



Waylaid in Whittier

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Category: Suspense

Description: Siren of the Seas' summer season is starting to wind down. Although thrilled at the thought of returning to a warmer climate, Alaska has captured Millie's heart and she's sad at the thought of leaving the picturesque paradise behind.

Sharky's girlfriend Elvira Cobb has managed to finagle an invitation to travel to Alaska and learn about gold mining operations firsthand. She sends Sharky cryptic messages alluding to her location yet not coming right out and telling him where she is.

Annoyed that she didn't run it by him first, and not a fan of surprises, the couple argue. Elvira's last words to Sharky is that he won't have to worry about her bothering him again.

After cooling off, Sharky tries reaching Elvira to apologize and invite her to cruise on board Siren of the Seas. He's met with silence.

Thinking she's still angry, he figures a little time will settle ruffled feathers...until Elvira's sister Dernice contacts him in a panic. Elvira is in jail; being held for a crime she swears she didn't commit.

A frantic Sharky enlists the help of Millie and friends to help figure out what exactly happened and prove Elvira's innocence. It's going to take their combined sleuthing skills to rescue Elvira who may have finally taken on a little more than she can handle after becoming Waylaid in Whittier.

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Chapter 1

“...is of utmost importance.” Gustav Olson, the new safety director, droned on. “Going forward, each department head is responsible for maintaining safety logs, to be turned in weekly to my office. The new form you’ll be required to use has already been uploaded and is online.”

Millie resisted the urge to look at her watch. She and her colleagues had been stuck in Gustav’s self-designated “command center” for almost an hour now, an hour of hashing and rehashing Majestic Cruise Lines’ safety policies.

She nudged Sharky. “You know, this is all your fault, us having to sit through this meeting.”

“She’s right.” Annette wagged her finger at him. “I could think of a bazillion better things to do besides sitting here and having Olson drill into our heads the stuff we already know...including how not to super clean the I-95 corridor with slippery solvent.”

Sharky’s brows furrowed. “It wasn’t the entire corridor, only a small section over by the room where I store confiscated items. How was I to know the sanitizer would turn the hallway into an ice rink?”

Olson stopped talking and pointedly stared in their direction.

Millie scrunched down in her seat. She was already on Olson’s radar after he sprang a surprise inspection of the dressing room area, deeming it unsafe because of the

entertainment staff's blind spot when they came around the corner for costume changes during performances.

Clearly, the man didn't grasp the fact her staff had to complete the changes in record time, which meant it occasionally created somewhat of a safety hazard.

"I won't take any more of your time," he announced.

Cat, who was seated on Millie's other side, clapped loudly.

The safety director shot her a death look and continued. "Please be advised that I'm increasing my unannounced inspections. I expect to find your areas clean and clear, with safety being an utmost priority."

Donovan Sweeney, the ship's purser, stopped Olson, who was making a beeline for the exit.

Millie, with Annette, Cat and Sharky close behind, hurried out the side door, taking a straight shot down to Sharky's office.

"I'm ready for the donut you promised," Annette said.

"They're the best around." Sharky took the bakery box that was sitting on top of the filing cabinet and placed it on his desk. "Thank you for agreeing to join me here after the meeting. I'll cut right to the chase. I have a problem."

Sharky's cat, Fin, who was curled up and napping on a nearby chair, lifted his head. He slowly stood, arching his back in a long stretch before climbing onto the desk, demanding to be petted.

Millie promptly complied. "There's my Fin. Are you ready to head home, buddy?"

“I know I am. The Caribbean is calling,” Annette said. “So, what’s up, Sharky?”

“Food first.” Cat chose a chocolate donut with a generous dose of coconut sprinkled on top and passed the box to Millie. “I’m not good at solving crises on an empty stomach, not to mention I’m not a huge fan of early morning meetings.”

“Early morningsafetymeetings,” Annette corrected.

“I’ve already apologized,” Sharky said. “Don’t bust my chops too badly. It’s been a rough week.”

Millie perused the offerings, finally deciding on a good old-fashioned glazed donut. She took a big bite. The donut nearly melted in her mouth. “These are delish. Where did you say you got them?”

“Big Sky Bakery in Juneau. I picked them up before we left.” Sharky waited for Annette to finish choosing her donut. He grabbed a chocolate éclair, shoved half of it in his mouth while reaching for a plain donut with his free hand.

Cat arched her eyebrow. “I thought you were cutting back on sweets.”

“I am,” Sharky mumbled. “Four is my usual.”

Dee...doo...dum ditty...doo.Sharky’s cell phone blasted a catchy tune. “Not again.” He tapped the top to dismiss the call and placed it face down. “I can’t take much more.”

Millie took another bite of her decadent treat. “What major issue is troubling you?”

The phone went off again. With a look of utter exasperation, he turned it over. “Elvira. Elvira is driving me nuts.” He tapped the screen. The phone went silent.

“Maybe you should tell her not to call as often and remind her that you’re working,”
Cat suggested. “What does she want?”

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“I have no idea. She mentioned maybe traveling to Alaska this summer to learn about gold mining. Next thing I know, she’s sending me cryptic messages. I’m beginning to think she’s here.”

“Here on board Siren of the Seas?” Millie asked.

“Here in Alaska. I got the first message about three days ago. It said something along the lines of her having a golden opportunity to strike it rich, and then she sent me a text with a picture of herself standing on top of a pile of rocks and holding a pickax.”

“Let me see.”

Sharky handed Millie his phone.

She slipped her reading glasses on and studied the photo. Sure enough, Elvira stood on a small mound, a bright yellow hard hat atop her head and grinning from ear to ear. “This could most definitely have been taken here in Alaska.”

“There are more.” Sharky scrolled through the screen, showing them picture after picture of Elvira, all with cryptic captions. “I don’t know if she’s bored or what. We’ve talked a few times. Whenever I try to pin her down to find out exactly where she is, she cuts me off and says she’s gotta go.”

“I would nip this in the bud if Elvira is bothering you,” Annette said. “Tell her you’re not a fan of guessing games.”

“I’ve been racking my brain, trying to figure out what her angle is. All I can come up

with is she's onto something, some sort of find, and doesn't want to spill the beans."

"Meaning gold?" Millie asked.

"Maybe."

"Elvira is one of those people that you need to be blunt and to the point with," she said. "It's possible you're not being firm enough with her."

"I guess I'm looking for female input seeing how I'm a little rusty in the relationship department. I was hoping you could give me some tips."

"I'm with Millie," Annette said. "You need to be firm but kind."

"Ditto for me," Cat said. "Take control of the situation."

"Firm but suave." Sharky smoothed his hair back. "I think I can handle it."

Dee...doo...dum ditty...doo.

"It looks like you can handle it right now." Millie made a move to head toward the door. "We'll give you some privacy."

"If you need moral support, we'll be in the hall." Annette followed suit.

Sharky stopped them. "Don't leave. I might need you as my witnesses to verify I treated her with the utmost respect."

"Are you sure?" Cat hesitated.

"Positive." Sharky motioned for his friends to hang tight. He snatched his phone off

the desk. “Hello, Elvira.” He promptly put the call on speaker and pressed a finger to his lips.

“Hey, Sharky. Did you get my last text and picture?”

“The one with you holding a pickax? You’re looking good, like maybe you lost a little weight,” he complimented.

Millie winked and gave him a thumbs up.

“Thanks. Yeah.” Elvira cleared her throat. “I’m getting plenty of exercise up here.”

“Where exactly is up here?”

“I might as well let the cat out of the bag. I’m in Whittier.”

He made a choking sound. “Whittier, Alaska?”

