little box-like, with a climbing frame in the front garden and a crumbling, forgotten hosepipe propped up against the wall. The place could have used a lick of paint and looked rather forlorn under London’s typically cloudy, mid-morning sky. However, Graham was careful not to judge Nikki Watkins during one of the worst weeks of her life.

“I’d like to begin,” Graham said delicately as they took seats on two sofas in a living room that smelled of cigarette smoke, “by expressing our condolences, Ms. Watkins. Your sister’s passing is a tragedy, and I want you to know that we’re putting everything we have into finding out what happened.”

Nikki was perhaps thirty, but cigarettes and cheap gin were unkindly taking their toll on her skin. She said nothing but lit a cigarette with a big, heavy butane lighter and sat cross-legged on the couch opposite the two officers.

“We interviewed everyone at the inn, and we will be speaking with Mr. Travis this afternoon,” Harris added.

Nikki gave a strange, dismissive snort and took a massive pull on her cigarette before tipping her head back and blowing a cloud of grey smoke into the smoggy air. “That bastard,” she croaked. “Good-for-nothing sack of...”

“You’re referring to Mr. Travis?” Sergeant Harris checked as he typed.

“Wriggled his way out of three jail sentences. Cheats on his taxes, on his benefits, the bloody lot. But no, Norah never saw that side of him, did she? Always defending him, at least when they first got together. She was always spouting some head-in-the-clouds crap about him ‘having a dream,’ and ‘harbouring ambitions.’” Nikki tutted from within her cloud of smoke. “As if that man could find his own arse with both hands, map, and a compass,” she snorted. “He’s a lazy, no-good little...”

Graham could have finished the rest himself. He’d interviewed hundreds of people as part of his investigations—perhaps over a thousand, by now—and there was always that one character in the tale who had never endeared himself to the others, the one who was the object of derision, the perpetual disappointment, the one who’d let himself down or kept the wrong company. Most often a young man, he was the one who everyone always assumed would “never amount to anything.”

“Ms. Watkins, could you shed some light on their relationship? Norah seems to have stayed with him far longer than many would have.” Graham was doing his delicate best, but there was no subtle way of asking what many must have wondered. *How did a total loser like Travis snag a blonde bombshell like Norah?*

“They married young. Too young,” Nikki told them. “She wanted away from our parents, bless them, and Travis promised that he was on the up-and-up, that they’d be travelling around the French Riviera, or shopping in New York. And she swallowed it!” Nikki exclaimed, still amazed that her sister could have been quite so gullible. “After two years of marital ‘bliss,’ she finally woke up and smelled the coffee. Finally, Norah recognised what we all knew—that he was just a sham. No prospects, no education. Just a career criminal, waiting for his big break.”

Harris typed quickly, whilst Graham made shorter, hieroglyphic notes in his notepad.

“But he couldn’t even get criming right,” Nikki commented bitterly. “He was always getting caught or was a suspect and had to lie low. Any number of times,” she recalled. “Chronic underachiever, even when he was on the wrong side of the law.”

Graham made another note and then said, “Actually, Ms. Watkins, we prefer our criminals incompetent and bumbling. Makes them a lot easier to catch,” he smiled.

“Well, he got caught alright, but nothing stuck. Eventually, Norah saw the writing on the wall and decided against spending three or four years visiting that useless nobody in jail, trying to keep it together on the outside whilst he relaxed in some daycare for the unforgivably stupid, and she walked. Not before time, neither.”

Harris raised an eyebrow to the DI, who returned his glance. “What we’re really trying to decide,” Graham explained, “is whether Mr. Travis should be considered a suspect.”

Nikki knocked ash down her black t-shirt in a fit of throaty laughter. “*Suspect?*” she wheezed. “He’s got to be a

suspect! Who the hell *else* would have done something like this?”

“We’re having the same suspicions that you are, Ms. Watkins, but until we can prove it beyond a reasonable doubt, Mr. Travis remains a person of interest in this case,” Graham explained, “but not yet a *suspect*.”

Nikki almost spat her next words. “Think whatever you want. Do your interviews, get your lab boffins on it, analyse his DNA and his fingerprints, and what have you. But I *know*, right now, sitting here, that he lost control. He couldn’t handle her leaving him. Failure in business, in school, in crime, and now in his marriage, too.”

“What made her finally leave?” Harris asked.

Nikki was reluctant now. “Couldn’t say,” she shrugged, suddenly appearing reluctant to talk badly about her ex-brother-in-law.

“I think you can, Ms. Watkins,” Graham said with as much gentle encouragement as he could, “and even if you don’t think it’s relevant, or you aren’t certain it’s true, it might help us.”

Nikki reached for a cigarette before realising she already had one smouldering between her yellowed fingers. She inhaled the last quarter-inch of tobacco with the enthusiasm of one enjoying a pleasure unlikely ever to be repeated, then let the smoke escape in a slightly grey cloud of noxious fumes. She reached for her next cigarette before she’d stubbed the previous one out.

“She was seeing a man. A nice man,” she said mildly. “Worked near her office in Marble Arch, I think he did.”

His fingers travelling at speed across the screen of his tablet, Harris asked, “Was his name, Tim?”

“Yeah.” Nikki paused. She tilted her head slightly. “He’s not caught up in this, is he?”

“What can you tell us about him?” Graham asked.

“I only met him once. Seemed nice. Certainly a darn sight better than that worthless ex-husband of hers,” Nikki said venomously. “Norah talked about going away with him. Just as a friend, she said.”

“Did her ex know about Norah’s friendship with Tim?”

Nikki stubbed out her second cigarette without taking a drag and put the ashtray aside. “No, I don’t reckon he knew. But, you know what? Travis was clueless about her. Just assumed that he was the centre of her world, just like he was the centre of his own. I think he might actually have been stupid enough to believe that Norah would come back to him, even after everything.” Nikki shook her head incredulously. “I mean, he broke their wedding vows before their first anniversary. Saw other women, hit her... She had bruises one night, not three months after marrying. I told her to call the police, but would she?”

Harris fielded this one. “Did she ever report him? We always encourage victims of domestic violence to come forward, Ms. Watkins.”

Another derisive snort. “And what the bleedin’ hell do you reckon old Jimmy would have made of *that*?” she demanded. “Her life wouldn’t have been worth living!”

Graham followed the thread a little further. “Do you think Norah wanted to come to the police, and perhaps her husband threatened her?”

Nikki leant against the back of the sofa. “I couldn’t say. They fought like cats and dogs, but they were man and wife, you know what I mean? She had a weird loyalty toward him. She used to say, ‘When you’re married you

love together, you fight together, and if the time comes, you go down together.”

Her words reminded Harris of something a marriage counsellor had once said during the first separation from his wife, Judith: “A marriage takes two. One won’t do.”

“I don’t think she would have ever grassed on him,” Nikki continued. “Nah, I reckon he lost it one night and went down to see her. Her having a separate life wouldn’t have sat well with him. Things probably got out of hand.” Nikki’s face turned mulish and she crossed her arms. “You must find him, bring him down.”

As the two men left, Nikki looked pale and upset. She had that look in her eye which Harris and Graham had both seen too often. It was the pain of loss, sudden, irreversible, and impossibly hard to bear, one which would go on hurting and nagging and gnawing for years.

In Graham’s experience, the only thing that even *began* to assuage that kind of pain was seeing the person responsible for it in the dock and subsequently convicted and sentenced. The perpetrator doomed to years of incarcerated misery offered a form of karmic wiping of the slate and only then could the person lost be grieved over. Understanding this gave Graham an edge, an oddly emotional resolve, a steely determination. He would find that closure for Nikki. For her and for himself, he’d find the killer, whoever it was.

CHAPTER TWELVE



“£225,000” HARRIS COUNTERED.

“Give over,” Graham said. “You can’t ask more than £210,000 for that.”

“Alright, what about this one?” Harris pointed to another brick home as they drove slowly down the street. They were looking for number eighty-eight.

Graham evaluated the house, as they often did on streets like this. “Needs new guttering, yard isn’t all that great. Say, £205,000?”

Harris played his part in their ongoing joust about London’s outrageous property prices. “Two *hundred*,” he let the gigantic sum sink in, “and five *thousand* pounds?”

“I’d say,” Graham said.

“For *that*? We’re not in sodding Kensington, you know,” Harris reminded him.

“It’s not falling down or anything. £205,000 sounds reasonable.”

“Jesus, but this one really *is* falling down,” Harris muttered as they pulled up outside number eighty-eight.

“Drags down the whole neighbourhood. What would you pay?”

Graham made a face. “£160,000 or so, but you’d be buying it for the land and starting again.”

“I think we can take it that Mr. Travis is not a man given to spontaneous bouts of home improvement,” Harris concluded. Then he grinned at his boss. “See, I’ll make detective any day now.”

James Travis had made his home in what was by far the less pleasant half of a semidetached dwelling, perhaps two miles from his sister-in-law’s address and uncomfortably close to one of the main rail lines that brought commuters in from the south. The front yard was a scramble of limp, tangled grass, and detritus—a discarded child’s bicycle with only one wheel, well-chewed dog bones, and a blue and red garden gnome which looked as though it was someone’s favourite air rifle target. Graham knocked on the door where the green paint had flaked away.

“Good afternoon,” Graham said as the door swung open. “Would you be Mr. Travis?”

Standing in the doorway was a shirtless, skinny man of around thirty-five. He had short blond hair and an unimpressed, sneering expression. “Eh?”

“I’m Detective Inspector Graham, sir. This is Sergeant Harris. We’d like to ask you a few questions.”

“What about?” Travis asked defiantly.

Your ex-wife, who died violently not two days ago, you pig-ignorant troglodyte. “We’re investigating the death of Norah Travis, sir. You spoke with one of my London-based colleagues this morning. I was at the crime scene in Chiddlinghurst yesterday,” Graham said.

“And what?” Travis demanded. “You think I went

down there and murdered her?"

Graham cleared his throat. "Could we speak inside please, Mr. Travis?"

"Why?"

The defiant tone, Travis's slovenly appearance, and the lamentable state of the place were all useful data points for Graham. On their own, they might not implicate James Travis in the murder of his ex-wife but they offered clues to the character of the man. Anyone with a nose, a sense of social justice, or an enthusiasm for human compassion would have found Jimmy repugnant. He was like a lobotomised skinhead on poppers. But Graham had learnt long ago that everyone has a rich inner life, an invisible counterpart to the aspect of themselves they showed to the public. Although he may appear one way now, James Travis was almost certainly more complicated than his bony, vaguely anarchistic exterior might suggest. To uncover whether that interior was laudable was Graham's mission.

"This isn't a conversation you want to have on your doorstep, sir, what with all the neighbours seeing. May we?" It wasn't a true question and Harris all but barged past Travis into the house. Like Nikki's, it smelled of cigarettes and also burned toast with an aesthetic appeal that was but a single notch above a crack den in Graham's view.

"When did you last see your ex-wife, Mr. Travis?" Graham asked once they were all seated around the kitchen table. Sitting in the living room would have necessitated two hours of assiduous cleaning.

"Can't remember," Travis answered. "It's been ages. Got no idea where she's been sleeping or anything."

Harris tried something. "We are sorry for your loss,

Mr. Travis. This is a tragedy.”

“Eh?” Travis had still not located a shirt nor offered the officers anything to drink. “Tragedy? Yeah, sure, mate. Call it whatever you want. But for me, she was a pain in the arse when we married, and she’s been a pain in the arse ever since,” he whined.

The two policemen exchanged a glance. “Can you account for your whereabouts on Sunday night, sir?” Harris asked.

“Hackney. With a bunch of my friends. Got the last bus back at about three in the mornin’,” Travis told them.

Graham asked next, “Do you play golf, by any chance?”

A sceptical look jarred Travis’ face. “Do I do *what*?”

For the second time since the investigation began, Graham prepared to explain the basics of a globally popular sport. “Golf, you know, with the clubs and the ball.”

“No, Detective chief whatever-your-name-is, I don’t play bloody golf. That’s for posh geezers, innit? Do I look like I’m bloody posh?”

Graham let Harris ask the rest of the basic interview questions whilst he poked around the house. He found nothing to interest him. Travis appeared to be on the inside exactly who he said he was on the outside—a scruffy layabout with low-level criminal tendencies. When they returned to their car, Graham gave Harris directions back to Chiddlinghurst and explained his theory.

“We’ll get the Hackney lot to check out Jimmy’s alibis, but I’ll tell you right now that I don’t think he killed Norah.”

Harris glanced over at his boss. “Really?”

“Bet you a hundred quid. Oh, he was glad to be rid of her,” Graham noted, “but nothing about him, however unpleasant and cave-dwelling he might appear, shouted ‘murderer’ to me. And I’ve met more than my share. He’s not resourceful enough to negotiate his way to the Home Counties of his own volition, murder someone in an unfamiliar place, set up an alibi, and put on that performance of innocence. He’s way too limited.”

“So, there’s something else going on here besides the jealous husband and the ex-wife with the new boyfriend,” Harris observed.

“Could it have been Tim Lloyd?” Graham wondered to himself. “And, if so, why?” he said next, staring out at the traffic. Rain began to fall, light but persistent.

“Or, to ask it another way, sir, why would Tim kill her and then hang around the hotel for the next twelve hours so the local constabulary could interview him as part of a murder investigation? What advantage was there to staying, once the deed was done?” Harris changed lanes to pass a bus full of teenagers, some of whom entertained themselves during their journey by giving the officers a two-fingered salute.

“To maintain the impression of innocence,” Graham said, ignoring the unruly teens, “We always imagine that the killer strikes and then flees the scene. But more often than you’d think, the murderer stays around, gathers information, and tries to blend in. Some criminals get a kick out of watching the enormous amount of fuss their crimes generate. It’s why they often revisit the scene of the crime.”

Harris thought it over. “Do you see Tim Lloyd as the type to kill someone and then be cool enough to stick around?”

“I don’t. But I also don’t love the theory which implies that the murderer walked in off the street, clubbed Norah over the head, and then vanished. I mean, there are such things as contract killings, but they’re exceptionally rare and seem implausible in this instance.”

Harris nodded. “And I don’t see Mr. Travis stumping up a couple of grand for someone to bump off his wife.”

“Not even for a minute,” Graham agreed. His phone rang. “It’s Bert. You know where to turn, right? Junction eleven.” Harris nodded and Graham took the call. “Hello Bert, what’s the good news?” Graham listened for a minute, thanked the pathologist, and hung up. “He’s identified our murder weapon.”

“Wait, what? We already know it was a golf club!” Harris asked, confused.

“No, sorry, I mean Bert knows what *kind* of golf club it was.”

“Ah,” Harris said.

“It was a driver.” DI Graham made another note in his book. “Big, powerful. Ideal for knocking down a defenceless woman and taking her out.”

“Could it have been wielded by another woman?” Harris said.

“Who, Amelia? What possible motive could she have?”

“Or Doris?” the sergeant tried next. “Decides she’s fed up with people leaving their dirty towels on the floor,” he said, affecting Doris’ Northern accent.

“Be serious, Sergeant,” Graham said mildly. “Besides, Doris has a gold-plated alibi.”

“Well, bugger,” Harris said, deflated.

“Indeed,” Graham agreed.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



DUSK WAS SETTLING on the village of Chiddlinghurst when the two officers arrived back. They made straight for the Lavender, parking the police car in the gravel driveway at the front. Graham always felt a little self-conscious about showing up in such a highly visible police vehicle, but his own unmarked Audi was in London. He justified his misgivings on the basis that it was reasonable to think that the public gained security and confidence from seeing the badge of the constabulary, especially just after a gruesome and unexpected murder right in their midst.

Cliff Swansbourne greeted them at the door. “Welcome back, travellers. Did you find answers in London?”

Graham shed his suit jacket and loosened his tie. “Somewhat, Mr. Swansbourne. Could we bother you for a cup of tea?”

“Of course,” Cliff replied, but then seemed to beckon slightly for the two men to follow him. “Got a couple of details I wanted to pass on,” he whispered. “Things that might help your investigation, you know?”

They retreated into the kitchen, which seemed a little overly cautious to Graham, seeing as the inn was virtually empty. "You've already been very helpful, Mr. Swansbourne," Graham was saying. "It can't have been easy..."

"Tim Lloyd," Cliff said without further preparation. "I had a word with him earlier today, whilst you were in town." Cliff tossed a tea bag into a remarkably ancient teapot and followed it with boiling water. "Amelia was there too, but she's visiting her sister tonight. Every Tuesday evening, without fail. Murder investigation or none."

"Nothing more important than family," Sergeant Harris contributed, then winced slightly.

Graham took the offered mug of tea. "What did Mr. Lloyd have to say? Please be precise. I'm sure I don't have to remind you," he said, reaching for his notebook, "of the seriousness of this matter. You must relay everything he said, word for word if you can."

Cliff was nodding. "It's just that... Well, we've known Tim since the first week we took over the place. He loves it here. Home away from home, all of that. He's never caused any trouble, except maybe just occasionally being a little too familiar. I mean, we're hoteliers, not his family, though he's been very kind and a very regular guest. Amelia indulges him, you see," Cliff explained, turning to Harris. "She's got a soft spot for him. In fact, she told me not to pass any of this on, but I just have to..."

With a flat palm extended, Graham said gently, "Take your time, sir. These things are always easier if you take a couple of deep breaths first."

Cliff followed his advice. Graham and Harris could easily see that this unwelcome case had brought with it more stress and distraction than Swansbourne was ready

to cope with. Not only had there been a death in their inn, but a *bone fide* murder. An accident or a heart attack would have been one thing, but this meant that someone had stolen into their quiet, rural establishment and beaten a woman to *death* with a golf club. It would have been hard on anyone, but Graham had the sense that Cliff Swansbourne, for all his maturity and experience, might not be built from the sternest stuff.

“I went to speak to him,” Cliff confided. “I was upset with him for his behaviour yesterday morning. You know, hanging around the crime scene like that, poking his nose in. I thought you were going to tear him to bits when you found him with the body, Detective. Would have served him right, too.”

“Simply trying to maintain the integrity of the scene,” Graham explained.

“Well, I told him I didn’t think he should have been there, nosing around. And do you know what he said? He told me, as God is my witness that he and Norah were very close. ‘Closer than any of you think,’ he told me. They were planning to head off to the Caribbean together in a couple of days, for heaven’s sake! Hadn’t told anyone! We thought Norah was staying at least through the end of the week.”

Harris was typing, Graham was writing, and Cliff seemed more unburdened with each passing moment. This information had clearly weighed on him.

“Well, as you know,” Graham clarified, “he told us that they were on friendly terms, the occasional coffee, perhaps something more intimate. But going on holiday together—that’s a new piece of information.”

“I mean,” Cliff said, “I’d always assumed he was trustworthy but he lied about how close they were, and

for no good reason that I can see. Can we trust him, even now?" Cliff asked them.

"Mr. Swansbourne," Graham began, "we'll speak with Mr. Lloyd again in the light of this new information."

"But why not just tell us everything?" Cliff wondered aloud. "Who cares if he was in love with Norah, or about to jet off somewhere with her? She's divorced, he's single. It's the twenty-first century," he marvelled. "We've got men marrying men and women marrying women, bless them all. It's a much more tolerant society than the one I grew up in. Why would Tim lie about a straightforward relationship? What can he be hiding?"

"You're making some good points, sir," Graham told Cliff. "We'll be speaking with Mr. Lloyd some more, rest assured."

"I just want to be as useful as possible," Cliff explained. "You know, the faster this is resolved, the faster we can put the whole nasty episode behind us. It's made us both re-think whether," Cliff said, his eyes welling slightly as he glanced around the kitchen, "we really, truly want to be here."

Harris contributed his two cents. "Anyone would understand that, sir," he said, handing back his empty tea mug, "but it would be a great shame if a cowardly act like this ended up changing the direction you're taking. I mean, your reviews are all five-star, and the gardens look incredible..."

"Amelia's doing, I assure you," Cliff said. "She could run this place with one hand tied behind her back. Put her and Doris Tisbury together and literally, anything becomes possible."

Silently, broodingly, DI Graham let a thought perco-

late up into his consciousness and, for the first time, receive genuine and careful thought: *Capable of anything... Including murder?*

He put the thought aside for the moment, along with a raft of other theories. "With our interviews complete," Graham said, "barring one more little chat with Mr. Lloyd, we'd like to move onto the forensic stage."

Cliff frowned. This sounded immediately like more disruption, more police presence, more pathologists and scientists busying themselves in his well-kept hallways. "I thought Norah's body was over at the morgue, you know, for the examination."

"It is," Graham confirmed. "But we've got a strong lead on a murder weapon."

Cliff brightened. "Oh? That's good news. And so *quickly*." He marvelled again at the pace of change. "Guess you're just as good as those detectives on TV."

I'm a darn sight better than that fictional shower of incompetence. And I'm still getting warmed up. Graham let the remark pass. "Do you have any golf clubs on the premises?"

"Yes, of course. A number of our regular guests leave their sets here in-between visits. They prefer that to carting them back and forth, you know."

"We'll be needing access to every single one, if you don't mind," Graham informed Cliff.

After another long frown and a surprised shake of the head, Cliff said, "But there are over a *dozen* of our guests' golf bags in the shed. You need to search through all of them?"

"In actual fact," Graham told him, "we'll only be examining the drivers in detail, and the rest more superfi-

cially. But there's a strong chance that the murder weapon is among them."

"Well, of course. Whatever you need."

"We'll make a start first thing," Graham promised him. "The local Scenes of Crime lads are very efficient. They'll be here for the morning, I imagine, but by lunchtime, we should be out of your hair."

Cliff saw the two men to their car and then returned to the kitchen table. *Perhaps it really is time to pack this in. Sell the murder story as some salacious piece of gossip to a glossy magazine, get a handsome cheque, and retire for good. Sun, sand, and margaritas.* Right then, at the end of a long and horrid day, it sounded as good as it ever had.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



CHRIS STEVENS WAS the Scenes of Crime Officer on duty, an energetic and thoroughly professional man with a thin, black moustache and almost famously nerdy glasses. Universally respected for his work but not celebrated for his sense of humour, Stevens was in a bullish, problem-solving mood as he strode down the hallway of the Lavender. He began sizing up the murder scene within moments of his arrival, just after eight on this promisingly sunny Wednesday morning.

“There’s always contamination of some kind,” he explained to the small crowd which gathered outside the room—the Swansbournes, DI Graham, and Sergeant Harris.

Amelia was watching these events with interest, but if she were honest, she would have rather that the bunch of them finished their work and disappeared. She liked DI Graham well enough, and the burly sergeant was nice and very professional; if there *had* to be a murder investigation at the Lavender, this cast of characters was as

discreet and helpful as she could have hoped for. But their uniforms and medical bags, the paraphernalia of police work and evidence gathering... these things didn't *belong* here. They were an unwelcome reminder that mere yards from where she and Cliff slept, something utterly terrible had happened.

The next to arrive was a curious but frustrated Doris Tisbury, whose sole hope for the day was to finally clean the murdered woman's room. Something about the incompleteness of her task genuinely bothered Doris, as though the murder scene were a missing piece from her personal jigsaw, and only her prompt and thorough attention would bring her mind some rest. Her son, a schoolteacher and certainly no medical expert, had "diagnosed" Doris with "OCD" or some such, and it drove her batty to hear him carry on about "reward circuits" and "habituated compulsions" that she knew nothing about, but which were clearly directed at her. Back in the day, Doris informed her son testily, neatness was considered a virtue, not frowned upon as something requiring treatment by a psychiatrist or worse. Not for the first time, she considered that she'd been born in the wrong century.

"Mr. Lloyd isn't up yet, I don't think," Cliff told Stevens as the bespectacled forensic scientist located his swabs and a camera. "But he was the only one, besides Doris, who was in here before the police arrived."

Cliff and Amelia kept their distance as Stevens began taking a swab from the floor by the bathtub. "I'll need a DNA sample from him and from Doris. Hopefully, our killer left some small fragment of himself behind."

"Or herself," Amelia added.

Stevens straightened up and slotted the swab away in its plastic tube. “You know how many murders there are by golf club every year in the UK?” he asked.

Amelia bristled. She wasn’t sure she liked this officious young man with his know-it-all air. “I’m sure you’ll enlighten me.”

“Somewhere around none,” the SOCO told her. “It’s an extremely uncommon murder method. I can only think of two, historically, and they were all *ages* ago. Men committed both of them. In fact, the vast majority of murders ultimately prove to have a male perpetrator,” he added. “Particularly those involving clubs, bats, sticks, or other methods of beating a victim to death.”

Cliff attempted to lighten the atmosphere. “I don’t know, Mr. Stevens. In the hands of our Doris, I’m sure a golf club could lay waste to nations.”

Doris loved this kind of banter and gave as good as she got. “Not me,” she said, picking up fresh towels from her cart and heading down the hallway. “I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

Cliff cracked up laughing as the big-framed Doris marched off to her daily chores. It was the first time he could remember laughing—or even *smiling*—since Doris had first delivered the terrible news.

“Well,” Amelia said, close to a fit of the giggles herself and grateful for a little light relief from the heaviness that had blanketed their days since Norah’s body had been found. “There’s an image to conjure with.”

“I’d rather not,” Cliff managed through his laughter.

Stevens ignored the entire exchange and silently wished for some time alone. There were always curious onlookers, and Stevens didn’t mind in principle, but they

invariably found cause to contribute some theory or other which was apt to knock Stevens off his stride. He was a scientist, not an investigator, and he simply wanted to collect evidence before feeding it into DI Graham's investigative process. Besides, it was to be a busy morning, even once he'd finished with this blood-stained bathroom floor.

Around thirty minutes later, Cliff showed Stevens to the shed and opened the door. There was that reassuring, slightly musty odour of leather and metal emanating from the interior as the door creaked open. Cliff had been offering guests inexpensive, secure golf club storage since he and Amelia had taken over the Lavender. It made economic sense. The only costs were a new lock and a motion-detector system for the back garden. There was one problem, however. A family of foxes who lived in the countryside beyond the village visited regularly. They would set off all the security lights as they trotted brazenly through at night. On occasion, guests complained bitterly to Amelia and Cliff about being woken by a blast of bright light invading their bedrooms in the middle of the night. Cliff's response was to produce his phone and show a video of the cheeky culprits and their kits gambolling across the lawn. The guests would inevitably pipe down, charmed at the sight. And so, thanks to the storage shed, Cliff made some easy money that allowed him a quality of wine a notch above that he would have drunk otherwise. Easy money was one of Cliff's favourite things.

Cliff was about to pull bags full of clubs out onto the grass for Stevens' inspection before the SOCO let him know, a tad too brusquely for Cliff's own tastes, that he'd need to inspect each club in situ.

“We mustn’t compromise the scene, sir. We must protect it. Even if the murder weapon isn’t here, if the killer touched a bag, for example, we might get a partial print off the leather.” Cliff backed off to watch the thirty-something Stevens do his work. “My first task is to search for what *isn’t* there,” he said. “If the murderer took their weapon from this shed and abandoned it elsewhere, there’ll be a driver missing.”

A few minutes later, careful tallying of the clubs showed Stevens that not a single golf bag lacked a driver. “All present and correct,” he muttered.

“So now what?” Cliff asked.

Without answering, Stevens pulled out his forensics kit. It surprised Cliff to see that the SOCO carried his equipment in a backpack as though he were a college student. Cliff had been expecting some kind of futuristic tool bag. In his imagination, it glowed blue neon and jetted out steam when it was opened. Stevens didn’t even carry one of those natty, black leather bags, like a country doctor from the 1950s. In Cliff’s view, a backpack was prosaic by comparison. “Now,” Stevens told him, “I meticulously swab every golf club, starting with the drivers, to see if there are any bloodstains.”

“And if there are?” Cliff wanted to know.

Stevens enjoyed appearing an expert in front of laymen but did not possess the insight to realise that by doing so he encouraged their questions, questions he didn’t appreciate. Stevens could be chippy at the best of times, curmudgeonly at worst, but he kept his resentment at Cliff’s interruption from his expression. A sigh and a slightly curt tone were the only indications of his predilection not to suffer fools easily. “Then we’ll probably have found the murder weapon. Unless the denizens

of the local golf courses are given to smearing blood on their clubs as part of some gruesome and ancient hazing ritual,” he said. It was the closest thing to a joke Stevens had uttered since he’d arrived, a record which would stand all day.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“WELL THEN, I’LL leave you to it.” Cliff started to leave, a nice cup of tea and a bacon sandwich firmly on his mind, when an old man appeared next to the shed.

“Morning, there, Clifford!” the man said, his overly loud tone hinting at his deafness. Bob Sykes was one of those men who had been very old for a very long time. If Cliff were pressed, he’d have guessed Sykes was pushing ninety, but the man himself claimed to have long since forgotten. “Old age,” he was fond of saying, “always comes at a bad time.” Despite his vintage, Sykes was a groundskeeper at the nearby golf course.

“Morning, Mr. Sykes,” Cliff responded. There wasn’t a person in Chiddlinghurst who would dream of referring to Mr. Sykes by his first name. Cliff handled the introductions between Sykes and Stevens.

“Now what’s this I hear,” Sykes asked, his voice a reedy tenor, “about a pretty lady coming to grief in one of your bathrooms?”

“I’m afraid we’ve had a murder, Mr. Sykes,” Stevens

explained. "We're investigating exactly what happened, and we're getting closer every hour."

Sykes leant on a weather-beaten golf club. "Well, I heard about it, and it's a rotten thing to happen, ain't that right, Clifford?"

"Damned tragedy," Cliff told him.

"I says to the wife," Sykes related, "I says, 'A murder at the Lavender? Never in a million years. There's scarce ever trouble with the Swansbournes,' I told her."

The stress of the past few days and the inevitable damage to the Lavender's reputation showed momentarily on Cliff's lined face. "Well, it's poor Norah I feel sorry for," he said finally. "We'll muddle along alright, but she's...."

"In a far better place," Sykes said, curling a bony finger toward the sky. "Mark my words, Clifford. Far better and more beautiful than any place we've ever seen with these mortal eyes."

Stevens raised his head from his work. "I'd like to believe that."

"Are you getting spiritual in your advanced years Mr. Sykes?" Cliff asked.

The old man cackled. "Wait 'til you're as old as I am," he told Cliff. "Spend a moment staring mortality and eternity in the face and then tell me there's no splendour or comfort to be found in a vision of the celestial city. There's power in that message, young 'uns, I tell you."

"Or perhaps," Cliff said, "you're squaring things with the Divine before you shuffle off to meet him."

Another cackle. Sykes sounded like an ancient witch when he laughed. "It certainly wouldn't do," the old man said, "for me to get all the way to the Pearly Gates and find my name's not on the list." He leant once more on

the golf club and only then looked down at it with a spark of realisation in his eyes. "Well, I'll be a monkey's uncle. I was nothing more than a hair's breadth from forgetting what I came over to say!"

"What's that, Mr. Sykes?" Cliff asked. His bacon sandwich daydream had receded alarmingly, and he was keen to get it back on track.

"I found this driver in the bunker on the fourteenth," he said, lifting the club on which he'd been leaning. "Wondered if one of your guests had forgotten it. Funny place to have a driver out, wouldn't you say? The middle of the fairway, with bunkers all around?"

Cliff wisely decided not to touch the driver but motioned to Stevens, who took it between gloved thumbs and forefingers as though it were a holy relic. "Where precisely was this found, Mr. Sykes?" Stevens said, excitement in his voice.

"Half-buried, it was," Sykes reported. "Like someone tried to hide it there, and either did a rotten job or someone else dug it up part of the way. I found it sticking out of the bunker, like a bit of old shrapnel on a beach."

"And when did you make this discovery?" Stevens asked, already preparing to swab the metal where the club would meet the ball. *Or the back of Norah Travis' head.*

"Not an hour ago," Sykes replied. "My first thought was that somebody had forgotten it, but then I thought of you. I got myself wondering if one of you policemen might like to have a look at it. There was word going around the pub last night that the young woman was hit over the head with a golf club. That was the rumour, anyway, unless my old hearing let me down again. Of all the sorry ways to meet your maker...."

“No, you’re quite right,” Stevens said. “We’re confident the murder weapon was a driver.”

“Well,” Sykes said, “I’m relieved not to be entirely losing my marbles.”

Stevens gave Cliff a meaningful glance and then reached for his mobile phone. “DI Graham?” he confirmed. “Chris Stevens, SOCO... Yes, I’m in the shed in the back garden.” He glanced at Sykes who grimaced comically, enjoying the moment. “I’ve got a local resident here, groundskeeper at the golf club. And the thing is, sir, I’m pretty sure he’s brought me the weapon that was used to murder Norah Travis.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



LOUISE HOVERED NERVOUSLY by the doorway to the crime lab as if afraid of being accused of trespass. Or, as her boss sometimes called it, “lurking.” She was always hesitant to disturb Bert Hatfield when he was in one of his “beautiful mind” moods. The largest whiteboard she had found in the office supply catalogue covered one wall of the lab and Bert had spent the first hour of this Thursday morning scribbling on it with zest and purpose.

“Er, sir?” Louise tried, tapping tentatively at the door frame.

Bert didn’t miss a beat, his marker squeaking noisily on the board. “Louise, my dear, if I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times. My colleagues call me Bert,” he explained, still writing, “and you’re my colleague.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was another animated squeak. “Oh, for pity’s sake,” he said with a reassuring smile. “With what can I help you, oh timid shrew?”

Lurking—yes, that was the word—immediately

behind Louise was an even more reluctant figure, a teenager in a smart grey and black school uniform.

“Bloody hell,” Bert exclaimed, finally capping the pen and slotting it onto the board’s metal rail and peering at the schoolgirl. “Do they still make you wear those ghastly things?”

Louise found her voice once more. “This is Fiona. From St. Aidan’s.” The silence betrayed Bert’s having entirely forgotten about this long-planned work experience visit. “It was in your calendar,” Louise added.

“Bugger,” the pathologist muttered. “Quite alright, quite alright. Come on in, Fiona. Sorry about all that.” He ushered her into the room and politely dismissed Louise who returned to her front desk duties. “You’ve arrived on a rather auspicious day, as it happens.”

“Really?” the fifteen-year-old asked. She had bright blue eyes and a quiet curiosity which Bert found both pleasant and rather admirable, particularly given that his lab dealt almost exclusively with the lamentable and gruesome.

“You’ll have heard about the murder over in Chiddinghurst?” he asked, leading Fiona around two tables stacked high with books and papers toward his desk in the corner. In truth, there could have laid almost anything under the tremendous weight of documentation Bert had accrued and “stored.” It gave the lab the feel of a much loved but slightly shabby library whose main topic was death: manners of bringing it about, and the people guilty of having done so.

“Norah Travis,” Fiona replied crisply. “Very sad. Only twenty-seven, wasn’t she?”

“Well done for reading the news,” Bert told her. “I didn’t think young people bothered with it.”

Fiona was not, as Bert would find during a memorable morning, a typical fifteen-year-old. She had bent over backward to be assigned this rather special position, writing letters and using her father's modest influence as a human resources manager for a local pharmaceutical company. To be a pathologist had been her dream since childhood, and she had little interest in any other career. Hers was no morbid fascination with death, however. She was passionate about the *process*, the hard science of sleuthing one's way from complete confusion to stand-up-in-court certainty. She wanted to catch bad people, of course, and bring closure to families, but her focus had always been on *how* a murderer was brought to justice. "It just revs me up," she had explained to a slightly perplexed career counsellor at her school. "I can't explain it."

"I read the news all the time," Fiona reported honestly. "Are you working on evidence connected to her case?" A flash of excitement accompanied Fiona's question. *I might help solve a murder! On my first day!*

"I am," Bert reported. "We've had a couple of strokes of luck, but we're not there yet."

He opened three different files on the computer and allowed Fiona to read them. She did so quickly, perched on a black stool by Bert's desk, taking notes on a spiral-bound pad. Then Bert had a thought.

"You've signed all the non-disclosure stuff, right?" Fiona nodded. "Good. Because you really can't discuss any of this with anyone. Not until we've taken the case to court. Alright with you?"

"You can trust me," Fiona said. Bert believed her at once. There were some people you just knew wouldn't let you down.

Once Fiona had finished reading and taking her notes, Bert filled her in on the rest.

“Thankfully, we’re blessed with a gifted SOCO. You know what one of those is, don’t you?”

“Scenes of Crime Officer,” Fiona replied.

“Good girl. Now, our man Stevens is very thorough, really one of the best. With his help,” Bert said, reaching across to an object wrapped in plastic, “and a lucky break, something has fallen into our laps. Care to identify it?”

Fiona took the golf club in her hands as though being handed a piece of the original Cross. “I don’t play golf, so I don’t know what type. But it seems heavy,” she said, weighing the thick-handled club in her hands.

“It’s a driver,” Bert said. “Heaviest of the lot. If someone raised this and brought it down,” he said, mimicking the motion, “or swung from the side, they’d cause a serious injury, wouldn’t you say?”

Fiona tried swinging the club in an imitation of the murderous impact. “Fractures, for sure,” she said.

“Now,” Bert said, taking back the club. “We’ve got a theory that Norah Travis was hit very hard, just the once, by a golf club. See here,” he said, returning to the computer screen and bringing up images from the post-mortem. “Notice this pattern of crossed lines? They’re different in every manufacturer, of course.”

“And this pattern,” Fiona said, almost touching the screen, “matches the club the SOCO found?”

She was brimming with an excitement kept under control only by the severity of the case and the gravity of her surroundings. Before this moment, Fiona would never have dared believe that she’d be allowed even to *see* this lab, never mind examine the evidence under scrutiny. She was on cloud nine.

“It does. Within tolerances. But there’s a way we can make sure, and that’s how I was going to spend my morning,” Bert said, giving her an almost conspiratorial grin. “Care to join me?”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



DETECTIVE INSPECTOR GRAHAM sat rather gloomily in the dining room of the Lavender bed and breakfast at just after 9 a.m. on this promisingly bright Thursday. He was not, by his own admission, at his best in the morning. His doctor had warned Graham about this, though he had provided no concrete method of setting aside the feelings of fatigue, ennui, and dissatisfaction he generally felt in the hours between waking and mid-morning. They assailed him with a regularity and severity that created a debilitating vicious cycle. He had a depressing sense that he would be unable to achieve anything; that this new day, and his hard work, would come to naught.

The thought that plagued him popped into his head unbidden and repeatedly during these lulls: that he was a charlatan, a failure. The dark whirling of those thoughts had conspired to drive him to the edge more than once. He knew, intellectually, that giving in to his demons would only take him over that edge. He cursed happenstance for shaping the Lavender's dining room in such a

way that the well-stocked bar was easily visible. *Not now*, his better self said yet again. *Not now and not ever*.

Instead, he drank tea. The depressed mind, he'd come to understand, has less ammunition with which to flatten its victim when provided with constant novelty. Silencing the demons had seemed impossible until they'd shown themselves usefully appeased by regular and various infusions of caffeine. Graham would never have believed it, and his doctor was surprised enough to write up his case in a minor journal, but tea—perhaps the neurochemical opposite of alcohol—was saving David Graham's life.

Amelia had been helpful enough, after Graham's initial request, to serve him a rotating assortment from the six teas they had in the kitchen. On this sunny Thursday morning, David was trying to lift his gloom with a jasmine tea from Anhui province in China. It was rather complex, he found to his satisfaction. If its taste had had a colour, this tea would have been lilac or rosy-pink, gentle on the senses but certain of its own virtues. Within moments of inhaling its vapours, and only a minute after finishing his first cup, DI Graham's view of the world was quickly changing. He welcomed the sunshine not as a chronometer of his regular morning depression, but as a warming, healing light which would ensure a good day. Synapses fired anew. He felt as though an MRI of his awakening mind would show a riot of yellows and reds as energy filled those parts of his mind kept dormant and shadowed by his sadness.

After the second cup, to his great relief, the blues were banished. He turned to his notebooks with a fresh alertness and began interrogating for the third or fourth time, everything he knew about this frustrating case.

The pieces he'd found simply would not fall into place. He had found no one who had had a motive *and* the opportunity to murder Norah Travis. He turned all the facts over in his mind. Perhaps he'd been thinking about the case all wrong. As the effects of the tea took hold, and his mind raced in that way that he loved, like a greyhound finally given its druthers to chase an elusive rabbit down the track, he stopped and re-read a note he'd made on Monday, during his initial interviews.

A note that he hadn't followed up. *Come on, Dave, you're slipping. You're better than this.*

"Is Mr. Swansbourne in this morning?" he asked Amelia as she brought a fresh pot of the Anhui jasmine.

"Yes, I think he's just finishing shaving. Would you like to see him?"

Cliff, when he appeared, was looking a little better, not as drawn and stressed as he had in the days prior. "Beautiful morning, isn't it?" he said as he took a seat opposite Graham.

The now cheery, almost giddily contented part of Graham's mind obliged him to agree, but there were far more serious topics at hand than the sunshine, however welcome it was. "Cliff, I've got to ask you about something you said back on Monday."

Amelia chipped in from the kitchen. "Good luck with that, Detective Inspector. Our Cliff could tell you what he had for breakfast in 1976 but he's like Swiss cheese on anything more recent."

Her husband scowled good-naturedly, and then asked Graham, "What was it I said?"

"You told me," Graham replied, referring to his notes, "that you'd heard voices coming from the direction of the

guest's rooms on Sunday evening. I'd like to know more about what you heard."

Cliff gave a funny, bashful smile and rolled his eyes. "Well, you know...I wasn't sure. I don't want to cast aspersions. And it seemed so...irrelevant."

Graham said nothing but readied his pen and notebook.

His discomfort very obvious, Cliff muttered, "It's hard to know what to say. You know..."

Graham exuded patience, but inwardly his investigative self burned to hurry the truth from Cliff, even at the risk of being rude. "Let's say that I don't," he said.

"They were...well, you know. Tim and Norah." Cliff fidgeted under the table like a seven-year-old called into the headmaster's office.

The DI held his temper by a narrow margin. "Go on."

"It was...love, I think," Cliff murmured. "The sounds of love."

Amelia returned to the doorway between the kitchen and dining room, her hands on her hips. "For heaven's sake, Clifford. It's not the sodding 1950s anymore. He means they were *at it*, DI Graham." Cliff winced. "Having some nookie," she continued. "Bonking for Britain, most likely."

"Amelia Swansbourne!" Cliff gasped.

His wife was unmoved. "Well, what should we call it, you impossible man?" she demanded. "Marital relations?"

DI Graham held a hand up in mute appeal. "I get the picture, believe me."

Cliff turned to Graham. "Look, I could have been wrong. The wildlife around here can get pretty noisy, too. It's hard to distinguish what's what at times."

“Did you hear this also, Mrs. Swansbourne?” Graham asked.

She shook her head. “No, my husband enjoyed that all on his own.”

Acutely uncomfortable, Cliff reddened, his shoulders hunched. “That’s what I think I heard,” he said simply. “Hope it helps.”

“It might,” DI Graham observed. “You’d be surprised how many big cases are broken open by the tiniest detail. Thanks, Mr. Swansbourne. Please, continue what you were doing. I’m sure you’re a busy man.”

With a hotel emptied by fallout from the murder, bookings being cancelled left and right after a painful social media reaction, and Doris efficiently cleaning the mostly empty hotel, Cliff found himself with little to do. He headed for his Land Rover Defender whilst Graham pored over his notes.

‘The sounds of love’, he wrote. *Interesting, but hardly conclusive and if true, not the story Mr. Lloyd offered. I’m still missing something.* The thought nagged at him, like a confounded blister, for the next hour.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



FIONA OBSERVED DR. Hatfield with rapt attention as he went about what was, for him, a relatively routine task, but which produced a flurry of notes and questions from the young student.

“I thought these were incredibly expensive?” she asked, as they both stood over a square, black machine that looked like a laser printer but with four top compartments, each with its own thick, grey lid.

“Oh, they are,” Bert told her. “Thermal cyclers are about £200,000 a pop,” he said, closing the lids and pressing a sequence of buttons on the panel at its front. “But a friend at the Met owed me a favour after I broke open a case for them last year, and he was good enough to let us have one of these beauties on loan.”

Fiona searched her memory for a second. “The Angela Forrest murder?” she gasped. “That was *you*?”

Bert gave her a proud smile. “I don’t want to sound like I’m boasting, but that was the smallest sample of DNA ever to be successfully used to prosecute a murderer. I didn’t think we’d pull it off.”

The whole country had spent days in shock after the discovery of thirteen-year-old Angela's body in a churchyard near Folkestone. She had been exceptionally bright, a gifted athlete and artist abducted after hockey practice by a "man with a white van." The hunt for her killer had found vocal and useful support from the national newspapers, particularly the oft-criticised "gutter press" of tabloids and glossy weekly magazines who had called for her killer's prompt execution from the outset.

Thankfully, the death penalty wasn't available but there was a tremendous satisfaction when the judge handed down the stiffest penalty he could: life in prison without the possibility of parole. Keith Marshall, a name now added to the list of Britain's most hated child-murderers, would never walk free. Bert Hatfield's exemplary work was central to Crown's evidence.

"I remember something about a new technique," Fiona said. "Using tiny amounts of DNA but copying them."

Bert was impressed. "You're on the right lines. You see our sample, there?"

Fiona nodded. They had already swabbed the golf club. "Well, there isn't all that much of it, is there? We're talking about tiny, broken fragments of DNA. Not enough, on its own, for us even to tell if the material belonged to a man or a woman."

"So..." Fiona said, thoroughly engaged as ever.

"So, we need to copy that tiny fragment as many times as we can, and from the results, we can produce an incomplete but useful DNA profile."

Thinking the process through, Fiona asked, "But how will we know it's Norah's?"

Bert reached over to his desk and brought out a test

tube with a sample swab inside. “From the postmortem. If we can match what we find from the golf club with the sample I took from Norah...”

“We’ll know this was the golf club that killed her!” Fiona exclaimed excitedly.

“There you go. Now, this will take a moment so let’s grab a coffee whilst it’s doing its thing.”

“Thing?” Fiona asked, peering at the device.

“It’s going to repeatedly heat and cool the sample—hence the name ‘thermal cyler’—in the presence of an agent that will help to create new strands of genetic material,” Bert explained.

“Agent?” Fiona asked, her notebook ready.

“Actually, an extract from a type of bacteria that just happens to be terrific at helping DNA strands copy themselves. But let’s not get too technical.” Bert led Fiona from the room, and although the teenager would have loved to get a lot more technical, she followed him along toward the reception area where the customary 10:30 a.m. pot of coffee was being readied.

“Louise, you’re an angel,” Bert told her, reaching for the steaming pot.

Louise was putting down her phone. “Oh, I know,” she quipped. “Sir, would you call DI Graham? He’s got a question for you.”

* * *

“Bert?”

“Good morning. How’s sunny Chiddlinghurst?” Hatfield asked Graham.

“Bloody frustrating,” the DI admitted. “But I’ve got a question. The kind I can’t believe I haven’t asked before.”

Graham's tone was a little worrying. He seemed genuinely angry with himself, though Bert knew him as a mild-mannered sort of chap. "Go ahead," Bert told him, glancing over at Fiona. "I've got some special help today, so we're ready for whatever the world of crime can throw at us." Fiona grinned over the rim of her coffee cup.

Graham got straight to the point. "Was there any evidence that Norah was sexually active on the night she was murdered?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Are you sure?" Graham pressed, his tone impatient.

Take it easy, old chap. There's no need to get snippy.

Bert again looked over at Fiona and held up a finger in a polite request for her patience before taking this delicate conversation back to the lab. "Let me check the records again, David, but I really don't remember anything." Bert reached his desk and opened a file on his computer. "Well, it's hard to say with a hundred percent certainty, but there were none of the classic signs."

"How do you mean?" Graham demanded.

Hatfield took a couple of breaths. The DI sounded genuinely rattled, as though he was holding Bert responsible for slowing his investigation. *I can't manufacture evidence, you know.* "We did all the usual tests," he said, paraphrasing two pages of the report, "and found no evidence of sexual contact immediately before, or in the days before her death."

Graham was silent for a moment. "But that doesn't mean it didn't happen, right?"

"I can't be absolutely sure. You know...Well, we're both men of the world, right, Detective Inspector? There's more than one way to skin a cat, and all that, but there was no *sign* of sexual contact."

Graham tersely thanked the pathologist and hung up. Bert spent a long moment with a puzzled, worried expression on his face, and then nudged open the lab door and gave his work experience student an artificial but convincing smile.

“Fiona? The PCR machine is calling.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN



SERGEANT HARRIS ARRIVED to find the DI alone, brooding over his notes. Graham was sipping tea as though it were the elixir of life. “Morning, sir.”

“Ah, Harris. Have a seat, would you?” Graham was building a picture of what might have happened in the hours before Norah’s sad departure from this earth. His progress energised him.

“Look, this is a bit of a funny one, but I want to brainstorm something with you. In confidence,” he emphasised.

“Fire away, sir,” Harris said. He wore his summer uniform, the sleeves of his white shirt rolled up, his cap set on the table, his black tie neatly in place.

“Bear with me here, Sergeant, but...what might, all other things being equal, make a grown woman scream at 11 o’clock on a Sunday morning?”

Harris’ eyebrows formed a puzzled furrow, then rose in an unmistakably amused inquiry.

“Yes, before you ask, I want you to skip the obvious. I

know Tim Lloyd was here at the Lavender, but I can't prove they were together."

"Well, if she wasn't yelling out in pain, that leaves a fairly short list of possibilities," Harris observed.

"Short, but I want it anyway," Graham said. "Have a go."

"Right," Harris said, considering the matter. "Well, she might have been injured, as I say. Got to consider it."

"Bert found nothing on the body that suggested an injury," Graham replied. "Well, except for the bloody great thwack on the back of her head from a golf club."

"Yeah, let's not forget about that," Harris said. "Remember, Mrs. Swansbourne thought it might have been a shout of surprise. You know, a shock, or something."

Graham pondered this. "A spider, maybe? You know how some people are."

"What about a cockroach?" Harris offered.

The DI tutted disapprovingly. "I wouldn't let Mrs. Tisbury hear you talking like that."

Harris grinned. "Well, was there anything scary on TV?"

"On a Sunday morning?" Graham reminded him.

"Or she read something on her phone. Got a surprising text. Who knows?"

Harris meant no harm by this flippant comment, but it summed up the lamentable state of their investigation so concisely that Graham felt a sudden welling up of anger. To Harris' surprise, Graham's notebook hit the desk with a thud of frustration. "Not us, and that's the bloody problem."

It didn't take the experienced eye of a psychologist for

Harris to recognise that his boss was taking something rather more than a strictly professional interest in this case. It had become something *personal*, a battle of wits, one which Graham couldn't bear to lose. Such intense, emotional involvement was never a good sign for a professional police officer. Cases were to be puzzled out, solved through guile and perseverance, not seen as some intense, personal battle with the perpetrator or other, less definable demon.

"Begging your pardon, sir, but..."

"What?" Graham snapped.

"Are you alright?" Harris asked with very genuine concern.

Graham stopped short of another angry growl and sighed heavily. "Not really, Sergeant. I'll be honest."

Harris spoke with great care. He knew Graham only through their work. There'd been the occasional chat in the pub, but even then, they discussed only cases.

"If you need to talk to someone, sir... I've been on the force a long time. And I know what it can do to a man, this kind of work. The stress, the odd hours." He paused to make sure that he wasn't about to overstep an important boundary. "And, if things at home are difficult, sir... well, that doesn't help."

For a long moment, Graham stared at the starched, white cloth that lay across the dining room table. Then he poured himself yet another cup of Anhui.

Harris watched him with real sympathy. It had been five months, and yet it was clearly still too soon to bring up the shocking tragedy that was so plainly weighing on the senior police officer. This case was Graham's first on "active duty" since it had happened. He had spent most

of the intervening months alone, on compassionate leave, the time spent in either a silent, empty house, or in his office reviewing case files. On the nights he'd felt unable to return home, he'd slept fitfully on a camp bed in his office. His wife, Isabelle, had retreated even further—to her parent's home in the wilds of North Wales. Their disappointing, depressing, terse phone conversations were little comfort.

Returning to lead an investigation had been a breakthrough for Graham, but after four days without an arrest, he was struggling to maintain his professional detachment. His unresolved grief was threatening the fragile emotional equilibrium he had strived so hard to create. And he knew it.

Graham finished his cup of tea and stood smartly. "You know what really helps?" he asked.

"Sir?" Harris said, standing too.

Graham slid the notebook back in his pocket. "Catching murderers. Let's nail this bastard, Harris." He made toward the door of the Lavender. "Come on, chop, chop. We've got work to do."

* * *

Fiona's eyes glittered enthusiastically with the thrill of discovery. "We have a match," Bert Hatfield announced. "Isn't technology wonderful?"

Scrutinising the on-screen results, Fiona asked, "How certain is it? I mean, there are plenty of blonde women of her age walking around."

"Not that many," Bert advised, "who were recently struck in the back of a head with a golf driver."

"Admittedly," Fiona said sheepishly.

“The chances of a mistake are around a billion to one. So, if it’s not Norah, it might be one of, say, six or seven other people on the *whole planet*.”

“So, what now?”

“Now, I tell the harassed DI Graham that we definitively have the murder weapon. The trouble is,” Bert said, sighing, “that we’ve got not even a smidge of a fingerprint. Which tells us something.”

Sensing another invitation to brainstorm possibilities, Fiona asked, “Does sand wipe away fingerprints?”

“Not particularly,” Bert answered. “But murderers often do.”

“So, the driver was deliberately wiped clean, and then buried in a bunker on the golf course.”

“Yup,” Bert confirmed. “But by whom?” He raised a forefinger to make his point.

The pair sat for a moment in thoughtful silence. Bert hated dead ends. They always made him feel as though he’d omitted to take the right approach. *Just use better tools, ask better questions, Bert.*

“What else have we got?” he said. Bert returned to his desk and pulled up the list Louise had made of Norah’s personal effects. “Worth another glance, I’d say,” he said, mostly to himself.

Although both he and Stevens had pored over Norah’s clothing, her small, bright red suitcase, and toiletries from the bathroom, he couldn’t see any harm in doing so again. Hatfield showed Fiona the list, and together they methodically located and inspected each item. “Hair clip, plastic, green,” he read out loud. “Woman’s blouse, white, blood-stained. Hairbrush, black plastic, with fibres.” Nothing seemed even remotely amiss.

“Do you see anything unusual?” Fiona asked.

“No,” Bert responded. “Neither did Stevens the first time we went through this process.” Dr. Hatfield had got used to Fiona’s questions, but he was a little tetchy. Whilst he was known for his patience, even Bert became frustrated when an apparent wealth of evidence refused to yield anything of value.

Fiona lifted a plastic evidence bag to the light. It contained a piece of paper. Bert read from his list. “Lottery ticket, Saturday’s draw.” There were three other objects—chewing gum, a bottle of painkillers that Bert had already thoroughly tested, and a tape measure. “And that’s all, folks,” he said. “The life and times of Norah Travis, deceased.”

“Not a lot here,” Fiona sighed.

“I need another coffee,” Bert said. “Come on, we’ll bother Louise for a moment or two.”

“Bothering Louise” was a long-established and enjoyable tradition for Bert, and Louise was good enough to humour him. Between phone calls, answering email enquiries from police officers and medical staff, as well as taking care of the endless filing and copying, Bert brightened his assistant’s day with a series of terrible, old jokes. He had a legendary store of utter howlers and was in the middle of the one about the guy with the van full of penguins when Fiona, who hadn’t been paying too much attention to him, exploded.

“Sir?!” she almost shrieked. “Dr. Hatfield?!” she gasped, clutching her phone.

“What on earth’s the matter, child?” Bert asked, the rest of the joke abandoned.

“The numbers...The lottery ticket,” she stuttered.

“What about it?” he said, turning her phone so that

he could see. And then, as he realised the implications, he turned to his assistant. “Louise, get DI Graham on the phone,” he said. “He won’t believe this.”

CHAPTER TWENTY



AFTER YET ANOTHER inspection of the crime scene, a slightly purposeless wander around the hotel to “soak up the atmosphere,” and more long sessions of staring at his notes whilst drinking Anhui jasmine, Graham could put off the inevitable no longer. His earlier optimism had dimmed once more, and though he remained determined, he simply couldn’t see a way forward in the case.

Hatfield had confirmed that they’d found the murder weapon, but the lack of fingerprints, or an obvious owner, was almost unbearably disappointing. To make matters worse, the conflicting evidence over Norah’s romantic life made little sense. Something, or someone, had lied to him. Either Tim Lloyd was making up the story about being “in the doghouse” on the night Norah was killed and the postmortem evidence wasn’t revealing what truly happened, or Cliff was mistaken or.... Graham’s thoughts whirled. It was maddening.

At around five, Graham reached his home, a quaint cottage that dated to the turn of the 1900s. So reluctant was he to be there that he’d stopped at a junction and

turned the other way, before forcing himself to double-back and park in his driveway for the first time in ten days. The garden needed a tidy. Leaves dotted the little front lawn. He took a deep breath as he turned his car engine off. It would be awful, but he knew he needed to do this.

The silence after opening the front door still hollowed him out as he entered. It was so glaring, so incongruous in a house where there had been such light and life and noise. The kitchen was clean and tidy. Someone must have done that, but Graham couldn't for the life of him remember who. Earlier, instead of the clean, shiny work-tops that now presented themselves, he would come home to find cheese crackers scattered across the surface, crumbs often scrunched underfoot. Small, brightly coloured, partitioned plates were stacked in the corner. Alongside them were matching cups, adorned with the latest cartoon princess whose signature tune was sung so often that it had driven him into the long, back garden many times. Oh, how he longed to hear that song now.

Life would be forever divided in two, "before" and "after." Before, Isabelle had hated housework, and Graham had found himself too busy to help as much as he'd wanted. Their home had been cluttered but lively, full of energy, laughter, and endless activities. When she wasn't working at the hospice, Isabelle spent all her time with their daughter. She had shepherded Katie through life, encouraging her bright curiosity, her willingness to try new things, her quirky sense of humour. By the age of five, Katie was already comfortable eating any vegetable she was offered—to the envious surprise of her classmates' parents—and was making up little jokes that were just about beginning to make sense.

He should have been there more, Graham knew. A young child needs attention and love and guidance, not an exhausted father with so many other things on his mind. He'd hated the necessity of "outsourcing" some of the responsibilities of raising a child, as Isabelle had called it, and they had struggled to afford a nanny, but there was nothing for it. They needed the help. Cora had genuinely loved Katie without indulging her, and they had trusted her implicitly. The crash wasn't Cora's fault. It was just one of those things.

Graham burned with anger at the memory. Without realising it, he'd climbed the stairs in a slow trance and found himself at Katie's bedroom door. Her toys were still on the floor, where she'd left them. He hadn't stepped in there since the night of the accident, when from the doorway he'd watched his wife, eerily silent with grief, slowly curl up in the tiny bed that still held the fragrance of their little girl.

The evidence from the closed-circuit cameras was conclusive. A delivery van ran a red light at twenty miles per hour over the limit. The collision was inevitable. The back-left of the car took all the force of the impact.

Graham sat on the floor of Katie's bedroom and leant against the side of her bed, knees tucked under his chin. His eyes closed as his forehead touched the softness of her girly pink blanket, memories of reading her bedtime stories dancing in his mind. The wave hit then. It tumbled over him at first, then violently engulfed him, sucking him down, his anguish annihilating his consciousness. Graham knew only complete obedience to the tyranny of sorrow would transport him through the dark, desolate tunnel that lay before him. He'd resisted until now, but he had grown weaker. Now, he was ready.

Finally, the tears came as he surrendered like a sacrifice at the altar of heartbreak, his defences finally breached. It was time to embark on grief's journey.

* * *

At six-foot-three and with the build of a rugby prop forward, Harris wasn't known for his athleticism. Nevertheless, the big man covered the ground with surprising speed. His orders were simple: keep trying DI Graham, get to the Lavender, and don't let anyone leave.

"Sir?" he panted. "Thank God. I've been trying you for..."

"What's the problem, Sergeant?" Graham asked. His voice seemed quiet and hollow, his manner so very different from the zealous determination he'd shown earlier.

"Sir, I don't know how we overlooked it, but, well, Norah won the lottery on Saturday night."

Graham had spent half an hour sitting in his car. He had been entirely unsure of where to go, but certain that he couldn't be in his house for another second. Then, impulsively, he'd headed in the direction of Wales, and Isabelle. He hadn't thought things through. She hadn't answered her phone, and with each mile, he knew it to be a fool's errand. "Really?" he managed into his phone, immediately looking for a place to turn around.

"Nearly six *million* pounds, sir."

The DI sat bolt upright in his seat. "*Jesus*, Sarge."

"That's about right, I'd say. She was the only winner last week." Harris had double-checked the numbers and then had two colleagues do the same, just to be sure.

“And she must have known about it by the time she was murdered,” Graham offered.

“I’d go further than that, sir,” Harris said. “I’d say it goes some way to explaining our mysterious Sunday morning scream.”

“Bloody hell. You’re at the Lavender?”

“Yes, sir. Just arrived.”

“Brilliant. Don’t let anyone leave.” Graham attached the magnetic blue light to his car’s roof and began to bully his way through the evening traffic.

“Already on it, sir,” Harris replied, grinning as he heard passion return to his boss’s voice as the DI cursed at his fellow motorists. “See you soon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



GRAHAM'S MIND WAS split animatedly between the evidence and the traffic. He ran through his thoughts again, as though delivering an oft-recited poem. In his mind, he tracked each suspect from a starting point on Sunday, all the way through to the moment of the murder, and after. As he did so, new thoughts began to crystallise. It was as though he'd downed a pot of energising tea, but this was simply his investigative mind at work, driven by the frustrations of the case, the urgent need to take *control* of something, and the raw excitement of doing so at ninety miles an hour with his blue lights blazing.

Even if he were wrong, even if he'd make a fool of himself in the attempt, he would gather the whole bunch of them together at the Lavender and have it out. Put everything in the open. Show them that he had the measure of this case, that he could still "pull a Dave Graham" when the moment called for it.

Graham's car was very fortunate to arrive at the Lavender without serious damage. Flashing blue lights or

no, he'd taken extraordinary risks whilst crossing junctions against the signal and jinking around slower cars which, on this occasion, meant everyone else on the road. After thirty-five minutes' hectic thought and speeding, Graham swerved into the hotel's beautifully kept driveway, sending a cloud of gravel spinning into Amelia's perfect flower beds.

"Sergeant Harris?" Graham called as he burst through the door.

"Present and correct, sir," the big sergeant replied, appearing from the dining room. He leant in closer. "I don't know how much like the ending of a 1940s murder mystery you wanted this to be, but everyone's here. They're around the dining room table. Figured it was best, sir."

Graham peered through the doorway to see an anxious-looking Cliff and Amelia, Tim Lloyd, Doris Tisbury, and even old Sykes, sitting in perplexed silence. As Graham entered, his mind racing as though he'd just finished his third pot of tea, Cliff stood.

"DI Graham, I'm hoping there's a special reason for this," the Lavender's proprietor said. "We've tried our best to be helpful, but with the police coming and going like this, it will be very hard to rebuild our business."

Graham nodded with understanding. "Have a seat, Mr. Swansbourne. All shall be revealed."

Cliff was hardly satisfied. In the days since the tragedy, Amelia had noticed that her husband was becoming withdrawn and very concerned about their future. His long-cherished Mexico plan, seemingly coming closer, day-by-patient-day, was now seriously in question. How could they plan for a relaxed retirement when the world was getting to know their establishment

as a “murder hotel?” Amelia had tried her best to see the bright side. They could theme the Lavender around the murder, she’d suggested half-seriously, bring in the morbidly curious at five-star rates.

“Have you found him?” Tim Lloyd asked next. “The murderer?”

Graham fixed him with a steady stare. “I may have, Mr. Lloyd. I ask you all for some patience whilst we bring this sad chapter to a close. I believe,” he said, addressing the whole, rather unsettled group, “that we now have sufficient evidence to make an arrest. As you might know, what happens after that is down to our colleagues at the Crown Prosecution Service. They’ll decide if we’ve got enough to secure a conviction. But I’m increasingly confident,” Graham told them, then added, after meeting the gaze of each of them, “that we have.” The atmosphere was tense.

Harris pondered as Graham paced, checking his notebooks one last time. *Bet we’ve got the bugger where we want him, and he’s in this room. Or, someone here knows who did it.* The prospect of finding their killer electrified Harris. He was also dying to see Graham in action, back to his best, juggling evidence like the accomplished master he was. *Go and get ‘em, boss.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



“METHOD,” GRAHAM BEGAN, the only person in the room on his feet, “motive,” he added, checking the famed triumvirate off on his fingers, “and opportunity. We’ve been searching, Sergeant Harris and I, for a very particular combination of these three elusive elements.” Harris sat near the door to prevent any ill-advised attempts at an escape from this anxious situation. It was about to become acutely uncomfortable for at least one of the participants. “Norah was young, beautiful,” Graham said, and then added, “and, let’s not deny it, *desirable*.” Harris watched the room’s reactions, trying to read the flickers of eyelids, folding and unfolding limbs, tilts of the head.

“She had recently divorced and was in a fragile state after escaping a difficult and sometimes traumatic relationship.” Graham turned to Tim, whose expression was dark and concerned. “As Mr. Lloyd well knows.”

Tim misread this comment as an accusation of some sort. “I had nothing to do with...”

“Hold that thought, for the moment, if you would,

sir," Graham told him. "I'm afraid I'm obliged by habit to do what my former sergeant used to call my 'speechy thing.' I think a lot better out loud. If you'll indulge me." It wasn't a request, but Lloyd nodded his assent, anyway.

"She was in a new relationship, apparently a happy, if casual one," Graham said, bringing another unwarranted nod from Lloyd. "She was planning a trip, and to everyone we've spoken to who knew her, she seemed at her happiest in years."

He referred quickly to his notebook, more to ensure that he hadn't forgotten anything than to remind him what would come next. The evidence had already laid itself out in his mind with almost all of the connections firmly in place. It remained only to present his findings to those involved, judge their responses, listen to their defence, and name the killer.

"Mr. Sykes," Graham said, his voice raised to ensure the old man would hear. "Would you tell us all, once more, how you came across the driver you handed to my colleague, Mr. Stevens?"

Sykes started as though waking from a brief but deep sleep. "Eh?" he asked. "Oh, yes...in the bunker, it was, on the fairway. Bloody strange, I said to myself, to leave a perfectly good golf club under a foot of sand."

"And how did you come to see it, buried as it was?" Graham asked him.

"Well," Sykes said, thinking back. "I suppose it was jutting out of the sand just a bit. You know, enough for me to see there was something there."

Graham took a step toward the ancient groundskeeper who wore a green polo shirt from the nearby club. "Are you in the habit of patrolling the fairways, searching for buried murder weapons?"

“Beg pardon?” Sykes said. In these last few years, as his deafness took a greater hold, this pair of words was perhaps his most common response. Cliff patiently repeated the question for him.

“I walk the course, as I’m required to,” Sykes replied defensively. “What of it?”

Harris saw that Graham had decided to address the least likely suspect first. He wondered why but knew better than to question DI Graham’s methods. “You wouldn’t be the first person,” Graham informed him, “to present important evidence to the police in order to deflect suspicion.”

Sykes listened intently, his head cocked to one side. He chewed on Graham’s comment for a moment. Then he said, “You know, I’m flattered, young man.”

The DI had hardly expected this. “Flattered, Mr. Sykes?”

The old man chuckled to himself. “I’ve been strolling around God’s great earth since there were posters of Lord Kitchener on walls of London pubs demanding that we do our duty and fight the Germans in Flanders,” he recalled. “I’ve taken lives, I don’t mind admitting it. But that was in Korea when I was even younger than you are now. I couldn’t hit a golf ball even twenty yards these days. No,” he chuckled again, “my fighting days are long past.”

To Harris and the others, it seemed that Graham had got off on the wrong foot, making a frivolous accusation against a man who couldn’t possibly have been involved in Norah’s murder.

“Quite so,” Graham said. “Forgive me, Mr. Sykes.”

A wave of his ancient, leathery hand and another cackle of mirth let Graham know where he stood.

"I hope," Tim Lloyd officiously opined, "that you've brought something more concrete than *that*."

Harris scowled at the man, but Graham answered the question with grace. "Just getting warmed up, Mr. Lloyd. Perhaps," he said, "you might explain why you were banished to your room on the night Norah was murdered."

Tim almost stood, but the looming, guardian presence of Harris stopped him short. "Why?" Tim gasped. "Why should I do that?"

"To defend yourself. Come now, Mr. Lloyd. We're all adults here. Norah and yourself were involved in a physical relationship," Graham said, deliberately choosing a delicate phrasing. "Expectations would suggest that you and Norah were together on the night she was murdered but you insist that Norah turfed you out on that Sunday evening and you slept in your own room alone. Very odd, wouldn't you say?"

Tim folded his arms. "She was angry with me," he explained. "I said some stupid things. I regretted them, and I apologised, but she told me her ex-husband made her feel second-best and she wouldn't stand for feeling that way again."

"Mrs. Tisbury," Graham said. "You are our only source on these matters. Did Tim sleep in his room on Sunday night?"

Doris sat immobile, like a fleshy, imperturbable battle cruiser at anchor. "He did," she answered. "But Norah did not."

"You're certain?" Graham asked.

"Detective Inspector," she began in a tone which would brook not the least argument, "I've been making

hotel beds since before your parents were courting. I'd know in an instant if they'd been slept in. Hers was just as I'd left it that morning."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



GRAHAM LET THE room chew this over.

“Six,” he finally said into the silence. “Nineteen. Twenty-two. Twenty-nine. Does this have a familiar ring to it?”

Sykes piped up. “That’ll be the lottery, that will,” he told them. “You need two more numbers.”

“I do Mr. Sykes. Thirty-three and thirty-five. I’m sure there was a bonus ball too, but Norah didn’t need it.” He turned his head to look at Tim. “Did she, Mr. Lloyd?”

Scarlet-faced and looking as guilty as sin, Tim replied, “That’s right.”

“She was planning to celebrate the win, was she not?” Graham asked him. “Perhaps seeing if Cliff had a bottle of champagne behind the bar. Probably by engaging in activities designed to culminate in emitting the ‘sounds of love’, even.” Graham looked pointedly at Cliff before turning back to Tim. “But you screwed it up, didn’t you?”

Lloyd gave every impression of wanting to vanish into a hole in the floor. “It wasn’t my greatest moment.”

“Tell us what happened,” Graham demanded. He was

visibly angry with Lloyd, as much for his deceit as for his careless mistreatment of Norah at her time of greatest joy.

“I put pressure on her,” he said. “I’ve been wanting to start my own company. Investigative Reporters for Hire,” he said. “I’d even picked out a logo I liked.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Amelia scoffed.

“I needed money upfront, and all I said was...well, when Norah told me about the lottery win, I suggested that she could back the company, give me a solid start.”

Graham pinched the bridge of his nose. “So, within moments of your being told of Norah’s good fortune, you decided to bully her into getting your new company started.”

“Like I said, not my best moment,” Lloyd admitted.

“Why did you not mention Ms. Travis had won the lottery?”

“I should have. I thought it might implicate me. I thought it best to just stay right out of it. I’m sorry.” Tim Lloyd had the expression of a bloodhound, morose and sheepish.

“You’re a hapless twerp, Tim,” Graham told him. “Nice enough, but bloody hapless.”

Harris was surprised, but then Graham set up the finale Harris and the others had been waiting for. “But not a murderer.”

Amelia turned to Graham and begged, “So, *who* on earth did it?”

“There’s another piece of evidence which we have to consider,” Graham told them. He was enjoying this role, both the meticulous combing-through of the evidence and the showmanship such a group interrogation demanded. “I received evidence from a reliable source

that Tim and Norah were anything *but* falling out on Sunday evening. Isn't that so, Mr. Swansbourne?"

Cliff gave an uncertain glance, first at his wife, and then at Harris. "Well, I was only reporting what I thought I heard."

"Naturally, sir, that's all any of us can do. But, wouldn't you say, that the 'sounds of love' you claimed to hear from the direction of the guest's rooms across the lawns are, not to put too fine a point on it, rather *distinctive*?"

He squirmed in his seat. "I'd say so."

"Not the kind of thing you're likely to misconstrue."

Cliff pursed his lips. "I really don't know what you're driving at."

Graham stopped. "Driving," he said. "Driving, yes. An interesting choice of word."

Cliff looked appealingly at Amelia. For the first time, Harris saw something genuinely of note in the wealth of body language around the table. *He's reaching out to her. He wants her help. He fears what Graham might say next.*

"I think you do know what I'm *driving* at, sir. Do you deny that you visited Norah in her room on Sunday afternoon or early evening?"

Harris was surprised yet again. This was entirely new. Was Graham just guessing now or playing a more subtle game?

"I don't remember," Cliff began.

"Did she, at any point, share with you the news that had been such a profound shock that very morning, that she'd cried out in gleeful surprise?"

Amelia's head snapped around. "I *knew* it! I *knew* I wasn't losing my marbles!"

Graham took a deep breath. "Here is someone who

needed money even more desperately than Tim. Someone friendly and respected enough to feel that he might simply be given a chunk of Norah's winnings for being a *nice chap*. Someone whom the police would never suspect."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



STILL CONFUSED, AMELIA turned to her husband. “Cliff, what’s he talking about...” she began, but the truth dawned with a shuddering, horrid certainty. “Oh, my God.” She grasped his hand as he stared mutely at the tablecloth. “Cliff, tell him he’s wrong. There’s no way...”

“Amelia...” Cliff whispered.

“I *won’t* believe it! That lovely young woman. You *couldn’t* have, Cliff...” Tears smeared Amelia’s eye makeup. Around the table, as the truth became clear, stunned expressions turned to ones of uncomprehending horror as the group realised that this man whom they liked and respected could be capable of such a thing.

“I’m sorry...” Cliff managed, his voice tight. “It was slipping away from me. My dream, my plans for retirement.” Amelia’s hands were at her mouth as though suppressing a scream. “You said it too many times, Amelia. ‘Next year,’ or ‘in a while.’ And I’ve worked like a bloody slave for this place, years of day-in, day-out grind. I couldn’t cope with it anymore, love.”

“But...” Amelia stuttered, “*murder*, Cliff? Over something as meaningless as *money*?”

“Not money, escape. I needed her to share it with me,” Cliff explained, almost *sotto voce*. “Just enough to get us loose from this place, get settled over there.”

“Over *where*?” Sykes demanded. “What was so damned important you had to put everyone through all of *this*?”

Amelia said it for him. “Mexico. Retirement in the sunshine. It’s what he’s always wanted. And now...” she said before she stopped and dissolved into tears.

Clifford Swansbourne, his years now heavy upon him, stood with such aching slowness that Sergeant Harris felt no need to restrain him. There was not the least spark of escape or violence in the man. “I’ve done the most terrible thing,” he confessed. “I saw what was happening to my life, to our dream. We deserve a little comfort later in life, and that’s all I wanted. But I went about it as though I’m an evil man. But I’m not. I’m *really* not.”

Amelia said nothing, despite Cliff’s imploring eyes.

“I bumped into Norah in the hallway on that Sunday. She was going down to the garden to read, and she was just so happy, so jolly. I asked how she was doing, and she told me, whispered it, that she’d had this lottery win. Said she was keeping it a secret but she couldn’t help but tell someone. She didn’t say how much, but I knew it was more than a tenner, you know.” A ghost of a smile played on Cliff’s lips but nobody laughed.

“And then?” Graham prompted, writing continuously.

“Well, I congratulated her, as anyone would,” Cliff said. “She went to read in the garden and I went back to the kitchen, but the thought wouldn’t leave me. Just five

percent, maybe, of her winnings would have set us up. Enough to invest in one of those high-interest accounts. We could have lived off the interest whilst someone else worried about this place and we enjoyed ourselves.”

Sykes was glaring at him as though Cliff were the worst imaginable evil. “The devil’s work,” was all he muttered.

Cliff pressed on. They could all see his need to unburden himself, however painful it was. Amelia sat pale and dumbstruck in her seat. “Later, instead of heading to bed, I went to Norah’s room. I saw Tim coming out and hid down the corridor until he’d gone. I never heard any ‘sounds of love.’ Foxes, more like. Anyhow, I walked up to Norah’s door and she invited me in. She seemed a bit red-faced so I guessed something had happened with Tim. I—I somehow found the words to ask her about the money. I can’t say she was receptive, I was virtually a stranger to her. I told her about working all those years, unable really to save much, but she just stared at me.” He wiped his eyes with his sleeve. “Then she said something terrible.”

Harris prompted him. “Go on, sir.”

“She said, ‘It’s men like you, the takers, the scroungers, who make me sick.’ That’s what she said. She waved the ticket in front of me, taunting me.”

None of the others needed to be told how Cliff felt, but he explained anyway. “Right then, I saw Mexico slipping away, receding over the horizon. I knew I’d never get there. I knew I’d die under a cloudy sky in some nursing home, and I just couldn’t...”

“Oh, Cliff,” Amelia moaned finally. She said nothing more.

“I keep a spare driver around for chasing animals—

cats, foxes—out of the garden,” Cliff explained. “I couldn’t sleep, you know, mulling things over. Worrying about the future. And thinking to myself how other people always,” he said, his fists bunching, “*always* get the luck.”

Graham was nodding slowly. “You were angry with her. Angry at what she said, the injustice of it, and at her good fortune.”

“I left but I couldn’t shake her words from my mind. I still don’t know how that driver got in my hands, and I can’t remember walking back to her room.” Cliff was shaking now. “I don’t know why she opened the door again at that late hour. But...” He began to sob, the memory of his terrible crime overwhelming him. “I lost control,” he explained through his tears. “Never in my life have I done anything like it. Not once before.” Tears streamed down his lined face, and they knew that he was finished.

Graham had one more question he wanted answered. “Mr. Swansbourne, once it was over, why didn’t you take the ticket as your own? You weren’t to know that she’d told Mr. Lloyd about her win. She said she was planning to keep it a secret.”

Cliff said nothing, his eyes downcast. But Amelia knew the answer. “I’d never have believed it, Detective Inspector,” she explained. “Cliff had a problem, a long time ago, with gambling. He made me a promise then, and he’s never broken it. Not in thirty years. If he’d presented that lottery ticket as his own, it wouldn’t have been credible. I’d have known in an instant something was up.”

“Like he’d just murdered someone?” Tim Lloyd said

bitterly. "Just goes to show, we never really know each other." Harris glared at him, and Lloyd fell silent.

"You were planning a sunny retirement, Mr. Swansbourne. But now," Graham said, completing the thought, "you will spend your last years behind bars."

Graham found Sergeant Harris at his shoulder. "Sir," Harris said to his boss, "would you mind?" Graham nodded and moved to allow Harris to clasp Cliff's arm. There was no resistance, not now. Cuffing the murderer's hands behind his back, Harris saw no reason to delay. "See you in the car, sir. Mrs. Swansbourne, it might be best," he said, leading Cliff to the door, "to call a lawyer."

Graham stood and tried to enjoy the moment as Harris guided Cliff to the car and put him in the back seat. There was a satisfaction; the sort of closure one might feel upon paying off a mortgage or completing a dissertation. But there was no surge of excitement, no urge to celebrate the victory. Content though he was to have got his man, Graham felt, in the final analysis, just too bloody sad.

EPILOGUE



CLIFF SWANSBOURNE WAS sentenced to fifteen years for the manslaughter of Norah Travis. He will be well over seventy before being considered for parole. He suffers from depression and during her monthly visits, his wife Amelia encourages him to tutor younger inmates in the prison's kitchens.

Amelia continues to run the Lavender with the help of **Doris Tisbury**. The gardens look a little less perfect and Amelia has advertised for a local chef to help in the kitchen so that she can attend to them more often. Amelia has no desire to retire and claims that she will work at the bed and breakfast "until I drop." Tim Lloyd never returned to the Lavender Inn.

Jimmy Travis was eventually arrested and sentenced to two years for drug dealing. He served six months and was monitored via an ankle bracelet on his release. He has not

re-offended, but his parole officer has warned him to expect an ASBO (Anti-Social Behaviour Order) if he doesn't mend his ways.

Shortly after Cliff Swansbourne's sentencing, **Nikki Watkins** found herself pregnant. She gave up smoking and when she gave birth to a healthy daughter named her Norah.

Detective Inspector Graham was offered and accepted a position he applied for on Jersey. Jersey is an island located just off the coast of Northern France in the English Channel. When queried by Sergeant Harris about the wisdom of moving to a sleepy, isolated community, Graham's response was to demur, saying, "I have the feeling that it's going to be just perfect." The offer came at just the right moment for the detective inspector. He received the job offer on the same day as his wife, Isabelle filed for divorce.

Sergeant Harris was sorry to see DI Graham leave the Met, but wished him well. Harris was reassigned to the Fraud Squad. He misses the action of CID but credits the regular hours with helping save his marriage to Judith.

Fiona did extremely well in her school exams, receiving top marks in all her subjects especially biology, chemistry, and mathematics. She is now at sixth form college. Her ambition is to attend university to study medicine. To

THE CASE OF THE SCREAMING BEAUTY

that end, she spends her summers interning at various hospital pathology labs in London and the surrounding area.

Inspired by her sharp mind and ambition, **Dr. Bert Hatfield** kept in touch with Fiona and acted as her mentor. He continues to regale his assistant with questionable jokes and drink too much coffee. Revealing the secrets of the deceased holds as much appeal to him as it ever did.

* * *



Thank you for reading *The Case of the Screaming Beauty*! I hope you love Inspector Graham as much as I do. The next book in the Inspector David Graham series continues his story as he moves to the beautiful Channel Island of Jersey. Within minutes he is embroiled in a murder case and it falls to the brand new detective inspector to ferret out the clues and solve the case... whilst bringing his inexperienced team of cohorts along

to assist. Get your copy of *The Case of the Hidden Flame* from Amazon now! *The Case of the Hidden Flame* is FREE in Kindle Unlimited.

I hugely appreciate your help in spreading the word about *The Case of the Screaming Beauty*, including telling a friend. Reviews help readers find books! Please leave a review on your favourite book site.

Turn the page for an excerpt from the next in the Inspector Graham series, *The Case of the Hidden Flame...*

ALISON GOLDEN

Grace Dagnall

**USA
Today
Bestselling
Author**



AN INSPECTOR DAVID GRAHAM MYSTERY

The Case of the
**Hidden
Flame**



CHAPTER ONE



CONSTABLE JIM ROACH made sure that he wasn't being watched and then took a long moment to assess his appearance in the mirror. He knew that he would have only one chance to make a first impression, and he was determined to single himself out as a man of both neatness and integrity; someone who could be entrusted with the most challenging, perhaps even the most *dangerous* investigations. The new boss could well be his long-awaited passport to promotion. Roach might—the thought made his breath catch in his throat—even get to see a dead body for the first time. That was worth ensuring that his tie was straight, his uniform was spotless, his jacket buttons gleamed, and his hair was neatly in place.

There. Perfect. Roach grinned conspiratorially at the face in the mirror and returned to the tiny police station's reception desk, where he busied himself with unusual energy. "Shipshape and Bristol fashion," he muttered as he straightened the lobby chairs and then belatedly flipped over the calendar of fetching Jersey

postcards from August to September. Behind the desk, there was a smattering of filing waiting for him, put off for weeks but accomplished in about six minutes once he put his mind to it. He slid a deck of cards into a desk drawer. “No solitaire this shift, Constable Roach,” he admonished himself. “The new boss wouldn’t like it.”

He heard familiar footsteps strolling into the reception area from the small hallway beyond, where the “new boss” would have his office. There followed an even more familiar voice, its Cockney accent robustly unchanged despite six years on Jersey.

“Bloody hell, Jim.” The man stopped and stared. “Are we trying to win a contest or something?”

“What’s that, mate?” Roach asked from behind the flip-top reception desk.

“I’ve never seen the place so tidy,” the burly police officer exclaimed. “Expecting company, are we?”

Barry “Bazza” Barnwell loved nothing more than needling his younger colleague, especially when Roach let slip his desire to get ahead in the constabulary. Barnwell was older than Roach but he was as content as could be to remain what he called a “beat cop,” whilst Roach had dreams of a sergeant’s stripes and then much more. Scotland Yard. CID. Chasing down terrorists and drug runners and murderers. *That* was where the action was. Gorey Constabulary, pleasantly unchallenging as Barnwell found it, was merely a stepping stone for Constable Roach.

“It never hurts to put your best foot forward,” Roach said, continuing to tidy stacks of paper behind the desk.

“What are you thinking, eh?” Barnwell asked, leaning on the desk. “Once Mister High And Mighty arrives, he’ll

second you to the bloody SAS or something? ‘Our man in Tangiers’ within a month, is it?’”

“Bazza,” Roach replied wearily, polishing the much-abused desktop with a yellow duster. “You may be happy on this little island, but I’ve got aspirations.”

“Have you, by God?” Barnwell chuckled. “Well, I’d see a doctor about that if I were you. Sounds painful. Not to mention a likely danger to yourself and others.”

Roach ignored him, but there was little else to occupy them during this quiet, summer morning. Besides, Barnwell was having too much fun.

“I’m not sure you’re cut out for armed police or the riot squad, you know,” Barnwell said. “Chap like you? What is it now, a whole *five* arrests... And three of those were for tax evasion?”

This got Roach’s goat. “There was that plonker on the beach who was trying to do things to that girl. Remember that, eh? Saved her *honour*, I did.”

Barnwell laughed at the memory. “Oh yeah, first-rate police work, that was. She was only *there* because he’d already paid her fifty quid, you wazzack. And he was only *trying*,” Barnwell added, “because he’d had a skin-full at the Lamb and Flag and could barely even...”

Saved by the phone. It had an old-fashioned ring—Roach had insisted—not one of those annoying, half-hearted tones that went *beep-beep* but a proper telephone *jangle*.

“Gorey Police, Constable Roach speaking,” he said, ignoring Barnwell’s descent toward the reception floor in a fit of his own giggles. “Yes, sir,” Roach said crisply. “Understood, sir. We look forward to meeting you then, sir.” He replaced the receiver.

“You forgot the ‘three bags full, *sir*,’” Barnwell offered.

“Get yourself together, mate,” Roach announced purposefully. “Our new overlord approaches.”

“Who?” Barnwell asked, straightening his tie and biting off the remnants of his laughter.

“The new DI, you unmentionable so-and-so. And if you show me up, so help me....”

Roach became a whirlwind once more, carefully adjusting the time on the big wall clock, one which looked as though it had done a century’s steady labour in a train station waiting room. Then, to Barnwell’s endless amusement, Roach watered the plants, including the incongruous but pleasingly bushy shrub in the corner, before trundling through to the back offices.

The hallway led to the DI’s new office. It had been hastily refurbished as soon as they had got word of the new appointment. Roach already knew it to be “ship-shape.” There was also a second office occupied by Sergeant Janice Harding. Janice was their immediate superior but given the regular antics of the two constables, she often felt more like a nanny or a middle school dinner lady.

“Sarge, he’s on his way from the airport in a cab,” Roach announced.

“I heard the phone five minutes ago, Roach,” Sergeant Harding complained, standing suddenly. “What took you so long to tell me?”

Normally immune to any kind of fluster, it was both unique and amusing to see Janice sent into such a tizzy over this new arrival. Roach suspected that her interest was less in the possibility of career advancement and more in the new DI’s reputation as a good-looking, old-fashioned charmer. There hadn’t been a lot of luck with the men lately, Janice would concede, a point of partic-

ular concern given Jersey's limited supply of eligible bachelors. And, with Harding rapidly approaching her 'Big Three-Oh,' it was high time for that to change.

Janice brushed down her skirt and ignoring Roach's looming presence in her doorway, tidied her hair in the mirror.

"Well, Roach? Is the reception area looking..."

"Shipshape and Bristol fashion," Constable Roach reported proudly. "And his office is just how he asked for it."

"And what about Constable Barnwell?" she asked. Janice leant close and whispered, "He hasn't been drinking, has he?"

"Not that I can tell," Jim whispered back.

"Good. We could all do without dealing with that nonsense, today of all days."

She shooed Roach out of the way and carried out her own inspection of their small police station. Roach shrugged as Janice found a number of things to improve—she straightened the framed map of Jersey on the main wall and the two portraits of previous police chiefs—and then he went to find Barnwell who was in the station's back room where they stored equipment and other items not required on a day-to-day basis.

"Remember what I said," Roach called out with all seriousness. "Professionalism and respect, you hear?"

"Loud and clear, Roachie," Barnwell quipped, hanging spare uniforms up in a neat line. "I'll make sure there's no getting off on the wrong foot."

Roach eyed him uncertainly. "You really want to be in here when he arrives? Or behind your desk where you belong?"

CHAPTER ONE

“I’ll be wherever I happen to be, matey,” was Barnwell’s uncompromising reply.



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A ROXY REINHARDT MYSTERY

MARDI GRAS MADNESS



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ALISON GOLDEN WITH
HONEY BROUSSARD

CHAPTER ONE



“WHAT IS *WRONG* with you?” the man said.

Roxy blinked repeatedly to get her view of the world to clear. As it was, everything blurred with unshed tears. The call center desks warped as the fluid in her eyes distorted everything, stretching out desks and squeezing people until it all looked as wrong as it felt. *Please don't let me cry . . . please don't let me cry.*

“Sir,” Roxy said, praying her voice wouldn't shake, “I have to remind you to remain non-abusive in your interactions with customer service.” She adjusted her headset and swallowed hard. “It would be easier for us to troubleshoot your washing machine problems if you were a little calmer.”

“I am calm!” the man at the other end of the line shouted, adding a strong curse word for good measure.

“Okay,” said Roxy, just about holding it together enough that her voice didn't tremble. “Just a second, please.” She hit the “hold” button and let out a long breath trying to calm herself. What she didn't expect was a little sob to escape, too.

Jade had heard and turned around with a nasty gleeful look on her face. “Are you *crying*, Roxy?” she asked, her eyes shining. Straightening up in her seat, Roxy tucked her blonde flyaways behind her ears.

“No,” Roxy said quickly. Some days this job felt so much like high school. It was as though bullies picked on her, sneered at her, and followed her around. She always seemed to have to “protect” herself from Jade, as well as Chloe, the girl in front who was mercifully taking what seemed a long, drawn-out technical call.

Roxy tried to take no notice. All she wanted to do was go to the office each morning, work hard, save her money, go home and spend the evening snuggling on the couch with her boyfriend Ryan and fluffy white princess cat Nefertiti. Was that too much to ask?

Apparently it was, as Jade and Chloe always seemed to have something smart and cutting to say. In Chloe’s case, it was often cloaked as a “compliment.”

“Oh, Roxy, your hair looks nice today. At least, it looks so much better than it did yesterday,” or “Oh, Roxy, I wish I had a figure like yours. All the men chase after me because of my curves, and it’s just so annoying.”

Roxy was short, only five-feet-two. She had a slim, small-boned figure with which she was mostly at peace. But she was frequently carded and even mistaken for her boyfriend’s much younger sister, despite being 24.

Roxy was generally secure enough in herself to recognize these young women, her co-workers, as insecure and rude and their “compliments” as silliness. However, today she wasn’t able to let their comments roll off her back quite so easily. She took a deep breath. In truth it felt like everything in her life was falling apart, and she had no clue how to patch it back together again.

Always one to try and look on the bright side at times like these, she would tell herself, “At least I still have my savings.” Having grown up in a semi-rural, impoverished home in Ohio, this money that she had put aside was very important to her. The cushion of money made her feel so *safe*.

Roxy didn’t make all that much as a call center customer service rep, but she religiously transferred a couple hundred dollars into her savings account each month. It meant bringing in sandwiches and coffee in a flask instead of buying them from the store next door like everyone else, but it was worth it for the glorious feeling of security. Heck, it meant coming to her miserable call center job day in and day out, but if that’s what it took, that’s what it took. She would pay the price of 50 percent boredom, 50 percent stress for the peace of mind she felt when she checked her bank balance—something she did at *least* once a day. Seeing that dollar amount next to her name was thrilling to Roxy.

But not even her nest egg could save her from her other Big Problem. Ryan, her tall, dark, six-foot-five boyfriend, was slipping away. No, he was *wrenching* himself away. No matter what Roxy did, he was ruder and more distant—saying more and more hurtful things as the days went by. It wasn’t his raised voice that hurt her so much; it was the look in his eyes. All the warmth had gone. He looked through her like she was a complete stranger. Her eyes welled up again.

She suddenly remembered her abusive customer at the end of the phone. She pressed the “hold” button to go back to the call but got nothing but a *beeeeeep* on the other end. He’d already hung up. Roxy flopped her head forward into her hands and swallowed. She’d give

anything not to cry here. *Anything*. The customer would call back and report her for leaving him on hold for so long, and her supervisor would dock her pay instantly, she just knew it.

Angela, her boss, was a cold, hard woman who prided herself on being “no-nonsense” with her employees, which in this case meant she was a real witch. Any little mistake, she docked pay. Didn’t meet your call target for the day? Docked pay. Got to your desk one minute late? Docked pay. If anyone got sick or pregnant, she treated them like they’d made a terrible, unworthy choice and were exaggerating their symptoms.

Roxy felt her phone vibrate in her bag. She knew it would be Ryan—he was the only one who called her. Preferring a quiet, almost silent life, she had very few friends, and her mom never called. She’d never met her father, so it couldn’t possibly be him. Roxy felt a huge urge to reach down and check her phone surreptitiously. Cell phones, however, were strictly forbidden in the office. Getting caught using it one time was a fineable offense. Twice? Instantaneous termination of employment.

Roxy valued her job too much to check her phone, but her mind ran wild trying to work out why Ryan might have texted her. Was it a “sorry for being a jerk, honey bun, let’s move on,” kind of text? Or, much more likely, a variation on “you’re so unambitious, and you’re holding my life back.” The latter seemed to be his latest complaint.

Roxy couldn’t ruminate for too long, however, because the phone on her desk rang again—a new customer service call to take. “Good afternoon, you’re

MARDI GRAS MADNESS

through to Modal Appliances, Inc. My name's Roxy. How may I help you today?"

CHAPTER TWO



“OH, HELLO,” THE voice of an elderly lady said. “I’ve just bought a new washing machine, and I can’t work out all these complicated buttons. Do you think you could help me with that?”

“Of course, ma’am,” Roxy said with a forced smile. “Do you know what model of machine you bought by any chance?”

“No, dear, I’m afraid I don’t.”

“No problem,” Roxy said. “Let me walk you through how to find that out. There’s a special sticker on the back of the machine.”

“Oh, thank you,” the old lady said. “That would be very kind of you, Roxy.”

“You’re so welcome.”

Roxy’s favorite calls were those where she could help people who were polite and respectful, even grateful, and she dared to believe that perhaps her day was looking up just the tiniest bit.

But then she caught sight of Angela, her supervisor, marching over. From where Roxy sat, it didn’t look like

Angela was using her “We’re-Hitting-Targets-And-I’m-Giving-You-A-Huge-Bonus” walk. It was more like “I’m-On-The-Warpath-And-About-To-Give-You-Hell.”

Angela’s eyes locked onto Roxy and didn’t leave her face.

Jade, even though she was on a call, noticed Angela storm by and turned to flash her eyes wide at Roxy, evidently delighted by the promise of impending drama. Roxy’s fingers began to shake ever so slightly as Angela came to a stop next to Roxy’s desk and towered over her, folding her arms. Roxy looked up, but Angela flapped at her dismissively, signaling that she should get back to the call.

Roxy pulled up the relevant manual on her screen and prepared to talk the elderly woman through the buttons on her machine. Roxy couldn’t concentrate what with Angela looming over her, however, and she made a couple of mistakes as she explained. She sputtered and wondered if Angela had noticed. What was she thinking? Of course, Angela had noticed.

“Thank you, dear,” the elderly woman said at the end of the call. “I *think* I understand now.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Roxy said. She tried to put good-natured friendliness into the call like she always did, but she was so anxious that it came out all rushed and a tad insincere. “If you have any more questions please feel free to call us again. Thank you for calling Modal Appliances, Inc. Have a nice day.” Roxy spun her chair around to face Angela.

Her supervisor launched into a lecture before Roxy even had the time to blink. “You do know I’ve just had some idiot yelling at me, telling me that you had *hung up on him* and that he was going to complain about Modal

Appliances' customer service to anyone who would listen because we don't value our customers."

"Oh . . ." Roxy took a deep breath and looked up at Angela. She tried to meet her eyes, but it was hard. Angela's gaze felt like a pair of lasers boring into her. "Well, I didn't hang up on him. I just put him on hold for a moment, to . . ."

"To what?" Angela exploded!

"To collect myself," Roxy bravely continued. She *hated* confrontation. "Because he was being abusive."

"To *collect* yourself," Angela said with a mocking smile. "Oh, well that's just swell. Are you sure you're cut out for this job, Roxy?"

Roxy felt a lump in her throat. It was such an unfair question. She had consistently met her targets and often had customers tell her how kind and helpful she was. An elderly gentleman had even once said that she had made his week. "Yes" was all Roxy could come out with.

Angela snorted. "Not convincing. Pack your stuff."

"Wh . . . what?"

"Take your bag and your lunchboxes and go," Angela said, pointing towards the door at the end of the corridor between the cubicles.

"Go . . . you mean, like, forever?"

Angela was already walking away. "I haven't decided yet. I'll call you if I want you to come back."

"But . . ." Roxy began. Angela was already too far away to hear her.

Now the world *did* begin to distort and warp with her tears. She packed her lunch things into her handbag and took her favorite pen—a purple fluffy thing with a cat on it that wrote as smooth as anything—from the desktop. There was nothing else of hers there. She didn't look at

Jade or Chloe, but that didn't stop her from hearing them gossip about her.

"About time, if you ask me," Chloe said, in a whisper that was much too loud to be tactful. "Maybe we can finally get someone hired who actually fits in."

"Right?" Jade said, "And, hopefully someone with more fashion sense."

Roxy knew they were being snarky and mean, but that didn't stop their comments from stinging. She swung her bag over her shoulder and strode down the aisle of the office determined not to look at anyone. She kept her head high as if she were full of confidence, and, thankfully, she made it to the door without stumbling in her kitten heels as she had sometimes done in the past. However, a tear did slide down her cheek, and she had to quickly wipe it away.

Once in her car—the smallest, most reliable car Roxy had been able to find without putting herself into debt—she had a good cry. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she bent forward to turn on the ignition. She even had a little wail as she drove back to the apartment she shared with Ryan. She hadn't cried in so incredibly long that it felt weirdly good to do so. All her sadness, disappointment, humiliation—and yes, anger—gushed from beneath her long, dark eyelashes in watery rivulets that she couldn't have stopped if she'd tried.

As Roxy climbed the stairs to her apartment, she paused in the dingy stairwell. How should she be? Should she wipe all her tears away and put on a brave face? Maybe then Ryan wouldn't think of her as such a drag. Or should she allow herself to cry in front of him so he could see how upset all this was making her? Then, perhaps,

he'd find an iota of emotion—preferably a supportive one—and wrap her up in his strong arms like he used to.

But Roxy didn't know what he would do anymore. She felt like she didn't know *him* anymore. She still really wanted to. She had this desperate urge to reconnect with him, to rekindle their spark. But how? She'd tried pretty much everything. And this on top of her dismissal made her so unsure that she couldn't be certain of the ground beneath her feet.

Roxy looked at herself in her makeup mirror and scrubbed at her blotchy face with a tissue. Her lashes clumped but the light hitting the surface of her moist eyes made them shine. One of her gold stud earrings was missing.

Roxy was an attractive young woman. A few times throughout her life she had been told that she was beautiful, a compliment she vigorously denied. Her insecurity made her shake in the face of such approval. She would blush furiously.

But, in truth, her pale skin was like alabaster while her bone structure was delicate. She had deep blue, heavy-lidded, almond-shaped eyes that sat atop a neat, upturned nose. She had a full, small mouth. As she looked in the mirror she could see that her nose was red and her lips were swollen, both a result of her tears.

Roxy's oval face and fine features were accentuated by her short, blonde hair. The length of it was one of the few things upon which Roxy stood firm. While her boyfriend objected to her hair being so short, Roxy detested spending time styling it. The result was a "wash and go" cut that was perfect for her, even though the "swish" that Ryan craved was lacking.

Roxy patted down her plain white T-shirt, and beige

skirt, flattening out the wrinkles and turned the key in the lock of her apartment door. She felt numb. Nefertiti, her cat with a cute squashed-up face and an abundance of pristine white fur, was waiting for her in the hallway as usual.

“Hello, my sweet girl,” Roxy said, giving the cat a rub under her chin. She straightened up. “Ryan?”

Ryan worked as a graphic designer from the comfort of their couch and was mostly home, but Roxy’s voice echoed around the apartment. There was no reply. She headed into the bedroom to see if he was asleep. He wasn’t there. Her heart dropped. She saw the closet. His side was empty, the hangers askew.

Roxy dove into her purse for her phone remembering that she hadn’t yet read his text message. Her heart hammered.

Bye, Roxy. I’m moving in with my new girlfriend. Thanks for the fun times.

CHAPTER THREE



ROXY DIDN'T GET dinner. She didn't even change out of her work clothes. Usually, the first thing she'd do when she got in was shower, slip into some clean pajamas and fluffy cat slippers that looked quite like Nefertiti, and pad around the apartment for the rest of the evening. But today, Roxy simply crashed onto the bed and fell asleep fully clothed, with Nefertiti curled up beside her.

Ten hours later—as if it were the next moment—Roxy woke up in the same position that she had collapsed into the previous night. For a glorious moment or two, she enjoyed the golden morning sunlight streaming through the blinds and the feeling of wellbeing that her good, long sleep had given her, but then reality came crashing down. Ryan wasn't there. Ryan wasn't in her *life*. And she didn't even know if she had a job to go to.

Her mind started running. Would she have to dip into her savings? She could barely afford this apartment on her own *with* her job, let alone without it. Back when they had first rented it, she'd preferred a far more modest place so she could save even more of her paycheck. But

Ryan had picked out this sleek one-bedroom, wooden-floored, white-walled apartment, and she'd have gone along with pretty much anything to make him happy. Now she'd gotten used to it.

Roxy's mind continued to race. What if she *had* lost her job? Where would she live? How would she eat? In her mind's eye, she could see it all too clearly—her savings spent, her car sold, the money from that spent too. Next she'd be destitute, on the street, cold and dirty with no one to care for or about her. Roxy's heart began to beat more quickly.

But then again, what if Angela did ask her back? What should she do? Sink deeper and deeper into this black hole of misery where her life crumbled to nothingness as Jade and Chloe looked on and laughed? As Angela tormented her day after day? As customers called up to curse at her for their washing machine woes? After all that, she'd come home to an empty apartment where Nefertiti would be the only ray of light in her otherwise dismal existence. None of the available options sounded good.

Nefertiti must have padded out of the room during the night, leaving the bed empty. Roxy rolled over onto her side, feeling thoroughly miserable and having talked herself into a depression as deep as the Grand Canyon. It was at times like these that she wished she had a friend, a true friend, someone who really understood her. Sure, there were a couple of people from school that she messaged on Facebook now and then, and one or two women from her old job that she sometimes went out with on the weekend. But she had no one who she could ugly-cry to on the phone and with whom she could share her worries.

Eventually, Roxy swallowed her tears, and with no phone call from Angela forthcoming, she moped around the house. Days like this called for a huge tub of ice cream, but she didn't have any in the freezer, and the thought of going to the store to buy some seemed to demand the amount of energy required to climb Mount Everest. The idea of *seeing* anyone felt horrifying.

Roxy sprawled out on the couch, arranging herself around Nefertiti's curled-up, white, fluffy softness and flipped through TV stations. There were Lifetime movies and some others she hadn't heard of, but a Tuesday morning didn't exactly get top programming. She tried to settle down to watch a *Dr. Phil*—anything—but neither her mind nor her body would settle, and she felt like launching the remote at the TV set. This was so unlike her that she startled herself.

Roxy sighed and went to the kitchen. She shoved a six-pack of yogurts from the refrigerator into the freezer hoping that would be an adequate substitute for ice cream. She purposefully walked back out of the kitchen before she leaned against the doorframe. "Oh, what's the point, Nefertiti?" Roxy said. But she could see from her place at the doorway that even the cat was ignoring her. Nefertiti was sitting bolt upright, staring at the TV.

"Hey," Roxy said with her first little smile of the day. Nefertiti looked so human as she sat on the sofa watching television, it made Roxy laugh. "What's so interesting, Nef?" Roxy stepped forward into the living room and turned to look at the screen.

"Oh . . ." she said. She watched the bright colors of a carnival flash up. The weirdest feeling overcame her—a feeling she'd never had before. She sat down beside Nefertiti; her eyes now glued to the screen. "Oh . . ." she

said again. It was like she was watching something she'd seen or been a part of before, almost like nostalgia for something she'd never really known but knew about instinctively.

Roxy watched as carnival dancers spun and flashed their bright costumes, revelers packing the streets. She watched women in skimpy bright outfits, their bodies painted, twirling and dancing and laughing and looking *so* carefree. That was one thing Roxy wished she could be, carefree.

"Taste real life," a woman's voiceover on the commercial said. "Taste real culture. Taste Mardi Gras in New Orleans. We're waiting for you." The pounding sound of drums in the background matched the pounding of Roxy's heart.

Once the commercial had ended and an ad for some kind of drug had started, Roxy let out a little breath like *she'd* been dancing among the bright colors and booming drums. "Well," she breathed, looking at Nefertiti. She trailed off not quite knowing what to say. How could you explain *that* feeling? And why had Nefertiti been so interested? The fluffy cat sat back down again and curled up on the couch. Sinking back into her sleepy zone, she purred just a little.

Roxy felt baffled and, all of a sudden, not depressed at all.

She began tickling Nefertiti under her chin, and before she could stop it, a new, slightly scandalous idea was forming in her head.

"No, you couldn't *possibly*," Roxy said to herself out loud. But a huge smile was spreading over her face. "Not sensible Roxy. She'd *never* do that." But talking the idea down only served to make a new rebellious streak in her

gain strength. She got up feeling like a new person, full of energy, and sauntered over to the bedroom to get her laptop.

“All right,” Roxy said, mentally preparing herself for what lay ahead. She threaded her fingers together and pushed her palms out in a stretch. She bobbed her head from side to side like a boxer preparing to enter the ring. “Okay.” Butterflies danced in her stomach, but it felt thrilling rather than nerve-wracking. “I’m going to *do this*.”

She placed her fingertips on the keyboard, typed a few words, and pressed “Return.”

CHAPTER FOUR



“HAVE I COMPLETELY and utterly lost my mind?” Roxy said to Nefertiti. She almost couldn’t believe what she was doing. She had nearly had a panic attack when she realized that she was eating into her savings for the first time *ever*. The bus she was traveling in had been at a service station at the time. Now, Roxy poked her finger into Nefertiti’s travel box, trying unsuccessfully to stroke her. “Have I gone totally crazy?”

The middle-aged lady across the aisle from Roxy clearly thought so by the look she shot her, though in fairness that was probably because Roxy had prattled on to Nefertiti constantly about all kinds of nonsense for the past three hours.

For her part, Roxy couldn’t believe that she was now over 800 miles away from her home state of Ohio. She hadn’t *ever* been that far before. The furthest she’d ventured was to visit some of Ryan’s family in the Chicago suburbs.

That had been an uncomfortable visit. It was the first time she’d met Ryan’s mom, who kept calling him, “My

little Ry-Ry,” waiting on him hand and foot, and undermining Roxy at every opportunity. She had made snide little “jokes” about her son’s girlfriend, and Ryan had laughed along.

Roxy drifted into silence as she stared out the window as Alabama raced by. Her heart hurt a little. Life had changed so quickly. She thought she had been so *happy*—with Ryan, with her job, with her cozy life, with her cute apartment that she’d now given notice on, and with her little rusty car that she’d sold just before she left. All of the money went into her savings account, of course. But had she really been satisfied and content with her life? The overwhelming feeling Roxy got as she whizzed down the country to the South was *No, she had not!*

Roxy felt free now in a way she never had before. Her tension was easing. Her disappointing memories were disappearing in the rearview mirror of the bus. She was breaking into smiles more easily, and she alternately tapped her feet as she managed her pent-up energy. Roxy had been gone for fewer than 18 hours.