“Yep. Remember the television producer I mentioned contacting a while back? He invited me to check out the gold mining operations. I’ve learned a lot.”

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“Have you found gold?”

“Maybe,” Elvira answered evasively. “Between you and me, I might have found my very own honey hole. I’m heading out later today and hope to confirm my findings.”

“Along with the production crew?”

“No way. I found this spot on my own.”

“Well, good luck.”

“Thanks. I’ve been thinking... I’ll be wrapping things up here in the next day or so. It’s the end of the season and the DNR is shutting down the roads. Something about unpredictable conditions...yada, yada. When is Siren of the Seas docking in Whittier?”

“We’re at sea today and have a scheduled stop in Anchorage tomorrow, not to dock, but to grab some supplies via the shuttle boats. We’ll be in Whittier Saturday morning to let passengers off. The ship overnights and we leave Sunday afternoon.”

“This might work out perfectly.” Elvira made a clicking sound with her teeth. “Do you have room for one more?”

“One more what?”

“Passenger. Me.”

Sharky briefly closed his eyes, and Millie could only imagine what he was thinking. She knew two things about the head of the maintenance department. First and foremost, he was a loyal friend who could be counted on in times of trouble, which is why she and the others were there—to help one of their own.

Secondly, was the fact he was not a fan of surprises. “You want to hop on Siren of the Seas when we reach Whittier?”

“You sound surprised,” Elvira said.

“More like shocked.”

“With all the hints I’ve been dropping?” she asked incredulously. “You’ve got to be kidding. I thought you knew and were playing along.”

“I had no clue.”

“But I told you before about the invite to come to Alaska,” she whined.

“And then you dropped it. I had no idea. Wait. I take that back. I had an inkling when you started sending me photos.”

“You don’t sound as excited as I thought you’d be.”

“It would have been better if we planned it in advance...so I could schedule time off work to spend with you. I don’t know how much fun you’ll have sitting in my cramped cabin all day while I’m working.”

“Why would I sit in the cabin? The ship has activities galore. I’ll be busy enjoying some R&R.”

“While I’m at work,” Sharky grumbled. “It doesn’t sound like much of a fun visit to me.”

“You don’t want to see me?”

“I do, but more notice and pre-planning would have been the considerate thing to do,” he lectured.

Millie frantically made a timeout with her hands. The conversation was heading south—and fast. It was too late.

“Fine. Forget I mentioned it. You won’t have to worry about me bothering you again.”

“I didn’t mean for it to sound like I don’t want to see you, but I would have preferred we plan your visit in advance. I’m sure you understand where I’m coming from, right?”

Silence.

“Elvira?”

There was no reply. Sharky heaved a heavy sigh. “She hung up on me.”

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“I think you hurt her feelings,” Cat said.

“I thought I was very polite and calmly explained my position to her.”

“It was going okay until you told her pre-planning would have been the considerate thing to do,” Millie said.

“Great.” Sharky set his phone on the desk. “I feel bad now. I didn’t mean to hurt her feelings.”

Annette patted his shoulder. “She strikes me as the kind of person who is willing to forgive and forget. Give her a little time to calm down and then call her back. I’m sure by the time we reach Whittier, you two will have worked things out.”

Sharky brightened. “You’re right. I’ll get ahold of her later and apologize. Hopefully, she’ll realize what I said was true.”

Millie offered him an encouraging smile and wished him luck. “I’m with Annette. I think she’ll come around.”

“Thanks for the pep talk and advice. I’m confident we’ll iron this out.”

Millie followed Annette and Cat into the hallway. She waited until they were a safe distance away to talk. “Well? What do you think about having Elvira back on board Siren of the Seas?”

“If it’s anything like the last time she was on the ship, Sharky’s gonna have his hands

full,” Annette said. “To be honest, I’m surprised the woman is brave enough to hang out with rough and tumble mining guys. If you ask me, putting yourself in that type of situation is asking for trouble.”

Millie couldn’t agree more. Little did she know Annette’s statement was a foreboding of what would lie ahead for Elvira Cobb.

Chapter 2

“Millie, do you copy?”

Millie unclipped her radio from her belt. “Go ahead, Andy.”

“Where are you?”

“Scout and I are getting ready to make our rounds.”

“Perfect. Meet me up in the spa. Bring your raincoat.”

“My raincoat?”

“Remember the special project I told you I was working on?”

“How could I forget?” For weeks now, her former boss, now in charge of fun and funds aboard the cruise ship, had been working on a super-secret special project. It was so super-secret that even his wife Cat, who was also Millie’s close friend, had no idea what it was.

“It’s ready, and you’re going to be the first person to test it out.”

“Should I be scared?” she joked.

“Scared? Of course not. It’ll be fun.”

Millie promised she was on her way, grabbed her raincoat and wheeled Scout’s stroller out of their apartment.

Nic, the ship’s captain and Millie’s husband, caught her eye and made his way across the bridge. “You and Scout are heading out?”

“To make our rounds.” She told him her first stop was to meet Andy up in the spa. “He’s showing me the project he’s been working on.”

“It’s creative. I only hope the time and work he’s put into it are worth the effort.” Nic glanced at the clock. “I’ll catch up with you in a minute.”

“You’re checking it out too?”

“I am.”

“See you in a few.” Millie gave him a quick peck on the cheek and stepped off the bridge. Taking the side stairs, she and her miniature Yorkie reached the spa deck in no time.

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She gave a friendly wave to Camille Bessette, the spa's manager, and continued walking.

Camille hurried around the desk. "Are you here to check out Andy's new project?"

"I am."

"I'm dying to know what it is. I was just heading that way." She hustled to keep up with Millie's fast pace. "The workers have been in and out of here for days." Camille explained she'd attempted to take a sneak peek, only to be promptly escorted out and told the area was closed until further notice.

The women stopped when they reached the doorway leading to the spa's inner sanctuary, noticing a big bold "Restricted Area" sign taped to it.

"Let's try to guess what it is. I have a clue. Andy told me to bring my raincoat."

"Raincoat?" Camille wrinkled her nose. "That explains why workers wheeled a cartful of drainage pipes back here."

"Maybe it's a splash pad."

"For children?"

"For adults." Millie warmed to the idea. "How cool would an indoor adult splash pad be?"

“Especially if it had massagers on them.” Camille closed her eyes. “Steamy jets of goodness in a sauna setting.”

“I like the sounds of that.” Millie reached for the door handle. “There’s only one way to find out.”

The hush of low voices echoed from within. Neon green masking tape lined the floor, directing their steps past the lush potted plants strategically placed inside to offer an intimate setting. Music, a mixture of both flutes and harps, played softly in the background.

Millie caught a whiff of jasmine mingled with sage. The music, the scent, the scenery all evoked a sense of tranquility and she could feel herself relax. “I need to spend more time in here.”

“It’s a peaceful place.” Camille confided that after particularly stressful workdays, she sometimes sneaked in and lounged in the relaxation room. “You should come hang out with me.”

“I think I will. Thanks for the offer.”

Following the designated path, the women rounded the corner and came to an abrupt halt. A cluster of ship employees stood near the trio of rainfall showers...showers that reminded Millie of test tubes.

Andy stood in front of the group, chatting with Donovan Sweeney. He caught Millie’s eye and waved her over.

“I think Andy wants you near the front,” Camille whispered.

“Great.” Millie was starting to suspect he hadn’t summoned her to check out his most

recent project, but to be a part of his “big reveal.”

“It looks like an impressive gathering.”

Camille wasn't wrong. Somehow, Nic had arrived before her. He stood near the front, alongside Donovan, Dave Patterson, the head of security, Antonio Vitale, the staff captain, as well as several other officers.

Millie hesitated. “I guess I better get up there.”

“I'll keep an eye on Scout,” Camille offered.

“Thanks.” She trudged past the others, reluctantly making her way to the front of the room. “Is everyone else here to test out your surprise?”

“No. I only needed one volunteer.”

She glanced around the room at the growing crowd. “You didn't mention I was part of the big reveal.”

“You're always such a good sport. I figured you wouldn't mind showing off the spa's new star attraction.”

Millie's eyes slid to the side, studying the trio of showers, trying to figure out what was different about them. “What am I getting myself into?”

“You'll find out soon enough. I see you remembered to bring your raincoat.”

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“Something tells me you’re going to owe me big time after this.” Millie slipped the raincoat on.

“The hood,” Andy said. “You’ll want your hood on.”

Taking note of his sly smile, she made sure she tied it around her chin, figuring that before his demonstration was over, Millie would be glad she did. “I’m ready for whatever you’re about to subject me to.”

Andy cleared his throat and addressed the crowd. “I appreciate you taking time out of your busy schedules to attend this demonstration of the newest, hottest feature on board any cruise ship sailing the high seas.”

He went into a short spiel about how he’d been approached by a company eager to break into the cruise ship market. After some back and forth, Andy had agreed to partner with them to install the cutting edge spa feature in exchange for free publicity.

Millie interrupted. “Meaning they gave you a discount.”

A small rumble of laughter ensued. Andy possessed many qualities, with thriftiness being near the top of the list.

“Of course. If this new spa feature works out, Siren of the Seas will be featured in cruise ship magazines across the globe which could generate commissions, depending on how many units are sold.”

It was all beginning to make perfect sense. Andy, a true tightwad, frugal, thrifty, all

the above, rarely took his eyes off the “bottom line.” Which was cause for concern, considering Millie was the guinea pig for his new project.

“Without further ado.” Andy placed a light hand on her back and propelled her toward the center shower. “Millie, if you’ll be so kind as to make your way inside.”

She sucked in a breath and stepped into the shower, mentally preparing herself for what was to come.

“I almost forgot.” Andy grabbed a pair of rubber shoes sitting near the shower door. He handed them to her. “You’ll want to take your shoes and socks off.”

Millie muttered under her breath, placing her work shoes and socks a safe distance away before sliding her bare feet into the rubber shoes.

Andy propped the door open and backed up, leaving a good five feet of separation between them. “I think we’re ready to go. On the count of three, I’m going to have Millie press the big blue button.”

“Do I have to?”

More laughter followed her comment.

Andy ignored it. “One...two...three.”

“I hope I don’t end up regretting this.” Millie gritted her teeth and pressed the button.

Chapter 3

The spa shower made a whirring sound. The whirring picked up and became more of a steady hum, yet nothing happened.

Millie placed a light hand on the wall, confirming there was a faint vibration. “It’s making a lot of noise, but nothing is happening. Is it broken?”

Andy held up a finger. “It needs a few seconds to crank up.”

A dribble of water dripped on the floor, followed by icy cold air blasting out of the wall vents.

Millie shivered, rubbing the sides of her arms. “This reminds me of what it feels like to stand on the promenade while we’re touring Glacier Bay.”

“The best is yet to come. It should start kicking in any second.” Andy gleefully rubbed his palms together. “The suspense is killing me.”

Plop.

A chunk of part snow and part slush landed on Millie’s head and slid down the side of her hood.

Plop.

Millie turned, noticing a glob of thick snow perched on her shoulder. She lifted her gaze, watching as spurts of snow blasted out of the showerhead. “It’s snowing.”

“Snow showering.” Andy beamed. “Isn’t it bloody brilliant?”

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The snow machine was only just getting started and began dropping more of the white stuff on her with increasing speed...on the floor, on the bench seat.

Nic folded his arms, an amused expression on his face. "Millie has entered her own winter wonderland," he teased.

"It's creative," Donovan said. "What's the purpose?"

"To offer a unique experience, something other cruise lines don't have," Andy said. "I've done a great deal of research. This snow shower will be the next hottest feature on board cruise ships and Siren of the Seas will be one of the first ones to offer it to guests."

"Or the coldest," Donovan joked.

"For a fee, I'm sure." Millie shifted to the side, watching as the snow continued falling and began piling up at her feet.

"Not only is it fun, but the snow shower offers health benefits, from detoxing to increasing circulation." Andy removed his cell phone from his pocket and held it up. "This is the perfect photo op. I need a snapshot for the new flyer we'll be adding to the passenger promo packets."

Millie started shaking her head. "Oh, no. I agreed to demonstrate it for you...reluctantly I might add. I didn't sign up to be part of your sales pitch."

"C'mon, Millie," he coaxed. "You look great."

“I’m with Andy,” Donovan said. “It’s a good look.”

“Fine.” She pursed her lips. “But make it quick. My toes are getting numb.”

Camille made her way through the crowd. “I’ll be darned. I’ve never seen such a thing.” Scout wiggled and squirmed until she set him down. The curious pup promptly scampered over.

“I wonder what Scout will think.” Millie coaxed him inside.

Yip. He promptly hopped over the threshold and into the shower, prancing in a circle, a look of pure joy on his furry face.

“I don’t know how passengers will react, but Scout gives it four paws of approval,” Nic joked.

A pile of the white stuff landed on his head. It dripped down the sides of his muzzle, forming a snowy white beard.

“This is one for the printing press.” Andy snapped a picture of Millie and her pup. “The temperature might need a little tweaking. The snow seems a little too wet. I was hoping for more of a powdery shower, a sort of snow globe effect.”

“I disagree. I think the snow is the perfect consistency for...” Millie’s eyes filled with mischief. She scooped up a handful of snow, expertly forming a snowball. She playfully tossed it at Andy, grazing his shoulder. “Snowball fight!”

“You called it.” Andy shoved his phone in his pocket. He swooped down, grabbed a handful of snow and flung it at Millie.

“I’ll have you know I’m an old pro.” Millie scooped up another handful and aimed it

above her former boss's head, skimming his hair and hitting the wall.

“We'll have to see about that.” Andy hurled the next one at her knee. It landed dead center, sending snow spraying in all directions.

They ran out of snow and the spontaneous snowball fight ended as quickly as it began.

Camille grabbed a pile of clean towels from the bin. She handed one to Andy, a second to Millie, and wrapped the third around Scout, who was soaking wet.

“Thanks.” Millie dried her face. “I don't know how many passengers will pay for a snow shower, but Nic is right. Scout's a fan.”

“They're gonna love it,” Andy predicted. “Think about how refreshing a snow shower will feel in the middle of summer in the sweltering Caribbean heat?”

“I have to give you an A+ for originality,” Camille said. “You might be onto something. Only time will tell.”

“Maybe you can pitch it as a BOGO—buy one, get one free spa snow package.”

“Great minds think alike.” Andy tapped the side of his forehead. “We could pass out snow session vouchers to trivia contest winners.”

“There are hundreds of ways to get the word out.” Millie peeled the raincoat off and fluffed her hair. “Unfortunately, the fun and games are over. It's back to work for Scout and me.”

The other attendees had already left, and Millie and her pup weren't far behind. They swung by the almost empty lido deck. Finding a lounge chair close to the pool had

not been an issue during their Alaska season. The hot tubs, on the other hand, were an entirely different story, almost always packed from morning until late into the evening.

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Although Millie would miss the majestic beauty, the awe-inspiring nature, not to mention the tranquility of Alaska, she was ready for Siren of the Seas to return to a warmer climate. She missed the festive deck parties, the rhythm of the steel drums, not to mention she couldn't wait to dig out her favorite sundress and pair of flip-flops.