Perhaps leaving it all behind for a while wasn’t going to be as hard as she thought. In a month she’d have to find somewhere to live and somewhere to work. Her new life wouldn’t be one long Mardi Gras, but that was okay. When Roxy’s pessimistic thoughts threatened to break through her excitement, she calmed herself with a lot of soothing self-talk, letting herself know it was fine to dip into her savings. That’s what they were for she told herself—to give her just the right amount of freedom she needed to explore. She settled back in her seat and let out a long breath. Things were going to be fine. They were, *weren’t they?*

Roxy drifted off to sleep at some point. She was awak-

ened when the bus driver spotted a stop sign at the last minute and screeched to a halt. She blinked and looked out of the window. They were in New Orleans already? She was about to turn to the woman across the aisle and ask, but then she spotted a sign that said “*Craving Cajun?*” She couldn’t wait to try the food. While her frame was petite, Roxy had a deceptively large appetite and enjoyed cuisine from around the world in rather large amounts.

That was one thing she could thank Ryan for—introducing her to international food. Along with Mexican, Chinese, Italian, and Indian fare, they’d also adventured into less-explored culinary territory. They’d tried Indonesian, Jamaican, and Polish food, and they loved a good Ethiopian meal from time to time.

“Stop thinking about him,” Roxy whispered to herself. “This is *your* new life—not his! Not yours to share, but yours *alone*.” She was both extremely nervous and extremely exhilarated. She felt a buzzing sensation travel through her body. She couldn’t wait to hop off the bus and locate the hotel where she was staying for the next month. *That* would be the beginning of her new life.

* * *

Roxy strolled down the New Orleans streets, pulling her case with one hand and holding Nefertiti’s travel box in the other. She *sort of* knew where she was going, but she was enjoying the scenery and didn’t mind too much that she was meandering a little. The sun was shining down, and Roxy felt sunny and optimistic.

She figured that she couldn’t miss the guesthouse she was looking for. The pictures she’d seen made it look

idyllic and so bright that she expected to squint. The flamingo pink frontage of the small hotel was what had attracted her, and when she found that they *did* accept pets, Roxy knew that it was the perfect place for her stay. The price was very reasonable, too, and they offered a hefty discount for month-long visits. Perfect.

Eventually though, Roxy stopped a sympathetic-looking woman in the street and asked her, "Do you know where Evangeline's guesthouse is?"

The woman's eyes flashed wide for a moment before she fixed her face into a smile. "Sure thing, sugar. You just go into the alleyway off this street, and it's a little way down there. You see it?" She pointed.

"Oh, sure, great," Roxy said.

The woman looked her over, her eyes curious. Roxy paused, wondering if she was violating any kind of local custom or unspoken rule. Perhaps her northern manners weren't up to snuff for those in the South. "Thank you, ma'am," she added, feeling a little uncomfortable but hoping she was saying the right thing.

"You're most welcome. Take care now."

Roxy followed the woman's directions and turned into a little alleyway. It was a very narrow cobblestone street, so narrow that only a small vehicle could have turned around in it. At the other end, there was an ivy-covered brick wall. Set within that was a tall, wrought iron gate beyond which she saw gravestones. Halfway down the alleyway, placed outside a café from which the most beautiful, sweet, pastry-baking smell was pouring, were set some tables and chairs. Her attention was quickly snatched away, however, by the building that faced them.

The sky above it was a deep, deep blue just as the

website had promised, and Evangeline's was indeed where it was supposed to be, nestled among a huddle of old wooden buildings. The narrow three-story structure was pink as the photographs had shown, but that was where reality collided with Roxy's expectations. It was like a truck hitting a brick wall.

The pictures Roxy had seen must have been taken years and years ago. Now the paint was patchy—baby pink in some places, salmon in others, and almost white at the very top where it caught the most sun. Some of the wooden trim boards had black streaks running through them and were half rotted away. There was a little balcony on the third floor that looked like it would collapse at any minute, and while the windows were clean, one of them had a massive crack across it. Even the courtyard out front was a scrub of weeds. Roxy would have assumed it was abandoned if many of the windows hadn't been open.

Roxy gulped. What *on earth* had she done?

"Okay, Nefertiti. Here's home for the next month." Roxy tried to sound cheerful, but she had a horrible sinking feeling. Her stomach was collapsing in on itself. Still, she thrust her head up and threw her shoulders back. There was no way she'd cry or break down or even doubt herself. She'd prove she wasn't boring. She'd prove she wasn't a pushover. She'd prove she wasn't afraid of anything. She'd prove she was adventurous, exciting Roxy, fully in control of her fabulous, fun, new life.

Roxy lugged her case over to the narrow weed-surrounded doorway and looked around for a doorbell. There wasn't one, so she knocked, plastering a smile on her face for whoever would greet her. She waited for something to happen. No one came, so she knocked

again, more forcibly this time. The door opened with a long creak. Roxy peered inside.

In the hallway, she could see some rather grand-looking pieces of furniture, a large armchair, an armoire, and a huge mirror. They appeared to be antiques. An ornate wooden staircase with a worn carpet led upward and around a corner. On the wall, there was even a gilt-framed portrait of a young woman with blonde flowing hair wearing a hat and an old-fashioned, floral, frilly dress. There, though, the potential grandeur of the hallway ended.

The antique furniture was rendered incongruous next to a cheap-looking laminate front desk, and under a strip light that was far too bright to be comfortable, their shabbiness was laid bare. Gray cobwebby masses darkened the high white wooden ceiling, and Roxy spied a long-legged spider making its slow descent down the wall behind the unmanned desk. It was all very strange.

Just then, a woman walked across the hallway and toward the staircase. She didn't notice Roxy, who watched her closely. Her dark hair was piled up into a messy bun at the back of her head, and she wore a lime green jogging suit and bright white sneakers. Roxy estimated the woman to be in her mid-forties and might have guessed that she was an avid runner but for the little extra weight she carried around her middle and the full face of makeup she had on. Still slightly stunned by the situation, Roxy didn't gather herself to speak, even as the woman began to jog up the stairs.

"Meeeoowwww," said Nefertiti.

At the sound, the woman swung around and put one hand to her chest in shock, gasping and leaning forward before unfurling herself and laughing when she saw

Roxy. "My goodness, you gave me a scare," she said. She came jogging back down the stairs.

"Sorry," Roxy said with a smile, glad for an opening to start a conversation. "This is Nefertiti. My cat. She can be quite vocal at times."

"I love cats," the woman said. "I used to have two. Not anymore, I'm afraid." She didn't elaborate.

"Oh, right," Roxy said. "So . . . are you . . . I'm . . . I'm meant to be staying here . . . I mean to say, I'm arriving."

The woman laughed at her but not unkindly. "They give a good welcome at this place, don't they?"

"Umm . . ." Roxy didn't quite know what to say. "So . . . you don't work here?"

"Oh, no," said the woman. "I'm a guest, too."

"Oh, right. Are you staying for Mardi Gras?"

The woman laughed again, but this time with a little bitterness. "For Mardi Gras and then some. I'm not quite sure what I'm doing next."

"Me either," said Roxy, her shoulders relaxing. "I have a month booked, with nowhere to go at the end of it."

The woman's eyes brightened perceptibly. "Well, then, we're in the same boat, aren't we?" She gave Roxy a conspiratorial grin. "Man trouble. Am I right?"

CHAPTER FIVE



“YOU ARE,” ROXY said with a humorless chuckle before she could stop herself. She didn’t normally share intimacies this quickly, if at all, but being alone in a new city seemed to have changed her.

The woman sighed dramatically. “Me too. I thought I had my life all figured out in New Jersey, but then my husband, well . . . let’s say he found being faithful too taxing, and I found out about it. Stormed out that night with a suitcase, I did, and well, here I am!” She looked genuinely happy about it.

“Yeah, my boyfriend wasn’t exactly Prince Charming either,” Roxy said.

“Oh well, what man is really?” the woman said. “I’m Louise, by the way.”

“I’m Roxy. Have you been here long?”

“About, um . . .” Louise looked up at the cobwebs on the ceiling, “three weeks now.”

“How do you like it?”

Louise’s blue eyes twinkled. “Well, it’s not exactly a 5-star experience, and the cemetery at the end of the

alleyway is a little off-putting after dark, but once you taste Evangeline's meals and the pastries from across the way, you'll *never* want to leave."

Now, *that* sounded good. Roxy had never been a big cook or baker while her boyfriend, wrapped in cotton wool by his mother as he had been, hadn't known how to do anything domestic nor had he been inclined to try. He'd have ordered takeout every day, but Roxy was too budget-conscious for that. They had eaten a lot of chicken stir-fry and baked potatoes. Good, wholesome food prepared by someone else sounded heavenly.

"And it has great bones."

Roxy frowned. "What does?"

"This place . . . good bones. I'm an interior designer," Louise explained. "And I'm just *desperate* to redecorate this place. My mind runs wild with how I could make it truly splendid. It's got great potential. It's a shame they want to tear it down."

"They do?" Roxy said. She wondered who "they" were.

"Yes," Louise said. "Why anyone would want to knock a building of such *heritage* down is beyond me. I'd tell them to . . ."

Nefertiti interrupted her with a very loud, very annoyed *meeeeooowwww*.

"Oh!" Louise said. "That cat of yours is getting fed up with hearing us warble on. She wants to get settled in, I think."

Roxy was feeling apprehensive. Evangeline's looked like a dump. People wanted to tear it down, possibly before her month's stay was done, and who knew what horrors lurked in her room. She was torn between wanting to see more of the guesthouse and running back

out the door. Was it going to be a cobweb-infested hovel? Or might it be quite charming in a rustic sort of way?

“Where *is* everyone?” Louise said, peering around. “Evangeline and Nat should be somewhere. Each one of them is crazier than the other, you know. And not exactly customer service whizzes either.”

From the side door, in strode an androgynous young woman who looked to be in her early twenties. She was dressed head to toe in black: black T-shirt, black skinny jeans, black work boots. Her dark brown hair was cropped short, and her ears were adorned with multiple piercings. There was a tiny diamond stud in her nose. Her short-sleeved T-shirt revealed one entire arm covered in tattoos. Roxy, her eyes widening just a little, leaned in closer but quickly withdrew. She didn’t want to be caught staring, especially not by this sharp-eyed, intimidating young woman.

“Well, what were you expecting at these prices?” the tattooed woman said with an English accent that was more Eliza Doolittle than Mary Poppins. “The Ritz?” A smirk pulled at her lips.

Louise chuckled, completely unembarrassed that her criticism of the guesthouse service had been overheard. “Oh, Nat. Not the Ritz. But maybe just a little common courtesy would be nice. I treat my house guests better, and they’re not even paying.”

“Of course you do,” Nat said. “You don’t get guests day-in and day-out though, do you?”

“Neither do you,” Louise shot back, and there was a moment of stunned silence during which Roxy nervously looked back and forth between both women as she gauged the atmosphere. After a second, Nat burst out laughing, followed by Louise. Roxy joined in although not

quite so uproariously. “This is Roxy and her cat, who seems to be getting restless,” Louise said when she’d calmed down.

Nat nodded at Roxy. “Hi. I’m Nat. You’re here for a month, aren’t you?”

Roxy swallowed, wondering what she had gotten herself into. “That I am.”

“Come on then, don’t be shy. I’ll haul your luggage up for you,” Nat said. She grabbed the handle from Roxy and rolled the case to the stairs. “You’ve got the room at the top, the one with the balcony. You can’t actually go *out* on the balcony, because it’ll fall down if you do, but you can open the top of the doors. Sam, he’s our handyman, sort of chopped them in half or something. Don’t ask me how.”

Roxy followed behind obediently, while Louise gave her a wide-eyed look and smile of sympathy. As they walked up the stairs, Roxy found there was no need for polite conversation, because Nat just kept talking and talking.

“Now, we don’t have any AC up here, so you might roast like a chicken.” When she saw Roxy chewing her lip, Nat laughed. “Nah, I’m just joking. Well, you might in July or August, but you’re not with us that long. You just open the windows in the front and the back, and you’ll get a breeze going through. No problem. I’ve stayed up here heaps of times. Breakfast is *en famille* and starts at 8, dinner is at 6.”

“Okay,” Roxy said. She followed Nat up the creaking staircase and took the opportunity to check out her tattoos. There were some roses and crosses and skulls, and a mishmash of bare-breasted women, unicorns, band

names, and what looked like gargoyles or demons. There was a pirate ship in amongst the madness, too.

Nat caught her looking as they reached the third floor, and flashed her a grin. "I'm working out what to get next. I'm addicted." Then she opened the white wooden door to Roxy's room. There was a key in the lock. "Here you are," she said.

Roxy stepped into the attic room. It smelled a little of old wood, but also of freshly laundered cotton and delicious baked goods from across the narrow cobblestone alley. The half-door window contraptions didn't look as strange as they sounded and the windows were open wide, the white linen curtains flapping gently in the breeze.

The bed was large. A soft-looking white duvet lay over it. Across the room, next to an old armoire, there was a vintage dressing table with a white Louis-style stool. A rocking chair stood in the corner. The dark wooden floor was covered with a pale blue tasseled rug, and the whole place looked clean, welcoming, and comfortable.

Roxy sighed happily. She was pleasantly surprised.

"See? Not too shabby, huh? Like I said, dinner's at six, cocktails at five-thirty. See you then," Nat said. She unceremoniously plonked Roxy's case on the floor and spun around on her boot heel to leave her guest alone.

When Nat had left, Roxy sat down on the bed and looked around. She felt a thrill pulse through her. Nefertiti gave a tiny mewl from her carrier, and Roxy leaned down to let her out, cuddling the fluffy cat to her chest.

"This isn't too bad, is it, Nef? There's adventure ahead, possibilities. Anything could happen." She buried her nose in Nefertiti's soft, white fur, feeling the hairs tickle her nose. "And it's all going to be okay."

CHAPTER SIX



EVANGELINE SURPRISED ROXY in numerous ways, not least by the fact that she appeared to be at least eighty years old. The guesthouse owner was short, stocky, and with a tanned face creased a thousand times with wrinkles. In her ears were big gold hoop earrings and around her waist an apron lay over her blue dress patterned with tiny flowers.

She passed through the dining room from time to time, giving Roxy and Louise cheerful waves as they waited for their dinner. She had a spring in her step and twinkling green eyes lit up her face.

Every time she went through the white swinging door to the kitchen, a huge blast of fabulous-smelling air drifted outward—sausage and peppers and all kinds of savory flavors that Roxy couldn't quite put her finger on. Plus, something delicious was baking. Roxy sniffed the air and frowned, trying to identify the smell. *Oh, it was cornbread!*

“Smell awright, cher?” Evangeline said as she walked by, throwing Roxy a wink.

“Smells like *heaven*,” Roxy said cheerfully. She’d had a big tuna sandwich and a packet of chips on the bus on the way down but nothing since, despite the bakery across the road calling her name. Now she was ravenous. “I can’t wait.”

Evangeline looked her up and down as she pushed the swing door with her behind and grinned. “I think we need to get some good ole Creole spice into you, cher. Get you smiling and bright and a little round, like Louise here.”

Louise laughed, pretending to be outraged. “Evangeline!”

Evangeline laughed. “Many men like a little more meat on the bones, Louise, don’t ‘cha know? If you’ve still got your eye on Sam . . .”

“I have not!” Louise protested, this time quite serious.

Evangeline snickered and disappeared into the kitchen, throwing another wink in Roxy’s direction. She returned with two glasses. The drink inside was thick and creamy and white, with chocolate dust on top. “Your brandy milk punch. Usually for brunch, but since both of y’all missed that . . .”

“Thank you,” Roxy said. “It looks scrumptious.”

“It *is*,” said Louise leaning in and whispering. “That’s *why* I’ve been missing brunch. I’ve been putting on weight thanks to all this fabulous Creole cooking. I’m trying to get it off by running in the mornings and *not* sipping sugary drinks any time of day, but especially at breakfast. I can’t keep my nose out of the sugar bowl if I start early. I’ll be the size of a house before Evangeline’s through with me if I’m not careful.”

“Oh, life’s too short to eat dull food, child,” said Evangeline, overhearing as she once more made her way back

into the kitchen. They heard her start to berate someone about something or other. Her words were laced with French and made Roxy pause as she sipped on her brandy milk punch, which was indeed scrumptious.

Roxy turned to Louise, "So how . . .?"

She trailed off. It was clear Louise wasn't listening. She was flicking her hair behind her shoulder, sitting up straight, and pushing her lips into a pout. She was looking over Roxy's shoulder toward the doorway that led out from the lobby.

Roxy followed her gaze and despite Louise's bad manners, immediately appreciated what was causing her to behave in this odd fashion. The guy who had just come through the doorway was gorgeous.

He was tall for one thing and broad-shouldered for another, the kind of man who looked like he could lift small, slight Roxy with his little finger. The huge saxophone case he carried was dwarfed in his strong arms. He had tousled sandy hair and dark eyes that betrayed a little shyness but which were in direct contradiction to his confident walk.

"Hi Sam," Louise said. Her voice got a little high and childlike. Roxy suppressed a cringe.

Sam looked awkward. "Hi, Louise." He looked at Roxy, then back at Louise, obviously expecting an introduction, but Louise was far too busy batting her eyelashes at him to cotton on.

"I'm . . ." Roxy began, but unexpectedly, her voice caught in her throat. She cleared it and ended up in a coughing fit. She tried to sip a little punch to soothe her throat, but it didn't help. She grabbed a napkin, and Sam leaned his saxophone case against the wall to give her a firm pat on the back.

“Sorry,” Roxy said through yet another cough, her voice tight and constricted. “I’m Roxy Reinhardt.” Her eyes were watering, and she laughed at herself through the coughs—what else was there to do?

Sam opened his mouth, but before he could speak, a booming voice came from the doorway, “And I’m Elijah Walder, if you don’t mind!” An extremely slender man with sparkling eyes stepped in, holding aloft a white paper box like it was a tray. He came over to the table. He was wearing a black bow tie atop a white short-sleeved shirt printed with coffee cups. “Roxy, did I hear?” he said, sticking his free hand out.

“You did,” Roxy said with a smile, taking his hand and shaking it quickly.

“Good to have another lovely, bright, and pretty flower around to liven up the place. Besides me, of course,” he said. He strode away toward the kitchen door with his hips swaying from side to side as he did so; the box he held aloft moving in concert with them. “Better get these in to Evangeline,” he said cheerfully, “before I get yelled at.” He turned and cupped his hand to his mouth. “You know what she’s like,” he whispered.

Elijah was like a whirlwind, passing through the room so quickly no one had a chance to react. Roxy wasn’t sure how she felt about being called a “lovely, bright, and pretty flower,” but Elijah seemed to mean it kindly.

Sam thrust his hands into his pockets and laughed, watching the skinny man flounce into the kitchen. “Elijah owns the bakery across the street.”

“He does?” Roxy asked. “It smelled *spectacularly* good earlier. I’ll be in there every single day, I’ll bet.”

Sam pulled up a chair from the next table. "I wouldn't blame you."

Louise leaned her elbows on the table and focused on him. From the way she was blinking owlishly in his direction, her mascara-thickened lashes batting furiously, Roxy doubted Louise had noticed Elijah at all. "Sam knows how to do *everything*," Louise said, in a husky, low-toned voice.

"Is that so?" Roxy said.

"Of course not," Sam retorted.

"It is," said Louise, leaning over and pushing Sam playfully on his bicep with her fingertips.

Sam blushed. Roxy reckoned it was with embarrassment but suspected that Louise would interpret it as a sign of attraction.

"He's got his own *very* successful laundry business," Louise continued. "He plays the sax like an absolute god. He fixes just about everything around here. *And* he manages to maintain an incredible physique." Her eyelashes flickered. "Did you bring that monster of a car with you today?"

Sam stared at the floor, then at the ceiling. He laughed. "Yes, yes, I did."

Louise turned to Roxy. "He has this *incredible* deep red car. What is it, Sam?"

"A Rolls Royce Phantom," he said. "But it's just . . . it's nothing. It's the one luxury I allow myself."

"It costs more than my *house!*" Louise said excitedly.

Sam turned quickly as they heard the front door open and close. A woman came into the room, and he sounded far too relieved when he said, "Sage! So good to see you!"

CHAPTER SEVEN



SAGE WAS A tall, willowy African-American woman. She looked to be in her late thirties. Long, mermaid-like hair in a mixture of pastel colors fell in ribbons to her waist. She wore billowing, purple linen robes. Around her neck were draped multiple chains, each one weighed down by a stone that lay on her breastbone. A laptop satchel sat at her right hip, the strap crossing her body. She raised her palms as she laughed good-naturedly at Sam's words. "It is a pleasure to lay eyes upon you, too, Samuel." The mellow tone of her voice was like honey and had that lovely New Orleans lilt. "Along with all the souls present here today," she looked at Louise and Roxy, then around the room, "both seen and unseen."

"This is Sage Washington," Sam told Roxy. "She keeps the guesthouse website up to date and about a thousand other things." He flashed his eyes wide, and by the way he did so, Roxy could tell he meant a thousand other *unusual* things. But there wasn't a trace of mocking in his look; he treated Sage and the rest of them with great respect.

"The website?" Roxy said. Sage seemed such an ethereal soul, Roxy couldn't imagine her knowing what a computer was, let alone working one.

"Yes, sugar," Sage said. "But that's just my day job. I do tarot readings and all sorts of other spiritual work. I connect with the spirit world daily."

"*And* the not-so-spirit world," Sam said. They all laughed.

"It's true," Sage said. "I'd say connecting with the spirit world is my true calling, but I love my computer work, too."

Sage beamed a huge smile at Roxy, "So who are you, sugar?" she asked her.

"I'm Roxy. I'm from Ohio. I arrived here today."

"Greetings," Sage said. "You have a beautiful aura."

"Oh," said Roxy, a little taken aback. "Um, thank you."

"Evangeline not done yet?" Sage said, reaching into her bag. "I could whip out my laptop and finish the last bit of programming for this client, before . . ."

"You won't be bringing any screens to *my* table!" Evangeline said, bursting through the kitchen door, carrying a steaming plate in each hand. "The only thing on this table is going to be my jambalaya. I made a special one for you, honey."

"I'm a vegetarian," Sage explained to Roxy. Elijah and Nat followed Evangeline out, all carrying plates.

"Put the tables together, why don't ya, Sam," Evangeline said.

"Sure," he replied, "but I've come for the washing. I heard you had a problem with the machine today."

"Yes, yes," Evangeline said impatiently. "You can pick it up later. Now, sit down and eat."

“Are you *sure* you don’t want me to buy you a new washing machine? I could donate one of . . .”

“Charity,” she hissed at him. “Now be quiet, we have a new guest.”

“Sorry,” Sam said. He looked a little shamefaced as he realized he’d been indiscreet. “Roxy, you’ll love Evangeline’s feast. Her food is the best.”

Soon he’d dragged all the lace-covered tables into a neat row. Louise watched his bulging biceps the whole while, but the others arranged the chairs around the table as they anticipated tucking in to their hot plates of food.

Roxy noticed that Sam studiously avoided sitting next to Louise and ended up between Evangeline and Nat. The younger woman had hustled out of the kitchen and, with a grin, had plonked herself down gracelessly beside Roxy. Roxy couldn’t tell what to make of the English woman. There was a definite edge to her, what with the piercings and the tattoos and the big biker boots, but she seemed nice enough. Elijah sat between Louise and Sage on the other side of the table.

“Now, Roxy,” Evangeline said, “everyone else is used to this already, but let me tell you specially, cher. This is real Creole jambalaya, with salt pork, smoky sausage, shrimp, and a secret spice mix that’s been in my family since before your grandmamma was born. It’s got a little kick to it.” She nodded at the jugs on the table—one of ice water, the other lemonade—and then at the bottles of red wine. “So go ahead and fill your glass with whatever beverage you’d prefer.”

“That sounds like an invitation to me,” Elijah said. He’d also joined them at the table. “Let’s be getting ourselves going.”

“But don’t let Louise guzzle down all the wine over there,” Evangeline said, “or she’ll be flirtin’ with the floor mop by the time the evenin’s through.”

“I will not!” Louise exclaimed.

Evangeline chuckled to herself. “If you say so, cher.” Then she lifted her glass and said, “*Laissez les bons temps rouler!*”

Louise flashed Roxy a grin. “That’s something about having a good time.”

And they certainly *did* have a good time. The jambalaya was delicious, deep and rich with flavor and spice. The red wine was robust and warm, and it made Roxy feel all cozy. Best of all, Sam and Elijah got up after dinner and treated them to a live jazz show. Elijah demonstrated some deft finger work on the grand piano that sat in the corner, while Sam filled the whole room with beautiful, rich saxophone melodies. Soothed nearly to sleep, Roxy nibbled her dessert—a delicious pastry from Elijah’s bakery—and felt the happiest and satisfied she had been in a long, long time.

Just as they were about to wrap up, Evangeline nodded at Sage, who reached into her bag and pulled out a well-worn deck of cards. Roxy wondered if she was about to start doing magic tricks, or if they were going to play poker. Neither was her sort of thing.

“Tarot cards,” Louise explained to her. “It’s their little after-dinner ritual.” She rolled her eyes.

But no one was paying Louise much attention. Sipping on her wine, Evangeline watched keenly as Sage laid out the cards, face down.

“Let’s go for a quick one today,” Sage said. “I’ve got some programming to do before bed.”

“I want a reading,” Evangeline rushed to say. “About .

. . ." She widened her eyes significantly, "you know, this place." She looked over at Roxy and then back at Sage. "A fast one is fine."

"All right," Sage said. "Choose two cards."

Evangeline, her gnarled hand hovering over the cards, quickly pulled two back toward her. She flipped them over.

Sage gasped. "The Ten of Swords and The Tower. Oh gosh."

"What does it mean? What does it mean?" Evangeline asked.

Sage bit her lip. "Umm . . . well, it doesn't look good. But if we're looking for the positive . . ."

"I don't want the positive," Evangeline snapped. "I want the cold, hard truth."

Roxy peered over and saw that one of the cards depicted a man lying dead with ten swords sticking out of his back.

"Okay," Sage said. She gulped. "Well, the Ten of Swords means you're about to experience an unwelcome surprise. And . . ." She sounded reluctant to go on.

"And . . .?" Evangeline said impatiently.

"Well, The Tower means everything's about to change—and not the rainbows and unicorns kind of change," said Sage.

"Hmm," Evangeline said. She was silent as she dipped her head and stared at the floor in deep thought, sipping her wine.

"Well, that's cheerful. Lucky they're just cards picked at random, eh?" Elijah said with a grin. He bit into his third pastry. Roxy wondered how on earth he stayed so slim, him being such a talented baker and surrounded by

deliciousness all day. He was as thin and lanky as a beanpole.

Judging by the worn state of her card deck, Sage clearly believed heart and soul in tarot readings. She didn't say anything. She simply bit her lip and looked up at Evangeline. Her eyes were full of anxiety.

CHAPTER EIGHT



THE NEXT MORNING it took a while for Roxy to register where she was. Nefertiti was curled up in front of her face as usual, but she had to blink and lie back for a couple of seconds to remember that she was at Evangeline's guest-house in New Orleans and that her regular life was indeed over.

It hadn't helped that she'd dreamed of Ryan giving her the most beautiful bouquet of flowers and telling her that she was his soul mate. Tears stung her eyes as she realized her dream hadn't been real. She'd have never called their love a grand passion, but when the relationship was working, it had been cozy and comforting and familiar, which was just how Roxy wanted life to be.

They'd had their problems, and Ryan was a real jerk at times, but she'd swept all that under the carpet to keep the relationship going. A fat lot of good that had done her. Now he was off, pursuing *his* Grand Passion it seemed, and Roxy was alone with no job, using up her precious savings without a plan. She stared at the ceiling. Was she really here because of a *commercial*? At the time,

her decision had felt so *right*, like the universe had ordered stars in the perfect configuration just for her. Now it seemed ridiculous.

“Oh, Neffi, what have I done?” she said. Nefertiti pushed her nose under Roxy’s chin and purred loudly as her owner tickled her. Roxy sighed. “Well, at least *you* sound happy.”

She hauled herself up, wondering what she was going to do for the day, and the day after, and the day after that. She knew there was a Mardi Gras party in the area that night—Louise had told her—but Roxy was *not* in a party mood.

Even after a shower in the tiny bathroom and slipping into one of her favorite outfits, a denim sundress with a large ruffle neckline and lace hem, Roxy looked into the mirror and sighed heavily again. She tried a smile. It was little and pathetic, only just turning up the corners of her mouth, but it was a smile nonetheless. She inched her feet into silver sandals that sparkled with rhinestones and bent over to feed Nefertiti using the little carry bowl and one of the cat food sachets she’d brought along with her. Her cat tucked in with delight. Unlike her owner, she was unperturbed by her surroundings. “Maybe *I’ll* feel better after breakfast,” Roxy said.

But her image of beignets—a type of square donut that New Orleans is famous for—and coffee while reading pamphlets that would tell her about local tourist spots she should visit was shattered by the sound of raised voices in the hallway. She could hear them as she came down the stairs. She tried to make them out. One was easy. It was the quivering but fierce tones of Evangeline. The other was a man’s voice, one she didn’t recognize.

“I’ve told you ‘no’ a thousand times, haven’t I? No, no, no, and no. When will you people get that message into your head, huh? Are you stupid or just senile?” Evangeline raged.

The man’s voice was tense. “You and I know that you’re pathetic and desperate clinging onto this dump of a place. Do what any right-thinking person would do and take the money.”

“Like hell, I will!” Evangeline shot back.

They were so embroiled in hurling insults, they barely seemed to notice Roxy walking past. Evangeline was like a crackling, spitting fire. The man was losing his temper, too. His face was red, and he had a bead of sweat in his mustache. He was very tall and snappily dressed, but Evangeline didn’t seem the least bit intimidated, even though he positively towered over her.

Roxy slunk into the dining room, her nerves on edge. She looked around the room to see pastel-haired Sage tapping away at her laptop, absentmindedly eating a beignet, her eyes glued to the screen. She seemed to be completely oblivious to the drama unfolding in the hallway.

Louise was there too, sitting at a table in her running gear, her hair scraped back into a ponytail. She smiled at Roxy sheepishly and beckoned for her to come over and sit opposite. Roxy had planned to sit alone, but she wasn’t sure how she could now, not without looking very rude.

“Morning,” Louise said.

“Good morning,” said Roxy, making an effort to sound cheerful.

“I’m . . .” Louise’s eyes darted about awkwardly as she sipped her coffee. She looked down at her bowl of fruit.

"I'm so embarrassed about yesterday." She lowered her voice. "I think I came on a little strong with Sam, don't you? You know, with the flirting?"

Roxy shifted in her seat, not knowing what to say. Louise stared at her with eager eyes. "Oh, I don't know," Roxy said eventually. "I'm most definitely *not* a relationship expert."

Louise puffed out a weary breath and leaned back in her chair. "Me either. I mean, he's good looking, and tall and talented, but I've just gotten out of a marriage, for goodness' sake. I think I just like him being around." She laughed self-consciously. "He's quite a comforting figure. Any time anything goes wrong around here, it's like, 'Oh, Sam'll fix it.'" She wiggled her head from side to side as she spoke.

Roxy nodded. "Talking of things going wrong . . ." She was about to ask what on earth was going on with Evangeline and the suited stranger outside in the hallway, but before she could, Evangeline herself stormed in and over to Sage's table. She dropped into the chair opposite and buried her head in her hands. Roxy was pretty sure she was crying.

Sage came out of her laptop daze. "The cards don't tell lies," she said. She rubbed Evangeline's arm.

"Maybe I should sell. That guy, Richard Lomas, certainly thinks so," Evangeline said. She pulled one hand away from her face and thumbed in the direction of the lobby where Roxy had passed her arguing with the man. The elderly woman roughly wiped her eyes with a napkin and sat up straight, jerking her arm away from Sage. "He works for TML Property Developers. He says it would be better for me to retire and put this place up for sale—specifically so he can buy it. Thing is, he's right. There are

more repairs than I can keep up with and not enough guests. And the ones we have barely bring in enough money to take care of 'em. But he wants to tear the old girl down. Seems no one values New Orleans heritage no more. Y'all want to demolish these beautiful old places and build shiny, soulless apartment complexes in their place."

"Not everyone," Sage said. "Not you."

"Perhaps swimming against the tide is a waste of darn time, after all," Evangeline said bitterly. "Maybe I *am* standing in the way of *development* and *progress*. If I sold to Richard Lomas or some other developer, I could walk away and buy a nice little cottage. No more gettin' up at 6 AM to cook and clean for other people. I could sleep in and grow a pretty yard to sit in. I could get a little dog." She brightened up at the thought.

Nat came out of the kitchen, a white frilly apron over the top of her dark, edgy clothes. Her gaze flitted over Evangeline's face, and then to Sage. "Oh, what is it now?" she said, exasperated. "Can't be that you're bottling it, surely?" Nat said.

"I'm not sure I want to run a guesthouse no more, cher," Evangeline replied, wearily. "Much as I love the people. And the cooking, now and again."

"So what are you going to do?" Nat said, deadly serious now. Her wide, amused eyes were filled with concern, and a small frown creased her forehead. "Chuck me out onto the street?" Her voice rose high with tension on the last word.

Louise called over. "I'll hire you when I buy one," she said to Nat. "I'd *love* to have a little guesthouse just like this."

"You try runnin' one 'fore you say that," Evangeline

said. “Especially *this* one. What with the upkeep and the dry rot and everythin’ wearin’ out because it’s all 100 years old, it’s not easy. You have to have a real love of old architecture.”

Roxy felt like she was in an alternate universe. She’d never been in a place where staff and guests spoke so freely to each other. It was almost like they were a bickering, but affectionate, family. Growing up, it had just been Roxy and her mom. There had been no extended family, and things had always been tense and difficult.

These easy exchanges, these expressions of feeling, the acceptance that the people around her showed for one another was unfamiliar to her, but she liked it. It felt refreshing. She felt a little like an outsider right now, but maybe, in the month she would be there, she’d learn to fit in, and this level of honesty and sense of freedom would rub off on her.

Louise ate her last piece of fruit. “Well, I’m going to have to think of *something* to do long term. I can’t be a lady of leisure for the rest of my life. I’m too young for that even if I could afford it.” She stood. “Anyhow, I’m off for my jog. Gotta run off last night’s dinner.” She stretched her arms above her head and gave them all a wave as she headed out.

“Now, what I *actually* came out here for was to ask you, Roxy,” Nat said, “what you would like for breakfast? We have eggs, sausages, bacon, grits, biscuits, muffins, pancakes, omelets, toast . . .”

“Wow!” Roxy said. Talk about options! She would certainly be having fun with her breakfasts over the next month, but she was still set on her original vision. “Do you have beignets, too?”

“As long as I haven’t eaten them all,” Nat said,

throwing her a wink. She leaned her head toward the kitchen. “Yep, yep, we do. Anything to drink?”

“Coffee, please. With cream and sugar.”

“Coming right up.”

“Now, Evangeline,” said Sage as sternly as she could with that smooth-as-cream voice of hers. “I got up early to finish my programming job, so I have the day free. What can we do to cheer you up?”

“Me?” Evangeline said, incredulous. “I don’t need cheering up, cher.” Her eyes belied her words but then sparkled with appreciation at the kindness Sage had shown her. She slapped her thighs. “I’ve got plenty of jobs to be gettin’ on with.” She pushed the three-quarter length sleeves of her green, floral print dress up over her elbows and headed to the kitchen. “You know, that Richard Lomas might not agree,” she said, pointing to the place outside the room where she and the red-faced man had been arguing. “But I believe that this place is wonderful.” She smiled at Roxy. “You have a good day, now, cher.”

Sage watched Evangeline’s retreating figure as it disappeared into the kitchen before turning to Roxy. “What are you doing today, sweetheart?” she asked. “I’m heading to our local botanica. That’s a spiritual supplies store. It may not be your thing, but it’s a great walk over there, and the sun is blessing us with its rays this morning. Nat’s coming. What do you say?”

Roxy smiled. She felt quite comfortable with Sage despite her strange ideas. “Sure,” she said. “I’d love to see more of the city. When do we leave?”

CHAPTER NINE



AS IT TURNED out, Roxy loved the botanica. She'd never been in such a place before. She breathed in its musky, sweet smell as she peered at all the unfamiliar objects on the shelves. There were little statues of Mother Mary, the saints, and other figures she didn't recognize. There were candles in every color, oils in tiny bottles, and so many scents, Roxy became intoxicated. There were crystals, engraved boxes, a basket of pewter "charms." There were even snowglobes labeled "Love," "Money," and "Revenge."

Nat stood in the doorway, her arms folded over her chest. She looked distinctly unimpressed. "Come *on*," she kept saying. "How hard is it to choose between a bunch of candles or a handful of crystals?" Roxy looked up and saw pulses of anxiety play across Nat's face. She looked disturbed by the energy of the store though she did clutch a packet of incense sticks.

Sage smiled, her eyes appearing only half-focused. "I've ventured outside the realm of time so that I may deeply pleasure my soul."

“Yeah, I’m sure Evangeline will buy *that* when I tell her why I’m late,” Nat grumbled.

Roxy had no idea what to buy. She turned another corner and came upon a whole new assortment of seemingly random objects—a huge collection of silk flowers, bottle after bottle of Florida Water, silver goblets filled with shiny black stones, and a line of human skulls which looked much too real for Roxy’s liking. She took the time to remind herself that, of course, they *weren’t* real. They couldn’t possibly be. But still . . .

She could have stayed to explore the store all day until she came upon the skulls. They sent a jolting shiver up her spine, and she went to join Nat at the entrance. By now, Nat was mumbling “weirdos” and “absolute rubbish” under her breath. Feeling a little intimidated by this rather brittle, young English woman, Roxy pretended to study a rack of herbs while they waited for Sage to finish up.

On the way back to the guesthouse, Sage and Nat had a good-natured—but still heated—argument. Nat started it.

“So Sage, what miracle in a bag did you buy this time?”

“Candles for my archangel altar,” Sage said, ignoring Nat’s sarcasm.

“And what’s *that* when it’s at home?” Nat asked with a snort.

Roxy, too, was a little curious and equally skeptical, but she would never have been so outwardly scornful.

“An archangel altar is a portal to facilitate contact with certain benevolent spirits from the unseen world,” Sage said serenely.

“Oh brother,” Nat said, rolling her eyes.

“No one’s asking *you* to believe in it, honey,” Sage said smoothly. “It’s not your fault. Society has conditioned us to not believe anything beyond the bounds of modern science. And that’s okay.”

Nat shrugged. “Meh. I didn’t like science at school either. I like things I can see and touch, and you can’t see atoms, can you? Well, they can with their super-super-super-microscope thingies, but not with ‘the naked eye.’ No, I like to think about what I can see right in front of me. Like now, we have to get back to Evangeline’s because I have to make lunch, and if I don’t, she’s going to go crazy on me. That’s what *I* believe in.”

Sage sighed. “Well, everyone’s different.”

Nat looked her up and down. “And thank goddess for that!”

Roxy hated the mounting tension, but then Nat and Sage burst out laughing, and Nat threw her arm around Sage’s shoulders. “I do love you, you crazy witch lady.”

Sage chuckled. “And I love you, too, you . . . you . . . thug!” They all laughed at that.

“Oh, look, is that Sam?” Roxy said, pointing a little way down a side street on the other side of the road. His flashy car was parked on the sidewalk. Sam was wearing reflective sunglasses and looked pretty flashy himself. He was speaking with a couple of guys who looked a little shady. They saw Sam count out a wad of bills and hand them to one of the men. Roxy frowned. “What is he doing?”

Nat shrugged her shoulders. “Who knows? He’s very private about what he does outside of the guesthouse and laundry.”

Roxy continued to look over as they passed and wondered what he could be doing. The transaction didn't look very savory.

When they reached the narrow cobbled street that housed Evangeline's guesthouse and Elijah's wonderful bakery, they spotted a woman wearing a navy pencil skirt and jacket up ahead of them. It was hard *not* to spot her because just then she caught the heel of her bright red stiletto in the cobblestones and went flying forward. She collapsed onto one of Elijah's tables and stayed there prostrate over it for a few seconds until she peered around to see who might have seen her ungainly fall. Carefully, she straightened up, tugged on her skirt, and wriggled it back into place. She smoothed down her thick, shoulder-length blonde hair, flicking what might have been crumbs off her jacket.

As Roxy, Sage, and Nat got closer, they could see the woman was furious. A deep frown creased her forehead, and she blew air from her nose like an angry bull. Tears shone in her eyes too, and when she noticed the women, she flushed a deep shade of pink. "Oh . . ." she said. Roxy felt a little sorry for her.

"Hi there," Nat said, uncharacteristically smiley. "Have you come to stay at Evangeline's?"

"Evange—? *That!*" the woman replied. She spun around, looking up at Roxy's rickety balcony in disgust. Roxy began to feel distinctly *less* sorry for her. "Of course not. I'm looking for Richard Lomas. Have you seen him?" Her eyes like lasers drilled into the three of them, and her lips, bearing remnants of red lipstick that matched her shoes, curled into a snarl.

Nat crumpled her brow.

“The name sounds familiar,” Sage said. “Um . . .”

“Tall guy,” the woman said, flicking up her chin. “Snappy suit. Property developer. Attitude to match.”

“Oh!” everyone said, even Roxy.

“Yes, we know him.” Nat crossed her arms over her chest. “Are you one of them? The demon developers?”

“No,” the woman practically spat. “My name is Mara Lomas. He’s my husband. How do you know him?”

“He’s been trying to persuade Evangeline to sell her building to him. So he can tear it down,” Nat said. “But it’s not for sale.”

Roxy wasn’t at all sure Nat should be sharing this kind of information with a stranger on the street, but before she could say anything, Mara started snarling again.

“Well, if you see the slippery snake, tell him I’m in town, I know exactly what he’s done, I know all about his *cozy* little double life *and* his mistress.” She laughed bitterly. “And tell him, he’d better say goodbye to his beloved Aston Martin too, because that’s the *first* thing I’m going to make my lawyers take from him.” She looked the three of them up and down. No one knew quite what to say. She nodded her head fractionally upward. “Just tell him I’m looking for him, okay?”

Nat shrugged. “Okay.”

“Good.” Mara began to stride away purposefully, but her exit wasn’t quite as dramatic and impressive as it could have been. She had to quickly change her stride to a totter as she picked her way carefully over the cobblestones in her three-inch heels.

“I hope for blessings on your soul,” Sage called out after her. She looked genuinely concerned.

Mara waved dismissively. “Pray for *his* soul,” she called back. “He’s going to need all the protection he can get!” Her voice reverberated around the small side street; then she turned the corner and was gone.

CHAPTER TEN



“WHOA,” WHISPERED ROXY. She wished *she* had been a little more Mara-esque toward *her* ex. Some threats and stiletto strutting might have been quite empowering, but at least she hadn’t sobbed down the phone or had some other humiliating reaction. She had retained her self-respect.

Roxy’s shoulders slumped when she thought of her ex-boyfriend. Without any idea of who his new girlfriend was or what she looked like, Roxy tortured herself with images of a tall, picture-perfect bronzed beauty with a gorgeous curvy body and thick, flowing, long hair. She’d be a brunette, of course, Roxy was sure. Ryan had loved to remind Roxy that he preferred dark-haired women. Dark-haired, *long-haired* women. As she considered this, she wondered whether she had been with someone who was deliberately cruel, who determinedly sought to undermine her, who *wanted* her to feel bad about herself? A frown creased the bridge of her nose.

“Are you all right?” Sage said. The African-American woman peered at her with concern.

“Oh, yes, yes, I’m fine.” Roxy woke up from her daydream and shook her head. “Yes, fine. Um, I must go. I’d better feed Nefertiti.”

“You can let her roam around, you know,” Nat said. “We just have to make sure the front door is closed for a bit so she doesn’t go outside and get lost. To make sure, Evangeline will put butter on her paws for a couple of days. Then she’ll *never* stray far.”

Roxy smiled. “Sounds like a plan.”

“Aha!” a voice from behind them called out.

They turned to see Elijah coming from his bakery, holding his signature white boxes. “You’ve got a beignet monster staying with you, huh?” he said. “Evangeline’s alone would keep my bakery going at the moment. Is it you, Roxy?” He narrowed his eyes as he pointed a finger and wagged it accusingly.

“Look at how skinny she is,” Nat said, laughing. “She’s not scarfing down thousands of those things now, is she?”

Elijah gestured down at his own impossibly wiry body.

“Not everyone has the metabolism of a stick insect,” Nat said.

He gave her a fake frown and waggled his finger again. “You’ll never get a job anywhere else, Miss, talking to people like that. I hope you’re kissing Evangeline’s shoes.”

Nat laughed again, but a little less heartily this time. She punched him in the arm.

“Anyhow,” Elijah said, “who’s coming to see the Krewe du Vieux with me tonight? Their parade is in the French Quarter. I was thinking of heading there then maybe taking a cruise down the river.”

“Wow!” Roxy said, her eyes lighting up. “I’ll come!” She paused. “What’s the Krewe du Vieux?” she added.

“It’s a Mardi Gras parade known for its wild, adult themes. They usually include political comedy, and they have some of the best brass and traditional jazz bands in New Orleans,” Elijah said.

“Sounds great!” Roxy replied.

“If we’re feeling brave enough we’ll hit their after-party, too. It’s called the Krewe du Vieux Doo. Try saying *that* fast,” he added.

“Krewe du Vieux Doo, Krewe du Vieux Doo, Krewe du Vieux Doo, Krewe du Vieux Doo, Krewe du Vieux Doo, Krewe du Vieux Doo,” Nat said.

“Okay, okay,” Elijah retorted, flapping his free hand to calm her down. “I didn’t mean for you to take me literally.”

“Krewe du Vieux Doo,” Sage said, elongating the vowels in the words, and shaking her head. “They should respect the vast spiritual heritage of Voodoo more carefully if you ask me. They’re making a mockery of it. You know, it’s a tradition thousands of years old from Central and West Africa.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Nat said. “But they just want to have *fun!* Relax a bit, Sage. You can’t take *everything* seriously. Elijah, I’ll be there. With Roxy *and* Sage.”

“Sounds more and more like a party every moment,” Elijah said with a grin. “I like it. Sam’s coming, too.”

“That means Louise will be there with her eyelashes,” said Nat. “Oh, bless her little heart.”

* * *

That evening, they all met in the lobby and walked down to the French Quarter together. Sage was in her trademark flowing robes, a pale lilac this time. The color matched the tones in her hair. Nat also wore what was proving to be her uniform—black jeans and a scary-looking band T-shirt. A big pink tongue splayed out from a skull and crossbones that was emblazoned across the front of her top. In contrast, Louise wore a figure-hugging baby blue dress and stood too close to Sam, who kept edging away. He was more conventional in jeans and a button-down shirt. To Roxy's eye, and probably Louise's, he looked more handsome than ever. Roxy had kept things simple with a long patterned rust-colored skirt and a cream peasant top, but Elijah wore a bright purple suit with a pair of shiny black crocodile shoes.

Evangeline stood at the doorway, Nefertiti in her arms. The guesthouse owner had indeed given the cat butter that afternoon, and Nefertiti had appreciated the treat enormously. The elderly woman watched the younger people with tears welling up in her eyes. "This is the last time you'll do this, leave from here to go to the parade. It's the end of an era," she said. She snuggled her head against Nefertiti's.

"You've decided to sell?" Sage asked.

Evangeline nodded. "I've called that developer. It's all over. This place will be just rubble by the en' of the summer." Her voice caught in her throat. "So y'all go on. Jump up in the carnival for me, and send ole Evangeline's out with the best of memories, won't ya?"

"Of course we will," Louise said. She wrapped Evangeline in a hug.

They walked to the French Quarter a little subdued, but Elijah kept telling everyone jokes and striding

forward cheerfully. He made everyone feel a little better. Everyone, that is, except Nat. She kept looking up and around at all the buildings and didn't join in with any of the conversations.

Roxy watched her for a while. She wondered what was causing Nat to be so nervous and if she knew her well enough to ask her if she was all right. After a few minutes' observation, Roxy decided against it. She didn't want her head bitten off for reaching out, and experience had taught her that might well happen. Instead, she fell into step beside Nat and they walked side by side in silence.

New Orleans looked truly beautiful as they walked through it. There were string lights dotted around the tops of buildings and hanging over roadways. They were like little fairies who had decided to bless the city with their magic. It was warm for the time of year, too.

"Lovely, isn't it, this place?" Roxy said to Nat.

"Not really," Nat replied. "I've seen better." She sounded nonchalant and dismissive, but her voice cracked.

Silence fell once more. They walked on for a while, falling behind the others. "So how did you end up here?" Roxy tried again.

"No particular reason."

"But you must have come here for something. You don't end up in New Orleans by accident." Roxy was surprising herself. She wasn't usually so forward.

"It's a long story," Nat said, staring resolutely ahead. She quickened her pace and walked away as Roxy wondered what that long story might be.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



APART FROM WHAT Elijah had told her, Roxy had no idea what to expect from the Krewe du Vieux parade, but she was very excited and curious to see it. They had gotten there early, and yet the streets were already lined with people waiting for the parade to start. The atmosphere on the street was buzzing as the group settled down at a table outside a fancy-looking restaurant where the tables were covered in linens and a replica oil lamp sat on every one. The air was getting a little colder. The sun had set and the cool wind rushed over the darkened Mississippi River.

“Café Brûlots all round to warm us up?” Elijah asked.

“Oh, yes!” everyone except Roxy said. She had no idea what a Café Brûlot was.

Sam sat down beside her. “You’re in for a real treat,” he said. “Café Brûlots are spiced liqueur coffees that they flame up right in front of you, watch.”

Roxy looked at him warily. He seemed like such a good, generous person, but she wondered whether he

was completely honest. There was that business with giving money to men on the side street and the flashy car. How did he afford such a thing? Was she just being paranoid? Oh, why was life so confusing?

A waiter in a jacket and bow tie came up to the table rolling a cart with a bowl set on top. He straightened and poured some liquor into a ladle.

“That’s cognac and curaçao. The spices are already in the bowl,” Sam said in his lovely low voice. Roxy could feel the heat of his body next to her, and she struggled to keep her heart from racing. After all, he was extremely handsome. And Louise was right. He emanated stability and capability. He seemed like a guy who would step in and save the day if necessary, whatever it took. Safe. Solid. A protector. Still, she couldn’t put her worries to rest.

The waiter set the alcohol on fire, and blue flames leaped up in a chaotic fiery dance. He ladled the flaming liquid over an orange that had been mostly peeled, its skin trailing downward in a spiral into the bowl. More blue flames jumped up, but the waiter doused them with a brown liquid.

“And there’s the coffee going in!” Louise said. She giggled girlishly and brushed her hand against Sam’s.

He jerked his away with a laugh. “Indeed, and now for the sugar.” He got up and went to stand next to Elijah.

The waiter poured sugar into the bowl and ladled the spiced coffee, cognac and curaçao mixture into small coffee glasses. He finished by adding a dollop of whipped cream. “Voilà!”

The table burst into applause.

“Bravo, bravo!” Elijah said, and he gathered up the

coffee cups as best he could, carrying three between his fingers.

Sam scooped up the other three coffees, and soon they were all sipping and sighing with delight. Roxy savored hers, drinking it ever so slowly. The brandy and coffee and cream together were warming, but the hints of orange and spice and cinnamon took the drink to a whole new level of “ahhhh.”

“Like drinking a hug,” Nat said.

Roxy smiled. “It *is* kind of like that!” She winced a little at the strength of the brandy, though. “They don’t scrimp on the alcohol, do they?”

Sam laughed. “They certainly don’t.”

Just then, police sirens started to blare, and blue lights flashed among the crowd.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Roxy said, getting up and looking around. She was a little jumpy at the best of times—the result of growing up with a mother who could be unpredictable. Sirens made her edgy.

“They’re clearing the road for the parade!” Sage said, clapping her hands. “Let’s go stand a little nearer and get a good look!”

The crowd wasn’t dense, and they managed to get a great spot almost immediately. Roxy’s head swirled a little when she got up, though. The brandy had been strong, and she was beginning to regret not having eaten anything since breakfast.

Brightly dressed people, some adorned with strings of fairy lights, began to walk down the middle of the street while music pumped away in the background. Roxy smiled at the colorful spectacle, the cold air hitting her face, joyous people all around her. She saw a woman with

blue hair, in a pink cone hat, a purple basque, and fishnets. She waved extravagantly to the crowd. Her friend, wearing a pirate hat, skull mask, and a ruffled gown, swayed silently to the music.

“Look at the horse!” Sage said, nudging Roxy.

Roxy peered down to the end of the street and saw a large, stocky, dark brown horse making its slow way toward them. It was pulling a parade float dressed in lights and swathes of bright fabric. A huge jester’s head was displayed on the front of the float while a couple of people stood on top of it wildly waving colored rags around a sculpture of the Statue of Liberty.

Next came a large group of people dressed in old-time clothes—men with tailcoats and tricorn hats, ladies with powdered faces, towering curly wigs, and corseted dresses in all kinds of vivid colors: fuchsia, turquoise, crimson, and canary yellow. They all laughed and joked and danced and drank as they proceeded down the center of the street.

Roxy couldn’t help but bounce along to the rhythm of the music. Most everyone did, and Elijah was near leaping about. Only Nat stood still, looking uncharacteristically shy and withdrawn. Roxy thought she might try to talk to her again later, but for now, she was entranced by the throbbing beat, happy screams, whoops, and cheers that reverberated all around her.

Soon a brass band was marching by, a whole assortment of men and women playing French horns and trumpets and saxophones and other instruments that Roxy didn’t know the names of. A percussion section followed behind with a man banging a big bass drum. The music was happy and cheerful and somewhat disorderly. It made Roxy want to dance.

As soon as the parade had passed and people milled around, Elijah jumped out into the road with them. “Who’s hitting the after-party with me?”

“I’d much prefer the boat ride,” Sage said.

“I think I need to eat something,” said Roxy. “That Café Brûlot has gone straight to my head!”

“Me too,” Louise said, giggling. She stumbled into Sam and put her hand on his chest. “Oops! Silly me!”

Sam carefully moved her hand away and steadied her on her feet. “Whoa there, lady,” he said.

“What about you, Nat?” Elijah said, looking over. She had her arms crossed protectively over her chest, and her face was solemn. “Cat got your tongue this evening?”