Stem to stern, top to bottom, Millie and her sidekick Scout traveled, checking in on activities and greeting passengers. Skyler Timmer's "The Sky's the Limit" travel blog had stopped featuring Millie and Siren of the Seas, which meant the number of passengers seeking her out had dwindled. She'd even been able to cut back on the number of "meet and greet" events.

Although still honored when passengers tracked her down to tell her how much they enjoyed all the activities on board, Millie was relieved her schedule was returning to normal.

Because of the sea day, it was all hands on deck for the entertainment staff. Bingo, trivia contests, an art auction, and an arts and crafts class. There was even a cooking demonstration in the main galley which is where Millie found herself after dropping Scout off at home.

She stood near the back, watching while Amit and Annette whipped up an authentic Alaskan dish, her stomach grumbling at the tantalizing aroma of garlic wafting in the air.

Because of the early morning safety meeting, she'd missed breakfast and realized she was famished.

“I’ll have my assistant, Amit, show you the finished product and then we’ll get down to the best part of today’s demonstration—taste-testing our baked salmon puff pastry pie.”

Amit opened the oven and removed golden brown piping hot pies. Working as a team, he and Annette sliced and plated the generous portions before handing them out.

Millie waited for the guests to enjoy their treat. The presentation ended. She stood by the door, chatting with a few of the passengers on their way out.

Finally, the galley cleared, and Annette noticed her. “Your timing is impeccable. We have a few slices of baked salmon pie left. Would you care to sample a piece?”

“You betcha.” Millie crossed the room and joined her friends at the counter. For the second time in as many days, she noticed Annette had put on makeup, something she rarely did. “Look at you, all dolled up, wearing lipstick and mascara.” She tilted her head. “I didn’t notice earlier, but is it my imagination, or is there something different about your hair?”

Annette tugged on her bangs. “I got a few highlights and dug out some of my makeup. There’s nothing wrong with looking nice.”

“Nothing at all.” Millie noted a hint of defensiveness in her friend’s voice and wisely changed the subject. “I see the culinary presentations are as popular as ever.”

“And so are the cooking classes. We haven’t set off the smoke detectors or fire alarms in weeks now,” Amit said proudly.

“Maybe because I haven’t been around to set them off,” Millie joked.

“You do seem to always be right in the thick of any excitement.” Annette laughed. “Speaking of excitement, any word from Sharky and if he was able to smooth things over with Elvira?”

“Not yet.” Millie dug into her piece of pie, savoring the rich flavors of the Alaskan salmon. “This is surprisingly creamy.”

“Because of the heavy cream we added.”

“There’s something else.” Millie sampled another bite. “I’m tasting garlic with a hint of pepper.”

“Turmeric,” Amit and Annette answered in unison.

“Miss Annette is on a healthy kick,” Amit added. “She has learned turmeric is very good for you.”

“It’s heart-healthy, not to mention anti-inflammatory.”

“The perfect combination. Delicious and good for us.” Millie polished off the rest of her piece and scraped the plate clean. “Between this healthy dish and Andy’s snow shower guaranteed to get rid of toxins, I’ve done my good deed to keep my body shipshape.”

“Andy has a snow shower?” Annette leaned her elbows on the counter.

Millie filled them in on the new feature. “I’m not sure how popular it will be. I suppose once we head back south to more tropical climates, we might have a few passengers and maybe even crewmembers eager to try it out.”

“I would like to try a snow shower,” Amit said.

“Swing by the spa when you have some time off and talk to Camille. Tell her Millie promised you could give it a test run.”

“I will do it. Thank you, Miss Millie.”

“You’re welcome.” Her activity app chimed, reminding her it was time to head down to the theater to oversee the headliner show’s practice run. “Your baked salmon pie is the best. If you want my two cents, you should add it to your regular rotation of culinary demonstrations.”

“I think I will.”

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Millie backed up, nearly colliding with a tall, dark-haired man she hadn't noticed standing in the galley doorway. "Whoops!"

"I'm sorry," he apologized, quickly sidestepping her. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"It was my fault. I wasn't watching where I was going." Millie offered him an apologetic smile and walked over to the RTG meal rack, thinking a small snack to go along with the salmon pie would tide her over until dinner later that evening.

Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Annette hurrying toward the man. He leaned in and they began talking in low voices.

Millie's sharp eye noted their body language, how they stood close together. Trying not to gawk, she furtively studied them through lowered lashes, thinking the man looked vaguely familiar.

Amit did an about-face, catching up with Millie, who had decided on a turkey wrap with a side of fresh veggies and dip. "The turkey wraps are a good choice. I added fresh avocado slices."

"I'm sure it will be delish. I can't wait to dig in." Millie grabbed Amit's arm and whispered in his ear. "Who is the guy Annette's cozying up to?"

Amit glanced over his shoulder. "His name is Jose Juan Carlos Garcia Santiago Hernandez. He used to go by the name Gary, but now he's asking everyone to call him Jose. He worked on board Siren of the Seas several years ago before transferring to another ship."

Millie repeated his name. She snapped her fingers. “I remember him. I ran into him right after I boarded Siren of the Seas way back when. What’s up with him and Annette?”

“I will tell you.” Amit placed a light hand on Millie’s back and whisked her out of the galley. They crossed over to the other side of the corridor, a safe distance away. “He and Miss Annette, they...like each other.”

“In a romantic way?”

He nodded. “They were a couple. One day, out of the blue, he was gone. Here one minute and gone the next. I asked Annette about it after he left, but she did not want to talk.”

“So maybe he dumped her.” Millie’s brows knitted. “And now he’s back.”

“Between you and me, Jose, Gary, or whatever he wants to be called, is not a good person.”

“Annette is no dummy. You think she’s making a mistake taking up with him again?”

“I do.” Amit nervously licked his lips. “Please do not say anything to her. She would not be happy.”

Millie promised she wouldn’t.

“I must get back to work.” Amit strode across the corridor. He waved goodbye and disappeared inside.

An uneasiness settled over Millie as she stared at the door. Looking back, Jose had given her an uncomfortable vibe way back when.

Call it women's intuition or an overall uneasiness over finding out someone who had walked out of her friend's life was now back in the picture. Whatever it was, Millie hoped Jose was on the up and up and Annette knew what she was doing.

Chapter 4

"How was your day off?" Millie watched her right-hand gal, assistant cruise director, Danielle, breeze into her office early the next morning.

"Awesome." She flopped down in a chair across from Millie. "Brody and I hung out in my cabin. We watched a marathon of old movies and ate junk food."

"And did you catch up on your sleep?"

"You bet. It was at the top of my to-do list before Brody showed up for our nothing to do day started." Danielle pressed her hand to her chest and closed her eyes. "It was heaven."

"Good for you. You deserved it." Millie tapped her pen on top of her notepad, thinking about her semi-restful night, except for the stretch of time when she was wide awake worrying about Elvira, Sharky and Jose.

"I ran into Andy. He showed me the picture of you standing in the new snow shower."

"More like getting dumped on." Millie grinned. "I wouldn't admit it to him, but I was honored to be the first to test it out. Me and Scout. He loved playing in the snow."

"Did I miss anything important yesterday?"

"Elvira Cobb is in Whittier. She and Sharky got into a fight after she told him she was

waiting for our ship so she could hop on board and cruise south with us.”

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Danielle's eyes grew as round as saucers. "Knowing Sharky, I'm going to guess it went over like a lead balloon."

"He wasn't thrilled."

"Because he didn't schedule time off, which means he'll be working. I don't know much about the woman, but something tells me she doesn't plan on sitting in his cabin, twiddling her thumbs and waiting for him to get off work."

"Nope. Reading between the lines, she wants to enjoy a little R&R—a free vacation courtesy of Sharky and he wasn't having any of it," Millie said. "I'll give her the benefit of the doubt and believe she didn't know Sharky would need to plan well in advance to take time off."

"Poor guy. He doesn't have much luck with women." Danielle absentmindedly tapped the top of her scheduling app. "I have a full day today. The mix and mingles singles party, dress the guest, two galley tours and some other hosting events."

"Speaking of galley, you missed out on a delicious baked salmon pie yesterday." Millie smacked her lips. "I can still taste it."

"I need to ask Amit and Annette to teach me how to cook one of these days."

"Annette has a new friend...or should I say, an old friend who has come back on board." Millie made googly eyes.

Danielle perked up. "A male friend?"

“His name is Jose Juan Carlos something, something. He used to go by the name of Gary.” Millie told her how she’d met the man only hours after boarding Siren of the Seas for the very first time. “Between you and me, the guy gave me a creepster vibe.”

“Annette’s one of the smartest people I know. She would show him the door if he wasn’t a good person.”

“Or maybe he has her fooled. Anyway, I’m sure you’ll run into him eventually.”

“What does he look like?”

Millie started to describe him and could tell from the look on her friend’s face she and Jose had already crossed paths, but not in a good way. “You’ve already met him?”

“I know who you’re talking about now. I’m not a fan.”

“What...did he do?”

“He works in the IT department. I was having an issue with my personal computer. I took it in to have them look at it. Jose was the one working. He helped me figure out the issue. While he thought I wasn’t paying attention, I caught him going over my recent internet searches without my permission.”

Millie’s jaw dropped. “You took your computer in to be looked at and he started digging around in your personal information?”

“Yep. I called him out. He apologized and made some lame excuse.” Danielle twined her fingers. “Maybe it’s the new company policy, but any other time I’ve taken my computer in to be checked out, the IT guys fix it and give it back. They don’t start snooping around.”

“I wouldn’t be happy about it either.”

Danielle’s watch chimed. “Time for me to head to the Sunrise Stretch yoga class.”

“While you’re up there, check out the snow shower if you have a chance. It’s pretty cool.”

“I will.” Danielle took off, and an inkling of concern crept in as Millie stared at the empty doorway. Jose’s actions were throwing up all sorts of red flags. Why had he come back after all thistime? Even more concerning...why was her friend giving him the time of day?

Thinking it wouldn’t hurt to do a little digging around, she accessed Majestic Cruise Line’s personnel website.

Millie typed Jose’s name, or as much of it as she could remember, into the search bar and hit the enter key. A link to his file appeared.

“Here goes nothing.” She double-clicked on the link, pulling up his job history. Scrolling to the top, Millie noted he’d been employed by Majestic Cruise Lines roughly a year longer than she had, working on board Siren of the Seas until around the time of her initial contract.

He transferred a couple of weeks later to another ship and then another. The job descriptions were all the same. Jose worked in the IT department.

She leaned back in her chair and studied the screen. It wasn’t unusual for crewmembers to hop from ship to ship. In fact, it was more uncommon for them to stick with one like she had done. Many of them, especially the younger ones, strategically moved to various ships, allowing them to travel around the world based on a particular itinerary.

Had Millie not met Nic and fallen in love, she might have done the same. Perhaps Jose was of the same mindset.

She skimmed a few more lines and clicked out of the screen. Despite an inkling of concern, Annette was an adult, fully capable of deciding who she wanted to be involved with, except for the fact that several years back she'd insisted she was not interested in dating and was perfectly content being single.

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But that was after Jose had left the ship. Perhaps she cared more for the man than she realized and was willing to give their relationship another chance. Either way, it wasn't any of Millie's business.

She pushed the troubling thought aside and jumped into her morning routine. First was the Sunrise Stride's laps around the sports court.

The end of the summer in Alaska meant crisp mornings and cooler days, perfect for a brisk walk. While she strolled, Millie chatted with the other walkers, while making a point of appreciating the rugged terrain as the ship anchored near Anchorage.

An orange dot skimmed across the water. It was one of the ship's lifeboats, heading to shore to pick up supplies along with crewmembers who were boarding for the voyage south.

After finishing, Millie hosted a round of trivia and then ran downstairs to grab a bite to eat.

Thinking it was going to be a day of nonstop running, she loaded up on scrambled eggs, rye toast, and thick slices of crispy bacon, along with a bowl of mixed fruit.

Millie swung by the beverage station for a cup of coffee before searching for an empty spot. She noticed Sharky at a high top bar with his back to her and an empty chair on each side.

She zigzagged past the tables and slipped in behind him. "Mind if I join you?"

Sharky spun around. “Hey, Millie. Have a seat.” He pulled the chair out, giving her enough room to slide in.

“Thanks.” She eased her tray onto the table. “How’s it going?”

“Not good. I tried calling Elvira last night. She didn’t answer. I texted her. She hasn’t replied. I think she’s really ticked off.”

“In your defense, she made a mistake when she surprised you.” Millie unwrapped her silverware. “I wouldn’t be happy if my boyfriend planned to hop on board the ship, expecting a free vacation while I had to work.”

“I hate to say it, but it’s kinda looking that way, like maybe she’s trying to take advantage of me.” Sharky scooped up a spoonful of oatmeal. “I don’t know what it is with me and women.”

“Elvira isn’t a bad person. On the bright side, she’s nothing like Svetlana.”

“Which isn’t saying much. Svetlana was going to kill me.”

“Because you tricked her into thinking you were a bigwig at Majestic Cruise Lines, which put a target on your back,” Millie reminded him.

“True. I learned my lesson.” Sharky reached for his glass of juice. “I guess there’s not much I can do if Elvira won’t return my calls or texts.”

“Would you like me to try calling her?”

He brightened. “Would you?”

Millie picked up her cell phone. “What’s her number?”

Sharky rattled it off while she dialed the number. The call went directly to voicemail.

“Hello, Elvira. It’s Millie Armati. Please give me a call when you get a chance.”
Millie left her number and ended the call.

“I hope she’s all right,” Sharky said. “I figured at the very least she would reply to my text, even if it was to tell me to go fly a kite.”

“Have you tried contacting her sister? I don’t remember her name.”

“Dernice. That’s a good idea.” Sharky polished off his oatmeal and picked up his phone. He sent a brief text, asking Elvira’s sister to call him. “I guess now we wait to see what happens.”

“If she plans on catching up with the ship in Whittier, she better let you know soon,”
Millie said. “We’ll be there tomorrow.”

“Yep.” Sharky finished his breakfast and left, promising to let Millie know if Dernice called him back.

On a tight schedule, Millie wasn’t far behind. She hosted a cruise director’s Q&A in the piano bar, wrapping it up in time to make it to the theater and introduce the destination expert to a large group of passengers.

Curious about the speaker and having heard nothing but good things about him, she hung around to listen in.

The man was both knowledgeable and entertaining, sharing fun facts about Whittier, how it was renowned for being one of the premier spots to tour the glaciers. It was also home to a state-of-the-art conservation center for injured and orphaned wildlife.

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According to the speaker, hiking and visiting waterfalls were popular, along with kayaking. While he talked, he showed photos of various scenery.

“There is one unique feature about Whittier most folks don’t know.” The expert motioned to the group. “Does anyone know what it might be?”

A woman seated next to Millie raised her hand. “Most Whittier residents live in one of two large apartment complexes in town.”

“Correct. One of them being Valley Shore Apartments,” he nodded. “Not only do they live there, but they shop, buy groceries, visit the post office, go to school, all in the same complex.”