All of a sudden, Nat burst into tears, shocking everyone. She quickly swallowed and wiped her eyes hurriedly, saying, “Sorry, I’m sorry.” She turned to leave. The group followed her.

“What’s wrong, cher?” Elijah said, putting his arm around her like a big brother.

“I’ve been beside myself all evening. What *am* I going to do? Evangeline’s closing!” Nat said, her voice strangled by another suppressed sob. “I won’t be able to stay!”

“What do you mean?” Sage said. “You can get another job.”

“But that’s just it!” said Nat. “I can’t.” She lowered her voice. “I don’t have a work visa. I came to the US to work as a nanny. Of course, that all went to pot, as does *everything* in my life, but Evangeline took me on and paid me under the table. It was lovely of her, and I’ll be eternally grateful . . . but . . . but, basically, I’m . . . well, I’m not legal!”

“Oh,” Elijah said, taken aback. Sage leaned over and,

encircling Nat's shoulders with her arm, kissed her on the head. "There, there."

Louise smiled brightly. "Well, you don't have to worry, sweetie. I've made up my mind. I'm not going to let Evangeline sell the place to a developer just so he can tear it down. I'm going to buy it myself. I intend to do it up and make it into an upscale boutique hotel. You can keep working there." Louise looked Nat over. "Maybe more . . . behind the scenes, but you'll get paid. We'll be one big happy family. Perhaps Evangeline will stay on and continue cooking. I sure hope so. I'm going to make her an offer she can't refuse as soon as I get back."

Sam said, "Louise, I was thinking of buying it, too." He looked uncomfortable. "I have some . . . uh . . . spare change lying around. It makes sense for Evangeline to sell especially to someone who will protect the building, but the thing is, I don't think she will hear of it. I've already floated the idea, and she says that I'm just interested in buying it as a favor for her. Her pride won't allow it! I think she's made up her mind to sell to this developer now. She'll get a decent price without sacrificing her dignity. Don't be surprised if she turns you down."

"That woman can be so stubborn!" Nat said.

"Indeed, she can," said Sage smoothly. "But everything will turn out all right in the end. The spirits will make sure of it."

"But what if they don't?" said Nat. "What if I end up being carted back to England? The whole point of leaving there was to start a new life. I have nothing to go back to."

Nat's words got Roxy thinking about her own situation. Where would she go once this month was up? What would she do? If this developer shut Evangeline's down

right away, would she even be able to stay for the full month she'd booked? Would she get her money back? Roxy bit her lip, beginning to feel as bad as Nat did. Her own future looked just as uncertain.

CHAPTER TWELVE



“LET’S TALK ABOUT this tomorrow,” Elijah said. “Come on, let’s eat and drink all our troubles away tonight. Problems can wait until the morning.”

He led them to a run-down restaurant with pool tables in the back. From the outside it was shabby. The paint peeled and a wooden door badly needed staining. Inside it was gloomy, but Roxy could see if she peered hard enough that the interior was . . . exactly the same as the exterior. The wooden tables and chairs had seen better days, and the tiled floor was cracked and uneven.

“Hello, André!” Elijah said loudly as he crossed the threshold. Everyone in the restaurant turned to look at him. “He owns this place,” Elijah explained to the others.

André, the heavysset owner with a huge handlebar mustache said, “Elijah!” just as animatedly. He came over and embraced Elijah with a hug, slapping him on the back.

“Table for a million, please,” Elijah said, gesturing at the group. He scanned his eyes over them all. “I mean, six.”

Despite the surroundings that hadn't promised much, they had the most gorgeous meal. Roxy chose a chicken and andouille gumbo to start, a lovely thick, buttery, tomatoey, highly seasoned stew. Next, she had a shrimp étouffée, a dish chock full of shrimp on a bed of rice. It had a deep, spicy, but slightly sweet flavor that she just couldn't get enough of.

While they ate, they chattered away, even Nat, who seemed better for having gotten her worries out. Fueling their conversation was a crisp chardonnay that Elijah described as having 'undertones of oak and smoke.' Glass after glass had gone down easily. Despite having filled herself up with savory courses, and sharing a plate of pralines with Nat, Roxy felt quite light-headed when she stood up. Everyone else seemed pretty merry, too. All except for Sage, who was a teetotaler.

"Boat ride next?" Elijah said to everyone, his voice slurring a little.

"I think . . . I think I might just fall in the Mississippi River," Louise said. "Which one of you strong men will jump in and save me, huh?" She looked straight at Sam.

"Oh, will you stop making a spectacle of yourself?" Nat said, a little too loudly. Nat's inhibitions were quite low *without* any alcohol in her system, so after a few drinks, Roxy was pretty sure she would say anything she darn well pleased. Nat was about to prove her theory correct.

"Look at you. He's young enough to be your *son*. We all know you're going through some kind of midlife crisis, but please, find someone your own age."

Ouch. There was a horrible pregnant pause, and Roxy hoped this wasn't going to turn into an awful argument. Everyone watched Louise, waiting to see how she'd react.

She burst out laughing. "Oh, let me have my little fun. Ever heard of living it up?" She held out her empty glass. "Elijah, pour me some more!"

"I think you've had quite enough!" he said. "And I've had far too much to be some lifeguard if you fall out of the boat. Let's get you home."

Louise giggled. "Okay! Home time!"

While Elijah escorted a very wobbly Louise back to Evangeline's, Nat, Sage, Roxy, and Sam headed off to catch the boat. Roxy was relieved to get out of the hot restaurant. The thick, fragrant air had steamed up all the windows, and the chatter and laughter of the patrons, along with all the glass clinking and plate clattering, made the atmosphere loud and overwhelming. As she walked outside, Roxy enjoyed the cold air hitting her face once more, and the four of them meandered down to the riverfront.

Roxy couldn't help but notice Sam in the warm glow of the streetlights. She looked up at him. From her viewpoint, the backdrop was a dark sky, with a sprinkling of stars shining here and there. He caught her looking and smiled down at her.

Snap out of it, Rox! She shook her head and turned around. She saw some stragglers from the last of the parade.

"I can't see any boats," Nat said. She was a few steps ahead of them and a little unsteady on her feet. "I'll go check at the kiosk."

"I'm coming with you," said Sage. She linked her arm firmly in Nat's before she could wriggle away, and they made off into the night. Sam continued after them.

Roxy was watching the last of the parade performers. "Shoot, I should have gotten a photo!" she said. She

pulled her phone out of her bag and lined up a shot before the performers disappeared from view. "Oh, it doesn't look that good," she muttered to herself and fiddled with her phone. "It's a little dark. Maybe if I turn on the flash?"

She got a couple of shots in but they weren't great either. She tried the zoom; it made everything blur. She decided to get a little closer.

Roxy was so intent on what she was doing she didn't notice she was alone at the riverside. As she walked forward, she sensed a tall, broad figure move up behind her. Momentarily, she thought it was Sam, until . . .

"Listen," a voice said behind her. "Give me that phone, or you'll regret it."

She spun around. "What?" before recoiling in horror.

There, in front of her was a man in a black and silver carnival mask, ribbons trailing from it. She gave a little scream. She looked over her shoulder, but the carnival stragglers had gone. So had her friends.

"You heard me," the man with the mask said. "Pay attention, I've got a gun." He patted his waist and moved closer. "You're a pretty little thing, aren't you?"

"Here, take it! Have the phone!" Roxy said, holding it out to him, her heart beating so fast she felt it would jump out of her chest. She began to back away. She fumbled her phone, and it fell to the ground.

The man walked up to her slowly, seeming to savor her fear.

"Sam!" she hollered. "Sam, help!"

"Sam, help!" the man mocked her. He pushed his face close to hers.

"Hey!" a voice bellowed through the still night air.

Sam had heard her. He came running. "Get out of here

right now!" he yelled as he quickly covered the ground between them.

"Or what?" the man spat. He turned to face Sam.

"He's got a weapon!" Roxy shouted.

But Sam stepped right up to the man, his eyes filled with rage, his hands ready for a fight as he cleared the assailant by several inches. "I said get out of here," he said, in a quiet, intimidating voice. "Trust me, you're gonna want to do as I say."

The man jerked toward him, his face inches from Sam's. Sam didn't even flinch. Then, like an animal who knows that retreat is the better course of action in the face of a stronger foe, the man sloped away. Sam and Roxy stood frozen until he'd turned a corner and was out of sight.

"Oh my," Roxy said, dropping her hands to her sides and allowing herself to finally breathe.

"Are you all right?" Sam asked. He came closer, and put his arm around her shoulder, looking her over with concern in his eyes. "Did he hurt you?"

"No, no, not at all," Roxy said. "He just gave me a scare, is all."

"I'm so sorry that happened to you. On your first night out in New Orleans, too. That's bad luck. You must think we're all criminals now."

"No," said Roxy. "No, I don't. Not at all."

"Do you want to go back to Evangeline's?" he asked. "I'll walk you there if you want." Seeing her phone still on the ground, Sam picked it up and handed it to her.

Roxy took the phone from him. She thought about Sam's question. "No, I'd like to go on the boat ride, please."

Sam smiled. "You're a brave one, aren't you?"

“Not usually,” Roxy replied.

“I don’t believe you,” he said.

Little did he know. They walked down the riverside together.

“So are you sure you like it here?” he asked after a while.

“It’s only been a day, but so far I love it,” Roxy said quietly. “I love the food, the atmosphere, the carnival, Evangeline’s—everything! There’s danger everywhere, I know that much.”

Roxy had grown up in a tough neighborhood. This wasn’t the first time she’d been mugged. It was almost a daily occurrence where she came from. People who knew her were often surprised by how little these sorts of things rattled her. It was emotional situations that made her nervous.

“Good,” Sam said. He paused before resuming, “What about . . . what about . . . the people?”

Roxy looked up. He looked away, and then looked back again.

She smiled and said softly, “The people are wonderful.”

Just at that moment, they heard Nat’s voice shouting back at them, cutting through the darkness. “There’s one more boat tonight! It gets here in fifteen minutes!”

“Well, fifteen minutes isn’t too long to wait,” Roxy said.

“No,” Sam agreed, with a half-smile Roxy found very attractive. “Not when there’s good company to be had.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



NEXT MORNING, THE atmosphere at breakfast was dire. Roxy was silent. Louise was sullen. Nat's service was fitful and slow. No one spoke. The fun of the carnival had passed. Only dejection and sore heads were left in its wake. Nefertiti had come downstairs with Roxy, but after a couple of minutes, she left. Plainly not even her cat could tolerate the mood and Roxy felt depressed. It felt as though she were living beneath a large dark cloud, one that could burst at any moment.

"Sam was right," Louise said to Roxy, eventually. "Evangeline rejected my offer. Said she was already committed to Lomas. She's expecting him here any minute to sign papers." A crash from the kitchen made both of them wince. It was followed by raised voices and finally a heavy silence.

Roxy pondered this news. If Evangeline sold the guesthouse, where would she go? She couldn't imagine staying in any other establishment. Roxy then berated herself for getting attached so quickly. She barely knew these people. So why then, did she want to go magic

shopping with Sage again, and learn more about those mysterious tarot cards? Why then, did she want to cut through Nat's tough exterior and become friends? Why then, did she want to keep eating Evangeline's exquisite meals and learn about New Orleans culture? And why then, did she want to stick around and get to know Sam?

Roxy munched through her beignets. She couldn't even touch her coffee—it reminded her too much of the Café Brûlot from the previous night, which now lived on as a lingering headache.

Once she was done eating, Roxy sat alone at the table, flicking through the local newspaper aimlessly. There was coverage of the carnival procession alongside the usual articles about properties for sale and local events. They made Roxy feel a little lost and lonely. Much as she liked it, New Orleans wasn't home, but Ohio wasn't either. Nor was with her mother. She didn't *have* a home. The only constant she had in her life was Nefertiti. Everything felt bleak, despite the beautiful morning sunlight streaming through the windows.

"We were supposed to sign the papers this morning, and now he doesn't even have the decency to show up!" Evangeline shouted in the kitchen.

Roxy heard the clatter of a saucepan. "I've had enough!" Nat shouted back. "If you're so desperate to sell this place and ruin everything, I'll get him for you myself! What hotel is he staying at?"

"I don't have a choice, Nat!"

"What hotel is he staying at?" Nat repeated fiercely.

"The gosh-darned Fontainebleau!" Evangeline shot back at her.

"Right, then!" Nat stormed out of the kitchen and threw her apron down on the table next to Roxy.

Despite Nat's fury and complete unwillingness to hide it, Roxy wasn't so intimidated by her anymore. If anything, she felt quite comfortable. After all, they were in the same boat. If Evangeline's closed down, both of them would have a serious problem.

"I'm coming with you," Roxy said, surprising herself with her boldness.

"Fine," said Nat. She was already striding out of the room, her chin stuck up high. Roxy had to scurry behind her to catch up, even when they were out on the street. Nat had long legs and kept up quite a pace in her heavy combat boots. They marched to the hotel in complete silence.

The hotel lobby was a shiny, marble affair, and Nat couldn't have looked more out of place. She didn't seem to care, though, or even notice. She marched right up to the front desk.

"I want to speak to a guest, Richard Lomas, please. Can you ring his room?"

"Of course . . . er, Miss," the young man at the desk said, looking taken aback. He looked Lomas up on his computer and dialed a number on the phone. "I'm afraid there's no answer."

"Try again, please," Nat said firmly.

"We have a policy—"

"Fine," said Nat. "Can you go up and see if he's there?" She paused, her eyebrows arched. "Please."

The man clenched his jaw as he stood up. "Yes, Miss," he said insincerely. "And who should I say wants to see him?" He looked her up and down. Nat's tattoos stood out even more than normal in the staid, chrome and neutral-shaded lobby.

Nat straightened up and held her head high. "The

management of Evangeline's. He'll know."

"Please wait over there," the man said. He gestured toward a couple of luxury couches in the seating area where suited businesspeople tapped away on laptops and swilled coffee.

"Thank you," said Roxy. Nat was already walking away. When Roxy sat down, she found herself fidgeting. She drummed her fingers against the leather arms of her chair.

"I don't know where I'm going to go either," Roxy said quietly. "My boyfriend left me. I have no job to go back to."

Nat looked out over the room to avoid making eye contact with her. "Hmph. You can go stay with your family."

"I don't have any family," Roxy said. "I don't know my dad. And . . . well, my mom and I don't get on."

Nat looked at her then, surprised, as if she were considering Roxy from a whole new perspective. "Oh . . . I thought . . . well, I don't know. You just seem like the kind of person who'd have a wonderful family who loves you, who you could go home to on the holidays, eat massive amounts of food, and have a laugh with."

Roxy chuckled. "I wish!"

Nat frowned and pursed her lips. "Are you sure? You look so . . . normal."

"I do my best," Roxy admitted. "Looks like I'm doing a better job than I thought."

"My parents would love to have a daughter like you," Nat said ruefully. "Unfortunately, they can't stand the sight of me. I'd hate to go back to England with my tail between my legs, deported."

"I know what you mean," Roxy said, feeling a rush of

recognition. “Every time something goes wrong, my mom loves to tell me how bad I am at being a grown-up. I haven’t told her anything about my job or my boyfriend—*ex*-boyfriend. It would give her too much ammunition. I find it better to say nothing.”

“Sounds just like my dad.” Nat sighed. “Perhaps we’re not quite as different as we look.”

“Maybe not,” Roxy said. Nat gave her a little smile and leaned over. She held out her fist. Roxy met it with her own—a fist bump! She didn’t think she’d ever done one before. It wasn’t conventional, but it worked. Their shared experience bonded them together.

Shortly afterward, the receptionist came out of the shining silver elevator in the hotel lobby. “There’s no answer from his room,” he told Nat. “I’m afraid you’ll have to try again later.”

At that moment, Nat’s phone rung. It was Elijah. Nat put the call on speakerphone. Roxy could hear a voice, it sounded like Louise’s, wailing and sobbing in the background.

“This was supposed to be . . . the beginning . . . of my new . . . life!” She sounded hysterical. And no wonder.

For it was Louise, it turned out, who had found the missing property developer. He was in the cemetery at the end of the alleyway, behind one of the graves. He was dead, a bullet through his chest.

* * *

Louise had come across Richard Lomas’ body on her morning jog. At first, she thought he was passed out drunk and shook him, but . . . “Deathly cold!” she’d

reported through sobs. “Deathly cold! And with a gunshot wound!”

Now, Roxy sat in the corner of the dining room at Evangeline’s, feeling numb as the drama played out before her. They had raced back to the guesthouse from the hotel, and Nat had gone straight into panic mode. She couldn’t stop making tea and coffee and plying everyone with beignets. “A cup of tea will make everything better,” she kept saying.

“It’s her crazy English way,” Evangeline explained. She sat slumped in a chair, periodically shaking her head, biting her lip, and wringing her hands. Elijah had rushed over when he heard Louise’s screams, and his complexion was now a shade of green that matched his shirt. He hovered in the doorway, looking unsure of himself. In the corner, Sage took Louise in her arms and rocked her gently, stroking her hair to calm her. Slowly, Louise’s wails subsided to sobs, then to a whimper as the shock of her discovery abated.

9-1-1 had been called, and as the small group waited for the police, the friends sat mostly in silence, all quietly contemplating Louise’s discovery, what it could mean, and wondering what on earth would happen next.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



DETECTIVE WILLIAM JOHNSON was a robust man in his early sixties with thick glasses and a bald head. He wasn't particularly tall or large, but he was sturdy and sure on his feet. He somehow dwarfed the dining room. He wore a sharp black suit and had the look of a bull that was about to charge.

As soon as he stepped into the room, Sage shivered. "Bad vibes," Roxy heard her whisper. "Very bad vibes."

Roxy couldn't have agreed more. Johnson seemed to make the very air turn cold and hostile. He was deeply unsettling, and the cruel glimmer in his eyes made Roxy feel like running upstairs and pulling the comforter over her head. As he looked over at Evangeline, Roxy could have sworn she heard him growl.

"Right, listen up! It seems that this was the last place the victim was seen alive." His eyes swiveled to Evangeline. They were beady, threatening. "He was talking to you." Johnson looked back at the others and said, "So you'll all stay here until you've spoken with me one by one."

Sam came running into the dining room, his eyes wild with anxiety. "Elijah called me. Is everyone okay?"

Detective Johnson sneered. "We're all fine, thank you, Superman. But now that you're here, you can sit yourself down, too."

"Right," Sam said, a little defensively. Roxy couldn't help but notice he looked pretty nervous, just as Nat did. Did he have something to hide, too? He avoided Johnson's eyes and rounded his broad shoulders like he was trying to make himself smaller, inconspicuous. "Well, I'm glad everything's being taken care of." Sam sat down on a chair by the door.

"Shall I fix everyone some coffee?" Nat said. When she got no response, "Maybe tea would be better?" She bit her lip and rushed into the kitchen.

"You first," Johnson said, pointing at Roxy.

"M . . . me?" said Roxy.

The detective sneered again. "Yes. You."

"Oh, but I wasn't even here when the body was found. I just came back."

Johnson stared at her. "Roxy Reinhardt, right? I've heard that you were at the victim's *hotel* when the body was found! I want to know why."

He took her to a side room off the lobby, which Evangeline and Nat used as a place to dump stuff in order to keep everywhere else clean. There was a mess of files, some with papers poking out as they tried to make their escape onto the floor. An old washing machine stood in the corner, and an assortment of random items, including napkins, plates, bed linen, and bizarrely, a bicycle wheel, were crammed into the rest of the space.

There was just about enough room for two chairs. Johnson set his recording device on top of a stack of files

and sniffed. “Well, this will have to do.” He then stated the date and time for the benefit of the recording. “Now please give me your full name.”

“Roxanne Melissa Reinhardt,” Roxy said.

“Date of birth?”

“2, 27, 1995.”

“Address?”

“Well . . . I’m kind of *between* addresses,” she said. She really didn’t want to elaborate about her breakup to this stern-faced, hard-hearted detective, but he looked at her with one eyebrow cocked. It clearly meant, “explain.” She tried to put a positive spin on things. “I’m starting a new life,” she said, holding her head high. “I wanted a change of scenery.”

“Tell me about what you were doing before and where,” Johnson said flatly. She had to go into detail, it seemed. “And how did you end up in New Orleans?” he said when she had finished.

“By bus,” she said.

He sighed, exasperated. “No, *why* New Orleans in particular?”

Roxy gulped. What could she say? Because her *cat* had alerted her to a commercial, which had stirred a feeling deep inside her that she didn’t understand? And she’d simply abandoned her former life and left? How ridiculous did *that* sound? In fact, it *was* ridiculous. What on earth was she doing with her life?

“Ms. Reinhardt?” Johnson said. He was watching her suspiciously.

She realized she had better come up with an answer fast. “Well, what with my ex-boyfriend leaving and me having a stressful time at work, I was attracted here by the, um, cuisine. It intrigued me. I thought it would be

good to go somewhere . . . interesting.” Roxy’s palms were sweating, but she didn’t want to wipe them against her jeans in case it made her look guilty.

“So, you left your job and your home town indefinitely because of . . . Creole and Cajun *food*?” Detective Johnson did not sound impressed. Roxy didn’t know if that was because he suspected her of lying, or that he considered her life choices to be ludicrous.

“Something like that, sir.”

“Oookay, then,” Johnson said. He continued on. “Richard Lomas died from a gunshot wound in the early hours of this morning. Also this morning, you accompanied . . . someone . . . to the Fontainebleau Hotel where he was staying, in order to track him down. Why was that?”

Roxy could feel her hands trembling. Authority figures always made her feel afraid. “Well . . .” she began, and her voice wobbled. “Evangeline had decided she was going to sell the guesthouse to Mr. Lomas and had arranged for him to come over and sign the papers. He didn’t turn up. The atmosphere here was tense, and I decided a walk would do me good. So when Nat said she was going to find him, Mr. Lomas, that is, I decided on the spur of the moment to go with her. Evangeline was angry that he hadn’t shown up.”

“Right,” the detective said. “Evangeline is a well-known figure in these parts. She’s been part of the establishment for decades. What is not clear is why she would decide to sell to this developer. She’s well-known in town as a conservationist, wanting to keep old buildings alive. She’s also known as someone who never gives up, even in the face of a sensible, logical proposition.” The veins in Johnson’s temples stood out, and his jaw muscle twitched as a dark cloud of annoyance swept over his face

as he spoke. Roxy got the feeling there was some history between the two that she didn't know about. His animosity seemed extreme and out of place for so early in an investigation. "I find it hard to believe she would sell her property knowing that he would tear it down and develop the area beyond all recognition."

"I think she's at the end of her rope," Roxy said. "Exhausted by the responsibility and drudgery of running such a place. I'm sure she didn't do it if that's what you mean. Kill Mr. Lomas," Roxy blurted out. "I mean, why would she? She wanted to sell her property to him."

Johnson smirked. "Is that so? Well, thank you for that important insight. Tell me again, which police department did you transfer from to come here?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“I . . . UH . . .” ROXY stumbled.

“So who do *you* think did it?” Johnson said, leaning forward, his eyes bright, his voice full of fake enthusiasm. He was mocking her.

Roxy felt heat flush her cheeks. A sense of shame burned in her chest, but since she’d been asked the question, she decided to answer it. “Probably Mara Lomas. That’s his wife. She came over yesterday, telling us to inform her husband that she knew what he was doing. Something about an affair.”

“Right,” Johnson said, raising his eyebrows and looking a little more interested in what she had to say. “She came over here?”

“Yes, she was in the street outside.”

“That’s mighty convenient for Evangeline,” he muttered under his breath. He coughed and looked down at his notebook. When he looked back up at Roxy, his eyes were shining.

His expression sent a shiver through Roxy. What *was* his beef with Evangeline? Did he hold a grudge against

her? He wasn't being logical, that was for sure. Or without bias, it would seem.

"Not convenient at all," Roxy said firmly. "How would killing Lomas help her? His wife has a far stronger motive." Roxy wasn't quite sure where she was finding the courage to speak out like this, but her sense of fair play was acute. And justice wasn't being done here.

"I'm not interested in your speculation," Johnson snapped, despite the fact he had been asking for just that a minute or so ago.

A silence stretched out between them. Roxy played with her fingers in her lap while Johnson sat back and let out a sigh. Roxy doubted he ever felt uncomfortable. He had far too much confidence and self-assurance. It was very off-putting.

"Is this place going to be shut down?" she asked.

"Not yet," Johnson said with a snort. "There's no reason for it. However, if a certain someone happens to be guilty and is carted off to jail, it won't be able to continue. It will have to be sold, probably to another developer who will tear it down. No one will buy it and retain it in its current state." He looked around with disgust as if he had found himself in a stinking pigpen.

"Actually, two people said they would buy it, aside from the developer."

"And you tell me that *now*?" Detective Johnson said, leaning forward. "Who? We may have to protect them from . . ." Roxy knew he *desperately* wanted to say Evangeline, but he couldn't, because the tape was running. "Harm," he said eventually. "Give me their names."

"Louise, the other guest," Roxy said. "The one who found the body. She's an interior designer. And Sam, the handyman and laundryman. He plays the saxophone,"

she added and regretted it immediately. The instrument Sam played was completely irrelevant to the inquiry.

“Okay,” Johnson said. “We need to make sure they stay safe. They might be in danger. Are either of them putting pressure on Evangeline to sell?”

“I don’t think so,” Roxy said. “They seemed to be offering a way to preserve the building and for Evangeline to stay on in some capacity. They didn’t want to tear it down. They wanted to keep the guesthouse as is, improve it, update it. Their offers seemed to be acts of genuine kindness.”

Detective Johnson opened his eyes wide and shook his head slowly. Roxy stopped herself from speaking. He was still being illogical. There was no sane reason to suspect Evangeline. “Right,” he said. “So you would say they’re on Evangeline’s side?”

Roxy was getting a little sick of his line of questioning. He seemed so closed-minded, so dogged in his dislike of Evangeline. Every time he said her name his lip literally curled. “I don’t know,” she said, a little more sharply than she’d usually have managed toward an authority figure. “I’m new around here. I don’t know anything about sides.”

“Whatever,” he said. His voice thickened into a monotonous drawl and his eyes glazed over as he said, “Can you account for your whereabouts last night?”

Roxy explained about the parade, then the meal, and the boat ride. She told him of her near mugging, and how afraid she had been, and how Sam had come to her rescue.

“Why are you going red?” Detective Johnson said.

That only made her blush deeper, and stammer for the right words to say. “It’s . . . it’s hot in here.”

Johnson rolled his eyes. "Can you tell me what Evangeline was doing last night? Was she with you at the parade? At the meal? On the boat ride?"

"No," Roxy said. "She stayed here. She said she'd been to enough carnival parades to last a lifetime, and she didn't feel like it. I think she was very sad. She seemed to have resigned herself to selling this guesthouse, but she doesn't really want to."

"Conjecture," Detective Johnson snapped. "You have no idea what she was thinking. And she was here, alone, not far from where the victim was found. Very suspicious."

"Well, I do know that she was holding Nefertiti when we left. Nefertiti's a very good companion when you're not feeling your best. And she's a very good judge of character."

"Who on earth is Nefertiti?" Johnson said irritably.

"My cat."

Johnson smirked. "And we can trust your cat to be a reliable character witness, can we?" He rolled his eyes again. "Anything more to say?"

"I don't think so," Roxy said. She couldn't stand being around this guy. She wanted to get away from him as quickly as possible. Roxy burned to say something to him about how he was assuming all kinds of bad things about Evangeline, but a shadowy fear swirled within her and sucked her voice down her throat. She lost her nerve. She wasn't brave or bold enough.

"No," Roxy said eventually, more firmly this time.

"Right. Interview over." Johnson snapped off the machine. "Now, I want to see the girl you went to the hotel with, whatever her name is; the strange looking one

who works here, the one with all the tattoos, wears only black.”

“That’s Nat.” Roxy felt for Nat. She was going to sweat. Roxy hoped Nat was a good actress because before she had even blinked, Johnson would have decided that her close relationship with Evangeline meant Nat was probably an accomplice to some crime that existed only in his mind. And that was before he knew of her illegal status.

“Nat,” Johnson said disapprovingly. “Go and get her. And tell her to bring me some coffee and beignets. And don’t scrimp on the beignets, you hear?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



“THAT GUY,” NAT said furiously. “Who the heck does he think he is?”

“Right?” Roxy agreed.

“He is deeply entrapped by his ego,” Sage said. “His true self is lost somewhere so deep within him that he doesn’t know who he is.”

“Well, I know exactly *what* he is,” said Nat. “A complete and utter . . .”

“He thinks Evangeline’s the murderer,” Roxy said, cutting Nat off before she said something she might regret. “And seemingly without any evidence.”

After Johnson had finished speaking with her, Roxy had watched the others, Nat, Evangeline, Louise, Elijah, Sage, and briefly, Sam, go into the small junk room one by one. They had all traipsed out again a while later, their faces blank. Judging by the look on the detective’s face when he finally emerged, no one, it seemed, had had any information that was remotely useful.

In need of a break, Roxy, Sage, and Nat had decided to take a walk down by the Mississippi River. Sage had said

she was feeling “energetically tied up” and Roxy knew exactly what she meant. The African-American woman looked particularly serene that morning, in long, flowing robes the color of golden sunlight. She had pulled back her now-braided mermaid hair into a topknot and adorned it with yellow-gold flowers. They were real, Roxy could tell, the petals had begun to droop a little.

“Of course it wasn’t Evangeline,” Nat snapped. “It’s *got* to be the developer’s wife.”

“That’s what I told him as well,” said Roxy. “She’s got to be the main suspect, surely?” Then an idea struck her. “Sage?” she said, then paused because she realized the idea sounded silly.

Sage looked at her. “What is it, good soul?”

“I don’t know . . . this sounds kind of dumb.” Roxy wasn’t afraid to say it in front of Sage, but she *was* scared of Nat’s reaction. Sniggering was the most likely one.

“Go ahead,” Sage said smoothly. She gave Nat a warning look. Roxy wondered if Sage’s skills included mind reading.

She blew out a little breath and looked over the river. She tried to find a way to phrase what she was about to say so that it didn’t sound preposterous. “You know that you know magic and everything . . .?”

“Yes,” Sage said, her face lighting up.

“Like the cards and stuff. I was wondering if there was any way to . . . well, to find out who did it. Using magic.”

“Oh, come on, Rox,” said Nat. Sage shot her another look, but it didn’t stop her. “If that were the case, we wouldn’t need detectives or police or anything. Sage isn’t Harry Potter, you know, and this is New Orleans, not Hogwarts.”

"I know, but . . ." Roxy struggled to reply. She knew it was a crazy idea.

"Well, good friends, there *are* ways to do so," said Sage, mellow despite Nat's derision. "But it requires very advanced magic. I have been practicing for thirty-three years, and even I wouldn't trust my own ability at that level. Magic of that form is . . . complex."

"Then who would be able to do it?" Roxy asked. "Can we find someone like that?"

"It would need to be one who has trained with a long line of indigenous priests, perhaps an advanced magician from Haiti or the Congo, or somewhere deep in the heart of South America. Certainly not me, unfortunately."

"Oh, what rubbish!" Nat said. "You don't really *believe* in all this magic stuff, do you, Sage? Sure, you mess around with the cards and buy your lotions and potions and incense. But it doesn't really *mean* anything, does it? It's just a source of comfort, a hobby. It's not *real*."

"That is grossly disrespectful, Nat," Sage said calmly.

"Yeah, but, come on! Magic? Even little kids grow out of that by the time they're 7 or 8. Yet here you are, a grown person, actually professing to believe in this stuff?"

"Everyone believes in different things," Roxy said, trying to smooth the atmosphere over.

"People around the world have used magic for thousands and thousands of years," Sage said. "Since the beginning of time. Whole societies have depended upon it. Look at the Ancient Egyptians, for example."

"Why would I do that?" Nat said dismissively.

Roxy looked up to the sky.

To her surprise, Sage actually laughed gently. "You

haven't done any in-depth research into magic throughout the ages, have you?" she asked Nat.

"No, I have not," Nat retorted.

"Have you read a single book on magic?"

"Well, no, but . . ."

"Exactly," Sage said smoothly. "You're simply projecting your uneducated prejudice onto me, without even knowing what you're talking about. And we are supposed to be friends, Nat. You're devaluing the foundation of my entire existence. That is *not* what friends do."

Roxy found her heart beating faster. "I don't think she meant to . . ."

"Nat knows exactly what she's doing," said Sage, her voice getting harder. The light caught her eyes and Roxy could see tears reflected in them. "Magic is my life. Magic saved me from . . . well, let's say I haven't had the easiest life. Magic is why I'm here today." Nat dropped her head and stared at her combat boots.

"And because Nat is stressed about this situation and her own *precarious* status, she starts picking a fight with me to let off some steam." Sage drew herself up to her full height. She was nearly six-feet tall. "Hear this, Nat. You need to be more aware of your feelings and be honest about them. The more you hide and suppress them, the more they come out in toxic leaks like this. You have hurt me with your words, very deeply. But I will choose the higher road." Her voice wobbled. "I'll see you all later." Sage glided away, her golden robes swishing.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



ROXY COULD HEAR her heart beating against her chest. She and Nat walked on in silence, neither of them wanting to talk about what had just happened. Soon they found a bench, and Nat flopped down on it. Roxy joined her. They both stared across the rippling river for a while.

“She’s right, you know,” Nat said eventually. “I am worried about being found out and deported *and* this whole murder thing. I knew what I was saying was hurtful, but there was something in me that just kept pushing on and on, wanting to keep going until she got mad at me. But Sage never gets mad. Not really.”

Roxy couldn’t understand what Nat was talking about. The idea of riling someone up until they got upset seemed both pointless and abhorrent to her.

“Now she’s gone off, I feel kind of relieved,” Nat said. “But also horrible. Because she’s really upset now.”

“Maybe you could go after her and apologize?” Roxy suggested. “She’s probably at the magic store.”

“How ironic,” Nat said, shaking her head.

Roxy watched a cloud being carried by the wind through the cold, blue sky. “Do you really believe what you said about magic?”

Nat sighed. “I don’t know. Like Sage said, I don’t know anything about it, really. I guess I’m a skeptic, but I haven’t looked into it. Not properly. It just seems so, oh I don’t know, pie in the sky, airy-fairy.”

“I’ve never really come across it before,” said Roxy. “I don’t know if I believe in it, but it is interesting. Since I’ve been here, I realize there are a *lot* of things I don’t know about. My life has been . . . sheltered.”

Nat laughed, but not unkindly. “That’s why I left England. I was born in London’s East End and my parents have worked hard all their lives. They wanted the best for me but our ideas of what that looked like were different. I was expected to go to university, get a clean, respectable office job, get married, have 2.3 kids or whatever, and a mortgage, preferably on a house in the suburbs. To them that was success, but just saying that bores me, let alone *doing* it for the rest of my life.”

It sounded lovely to Roxy, but she could appreciate it wasn’t for everyone. “You wanted more adventure.”

“Yep,” said Nat. “I got a nanny job here. My plan was to travel afterward. Go to India. Australia. Thailand.” She laughed again, but it was hollow.

“You could still, couldn’t you?”

“Yeah, I think so. But since I’ve overstayed my visa, I’m guessing they’ll never let me back into the US once I leave.”

“Oh.”

“When I do leave or get deported, I’m going to be leaving for good. So, as much as I want to explore the world, I’m not sure I can bring myself . . .” Nat looked

around. "New Orleans has become like home to me now. And Evangeline's like . . . not my mum exactly, but oh, I don't know, my crazy great aunt, or something. I don't want Evangeline's to get shut down."

"Me, neither," said Roxy. "I'm already feeling attached to the place, and I've only been here a couple of days."

Nat gave a smile tinged with a little sadness. "Sage is very wise," Nat said. "The magic stuff aside, she just is magic. She knows a lot of stuff. Before I met her, I'd *never* be here talking to you about emotions and stuff. I'd be somewhere down there . . ." She pointed to a bridge. "Probably *under* there, drinking away my sorrows, sure that no one would understand, and that I was the only person in the world with problems." She laughed at herself. "Sage is very wise," she repeated.

Roxy smiled. "She does seem like a very special person."

"Yep," Nat said. She got up from the bench. "Let's go find her, and I can tell her what a total idiot I am."

Roxy stood and gave Nat a side hug. "You're not a total idiot."

"Oh, really I am," Nat said raising her eyebrows.

"We need to make a plan," Roxy said firmly. "A plan of how we're going to find out who *really* killed that developer. I feel sure Johnson will try to pin the murder on Evangeline, and that'll ruin everything as well as be a terrible miscarriage of justice." Roxy felt a great sense of loyalty toward these people already. "If he isn't going to investigate fairly, then *we* will."

Nat looked at Roxy in surprise. "You're feistier than I thought," she said.

Roxy smiled back, remembering something her old

English teacher had said. He'd been the only teacher who hadn't treated her as if she were invisible. *Roxy, you're soft on the outside, but steely underneath, where it counts.* Roxy had never believed him but now, she felt it. It was a rush. "Thanks," she said to Nat.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



SAGE TOOK NAT'S bumbling apology outside the magic supplies store very graciously. In fact, she threw her arms around Nat's shoulders and squeezed her tight. "You know I love you, don't you, honey?"

Nat sniffed and swallowed hard. She bent her head into Sage's robed shoulder. She was the type to hold back tears at all costs, stiff upper lip and all that. "Yep," was all she could manage.

As they walked their way back to Evangeline's, the silence between them was companionable and restful after the emotional drama of earlier. The air was cold, but Roxy found it exhilarating. It chilled her cheeks as clouds cast a dark canopy over them, threatening rain. Sage had bought some strongly fragranced incense and even unlit, its mysterious musky smell wafted up from the paper bag she held and made the air around them sweet and unusual.

As they walked through the streets of the city, past a mixture of old, traditional buildings and flashing neon signs, Roxy felt something that she never had before. A

sense of purpose, perhaps? A *mission*? A quest? But not only that . . . she felt a kinship. A *shared* goal. It struck her as she fell into step beside Nat and Sage.

For the first time, Roxy felt like she belonged. She felt like she mattered, that she was part of something bigger than herself. She stopped thinking in any sort of longing, tugging way about her ex-boyfriend. Instead, she wondered, “What on *earth* was I thinking?” And, quite miraculously, she stopped worrying and desperately craving security and stability. It was ironic that here, in a city she didn’t know, with people she had just met, in an accommodation that could fall through at any moment, with the most uncertain future she had ever faced, she felt the safest she ever had.

Finally, Nat spoke up as they walked past a diner, and the air around them became thick and warm with the forceful smell of burgers and fries. It was so strong; it even drove away the scent of the incense that permanently swirled around Sage. “Oh heck, I’m starving,” Nat said. “Let’s grab some lunch here.” She slipped her phone out of her pants pocket. “It’s two o’clock already. I doubt Evangeline will be up to cooking today. I’m certainly not.”

Sage, a vegetarian, ordered herself a portion of fries. Nat got a cheeseburger, fries and a milkshake. Roxy, meanwhile, realized that she’d barely nibbled at her beignets that morning, and there was a dull ache in her stomach. The events of the day had distracted her, but as whiffs of fast food assailed her, her hunger made itself known, and she felt slightly nauseous. She ordered a chicken burger and fries combo that came with a soda. The food arrived in minutes, and they carried their trays to one of the laminated tables. It was safe to say this was not one of New Orleans’ finest eating

establishments, but Roxy didn't care. Right then, something cheap, familiar, and fattening seemed the best option.

None of them said much until their food was mostly eaten. Roxy's mind wandered back to the case. "How are we going to prove to Johnson that the murderer is not Evangeline? I'm *sure* it's Mara Lomas. I mean, come on, she thought her husband was having an affair, and she *threatened* him—out loud and in public. She said he needed all the protection he could get. How on earth can Johnson think it was Evangeline with that evidence in front of him? It's a total open and shut case."

"One would think so," Sage said with a grimace. "But knowing the story between that man and Evangeline, I wouldn't be so sure."

"Aha! I *knew* there had to be a history between them!" Roxy exclaimed. "When he questioned me, he was acting like he loathed her. Why is that?"

Sage blew a stream of air out of her mouth and adjusted her golden robes. "Evangeline's always been quite an activist. That lady is *tough*, I tell you. When she believes in something and knows she's right, she'll hang on to the very end. It's actually most unlike her to have given in to this developer. It's sad, really. I think it's because her eyesight is deteriorating, but anyway, she's been a thorn in Johnson's side for years."

"In what sense?" Roxy asked.

"Hey!" Nat interrupted. "Look!"

Roxy turned to see Nat pointing at the TV on the wall. It was showing local news. *MURDER*, it read at the bottom of the screen. There was a female reporter standing in front of the cordoned-off cemetery. Blue lights flashed. Police swarmed everywhere behind her.

“Hey, would you turn it up, please?” Nat said to the young woman behind the counter.

The woman pressed her lips together and flicked her mousey brown ponytail with annoyance, but she complied with Nat’s request. It was an old-fashioned boxy television, and the woman, who was quite short, had to reach up on tiptoes to press the volume button.

“The wife of the deceased is currently assisting police with their investigations,” the reporter said, her hair blowing about her in the breeze.

“Aha!” Nat took a delighted sip on her milkshake, her eyes lighting up. “Well, there we go. Johnson has seen sense after all. ‘Assisting with investigations’ *always* means guilty as heck. It’s just that they’re not quite ready to charge her.”

Roxy had been imagining Evangeline rattling around in jail, the other prisoners taking advantage of her as her eyesight got worse. She frowned as she sipped on her straw, even though her soda was long drained. “I certainly hope you’re right,” she said.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



THEY CONTINUED TO stare at the TV even though the news report had moved on to more upbeat topics. The channel was now showing footage of the carnival celebrations.

“You know, I don’t think Mara did it,” Sage said.

“Of course she did,” Nat scoffed.

But Roxy wasn’t so quick to dismiss Sage. “What makes you say that?”

Sage looked straight at Roxy, her dark eyes flashing. “My intuition.”

“Oh, for goodness . . .” Nat began, then seemed to remember their earlier argument and rushed to say, “Well, I mean, well, you know, I . . .” She couldn’t find anything with which to elegantly finish off her sentence so she sighed and her shoulders slumped. “Sorry.”

“Not to worry, sugar,” Sage said. She threw Nat a wink and patted her hand.

Roxy’s mind began to whirl again. She had never *ever* trusted her intuition. In the past, she’d always felt too anxious to *have* any. Her decision to come to New Orleans

had been unique in that respect. Until that point, when faced with choices, Roxy had always gone for the safest option, the one with the least potential to go wrong. Now, however, feeling much more relaxed in New Orleans among her new friends, the strange gut feeling she had, the fluttering that told her, *No, something isn't quite right here*, stood out. She wondered what it could mean. If Mara hadn't killed the developer, then who had?

"Let's go," Nat said. "Now that they've caught that dead man's crazy wife, maybe Evangeline will think about keeping the guesthouse open. I want to persuade her."

"You know she can't afford to keep it going," said Sage, as they tipped their tray contents into the trash. "It's been running at a loss for ages."

"Yeah, but Sam said he'd buy it off her," Nat said breezily as if the deal had already been sealed. "And Louise is our backup. As annoying as she is, if she keeps the guesthouse open, I'll be her best friend for life."

Roxy laughed. "And maybe there'll finally be a steamy romance between her and Sam as they run the guesthouse together. It'd be like something out of a book."

Nat snorted. "In her dreams."

"She's alright," Roxy said as they walked back out onto the street.

"No, too old, too cougar," said Nat. "And she keeps totally embarrassing herself."

"She is suffering," Sage said. "I would say both her first and second chakras are severely out of balance."

Nat opened her mouth, then closed it again. She let out a huge happy sigh, swinging her arms as they walked. "Well, looks like that dumb Johnson won't be sniffing around for much longer. Let's go home and persuade

Evangeline and Sam and Louise or any combination of the above to keep Evangeline's open."

* * *

When they got back, they found that Evangeline was not in the mood to be persuaded to do anything, however. They found her sweeping the dining room and humming a furious tune, her lips pursed tightly together. Roxy saw her roughly wipe away a tear from her cheek.

Sam was in the corner bagging up tablecloths for laundering. He gave Nat a cautionary look as they walked in, but Nat ignored him.

"Did you see Mara Lomas has been arrested, Evangeline? We're all off the hook. You can relax. So promise me you're going to keep this place, and I won't get deported."

"She's not been arrested, just taken in for questionin'," Evangeline said, not looking up from her sweeping. "And your immigration status has nothin' to do with me. I helped you out when I didn't have to, so I don't appreciate you tryin' to put a guilt trip on me, Miss Natalie."

"Don't call me that," said Nat. All the confidence had seeped out of her voice.

"Now, there's things to do," said Evangeline, "and you've been out for far too long. You can begin by tacklin' that stack of teacups in the kitch'n."

Nat pressed her lips together and walked away to make a start on the cups, accompanied by a lot of banging and slamming.

Evangeline sighed. "I'm being horrible, aren't I?" she said to Sage.

Sage placed a hand on her arm and said in a quiet,

kind voice. "Perhaps you're not quite embodying your best self."

Evangeline burst into tears. "I'm sorry, Nat, cher," she said, going to the kitchen door and speaking through it. "I'm just so very upset about the guesthouse and if everythin's goin' to work out. Don't take old Evangeline so seriously. Don't take my words to heart, cher."

Evangeline pushed the door open and went into the kitchen, wrapping a surprised Nat up in a big, warmly reciprocated hug. Roxy and Sage exchanged glances. Despite their bickering back and forth, Nat and Evangeline were clearly quite fond of one another. But, oh the tension. Roxy was fit to wilt.

CHAPTER TWENTY



AFTER THE SECOND emotional reconciliation in as many hours, Roxy needed a break. She headed to her room. Nefertiti was on the stairs, attending to her complex self-grooming regimen. As soon as she saw Roxy, she sprang to her feet and wound her fuzzy, fluffy self round and round Roxy's ankles.

"Hello, beautiful girl," Roxy said, leaning down to tickle her under the chin.

Nefertiti purred loudly, then padded up the stairs alongside her owner.

"You like it here, don't you?" said Roxy before sighing emphatically. "Me too. I'm going to find a way to get us to stay here, Nef." She turned to look at Nefertiti's cute squashed up face. "We might have to do a little investigating, though. Oh, oh!" Roxy suddenly found herself knocked off her feet as she turned the corner of the stairs and fell sprawling across the staircase.

"Oh no!" Louise said. "Sorry!" Her voice was thick as if she had been crying. She was sitting on the stairs

looking out of one of the old stained glass windows, her knees pulled up under her chin.

“It’s okay,” Roxy said, grabbing onto the stair rail to pull herself up. “I wasn’t looking where I was going.”

Louise wiped mascara from under her eyes, where it had begun to run in black streaks carried by her tears. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” Roxy said, although her elbow ached a little where she’d banged it against a step. “Are you?”

“I’m fine,” said Louise. She even tried a smile, but it looked so strained, hiding so much pain, that it tugged at Roxy’s heart.

Roxy felt a little nervous at what she was about to do and tapped one hand into the palm of the other. In the past, she had always diverted herself from any drama or problem or worry as soon as she could. Anything that wasn’t completely smooth sailing made her bite her lip and her pulse race. But this time, things felt different. She needed to do something.

Roxy sat down next to Louise and put an arm around her. “Something’s up. What’s wrong?”

Nefertiti clearly thought Louise had a lot of wrong going on, because she curled up at the feet of the two women and tucked her head under her paw, falling quickly into a snooze.

Louise looked down at the cat and gave a sad little smile. “She looks so cozy and happy and safe.”

Roxy smiled. “She sure does.”

Louise let out a long, sad sigh. “I wish I felt like that.”

“It would be awesome to be a cat, wouldn’t it?” Roxy agreed.

That made Louise laugh a little, her voice still tinged

with sadness. "Life would be a whole lot less complicated, that's for sure."

They sank into silence. Roxy looked at Louise out of the corner of her eye, trying to read her expression. "Is it . . . just that . . . well, you've been through so much already, what with your husband having an affair, you feeling like you had a new life ahead, and then this awful . . ." She couldn't bring herself to say the word. "This awful *thing* happened. You must be feeling like you don't know what to do and that things are hopeless anyway."

Louise widened her eyes. "Are you psychic? You read me like a book, Roxy. That's incredible."

"Oh, gosh," Roxy said quickly, flushing with embarrassment at the compliment. "No special skills here at all. I . . . I think it's quite easy to see."

Louise burst into tears. "So it's obvious to everyone that I'm a total mess?" she said thickly.

"Oh, no, no!" said Roxy. "That isn't what I meant at all!"

Louise gulped down tears, her face flushing. "Sorry, I apologize," she said. "I really do. A fully grown woman blubbing all over the place like this, it isn't dignified." She pulled herself up straight and attempted to regain her composure, but her face crumpled. "But you're right, it's just like you said. I had thought that this was to be my new start. But . . ."

"Didn't you say you wanted to buy the guesthouse?" Roxy said. "You still could. It would be a new start. A new life."

"I'm not sure I want to anymore. I can't . . ." Louise's eyes took on a glazed-over, faraway look as she trailed off.

"You can't what?"

"I can't stop . . . thinking about it. That moment."

Roxy paused for a second to fathom what Louise was talking about. From the traumatized look on her face, she gathered she must have meant the moment she stumbled across Richard Lomas' body.

"It's going to haunt me forever," Louise said. "His eyes . . . his eyes . . . they were open." Roxy shuddered involuntarily. "I want to get away," said Louise, firmly.

"You can do that," Roxy said. "You came here out of nowhere, didn't you say? Just like me. So you could go somewhere else. Anywhere."

Louise shook her head. "It's not the same anymore." Roxy could see she'd lost her confidence, her sense of adventure, her *joie de vivre*. "But I don't want to stay here, either," Louise added. "Anyway, I can't get away from myself, can I? I can't get away from what's in my own mind."

Roxy sighed. There was no answer to that. "I guess not." She was starting to feel a little depressed herself. She tried to come up with a positive thought. "Still, at least they've taken Mara Lomas, the developer's wife, in for questioning. That's progress, isn't it?"

"I guess," Louise said, looking unsure. "If she really is the killer. But it could have been . . ." She opened her mouth, and then closed it suddenly again. "Well, it could have been anyone."

Roxy's heart started thumping a little louder than usual. She looked at Louise. "Do you have an idea who the murderer might be?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



LOUISE PAUSED. HER eyes flickered. She was weighing something up in her mind. Eventually, she said, “No. We can all make our guesses, I’m sure. But I’d prefer the police find out who did it from the evidence.”

“Yes,” Roxy agreed. “You’re absolutely right.”

“But considering Lomas wanted to take over Evangeline’s, as well as *other buildings*, and he didn’t do business in a very honorable fashion from what I hear, they’ve probably got a massive suspect pool to work through.”

“He wanted to buy up other buildings in the city?”

“Uh-huh,” Louise said. “Before you arrived, I found him outside Evangeline’s making a phone call. I heard him say something like ‘I’m taking a look at two in the French Quarter, then I’ll head over to Touro.’”

“Oh,” said Roxy. She sat with that information for a moment and let it run through her mind. “Okay.” Things seemed to be getting quite a lot more complicated all of a sudden. She slumped back against the stair feeling crushed.

Why on earth had she thought that *she* could find out

who the killer was? After all, she was only an ex-call center operator? What did she know about investigations? What did she know about *anything*?

“Well . . .” she said, her mind a blank. “Right.”

“Are you going to be staying on here?” Louise asked. “Or do you think you’ll move on?”

“I . . . I’m not sure.”

“Go out and see the world while you can, would be my advice,” said Louise. “Whatever you do, don’t settle down with a no-good man and waste half your life, like me.” She gave a half-smile. “Hopefully, by the time you’re my age, you’ll have life a lot more figured out than I do.”

Roxy tried to think of a way to respond to her politely, but there wasn’t one. She just nodded a little awkwardly instead.

As if sensing the mood, Nefertiti got up and arched her back in a stretch. She began to pad up the stairs without so much as a backward look.

“It’s been such a long day,” Roxy said. “I’m going to see if I can nap the rest of the afternoon away.”

“That sounds like a good plan,” said Louise, offering her another small smile. She remained seated and watched, her eyes soulful and sad, as Roxy stood and followed her cat up the stairs.

Once they entered the loft, Roxy fed Nefertiti a packet of cat food and stood over her as she scarfed it down. When her cat had eaten her fill and raised her head to indicate she was done, Roxy dropped backward onto the bed.

She hadn’t realized how tired she was until she sprawled out, her arms and legs spread like a starfish. She looked up at the white ceiling.

The next thing she knew, she awoke with a jerk. It

was nighttime—the curtains were drawn, and there was a warm, cozy glow flooding the room. Someone had turned the lamp on. There was the most delicious smell—hearty and spicy and savory and warm.

Against the wall, Roxy saw Evangeline illuminated by the lamp. “Sorry to wake you, cher,” she said. “I brought you your dinner. Thought you might like to have it up here. Sage had a tarot reading to do for a client. Nat’s gone to listen to her music, and Louise is in her room with a bottle of brandy. So there’s no dinner downstairs tonight.”

“Sure,” Roxy said, feeling quite disoriented as she sat up. “I’d love to have it up here. It smells delicious.”

“Awright, cher.” Evangeline brought the tray over from the side table and placed it on Roxy’s lap. “It’s real Creole comfort food. Red beans and rice with sausage and a glass of red wine.” Roxy looked down and inhaled its spicy fragrance. “And then some Bananas Foster for dessert. To you, that’s bananas browned in a whole heap of butter, sugar, and liquor, and served with vanilla ice cream. My momma used to make that for us as a real treat when I was growin’ up. I always like to have it when things aren’t so good. Reminds me of her, and how kind she was.”

Roxy smiled. “That story will make me enjoy it all the more.”

“Well, cher, I’ll leave you to your meal. I’ll come up later for your tray. Just you leave it outside your door.”

Roxy’s mind, still dazed from her nap, spun as she tried to formulate a question. “Um, Evangeline?” There was so much to ask. Was she still going to sell the guest-house? Did Roxy need to find somewhere else to go? Would Nat get deported? Roxy looked up at the ceiling as

she deliberated which question to lead with. As she did so, more questions popped into her mind. Why did Johnson dislike Evangeline so much? Why was Richard Lomas looking at other properties? Who did Evangeline believe the murderer to be? Was it her? Roxy's thoughts tied themselves in knots. She didn't really think Evangeline was the killer, but there was a part of her that knew no one could be trusted, not for sure. She had learned that growing up.