A towering building with mountains in the backdrop appeared on the projector screen behind him.

Fascinated, Millie studied the photo while he elaborated on how the living and working arrangements worked. “It sounds intriguing.”

“My husband and I stumbled upon the buildings by accident a few years ago when we stayed in Whittier before boarding our cruise ship. If you ever get the chance, you should check them out. The folks who live there are friendly and aren’t at all shy about sharing what it’s like to co-exist.”

The talk ended, and Millie waited for the theater to clear. She chatted with the expert until Felix arrived to get ready for his line dancing class.

“Millie, my dear.” He sashayed across the stage and air kissed her cheeks. “Are you sticking around for my class?”

“I wish I could. Unfortunately, I need to get going.”

“I’ve been practicing a new move.”

“A new move?”

“Stand back.”

Millie took a step back.

Felix placed both hands on his hips. He tapped his toe, kicked up his heel, tapped his heel, flung his foot backward and shimmied in a circle, all while humming a catchy tune. Running through the dance move one more time, he wrapped it up with a stomp-stomp.

“Bravo.” Millie clapped enthusiastically. “I love it. You’ll have to teach it to me.”

“Whenever you’re ready.”

Participants started trickling in and Millie went the opposite way. She was halfway to the atrium when Sharky called.

She stepped off to the side. “Hey, Sharky. Were you able to get ahold of Elvira or Dernice?”

“I just got off the phone with Dernice. Elvira has fallen off the face of the earth.”

Chapter 5

Millie's scalp tingled. "Elvira is missing?"

"Missing and Dernice is freaked out. She was supposed to call her last night to hash out a problem involving one of the EC Security Services jobs. She never called."

"Has Dernice tried reaching her again this morning?"

"Yeah. She's convinced something bad has happened," Sharky said. "I left Patterson a message. I'm hoping he knows someone in Whittier who can try to track her down."

"We'll be docking there tomorrow morning," Millie said. "If no one has heard from her by then, we'll get off the ship and search ourselves."

"I'm worried," Sharky said. "This isn't like her. Something is wrong."

"Elvira is tough. I'm sure she's fine. Maybe she struck gold, is way out in the middle of nowhere and doesn't have cell phone reception."

"Maybe, but I doubt it."

Millie made him promise to let her know when he got an update and ended the call. She made a beeline for the security services office. The lights were on and the door was ajar.

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She gave it a light rap and stuck her head around the corner. “Good morning, Patterson.”

“Good morning, Millie, or should I call you snow bunny,” he teased.

“Very funny.” She tapped the top of her watch. “You got a minute?”

“For you, I have two. What’s up?”

“I just talked to Sharky. His girlfriend Elvira is in Whittier and MIA.”

Patterson’s expression sobered. “I’ve already reached out to the Whittier PD. I gave them the name of the group Elvira was working with. The person I spoke to promised to look into it, to see if they could locate her.”

“Thank you.” Millie pressed her hand to her chest. “She was supposed to check in with her sister, who is running her businesses while she’s up here and hasn’t.”

“What about your friend, the woman who lives in Savannah? I think her name was Garlucci. Maybe Elvira has touched base with her.”

“Carlita Garlucci-Taylor. I’m sure Dernice has already spoken with her,” Millie said. “I guess we’ll have to wait to find out what the Whittier authorities come up with.”

“She could surface. If she’s out in the boondocks searching for gold, it’s possible she doesn’t have cell phone reception.”

“Which is what I told Sharky. Unfortunately, Elvira’s a city slicker. I’m not sure how well she would do being stuck out in the wilderness overnight.” Visions of the woman lost...or worse yet...injured and unable to get help flitted through Millie’s head.

“We can only do so much. I hope Sharky doesn’t decide to go search for her and end up in trouble, too.”

“I suppose if we don’t have an update by tomorrow, he and I can get off the ship and go look for her.”

“But not in the wilderness,” Patterson said.

“No. We’ll stay in town and ask around,” Millie promised. “On an entirely different subject, I have a question. Do you know Jose Juan something, something Hernandez? He recently returned to Siren of the Seas and works in the IT department.”

Patterson drummed his fingers on his desk. “The name sounds vaguely familiar. Why?”

“I’m just curious.”

“Curious in a good way?”

“He hit my radar. He hit Danielle’s and Amit’s radars, too.”

“Are you trying to make a mystery out of a new employee?”

Millie bristled at the comment. “Of course not. When was the last time I did that?”

“Let me think.” He tapped the bottom of his chin. “A couple months ago, when you

reported one of the stevedores who was unloading at the Ketchikan port.”

“Because he kept going back and forth but wasn’t moving pallets,” she said. “Hey, you never know when a dock worker is going to go rogue and do bad things.”

“As you recall, he was in training.”

“Okay.” Millie sighed. “I’ll admit, I occasionally have an overactive imagination.”

“Which is why you’re great at solving mysteries. I don’t know this Hernandez employee.”

“Good. I suppose this is a good thing,” she said. “As far as Elvira goes...”

“Hopefully, we’ll hear something about Sharky’s girlfriend soon.”

Millie thanked him and exited his office. An uneasy feeling settled over her. Elvira could very well be in trouble. She hoped not because there was no way she or Sharky were equipped to search for her in Alaska’s wilderness.

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Millie dove into her work schedule, hopscotching from event to event, hosting activities, and even handling a minor crisis involving a bingo game dispute.

She worked through her early break. By the time the lunch hour rolled around, things had settled down, giving her an opportunity to head home and check on Scout.

Nic must've been watching out for her. He caught up with his wife near the hallway leading to their apartment. "You look stressed out."

"It's been a busy morning."

"I heard you being summoned on the radio and figured you had your hands full."

"More like overflowing." Millie pressed her finger to her lips. "I'm thinking only positive thoughts. The rest of the day will be easy breezy."

"At the very least, lunch will be. I ordered room service, hoping you would swing by. Our food is in the fridge."

Millie waited for him to swipe his keycard and open the apartment door. "Have I ever told you how much I love you?"

"Maybe a time or two, but I never tire of hearing it." Nic closed the door behind them and sneaked in a kiss. "Has my planning scored me a few brownie points?"

"Uh-oh. I knew there was a catch," she joked. "What do you want?"

Nic set his lanyard on the table and pulled her into his arms. “A few moments of my wife’s undivided attention.” He kissed her soundly. “Is that too much to ask?”

“Not at all.” Millie snuggled closer. “I’m yours until I have to clock back in.”

He kissed her again, this time a long, lingering kiss. “Something tells me the rest of your day is going to get a lot better.”

“It already has.” Millie kicked her shoes off and tilted her head. “I live such a blessed life.”

“We live a blessed life.” Nic released his grip. “Unfortunately, I’m on a tight schedule as well. Rest assured, I have a romantic evening planned.”

Millie arched her eyebrow. “What sort of romantic evening?”

“One that will have to wait for a few more days. But for now...” He led her into the dining room and escorted her to an empty chair. “Let’s enjoy what little time we have.”

While they ate, Millie filled Nic in on Sharky’s crisis and then shared her concerns about Jose. “Do you know or remember him from before? He works in the IT department.”

Nic thought about it. “No. His name doesn’t ring a bell, but then a lot of employees have come and gone.”

“I’m sure.” Millie toyed with her food. “Patterson thinks I’m making something out of nothing.”

Nic feigned shock. “My wife, jumping to conclusions?”

She playfully punched his arm. “Very funny. You have to admit, I have an uncanny ability of picking out the bad guys.”

“It’s true. The fact you remember him after all these years is amazing,” her husband marveled.