Evangeline laughed, as the silence stretched out. "Cat got your tongue?"

"What are you thinking about doing now?" Roxy blurted out.

"I can't say I'm sure yet," Evangeline said. "I *was* set on giving all this up." She cast her eyes around the room. "After all, my eyesight isn't what it used to be, and I don't have the energy I once had. I was all ready to sell to that developer fella, but it would be a real shame to let this place go, especially to have it torn down. Not many appreciate its beauty. She's an old girl, like me, but with a good structure, also like me." Evangeline laughed. "Yet, money is always . . . well, we don't have a money tree out front, do we?"

Roxy said, "I'm not sure Louise is still interested in taking it over, but what about Sam? Maybe he could put some money in the place and help renovate it. Then you would get more customers."

Evangeline's eye's hardened. "Charity, that would be." Her voice had hardened, too. "And Evangeline don't do charity." She bent down and gave Nefertiti a little tickle under her chin. "Ain't she so sweet? Yes, you are, cher! Yes, you are!" she said, cooing now. Roxy couldn't help but smile.

“Goodnight, Roxy. Enjoy your food, cher,” the elderly woman said.

“Thanks, Evangeline. For everything.”

The guesthouse owner paused by the door and looked back at Roxy with kindness in her eyes. “You’re most welcome, cher.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



BREAKFAST THE NEXT morning was another somber affair. Rain pounded at the windows. Outside, the light was a murky gray so dark they had to turn the lamps on. Roxy felt in limbo, and it seemed everyone else felt the same. Nobody spoke, except for Roxy when she gave Nat her order. Nat hadn't even asked her for it. She'd just turned up at the table and raised her eyebrows.

The silence remained unbroken until Elijah burst in with his cases of beignets. "Good morning!" he said jovially, walking across the room at a clip. Then he took in the atmosphere and stopped. "Well, we're a bunch of happy campers today, aren't we?" He laughed. "Don't you know? Today's the Endymion parade!"

He emphasized his words with an excited flourish that was remarkable given how many boxes of pastries he was balancing in one hand. No one replied except Roxy, who felt obliged to say something. She could only come up with a quiet, "Oh, okay."

"The weather's due to clear up by the afternoon. And the place'll be full of kids and laughter and lots of bright

colors and fun,” he said. “Come on, we all deserve some relaxation time. It will be a distraction.”

“There is a time for everything indeed,” Sage said. She had popped in for breakfast as she often did, but today she looked run down, in comparison to her usual unruffled self. Her long mermaid hair looked unkempt. Even her robe didn’t look right—the linen was all creased, and she’d spilled a drop of orange juice down the front. “Sometimes mourning and solemnity claim time for their own. We cannot always rush to distract ourselves from . . .”

“Oh, come now,” Elijah said with a charming smile. “Let’s take our minds off all the unpleasantness.”

Sage opened her mouth, but quickly closed it and sighed. She resumed munching on her beignet, poring over her laptop.

As he walked past her, Louise shot Elijah a spiteful look. It was so nasty that Roxy was startled by it. After a moment Louise looked down at her oatmeal and stirred her spoon slowly around the bowl. She clearly lacked an appetite. Roxy didn’t have one either, but that look perturbed her. Sure, Elijah could be a little insensitive to a mood, a little over the top, but Louise’s expression wasn’t one of annoyance, it was of pure hatred.

“What d’ya say, Nat? Evangeline?” Elijah said as he went into the kitchen.

Roxy turned back to Louise and scanned her face. The dark cloud had not left her features.

“We’re not quite in the right mood for a parade, are we?” Roxy tried.

“Mmmm,” Louise said. She was lost in her thoughts.

Roxy pressed on. “And you certainly don’t look in the mood for fun.”

“Oh, me?” said Louise. “I’m just thinking about liars, and how much I despise them.”

They heard Elijah in the kitchen. Louise shot more daggers in his direction.

“Liars?” Roxy said.

“Yes, liars.”

Elijah came out of the kitchen and said, “It’s settled! We’re leaving here at one o’clock after a quick lunch. See you then!”

“Bye,” Louise said, in a sickly-sweet voice. She had an equally false smile to match. Her eyes remained cold. As soon as Elijah had turned his back, she grimaced, her face full of disgust. “I hate liars, Roxy.”

Roxy leaned in. “What has Elijah lied about?” she asked quietly.

“Oh, not him in particular,” Louise said. She leaned back in her chair and her voice lost its intensity, but she couldn’t quite meet Roxy’s eyes. Roxy would have put money on the fact that Louise was lying. “Just men in general.”

“Is Elijah a cheat?” Roxy asked. “Does he even have a partner?”

“What does it matter?” Louise said. “Men are all cheaters and liars as far as I can tell. My husband, your boyfriend, Richard Lomas . . . and all the rest of them.”

“I really don’t think that’s true,” said Roxy. “Not all men.”

Louise gave her a patronizing smile. “You’re still a baby. You probably believe in Prince Charming. That a man will rush in on his charger to rescue you, and you’ll both live happily ever after. But don’t worry, it’ll take a couple more betrayals to knock that belief out of you, but knock it out of you they will.”

Roxy felt quite uncomfortable and a little angry at Louise's condescension. She shifted in her chair and looked at her without flinching. "You were staring at Elijah like you hated him. Why's that?"

Louise raised her eyebrows. "You're imagining things," she said. Her expression softened. "I'm sorry, we're all just tired and cranky and not thinking straight. Let's go to the parade later. I'm going to relax this morning. I suggest you do the same." Without another word, she got up from the table and left.

Roxy sat alone, looking out of the window when, all of a sudden, the lights went out. From the kitchen, the whirring sound of a mixer faded to nothing.

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" Roxy heard Evangeline shout. The old lady came barreling through from the kitchen. "The electricity's gone again," she called over furiously. "The wirin' in this darn place," she said. She shook her head. "No wonder everyone wants to tear it down."

With Evangeline on the warpath, Roxy decided to take Louise's advice. It was a bit early for a nap, but she could escape up to her room for some quiet time. She took a beignet from the table and wrapped it in a napkin, hoping that some of her appetite might return later. Then she headed to the darkened hallway where Evangeline was flicking switches in an electrical box mounted in a closet, still muttering furiously. "Can't even see the darn thing."

"Looks like I arrived at just the right time," a cheery voice called out. They turned to see Sam running into the hallway from the wet cobbled street, ruffling his hair to shake the rain from it. "Hi there, Roxy."

"Hi," said Roxy, a little shyly.

“Electric gone again, Evangeline?”

“No, I just fancied turnin’ the lights on and off and rummagin’ around in the dark for fun,” Evangeline said humorlessly.

“Let me take a look,” Sam said with a chuckle.

“I’m goin’ back to the kitchen,” Evangeline said. She spun on her heel and took off. “Come see me when you’ve fixed it. I told you this place was falling to pieces.”

“Why don’t you let me buy . . .”

Evangeline’s crotchiness turned to desperation. She spun around once more to face Roxy and Sam. She looked drained and exhausted. “Please, *stop*,” she said. “Please.” Then she disappeared into the kitchen.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



SAM GRIMACED BUT moved on quickly. He flashed his phone light on the electrical box, pulled back a panel, and said, “Aha. It’s just a couple of wires that need refitting. Evangeline should really do over the whole electrical system, but it’s very expensive for a rewire when you have all these period features.”

“Ah,” Roxy said, wishing she could come out with something insightful, preferably witty. Or at the very least, *interesting*. “I just love the architecture here,” was the best she could manage. She hated how simple and uninformed and unsophisticated that sounded. *She* sounded.

“Me too,” he said. “Are you busy, Roxy? This is quite a fiddly job. I could pretend I’m some kind of superhero who could do this all by himself, but I just might end up electrocuting myself. Can I ask you to hold a box for me, with my fuses and tools? Then I can easily take what I need without bending down and letting go of a wire? I don’t want to start an electrical fire or anything.”

“Sure,” Roxy said. She noticed that he had blushed a

little, plus he was rambling. Perhaps *he* was a little shy, too.

“Thanks,” he said. He dashed out into the rain to get tools from his van and quickly returned. “Great. If you could . . . just here would be amazing.”

Roxy stood and held her hands out. Sam placed a tray from the inside of his toolbox over her hands and laid various tools and fuses and electrical parts on it like he was performing surgery.

“Right. Perfect,” he said. He ducked his head into the electrical box and began to work.

Roxy waited for a moment, before saying, “You’ve offered to buy this place so many times. Why won’t Evangeline take you up on it? Is it really just because she thinks it’s charity?”

Sam sighed. “I don’t know. I think she thinks I’m, um, humoring her.”

“Well, are you?”

“No,” he said. Sam looked into her eyes as he leaned over to take a fuse. “I just like things the way they are. Why not keep them the same? I can afford it. And I’d like to help. I’ve offered to pay for a full rewire in the past. Offered to fix the roof. Take care of the dry rot. But nada. Evangeline won’t take any money to keep the place open. She won’t take any money to move on. That woman is like a mule. Stubborn as anything. Won’t go forward, won’t go back.” He peered deeply into the fuse box.

“Not to pry, but all these offers you’re making sound real expensive. I didn’t know the laundry business was quite so lucrative,” Roxy said.

Sam’s laugh was hollow. “Well, you know . . . life is full of surprises.”

Just then, a horrible idea struck Roxy like a lightning

bolt. She didn't even know where it came from. It wasn't a result of reasoning or deduction. It was something that flashed through her mind. Was it intuition?

Maybe Sam was getting bankrolled from somewhere. Maybe he used his laundry business as a front to get into all sorts of other "businesses." Perhaps he was a money launderer, buying up failing enterprises to funnel money on from who knows where. Perhaps that's why he was so keen to "help" Evangeline. Maybe *that* was how he got to own a fancy car. Perhaps he'd done this before. Perhaps that's what he'd been hiding all this time!

Roxy didn't know if her imagination was running away with her, or if she was really onto something. But she didn't want the warmth between them to skew her judgment, so she squinted and tried to look at Sam with a cold, objective eye.

He turned to pick another tool from the tray and gave her a lovely smile that drew up one corner of his mouth and showed off a dimple. "That's a real serious face," he said, his eyes dancing with mischief.

Roxy tried to view this, not as charming, but as suspicious and inappropriately irreverent, considering there had just been a murder.

"It appears to me that Detective Johnson will chase Evangeline down as the main suspect," said Roxy. "People say there's a history between them. Do you know what kind of history?"

"Sure, everyone knows," Sam said breezily. "There was a police corruption incident down here about 20 years ago. I was still a little kid back then, but I remember it. It was all over the news. Evangeline organized some major activism around it. You know, sit-ins, protests, that kind of stuff. Johnson was the accused guy's partner.

They'd been best friends since childhood. Evangeline's efforts got the guy locked up for a good many years. Well, I should say his crimes are what got him locked up, but he might have gotten away with them if it weren't for her. Johnson has hated her ever since, by all accounts."

"Wow," Roxy said.

"Plus, she's made a lot of fuss over historic buildings getting torn down in the past. She turns up at city hall a lot, speaks at the meetings. She's well-known down there. She makes herself a thorn in certain people's sides, and that doesn't always go down so well. She won't back down and doesn't hesitate to demand what she thinks is right. So Johnson thinks she's somewhere between a menace and a pain in the ass, depending on what mood he's in. They don't see eye to eye at all."

"Do you think he'll try to pin the murder on her?"

Sam paused and looked at her. "I don't know. If he's as corrupt as his former partner, maybe." He laughed. "Though the way Evangeline's going on right now, I wouldn't be so sorry to see the back of her myself."

"Ouch!" Roxy said.

"Bit close to the bone? Yeah, you're probably right, I shouldn't have said it. We all love Evangeline. The place wouldn't be the same without her." Sam fiddled with the electrical box one more time, and the hall lit up.

"Yay!" Roxy said. "Well done."

Sam put on a silly voice and took a bow. "Thank you. I could not have done it without my assistant, the curious, resourceful, and beautiful Roxanne." He resumed his regular voice. "It is Roxanne, right?"

Roxy wrinkled her nose. "Only to my mom."

"Sorry, Roxy it is then."

They shared a smile.

There was a rustle behind them. Evangeline came rushing in. She squeezed Sam in a hug and kissed him on the cheek. “You’re a genius, cher. Don’t mind old Evangeline being grouchy. I’m feeling as lost as a polar bear in the Sahara, but that’s no excuse. I’m sorry. To you too, Roxy.”

“You’re not lost,” Sam said, smiling at her and squeezing her shoulder. “You’re here with us, and you’re in exactly the right place.”

Roxy watched Sam looking down from his tall height at the diminutive figure of Evangeline and dreaded the idea that he could be faking for his own nefarious reasons. It felt unsettling, viewing someone she liked with suspicion. But years of feeling unsafe had prepared her—she was *well-versed* in not trusting people!

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



IT FELT STRANGE to step out onto the bustling streets that afternoon. People were going about their business as though nothing untoward had happened. Roxy felt she was living in a parallel universe, one that was dark and confusing.

Thankfully, the weather had cleared up. The streets still glistened with the rain of the morning. The sidewalks were covered in watery patches where the blue sky was reflected. But the dark clouds had been chased away by the wind, leaving a cold, clear sky.

In the end, everyone decided to come along to the Endymion parade. Evangeline had taken some persuading; she'd seen a thousand carnivals she said, but Elijah hadn't taken no for an answer. Quite uncharacteristically, she had let herself be swayed. Roxy sidled up to Evangeline as they walked. She was desperate to talk about what Sam had disclosed to her about Evangeline's relationship with Detective Johnson.

"Can I ask you something?" Roxy said, trying to work out how she could phrase it diplomatically.

“Sure.”

“Are you worried about Johnson holding a grudge, and trying to pin the murder on you? You know, after what happened.” Diplomacy wasn’t a skill Roxy possessed it would appear.

But Evangeline wasn’t offended. She shook her head. “No. He can try if he likes, the truth will out. I’m innocent, cher. I don’t have a motive, and that’s that . . . No court would find me guilty.” Evangeline peered at her. “How do you know what happened? You’re quite the little detective, aren’t ’cha?”

“Sam told me,” Roxy said. “I think you’re brave. I could never do the things he says that you’ve done.”

Evangeline smiled at her. “Of course you could, cher. You may not see it in yourself yet, but there’s a whole lot of moxie in there.” She tapped the top of Roxy’s chest and then laughed. “Moxie Roxy.”

Roxy laughed, too.

“He won’t try to pin it on me,” Evangeline said. “What happened was a long time ago. It’s in the past. And Johnson’s not corrupt, not like his partner. He might *want* me to be the murderer, but at the end of the day, he’s a good cop. We’ve come to . . . an understandin’. He leaves me alone to run my guesthouse. I leave him alone to do his job. That’s all there is to it.”

Roxy smiled. “Well, that sounds positive.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, cher. No need to worry yourself about me.”

They settled into a comfortable silence.

Slightly ahead of them, Nat clutched a large bottle of iced tea that she swigged from every so often. She looked determined to enjoy herself. Next to her, Sage, in sky-blue robes, sashayed along. Every time a child passed, she gave

them a big, kind smile. The children would smile back as they gravitated toward her and away from Louise who was a few steps behind. Louise walked with her head down, her hands thrust into the pockets of her pants, her lips in a flat line. She looked very unhappy. Bringing up the rear, Sam was light on his feet. He listened intently to Elijah. His friend was engrossed in telling a story, jabbing his finger to make his points.

Elijah clutched a huge basket of beignets and had brought another with him that Sam was carrying. "There'll be loads of families out enjoying themselves on St. Charles Avenue," he had explained. "We can sweeten up the occasion!"

Roxy noticed the vibrant shades of purple, green, and gold everywhere—on clothes and flags and decorations and strings of beads hanging around people's necks. One little girl was dressed head to toe in gold. Her dress was gold, her puffy coat was gold, her shoes were gold, her hair bows were gold, and even the beads on her frilly white socks were gold! She wore strings of plastic golden beads around her neck, too. Roxy saw her give Sam a gap-toothed smile as she passed, and he handed her a beignet with a wink.

As they walked along, the dazzling colors of the carnival passing by, Roxy's thoughts took a familiar turn—first they went to her uncertain future, and then they stuck like glue to the unsolved murder. Though she tried to focus on all the fun, sights, and sounds of the carnival, she couldn't help watching each of her party in turn. Were any of them the murderer? And if they were, what might their motivation be?

First, she looked at Evangeline. *Evangeline was desperate for a sale and killed Richard Lomas in a rage over*

the terms of a deal. Roxy wondered if it could possibly be true. It probably wasn't, in all likelihood. She couldn't see how Evangeline would benefit from Lomas' death.

They turned onto St. Charles Avenue and into a huge crowd. Kids were raised high, sitting on their fathers' shoulders, waving to people on the parade floats, and squealing with excitement. Music pounded, colors flashed, everyone shouted with excitement. The smells of Creole spices and hot dogs and deep-fried donuts carried on the cold air.

"Woohoo!" Nat said. She took a huge swig from her iced tea bottle.

Nat. *Nat killed Richard Lomas because . . . she knew if Evangeline's closed down, she'd have nowhere to work or live and could be thrown out of the country.* It was a plausible motive. The only thing was that to have killed him, Nat would need to be extremely dark and devious. Roxy hadn't seen any sign of that in her. Hmm. Roxy sure hoped this theory wasn't true, but she knew she had to keep an open mind.

Next, she turned to Louise. Louise was very subdued and serious as she hung back. She was watching the parade without a smile, her expression flat. Roxy could deduce nothing from it.

Louise killed Richard Lomas to . . . Roxy let her imagination click into gear . . . *to get her paws on the guesthouse . . .?* It seemed quite a flimsy reason. Would a middle-aged divorcee have such fire in her belly over a "new life" project that she'd be willing to *murder*? Unlikely, but maybe. People had killed for less.

Roxy looked back at the parade. Folk on the carnival floats were dressed up as all kinds of crazy characters. They tossed sweets and beads and tiny toys into the audi-

ence. Little kids scrambled and clutched at them. Many had bags to stuff their trinkets into. One small boy was so adorned with beads that Roxy was surprised he didn't keel over. She watched him as he stuffed his bag full of goodies, grabbing as many as his tiny hands could hold. Older kids hollered, "Throw me something, Mister!" Many adults joined in too, even those as old as Evangeline!

Elijah had given away nearly all his beignets, passing them to any kid nearby who hollered. His grin stretched all over his face. He seemed to be in his element when he was feeding people. Roxy studied him.

Elijah killed Richard Lomas because . . . he wanted to protect his own business? Perhaps . . . perhaps Elijah's bakery wasn't doing so well and it was Evangeline's daily pastry order that was keeping him afloat. If Evangeline's closed down perhaps Elijah's business would, too. By murdering the property developer, Elijah could scupper Evangeline's deal and his bakery business might survive.

Roxy immediately knew this theory was flawed. Elijah made deliveries all over town to various restaurants, hotels, private homes. His business wasn't struggling and in truth, she couldn't see Elijah as a likely suspect. His loud, bright breeziness seemed genuine. But then she thought back to that hateful look Louise had given him earlier. Maybe Louise knew something that Roxy didn't. Her mind began to spin.

"Hey Roxy," Sage said, bobbing up beside her with a grin. "Open your hand."

Roxy put out her palm with a smile, wondering what she was letting herself in for. Sage opened her fist over Roxy's palm, and Roxy looked down to see a pile of glitter

in her hand. It was a gorgeous mix of gold and deep purple.

“Fairy dust,” Sage explained, opening her eyes wide and looking very serious. “It’s collected from special fairy folk in Ireland and contains magical powers.”

Roxy looked up into Sage’s earnest eyes. “Oh, well, um, thank you.”

Sage burst out laughing. “Oh, sugar, I’m having you on! It’s just some glittery carnival fun. Though I guess there’s no harm in making a wish with it if you want.” She winked. “Never any harm in making wishes.”

Roxy grinned. “Why not?” Roxy didn’t know what to wish for. She’d never been one for wishing and dreaming. Worrying and procrastinating was more her style. Roxy closed her hand around the glitter and looked at Sage’s amused but kind face.

Sage. *Sage killed Richard Lomas because . . .*

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



ROXY TRIED TO work out what Sage would have to lose if Evangeline's was sold off. Not much, it seemed. She did some website work for the elderly guesthouse owner, but that hardly sounded lucrative compared with the corporate clients who were constantly hiring her. In fact, Roxy had a hunch that the work Sage did for the guesthouse was free of charge. Maybe she had another reason, but Roxy doubted it. Besides, Sage was a vegetarian. She didn't even believe in killing *animals*. Roxy was hard-pressed to believe Sage would ever kill a human being. This whole spiritual thing couldn't be an act . . . could it? She looked over to the last of their group.

Sam. Sam killed Richard Lomas so that he could scoop up the guesthouse from Evangeline and turn it into a thriving business that laundered, not washing, but money, maybe both!

Of all the motives she'd come up with, Roxy had to admit that this one seemed the most likely, except for the fact that Sam appeared as straight as an arrow. She forced herself to consider him though. She wondered how long Sam had been around. Was he really as much a part of the

furniture as he looked? Or was he a relative stranger who had ingratiated himself for nefarious reasons?

Roxy watched the parade go by, feeling a little spaced-out and confused. Despite thinking in-depth about everyone, the situation didn't feel any clearer.

Her head pounded with all the twists and turns. Her brain couldn't hold all her thoughts, much like her clenched hand couldn't hold all the glitter. She could see the beautiful mix of purple and gold spilling through her fingers. What would she wish for?

She knew, of course, that glitter wouldn't *really* make anything happen. But it posed an interesting question . . . What *could* she wish for? What *did* she really want? If only she knew!

With a little jump, she shot her arm into the air and let go of the glitter. *I wish I knew what I wanted for my life! I wish I knew where I was going next!*

It seemed something of a non-wish, but it was the best she could come up with. At the very least, it was sincere. Drifting away above the heads of the crowd, the glitter caught the breeze and the gold and purple flecks dipped and swirled before fading to nothingness. Roxy watched it as it floated away.

As the group of friends ambled back to Evangeline's a couple of hours later, Roxy wondered about the idea of staying in New Orleans long term. She loved the music that seemed to seep from every corner of the city. She loved the bright shotgun houses that were painted just about every color under the sun—one hot pink, the next canary yellow, the next a deep forest green. She loved the food and wondered hopefully if it might bulk out her slight, childlike figure a little.

She loved . . . Well, it was hard to explain . . . But, she

guessed, if she were being like Sage, she would have called it “the vibe.” The place had a warm, wraparound feeling to it, like stepping into your favorite grandmother’s kitchen, or at least what she imagined it would feel like if she had a favorite grandmother. Perhaps she did know what she wanted to do next after all . . .

As soon as they got back to the guesthouse, Evangeline was all smiles. Roxy realized it was the first time she’d seen her smile like that. She seemed lighter, happier.

“Everyone!” she said, clapping her hands at them in the hallway. “As y’all are here, I want to make an announcement. I’ve come to a big decision. First of all, I want to thank you for your offer to buy this old crumblin’ place, Sam. I’ve known you since you were a child, cher, and your generosity has always shined. This ole lady is duly grateful.”

On hearing this, Roxy immediately dismissed her earlier theory that Sam was a recent arrival and a fraud. If he was a cheat, he was deceiving people he had known for years. It seemed improbable.

Evangeline held her hand out for Louise to take. “But Louise and I have been talkin’, and I’ve decided she is gonna be the new owner here.”

Louise smiled a brave kind of smile and nodded like she was still trying to convince herself. “I know it’s a bold move, but you only get one chance at life,” she told the group. “I came here to start over, and that’s what I’m going to do. I’m not going to be put off by what happened to Richard Lomas. It’s a terrible tragedy, but I won’t fall apart. You can rely on me, and I’ll work like crazy to get Evangeline’s back on its feet.”

Evangeline nodded. “That’s what I like to hear, cher.”

“What will you do, Evangeline?” Sam asked. He looked tired but resigned.

“You’ll have to find out, cher,” Evangeline said with a wink and a sly smile.

Sam laughed. “Who knows what the next crazy chapter will be in Evangeline’s book of life, huh?”

“You got that right, my boy.”

“Congratulations, Louise! It is wonderful news. Don’t forget, my bakery is at your service, night and day,” Elijah said, taking Louise’s hand. With a deep bow he planted a kiss on the back of it.

“Yes, congratulations,” Sage said. “Let me know if you need the website updated.”

Nat stared at Louise, mulishly. She looked threatening, but Roxy knew Nat well enough by now to know she was feeling very nervous. “Um, congratulations Louise,” Nat mumbled. There was a pause. “Don’t suppose you’ll be keeping me on, will you?” she finally piped up, her voice tight and high.

“Of course, I will!” Louise said. “You might have to change up your clothing to match the new décor, but that’s all.”

“Right,” said Nat, crossing her arms, but keeping her cool. “Thank you,” she said, nodding.

“Hello!” A woman’s voice carried through the lobby, her voice dripping with insincere gaiety. “How nice to find you all here. Have I interrupted something?”

They turned to the doorway.

“Mara Lomas!” Nat exclaimed. Mara smiled from ear to ear. “What are you doing here? We thought you were in police custody!”

Mara looked distinctly disheveled compared with the last time they had seen her. Her stilettos had been

replaced by old running shoes. Her hair was straggly and pulled back in a messy bun. Her face was still a picture of fury, though. “The police have finally seen sense and accepted that I didn’t murder my husband. Now I want to find out who did. I know that Richard was trying to cut a deal here before he was shot so it was probably one of you guys.”

Roxy’s eyes flickered down to Mara’s hand—she was wearing her wedding ring. Roxy was sure she hadn’t been wearing it the last time she saw her.

“What do you care?” Nat said. “You hated the guy. He was cheating on you. You didn’t exactly sound like his greatest fan when you came over here before.”

Mara strode up to Nat and grabbed her by the face, her hand under Nat’s chin, her fingers pushing into her cheeks. “Don’t you *dare* talk about me and my dead husband like that!”

“Get off me!” Nat said, gripping Mara’s wrist and tearing the woman’s hand from her face.

“You keep quiet if you can’t tell me something helpful, do you hear?” Mara shouted. A tear fell down her cheek, and she wiped it away, furious. “Tell me, who killed my husband? Who?”

No one said anything.

“Tell me!” Mara screamed, her eyes popping.

“I’m sorry, cher,” Evangeline said. “We don’t have no idea what happened to . . .”

“It was one of you,” said Mara, narrowing her eyes. She picked up a letter knife from the hallway table and pointed it at each of the folks assembled in front of her. “I’m sure of it. Now you’re all covering for each other. I know it. I do. I’m 100% certain.”

Roxy’s heart was beating faster than usual. It always

did when someone yelled or got mad (or was waving a knife at her.)

“No one knows who killed Richard,” Sam said softly. “We want to know, too, but none of us are investigators.”

“Maybe not. I bet one of you is a murderer though,” said Mara, bitterness lacing her voice.

“Detective Johnson is still investigating,” Elijah said. “I’m sure he’ll find out who is responsible in the end.”

“Him!” Mara said. She snorted. “He likes to play the big shot. He has traumatized me all over again. *Helping them with their inquiries*. That’s no way to treat a grieving widow, is it?”

“No, it isn’t,” Sam agreed. His deep voice could be wonderfully soothing. “He’s not the gentlest guy in town, but he’s a good detective. He simply wants to find out what happened to your husband, that’s all.”

It seemed that Sam’s compassion took all the wind out of Mara’s sails. “Well,” she said, dropping the letter knife. “I’ll be back, but don’t think any of you are off the hook. I *will* find out who did this. And they *will* be sorry.”

She left, a little wobbly on her feet as she strode away, but thanks to her running shoes, she negotiated the cobblestones a little easier than she had last time.

As she watched Mara leave, Roxy was almost sure that what she’d just witnessed couldn’t have been a performance. Mara had *not* killed Richard Lomas. Roxy was certain. She would have put money on it. So, if it wasn’t her, *who was it?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



THAT NIGHT, ROXY couldn't sleep. Now, the idea was really dawning on her that she may well be sleeping under the same roof as a murderer. Or at the very least, associating with one. She hated the thought and her brain buzzed with theories until she got a headache.

She opened her eyes and stared at the ceiling, trying to shut her mind down so she could drift off to sleep. It wasn't working. Nefertiti was curled up next to her. She was purring so loudly she sounded like some sort of engine. Roxy absentmindedly pushed her fingertips through Nefertiti's fur as her mind did all sorts of gymnastics she couldn't control.

It was then that she heard a bloodcurdling scream. It came from the room below her. Roxy sat bolt upright, her heart racing. "Oh, my gosh!"

Roxy scrambled out of bed and rushed from the room. Then she realized she could be in danger and didn't have a weapon. She looked around. What could she use? Her eyes fell upon a large candlestick, and she rushed to

snatch it up. She doubted she'd have the strength to swing it around or cause some real damage if it came to it, but it was better than nothing.

She rushed down the stairs in bare feet and came across Louise, who was outside her room, clutching her chest, hyperventilating.

"Oh, my goodness, what happened?!" Roxy asked. "Are you okay?"

Louise gulped and tried to catch a breath. "I don't . . . I don't know! Someone was in my bedroom!" Her voice was slurred, and Roxy caught the scent of whiskey heavy on her breath.

"What? Who?"

"I don't know!" Louise squeaked. "It was dark. I couldn't see. I think he thought I was asleep, but then I gave him such a fright when I got up that he jumped out of the window. I tried to look down the street but I couldn't make him out—he was wearing all black and a ski mask." She leaned against the doorframe, still breathing heavily.

Roxy puffed out a breath. "This is getting serious now, Louise."

"Right?" Louise let out another big breath. "Oh, Roxy," she said. "I have to tell you."

"What? What do you have to tell me?"

Louise looked around, as though someone might be lurking in the stairway. "Come into my room. I want to show you something," she hissed.

Louise snapped on the light, and Roxy saw that her eyes were bloodshot. The path she made toward the bed was winding and wobbly.

"I've done something *terrible*," Louise said, "and I

don't know how to get myself out of it." She sat at the head of her bed, rummaging in her nightstand drawer. "I don't know if it's connected to what happened tonight. Maybe."

"What? What have you done, Louise?"

Louise patted the bed, and Roxy sat down. The older woman took yet another deep breath, then reached further into the nightstand drawer. She pulled out a phone. She put it on the bed and removed her hands quickly as though she might catch a horrible disease from it.

"Your phone," Roxy said, waiting for an explanation.

"No," said Louise, her voice cracking. "Not *my* phone." She whispered, "Richard Lomas' phone!"

Roxy gasped. "How did you get that?!" Her voice was loud with surprise.

"Shhhh!" Louise said furiously. "Oh, gosh." She shook her head, and then covered her eyes with her hand. "I made a *huge* mistake."

Roxy's heart started thumping so violently she could feel it in her temples.

"When I found him . . . I . . . I don't really know what happened. I saw his phone on the ground, near his hand. His cold, dead, outstretched hand." Louise was nearly in tears. "He had a bunch of flowers with him, too. I don't know why. I just took them both. I threw away the flowers, but I slipped the phone into my pocket. I don't know what I was thinking. I was just . . . in shock, I guess."

"Oh."

"And then I didn't tell Detective Johnson because I didn't know how, and every hour since then I've resolved to, but still I haven't. It's just got harder and harder, and

now we're here . . . I can't possibly tell him after all this time. I look so guilty. Oh help, what have I done?!" Louise leaned over and took both of Roxy's hands in hers, her eyes wide, imploring Roxy to understand.

Roxy shook her head. The situation was a real mess.

"I considered not telling him at all," said Louise. "But the thing is . . . there's *evidence* on this phone."

"Really?" Roxy said sitting up straight. "What kind of evidence?"

"Take the phone yourself and read the text messages," said Louise. "We're going to *have* to turn it in. It might make all the difference in the investigation."

Roxy was hesitant to pick up the phone. She'd already noticed that Louise was using the word "we," essentially drawing Roxy into her predicament, but she was too curious about what was on the phone to let that stop her. She wasn't about to allow the chance of finding evidence pass her by because she felt a little uncertain.

Roxy picked up the phone.

"One particular thread of messages is of note," Louise said. She looked away and up at the ceiling of her room.

Roxy tapped the phone and there, the first contact was *Elijah Walder*. She let out a little gasp. "Elijah? As in Elijah, Elijah?"

"You got it," Louise said.

Roxy clicked into the conversation and immediately scrolled up to the top, to see it all in chronological order. It was full of messages that showed Richard Lomas and Elijah had been in constant contact for a period of time.

I've sent you the proposal by email.

It was a message from Lomas to Elijah read. Elijah had responded.

When are you next in the area?

“What does it mean, do you think?” Roxy wondered out loud to Louise. “The proposal? Obviously, they were doing some kind of business together, but what? Do you think Elijah was involved in trying to get Evangeline to sell the guesthouse?” Her mind turned over, thinking back over all the times she’d been around the baker. She didn’t remember ever seeing him try to influence Evangeline’s decision or even discuss the deal with her.

“No,” Louise said. “Keep scrolling.”

“He was thinking of selling the bakery?” said Roxy as she read.

“Yes. But then things got a little hairy.”

Roxy read on. Elijah had written:

That price is an insult. This is my family business. It was passed down from my grandfather. I would expect much better compensation.

Lomas had written back:

I’m not interested in your business. Not even in the building. Only the land upon which the business and building are situated.

Elijah had responded furiously:

ALISON GOLDEN

NO DEAL.

The last message in the thread was one from Lomas:

We'll see about that. I have my ways and means. You having a little tantrum won't stop me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



ROXY READ THE text messages three times before she handed the phone back to Louise. “So . . . do you think it was Elijah who snuck into your room just now? Do you think he was going to hurt you?”

“Yes . . . no . . .” Louise said, looking a little lost. She put her hands up to her face. “Oh, I just don’t know.”

A tense, pregnant silence stretched out between them as they both considered what might have happened.

“Well, you’ll have to hand this cell phone into Detective Johnson,” Roxy said. “But . . . let’s wait a bit, a few more hours won’t make any difference now. You just focus on how you’re going to transform this place. You’ve had enough trauma and drama as it is. I’m going to do some investigating of my own. We’ll hand the cell phone in after that.”

Back in her room, there was no chance now that Roxy would get any sleep. She lay on the bed for a while, tossing and turning, but eventually gave up. She rose and opened her linen curtains. The sky was just beginning to edge out of darkness.

She wished she had someone to talk to, someone to bounce her ideas off. She didn't want to trouble Louise any more—she'd been through enough already. Besides, even with this information on Elijah, she couldn't entirely rule Louise out as a suspect. Neither could she rule out Nat or Evangeline. Sam would have made a good confidante, she was sure, but she was still a little suspicious of him too. Plus, she had to admit to herself, she had a crush on him that didn't help her keep a clear head. What about Sage?

Sage was usually up at dawn to perform her rituals, "Before the rest of the world gets up and clogs the energy space with their vibes," she had told Roxy. She was busy with programming and tarot readings during the day, but in the serenity of the early morning, she was alone and available.

Before Roxy's mind was made up, her body got into gear. She rushed over to her wardrobe and picked out some jeans, a shirt, and a cardigan. "Bye, Nef," she said as she slipped her sneakers on. "See you later, lovely girl."

She crept down the stairs, wincing at every creak, and let herself out of the front door into the cold morning air. She looked over at Elijah's bakery and gave a little involuntary shiver. She went out onto the cobblestones and looked back at Evangeline's. Below her own rickety balcony was Louise's room. Roxy looked at the open window and saw the thick old-fashioned drainpipe next to it. That, and the ledges that were built between the floors as part of the architectural style meant that it would be easy for someone to climb up or down.

Roxy pulled her cardigan around her to keep herself protected from the cold air then headed out of the cobbled alleyway and onto the street.

A black car pulled up to the curb next to her. Johnson stepped out of it, his face creased with barely concealed rage as usual. Roxy gulped. She had every intention of telling Johnson about the phone, but not now. Now, she wanted to avoid him.

“You,” he said.

Roxy tried to find a smile. “Good morning, Detective Johnson.”

He curled his lip. “A little birdy tells me you’re sneaking around, doing *detective work*.”

Roxy’s heart stopped.

He edged up horribly close to her. “Listen up, lady. I’m the detective, you’re just a guest in our city. Stay in your lane, okay?” He stepped back a pace. “And I sincerely hope you’re not out here at this early hour doing any *investigating*.”

“Oh, no,” Roxy lied. “I’m going to see Sage, for . . . some spiritual help. I’m not feeling so good.”

“You’ll be feeling a whole lot worse if you keep meddling,” he said. He waved his hand, dismissively. “Keep moving. Go on, go.”

Roxy scurried across the road, then headed up a stairway around the side of a store and up to Sage’s apartment that was located on top. She looked down at the street to see Johnson staring up at her. An ice-cold shiver ran through her, and she quickly turned away. She had wanted to see if he was going into the guesthouse, but she couldn’t bear to watch. Anyway, she suspected he would remain there staring at her until she was out of his sight.

Roxy took a deep breath and knocked on Sage’s door. As she waited for Sage to answer, Roxy wondered if she was doing the right thing.

“A visitor through the midst of esoteric time,” Roxy heard Sage say through the door.

It opened, and Sage stood before her, looking quite different from normal. Her long mermaid hair was gone, a short afro in its place. She had on soft white robes but was without her characteristic jewelry. Her brown eyes seemed to penetrate deep into Roxy’s soul, however. She didn’t break into her usual warm smile. She didn’t even speak further. She just nodded and stepped to the side to let Roxy through.

“Oh, um, thanks,” Roxy said in a quiet voice, then berated herself for speaking at all. There was an atmosphere between them, a different ambiance from usual, but Roxy couldn’t quite put her finger on what it was or why it was there.

Sage led her through the plain, ordinary hallway, with its white walls and wooden floor, and into a back room. Roxy gasped. It was like stepping into another world.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



THE ROOM WAS draped with silk hangings, in rich shades of orange and crimson and deep pink, which should have clashed, but somehow looked wonderful together. The smell of incense hung thick and sweet in the air, as white smoke unfurled in a graceful dance above four incense burners placed in each corner. Three white candles were burning in large glass jars, their flames flickering. They sat atop a white-clothed table in the center of the room. A clear bowl full of water sat in front of them. Cushions were laid out on the dark wooden floor, orange and deep red and pink like the drapes, and a deck of tarot cards were spread in an elaborate formation in front of them. The whole effect was mesmerizing.

“Wow,” Roxy said under her breath.

Sage sat on a crimson cushion and gestured for Roxy to do the same. When she turned to look at her, her eyes were bright. “It is no coincidence you have come here now, at this time. This is no ordinary visit. I can feel the difference. Spirit has carried you here.”

Roxy didn't quite know what to say so she looked down at her lap, mumbling hesitantly, her gaze flickering up to Sage's face and down to her lap again. "Well . . . I came here to run something by you. Something about the murder. Some information I've found out." Sage simply nodded.

Roxy decided to face Sage squarely and proceeded to tell her everything that Louise had told her. She also told Sage about the text messages between Lomas and Elijah. The tall African American woman listened intently. Once Roxy was done, Sage stared at the candles. She closed her eyes, and took a deep breath, exhaling with a long outward breath. She stayed still for such a long time that Roxy wondered if she had fallen asleep.

Roxy cast her eyes over the tarot cards on the floor. She still didn't know if she believed in them or not, but surely trying them out couldn't hurt.

Sage opened her eyes. "Let us consult the cards," she said.

Roxy flinched, wondering if it was a coincidence, or if Sage was reading her mind. "That's just what I was thinking!"

Sage raised an eyebrow. She scooped up all the tarot cards and began to shuffle them. First, she did so in her hand then she placed the deck on the floor face down. She pushed the deck over and spread the cards out before moving them around the floor until they were well mixed.

"Right," Sage said, rocking back on her heels. "Ask your question."

Roxy tried to get into a positive mindset and not let doubt take over. "Okay . . . How is Elijah involved in the murder of Richard Lomas?"

“Point to three cards.”

Roxy did as she was told and Sage laid the three cards in a row face down. “Ready?” she said.

Roxy gulped, not sure that she was. The seriousness of the situation was beginning to kick in. She was in a strange city, had placed herself in the middle of a murder investigation, and here she was using tarot cards to check her suspicions. The whole thing was just so, so far out of her normal experience, and yet, here she was. It was happening. It was real. “Yes,” she said.

“This card represents the past,” Sage said. She turned the first card over. “The Seven of Swords.” There was a picture of a man carrying knives in his arms, sneaking away, as if he were stealing them. “Deception,” said Sage. “Someone is trying to get away with something, undetected.” She rolled her eyes and laughed. “Really, universe? You don’t say!” She immediately got serious again. “Someone has false motives and has been pursuing an agenda of their own. Someone has been keeping secrets and deceiving others.”

Roxy’s heart beat a little faster. Maybe these cards really *did* work! Were they talking about Elijah? It seemed the tarot cards were just as ready to condemn him as his text messages.

“Right, the next card represents the present,” Sage said. She flipped it over and raised her eyebrows. “Ace of Swords,” she said, as if in a trance. “Communication needs to be clarified. Persevere in your quest for an answer even if it is not the one you wish for.”

Roxy’s eyes popped. She *didn’t* like the idea of Elijah being the killer. After all, he was part of the little group she had become quite attached to. He made the loveliest beignets. He seemed kind and, though a little outlandish,

good-hearted. Sam and Elijah were great friends and excellent music partners, but what was really known about him?

“Now for the final card,” Sage said. “This determines the future.” She flipped it over. “Death.”

Roxy gasped. “Another murder?”

“No,” said Sage. “It means total transformation. The complete and dramatic end of something. Starting over.”

Roxy let out a deep breath and looked at Sage. “So . . . do you think this means Elijah is the killer?”

Sage pursed her lips together. “It’s impossible to tell, honey. Some people say you can get yes and no answers from the cards, but that’s overly simplistic. They’re much more complex and layered than that. You have to mix the meanings in with your intuition. What’s your gut telling you?”

Roxy paused. “I don’t know,” she said. She had all sorts of feelings and impressions swirling around, but any time she tried to fix her mind on Elijah being the murderer, another possibility popped up. Nat. Mara. Evangeline. It was impossible to know. “I just don’t know.” She peered at Sage, who was now staring intently at the incense as it swirled and danced up to the ceiling. She wondered just how much Sage knew—how much secret knowledge her spiritual powers truly afforded her. “Do *you* know?”

“I wish I did,” said Sage. “Life is full of mysteries. I spend my time on this earth trying to decode them, but some are complex. They only reveal themselves when they desire it.”

“Well, I hope they desire it real soon,” Roxy said, thinking about the intruder Louise found in her room, “before someone else gets hurt.”

Sage nodded. "I'll put a protection spell over the guesthouse to keep y'all safe. While that can help, it depends on the forces at play, and right now there are some real strong ones out there. I can feel them, dark ones, greedy ones, ready to harm for their own benefit."

Roxy felt a little panicked. "So what can we do?"

"Work fast," said Sage. "My role is to liaise with the spiritual forces present. I'll work with them as much as I can to bring justice, but we need feet on the ground. Practical work. Get out there and find the truth."

Roxy breathed. "I'll certainly try."

Sage smiled for the first time that morning. She reached out and squeezed Roxy's hand. "The spirits are on your side, sweetheart."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



AS ROXY LEFT Sage's magical, mystical apartment, her mind went back to that first wonderfully cozy evening when they all holed up in Evangeline's dining room, eating spicy Creole food and listening to Elijah and Sam as they filled the place with the sounds of jazz.

Sam and Elijah seemed so close. They were truly in sync that night. Sure, they had performed some set pieces, but they had jammed together afterward, and it had flowed as easily as the wine.

If Elijah were the killer, as Roxy was grudgingly beginning to admit may be the case, surely Sam would be devastated. They were like brothers.

She meandered back toward the cobbled street where Evangeline's stood and paused for a moment. She looked at the bakery to her left and Evangeline's to the right. The short distance between them had once seemed so quaint and intimate. Now the distance felt sinister, a huge black shadowy presence between them, one that possibly divided a murderer from his prey. Roxy shivered involuntarily, not from the cold, but from the mental image of

Elijah sneaking out in the dead of night and climbing the pipes to Louise's room.

At that moment, Nat came out of the front door with a rug and began to shake it out. She looked up and jumped when she saw Roxy. "Blooming heck, Rox," she said. "You gave me one heck of a fright. What are you doing out and about so early?" Her face creased into a frown.

"Oh . . ." Roxy stared at Nat and wished she could explain. Everything was jumbled and muddled in her head, and it was starting to give her a headache. "I went to see Sage."

"Oh right." Nat went back to shaking out the rug, banging it against the railings and sending clouds of dust flying everywhere. She gave a happy smile. "So, Louise is taking over the guesthouse, and I get to stay on. Isn't that great?"

"Yep," Roxy said.

"Will you stay?"

"I . . . I don't know yet." Roxy was wary as she spoke to Nat. She didn't feel free to relax and chat normally. Anyone could be the killer. A thought popped into her head. "Do you know where I'd be able to find Sam?"

"He'll be at his laundry," Nat said. A teasing smile played at the corner of her lips. "Why?"

Roxy tried very hard not to blush. "I wanted to ask him . . ." There was a mischievous glint in Nat's eyes, so Roxy quickly made something up. "I wanted to ask him if he'd seen my . . . my . . . I think I left some money in one of my dress pockets. I want to see if I can rescue it before it gets put through the wash."

"Okay, if you say so," Nat said with a grin. "Well, the laundry isn't too far away. A couple of blocks. Go out of

the front entrance, turn left, and walk on until you get to 24th Street. Take another left, and it's down there a couple of minutes. Sam's Laundry. You can't miss it."

Roxy took off immediately, keen to get away from Nat but also because she didn't want to think too much about her decision to speak to Sam about what she knew.

The directions were easy to follow, and before long she was standing on the steps of the laundry. She could see clothing and linens tumbling inside the machines.

She entered and a little bell tinkled. The temperature was several degrees higher inside the laundry, a pleasing contrast to the cool outside.

"Hello," she said. Sam was behind the front desk attending to some paperwork. He didn't move. Individually, each of the machines made only gentle whirring noises, but together they created a distinct thrum, and she realized she'd have to raise her voice to make herself heard. "Hello!" Sam looked up this time, and a huge smile spread across his face. Roxy felt heat rising to her cheeks, and she had to look at the floor for a moment.

"Hi, Roxy. What a great surprise!" he said, standing up and showing his Southern manners.

"Hi, Sam." Roxy cleared her throat, reminding herself that she was here on a serious mission. There was no time to be embarrassed or to pay attention to how her legs felt. It was as though they were turning to jelly.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?" he asked. He brought out a chair from behind the counter and placed it in front of her. "Please, take a seat."

"Thank you." Roxy sat down, and taking his cue from her, he did, too. She forced herself to look up into his dreamy blue eyes. "This isn't a pleasure visit, I'm afraid."

Sam didn't blink. "That's a shame."

"I'm going to be 100% straight with you," said Roxy.

"Good! It's about time." A smile played at the corner of his lips.

"What?"

"Oh, come on. We both . . ." he trailed off. Roxy was utterly bewildered.

A look of panic sprung into Sam's eyes. "Erm . . . I mean to say, you know . . . erm . . . you'll be staying on at the guesthouse, won't you?" He began to talk very fast. "I mean, you keep saying you don't know, you don't know, but I think we both know you will."

"Oh," Roxy said. "Well, yeah, I think I will. For a while anyway." She laughed awkwardly. "You got me there, skipper." What was she saying? *Skipper?*

He looked immensely relieved. "New Orleans is like that. Once it gets its hooks into you, it doesn't want to give you back. I grew up here, of course. I tried going away to college, but I came straight back after I graduated and opened my first business. My father was furious. He wanted me to go into investment banking in New York."

They settled into a comfortable silence. The whir of the machines went on. Roxy liked the sound. The moment felt cozy and intimate, but she knew she had to broach the subject of Elijah sooner or later. She opened her mouth.

"Sam, I . . ."

"Roxy, I . . ."

They spoke at the same time. They laughed.

"Go on," he said. His eyes were sparkling. Roxy got the distinct feeling that he thought she was going to ask him on a date. In truth, she didn't want the moment to end. She felt this pleasant, electric tension between them, but

she had no plans to invite him out. She just didn't do that kind of thing.

Instead, she took a deep breath. "I have reason to believe that Elijah might have been involved in Richard Lomas' murder."

CHAPTER THIRTY



SAM'S OPEN, EXPECTANT expression changed immediately. It crumpled into a deep, concerned frown.

"What?" he breathed. "No."

"I'm so sorry. I know you won't want to believe that, but . . . there's a lot of evidence that points in that direction." Roxy explained about the phone, and the break-in, and the conversations that had been going on between Elijah and Richard.

Sam started pushing paperwork around unnecessarily. He shuffled his papers and stacked them. Then he unstacked them again. Roxy doubted he even registered what he was doing.

"Well, I think you're wrong," he said, his voice hard. He frowned and rubbed the back of his neck.

Roxy felt tension—now the utterly wrong kind of tension—course through her body. "I wish I were, Sam, but . . ."

"But what?" he said. "Honestly, Roxy, I think you should let this go. Detective Johnson is . . ."

Suddenly Roxy felt quite angry. "Detective Johnson is

what?” she interrupted, surprising herself with the steel in her voice. “An idiot, if you ask me.”

“So you know better than him about investigating, do you?”

“You’ve sure changed your tune!” Roxy snapped. “You said he might be corrupt.”

“Well, maybe,” Sam said. “But the alternative isn’t for us to go around playing cop.”

“Playing cop?!” Roxy said. “Excuse me for caring. I’m trying to ensure Evangeline isn’t the subject of a miscarriage of justice!”

Sam leaned back in his chair and tapped his fingers on the desk in irritation. “Okay, let’s say Johnson is corrupt and will pin the murder on whoever he wants. You think you can stand up to him and the whole police department?”

“Well, no, but . . .” Roxy floundered.

“Look, Roxy, you’re not from this town,” Sam said. His voice was a little kinder now. “You don’t know what goes on behind the scenes.”

Roxy felt a horrible knot in her stomach. “I’m just trying to . . .”

“Well, don’t,” Sam said. “Don’t try. I know you mean well, but you’re a visitor to this city, a tourist. Let the police sort it out. If Evangeline does get charged with Lomas’ murder, I’ll get the best lawyers on the case. *That’s* what’s going to help. Not this. Not you.”

Roxy swallowed, tears threatened to well, but she held her head high. “I think you’re only saying this because you don’t want to face the fact that Elijah might have done it.”

Sam shook his head. “Louise needs to hand in that phone and prepare herself for the consequences. She

could go to jail for keeping it. It's theft at best. Obstructing the course of justice at worst."

"But she was in shock!"

"Do you think Johnson will give a rat's behind about shock?"

"No, but . . ."

"This is not cool," he said. "Not cool at all. Louise has got herself in too deep. And now you're doing the same. This is going to blow up in your faces. Johnson might even put *you* in jail for knowing about the phone and doing nothing about it."

Roxy had been so wrapped up in her investigation, she hadn't even thought of that. His words were like a bucket of ice water dumped over her head. "He wouldn't," she said, but her voice wobbled. She imagined herself in jail with a bunch of tough women. From a steady job with a steady boyfriend, renting a nice apartment with savings in the bank . . . to that? Maybe this move had been a terrible idea after all. Maybe she was crazy even being in New Orleans, let alone getting herself mixed up in all of this. "Johnson wouldn't be that cruel," she said, although she suspected that he would.

"Look, Roxy, I don't mean to be harsh, but you have to be realistic. Both you and Louise have come into town and gotten yourselves wrapped up in a serious issue, an issue that could have big implications. Life-changing implications. I know New Orleans is a mystical place, but don't get caught up in the hype of Mardi Gras and Sage's spiritualism and think that magic will fix this. It won't. Despite the wonder of this city, it isn't immune from the harsher aspects of life. It won't give you a happy-ever-after ending just because. Reality is dirty and gritty and messy here, just like everywhere else."

Roxy didn't know what to say. She felt heavy all over. Her limbs were like lead. "Right," she said, still trying to inject a little sass into her voice.

Sam sighed. "I'm not trying to be unpleasant, Roxy," he said, his voice softening again. "I just want you to be realistic."

Now, Roxy felt patronized. She shot him a glare. "You just don't want to consider that Elijah might be a murderer," she repeated.

"I don't know about that." Sam shook his head. "I certainly don't think he is, but maybe I'm wrong. I hope not. But the truth will out. The police will find out who did it. It won't be tourists solving this, digging around like they're on a murder mystery weekend."

"Stop calling me a tourist!" Roxy snapped.

"But that's what you *are*," he said softly. "You've only been here a few days. You don't really know New Orleans yet. She's a mysterious, unpredictable old girl."

Roxy, her eyes gleaming furiously, stood. "I'm going back to Evangeline's. I'll take my washing, if you don't mind."

"Don't you want me to drive it over? I have laundry for the others, too."

"I'll take it all," Roxy said icily.

"You sure? It's a big pile."

"Fine with me."

"Come on, don't be like that. I'll take you."

"No, thank you."

Sam sighed and went into the back room. He came out with several parcels of washing, all wrapped up with paper and string. "Here you go." He put them on his table.

Roxy stacked them and picked them up carefully. She just about managed to carry them all and started

forward, peering over the top. One parcel fell off, but Sam caught it and popped it back on. “Look,” he said, when they were so close she could smell the deep, alluring musk of his aftershave. “I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. I just . . .”

Roxy put on a big smile. It was like a weapon. “You didn’t make me feel bad. You made me feel more certain,” she said, making for the door. “Bye, Sam.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



“WE’RE PULLING OUT all the stops tonight!” Evangeline said. “Louise is taking over my business. We’re celebrating!” Evangeline’s eyes were bright, but her voice was brittle and Roxy suspected that despite her brave face, Evangeline wasn’t as happy as she seemed. Old age was forcing her to hand her guesthouse over, and Roxy knew that Evangeline would be feeling burning shame and grief at losing her independence, her livelihood, and her beloved building.

“Come and help in the kitchen,” Nat had said, catching Roxy as she came back from her angry visit to the laundry. “We’re cooking up a storm!”

Roxy was still piled high with parcels and decided to take them to her room. She’d distribute them later. Nefer-titi lazily looked up when she came in. Roxy tickled the cat under her chin as she lay curled up in a chair before rushing down the stairs to help. She felt so mixed up and confused that she thought a good cooking session with Nat and Evangeline, both fierce, no-nonsense women, would make her feel better.

The warm aroma of Creole spices drifted from the kitchen around the ground floor and up the stairs, immediately making Roxy feel at home again. *Forget Sam, and forget the murder investigation for now.*

As soon as Roxy stepped into the kitchen, which was thick with steam and spice, Evangeline called out, "It's beignets or nothing for breakfast, cher. This kitchen's occupied all day."

"I came to help," Roxy said. She'd gotten up so early, it was hard to believe that it wasn't yet ten o'clock.

"Aha!" Evangeline said. "Another pair of hands. Suits me."

Nat grinned and held out the plate of beignets to Roxy. "And you can't eat as you go, so have your fill now."

Roxy took one gratefully. Despite her fast metabolism, she was sure she'd get to be the size of a house if she lived in New Orleans permanently. She took a bite. "So what are we making?"

"A Creole feast!" Nat said excitedly, taking a pan from a cupboard and whirling it around.

"Stop that, or you'll put someone's eye out!" Evangeline snapped. She was chopping copious amounts of onion and garlic at lightning speed. "Let me tell you what we're making, cher: a little turtle soup to start, then a crawfish pie . . ."

"My *absolute* favorite," Nat said.

"Next, our main dish." Evangeline swelled with pride. "Barbecued shrimp with Eggs Hussarde, collard greens, smothered okra, potato casserole on the side, and a jalapeño shrimp cornbread."

"In little ramekins," Nat added happily. "They look so cute."

"Wow," said Roxy. "That sounds like quite a spread."

“You betcha, cher,” Evangeline said. “It’s a mashup of my grandmomma’s classics. You won’t find that combination anywhere else, not in New Orleans, not in the whole world.”

“I can believe that,” Roxy said. She felt her mood lift.

“And to finish, New Orleans bread pudding with whiskey sauce,” said Nat. She was practically bouncing around the kitchen. Roxy guessed her mood was partly to do with the feast, but mostly because she wasn’t facing the threat of deportation any longer.

“Now, as a clever girl, you’ll already have guessed that we’ll be on our feet all darn day,” Evangeline said. “And there’s plenty to do. Want to chop a mountain of onions?” Roxy wrinkled her nose.

“Well then, you know how to purge crawfish?”

Roxy giggled. “Nope. Absolutely not.”

“I could do it at four years old,” Evangeline said. “Every good N’awlins girl can. Nat, show her.”

Nat took Roxy by the hand and dragged her into a small back room that had an outside door. She pointed at a large bucket of squirming crawfish. “I hope you’re not squeamish!” she said.

Roxy hadn’t seen crawfish before. She looked at their shiny black shells and long red pincers. They waved at her, and she did, in all honesty, feel a little nervous of them, but she wouldn’t let on to Nat. She pasted a big smile on her face. “I’m ready.”

“Good. You have to purge to get all the mud out of them,” Nat said, getting out a big basin. “Right, tip all the crawfish in there.”

Roxy did so.

“Next we pour a bunch of salt over them.” Nat grabbed a bag of salt from the side and sprinkled liber-

ally. "Then hot water. Fill up that jug there." Roxy filled the jug with hot water. "Go ahead, pour it in the bucket." Roxy poured, and the water began to turn brown.

"Ew," Nat said. "See all that muck?" She kneeled and began to stir the crawfish around the basin with a metal spoon. The crawfish squirmed and splashed in the water. Nat looked up at Roxy and grinned. "New Orleans doesn't look so glamorous now, huh?"

Roxy laughed.

Nat poked around with the spoon. "We have to fish out any dead ones. Evangeline will go bananas if they end up in the pot. Oh, look, there's one," she said, scooping it out. She flicked it in the trash. "Now we gotta drain them."

Soon they were back in the kitchen over a boiling pot of water. Nat added garlic powder, cayenne pepper, sticks of butter, oranges, lemons, and a whole load of powder called "Crab Boil."

Evangeline stood with her arms folded, casting a watchful eye over their progress. "Let that cook a little."

Roxy stood holding the large strainer of wriggling crawfish, as Evangeline poured some hot sauce into the bubbling mix.

"You're gonna burn our mouths!" Nat protested.

Roxy coughed as the mixture sent its spicy steam into her face.

Evangeline laughed at her. "A little spice is good for the soul, cher. Now tip in them crawfish, and let's get this pot goin'."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



ALL DAY THEY cooked. Roxy grabbed a grilled cheese sandwich for lunch, and the time flew by as she thoroughly enjoyed herself. Before long, the day turned into evening, and most everything was ready.

“Now you two, go put on your glad-rags while I finish up here,” said Evangeline.

Roxy headed upstairs and fed Nefertiti. She couldn’t wait to have a hot shower, but before she did, she flopped down on the bed and kicked off her shoes. Her feet were aching, her whole body was aching.

“Oh, Nef-nef,” she said, sighing happily. “Do you really think New Orleans will become our home?” Nefertiti was far too interested in her bowl of food to reply.

Roxy’s earlier rush of anger toward Sam had blown itself out. All that chopping, stirring, boiling, and cleaning had purged her of it. She could even concede that he was probably right. She should just enjoy her time here and leave the investigating to the pros. If Evangeline wound up in court, of *course* Sam would pay for the best lawyers and get her off. Why had Roxy ever felt any of

this was her responsibility? She looked back on it all and felt a little embarrassed. It was as if she had been a child playing detective.

It had felt like an adventure, but Sam was right. Roxy wasn't an investigator. She was a call-center operator. Actually, she wasn't even *that* anymore. As he said, she was a tourist, just a visitor passing through.

Roxy felt her mood about to take a nosedive. Her mind started to fill with the same old anxieties and questions about where she would go, what she would do, and how she would survive.

"Nope," she said out loud. "Not today."

The evening was going to be wonderful. They would feast, Sam and Elijah would play their wonderful jazz music, and the whole world would come to a standstill for a while. They couldn't escape reality completely, but they could lock it out of the guesthouse for a few hours.

Roxy decided to look on the bright side. She took a long hot shower and padded around the room in her slippers, humming happy tunes to keep her spirits up. She managed to remember one from the parade that they'd pumped out of the speakers over and over again, and it made her feel cheerful and relaxed.

She planned her evening. She would put on a little makeup and some jewelry and if she paired that with one of her freshly laundered dresses, she might feel like a million bucks. Roxy walked over to the chair where she had left the bundles she'd brought back from Sam's. She carried them to the bed and immediately noticed she had a problem.

The outsides of the parcels weren't labeled with names, but rather with numbers. So whose was whose? Roxy couldn't tell. She pondered for a moment. There was

nothing for it. She'd have to open each parcel to find out to whom it belonged.

Roxy slipped the string that bound the bundles to the side, and opened them one by one, sifting through the clothes deliberately. It wouldn't do to mix them up. One parcel contained a pair of pants and as Roxy picked it up, she felt something hard and smooth and flat in the pocket. Slipping her fingers inside, she pulled out a laminated card. Her heart started thumping.

No way. It couldn't be possible. Roxy stared at the card.

"Oh, my goodness," she said. The world was spinning. "Oh, my gosh."

* * *

As Roxy sashayed down the stairs, she felt rather glamorous. She was wearing her red dress and her big, gold, hoop earrings while on her feet were espadrilles, their red straps crisscrossing her ankles and up her slim legs. She didn't normally go in for standout pizzazz, she was modest in her choice of clothing, more of a wallflower, but tonight she felt a sense of confidence she'd never felt before. Her uncertainty and confusion were gone; determination burned deep in her soul.

"Oh wow, you look gorgeous!" Nat said as they met in the hallway.

Nat wore her regular clothes, only with a bit more bling; on her feet were shiny bottle-green boots with sparkly laces. "*Love* your boots," Roxy said.

Nat grinned. "Thanks! They're my favorites." She wrinkled her nose and smiled.

Roxy gasped as she walked into the dining room. It

had been completely transformed since breakfast. One long, grand dining table covered with huge, heavy, white tablecloths bisected the room. There was so much silver, china, and crystal that Roxy wasn't sure how the table legs didn't buckle. White plates lay on gold placemats, and down the center sat candelabras, white candles flickering. Between the candelabras were silver platters upon which the food they were about to feast on lay under silver covers.

"This looks amazing!" Roxy said.

It smelled heavenly, too, that very specific New Orleans smell of deep, rich spices, meat, seafood, and baked bread, all rolled into one.

Sage had already arrived. Even though she was a vegetarian and the feast most decidedly was not, Sage would not miss it for anything. She wore a long flowing dress in a deep-sea blue. It was covered in lace and had draping sleeves and gorgeous little blue beaded details. Her natural hair shone with bouncy coils, and a wreath of blue flowers was woven into them. She smiled serenely at Roxy.

"You look . . ." Roxy was practically speechless. "You look . . . like a sea goddess!"

Sage laughed in such a deep, throaty way that Roxy felt the whole room warm up. "What a lovely thing to say!"

Soon everyone else arrived—Sam in a regular black tuxedo, Elijah in an *ir*regular tuxedo, one with a loud orange African print. Louise wore a tight, bright yellow dress that accentuated her ample curves, and Evangeline, a pretty floral frock.

Nat looked around at them all and laughed, "Wow, we make quite a picture!"

MARDI GRAS MADNESS

“I’ll say!” added Roxy. She and Sam shared a warm look over the table, letting each other know that they weren’t still mad with each other.

“Come on, people, this ain’t some fashion show!” Evangeline said. “Let’s eat!”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



THE MURDER, THE guesthouse handover, and the drama were all forgotten as they sank into the heartiest cuisine New Orleans had to offer. Plenty of wine washed it all down, and laughter echoed around the dining room.

After a long day, Roxy was hungry and eager to try everything but was a little wary of the soup. It was the first time she'd eaten turtle. Evangeline saw her clutching her spoon as she looked down at her bowl nervously.

"There are seven kinds of meat on a turtle, cher," Evangeline said. "Some folk say that it tastes of turkey, fish, veal, or pork, dependin' on the part you get. Nat and me, we take out the fish parts and leave the rest. That's how I learned it from my grandmomma. Give it a taste and see if it isn't one of the best darn things you ever did eat."

Roxy forced a smile. It did *smell* delicious, which made tasting it a little easier. "Here's goes," she said. She sipped a little off her spoon. "Ooh, it *does* taste like pork! It's lovely!"

Evangeline nodded proudly, "You bet, cher."

Next, they had crawfish pie, Nat's favorite. The crawfish they'd cleaned earlier had been mixed with vegetables and stuffed into a pot pie. Each of them got a hearty slice.

As if that wasn't enough, the Eggs Hussarde that came afterward was a truly special dish. It comprised a poached egg blanketed with hollandaise sauce and draped over bacon and mushrooms. The bacon and mushrooms had been soaked in their own rich, red wine sauce and all sat on top of an English muffin. To the side, there were large barbecued shrimp, browned with burnt sugar, alongside collard greens, okra cooked with crushed tomatoes, and potato casserole with melted cheese. A small ramekin filled with jalapeño shrimp cornbread completed the dish.

Roxy was so full from the earlier courses it took her a little time to get through this one, but she persevered because it was so delicious. As she ate, she listened to the sounds of friends enjoying themselves—the clink of glasses, the peals of laughter, the sounds of animated chatter.

Dessert followed, and once they were all done with their bread pudding in whiskey sauce, Evangeline clapped loudly. "Everyone, please listen," she said. Her expression and voice were serious, in sharp contrast to just a moment before. The place fell into silence.

"Now is the time," Evangeline said, "to hand over the ownership of my darlin' buildin'." She reached down into a bag that was under the table and pulled out a contract. Tears welled in her eyes. Then she coughed, pulled herself up straight and said, "No time for nonsense. We're here to do business. Louise, please join me, Cher."

Adrenaline pumped through Roxy's body. She looked

at everyone at the table. They were all fixed on the scene between Evangeline and Louise. "I don't think you want to do that," Roxy said, her voice low.

"I don't?" Evangeline said.

Louise and Roxy's eyes locked for a moment. Louise squinted.

"What are you saying, honey?" she said. Louise's voice was low and syrupy sweet.

"I'm saying that there's more going on here than we truly know." Roxy didn't flinch under Louise's sharp gaze, but she was watchful. Louise, Evangeline's contract in her hand, was like a snake waiting to pounce.

"Hmmm, you're probably right. Evangeline, I think you'd better call the police," Louise said, her eyes still narrow and fixed on Roxy, her chin lifting. "I think we have a murderer in our midst."

"We certainly do," Roxy said. The atmosphere was tense. The two women seemed to be in a standoff, like a bull and a matador.

"What?" Evangeline was wild-eyed. "Who?"

There was silence, but then Louise dramatically swiveled her eyeballs to another part of the room. "Elijah!" she said. She looked down her nose at him in triumph.

"What?" Elijah said. He exploded out of his chair, his wiry frame shaking with adrenaline and indignation. "What are you talking about?"

"We should leave this to Detective Johnson," Sam said forcefully. "This is *not* our job."

"Huh," Louise scoffed. "You're probably in on it, too!" The giggly, flirty Louise of before had vanished.

Evangeline turned to Elijah, who was still on his feet.

He was jiggling up and down with frustration. “Elijah, is this true, cher?”

“Of course it isn’t!”

“Then why did you hide the fact that *you* were talking to Richard Lomas about selling your building?” Louise spat. “Did you think your secret would be safe forever?”

Evangeline gasped. Elijah crumpled back down to his seat and threw his head back, dragging his hands down his face. “Listen, I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want to influence your decision one way or another, Evangeline. And I didn’t want to worry you. I was hoping to sell my building and move the bakery elsewhere in the city. But Lomas didn’t offer me enough money, and I turned him down.”

“But why didn’t you tell us?” Evangeline cried. “We’re your friends!”

Elijah looked embarrassed, “I thought you’d think badly of me for chasing the money and not protecting the buildings.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



“A LIKELY STORY,” Louise scoffed.

Nat shook her head. “Elijah, how could you hide something like that from us?”

Roxy looked over at Sage whose eyes were closed. She looked peaceful, a small smile turning up the corners of her lips. Roxy wondered if she was meditating and had escaped to another place, maybe to a beautiful meadow where lambs were roaming free and butterflies fluttered over wildflowers.

But Roxy couldn’t escape. She had to face reality. Terror of what she was about to do gripped her throat. Her hands trembled in her lap as she surreptitiously dialed 9-1-1 on her cell phone under the table.

“Look, I’m sorry for what I did, but I didn’t *kill* anyone!” Elijah exclaimed.

Sam got up and put a strong arm around his shoulders. “Calm down, buddy.” Then he faced the others and spoke firmly. “This has to stop, and it has to stop NOW. None of us knows what really happened. We’re all jumping to conclusions and getting ourselves riled up.

We should all go home and just go to bed. The police will sort it out.”

“Ha!” Louise said, getting to her feet. “You think I can sleep at night?” She pointed at Elijah. “That *man* snuck into my room last night. He would have surely killed me if I hadn’t been awake!”

“He was in your room?!” Nat said with a gasp.

“No, I wasn’t!” Elijah looked as though his eyes would pop out of his head.

“No,” Roxy said quietly. “He wasn’t.”

Louise looked confused. “But Roxy, you were there when . . .”

“When you *lied* to me,” Roxy said.

“Huh?”

“Speak the truth, sweet love,” said Sage, still not opening her eyes.

“I intend to.” Roxy drew the card she had found in the laundry from the pocket of her red dress and laid it on the table. “This is Louise’s work ID card. Except your name isn’t Louise, is it? It’s Emma Warren.”

Louise stood dead still, stunned.

“And you work for . . .” Roxy pointed to the card. “Tobin & Partners, a huge property development company in Dallas. I looked it up online.”

“Lies!” Louise shouted.

Evangeline snatched the card up. “Let me see that.”

Nat ran from her side of the table over to Evangeline. “Me too.”

Roxy looked right at Louise. “You lied to me, to all of us. You were here all along to buy this guesthouse. You don’t want to keep it and do it up nicely to preserve New Orleans heritage at all. You want to tear it down and

build shiny new apartments, then sell them off for a huge profit, just like Richard Lomas wanted to.”

Roxy felt a wave of anger run through her. “You tricked everyone. You made up all that stuff about your marriage failing, and that you were simply taking a break here. You pretended to be one of us. You lied and lied and lied. Even your name is made up! All for money. And then when Richard Lomas looked like he was going to beat you to a deal with Evangeline, you killed him. You lured him to the cemetery that night after the boat ride and shot him in cold blood.

“How could I have done that? I was drunk. Elijah had to escort me home.”

“It was all a pretense. My guess is that Lomas told you he was negotiating with Elijah as well as Evangeline, and you seized your moment. You shot him *and* stole his phone so you could frame Elijah.”

Suddenly, Louise recovered from her shock at being accused. She sneered. “All right. You’re right about who I am, and that I wanted to get my hands on this guesthouse. But lying isn’t a criminal offense. And you can’t prove I killed Richard Lomas because I didn’t.”

Evangeline looked up at Louise, hate burning in her eyes. “Well, you’re not gettin’ this guesthouse now, let me tell you that. You’re a liar and a cheat, and possibly a murderer, too.”

Louise’s face crumpled. She looked like she was in pain. She wandered away from the table toward the kitchen. “I felt *terrible* about lying to you. Not at first, but as it went on, and I could see you were all becoming *fond* of me.” She let out a little sob. “I . . . I’m not sure I even want the guesthouse anymore.”

Evangeline couldn’t stop staring at Louise’s ID while

shaking her head. Then, quick as a flash, Louise darted into the kitchen.

“What’s she doing?” Nat cried.

Evangeline got to her feet. “You get out of my kitchen!” She marched toward it, but before she could make it through the doorway, Louise was back.

She had gone into the kitchen tremulous and upset but now appeared completely deranged. Her eyes were wild and the whites of her eyes showed. Her hair was messed up, and she pulled at her sunshine yellow dress with her free hand like she wanted to rip it off. It was as though the exposure of her identity and motives had unhinged her completely. Everyone gasped. Louise had a huge carving knife in her hand.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



EVANGELINE, THE KNIFE a few inches from her chest, took a step back.

“You’ll sign that contract, and you’ll sign that contract now,” Louise spat at her. “And no one here will *ever* say anything or contest this sale unless you want to end up like Richard Lomas. Six feet under.”

“So you *did* kill him, then?” Roxy said.

Louise laughed. “Yes, Roxy, sweetie,” she said in a cajoling voice. “I did.”

“You’re crazy, woman,” Elijah said. “Give it up. You can’t seriously think you’re going to get away with this. We’ll go to the police and tell them all about you. You’ll be slammed in a cell by the end of the night.”

“Hah! Not if you know what’s good for you. Property development is a murderous, duplicitous industry of scum. It’s teeming full of lowlifes, and I know most of them. They wouldn’t think twice about picking you off one by one.”

Evangeline’s hands were trembling, but she kept her

head high. “You will never *ever* get this guesthouse. Over my dead body.”

“That can be arranged.” Louise lunged, grabbed Evangeline, and held the carving knife in front of her. “Don’t test me, old lady.”

Sam, furious, barreled toward her. “STOP!”

“Don’t move!” Louise said. “Nobody move!” She pressed the carving knife against Evangeline’s straining neck. The elderly woman’s veins bulged as did the one down the center of Louise’s forehead. The atmosphere in the room was electric as the situation sat literally on a knife’s edge. “We’re not far from a really serious *accident* happening here.”

Sam froze. Everyone did. Everyone except Nefertiti.

Unbeknownst to everyone, the fluffy white cat had silently padded downstairs. She brushed against Louise’s leg, startling her. Louise flinched, and Sam, showing lightning reflexes, reached over and wrested the knife from her hand. As he did so, Roxy lunged at Louise as hard as she could. Despite Roxy’s slight build, the force of her knocked Louise over. Roxy pinned her to the ground. Louise wasn’t through yet, though. She wiggled and squirmed just like the crawfish Roxy and Nat had purged earlier. Roxy couldn’t keep her down. Sam bent over to help, but Louise unleashed a mighty kick at his leg, and he doubled over in agony. As Roxy checked to see if Sam was okay, Louise twisted out of Roxy’s grip and ran back into the kitchen. The gang of friends scurried after her.

Inside the white subway-tiled kitchen, Louise rushed over to the huge black range. She seized a 12-inch chef’s knife from the counter. She waved it in front of her, threatening the group, the point of the gleaming knife glinting in the light. “Don’t come near me!” she yelled. A

lock of hair fell into her eyes, and she pushed it back roughly before grabbing a bottle of oil and pouring it into a nearby pan. With the knife shaking in her hand, she shouted, "If you're not going to give me the guesthouse, I'm going to burn it to the ground. Just you watch."

"No, don't!" Roxy screamed. She took a step forward. Louise thrust the knife toward her and grabbed her wrist, pulling her in. Now *Roxy* was being held hostage. Roxy could feel the edge of the knife against her skin.

"If any of y'all come near me, your darling Roxy will get it, do you hear?" Louise spat.

With her free hand, she got ahold of a lighter and lit the gas burner. She placed the pan of oil on top. It shot up in flames. Louise cackled like a witch. She stood in front of the range, between the flames and the assembled group. "Now, we're all just going to have to wait, aren't we? Soon this wooden dump will be burned to the ground and maybe us along with it." She flashed an evil grin at Evangeline. "Insurance can't make up for lost heritage, can it?"

Louise was pressing the edge of the knife into Roxy so intently that she knew she couldn't move an inch. Louise wouldn't hesitate to harm her. Roxy didn't doubt Louise's words on that for a moment.

"Just give it up, Louise," Sam said in an authoritative voice.

She laughed at him, and casually leaned back against the edge of the range, her hand still holding the knife against Roxy's body. The flames were getting higher, the pan was starting to smoke.

Evangeline snorted. "You sick, sick woman."

Louise sneered. "You stupid, stupid woman. People like you deserve to get conned."

“You drop that knife right now, or I’ll blast you into infinity.” A voice boomed into the kitchen from outside.

“Detective Johnson!” Nat called out.

All the color drained from Louise’s face, but she tightened her grip on Roxy. “Why should I?”

“It’s over, Emma Warren,” Johnson said, pushing through the kitchen door with his shoulder, gun cocked.

Louise began to laugh again, “Hahahahaha . . . aaaaargghhh!” She dropped the knife and pushed Roxy away from her. She half-turned from the range, slapping at her back. Her dress had caught on fire. Flames flickered from the bright yellow fabric at the back of her dress as it melted away, exposing Louise’s reddened, hot flesh.

Sam, Elijah, and Nat lurched at her in unison, but Louise refused to submit that easily. Slapping her back with one hand, she tipped the oil onto the gas flame with the other. *Whoooooosh!* A gigantic wall of fire shot into the air. The others raised their arms against the blanket of fearsome heat as Louise darted across the kitchen floor toward the back hallway, almighty crashes sounding as she pushed pots and pans to the ground behind her. She was running to the small back room where Nat and Roxy had purged the crawfish earlier.

“There’s a back entrance there!” Evangeline hollered, grabbing a fire extinguisher. “Someone go round the outside, quick!”

Evangeline needn’t have worried. Johnson’s officers were already stationed there. A few moments later, a female police officer recited Louise her Miranda rights, while Louise screamed all kinds of expletives at her.

* * *

A silence settled over the six friends as they went to the front of the guesthouse to watch Louise being escorted into a waiting police car.

Elijah was sweating, red-faced, and angry, Sam looked nonplussed. Nat frowned, Evangeline's arms were crossed, while Sage stood serenely. Next to her, Roxy was quiet and thoughtful.

"Well, that's that taken care of," Johnson said as the cops shut the door on Louise. He turned to Roxy, looking slightly uncomfortable. "The tip-off you gave us this afternoon has led to a successful arrest."

Roxy brightened when he spoke. She grinned and dared to be a little bold. "Are you thanking me, Detective Johnson?"

Johnson was deadpan. "You have done your duty as a citizen."

"I'd take that as a yes!" Evangeline said. "It's the best you're gonna get!"

"What do you mean the tip-off?" Sam asked.

"I found Louise's real ID in the clothes I brought back from your laundry," Roxy said. "So I contacted Detective Johnson and set this little drama up. I hadn't anticipated she was going to turn quite so feral, though."

"Well, my trust issues just got much worse," Nat said with a sigh.

Sam looked at the detective. "Do you have enough evidence to charge her?"

"Per the plans we set up with Ms. Reinhardt this afternoon, we've got the confession recorded," Johnson said. "We'll search for the firearm used to commit the crime, and look for DNA evidence, but we've got plenty on her so far. Even if the murder case falls through, we could charge her with arson, attempted murder, you

name it. She crossed a lot of lines back there. You were all in a lot of danger.”

“Nonsense,” Evangeline said. “Just a little skirmish, is all.”

Johnson rolled his eyes. “Still as stubborn as ever, I see.”

“Hurry up and search her room, would you? And get the heck out of my guesthouse,” Evangeline said, shaking her head and flicking her hands as though Johnson were an insect whose presence on the premises wouldn’t do Evangeline’s reputation any good.

“Gladly,” Johnson said drily.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



LATER THAT NIGHT, Roxy was in her room with Nefertiti curled up on the bed beside her.

The day had been a rollercoaster. Her tarot card reading with Sage seemed like such a long time ago. Since then she'd argued with Sam in the laundry, spent the bulk of the day on her feet cooking, found the badge that clued her in to Louise's real identity, contacted Detective Johnson with her suspicions, confronted Louise at the dinner, wrestled her to the ground, had her life threatened, and watched a murderer get arrested.

And, after it all, she *still* didn't know where she would live, or what she would do. The case had been an excellent distraction, but now she had nothing to do, nothing to look forward to . . . no plans, no direction.

Exhausted, she had a little cry to let out all the tensions of the day, until there was a soft knock at her door. Roxy quickly wiped her tears and cleared her throat. "Come in," she croaked.

In came Evangeline, a look of concern on her face. She was followed by an equally serious-looking Sam.

“Oh,” Roxy said, taken aback. She was sure she looked an absolute mess, her eyes ringed with mascara that had run, her red dress all crumpled and askew. “Hi.” She tried to smooth out her hair and ran her fingertips under her eyes. Hopefully, the dim light hid the worst. “Sit down, go ahead.”

Evangeline sat on the bed next to her while Sam dragged a chair over. “We’ve come with a proposition,” Evangeline said.

“Okay . . .?” Roxy felt a little nervous.

“Don’t look so scared,” Sam said, with a gentle laugh. “It’s nothing too terrible. At least, I hope not.”

Evangeline spoke. Her green eyes were soft and gentle. “We’ve really enjoyed havin’ you here, cher. You’re a wonderful person, friendly but not too much, willin’ to roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty. And you solved the murder. That takes some moxie. I was goin’ to ask you, well, I know you said you were startin’ a new life. Do you . . . would you . . . will you become part-owner in this ole place with Sam and take over the day-to-day runnin’ of the guesthouse from me?” Roxy’s mind went into a spin.

“Nat’ll stay on, of course,” Evangeline said. “Sage’ll do the website. I can even teach y’all how to *really* cook if you want. I can’t stay forever, but I don’t have to go rushin’ off right away. Sam’ll do the repairs and the laundry still, and Elijah’ll bring all the bread and pastries, as usual.”

Roxy stared at them. This couldn’t be happening, could it? Something so good that was such a blessing? Things like this didn’t happen to her. Life was a struggle!

“But I can’t afford to buy it from you,” she said.

“That’s all right,” Evangeline replied. “It’s all settled.”

Sam's goin' to buy it and give you half. You'll be the manager with a steady paycheck and a stake in the property."

"Gosh." Roxy settled back onto the headboard and stared into space as she processed this information.

"Unless you have other plans, cher," Evangeline said gently. "I guess the world is your oyster now. You could go anywhere. Start afresh wherever you wanted."

"Though it'd be nice if you stuck around." Sam's voice was deep and full of meaning. "Real nice."

Roxy looked up. Sam was looking right at her, his eyes sincere. She avoided them for a moment, pushing back the wave in her chest that was threatening to break. Instead, she pushed her fingers into Nefertiti's long fur and stroked her soft, soft belly.

Roxy allowed her thoughts to roam for a second or two. She imagined herself traveling out of New Orleans by bus, her bags packed, Nefertiti in her little carrier, as she rode away from all the new friends she had made. Where was she going? She didn't know. But as she imagined herself looking out of the window at this city she'd come to love, she felt a tug at her heart. Not a little tug, like a sentimental but necessary goodbye, but a gigantic pull, like someone had lassoed her with a thick rope and wasn't about to let go.

Her senses were alive. The colors of Mardi Gras flashed before her eyes and she heard the noises of the parades in her ears. She could smell the Cajun spices that lingered in the air around her like spirits urging her to stay. Perhaps *this* city, with all its magic and mystery and chaos was the place she'd finally make her home. It seemed so unlikely, but she had discovered that she was a little fiercer and a little wilder than she

knew. New Orleans had brought all that moxie up to the surface.

“We’ll give you some time to think about it, cher,” Evangeline said, giving her a motherly pat on the knee.

“No,” said Roxy.

She thought back to that wild, devil-may-care moment in her apartment. That split second when her spirit had told her, *WE’RE OFF!* no matter what her fearful mind countered with. This moment was different, though. The feeling didn’t sweep over her from outside, gripping her soul with determination. This time, it bubbled up from somewhere deep within. To come to New Orleans had been a whim. To stay was a *conviction*.

Roxy looked Evangeline and Sam in the eyes and smiled. “I’m going to accept your offer with many thanks. I shall be delighted to stay.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



TIME WHIZZED BY and before Roxy knew it, the night of the Grand Opening rolled around. She had changed the name of the guesthouse to the Funky Cat Inn, a nod to the jazz traditions of the city and the music she planned to provide regularly. She and Nat had spent weeks reimagining each room from scratch. They'd headed to the New Orleans Public Library and checked out numerous books on traditional buildings with pictures of sumptuous decors for inspiration.

They'd hit flea markets with Sam's laundry van (and his generous cash injection) and filled it up with all manner of French antiques and some amazing reproductions that they put to use in the communal and private rooms of the guesthouse.

Sam had also gotten to work. He had rewired the building and arranged all the structural repair work necessary. New windows had been installed and the balconies fixed. By the time he had finished, the Funky Cat Inn was up to code and then some.

On one of their trips to the flea market, Roxy finally

broached the elephant in the room with Nat. “Where *does* Sam get all this money from? Surely the laundry business doesn’t make enough for him to splash this amount of cash around?”

Nat raised her eyebrows. “We don’t ask about that. I think he has family money, and he’s a little embarrassed about it, but that’s just a guess. Like I said, we don’t talk about it.”

“Why not?”

“He gets very cagey,” Nat said. “So we don’t push it. He grew up around here, his family goes way back, generations, and Evangeline always said that was good enough for her.” That was the last they talked of it.

The dining room where tonight’s event was to be held had been transformed. They’d split it into a grand lounge on one side, the dining area on the other. The whole place was painted a gorgeous, soft, pale blue. The room was now furnished with a mixture of champagne and pastel blue fabrics, mahogany side tables with ornately curved legs, lamps, gilded mirrors, and an abundance of interesting knickknacks and ornaments. They even had an enormous chandelier glittering overhead.

The bedrooms were sumptuous too, and Nefertiti looked more regal than ever curled up on one of the Louis-style four-poster beds. Her bright eyes matched the blue of the bedspreads exactly. She was the perfect accessory. Sage had taken a wonderful picture of her for their new Instagram page.

Sage had a great eye for photography. Her pictures of the food and the décor were so gorgeous that their social media follower counts were climbing every day. There had been a write-up in a local paper too, and slowly word was spreading that the Funky Cat Inn was the place to

stay in New Orleans. Roxy trembled with anticipation when she thought about it.

Roxy felt she was in a permanent state of exhilaration. She had become so consumed by the whole process of turning the guesthouse from a vision in her head into a reality all around her that she often couldn't sleep. She'd never felt so accomplished.

"A boutique luxury, yet traditional, New Orleans experience" was the phrase she kept repeating to decorators, antique dealers, and just about anyone who would listen. It encapsulated precisely her goal for the new hotel.

* * *

Roxy rushed around on the day of the Grand Opening, but eventually, there was nothing more to do so she took herself to her room to get ready. She'd bought herself a new dress. She'd never have picked out something so show-stopping before, but being the new proprietor of this fabulous place and with some encouragement from Nat and Sage, she'd come to believe that a silver-sequined, figure-hugging dress wasn't *too* over the top. Okay, well maybe it was, especially when paired with an abundance of silver and crystal jewelry loaned to her by Sage and which now sparkled in her ears and around her neck and her wrists, but *why the heck not?* Wasn't life for enjoying, after all?

They were expecting a big turnout, but Roxy couldn't help drumming her fingertips on the arm of one of the couches as she finally sat down and waited for her guests to arrive. The time seemed to tick by so, so slowly. They'd printed flyers and passed them out just about every-

where. Elijah had distributed them with every beignet purchase made at his bakery, Sam had wrapped one inside every laundry parcel, Sage had left a whole bunch at the botanica, and Nat had spent all her days off on the street at the end of the alleyway handing out details of the event to passersby.

They'd even sent an invitation to Mara Lomas, a kind of peace offering. After Louise had been arrested, Mara had come back around to the guesthouse in tears, saying to them how ashamed she was of her behavior. They'd tried to console her by telling her that she had been right—it *was* one of them who had killed her husband—but the message didn't seem to get through. Mara was determined to feel guilty and she had returned to her home state to make some sense of her life. Roxy didn't expect Mara to attend the Grand Opening, but she'd written on the invitation, "We wish you all the best for the future," and she really did.

Nat came and sat next to Roxy. She patted her on the shoulder. Roxy wouldn't have dreamed of asking her to drop her "uniform," but Nat herself had said, "With all this grandeur, I feel a little silly in my Slipknot tee. Slipknot's a band by the way," she added to relieve Roxy of her perplexed expression. Instead, Nat was wearing a smart, tailored trouser suit that looked awesome on her. She'd paired it with her shiny green boots with the sparkly laces, which somehow worked, and a plain white T-shirt. Her ears continued to drip with jewelry, and she had kept her tiny diamond nose stud in place. "So that I still feel like myself," she'd said.

Shortly after 6 PM, people began to trickle in. Evangeline, who had helped with the food, handed the guests glasses of wine and Café Brûlot. The tables were laid out

with what seemed like thousands of New Orleans-style canapés, and Sage offered tarot readings in the lounge.

Elijah and Sam were on the music, filling the whole place with warm jazz and the cool, mellow sounds of Miles Davis along with the more upbeat tunes of Duke Ellington, filtered through the air. After a while, Nat joined them, astounding Roxy as she demonstrated the most beautiful, soulful voice Roxy had ever heard. Nat sung jazz classics, *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*, and *It Don't Mean A Thing If It Ain't Got That Swing* and then, with a level of graciousness that she had not previously been known for, she took song requests from Roxy's guests.

As they finished a set, Roxy walked up to her. "Why didn't you tell me you could sing?" she whispered.

"Ah, it's nothing," Nat said, shyly.

"Nothing? You were fantastic!"

"Nat only gets her voice out on special occasions," Sam said. "For *special* people," he added.

"When she sings, she has a true Southern vibe," Sage said. She raised her eyebrows. "Quite unusual when you consider she's from across the pond."

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT



LATER THAT EVENING, Roxy felt like a break and stepped outside into the warm night air. The stars were all out, and it seemed like even they were smiling down at her.

She found Sam out there too, his back turned to her as he looked up to the sky.

“Oh, hey,” she said.

He jumped. “Hi, Roxy.” He grinned. “Going great, isn’t it?”

“Yep!”

“The stars are all out in celebration,” he said.

“Lovely clear night, isn’t it?” They gazed up at the stars for a moment in companionable silence. “You were wrong about New Orleans, you know,” she said eventually. “It is magic.”

Sam cleared his throat. “I’ve been meaning to say this for a while.” He stared at his feet. “But you know, dumb male pride and all.”

Roxy stayed silent and watched him.

“I don’t think I spoke to you very nicely when you

came to the laundry, when you talked about your suspicions concerning Elijah.”

Roxy had let that go a long time back. She laughed. “Well, you *were* right. It wasn’t him, and at that point, it really would have been wise for me to butt out. It was only after we spoke that I found Louise’s badge and got a part to play.”

Sam looked down at her. “That’s all true. But I could have spoken in more of a polite manner.”

“Ever the Southern gentleman,” Roxy said fondly. “Well, that means I’ll have to be a *proper Southern belle*.” She tried to put on the accent and failed miserably. They both burst into laughter.

Roxy didn’t quite know what came over her. Maybe it was the champagne, or the beauty of the stars, or the deep happiness she felt in her soul, but she wanted to reach out and kiss him. She paused, though, wondering if it were appropriate. Would he kiss her back? Would he jump away and be like, “You’ve got the wrong idea! We’re business partners, that’s all!”? Her hesitation broke the spell, and she gave him an awkward smile instead. The doubts she had about him came flooding back. Perhaps those red flags meant something. Maybe he was just pretending to be a nice guy.

At that moment, Nat came bustling around the corner. “Roxy, I’ve been looking . . .” She cut herself short. “Ooooh,” she said, her eyes shining. “Have I interrupted something?”

“No!” Roxy said a little too forcefully.

Nat raised an eyebrow. “If you say so. Anyway, come on inside. We’re all waiting for you, Rox.”

It was coming up on midnight. Inside, everyone had a

champagne glass in hand, and there was a round of applause when Roxy made her way back in.

“Evangeline was just saying how proud she was of you, how you’ve transformed the place,” Nat said. “They want to hear something from you now.”

Roxy would have *died* in her former life if she’d had to do any form of public speaking. But now, here, considering who she was in this moment, all her nerves fell away, and she was filled with a deep sense of warmth and affection.

“Thank you all for coming,” she said. “This place . . . it has come to mean so much to me. Not just this guesthouse, but the whole city. New Orleans is full of magic and wonder. It has changed me. When I got here, I had no idea where my life would lead. I had nothing except my suitcase full of clothes and my cat. No job. No family. No one by my side. No direction. I was painfully shy and didn’t have any sort of belief in myself. But . . . this city has changed me. It has taught me that miracles do happen, that I have a power inside me that I’ve never been aware of. I’m a new person now, a better person, a more empowered person. And, thanks to your amazing cuisine, also a slightly fatter person!” Everyone laughed.

“So I just want to say thank you. Thank you to Evangeline for introducing me to Creole and Cajun ways. Thank you to Nat, the craziest, most loveable girl I know. Thank you to Sage, for making me believe in magic. Thank you to Elijah, for showing me that it’s okay to be different and that beignets are food from the heavens. Thank you to Sam, for being . . . a great friend. And thank you to New Orleans for helping me find myself. I am beyond grateful for this new chapter in my life.” She raised the glass of champagne that Nat had thrust into

her hand. "And thank you for being here to share it with me."

The crowd applauded, and Roxy looked around. The dining room was full of people, chattering, laughing, eating and drinking. She wandered into the lobby where she could survey the entire room. As she watched the scene in front of her, she felt a huge sense of satisfaction and achievement.

"I *did* this," she whispered to herself. She almost couldn't believe it.

Her phone gave a little "ting." She looked at the screen. There was a text from Angela, her call center supervisor at Modal Appliances, Inc.

Jade and Chloe have been fired for fighting in the women's bathroom. We are two customer service reps down. Come back to work at 9 AM sharp, but no pay for the time you missed. Don't be late!

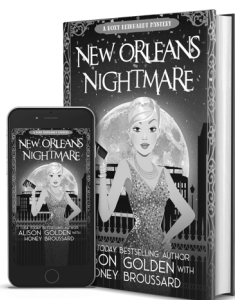
Roxy read the text several times. She tapped out a reply.

Can't make it. Sorry. Good luck, though.

She looked back at the room and watched her guests. Sam waved from across the room.

She knew what to do. She didn't hesitate. There was no grief, no loss, no love lost. She swiped her phone. There was a "whoosh." Angela was gone for good.

* * *



Thank you for reading *Mardi Gras Madness*! I hope you love Roxy and her gang as much as I do. The next book in the Roxy series continues her story as she finds herself in the midst of yet more mayhem.

A New Orleans guesthouse. A social media murder. A killer with a virtual ax to grind . . .

Can Roxy reveal the killer before they strike again? Or is her reputation dead on arrival? Get your copy of *New Orleans Nightmare* from Amazon now! *New Orleans Nightmare* is FREE in Kindle Unlimited.

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Turn the page for an excerpt from the next in the Roxy Reinhardt series, *New Orleans Nightmare*...

A ROXY REINHARDT MYSTERY

NEW ORLEANS NIGHTMARE



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ALISON GOLDEN WITH
HONEY BROUSSARD

CHAPTER ONE



“OOOOH, I’M SO excited!” Roxy Reinhardt said, dancing around the kitchen, while pots and pans of all sizes bubbled on the stovetop. Gumbos, stews, and jambalayas filled the room with rich, spicy steam as she boogied in the space between the range and the countertops.

“Me too!” Nat said, clapping her hands together.

Roxy was the manager and part-owner of the Funky Cat Inn, having been recently installed as such by the previous owner, Evangeline, and local investor, laundryman, handyman, and something of a handsome dark horse, Sam. Nat was Roxy’s “Girl Friday.” She was also a former English nanny who had overstayed her visa. Today they were preparing a “Grand Welcome Meal.”

“Who are these people again?” Evangeline asked Roxy, for the third time. “I don’t understand all these new-fangled Instabook things, cher.”

Evangeline was retired and living her own life now, but she still came over to help them with the food. She was an absolute master at Creole and Cajun cooking and

baking, and Roxy and Nat had submitted themselves to an extended tutelage.

“They’re called influencers,” Roxy explained. “That means that they have a lot of followers on Instagram.”

“Huh?” Evangeline said.

Nat rolled her eyes and gave Roxy a wink as she looked back from a pot of gumbo she was stirring. “Instagram is a platform where you have your own page, and you put pictures on it. If people like what they see, they follow you to watch what you’re going to put up next. We have a page for the Funky Cat. Sage runs it.”

“So why are these . . .” Evangeline frowned. “Why are these influgrammers comin’ here?”

“*Influencers*, Evangeline,” Nat said.

Roxy laughed. “Influgrammers sounds pretty good, though! You might have just coined a new word there, Evangeline. Anyway, the influencers are coming here to stay as part of a promotion. We pay them to showcase their visit. All the pictures and videos they shoot while they are here get put on their Instagram feed, and their followers will see them. Since they have hundreds of thousands of followers, it’s great publicity. This is huge for us.”

Roxy had arrived in New Orleans during Mardi Gras season. Now though, spring had brightened into summer and the vivid colors and excitement of Mardi Gras were over. The city had lazily tilted into June, but with the imminent arrival of the influencers, the atmosphere at the Funky Cat was ramping up to a level never experienced in the building’s entire 102-year existence.

Evangeline sighed, shaking her head with bemusement. “Back in my day, people simply bought an ad in a magazine or two.”

CHAPTER ONE

Well into her eighties, Evangeline bustled around the kitchen with pots and spices, her floral wraparound dresses swishing beneath her aprons as she did so. She was a flurry of bustle and action. She could still manage six pans on the flame at one time, and ordered Roxy and Nat about the place as if she still owned the kitchen, which, when she was in it, she did.

Nat picked up a large sack of crawfish and carried it into the back room to begin purging them. “Times have changed, Evangeline, and we’ve gotta keep up if we want the Funky Cat to be a success.”

“It only has six rooms!” Evangeline cried, rearranging bags of spices on the counter. “How much of a success can it be?”

Roxy felt awkward. She didn’t want to talk about how much more upscale the boutique hotel was now or how expensive the rooms had become since Evangeline’s time as owner; it would be rude and embarrassing.

“Well, the room rates are just a touch higher, so we need a new, more affluent demographic, that’s all. Now, shouldn’t we get started on the jalapeño cornbreads? Where have those ramekins gotten to?”

They were really going to town on the welcome meal for the influencers. It was to be a five-course affair.

“Do you think they’ll be able to eat all this lot?” Nat wondered out loud as she wandered back into the kitchen a few minutes later. She was carrying a pot of newly purged crawfish with a grin on her face. “For course one, we’ve got a chicken gumbo with Cajun spices.” Nat ladled up a spoonful of the gumbo and let it slowly pour back into the pan. “Followed by miniature crawfish and cheese pies, followed by Shrimp Creole. That’s shrimp cooked in tomatoes, peppers and hot

sauce, with white rice, Roxy,” the young English woman said gravely.

Nat was a Funky Cat treasure. She helped Roxy with anything that was needed at the boutique hotel, from cooking to serving guests, from checking them in to cleaning their rooms. And her talents extended even further. Nat possessed a voice that was so smooth and creamy that Roxy had hired her on the spot to sing for guests.

Now, Nat’s black nail polish gleamed in the lights of the kitchen. Her excitement about the upcoming meal really *was* something. Getting the cynical, skeptical Nat to be joyous and upbeat about anything was a true feat. But then, what was coming was a bold, new experiment for the small hotel.

“Yum, and I’m preparing dessert—warm bread pudding with caramel and whiskey sauce,” Roxy said.

“Don’t forget the cheese course!” Evangeline cried out from where she was stirring a huge pot of broth.

“I’m not sure they will be able to eat it all, but I do know that thousands and thousands will be watching via their Instagram accounts, and we have to give a great impression, not only of the Funky Cat, but of New Orleans,” Roxy finished.

The city was the first place Roxy had ever felt truly at home. It was hard to explain, but New Orleans had gotten into her bones somehow. There was a *heat* about “N’awlins” as the locals called it, perhaps from the spices, perhaps from the carnivals and the magic and the spiritualism that lurked about the place, perhaps from the music that floated from basements and businesses at any time of the day or night. Whatever it was, the essence of it had found its way into Roxy’s very soul,

lodged itself there, and wasn't about to leave any time soon.

As she chopped onions and garlic for the Shrimp Creole, Roxy sighed happily to herself. Things were *finally* falling into place in her life, and she felt cozy and warm and safe. Just then, they heard the sound of the front door knocker being rapped. Hard.

Roxy frowned, her knife paused over an onion. She was expecting Sam, but he'd have simply walked in without knocking. Roxy wiped her hands down her apron and hurried out of the kitchen, through the dining room and into the hallway. The influencers weren't due for a good three hours. She hoped this wasn't one of them arriving early. She wanted to be dressed in her best and have the food ready before they got even so much as a glimpse of the Funky Cat or its proprietor. A little flustered, she pulled open the door. Her heart sank.

A very tall, slim woman with huge sunglasses and long, black hair that cascaded in waves down her back stood on the doorstep. She wore chunky high heels on her feet, skinny jeans, and a leather jacket with a fur collar that looked very expensive indeed. Behind her, six Louis Vuitton suitcases and two holdalls were piled up in the courtyard. Without so much as a greeting, the woman walked assuredly past Roxy and into the Funky Cat lobby.

"Oh, hello," Roxy said, stepping back to give the woman room to pass. *Who was she?* The woman had walked in like *she* owned the place, a demeanor that Roxy suspected was her visitor's default setting. Then she remembered who the woman was!

"Good afternoon," the visitor said, pushing her sunglasses on top of her head. "I am Ada Okafor." The woman eyed Roxy. "But I expect you knew that. I'm early,

I know. I'm always early. The early bird catches the worm. Snooze, you lose." She flicked her wrist and poked one forefinger into the air.

Roxy recovered quickly. "Great to meet you. I'm Roxy Reinhardt, part-owner and manager of this hotel." Roxy stuck out her hand, but Ada didn't seem to notice so Roxy gestured down at her apron, embarrassed. "Yes, um, I'm afraid we aren't quite, um, ready for the grand welcome we wanted to give you." What was happening to her? All Roxy's confidence and excitement had evaporated at the sight of this officious, elegant woman.

"It's fine," Ada said, though her mouth twitched. She didn't look impressed. "I will go to my room and do some editing on the mag while you," she looked Roxy up and down, "pull yourself together." Ada Okafor ran a travel magazine for rich Nigerians who wanted to jet-set around the world like she did. She had a huge international following on Instagram in the luxury travel market.

Ada looked around. "But who will carry my bags?"



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HUNTED

A DIANA HUNTER MYSTERY

CHAPTER ONE



“DO YOU HAVE to go?” Lydia Hunter asked her daughter as she helped pack her belongings into boxes.

“You know I have to, Mom,” Diana replied.

“But why?” Lydia blinked rapidly, holding back tears that threatened to fall.

“Because I’d rather not waste time commuting to school. I’ll have plenty of work to do without going back and forth.”

“But we live in South Cambie, not the North Pole! It’s not even a fifteen-minute drive.”

Diana sighed. They’d had this argument repeatedly. “Mom, I’ve signed up for two undergrad programs. I’m going to be spending every waking moment studying. Are you going to be happy knowing that I’m out driving back and forth at midnight?”

Lydia sighed, her light blue eyes glossy with unshed tears. “I know you’re right. I know we’ve talked about it a million times, and your father agrees that it’s safer for you to be on campus, but you’re only sixteen! You’re my

baby.” Lydia was sniffing, trying to look anywhere except at her logical and highly driven daughter.

“It’ll be okay, Mom. You’ll see. You can visit me anytime, and I promise I’ll come home for a whole weekend at least once a month.” Diana smiled and pulled her mother in for a hug, a rare expression of affection.

It wasn’t that Diana had any problems expressing love exactly. It was more that she was often distracted, her mind working on some problem or other. She simply didn’t comprehend what other people needed from her. Her brain was on other matters.

Lydia sighed again. “Why did I have to have a genius for a child?”

“Genetically speaking . . .”

“I was being rhetorical.” Lydia cut Diana off with a chuckle. She knew that her daughter, given half a chance, would subject her to a lecture on genetics, epigenetics, and polymorphisms, along with a summary of their impact on the developing brain throughout pregnancy and beyond. Lydia couldn’t stand for that right at this moment.

Diana was more than intelligent. She was far above the norm. She was reading by the age of two and a half. At five, she was doing math far above the level of even a first-grader. By the time Diana started second grade, she was so far ahead of the other children she had become a problem in school. When the school counselor called Lydia to suggest Diana be placed into a program for gifted children, what could Lydia do but agree? Diana was bored and had let everyone know.

And that was how it had gone for the next ten years. There would be a period of calm as Diana threw herself into whatever passion captured her attention, followed

by a period of frustration and poor behavior once she had mastered her current interest and cast around for something new. Relative calm would return when Diana alighted upon another field of interest, and the cycle would begin again.

Had it been up to Diana, she'd have started her undergraduate courses by now. And probably finished them too. But her mother had been adamant. Diana wouldn't spend her entire life with her nose in books. She would have as much of a normal childhood as possible.

So, they had come to a compromise. Diana wouldn't head out to university until she was at least sixteen. After that, it would be Diana's decision what she did and how quickly she did it. That's why Lydia wasn't surprised when Diana chose to study two undergraduate programs, biotechnology and computer sciences.

Lydia didn't understand Diana's decision. The two degrees couldn't be more dissimilar. But what did she know? Maybe it made sense. It didn't matter. Diana was leaving home. She was growing up. Decisions were hers to make now.

Lydia had known the day she discovered she was pregnant that her daughter would be special. That she'd do amazing things with her life. Of course, every mother feels that way, but Lydia was right. Her daughter *was* special. And now, here they were. Diana was on the point of leaving home, much too early in Lydia's opinion.

"I'm going to miss you," Lydia whispered.

Diana grinned. "I'll miss you too, Mom."

Lydia glanced around her daughter's bedroom. There were no posters of her favorite actors or bands on the walls. No inappropriate clothes, the subject of mother-daughter arguments the world over, littered the floor.

There was no make-up, nothing to indicate that this was a sixteen-year-old girl's bedroom.

Unlike other girls her age, fashion wasn't Diana's thing. Her wardrobe mainly comprised jeans, T-shirts, and sneakers. Diana liked being comfortable and had little interest in how she looked. As long as her clothes were functional, covered her up, and didn't get in her way, Diana was happy. She liked things simple except when it came to solving problems. Then it was a case of the more complex, the better.

As it was, Diana's bedroom looked more like a professor's study. Books lay everywhere, including over much of the floor. A computer sat on a desk facing the windows. Papers scribbled with notes, most of which no one else had a chance of comprehending, littered every other available surface.

At one point, Diana got interested in electronics, but thankfully, that messy phase had passed. Her room was no longer covered with circuit boards, wires, and a myriad of tools. It was quite neat now, compared to those days.

Diana's bed was a simple box frame tucked into the corner of her room, her sheets wild with a red and black geometric design. Shelves housing the various projects she tinkered with filled the rest of the space. It wasn't a typical teenager's room.

Lydia glanced at Diana as she stuffed some books into another box. "You do know you won't have much space in your room on campus, right?"

Diana looked up. "I'll find a place for them," she said.

"I'm sure you will." Lydia smiled. Knowing her daughter, she'd probably invent some trans-dimensional

bag that would allow her to store an entire library's worth of books in a space no bigger than a purse.

Lydia rolled her eyes. She'd been spending too much time with Diana watching science fiction shows. They weren't Lydia's favorite, she was more into mysteries, but it was a way to spend time with her headstrong, opinionated child in a mutually soothing way.

Despite Diana's anti-social habit of shouting at the screen bemoaning the poor science upon which these sci-fi shows were based, she still loved them. They were her guilty pleasure. But to anyone who asked, she vehemently maintained she only watched them for research, namely to identify what she *shouldn't* do if she ever wrote a book or a screenplay.

When Lydia heard Diana defending herself like this, she would close her eyes without comment. It was the best way. A mother didn't have to attend every argument her teenage daughter invited her to.

"Are you two ready?" Diana's father yelled up the stairs.

"Nearly, Dad. One more box to go."

"Well, hurry. You'd think you were moving to the other side of the world, not down the road."

CHAPTER TWO



JOHN HUNTER WAS more upset about Diana's move than even Lydia, but he tried to pretend everything was alright. His wife smiled to herself as she watched his attempts to maintain a calm demeanor he wasn't known for.