“I remember a few details about those first days on board. I was terrified I would mess up; certain Andy would fire me at any moment and I would end up returning home to Michigan with my tail between my legs.”

“But it didn’t work out that way, did it?” Nic asked. “Instead, here you are, living your best life, traveling around the world with your husband and friends.”

“The only thing missing is seeing more of my kids and grandkids.” She fed a small scrap of turkey to Scout, who sat patiently waiting and watching their every move. “I need to get going. I’ll be working on a new activity schedule for when we head back to the warmer Caribbean climate. What are our first ports?”

“One of your favorites...St. Kitts, along with the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.” Nic rolled the “r” around on his tongue. “Siren of the Seas hasn’t stopped there in a long time.”

“I don’t recall ever docking in Puerto Rico. I’ll have to check out the sights.”

“Maybe we can plan a day and go together.”

“I would like that.” Millie pushed her chair back. “Thank you for lunch.”

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“You’re welcome.” Nic carried their empty plates into the kitchen. “I’ll take Scout with me to the bridge.”

Millie tracked down the pup’s co-captain’s hat and placed it on top of his head. “He’s ready to help navigate.”

After Nic left, Millie finished cleaning up. She was halfway to her office when Sharky radioed.

“Millie, do you copy?”

“I’m here, Sharky. Go ahead.”

“Where are you?”

“Heading to my office.”

Sharky signed off, promising he was on his way.

He must have been in the vicinity because she found him waiting outside her door when she arrived, a look of concern etched on his face.

Millie’s heart plummeted. “You have news.”

“Dernice finally called me back. There’s a reason we haven’t heard from Elvira.”

Chapter 6

Millie said the first thing that popped into her head. “We were right. Elvira went searching for gold and is missing in Alaska’s wilderness.”

“Not even close,” Sharky said. “She’s in jail.”

“In jail?” Millie made a choking sound. “What happened?”

“I don’t know the details. What I do know is it involves someone from the gold mining group.” Sharky told her he was on his way to Patterson’s office to see if he could get more information.

“I’ll go with you.”

It was a quick trip from the theater to the other end of the ship. As luck would have it, the lights were off with no sign of the head of security.

Not wanting to broadcast Sharky’s personal emergency, she dialed his cell phone number. Patterson didn’t answer, so she left a brief message. “While we wait, we can check the local news to see if there’s anything being reported.”

“Good idea.” Returning to their starting point, Millie ushered her friend into her office. She promptly turned her desktop computer on. “I’ll start with Whittier’s local news.”

A preliminary search came up empty-handed. “Crud. I’m striking out.”

“Try Anchorage. We’re close to the city.”

“Good idea.” Millie cleared the screen and tried again, this time clicking on a local news link.

Several recent stories appeared. She made it halfway down when a post caught her eye. “I may have found something.” Millie slipped her reading glasses on. “Do you know the name of the company Elvira was shadowing?”

“I have it written down in my office,” Sharky said. “It was gold something.”

“Gold Grade Mining Group?”

“Yeah. That’s it.”

Millie crooked her finger. “Check it out.”

He hurried around the desk and peered over her shoulder. “Georgia Woman Arrested for Vicious Attack.” The story claimed an out-of-state woman who arrived in Alaska several days prior to work alongside a team of goldminers and television production crew, became involved in an altercation with another woman, also a part of the team, at a bar in downtown Whittier. After leaving, the victim was attacked and taken to a local hospital.

Near the bottom of the story, the victim’s name was released, Wanda Tillman. The last paragraph listed the suspect’s name, Elvira Cobb.

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Millie blew air through thinned lips. “I hate to say it, but Elvira is in big trouble.”

“No kidding.” Sharky straightened his back. “I don’t think she did it.”

“Let’s go with the scenario Elvira and this woman, who was part of the gold mining team, got into an argument over gold. Even if provoked, Elvira wouldn’t retaliate?”

“I mean. I suppose she might, if she had to defend herself. Dernice is practically begging me for my help.”

“Help what? To see if the judge will set bail so we can get her out? I’m not sure how a violent assault charge from a person who lives out of state is handled up here, but I’m pretty sure they would consider her a flight risk, which means the judge might not set a bail amount.”

“Good point.”

While Sharky paced, Millie searched for more stories, but found nothing. “We’ll be in Whittier tomorrow morning and staying overnight.”

Chirp. “Patterson is calling me back.”

“Maybe he has some news.”

“Hey, Patterson. I’m with Sharky and have you on speaker.”

“I have news on Elvira Cobb.”

Sharky crossed his fingers. “Good news or bad?”

“Elvira is in the Whittier jail. She’s being charged with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon and attempted murder.”

“Both charges?” Millie asked.

“Both. Wanda Tillman, the woman who was attacked, is related to a local law enforcement officer.”

“So the cops charged her with the most serious offense possible because she’s related to a local cop?”

“It’s looking that way,” Patterson said. “From what I was told, the judge has decided not to set bail or bond. She’s not going anywhere. I’m guessing you and Sharky plan to get off the ship tomorrow morning to see what you can do.”

“I...” Millie shot Sharky a questioning glance. “I’m sure Sharky will get off, but I don’t know if he wants my help.”

“Yes.” Sharky nodded his head. “I need you, Millster.”

“Okay. It looks like I’ll be getting off too. With any luck, she’ll be allowed visitors,” Millie said.

“I’m one step ahead of you. I was able to verify that she is. How many and when...I’m not sure on that.”

“We’ll figure it out.” Millie thanked him. She ended the call and waved her phone in the air. “We dock at seven. Clearance to disembark will take a few minutes. I’ll have to see the passengers off. Why don’t we plan on meeting at eight near the gangway?”

“Eight it is.” Sharky rubbed the back of his neck. “We might need help, depending on what we find out from Elvira.”

“Meaning you think we should round up the team...Danielle, Annette and Cat in case we need more boots on the ground?” Millie asked.

“I want to be prepared for whatever we find when we get there.”

“Which is probably a wise decision.” Millie sent out a group text, asking the trio to meet in her office.

Within minutes, the friends had assembled. Taking turns, Millie and Sharky brought them up to speed.

“We believe it’s possible Elvira may have found something. Another miner, a woman who happens to be related to a local cop, is part of the mining group. She argued with Elvira in public with people around.”

“A bar,” Millie chimed in.

“The woman, Wanda, left and was attacked either at the bar or somewhere nearby. Patterson confirmed she can have at least one visitor. Millie and I are gonna try to see her tomorrow morning to get the details.”

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“And then what?” Cat asked.

“We go from there. Siren of the Seas will be docked overnight, which means we have some time—not a ton—but hopefully enough to do some digging around.” Millie motioned toward Danielle. “The new group of passengers will start boarding around eleven. Would you mind filling in for me?”

“Not at all,” Danielle said. “Disembarkation morning is chaotic, but after the current passengers leave, we’ll have a few hours to catch our breaths and get ready for the evening events.”

“And I’m banking on us figuring this out in record time,” Millie said. “As long as Elvira can give us some solid leads to work with.”

Danielle excused herself. She stepped out of Millie’s office and returned moments later. “I told Brody what was going on. He’s offered to help since I’m going to hang out on the ship to fill in for you.”

“Awesome.” Millie wasn’t surprised, considering he and Sharky were good friends. “We’ll take all the help we can get.”

The others left, promising to keep their radios and cell phones handy in the event they were needed to help the following morning. After they left, Millie turned her attention to her upcoming itinerary and schedule.

She tweaked several events based on the forecast, something she had learned to keep track of because of the unpredictable early fall weather.

Alaska had been a season filled with adventures, the first one kicking off when she and Nic were at the airport, flying to Ketchikan to catch up with the ship.