John was an anxious father, overprotective and fiercely loyal, his feelings hidden by a brusque manner and an uncompromising eye when it came to Diana's associates. He gave short-shrift to anything—or anyone—that might harm or disadvantage her. He was her biggest fan and cheerleader. If she'd said the sky was lime green, he'd have agreed.

John placed special importance on Diana's physical safety. He'd enrolled her in every self-defense class he could find as soon as she was old enough. At his instigation, she'd trained in almost every martial art since she was a toddler. As a homicide detective with the Vancouver Police Department, John saw the worst of the city and he wanted to make sure his daughter was affected by none of it.

Lydia, though, had put her foot down when he'd signed Diana up for a firearms course. Diana had been fourteen at the time, and Lydia had told her husband point-blank that their daughter would not be learning how to operate an "instrument of death" at such a young age.

She'd also calmly reminded him that he couldn't prove Diana was in imminent danger and that police protection wouldn't suffice if she was. That was the only way a civilian could carry a concealed weapon in Canada. Of course, John had ignored the logic of her arguments and pouted. He'd wheedled. Then he'd begged.

He'd brought crime scene photos home and said that even if she couldn't carry a gun, it would still be an extra skill in Diana's arsenal. He'd also launched into a long lecture about how learning to shoot would improve her hand-eye coordination, mental discipline, and self-confidence. Gun skills would help her academics was about the sum of his argument. It hadn't worked.

Lydia had rolled her eyes. She held her ground. Guns were unnecessary, and John Hunter was overzealous.

Thwarted in his attempt to arm Diana, Lydia was surprised John hadn't turned into a wild-eyed, raving lunatic at the prospect of the girl's imminent move. He was too calm. She suspected something. Lydia planned to find out what it was, but not now. She refused to waste the last few minutes she had left with her daughter.

Half an hour later, John carried the last box of books to the car, shutting the back door of their black Ford Explorer parked in the driveway. "Are you sure you haven't forgotten anything? Like the kitchen sink?" John asked with a cocked eyebrow.

“Don’t be mean, Dad,” Diana admonished as she swatted him on the arm.

“Ow!” he complained good-naturedly before hugging her. “I’m going to miss you, Didi,” he said into her hair.

“Stop calling me that!”

Lydia smiled at the scene unfolding before her. Diana hated John’s pet name for her, but she didn’t budge from his embrace. The two of them had always been close. And that was one thing Lydia had been extremely grateful for.

“I’ll miss you too, Dad.” Lydia heard her daughter’s muffled whisper. John glanced up at his wife. His eyes were also moist.

A few moments later, Diana began to fidget. “For you to miss me, I have to actually leave, you know,” she said, wriggling from his clutches.

Her father laughed, letting her go, albeit half-heartedly. “Now, do you remember . . .”

“Not the lecture again, Dad,” Diana groaned. “I’ve heard it five times in the past two hours.”

Her father glared at her. “You don’t know what . . .”

“Yes, yes, I know. The world is full of horrible people who are all out to get me, and boys are the spawn of evil who, because of their biological drive to procreate with anything that moves, are bound and determined to impregnate me. They don’t care about me or my feelings. Got it.” Diana recited her father’s earlier words in a monotone. “That about right?”

John’s eyes narrowed. “Precisely. And, remember, don’t go out . . .”

“After dark because all the stalkers, rapists, and serial killers will hang out right outside my dorm room waiting for me.”

“Exactly, and . . .”

“I think she’s got the point, John,” Lydia said.

John looked at his wife indignantly. “If you saw what I see every day, you’d wonder how I let her leave the house! Either of you,” he added, looking at his wife with concern.

Lydia shook her head, but a warm smile curled her lips. “Please remember, honey, that we do see what you see every day because you make a point of showing us the pictures. Let us never forget that we live in the city of Vancouver, which, despite so many people around the world thinking it’s a lovely place to live, is, in fact, a pit of evil and the crime capital of the universe.”

“But it is!”

“This is fun and all, but can we get going, please? Pretty please?” The puppy dog expression Diana launched in her father’s direction was her most powerful, effective weapon. That, and her tears.

Diana hardly ever cried. But on the rare occasions that she did, it destroyed her father. He would take on an entire army of serial killers by himself with only a rusty spoon as a defense if it put a smile on her face. When she gave him that pleading look, he turned from one of the hardest-ass detectives into a complete sap. Diana had him wrapped around her little finger.

“Okay,” John said. “Everyone in the car.”

When Diana hopped into the SUV and closed the door, Lydia saw her chance. “What did you do?” she asked her husband pointedly. Her eyes narrowed.

“Me? What are you talking about?” John’s far-too-innocent look communicated more than words. He knew precisely what she meant.

“John,” Lydia said warningly.

John ran a frustrated hand through his hair. “I may or

may not have gone down to the precinct nearest her campus and had a quiet word with the boys there. And they may or may not have promised to keep an eye out for her. And I also may or may not have had another quiet word with campus security and warned them that unless they wanted half the Vancouver Police Department breathing down their necks, they would keep her safe.”

“Only half?”

“Yeah, the other half will be busy dealing with the lowlife who hurt her,” John replied.

“You’re impossible. You know Diana will kill you if she finds out.”

“If she finds out.”

“You know that your daughter is incredibly perceptive, right?”

“Well, it’s my prerogative as her father to be like a lion around her.” John paused. “She’s our baby, Lydia. And she’s leaving home.”

“Don’t. I’ll start crying, and then she’ll really kill us for making her late.”

John enveloped his wife in a hug. “She’ll be alright.”

“Yes, she will.”

“Are we going to be leaving this century?” Diana interrupted them through the car window.

“We’re coming, we’re coming,” John mumbled.

Lydia and John got into the car, and within moments, they had left behind the three-bedroom townhouse that had been Diana’s home almost since the day she was born.

CHAPTER THREE

THREE YEARS LATER . . .



JOHN HUNTER WAS roused from a deep and pleasant sleep by his phone's alarm. With his eyes closed, he fumbled around for the offending device and put the alarm on snooze. He groaned as he turned over, throwing an arm over his wife and nuzzling her shoulder deep under the covers.

"We have to get up," Lydia said in a groggy voice.

"Five more minutes," John murmured. "I was having such a nice dream."

"Were you?" Lydia scooted back a little, snuggling into his warmth.

"Mmm. It involved you, me, Paris, and a very, very romantic evening if you get my drift," he purred.

Lydia giggled. "Now that I could get on board with. Of course, it would be nicer if it were more than just a dream," she said with a soft sigh.

"We need a vacation," John grumbled.

"Yes, we do."

"You know what? How about we just do it? I mean,

we both have plenty of vacation time, and Paris isn't that far."

"It's only halfway around the world. And do you have any idea how expensive a trip like that would be?"

Lydia had always been the practical one, at least in terms of finances. And that's precisely why she was in charge of their money. Had it been left to John, they couldn't have bought a cardboard box, let alone own a house, have savings, and still lead a comfortable life. John appreciated it all, he truly did, but sometimes Lydia was a little too tight with the money, like now.

"I know it's expensive, but it probably won't put even a dent in our savings. You're a clever woman and a shrewd negotiator who could, in all likelihood, get us a great deal." After almost nineteen years, John knew precisely which buttons to push.

"I know what you're doing," Lydia said as she turned over.

John looked into her eyes. They were the color of the sky on a beautiful spring morning. "Baby, we need some time, to get away. Just the two of us. I want to go with my wife to the most romantic city in the world. Is that so wrong?"

Lydia's eyes lit up, and she smiled softly. Cupping his cheek, she said, "I'll look over the figures and see if we can make it happen."

John grinned. From Lydia, that was even better than a yes. It meant she would look over the figures and *make* it happen. "Paris, here we come."

Lydia shook her head and poked him in the ribs. "If you want to see Paris anytime soon, you must get up." John groaned in protest. "Or we could stay in bed and be late for work, only dreaming of Paris as we rapidly

descend into poverty after losing our jobs and never finding work again.”

John threw off the covers. “Yes, I’m sure we’ll both get fired for being a few minutes late.” That was his Lydia. She was generally very optimistic, but she could exaggerate on occasion. John rolled out of bed and stretched. He heard Lydia sigh and looked back at her curiously.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she replied with a blush. He grinned. He found it amazing and not a little sexy that even after all this time, she could still blush. She’d been checking him out.

It was understandable. His fiftieth birthday was only a month away, but he kept himself in good shape with regular trips to the gym and a clean diet.

“Like what you see?” He waggled his eyebrows at her. Lydia laughed, throwing a pillow at him.

“You know I do. Now stop fishing for compliments and get ready.”

“Yes, ma’am,” John replied with a salute. A grin still plastered across his face, he made his way to the bathroom.

Fifteen minutes later, he was downstairs in the kitchen, pouring coffee for them both; two sugars and milk for Lydia and black for him. He placed the cups on the island and switched on the television to listen to the morning news.

Opening the fridge, he took out eggs, Canadian bacon, bell peppers, onions, and mushrooms. It was his turn to get breakfast. He chopped the vegetables and glanced at the clock.

“Hun, your coffee’s getting cold,” he called out.

“Coming,” Lydia shouted back. A few minutes later,

she walked up and looked around him to see what he was making. "Omelet? What's the occasion?" Usually, they stuck to simpler meals in the morning, ones that didn't involve cooking.

"Can't a man do something nice for his wife without it being a special occasion?"

Lydia cocked an eyebrow but smiled. She kissed his cheek. "Thank you."

"You'd think I never do anything for you," John grumbled.

Lydia laughed as she sat on the island. "No, I just like to keep you on your toes. Can't have you forgetting to do stuff for me. You know, to show me how much you care." Lydia winked. Taking a sip of her coffee, she closed her eyes and moaned.

"Good?" John asked.

Lydia nodded, a pleased look on her face. "Perfect."

John turned back to the omelets he was making. "We're still on for tonight, right?"

It was their date night, and John had made reservations at a fancy French restaurant. He'd been secretly working on the idea of a trip to Paris for the past few weeks, dropping hints here and there.

"Unless some emergency comes up, sure," Lydia replied.

"We'll leave around seven. Our reservation is for half-past so that should give us plenty of time to get to the restaurant."

"Sounds good. My shift ends at six, so I'll be able to get home and change, no problem." Lydia paused for a moment. "But what about you? You don't finish until six-thirty. Please tell me you aren't going like that." Her

husband was wearing a checked flannel shirt over baggy old jeans.

"I'll change. I just don't need three hours to do it." He looked at her. "Unlike *some* people I could mention."

"Aren't we hilarious this morning?"

John grinned at Lydia. "Just saying it like it is."

"You're lucky you're so good-looking, or I'd have booted you out ages ago."

John dished out the omelet and set Lydia's plate in front of her with a kiss on her cheek. "I knew you only wanted me for my looks," he said with a wink.

"You got that right," she replied, a sparkle in her eye.

John grabbed hold of his shirt. "You wound me so, my lady," he cried.

Lydia rolled her eyes. "You can be so melodramatic sometimes."

"That's precisely why you love me."

"Keep telling yourself that."

John paused for a moment to look at his wife. He covered the hand she rested on the table with his own. "I love you more than my own life," he said seriously.

Lydia turned her hand over and gripped his. "I love you too, my darling."

CHAPTER FOUR



THAT AFTERNOON JOHN sat at his desk glaring at the computer screen in front of him as if boring holes into it would help him find something that wasn't there.

"Who the hell sealed this file?" he muttered to himself. The folder contained the only leads they had on the case he'd been working and he needed to get into it. He would speak to his superintendent.

Just as he was about to stand, there was movement in his peripheral vision. Looking up, a uniformed officer approached him. "Detective," the man said hesitantly. When the constable said nothing further and merely fidgeted, a shiver of irritation ran down the back of John's neck.

"What is it, Constable?" he asked. "I haven't all day, man." John had a reputation for being tough, and it suited him most of the time.

The man swallowed hard. "Detective Gregson would like to see you in the waiting room, sir."

"The waiting room?"

"Yes, sir. He wants to talk to you privately." The

waiting room was hardly what one would call private; it was mostly glass. But it was less public than the bullpen. That fact made John curious about what his longtime partner and friend, Liam Gregson, wanted to tell him. And why he hadn't come to get him himself.

John nodded. "Thank you." He got up slowly and walked to a room housed in a corner of the vast floor several stories up the Vancouver Police Department building. He closed the door behind him and stared at his buddy. His partner looked shell-shocked.

"Everything okay, Liam?" John asked. He frowned. Something was up. He'd never seen his friend so shaken, and they'd worked together for more than five years.

"John, I've got some bad news." Liam's tone was somber. John froze. Liam was an easy-going guy who was always cracking jokes. Some thought his sense of humor morbid at times, but it was Liam's way of coping with the terrible things they dealt with day in and day out. This, though, wasn't one of those black humor moments. Liam was deadly serious.

John examined his partner's face. The clenched jaw, the moist eyes, the wincing, the stooped posture. It wasn't a demeanor unfamiliar to John. Liam got this way every time they had to deliver terrible news. No matter how many times they gave the death notice, for Liam, every instance felt like his first.

"No," John whispered, suddenly catching on. "No." His eyebrows rose emphatically, his pupils dilating. "I don't want to hear it." The younger man's body language clearly indicated that whatever it was, John wouldn't like it at all. Whatever had happened, it affected him intimately, and it was serious.

"I'm sorry, John," Liam said, his voice strangled.

John began to pray. Please, not my girls. Not my girls. Please, God, let them be all right. I'll do anything. Please . . . "Diana?"

Liam shook his head. "Lydia."

John's throat tightened. "What?" he managed.

"I'm so sorry, buddy."

John watched a lone tear track down Liam's left cheek, his world reduced to that single droplet as it made its way down the other man's face until it disappeared into nothingness. He couldn't process anything else. Not even what that tear meant. Certainly not Liam's words.

John's hands clenched into fists. The cheap plastic pen he'd been holding snapped in half. It sounded like a gunshot in the silence. He looked out into the bullpen.

There were fifteen or so detectives and uniformed officers sitting at desks. Normally, they were a curious and noisy bunch. People milled around, banter passing for conversation. Yet at that moment, everyone was going about their business quietly, and they seemed to be doing their best to avoid even glancing in his direction.

Everyone knew. They all knew. But no, there was nothing to know. "Lydia's fine," John muttered. "She's fine. We had coffee this morning. She kissed me goodbye. We're having dinner tonight at that fancy new place that just opened up on Alberni."

"John," Liam whispered as he grabbed his forearm. "I'm sorry to have to tell you . . ." Liam's voice cracked. He cleared his throat. "Lydia's dead."

John's stomach heaved. His temperature rose to boiling. He burned from the inside. He stared at his hands, unwilling to look at Liam and the sadness he'd see in the other man's eyes. Taking a deep breath, John steadied himself. He wouldn't break down. Not here.

“What happened?” His voice was barely above a whisper.

Liam shook his head. “I’m not sure. The call came in a little while ago. They found her b—they found Lydia at the hospital, in the nurse’s rec room.”

“Maybe she’s just sleeping.” John knew he was being ridiculous. It was a hospital. They’d know if someone was dead. But he couldn’t allow himself to believe what he was hearing.

The pitying look Liam gave him made John want to roar, to rage at the world, to hit something. He wanted to . . . He wanted Lydia to be alive.

He wished he’d told her to take the day off. To tell her that she worked too hard and that she needed to rest. But he hadn’t and now he couldn’t.

He grabbed his head. The pressure was building. It had to go somewhere.

“What happened? I need to know what happened, Liam!” John surged across the room, yanking open the door.

“They won’t let you in!” Liam shouted after him. But John ignored his partner and ran to his desk. He grabbed his car keys and stormed from the bullpen. He’d shout and scream and holler until they let him see her. His Lydia.

Running feet pounded behind him. “Give me the keys.” It was Liam.

“I have to see her, Liam.” John didn’t break stride or look at his friend.

“I know. But give me the damned keys. I’ll drive. You’ll kill yourself.”

John cut Liam a look. “Maybe I should.”

“Don’t be stupid! What about Diana?”

Diana didn't know. He'd have to tell her. Oh God, she would be devastated.

John laughed humorlessly. He was scarcely able to acknowledge to himself that never again would he see the smiling face of the woman he had loved for almost two decades. Whatever would he say to their daughter?

"We'll do it together," Liam promised. "We'll tell her."

CHAPTER FIVE



JOHN THREW LIAM the keys and got into the passenger side of the SUV. He stared out of the window, unseeing as the scenery flew past. He knew Liam would do the right thing. He could trust him. Just as he knew the younger man would help him break the news to Diana.

John wasn't sure he could say his wife's name and that word in the same sentence. He couldn't say *dead*. He couldn't even contemplate it. Not yet. But Liam would be there. And he had every right to be. He was practically family.

Since Liam had become John's partner, Lydia had rolled him into their tight-knit family, an adoption of sorts. He'd come over for Sunday lunch every week, and once Diana left for university, Liam spent more time at the Hunter's home than he did his own.

Lydia had always had a soft spot for the lonely, damaged ones. And the moment she'd spotted Liam, she'd known right away that he'd had a rough time. She'd seen right through his brash attitude, and the young man had been unable to sustain his defenses. No one could

resist Lydia. All she'd ever done was make the world a better place.

Something wet hit the back of John's hand. He looked down in surprise. Raising a trembling hand to his face, he realized he was crying.

No, damn it, no! Lydia couldn't be dead. Someone had made a mistake. They must have. Maybe the dead woman was someone who just looked like Lydia. That was it. That had to be it.

A few minutes—and several broken traffic laws—later, John and Liam pulled up in front of Mercy General Hospital. Lydia had worked there for almost fifteen years. She'd started soon after giving birth to Diana, and with her quick intelligence and warm bedside manner, had rapidly risen through the ranks to become a senior nurse. Everyone loved her. And now, she was gone? No! No, this person they were talking about wasn't Lydia. It couldn't be.

John got out of the vehicle, dazed, his movements slow. He couldn't run. He wouldn't run. It would bring the truth that much closer, that much faster.

Again, John considered that the body they had come to view wasn't his Lydia. It would be some other poor nurse, and he would do his job. He would secure the scene, investigate what had happened to her, and share his condolences with some other devastated family. John squared his shoulders and walked into the hospital confidently, Liam on his heels.

John didn't ask for directions. He didn't need them. As he rounded yet another corner in the maze of corridors that wound through Mercy General, he stopped dead. Two uniformed officers were holding back the curious. John walked toward them, determined. When the consta-

bles saw him, they looked at each other nervously. A veteran cop, John's reputation preceded him.

"We can't let you in, sir," one of the men said.

John gritted his teeth. "I need to work the scene."

The men shook their heads. "I'm sorry, sir. We have strict orders not to let you in."

Just as John was about to snap, Liam intervened. "He needs to see her," he said, his tone low. The officers looked at Liam, he outranked them, and after a moment's hesitation, nodded their assent. Raising the yellow tape, they let the pair of detectives through.

John looked at the doorway as if it was a portal to hell. And, in a way, it was. Once across the threshold, his fantasies eviscerated, he'd be confronted by an icy, painful truth that would grip him like a vice and never let go. John clenched his fists by his sides. He took a deep breath followed by three steps that would change his life forever.

John paused, looking around. It was a small room. Barely the size of a closet. Two bunk beds filled most of the space. A small table with two chairs and a refrigerator took up the rest. John absorbed the details until he could prolong things no longer and his eyes landed on a body lying on a bottom bunk.

He smiled gently. She looked so beautiful and serene, almost as if she were asleep. Lydia lay on her back, one arm curled under her head, the other by her side. A hypodermic needle stuck out of her arm. John ground his teeth.

"Come on," Liam said. "Let's get out of here. Let SOCO do their job."

John shook his head. "No, I need to wake her up." He made toward Lydia, but Liam grabbed him.

“No! You know you can’t touch her!”

John resisted, leaning his heavier bulk into his slighter partner, but Liam was having none of it. He grabbed John around the waist, forcing him backward. With the pressure, the reality of the situation finally cleaved John in two. “Lydia!” he yelled.

Liam pushed John out of the room and down the corridor, away from the police officers who now stared at the floor. When they were out of sight and hearing, Liam pressed John against a wall.

“John, Lydia is dead! Do you get it? She is dead. She’s not asleep. She’s not waking up. She’s dead.” Tears ran unchecked down Liam’s face.

“No, no, no,” John muttered, shaking his head.

“Get it together! For Diana! You have a daughter who has no idea her mother is dead. You need to pull yourself together for her, John. Come on, now.”

John stared at Liam, his eyes glassy. He brought a fist up to his chest, rubbing the spot just above his heart, as if doing so would ease his pain. “My Lydia’s dead?”

“I’m so goddamned sorry, John, but yes, she is.”

John felt his knees give way. He crumpled to the floor and began rocking back and forth. “Lydia,” he whispered through tears.

Liam gave him a few moments, then hooked his hand under John’s arm and pulled him up. “Come.”

CHAPTER SIX

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA,
VANCOUVER CAMPUS



“OH MY GOD, did you see his face?” Teddy Van Alst laughed as he threw himself down on Diana’s bed.

Diana rolled her eyes at her friend’s words but she couldn’t help a small chuckle. “Teddy, you are impossible. Why won’t you leave Richard alone?” she said as she joined him on the bed.

“Because he’s a jerk,” her best friend replied.

Diana and Teddy had met in Computer Science class, and though he was two years older, they’d become fast friends. They were geeks, the outcasts, the ones who were different. They’d bonded because of it.

Their competitiveness pushed them to do better, and they’d gotten their degrees in two years, rather than the usual three. And when Diana simultaneously got her biochemistry degree, Teddy declared her a scary-smart dudette who would one day take over the world. She’d promised he could be her vice-whatever when she did.

After completing their undergraduate degrees, Teddy continued down the computer science path while Diana had gone to medical school. Even so, they were still best

friends and saw each other every day. They would have shared the same room if they could, but the university frowned on such things, even if Teddy wasn't interested in girls and never would be.

They spent virtually every free moment in each other's company, meeting for coffee every morning, and studying together in the evenings.

"Why is he a jerk?" she asked.

"Seriously? You really need to ask me that? After what I heard him say? He's lucky I didn't put him on a terrorist watch list and only froze his bank accounts." Among his myriad of hobbies, Teddy liked to "fiddle with" computers, as he put it.

"You're making it sound a lot worse than it is."

Teddy turned over and glared at her. "Diana Hunter, the idiot bet his friends that he'd get, and I quote, "the freaky smart girl into bed!" That makes him a massive jerk, okay? How could I let him get away with it?"

Diana rolled her eyes. "He wouldn't have gotten away with anything. That would imply I am susceptible to his charms."

"What charms?" Teddy snorted.

"Precisely. The day I fall into bed with Richard Morton is the day we get hit by an asteroid that obliterates the entire planet." Teddy opened his mouth to say something, but Diana held up a finger to silence him. "And even then, knowing I was about to die, I wouldn't sleep with him."

Teddy chuckled, then sobered. "He still deserved it," he mumbled.

Diana smiled and rolled over. She hugged her friend and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for always looking out for me," she said with a grin.

“Well, what am I here for? I’m your bodyguard. And that’s official. Your dad said so.”

It was true. Her dad adored Teddy. But the first time she’d brought him home for dinner, her father had scowled. A lot.

Teddy didn’t look like a geek at first glance. He was bullied as a child and again as a teen when the other kids figured out that he was gay. So, he started going to the gym.

Teddy reasoned that if he were bigger than everyone else, they’d be too scared to bully him. And he’d been right. He’d left for summer vacation in ninth grade a scrawny kid. By the start of the next school year, he’d gained a lot of muscle mass, and by the middle of tenth grade, he resembled a tank. The bullies gave him a wide berth.

When John Hunter learned that Teddy was gay and would never be a threat to his daughter’s virtue, his scowl disappeared. He’d promptly declared him her official bodyguard. And Teddy had been more than happy to oblige, claiming that her youth and naiveté in “matters of the heart” meant she needed his protection.

It was sweet. It was. Except for when the two of them ganged up on any potential date Diana might have had. Between Teddy and John, it was a miracle she had any social life at all. Oh, wait, that’s right, she didn’t. Well, not much of one.

Her IQ was a huge impediment. She found most boys her age boring as dirt and tended to avoid them. Anyone who seemed a little more interesting was either way too old—as in they could-be-her-dad-old—or they felt the need to compete with her, which sucked.

“I’m going to die alone,” she groaned.

Teddy looked at her in surprise. “Don’t be stupid. Of course, you’re not going to die alone. We’ll find you some hot, genius superstar who will worship the ground you walk on,” he said with a grin.

Diana rolled her eyes. “You do know you’re talking about someone who doesn’t exist, right?”

“Just wait. Everyone has a soul mate, and you’ll find yours,” Teddy said confidently.

Diana looked at him like he’d lost his mind. “Are you insane? I don’t need a soul mate. I just want to have some fun.” She huffed. “And maybe lose my virginity sometime before I’m a hundred years old,” she muttered.

Teddy’s eyes widened. “Oh, no! No! No! You will be a virgin until the day you die. Your father’s orders. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life locked up in isolation somewhere.”

“He was kidding when he said that.”

“It didn’t sound funny when he growled at me while cleaning his gun.”

Diana laughed. “Yeah, Dad can be a bit overprotective.”

“A bit? I mean, okay, I get it. I’d be the same if I had a daughter like you.”

“Like me?”

“Fishing for compliments, are we? Come on Di, you’re hot as sin, you can kick most guys’ asses—I really gotta thank your dad for that one—and you have a sick sense of humor. If I were straight, I would have married you by now.”

Diana giggled. “Teddy, you do amazing things for my ego. If you were straight, I would have married you too.” She winked at him.

“I’ve got a brilliant idea,” Teddy said, sitting up excit-

edly. He repositioned himself cross-legged on her bed and looked at her expectantly. She moved into the same position facing him.

“Go on, I’m listening, oh, Great One.”

“Let’s make a pact. If we haven’t found our soul mates by the time we’re thirty-five, we’ll marry each other.”

Diana’s eyes widened. “What kind of idea is that? Do you think people die at thirty-five?”

Now Teddy rolled his eyes. “Don’t be ridiculous. But I’d rather spend my life with you than alone.”

“Thanks, that makes me feel great.”

“That’s not what I—” Diana’s ringing phone interrupted him. She rolled over to look at the caller ID. “Hi, Liam, what’s up?” she said.

“Diana, we need to talk to you.”

Diana frowned. Liam’s grave tone didn’t sit well with her. “Is Dad alright?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. He’s here with me.”

“Well, then, spit it out. What is it? And why are you calling me and not Dad if he’s there with you?” she asked.

“Diana, could you come outside, please? I’d rather we not do this over the phone. We’re parked outside your building.”

Liam hung up. Diana stared at her phone.

“Everything okay?” Teddy asked.

Diana shook her head. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. Liam and my dad are here. They want to speak to me outside.”

“Do you want me to come with you?”

Diana looked up at him. “Please,” she said.

Teddy slipped his hand into hers. She squeezed it hard. “Okay, let’s find out what’s going on,” he said.

As they made their way outside, Diana could feel icy

fingers of fear squeezing her heart. They were getting tighter with every step. When she saw her father and Liam, her heart plummeted. John looked like death warmed over, and Liam didn't look any better. She stopped in her tracks, pulling Teddy back.

"I don't want to go over there," she whispered. "They're going to tell me something I don't want to hear. I just know it."

Teddy nodded. He thought so too, but he made to start walking. Diana's feet didn't move. "Di, honey, we have to go over there. Standing here won't change anything, whatever it is."

"I know, but it will delay it."

"You're only putting off the inevitable. Come on, Di, I'm here for you. Always." Teddy gave her hand a gentle squeeze and tugged her forward.

"Dad?" Diana said softly when she reached him. She saw tears in his eyes. A ripple of panic washed over her.

"Oh, baby," her father managed to get out, his voice breaking.

"What's going on?" Diana demanded.

"Mom—"

"Mom? What's happened to Mom? Dad, tell me what happened to Mom!" Diana was already screaming. She didn't care that everyone milling around the campus was staring at her. She paid no mind that Teddy was trying to calm her.

"Didi, I'm so sorry. She was found a few hours ago at work . . ." John trailed off, unable to say more.

"No! No! No! You're lying!" Diana flew at her father, hitting his chest with her fists. "You're lying! Why are you lying to me?" She sobbed, her breaths uneven.

John looked down at her. Straightening his shoulders,

he controlled his emotions as best he could, burying his pain to focus on her. He gathered Diana into his arms, holding her tightly. "I wish I was, Didi. I wish I was."

Diana broke down in her father's arms. He held her up, holding her tight, realizing finally that he could no longer protect her from the world, from pain, as he'd always believed. "Daddy," she sobbed into his chest.

"Shhhh." John Hunter soothed Diana as he petted her hair. "It's okay, sweetie, Daddy's here."

CHAPTER SEVEN



“EXCUSE ME?” JOHN growled, his tone so menacing it drained the color from Nico Stavros’s face. Stavros, the detective assigned to Lydia’s case, took a step back.

“Lydia’s death has been declared a suicide. I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“My wife did not kill herself.” John’s jaw clenched. He could feel the vein in his temple throb.

“I’m sorry, but that’s what the evidence points to.” Stavros was mumbling, looking for all the world as if he wished he could be back in the bullpen joshing with his mates or perhaps dealing with a road traffic accident, maybe a serial killer.

“What evidence?” John snapped. He was moments away from throttling the small man standing in front of him.

Stavros’s Adam’s apple bobbed like a buoy on choppy water. “There was no evidence of a break-in, no one’s fingerprints but hers were found on the hypodermic, and her psychiatrist said she was suffering from depression.”

“And based on that, you think my wife killed herself?”

Look, Stavros, you're a decent detective but how the hell have you closed so many cases when you take just five minutes to rule this a suicide? If you'd looked a bit deeper, you'd have discovered my wife didn't even have a psychiatrist!"

Nico Stavros *was* a decent detective, and a veteran one but faced with John Hunter's towering fury, he practically squeaked. "Lydia saw one of the psychiatrists from the hospital now and then. Something to do with all the death she had to deal with," he said quickly.

"That doesn't mean she was seeing a psych regularly and it definitely doesn't mean she was depressed or that she killed herself."

"She left a note," Stavros said quickly.

"What?"

"She left a suicide note."

"Don't say that!" John roared. The man in front of him took another step back.

"I'm sorry," Stavros said. "Let me get it for you." Moments later, he returned.

John yanked the plastic bag from Stavros's hand. It contained a piece of paper. "Has it been dusted for prints?" Stavros opened his mouth but stopped. "Well?" John demanded.

"No one's prints except Mrs. Hunter's were found on the note," Stavros said. "It's . . . It's addressed to you."

John paused before finally working up the courage to look at the paper he held in his hand. It was covered in the loopy scrawl that he knew so well.

My dearest John,

I know this will come as a shock to both you and Diana, but I can't

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deal with life anymore. There are so many things you don't know about me, my dear, sweet John. If you did, if you really knew me, knew about my past, you'd never look at me the same way again.

I couldn't bear the thought of you knowing how weak I am, and that's why I never told you how much I was suffering. I couldn't. I wanted you to be happy, and if you'd known how much I was hurting, I know you would have suffered right along with me.

It would have been just like that time when we went hiking and I fell and broke my leg. It wasn't your fault, and there was nothing you could do to take the pain away, but you suffered with me. Remember what I told you then? Well, I meant every single word and still do.

I want you and Diana to know that I love you dearly, and I'm sorry to hurt you like this. I'm just tired, John. Tired of fighting every day to put on a face that isn't mine. To act like someone I'm not. This is the best solution.

I don't want you and Diana grieving over me. You have to move on with your lives. It's best this way. Please believe that.

Your loving wife,

Lydia

John's hand shook. He was having a hard time believing what his senses were telling him. Lydia had been fine. She had been happy. They'd had coffee that morning. She'd laughed. They were planning a vacation to Paris, the most romantic city in the world. Lydia had not been suicidal. John simply couldn't believe it.

He glanced down at the piece of paper in his hand. His heart was screaming that Lydia would never kill herself, but the cop in him shouted that he had to accept the facts. He had physical evidence, words written in her hand, that Lydia had been deeply unhappy and she'd managed to hide it from him so well that he hadn't noticed until it was much too late.

Tears ran down his cheeks. He didn't care now who saw him. It took every ounce of strength he had not to fall to his knees.

Someone snatched the letter out of his hands. "You idiot!" Liam snarled at Stavros. "You tell him this? You show him this! Here? You don't deserve to wear that badge." Stung, Stavros slunk away, grateful though for the reprieve.

Liam turned to John. "And you! What are you doing here? You should be at home with Diana. It hasn't even been two days!"

"I needed to know what happened."

Liam took a deep breath. His shoulders dropped. He put his arm around his partner's shoulders. "Come on, I'll take you home."

"How am I going to tell Diana?" John asked. His hand twitched.

“The only way you can tell Diana anything. Clearly, and to the point.”

John smiled sadly. “There’s no beating around the bush with her. She’d take our heads off.”

“Exactly. So, come on, let’s go.”

“Liam, this news, this verdict of . . . suicide. It could change Diana forever. But I can’t lie to her. And even if I did, she’s a walking, talking lie detector. She knows my every tell. She’d figure out I was lying within a second. But how can I tell her, Liam? How can I tell her?”

“I’ll get a copy of the letter. It might help.” Liam turned and stalked to the bullpen, shouting at Stavros. Within a minute, he returned, a manila envelope clutched in his hand.

CHAPTER EIGHT



DIANA SAT ON the couch in the living room, her back ramrod straight. Dressed all in black, she struggled to hold her emotions in check. The threat of tears followed her around like a cloud. Every second she spent in the house felt heavy with the prospect of a downpour. Everywhere she looked, she saw something that reminded her of her mother. And it hurt. It hurt so badly.

Now, she was sitting on the couch as Liam and her father loomed above her. Thankfully, Teddy was sitting next to her, holding her hand. He had been a steadying presence over the past couple of days. And she had never been more grateful for his friendship.

“What is it you want to tell me?” she asked the two older men. She feared their answer. She thought back to the last time they’d given her news together; the worst moment of her life.

John Hunter sighed, running a hand through his hair. “They’ve discovered what happened to Mom,” he said softly.

Diana’s eyes widened. “They found whoever did this

to her already? Are they sure?" Her father winced. "What? What happened to Mom, Dad?"

John looked at her steadily, his blue eyes holding hers. "All evidence points to the fact that she took her own life."

Diana tucked in her chin. She was astounded. "What?"

"Diana, Didi, it looks like your mother killed herself."

"No, that's not possible. Mom would never . . . No, you've got it wrong." Diana looked back and forth between Liam and her father, their faces grim and determined. They believed what they were telling her. That didn't mean it was true, though.

Liam handed her an envelope. Diana took it with trembling hands. She attempted to remove the piece of paper inside. Helping her, Teddy gently took the envelope from her and pulled the paper out, handing her the white sheet.

Diana took it and began to read, her hands grasping the paper tighter with every word. When she had finished, she looked up at her father. The note was real. She knew her mother's handwriting.

"She left us," she said with a sob.

As he had many times over the past two days, John sat down and pulled Diana into a hug, holding her tightly. "I know it hurts, baby girl. But think how much pain she must have been in for her to believe that this was the only way out."

"She never said anything. Why didn't she say anything? We could have helped her."

"I know, Didi. I know. I wish she'd said something. I wish . . ." John pulled Diana to him. She curled up against his chest as she had when she was younger. She'd tried to

be stoic and strong, but losing her mother and now finding out she had abandoned them made Diana feel bereft and as vulnerable as a little girl. A little girl who wanted her mommy.

“You won’t leave me too, will you, Dad?” she asked, her voice small and terrified.

John was torn between grief for Lydia and resentment toward her for having forced such pain on them. For taking the coward’s way out. And to hear his smart, courageous nineteen-year-old daughter revert to a little girl begging him not to leave her made him angry. So, so angry at Lydia that he could barely see for fury.

He groaned, hugging Diana even more tightly. He closed his eyes and pressed his lips to her hair. “Of course not. I’ll never leave you. Not if I have a choice.”

As he said them, the words sounded familiar. They felt important. A flicker of a memory stirred deep in his brain. It floated, indistinct, but as he tried to catch it, his daughter’s quiet sobs distracted him. “Shhh, it’s okay, Didi. We’ll be okay. We will. I promise.”

* * *

Diana lay on her bed in her dorm. Teddy spooned her, holding her tightly against him as if trying to transmit some of his strength to her.

“How could she do this to me, Teddy? How could she do it to Dad? How could she do it to all of us who loved and cared for her?” Diana’s voice was thin and weak with exhaustion.

Behind her, Teddy sighed. “I know it hurts. I know it’s killing you that she did this, but Di, she must have been in a terrible place to see this as her only solution.”

"It's not fair, Teddy. Why didn't she say anything? We would have helped her. All of us. We could have been there for her, helped her deal with whatever it was that was so dreadful."

"I know, Di. And you know we'd have all done anything we could to help her. She knew that too. The pain she must have been in . . . Try not to be angry with her. She did the only thing she thought she could."

"You know, I just realized. She'll never see me married. She'll never meet my children. My kids won't have a grandma because she was . . . so selfish."

Diana knew she wasn't being fair, but part of her didn't care. So many people in Lydia's life had loved her, and she'd chosen to give them all up.

"Your dad will be there for you," Teddy reminded her.

Diana laughed, a cold, harsh sound. "You think? Who knows? After all, he might not be able to take the pain of losing my mother," she said sarcastically. "Maybe he'll decide to off himself too."

"Diana!" Teddy snapped. When he used her full name and with that tone of voice, Teddy meant business. "You have no right to belittle his pain. He's been doing the best he can, trying to be strong for you."

"I'm sorry," Diana said with a frustrated sigh. "I just wish I could understand what happened. I wish I could understand how and why my strong, apparently happy-as-a-clam mother suddenly turned into a depressive coward who chose to give up rather than fight."

"Don't, Di. Please, don't. You'll regret these words later."

Diana shook her head. "No, I won't. You know why? Because everyone has problems. You think being the brain box in every class is easy? Do you know you're the

only friend I've ever had? Do you know that I haven't even got to a second date with a boy? I scare them all off! I know it sounds pathetic, but you know as well as I do that growing up as an outsider isn't easy. Well, we could have killed ourselves, couldn't we? We could have given up, just like her. Then other people would be hurting instead of us. But we didn't, did we? We kept on."

Teddy sighed, nuzzling her hair. "It's not the same thing, and you know it."

Diana turned over to look into his eyes. "How isn't it the same thing? We were in pain, but we chose to fight back rather than roll over and die!"

"Di, you're not being fair. You have no idea what your mother was going through, and until you find out—if you ever find out—you have no right to judge. I'm sorry, but that's the truth."

Diana huffed. "Let's agree to disagree."

Teddy nodded. Retiring from a fight with Diana was often the smart thing to do. She had a stubborn streak. Arguing with her wasn't the best option.

"Thanks for being here, Teddy," Diana whispered.

"Where else would I be? You're my little sister, and I'll always be here for you, no matter what."

Diana closed her eyes and snuggled into Teddy's warmth. She was exhausted from the roller coaster of emotions she'd been riding ever since she'd heard of her mother's death. It was too much for her to comprehend and she craved rest, a respite from her emotions. Blissful oblivion overtook her in moments as she fell asleep in Teddy's arms. Tomorrow was another day, and she was in no rush for it to arrive.

CHAPTER NINE



KAREN ELWIN, THE coroner's assistant, cringed under John Hunter's murderous gaze.

"What?" John couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"I'm sorry, Detective Hunter. I have no idea what happened."

"Well, find out!" John exclaimed. "You can't just lose a body! I'm damn sure she didn't get up and walk out of here on her own."

"Let me call my partner. He was in charge of the night shift. Maybe he knows more."

The woman looked terrified, but John couldn't bring himself to care. How could she stand there and tell him his wife's body was missing and that she had no idea what happened to it?

The coroner's assistant scurried into her office to make the call. Two minutes later, Karen Elwin came back wringing her hands.

"Did you find her?" John snapped when it seemed the assistant wouldn't be saying anything of her own accord.

"An order came down from the Deputy Chief Consta-

ble's office overnight. Your wife's body was shipped out early this morning."

"That's it? An order from on high? No one thought to ask me?" John wanted to kill someone. "Who gives the DCC's office the right to decide what will happen to my wife's body?"

Karen Elwin shook her head. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "The orders were given, and we had to follow them."

"Where is she now? I'll go get her back myself."

"I'm afraid you can't."

"Oh? Why not?"

"The orders were to move her to the crematorium and . . . cremate her."

"Jesus. What time?" John demanded.

"What time?"

"What time is the cremation? I can stop it."

The woman looked at him and grimaced. "It took place three hours ago."

John's eyes widened as he realized what she was saying. "You're kidding me, right? Are you telling me you turned my wife to ash without consulting me? What is wrong with you people?"

He was screaming, and he knew he was scaring the woman. She had flinched, but he felt justified. Some moron cremated Lydia without his permission!

"I'm sorry, Mr. Hunter," Karen Elwin whispered.

"Enough! I don't want an apology. I want my wife's body! I want to be able to give her a proper burial. I want my daughter to be able to say goodbye to her mother. I want to say . . ."

John's voice cracked. He swallowed back tears. He tilted his head and looked at the ceiling, taking a deep,

juddering breath. “An apology isn’t enough. How could this happen? I want to know who signed that order. I want to know who’s responsible for this travesty. Cremating a body without permission from their next of kin! How could you? Who was it who told you to do it?”

The woman looked contrite. “I’m sorry, Mr. Hunter, you know I can’t release that information. There’s an ongoing investigation.”

John glared at her. “I’m a homicide detective with VPD. This order was issued by mistake. My wife’s death was ruled a suicide, which means there is no ongoing investigation and you can damn well tell me who’s responsible for cremating my wife’s body without my say-so!” His voice rose as he unleashed his venom on the clerk.

Elwin squared her shoulders. “Sir, I’m sorry, but I’m not authorized to release this information to anyone. If you wish to learn more, I suggest you take it up directly with the Deputy Chief Constable’s office.”

John was about to launch into another rage-filled speech, but seeing the woman’s petrified expression, he realized he was wasting his time. She was too junior, anyhow. He turned on his heel to leave before immediately turning back around again and placing his face just inches from hers. “Mark my words, this is not over. Not by a long way. Someone *will* pay for this!” John stormed out of the office, slamming the door behind him.

He wanted to hit something. How could this happen? How could he have lost Lydia all over again?

And then it hit him. How was he going to tell Diana? How was he going to drop yet another emotional bomb? Now he would have to explain why Diana couldn’t say goodbye to her mother. He would have to tell Diana that,

for a second time, they had lost the woman they both loved so deeply.

* * *

Later that evening, John sat nursing a glass of scotch. He was worried about Diana. She had taken the news of her mother's unexpected cremation well. Too well.

He thought over the past few day's events. Something wasn't right. If he had been Nico Stavros, he too, given the evidence, would have concluded that Lydia had killed herself. However, Stavros didn't know Lydia.

He didn't know what a fighter she was or how much she had overcome. He didn't know how she would go out of her way to avoid hurting people. It didn't make sense that Lydia killed herself and left them all to cry. At least, John hoped that was true. One minute his heart screamed that Lydia hadn't killed herself. Then his brain intervened with cold, hard logic, showing him the facts, the suicide note.

John's thoughts strayed to the circumstances surrounding Lydia's cremation. The act felt shocking and invasive, leaving John bereft and humiliated. On the surface, it appeared a simple clerical error. That's what they said at the Deputy Chief Constable's office when he had checked. The cremation order was intended for a body that remained unclaimed for the better part of a fortnight.

John couldn't accuse them of lying, at least not without proof, but the explanation he was given, that someone had accidentally written "Lydia Hunter" on the order instead of "Jane Doe #46," defied belief. It wasn't as if a simple spelling mistake had been made or that there

had been a mixup between two people with the same name lying in the same morgue. So, it was either a monumental error or something else was going on.

“Dad?” John heard Diana’s voice. He was tempted to share his thoughts with her but stopped himself. Diana had been through enough. After all, he had no evidence to support his thoughts. Just a few suspicions, suspicions that would get him thrown out of the office if he took them to his superintendent.

“What are you doing up and about at this time?” John asked.

Diana walked into the living room and sat next to her father on the couch. “Couldn’t sleep,” she replied, staring into the cheerful fire that didn’t represent how she felt at all.

“Me neither,” John replied.

“Why do you think she left us? Mom?” Diana said after a moment’s hesitation. This question, more than any other, was the one she needed answering. Diana had to understand why her mother chose to die. The more she thought about it, the harder it was to come up with an explanation and the more difficult it became to accept that her mother preferred death over life with her daughter and husband.

“It had nothing to do with you, Didi,” her father said softly.

“Then what was it to do with? Was that really her only option? Was it really the only way to solve her problems?”

John sighed. “I don’t know. Your mom was the love of my life. I saw her every day, and I’d sworn to protect her. Yet I didn’t notice anything was wrong. I couldn’t see that she was so unhappy she’d rather end her life than keep

on going. How do you think I feel knowing that I should have, could have, noticed something, yet I didn't? That she didn't trust me enough, wasn't confident enough in me, to let me help her."

John ran a hand through his hair. He exhaled slowly. "I'm sorry, Didi. I shouldn't take my frustrations out on you. You're dealing with enough as it is."

Diana shook her head. "No, Dad. I'm here for you. Just like you're here for me. After all, all we've got is each other."

"Well, there's Teddy and Liam, too," John reminded her with a small smile.

"Yeah," Diana replied. "You're right." She got to her feet, stretching. "I think I'll try to get some sleep."

"Good. Get some rest. I'll see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Dad."

"Night, Didi."

Diana smiled sadly and made her way up the stairs. She dropped down onto the bed, curling into Teddy. He was snoring loudly. It was a comforting sound. One that kept her grounded.

Ever since she'd learned of her mother's suicide, Diana had been battling her instincts. She was trying hard not to withdraw from the world. It was so tempting. She knew she could simply disappear into her studies, into her mind, and let science, math, and reason take over.

She knew she could stop the pain like that. She'd done it before, when she was younger and hadn't been able to deal with being bullied. She'd retreated from the world, barely exchanging two words with anyone.

At the time, her mother had been so worried, she'd taken her to the doctor and then a psychologist, who'd

figured her out pretty quickly. The shrink had explained that burying herself in her studies was Diana's coping mechanism and that she'd come out of it when she wanted or when an external factor forced her. At the time, she'd been ten. Chocolate cake had worked pretty well.

Now? Now Diana was worried that if she allowed herself to slip into that familiar place, she'd never come out of it. She'd be stuck in emotional limbo for good, never connecting with anyone, not truly.

While Diana pondered these things, Teddy's snoring slowly lulled her to sleep, her grief abating as she slipped out of consciousness, snuggling into her friend. Could she put distance between all those who loved her and whom she loved back? Or would the person she most hurt be herself?

CHAPTER TEN



IT HAD BEEN a month since Lydia's death, and to say that John was worried about Diana was putting it mildly. She'd gone back to school soon after the funeral but had refused to return home even once since then. She also refused to talk about her mother. Whenever John tried, Diana immediately changed the subject.

Had it happened only once, John would have chalked it up to grief and Diana needing time. But last night, he'd taken her to dinner. It must have been the tenth time he'd attempted it, only to be confronted with his daughter's implacable resolve not to talk about Lydia at all.

John understood that Diana was angry with her mom. And he couldn't say he blamed her. But this avoidance she was engaging in wasn't healthy for anyone, least of all her.

John sighed now as he stared at the ceiling, thinking. He was in the spare room. He hadn't been able to bear sleeping in the bed he'd shared with Lydia. He turned over and punched his pillow. Diana's distress weighed

heavily on his mind, and he couldn't sleep. He didn't know what to do.

Slowly, John nodded off, his sleep fitful, restless. He kept reliving a portion of the same unpleasant dream until, with a start, he jackknifed into a sitting position. Wiping away the sweat on his brow with the sheet, he stared at the wall in front of him. "Lydia *was* murdered," he whispered into the darkness.

The despair in his heart began to change. Soon, it morphed into a force field that surrounded him as it took shape and strength. Someone *had* killed his wife. He was sure of it.

But why? As John sat in the dark, he thought hard, piecing things together. Finally, he had a direction, a purpose.

* * *

The following morning, John sat in his kitchen sipping coffee. It was strange, so empty. Lydia had filled his life with love and laughter. And now? Everything was so quiet.

In the previous days, John's anger and resentment at Lydia's death had begun to fade as guilt assailed him; guilt that he hadn't tried harder, hadn't noticed her pain. But last night, thanks to a dream—a memory—all those destructive emotions had galvanized into a determination to catch her killer.

Now, John was certain that Lydia's death wasn't a suicide, and no one could persuade him otherwise. She hadn't killed herself. She had been murdered. And he would prove it.

But he had a problem. While Lydia's death was ruled

a suicide, John would have no access to police resources. And yet to gather evidence to begin proving his case, he needed them.

John rubbed his face with one hand, the other grasping his cooling coffee as he debated what to do. He scratched his chin. He'd get Liam's help. He'd win his partner over if he was skeptical.

John picked up his phone. "Liam, we need to talk. When can you come over?"

"Is something wrong?"

"Yes. No. I don't know. Look, I just need you to come over as soon as you can. It's about Lydia."

"John," Liam warned. John winced. His partner knew him well. "Look, Liam, this is serious. I'm not imagining things, nor am I hallucinating or talking to the dead. And no, I'm not having a breakdown. I just need to talk to you as soon as you can get here."

Liam sighed. John imagined him running his hand through his hair. It was a nervous gesture the younger detective engaged in when he was uncertain. "Fine. I'll be there in an hour," he said. The line went dead.

John put down his phone, satisfied. They both had the day off. They had time to go over everything and come up with a plan.

An hour later, the bell rang. John opened the door and tried to smile. He knew it was strained. He knew his eyes didn't shine. "Hey, Liam," he said as he stood back to let the younger man in.

"Everything alright?" Liam asked.

"Not right now, but it will be," John replied. "Coffee?"

Liam nodded. "Sure." John headed to the kitchen. Liam slid into a chair at the island while John poured him

coffee. He handed it to his partner before taking a seat opposite.

Liam watched him intently, but now that John faced saying the words he'd planned, he was having trouble voicing his thoughts. This was his only chance to convince Liam he wasn't crazy. If he couldn't do that, his life would get much tougher. He didn't think he stood a chance of convincing anyone else.

As he paused, Liam took a firm hold of the space between them. "Look, John, I know you're hurting. We all are. Lydia was an incredible woman. Those of us who had the privilege to know her were blessed, but she's gone." Liam's voice had lowered to a whisper as if it was almost a sacrilege to say the words out loud.

Taken by surprise, John glared at him. "Don't you think I know that?" he hissed. "Don't you think I don't feel it every moment of every day? Especially when I'm here, alone. Everywhere I look, something reminds me of Lydia and the fact that I'll never see her again."

Liam's eyebrows climbed into his scalp. John stopped. He'd ranted with more force than he had intended, but he was sick and tired of everyone tiptoeing around him as if he were a bomb about to go off.

It was true he was angry. He had lost his wife. He was grieving. He was worried sick about his daughter. But he wasn't out of his mind.

"Okay," Liam said gently. "What did you want to talk about?"

John hesitated for a moment, then decided. "Lydia didn't kill herself."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



AT JOHN'S WORDS, a pall of sadness crept across Liam's face. For the first time since they'd known each other, John wanted to reach across the island, yank Liam over it, and demonstrate how he felt in a way the younger man would never forget.

His nostrils flaring, John took one, two, three deep, calming breaths. Attacking Liam wouldn't help his case. He'd only give the other man more ammunition to tear down his theory. "Don't give me that look, Liam. I know what I'm talking about."

"I believe you think you do, John. But I also know just how hard it's been for you to accept that Lydia decided to take her own life. I think you're grasping at straws, deluding yourself."

John glared at him. "Liam, you haven't even heard what I have to say, and you're already judging."

Liam sighed. "I'm not judging you, but there's a reason we aren't allowed to investigate cases involving someone close to us. You lose all objectivity and start

seeing what you hope is there over what is *literally* there. Maybe it's time you took your own advice."

A few years ago, shortly after they'd partnered up, a childhood friend of Liam's had been the victim of a drunk driver. Liam had wanted to be assigned the case. When their super refused, Liam flipped. It had been John who'd explained that not only would Liam find it impossible to be objective, but his involvement would hurt their chances of getting a conviction. The defense would use Liam's connection to the deceased to cast doubt over the evidence they presented. It had taken a few hours, but Liam eventually, grudgingly, admitted that John was right.

"I'd love to do that. I'd love to sit back and watch as someone else catches my wife's killer. I mean, I'm sure that the detectives on the case are great at their job and all. Oh, but wait . . . no one is *assigned* to the case. You know why? Because it's been ruled a suicide!" John was shouting.

Liam opened his mouth but closed it before saying anything. John could almost hear the wheels in the man's head grating. "Tell me what you have," Liam said finally.

John pulled a copy of Lydia's suicide note from his back pocket. He unfolded the paper and pointed out a short passage he'd highlighted. "This paragraph has been bothering me since I read it but I couldn't put my finger on why for the life of me." John handed the note to Liam.

It would have been just like that time we went hiking, and I fell and broke my leg. It wasn't your fault, and there was nothing you could do to take the pain away, but you

suffered with me. Remember what I told you then? Well, I meant every single word and still do.

Liam read the passage silently. "I remember that trip. You called me in such a panic I thought the world was coming to an end. Lydia had fallen into a ravine, and you were so sure she was dying. I remember I had to calm you down because it sounded like you were about to throw yourself after her."

John laughed ruefully. "Yeah, my heart pretty much stopped for the few minutes it took me to reach her. She wasn't moving, and she wasn't answering me. Luckily, it was only a concussion and a broken leg, but I swear I thought I'd lost her."

"And you seemed pretty determined to follow her." Liam gave John a pointed look. John snorted.

"I'm not suicidal," he muttered. "Not now. Because I know that her death wasn't an accident and it wasn't suicide."

"How? How do you know that?"

"I couldn't see the significance of this passage at first. I guess I'd blocked out most of that day at the ravine because it took me until last night to remember. By the time I'd got down to Lydia, she was regaining consciousness. And my reaction was probably a little over the top. As soon as she came round and took one look at my face, *she* tried to comfort *me*, even though it should have been the other way around."

Liam smiled. "I'm not surprised. That sounds like Lydia. She was always looking out for everyone."

"The thing is now I remember clearly what happened. I'd been terrified that she was dead and I told her so. She

shook her head. She swore that she'd never leave me *if she had a choice*." There was silence for a moment as John paused to let the meaning of his words sink in.

"And you think that she's referring to that in her note? Giving you a message?"

"Yes, I do. Otherwise, what was the point? As she lay there in that ravine, I said a million times that I wished I could take her pain away. I berated myself for not looking after her better, but the only thing she said to me that would even be slightly relevant here was that she'd never leave me if she had a choice."

"And you think she wasn't given a choice? That she knew she was about to be killed and was coerced into writing this letter. That this was her way of telling you the note was fake and she'd been murdered, is that it?"

John nodded. "That, and the fact her body was "accidentally" cremated. You can't tell me that isn't suspicious."

Liam shrugged. "I did think it was an honest mistake, but if you're right, then maybe it wasn't."

"I thought it was strange at the time, but I dropped it because there was nothing else to go on. She'd killed herself, so why would anyone purposely have her body cremated? But if she was murdered . . ."

"If she was murdered, cremating her would hide evidence."

"Exactly. What I want to know is how the killer managed to get that cremation order filled out."

"What do you mean?"

"The DCC's office. The story I got was that they issued an order for an unidentified and unclaimed body but that someone accidentally wrote Lydia's name on the order instead of "Jane Doe #46"."

Liam's eyes widened. "Are you kidding me? How do you make a mistake like that? Why didn't you tell me this sooner?" John gave him a pointed look. "Because I was being an ass and kept accusing you of being in denial. I'm sorry," Liam added.

"It's okay. I would have thought the same thing if I was you."

"So, the order came from the DCC's office? Strange."

"Yeah, it is. And I'm telling you I'm seeing conspiracies left, right, and center. I mean, my first instinct was to think that it must have been a genuine mistake. Otherwise, someone in that office, someone who's supposed to be on our side, is lying. But now I can't help but think that it's a possibility."

"Do you think the DCC's involved?"

"Not necessarily. Someone lower down the chain of command—a secretary or an assistant—could have done it. All they'd have to do is change the name on the order and slip it into a stack of other documents that needed signing. I doubt the DCC stops to read every piece of paper he signs."

"So, we're looking for anyone who had access to the cremation order."

"Pretty much." John paused. "We can't take this to the super, can we?"

Liam shook his head. "Even if he believed us, without solid evidence, he'd shut us down the moment we mentioned the DCC's office. And the only evidence we have so far points to suicide and a clerical error. It's hardly substantial. We're also too close to the case. You know he'd never let us investigate this ourselves if he knew."

"I know. But I have no choice, Liam. I'll have to do this

on the side. Can you imagine what Lydia must have gone through? How fright—” John’s voice broke. He looked up at the ceiling as he blinked back tears. He felt Liam’s hand on his shoulder.

“You won’t have to go it alone, John. I loved Lydia too.”

John took a deep gulp of air. “I know, but I can’t ask you to do this. We have no idea who or what is involved, and I won’t ask you to risk your career.”

Liam rolled his eyes. “You’re not asking me to do anything. I’ve decided, and there’s jack all you can do about it. So listen, instead of arguing and wasting time, why don’t we get to work so we can find out who did this and put Lydia’s killer behind bars.”

John’s nostrils flared. At every mention of Lydia’s name, his objectivity evaporated, and a desperate, raging need for vengeance replaced it. He was certain of one thing. That no matter who had killed Lydia, he would make them pay. John would find them, and he would destroy them. No other option remained to him.

CHAPTER TWELVE



TEDDY SAT ON the floor outside Diana's dorm. With his back against the wall, he tried hard not to fall asleep. It was already two in the morning, and he'd been waiting for Diana for four hours.

Maybe he should have tried to find her. Sitting outside her room might not have been his smartest idea. But when he'd taken a more proactive approach a week ago and tracked Diana down to a frat party, she'd freaked out. Of course, that might have had something to do with the fact that she'd been blind drunk and he'd tried to drag her home against her will.

Teddy groaned. He'd give her another half an hour, then he'd look for her. He'd sling her over his shoulder if he had to.

Diana was spiraling out of control, and Teddy was worried about her. She'd ditched classes, her grades were slipping, and her professors were as worried as he was. Teddy knew that her mother's death was the only reason they hadn't come down harder on Diana.

Teddy grimaced and slammed his head against the

wall behind him. He would not allow himself to shed tears. Not here. He'd do it in the privacy of his room, as he always did.

Lydia had been a wonderful woman. She'd accepted him for who he was and had welcomed him into her family, something his own mother hadn't been willing to do once she'd discovered he was gay. When he'd met Diana's parents for the first time, Teddy hadn't felt comfortable revealing his sexuality to them—mostly because of the reaction of his own—but as it was, he needn't have worried. There were a few awkward moments, but he'd quickly been rolled right into the heart of Diana's family.

He remembered the first time Diana brought him home. He grinned at the memory.

“Di, please don't tell your parents I'm gay,” he'd begged. “I don't want them . . . I don't want them to look at me with the same disgust and disappointment my own folks do.”

Diana rolled her eyes. “Teddy, my parents aren't like that. And, anyway, I think you'll want to tell my dad.”

“Why?” Teddy asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Well, if he doesn't know you're not into girls, he'll assume you're either my boyfriend or are simply pretending to be my friend to get into my pants. That means you will get ‘the talk.’”

“The talk?”

“Yeah, the one where he describes in gruesome detail what he'll do to you if you hurt me and how your body will never be found. I think that's the long and short of it. I've never actually heard him deliver the speech, but a couple of potential boyfriends did provide a few details as they ran out the door.” Diana winked.

“It can’t be that bad.”

Diana laughed derisively. “Why do you think I’m still a virgin and will probably remain one until I get married?”

“You just haven’t found the right guy?” Teddy replied.

Diana snorted. “Keep telling yourself that.”

“Doesn’t matter. I’d still prefer you didn’t tell them.”

Diana leaned over and kissed Teddy’s cheek. “Teddy, I’ll do as you ask because you’re my best friend and I love you. But that doesn’t mean I agree with your approach. You should be proud of who you are.”

“And who’s that? A gay nerd who hides behind his appearance as a jock, or, as my father so eloquently describes me, a satanic curse on my family and an abomination.” Diana slapped Teddy on his arm. Hard. “Ow!”

“Stop talking like that about yourself. Your dad’s a moron who doesn’t deserve to have a son as awesome as you. And my dad is nothing like that.”

Teddy was adamant. “Look, this is important to me. I want your parents to like me and I want to feel normal for once. I don’t want to be the freak. Please, Di, for me. Don’t tell them.”

“Okaaaay.” Diana cuddled up to Teddy, putting an arm around his waist. “I do love you, you know,” she whispered.

Teddy dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “I love you too, Di. More than you’ll ever know.” Diana had saved him. He’d been alone until she’d come along and brightened his world.

When Teddy arrived at the Hunters, Lydia hugged him tightly, kissed him on the cheek, and thanked him for being a good friend to her daughter. Then John Hunter appeared.

Teddy was tall and well-built thanks to his five weekly training sessions at the gym. John Hunter, however, was slightly taller and bigger than Teddy. His eyes narrowed threateningly as he looked the younger man over.

Fifteen minutes of small talk later, John invited his daughter's friend into the den to look at his gun collection. Teddy swallowed hard and followed apprehensively. The moment the door closed, Diana's father turned and pointedly sized the younger man up and down.

"Diana tell you what I do for a living?"

"Yes, sir," Teddy replied, proud that his voice was steady, despite being decidedly uncomfortable.

"I'm a homicide detective. I catch murderers every day. I go after some of the worst people this city has ever seen, from drug addicts killing each other for a fix to psychopaths who torture and murder others for fun."

Teddy tried to smile. "Thank you for keeping us safe, sir."

John harrumphed. "The point I'm making is that if you hurt my little girl, they will never find your body."

At that moment, Teddy's resolve to keep his sexuality a secret faltered. He decided that telling the truth would be preferable to spending Thanksgiving weekend being glared at with threatening intent.

"I'm gay, sir," Teddy said quickly. He braced for impact. He was expecting a look of disgust. A snort of derision. To be told to get out of the house because he was an "abomination." He was expecting anything other than what happened.

"You're gay?" John Hunter asked, taken aback.

"Yes, sir."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



JOHN QUICKLY WENT on the offensive again. “How do I know you aren’t lying?”

Teddy opened his mouth to say something when the door opened. Diana’s mother sailed in.

“John Hunter, are you terrorizing the poor boy?”

Teddy watched in fascination as the man who had just a moment before looked ready and able to kill him, turned into a puppy in front of his wife. “Me? Of course not, darling. Teddy and I were just getting better acquainted.”

Lydia glared. “Right. I believe you. Teddy, dearest, why don’t you come with me? I just pulled out a batch of cookies from the oven.” Teddy looked at John and hesitated. “Oh, don’t mind John. His bark’s worse than his bite.”

The stare John was giving him made Teddy doubt that very much. But thankfully, the decision was taken from him. Lydia grabbed Teddy by the hand and pulled him after her.

Later that evening, they sat down to watch a movie.

Halfway through, Lydia and Diana got up to make popcorn.

“So, you’re gay,” John said, looking Teddy up and down.

“Yes, sir,” Teddy had replied defensively. He waited for the insults to begin.

But John Hunter nodded in satisfaction and looked back at the television, a smirk creeping across his lips, his eyes shining a little. “I believe this is going to be the beginning of a beautiful friendship,” he’d said.

Teddy’s jaw fell open. “Sir?”

“We’ll talk tomorrow, son, but you and I are going to become great friends. You’ll be looking after my little girl, right?”

Teddy nodded quickly. “I’ve been doing my utmost, and I always will. She’s my best friend. She’s closer to me than my sisters are.”

“That’s good. That’s very good,” John said with a pleased smile.

Teddy relaxed, and things only got better from then on. The following day, Lydia marched into the kitchen and promptly hugged him.

“Teddy, you’ll always be welcome here. If you ever need anything, even if it’s just someone to talk to, you call us, you hear?”

Shocked, Teddy nodded and thanked her. He’d looked at Diana questioningly. “Dad told her,” she whispered. “Then Mum asked me why I hadn’t said anything to her, and I might have told her a bit about the issues with your family.”

Teddy groaned, feeling embarrassed. But it wasn’t long before he relaxed into the Hunter family dynamic. They were so close and relaxed around each other that it

was a completely new experience for him. And instead of making him feel like an outsider, Lydia went out of her way to make sure he felt part of the family. It was the first Thanksgiving he had truly enjoyed.

But now the sound of giggling interrupted Teddy's memories. Diana was stumbling down the hall with a guy in tow. Teddy got to his feet and glared at the idiot holding on to Diana as they tried to walk in a straight line. She was swaying, obviously drunk.

"Teddy!" Diana exclaimed happily. "What are you doing here?"

"Waiting for you, obviously," he replied.

"Who's this guy?" It was the jackass speaking; a preppy boy, his shirt creased, too many buttons undone. He carried an almost empty bottle that dripped white wine, possibly champagne, onto the floor.

"Oh, this is Teddy. Teddy, this is . . ." Diana trailed off, obviously not knowing the guy's name or having forgotten it.

"Ethan," the guy slurred. "Why's he here? Weren't we gonna have some fun?"

Diana paled, eyeing Teddy's furious expression. "I don't think that's a good idea," she said quickly. "Teddy and I have some things to talk about."

"Like what?" the guy snapped at her. He was about to say something else, but it never left his lips. Teddy's hand snapped out and grabbed him by his shirt.

"Watch your mouth," Teddy said.

"Watchoo gonna do, huh?" Ethan wheezed.

Teddy rolled his eyes. "How about I rip your arms off and beat you with them," he growled menacingly. He moved his face to within inches of the smaller, slighter man.

The guy's mulish expression changed in an instant. He blanched. "Sorry."

"If I hear that you've been running your mouth off about my friend or that you've insulted her in any way, I will find you, and I won't be as nice next time. Got it?"

"Yes, absolutely." Teddy let go, and Ethan began backing away. "I swear. Not a word. I'll forget I even met her."

"Good." Ethan carefully placed the bottle of champagne on the ground, turned, and ran.

Diana watched him go, then snorted. "You've been hanging out with Dad too much."

"Diana, you and I have to talk," Teddy said.

Diana pursed her lips in a pout. "I don't want to. You have that look on your face that says I'm not going to like this talk, so how about we don't?"

"You have no choice in the matter."

Diana sighed and turned to unlock the door to her room. She poked her head in and almost swore out loud. Her roommate wasn't back. The coast was clear.

Diana was out of options. She knew precisely what Teddy wanted to talk about, and she wasn't in the mood. The last thing she wanted was a lecture on her conduct.

"Teddy," she whined, "have mercy. I don't want to talk now."

He eyed her for a moment. "Fine. But I'm spending the night here, and in the morning, we'll go out for coffee and a talk."

It wouldn't be the first time Teddy had spent the night in Diana's dorm room. Her roommate didn't mind at all. But at that moment, Diana was the one who didn't like the idea of him spending the night.

“Why don’t you go back to your place, and we’ll just meet for coffee in the morning.”

Now it was Teddy’s turn to snort. “Why? So you can ditch me? No thanks. I’ll spend the night.”

Diana stomped into her room. She whirled around quickly and tried to slam the door in Teddy’s face, but she wasn’t nearly fast enough. He caught the door long before she could shut it. And since he was twice her size, she didn’t stand a chance of resisting.

Defeated, she threw herself down on her bed. She felt the mattress next to her sink as Teddy sat down beside her. “Aren’t you going to change out of those clothes?”

“Nuh-uh,” she replied, her eyes shut. “Too lazy.” Diana shuddered. She could practically feel the disapproval roll off her big, sensible friend. With a sigh, Teddy got to his feet. Moments later, he dropped her favorite pajamas on the bed next to her. “Still too lazy,” she mumbled.

“I’ll help you. Now, come on.” Teddy helped Diana change into her pajamas, but before she could fall back onto the bed, he stopped her. “Wait a sec,” he said. He walked into the bathroom and came back carrying a glass of water. He handed her two pills. “Take these, or you’ll feel terrible in the morning.”

Diana, too tired to object, quickly downed the pills. Teddy put the glass on the nightstand and finally letting her lay down, tucked her in. He stretched out beside her and listened, waiting for her breaths to deepen as she fell into a deep sleep.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



THE FOLLOWING DAY, Diana woke with a groan. She heard Teddy's much too cheerful voice. "Come on, sleepy head, it's almost noon." She opened one eye. Sunlight pierced her pupil, making it ache. She shut it quickly and pulled a pillow over her head, trying her best to ignore Teddy.

"Nope, you're not getting off that easy." Teddy pulled the pillow away from her. Then he did the unthinkable. He swept the covers off her and left her to shiver on the bed.

"I hate you," she mumbled.

"I know, but you still need to get up."

"Don't wanna," she whined.

"Don't care. Now move!"

"Fine," Diana snapped, rolling over and placing her bare feet on the floor. She padded to the bathroom tossing a glare in Teddy's direction.

Ten minutes later, she was feeling better. She had Teddy to thank for that. If he hadn't given her those

painkillers last night, Diana would have been clutching her head.

“You’re looking better,” Teddy remarked.

“I feel better,” she replied with a small smile. She hesitated for a moment. “Thank you.”

Teddy nodded. “Come on, get dressed. Let’s go get some coffee. We must talk.”

“Do we have to?” Diana asked as she began to step out of her pajamas. Teddy, ever dutiful, picked up behind her. She had become a slob recently. Even she had to admit that.

“Yes, we do,” he replied.

Sighing, Diana got dressed. “Fine. Let’s go.” Her reluctance to receive the lecture Teddy was determined to deliver was overwhelmed by the priority of filtering some caffeine into her system.

Fifteen minutes later, they walked into a small café just off campus, a place they often went to when they wanted some quiet time. Diana sat down as Teddy went to get their coffees.

A few minutes later, he placed a long espresso with milk and two sugars in front of her. She leaned over and inhaled. It smelled wonderful. Diana wrapped her hands around the cup, letting the warmth seep into her skin. Bringing the coffee to her lips, she took a tentative sip and groaned in pleasure as the hot, smooth liquid ran down her throat.

“Ambrosia,” she whispered. She glanced up at Teddy with a smile that faltered when she saw the exasperated, concerned look on his face.

“Diana, what are you doing?”

She looked at him, feigning surprise. “I’m pretty sure

it should be quite obvious. I'm drinking coffee," she replied, indicating the cup in her hand.

"Come on, don't do that. Not with me. You can pretend with everyone else, but I know you too well for that."

Diana rolled her eyes. "What do you want from me, Teddy?"

"I want to know why you've suddenly turned into someone I don't recognize. I want to know why you seem so hell-bent on destroying yourself."

"Just because I'm having some fun doesn't mean I'm trying to destroy myself," Diana replied.

"Really? This is the third time this week you've gotten drunk, and it's not even the weekend! Last night, you showed up with some dude whose name you didn't even know!"

"I did know his name. I'd just forgotten it. And anyway, everyone else is doing it so why can't I?"

"Because you aren't everyone else," Teddy snapped. "You are a highly intelligent, beautiful woman who I thought had more respect for herself than to act like that."

Diana froze. Teddy glared at her. "You know I'm right." He frowned. "Do you have any idea what could happen to you at one of these parties? Don't you watch the news? Don't you know how many girls get attacked at these things? Especially girls who drink too much. Do you want to end up like that?"

"So, you're trying to tell me that if I get into trouble, it's my fault."

"I never said that! I am saying that you'll be a lot safer if you don't put yourself in harm's way."

"Look, Teddy, just drop it. I'm having a great time and

I don't need you raining on my parade. I can look after myself."

"Diana, don't shut me out. Tell me what's going on. Your professors are worried."

"You've been talking to my professors?" Diana snapped.

"Yes, I have. They know we're friends, and they're worried about you. You're brilliant, but recently your grades have dropped like a stone. So, what's going on?"

Diana snorted. "Like you don't know. My mother killed herself two months ago, remember? She didn't think I was important enough to stick around for, and I'm having a bit of a problem dealing with it."

"And you think that this is the best solution? Getting drunk? Going out partying? Skipping class?"

Diana shrugged. "I don't care. It makes me feel better."

Teddy looked at her sadly. "Di, you can't keep doing this. It won't solve anything."

"I don't care. I just need to forget for a little while. Let me forget, Teddy, please."

Like her dad, Teddy had always been a sucker for Diana's puppy dog look. "Fine, but you aren't allowed to go out alone anymore. I'm going with you. At least that way I can protect you."

Diana nodded with a smile. "Okay."

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



TEDDY LAY ON on his bed, staring at the ceiling. He didn't know what to do about Diana anymore. Two months had passed since their talk, and she'd kept her word. She hadn't gone out without him, but he knew it wasn't helping. She was still partying hard, and her grades hadn't picked up any. He needed to get her some help before the situation became irrevocable. He had to call her father.

Diana would hate him, of course, but Teddy was more interested in making sure she got the help she needed. Hopefully, in time, she'd forgive him. He'd call Mr. Hunter in the morning. He'd know what to do. He'd know how to help.

Just as Teddy was about to drift off to sleep, his phone rang. It was Diana. "Hey, Di, what's up?" He hoped she didn't want to go out because he wasn't up to it. She'd already dragged him to two parties that week, and he was exhausted.

"Teddy," he heard Diana whisper with a sob. He shot bolt upright, instantly on high alert.

“Di, what’s wrong?”

“Teddy, please help me.”

“Where are you? What’s going on?”

“I’m locked in a bathroom. Two guys are trying to get in. Oh God, Teddy, what have I done? Please, you have to help me!”

Teddy was already out of the door and running down the hall. “Tell me where you are.”

“At the Alpha Kappa Delta house,” Diana whispered.

The wildest fraternity of UBC. Teddy growled into the phone. They were known for throwing the biggest parties on campus and also for being complete and utter jerks. “Stay with me on the phone, I’m on my way now.”

“Okay,” Diana sniffled. There was a crash and Diana screamed. “Teddy!” The line went dead.

* * *

“God, Di, you just took ten years off my life,” Teddy whispered into her hair.

He rocked an uninjured but traumatized Diana in his arms as she cried into his shirt. He was shaking. He had brought her back to her dorm room.

“My hero,” she said, her voice cracking.

Half an hour before, Teddy had gotten to the frat house and rescued a terrified Diana from the bathroom. To the two young men who were banging on the door, baiting her, and jeering loudly through it, he had shown his displeasure. Elbowing them out of the way, he treated them to some savage rhetoric. And, in case his message hadn’t been clear enough, he’d given both of them a pummeling they wouldn’t forget, leaving them stunned and bloodied.

When he'd left the now much quieter, more somber frat house with Diana in his arms, the crowd had given Teddy looks that ranged from fear to respect. He'd pressed his lips together in a grim line. Word of what he had done would spread quickly: No one was to mess with Diana or he would come after them like he had the two frat boys.

He felt no remorse. It was the only way to deal with that kind of crowd. The gossip would deter any other idiot who contemplated taking such actions in the future.

"It's okay, baby."

"I know. You've got me," Diana said as she burrowed deeper into his chest.

Things couldn't keep on going like this. They'd been lucky on this occasion. He'd made it in time. But what if it happened again, and he wasn't close enough? What if he couldn't find her?

No. There would be no next time. Enough was enough. Teddy resolved to drive Diana to her dad's house. If anyone knew how to deal with her, it was Mr. Hunter.

Teddy lay Diana on the bed, but she whimpered, refusing to let go of him. So, he held her until she fell asleep. Then, carefully, gently, like she were a baby, he'd laid her down and packed a quick bag.

He tiptoed out of Diana's room and brought his car to the front of her dorm. Going back inside, he picked her up again, doing his best not to wake her. Ten minutes later, he was driving toward her childhood home.

* * *

Despite it being two in the morning, John and Liam were hard at work. John answered the door immediately. When he saw Teddy standing there with a black eye, and

scratches to his face, holding his daughter in his arms, his heart stopped beating.

“What happened?” John held the door wide and stood back to give Teddy room to carry Diana inside. He had already cataloged every inch of her. She seemed unharmed and was fast asleep.

“Can I take her upstairs, first?” Teddy whispered.

John nodded, gritting his teeth. His heart was racing and, not for the first time, he felt as if his world was crashing down around him. It was all too much. First, his wife. And now, what had happened to his daughter?

As Teddy climbed the stairs, Liam came out into the hall. “Everything alright?” he asked.

“I don’t know,” John replied.

A few minutes later, Teddy came down the stairs. Liam took one look at him and grunted. “You’re gonna need ice for that.”

They all went back into the kitchen. John shut the door and rounded on Teddy. “What happened to her?”

The younger man paled but stood his ground. “She needs help, Mr. Hunter. I got to her before anything happened, but we were lucky this time.”

“What are you talking about?”

Teddy proceeded to tell John about Diana’s recent behavior. When he got to the part about the two who had tried to attack her earlier that evening, John went to fetch his gun.

“John, you can’t go around shooting frat boys,” Liam said.

“Watch me,” John snapped.

“You’re a detective. An agent of the law. You do not go around shooting kids, no matter how much they deserve it.”

“It’s okay, Mr. Hunter, they won’t do it again. I made sure of it,” Teddy said. “That’s how I got this.” Teddy pointed to his eye. “And these.” He showed the older men two large, bloody, weeping grazes on both his elbows that would hurt like hell over the coming days.

John paused and looked at the young man standing in front of him. “Thank you.” His tone was grave.

“There’s no need to thank me, sir. Diana’s like my sister. I only wish I could have prevented tonight from happening, but she slipped out without telling me.”

“Do you know who they are?”

Teddy shook his head. “No, sir. I don’t hang out with those guys. They’re all grade-A idiots. But don’t you worry, I’ll recognize them if I see them again. And I gave them enough of a beating to make them think twice about terrorizing some other girl.”

“Good. I’ll speak to the local precinct. They’ll handle it. If these kids tried to do this with Diana, there’s a good chance they’ve already done it to other girls.”

“I think so too, sir.”

“Why don’t you go up and get some rest? Your room is where it’s always been,” John said with a small smile.

“Thank you, sir,” Teddy replied.

“No, thank *you*, Teddy. Thank you for protecting my little girl.”

Liam blew out his cheeks when Teddy left. “It’s all very well putting heat on those guys and using Teddy to protect her, but you know the real solution lies with Diana. She’s on a self-destructive path, John. You need to tell her.”

John looked at the papers strewn across the kitchen table where he and Liam had been reviewing what they had dug up on Lydia’s case. It was precious little. “I don’t

know. I really don't know. We don't have much. What if it makes things worse?"

"Can things *get* worse? The girl thinks her mother abandoned her. I'm pretty sure finding out that Lydia didn't kill herself will make her feel better than she does right now."

"I'll go up and check on her."

John walked up the stairs slowly. Liam was right. He needed to tell Diana that Lydia had not committed suicide. But things would get tricky when he told her. He knew that.

She'd want to get involved. It would be dangerous. Even though they'd found out little so far, they had discovered enough to realize that there had been a cover-up and a good chance someone powerful was involved. It wasn't ideal and John's instinct was to protect Diana, but he knew better than to let her keep believing Lydia had killed herself.

John quietly opened the door to Diana's room and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. She was sleeping on her side. She looked so innocent. His little girl. He walked in quietly and sat down on the edge of the bed, watching Diana sleep. If it hadn't been for Teddy, he could have lost her. He'd been distracted, so focused on the case that he hadn't taken the time to find out how his daughter was doing. "My little girl," he whispered.

Diana stirred, and John froze. He didn't want to wake her up. She needed to sleep after her ordeal. Nevertheless, her eyes opened slowly. She turned over and saw him. "Daddy?"

"Hi, baby," he whispered.

"Daddy!" she cried and launched herself into his arms.

“It’s okay, darling. I’ve got you. Teddy brought you home.”

“He saved me, Dad.”

“I know, honey. You go back to sleep. We have some things we need to talk about in the morning.”

Diana lay back down. “I’m glad Teddy brought me here,” she whispered as her eyes closed.

“So am I. You have no idea how much.”

Diana smiled. Within moments, she was asleep again. John was glad about that too. Because tomorrow promised to be a difficult day.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, Diana sat at the kitchen island across from her father. She held a cup of coffee, wrapping her hands around its comforting warmth. John looked relaxed, but Diana knew this was the calm before the storm. She was in for a lecture that she knew she deserved. A shiver ran through her. If it hadn't been for Teddy . . .

“You'll be pressing charges.” It wasn't a question.

Diana nodded. “Yes.” And she would. Not for herself as much as for any other girl who had been, or would be, subject to unwanted attention from those guys. Yes, she would be pressing charges.

“Good.” John paused for a moment. “Diana, I need to tell you something.”

She looked up at him, surprised. “What is it, Dad?”

“It's about your mother.”

Immediately, Diana felt the familiar feeling. It was like an elevator she was riding plunging to the floor. Her facial muscles dropped, her mouth drooping along with her eyelids. She did not want to talk about the woman

who had abandoned her. The woman who had taken the coward's way out. "I'm not interested," she said as she rose to her feet.

"Sit down," her father snapped. "I've had it with you acting like a spoiled child."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me. I have something important to tell you about your mother, and I don't care whether you want to hear it or not. You will sit down, shut up, and listen."

"I don't want to talk about her."

John's face darkened. "I said I don't care. Sit down," he snapped. Diana sat. She'd pushed her father too far. "You will never again refer to your mother like that or I swear, even if I've never laid a hand on you, I will take you over my knee and spank you."

Diana glared. "I'll refer to her any way I like. She was supposed to be my mother, but she chose the easy way out. She was a coward, and she left me, so I shall call her whatever I want."

"You are an ungrateful, spoiled little brat," her father growled. "Your mother loved you more than her own life, and you repay her with insults? How dare you. Did you ever stop to think, for even a moment, about her?"

John leaned his elbows on the island. "Let me tell you something, Diana, the world doesn't revolve around you, and only you, no matter how brilliant you are. And no matter what you think your mother did, you don't have the right to judge her or to treat her with anything less than complete respect."

Diana's eyes widened. Her father had never spoken to her like this. She'd always been daddy's little girl. Her voice softened.

“She left us both, Dad. How can you forgive her?”

“First of all, your mother did *not* kill herself. Secondly, even if she had, I wouldn’t be walking around with my head stuck up my backside like you seem to be doing. Instead, I’d have enough consideration for her to realize the choice she made was the only one she felt open to her. And I damn well wouldn’t be pretending she didn’t exist!”

But Diana didn’t hear most of his words. Her mind had come to a screeching halt. “What did you say?” she asked, her voice trembling.

John sighed, a hand on his head clutching his hair. “Your mother didn’t kill herself. She was murdered.”

“No,” Diana gasped. “You’re lying,” she said as she covered her ears with her hands, squeezing her eyes shut. “I don’t want to hear another word. Stop. Stop!”

“I thought you’d prefer to know your mother didn’t commit suicide. She didn’t abandon you.”

Diana opened her eyes. Tears shone out of them. “I’ve been blaming her all this time! I’ve said and thought terrible things about her. If she didn’t kill herself, I’ve been hating her for nothing.” She wrapped her arms around herself and leaned forward. “I’m a monster,” she whispered.

John sighed and shook his head. He leaned over, taking her by the arms and forcing her to look at him. “You aren’t a monster, baby. You were just lost for a bit there.”

Diana sniffled. “Dad, I cursed her very existence. I wished she hadn’t been my mother.”

John circled the island. Hugging her from behind, he whispered, “Mom loved you very, very much. She’d understand.”

Diana shook her head. “How could she? Even *I* don’t understand.” It was as if a spotlight had exploded into life, illuminating everything she’d said, thought, and done over the past few months. And the sight wasn’t pretty. She’d been wallowing in self-pity without a thought for anyone or anything else, including her mother’s memory.

“We all deal with pain in our own way,” John said softly.

“Mom didn’t kill herself?”

“No, honey, she didn’t. She was murdered, and it was made to look like a suicide.”

A shiver ran through Diana, her mouth opening in an ugly grimace. She hunched her shoulders and tears spilled down her cheeks. “Why would anyone want to kill Mom?” Her words came out in a squeak.

“I don’t know, baby, but I’m doing my best to find out.”

“How long?” she asked, suddenly assertive, her voice firm.

“How long what?”

“How long have you known Mom didn’t kill herself?”

“I suspected from the beginning, but I’ve been certain for the past three months.”

“Three months!”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



DIANA WRENCHED HERSELF from her father's arms and turned on him. "You've known for three months, and you didn't say anything?" she shouted. "How could you? You knew how I felt. You knew I couldn't stand that she'd killed herself. And you let me keep hating her when you knew she hadn't!"

"I didn't have any proof," John shouted back. "I didn't want to raise your hopes for nothing. What if I was wrong? What if I was so desperate to think she didn't leave us of her own accord that I was seeing things that weren't there? I couldn't do that to you. So I waited."

Diana's anger fizzled in the face of her father's pain. "But you're sure now?"

John nodded. "Pretty sure. Liam and I have been investigating the case in our spare time, on the sly. We can't get it reopened," he grumbled.

"Why not?" Diana asked.

John sat down and explained the situation about the Deputy Chief Constable's office and their involvement in what he and Liam believed to be a cover-up.

“We can’t go into the precinct shouting conspiracy because we’ll end up suspended. And we sound crazy enough as it is. So, we’ve been quietly doing what we can. It’s been slow going. It doesn’t help that there’s nothing to work with. There’s no body, no crime scene, no motive, and we have no idea who would want Mom dead.”

John choked on the tail-end of his sentence. Sometimes, despite his best efforts, he simply couldn’t separate Lydia from the case. That she knew what was about to happen to her and still had the presence of mind to send him a message just about killed him. Her terror . . . As Diana sat across from him, staring intently, he swallowed the lump in his throat. “Anyhow, we’re trying.”

“I could help,” Diana said softly.

John shook his head. “No, it’s too dangerous. We have no idea who’s involved and who we can trust. I don’t want you poking around and getting into trouble.”

“Come on, Dad. I can help. I’m observant. I see patterns most other people miss. I promise not to go poking around anything, but if you tell me what you have so far, I might find something you’ve missed.”

John paused. Having another set of eyes reviewing what he and Liam had learned would be helpful. “Okay, but only as long as you promise you won’t go off on your own. Remember, I’m the one with the experience. And the gun.”

Diana nodded quickly, unwilling to give John the chance to change his mind. She was already working furiously on changes she’d be making once she got back to school, but her father didn’t need to be made aware of them just yet.

An hour later, everyone gathered in the dining room. Diana had convinced her father that Teddy’s hacking

skills would prove useful. He had loved Lydia too, so he deserved to be in on the investigation she argued. Reluctantly, her father agreed.

“Okay, Liam, tell them what we know so far.”

Liam explained how John had first become convinced that Lydia hadn’t killed herself, thanks to the message she’d managed to get to him with her “suicide” note. He then told them about the cremation order from the Deputy Chief Constable’s office.

“We’ve been doing all this on the quiet. If we’re found out, we’ll be shut down so fast, we wouldn’t know what had hit us.”

“And if we do get found out, whoever is involved will know we’re onto them, and they’ll go to ground. We’ll never find them,” John added.

“Do we know who was in charge of filling out orders that day?” Diana said.

Her father shook his head. “There’s no way for us to find out.”

“Are the orders recorded digitally, or are they on paper forms?” Teddy piped up.

Liam shrugged. “I’m not certain, but probably digitally. Since they rolled out their new computer system, forms are completed in all the precincts and passed around the system from department to department.”

“But they would be printed out for the DCC to sign,” John added.

Teddy surged to his feet. “I’ll be right back,” he said as he rushed out of the room.

Moments later, he walked back into the dining room with his laptop. “You do know that hacking is a felony, right?” Liam said to the younger man.

“Who said anything about hacking?” Teddy replied innocently.

“Right,” Liam said, raising his eyebrows.

“Look, you guys have said you’ve been spinning your wheels for weeks. I can get into the records and I may find out who issued the order. It might give you a little more to go on.” Teddy waited for the men’s reaction. There was none. “Or, of course, you could just keep on doing what you’ve been doing . . .”

John intervened. “He’s right, Liam. Go for it, Teddy. Just make sure they can’t trace it back to us.”

“Puhlease.” Teddy rolled his eyes. John gave him a look, and he sobered.

Diana had been quiet the whole time. She’d been thinking about everything she’d heard, wondering what they weren’t seeing. “What about the psychiatrist?” she said.

Liam was paying attention to Teddy but John turned to look at her curiously. “What do you mean?” he asked.

“Well, have you looked into the psychiatrist? I mean he’s the one who said Mom was depressed and suicidal when she wasn’t. Let Teddy dig into him. Maybe we can find something out that way.”

“Sounds like a plan.” John beamed. “It’s true what they say. My daughter *is* a genius.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



OVER THE NEXT few weeks, Diana, Teddy, John, and Liam continued to investigate Lydia's murder but made precious little progress.

Ms. Jillian Stoltz had signed the cremation order but left her position on the day the order was issued after receiving a large deposit into her bank account. Teddy traced the payment to a shell corporation in the Cayman Islands.

"How did they get to her?" John had grumbled.

"She was a serious gambler. Massive debts," Teddy told him.

"That would do it," Liam added. "Look for the person with a weakness and exploit, exploit, exploit. What about the psychiatrist? Did you look into him?"

"I did. At first, I thought he might be credible. He'd been practicing at the hospital for three years. But then, I found records showing that he too received a large payment. \$50,000 was deposited into his bank account on the day Lydia died. I traced it back to the same shell corporation."

“Damn. Liam, why don’t you go have a little chat.”

“Okay, you gonna come?”

“No, go on your own,” John added, knowing he might not be able to keep an objective distance when faced with a man directly involved in the cover-up of his wife’s death.

The psychiatrist had been tight-lipped. Liam got nothing out of him. A week later, he turned up dead: suicide. Perturbed, John sent Diana back to school with a warning to stay out of the case.

Diana returned to UBC with a new determination. She would make her mother proud, and she would help her father find out who killed her and why. Signing up for a criminal psychology class *and* forensic science, she had been tempted to transfer out of medical school but decided to finish what she’d started. It would mean a lot of work, but she knew she could do it.

It was on one of her hectic days that she was approached. She had been rushing between classes when two men stopped her.

“Diana Hunter?” one of them asked. She slowed, sizing them up. Sunglasses, suits, ties. The pair had “government agent” written all over them.

“Yes. Can I help you?”

“My name is Stewart Duvall,” said the older man. He looked about the same age as her father, though nowhere near as fit. “This is Kieran Black.” He indicated to the much younger man next to him. Diana guessed him to be in his late twenties.

“Nice to meet you. I’m sorry, but I’m in a rush to get to class. How can I help?”

The younger man fidgeted. “We’re with CSIS.”

Diana’s eyebrows rose skywards “The Canadian Secu-

rity Intelligence Service?” She froze. Had they discovered Teddy’s hacking? Or were they working for whoever killed her mother? “Do you have ID?” She wasn’t taking any chances.

The two men pulled out their identity cards. Diana looked at each one closely. “What can I do for CSIS, gentlemen?” she asked, finally.

“That would be a conversation best held in private, Ms. Hunter. Is there anywhere we can go?”

Diana thought quickly. “The gardens,” she said. “There are benches there and it will be quiet at this time.

The older man nodded quickly. They followed her to UBC’s Botanical Garden and Centre for Plant Research where Diana chose a bench and took a seat. “Well, how can I help you?”

Duvall sat next to her. Black remained standing. He looked about, his hands clasped in front of him, feet spread apart.

“Ms. Hunter, you have come to the attention of CSIS,” Duvall said.

“I have?”

“I am here to ask if you are interested in talking to my superiors about how you might help us.”

Diana’s jaw threatened to drop, but she quickly asserted herself. “You want to recruit me?” Her mind was awl. She had been terrified they were there to arrest her and Teddy.

“We’re interested in a discussion, yes,” Duvall responded.

“Why?”

“All I can tell you is that it is felt that you possess certain skills and qualities that would complement our operations. I’m not at liberty to say anymore. My superi-

ors, though, will be more than happy to answer all your questions.”

Diana hesitated, then made a quick decision. “Thanks. I’m flattered. I am. But I’m not interested.” She made to leave.

“We understand this is a big decision,” the man cautioned. “But at this point, it’s just a discussion. Here’s my card. Why don’t you think about it and give me a call?”

Diana took Duvall’s card but shook her head. “I won’t change my mind, but thank you for the offer. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to get to class.”

“Of course. It was good to meet you, Ms. Hunter. Please keep this conversation just between us.”

“Certainly. And it was nice to meet you, too. Good-bye.” Diana turned and walked quickly to class without looking back.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



DIANA SAT ON on her bed, staring at the ceiling. It was summer break. She and Teddy had moved back into her home to help Liam and John with the investigation.

“I’m not happy about this, Diana. I’ve changed my mind. I want you and Teddy to enjoy your summer like normal kids. Not involving yourself in a murder case.”

“It’s too late for that, Dad. We’re already involved.” John opened his mouth to argue. “You know we’ll work on it with or without you so you might as well accept it.”

They still had squat. Nothing. Not even an idea of why someone might have wanted her mother dead. All they had was the name of a shell corporation, a dead psych, and a clerk who had disappeared. It was madly frustrating, especially with their hands tied fast.

Had it been an official investigation, her father could have interrogated witnesses and suspects. As it was, they had no official status, no access to police databases, and no idea whom they could trust. They had to work stealthily and sometimes illegally so that no one found out.

The door to Diana's bedroom burst open. Teddy ran in, his face flush with excitement. "I did it!"

"You did what?"

"I've got something!" he said excitedly.

Diana jumped off her bed. "What are you talking about? Show me!"

She followed him back to his room where he showed her what he'd found on his laptop. "I've finally got a connection to that damned shell corporation. It's only the address of a warehouse owned by a company that's very indirectly connected but . . ."

"But it's a lot more than we had before. Genius, Teddy." Diana kissed her friend on the cheek. She grabbed her phone and called her father. "Dad, Teddy's got something."

"We're on our way." The case had become an obsession for all of them. Fifteen minutes later, John Hunter arrived with Liam in tow.

"Tell me," John said before he was even through the door.

Teddy quickly explained how he'd managed to locate the warehouse. "It might be nothing, though. It's just a connection."

"That's what we're about, Teddy. Connections. One leads to another to another. Great job."

"We could do with you down at the precinct," Liam said with a grin.

Teddy blushed at the praise. "I don't think I'm cut out for that, but thanks."

"Okay, no point in waiting. Let's go check this place out and see what we can find." John was anxious to leave.

Diana glanced outside. It was dark. "Shouldn't you wait until tomorrow? Daylight would help."

“Nah, it’s only a bit of a poke about. We’ll be fine, Didi,” John said.

“I’d rather you not take the risk. It’s not the best part of town.”

“Don’t worry, we’re pros at this. We’ll be back in an hour,” John said, anxious to do something after what felt like an eternity of inaction.

As she watched her father walk from the house, Diana was gripped by dread. Hairs stood up on her arms. She shivered. “Dad, wait!” He turned around. She hugged him tightly. “I love you, Dad,” she said.

Her father hugged her back. “I love you too, baby.”

And then he was gone.

* * *

Diana paced back and forth. “They’ve been gone too long, and they’re not answering their phones. I’m telling you something has gone wrong.”

“I’m sure they’re fine. Maybe they don’t have cell coverage.” Teddy tried to reassure her as he cracked his knuckles. He was anxious too. He considered tapping into the police comms.

Diana rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. “You’re right. I’m just being paranoid.”

Another two hours passed. Diana was still pacing. Teddy triangulated John’s cell phone to the warehouse. There was plenty of signal. “Damn it,” he said as he slammed his fist against the table.

Diana went white. “Something’s wrong,” she whispered. “They’ve been there for four hours.”

“What shall we do?” Teddy responded fear etched on his face.

Diana looked at him, determination shining in her eyes. “We follow them,” she said.

“Are you crazy? They’re seasoned police officers with guns. If they’re in trouble, what do you think we can do? Shouldn’t we call the cops?”

“And alert whoever is behind my mother’s murder to the fact that we might be onto them? I’d rather not, thank you very much.”

“Diana, we can’t just go charging into a situation like this. We could get them killed! *We* could get killed.”

“So what do you expect me to do? Sit around? Either come with me, or I’ll go on my own.”

“Like I’d let you go off on your own, crazy woman,” Teddy muttered.

There was a knock at the door. Diana gasped. Her father wouldn’t knock. She rushed to the door and wrenched it open. A uniformed officer stood in the doorway with another man.

“Diana Hunter?” She nodded. “I’m Superintendent Steven Michaels. I work with your father.” Diana remembered him vaguely. They’d met a few times when John had taken her into the precinct as a kid.

Teddy moved up behind Diana and put his hand on her shoulder. “Is something wrong? Why are you here?”

“I have bad news. I regret to inform you that while answering a 911 call, John Hunter and his partner Liam Gregson were ambushed. There was a shoot-out. They were both killed. I’m so sorry.”

“What? No,” Diana closed her eyes, tilting her face upward. Her knees gave way and she crumpled to the ground. The word “killed” bounced around her brain like a pinball. Curling into a fetal position, she rocked back

HUNTED

and forth, oblivious to the men standing over her until a pair of strong arms wrapped themselves around her.

“Teddy, they’re gone. Everyone’s gone,” she cried, disbelief in her voice. She’d lost them all.

CHAPTER TWENTY



DIANA THREW HER purse on the bed. Downstairs, her father's wake was in full swing. His funeral had taken place earlier that day. Virtually the whole Vancouver Police Department had shown up. They'd handed her a flag. Diana had almost giggled. Like that would ease her pain.

The sound of laughing bubbled up from below. She grimaced. Flopping on her bed, she stared at the spider busily making its way across her bedroom ceiling, spinning a web as it went. How clever it was, surefooted and strategic, as it weaved a bridge across the wide gap, always making progress but never overreaching, risking a fall.

The policeman at the door had been lying. Or been lied to. There had been no 911 call and John and Liam weren't killed while responding to it. Diana and Teddy knew that, and as she lay across her childhood bed, Diana wondered if someone at the funeral knew it too.

She took a deep breath and stretched as she prepared to go back downstairs. There was a tap as her fist hit

something lying on the bed next to her. A manila envelope, her name printed on it.

Diana looked curiously before carefully opening it. She tipped the contents onto her bed. Dozens of photos of her and Teddy spilled across her quilt. And there was a note. She picked it up gingerly.

Back off or he's next. Tell anyone
and he dies.

Diana's heart raced. Back off what? Investigating her mother's murder? Her father's? And kill Teddy? Why not kill her? And what the hell was it all for, anyway?

Diana quickly scooped up the pictures and the note. She stuffed them back in the envelope and, placing it on top of her dresser, plastered a smile to her face and went downstairs.

* * *

Showing only the brave face they expected of her, Diana returned to the wake, mingling and charming her way through the crowd. When everyone had left, she sat alone with Teddy.

"Teddy, I've decided to go to Europe," she said.

"What?" he squawked.

"I need to get away. I need to forget for a little while. I'm falling apart, and if I don't leave, I'm going to explode."

Teddy nodded. "Fine, when are we leaving?"

"Not us, Teddy. Just me."

"You've got to be kidding me. If you think I'm letting

you go off on your own after everything that's happened, you're insane."

"It's not your choice to make. I have to leave, and I'm going alone."

The sullen expression that settled on Teddy's face told her he was ready to argue. She cut him off. "Don't you get it, Teddy? Every time I look at you, I remember what I've lost. I can't do it. I can't be your friend anymore. We need to part ways."

Diana knew she was being unkind, each word a stab to her heart, and surely Teddy's. But protecting him was her priority. He was all she had left. She'd rather Teddy be out of harm's way but far from her than dead like her father, her mother, and Liam.

"Diana, you can't do this. I loved them too, you know." Tears filled Diana's eyes at the broken look on Teddy's face, but she was resolute.

"I know, Teddy and I'm sorry, but I've lost my entire world and I can't be reminded of it everyday. I need some time. Please, you have to understand."

"But I can look after you, protect you. God knows you need it."

Diana said nothing, her eyes pleading. Teddy looked back at her for a moment, his eyes moist. He took a deep breath. "Okay, I'll give you some space because you've been through more than anyone should have to in a lifetime, but if you think I'm giving up on our friendship, you are sadly mistaken, girlfriend."

"Please, Teddy, just leave," Diana begged. "I need to be alone." She could feel herself wavering. If he didn't go now, she might not let him go at all.

"Fine," he said. He stomped up to his room. Five minutes later, he came downstairs. He stopped in front of

Diana and hugged her. She held herself stiffly. "I don't know what you think you're doing, but I will never give up on you. I love you, Di. Do you hear me? I love you, and I always will. You'll always be my baby sister."

"Please, just go," Diana whispered. Jaw clenched, Teddy nodded. Turning on his heel, he walked out of the house and out of her life, slamming the door behind him.

At the sound of the bang, Diana sobbed. Her body shuddered as she cried for those she'd lost and the life in which she now found herself. She was bereft, bereaved, alone.

* * *

Later, after weeping until grief left her body weak, Diana's mind cleared. Getting to her feet, she wandered from room to room, looking over family photos from happier times.

There were pictures of her as a baby, a young child, on her daddy's knee, baking cookies with Mom. In one, she proudly held up a crab, in another she tweaked her daddy's nose, his mouth open in mock horror, her gappy-toothed grin radiating innocent pleasure. With every smile, every happy scene that shone out at her, Diana's determination grew.

She was a Hunter. She would not be intimidated. She *would* discover who had killed her parents. She would find them, and she would destroy them.

Diana rushed to her room and dug through her schoolbag that lay crumpled and forgotten on her bedroom floor. She rifled through it until she found what she was looking for. A business card. She dialed the number.

“Duvall.”

“Mr. Duvall, this is Diana Hunter.”

“Hello, Ms. Hunter. I was very sorry to hear of your loss.” They knew. Of course, they did. “How can I help you?”

“Are your superiors still open to that discussion?”

“Of course. Have you reconsidered?”

Diana didn’t hesitate. “Yes. I’ve reconsidered.”

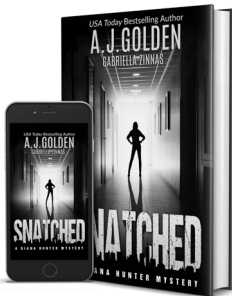
“That’s good to hear, Miss Hunter. How about Kieran Black picks you up tomorrow at 8 a.m. and we’ll go from there?”

“Yes,” Diana said firmly. “We’ll go from there. See you tomorrow then.”

“See you tomorrow, Miss Hunter.”

Staring out of the window at the dark, starry night, Diana slowly lowered her phone and terminated the call. Tonight, she would rest. She would not think nor would she grieve. The time for that was over. For tomorrow, the rest of her life would begin.

* * *



Thank you for reading *Hunted*! I hope you love Diana as much as I do. *Hunted* is the prequel to the Diana Hunter series and unlike the other books is not a complete mystery. *Hunted* relates the events that create the back-drop to the series.

In the second book, *Snatched*, we rejoin Diana ten years after the events of

Hunted as she struggles to adjust to life after a decade as a covert operator.

Can Diana find a murderer before an officious detective closes his case with her as the chief suspect? Or will they both discover something far more sinister lurking in the shadows of Royal Bay Beach? Get your copy of *Snatched* from Amazon now! *Snatched* is FREE in Kindle Unlimited.

I hugely appreciate your help in spreading the word about *Hunted*, including telling a friend. Reviews help readers find books! Please leave a review on your favorite book site.

Turn the page for an excerpt from the next book in the Diana Hunter series, *Snatched*...

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

A.J. GOLDEN

GABRIELLA ZINNAS



SNATCHED

A DIANA HUNTER MYSTERY

CHAPTER ONE



IN ONE SMOOTH, swooping motion, Diana Hunter bent over. That's when she saw him. A man under a tree outside her apartment. Usually, she wouldn't have taken any notice. He looked engrossed in the book he was reading, and it wasn't unusual for people to sit by the ocean on the grassy lawn behind the beach.

Raising her arms above her head and clasping her hands, she stretched her muscles, leaning from side to side, enjoying the slight tension and release in her hips, her sides, her shoulders, and her hands. She'd pushed herself hard on her run today. It had felt glorious after being stuck behind her desk almost around the clock for the past seven days. With her hands on her hips, Diana sucked in deep breaths of the salty air. But something wasn't right.

It was 7 a.m. No matter how much one loved it, reading outside at this time was odd. Sure, it was beautiful in the early morning, but then Royal Bay Beach was gorgeous at any time of day. The sun sparkled off the deep blue water, the grass lush and green, and the

smooth, pale sand simply called out for bare feet to disturb it.

Diana had spent many an afternoon enjoying a good book curled up under a maple tree or admiring the flowers and shrubs that dotted the promenade alongside the beach. But not so early in the morning that it was still quite chilly.

She'd first noticed the man when she'd started her run, almost an hour ago. And he hadn't moved an inch since then. Something was amiss.

"Sir? Are you feeling alright?" No response. Diana tried again, a little louder this time. "Sir?"

She walked over. The man was pale. His lips were blue. His chest wasn't moving. Diana reached out a hand and placed two fingers on his neck. His skin was clammy and cold. There was not even a flutter of a pulse. This man was dead.

The urge to shout was strong, but she suppressed it. "Breathe, Diana, breathe. Roll with it. You've seen dead bodies before. Get a grip." Diana looked up to see if anyone was around. The beach was deserted. She pulled out her phone and dialed 911.

"What is your emergency?" the dispatcher said as soon as the call connected.

"I'd like to report a body. At the beach." Diana cleared her throat. "Please send an ambulance and the police."

"A body . . . ?" The dispatcher's tone was disbelieving.

"Yes. The man isn't breathing. He's stiff and cold. He's dead." Confronted with the operator's officiousness, Diana's voice had risen an octave. She took a deep breath. "Please send someone."

The dispatcher was suddenly all business. "Tell me where you are, and I'll send units to your location."

“I’m on the promenade near Royal Bay Beach, close to Stanley Park.”

“What is your name, caller?”

“Diana, Diana Hunter.”

“Stay there, Ms. Hunter. The police will be five minutes.”

“Thank you.” Diana disconnected the call and looked down at the body again. What could have happened to him? Who was he? How did he die?

Part of her wanted to turn away and ignore the situation. This wasn’t her fight. She had been looking forward to spending a quiet weekend at home catching up on chores. But questions nagged at her. With a sigh of defeat, she scrutinized the body, scanning it with a practiced eye.

One thing was certain. He hadn’t been there last night. She’d got in after midnight and would have noticed someone sitting on the grass at that time.

Diana was tempted to stand up and move away, but her curiosity got the better of her. She took another quick look around and leaned in further. Pinching the man’s shirt fabric between the tips of her nails, she pulled the shirt away from his skin. She peered inside, but before she could react, she heard sirens. The cops understandably got rather touchy about strangers getting too close to corpses lying out in the open, so Diana jumped up and took a few steps to stand at an appropriate distance.

An ambulance, a patrol unit, and an unmarked police car pulled up next to the curb. As the paramedics sauntered over, Diana watched the policemen get out of their patrol vehicle. One of them looked young. He was pasty and pinched. This was probably his first body. As Diana tried to hide a small smile, she felt a light touch on her

CHAPTER ONE

elbow. A shiver of adrenaline rushed through her body like lightning.

“Are you Diana Hunter?”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Hunter, I’m Detective Peter Hopkinson. Can you tell me what happened?”



To get your copy of *Snatched* visit the link below:

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Alison Golden is the *USA Today* bestselling author of the Inspector David Graham mysteries, a traditional British detective series, and two cozy mystery series featuring main characters Reverend Annabelle Dixon and Roxy Reinhardt. As A. J. Golden, she writes the Diana Hunter thriller series.

Alison was raised in Bedfordshire, England. Her aim is to write stories that are designed to entertain, amuse, and calm. Her approach is to combine creative ideas with excellent writing and edit, edit, edit. Alison's mission is simple: To write excellent books that have readers clamouring for more.

Alison is based in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband and twin sons. She splits her time between London and San Francisco.

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