The eventful summer continued in Skagway during a scenic train ride when a passenger had fallen off in the worst possible spot, and now this. Would she and Sharky be able to clear Elvira's name...or was it possible his girlfriend was behind the attack?

She didn't know Elvira well, but she did know someone who did. Her friend, Carlita Garlucci.

Millie finished revising the new schedule. She sent copies to her staff along with one to the main office to be printed so it would be ready for the room stewards to drop off inside the passengers' cabins.

Although the ship's app was a handy tool and something many guests preferred to use, Millie was still a little "old school." In her mind, there was nothing better than perusing the Cruise Ship Chronicles with a morning cup of coffee out on the balcony.

The paper version harkened back to the days when cell phones were a rarity. In some ways, Millie missed those days. So often, she caught guests sitting at a table across from each other...not engaged in conversation but engrossed in their phones. She occasionally wondered how much of an uproar it would create if cell phones were banned from the dining room.

Not long ago, guests were prohibited from recording the headliner shows, but now the company welcomed the recordings, and the shows were seen around the world. In Majestic Cruise Lines' defense, it was a savvy business decision. What could be better than free advertising?

Still, phones created an element of social distancing, which made Millie sad. She

glanced at her watch. It was mid-afternoon, the perfect time to track down Carlita Garlucci to get the scoop on Elvira and find out if she thought the woman might be behind the attack.

Millie picked up her phone to place the call when she noticed a text from Cat, asking her to call as soon as she had a chance.

Instead of calling, she decided to swing by Ocean Treasures. She found her friend standing at the cash register while several customers milled about. Cat was working alone, which was unusual for a busy sea day.

“Hey, Cat. I got your text. What’s up? You look a little stressed.”

“My new employee, Kendra, took her break and hasn’t returned. I’m really worried about her. She seems depressed. I think she might be homesick.”

“Uh-oh. Do you want me to go find her?”

“If you don’t mind. She’s not answering my calls.” Cat shot an anxious glance at a cluster of women perusing the clearance rack. “I can’t leave.”

“Any ideas about where I should start?”

“Maybe her cabin.” Cat rattled off Kendra’s cabin number.

Millie told her friend as soon as she had word, she would let her know. She exited the gift shop and went straight to the crewmember’s deck. Millie knocked on Kendra’s door, but no one answered.

She reached for her main keycard, thinking the woman might have had some sort of medical episode, but decided against letting herself in. Entering her cabin would be

the last resort.

Millie made a beeline for the cafeteria. No sign of her. The employee lounge was next, followed by the computer center and the gym, all to no avail.

She started to backtrack toward Kendra's cabin when another potential spot to search popped into her head. It was the place she would go if she was looking for solace and a quiet spot to be alone.

Turning on her heel, Millie took the side stairs and climbed all the way to the tippy top of the ship. Her gut told her she would find Kendra. The question was—how could Millie help the homesick young woman?

Chapter 7

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At first glance, Millie thought the Sky Chapel was empty. It had sat empty for weeks now, ever since Pastor Evans' departure. The chapel's new pastor had not yet arrived. After several delays, she'd finally heard Pastor Haakenson would join Siren of the Seas when they returned to their home port of Miami.

She missed the Sunday services, missed her heart-to-heart talks with the pastor, a man she considered her friend. Millie had heard good things about his replacement and was eager to meet him, to get back into her Sunday morning routine of worship and teachings.

She started to back out when she heard a snuffle coming from near the front.

Millie tiptoed down the center aisle and spotted Kendra, her shoulders hunched and her head down, tucked away in the corner of the second row and barely visible.

"Kendra?" Millie softly called her name.

Her head shot up, and her shoulders stiffened. She slowly turned.

Millie's heart plummeted when she noticed the young woman's eyes were swollen and red. She hurried toward her. "Cat asked me to find you. She's worried. Did something happen?"

"N-no," Kendra hiccupped loudly. "I was on my break and thought I would come here because I'm...I'm having a hard time right now."

Tears burned the back of Millie's eyes and she could feel her throat clog at the

sorrowful look on her face. “Would it be okay if I sat down?”

She nodded.

Millie eased onto the seat. She reached over and grasped her cold hand. “What’s making you sad?”

“I miss my mom, my family. I didn’t know it would be this difficult being away from them.” A lone tear trailed down Kendra’s cheek.

Millie pulled a tissue from her pocket and handed it to her. “Have you talked to them?”

“I-I call when we get in port and have tried using the computers to FaceTime them, but haven’t had any luck getting through.”

“I’m sorry to hear that. If it’s any consolation, I know how you feel.” Millie understood exactly how Kendra felt. She’d gone through similar emotions when she first joined Siren of the Seas and became homesick. One day she was fine. The next, she could barely drag herself out of bed. But as the weeks wore on, she became less lonely and began making friends.

It happened to many of the crewmembers, especially those who were new. The more seasoned employees had become accustomed to being apart from their loved ones. Many of them had parents, wives, girlfriends, even children back home. They took their breaks and spent a few months with their families before returning to start a new contract.

A number of them came from poor countries and communities where good paying jobs or the prospect of getting ahead were slim to none. Working on board cruise ships allowed them to send a sizeable chunk of their earnings home to support their

families.

Millie had recently attended a staff meeting where Donovan told them the turnover rate was between 25 and 35 percent. He was asking for ideas and suggestions about how Majestic Cruise Lines could lower the number.

In recent years, the company had made a concerted effort to get the word out—that potential employees could work and live together on their ships.

It wasn't a new concept, but it was "newer." What had once been frowned upon was now encouraged. To her, it was a step in the right direction. Although it still didn't help those who had small children and extended families thousands of miles away.

"The ship's computers can be temperamental." Millie had heard more than once from crewmembers that using the internet was difficult at best and impossible at times, especially while at sea. Most preferred to wait until the ship was in port where they could get off and track down local hotspots.

"I-I didn't mean to take such a long break." Kendra's lower lip quivered. "But I don't think I'm in any shape to be helping passengers," she whispered.

"Let me give Cat a quick call. I need to let her know I found you." Millie stepped out of the chapel and called her friend. She told her how Kendra was having a hard time and needed a little longer of a break. "Do you want me to send someone over from my department to help cover at the store?"

"Maribelle just stopped by. She's going to run the cash register until Kendra gets back. She's such a sweet young woman. I hope she makes it through this period of adjustment. It can be rough."

"I think it will help if she's able to contact her family." Through the glass door, Millie

could see Kendra with her head down again. “I have an idea about how to make her feel a little less homesick.”

“Anything you can do to cheer her up is appreciated. I feel so bad for her.”

“Me too.” Millie promised to keep her in the loop and returned to Kendra’s side. “I have an idea, a way to help you feel a little less homesick.”

Kendra slowly lifted her head. “You do?”

She held out her hand. “Come with me.”

Millie led her out of the chapel, down the stairs, and to the bridge. She swiped her card and opened the door. The usual staff was on duty, including Nic. He did a double take when he saw his wife and Kendra passing through.

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She shook her head, giving him the “I’ll fill you in later” look.

Reaching the apartment, she eased the door open.

Scout scampered down the hall to greet them. The pup trampled over Millie’s foot. Curious about their guest, he promptly trotted over to her.

Kendra scooped him up. The pup wiggled and squirmed, his small pink tongue licking her chin.

“He’s adorable.” The young crewmember smiled for the first time since Millie had found her.

“Scout loves attention.” She could see the change in the woman’s demeanor, her expression, and she knew she’d made the right decision in bringing her home.

With snuggles and cuddles out of the way, Kendra and Scout played catch on the balcony while Millie fixed two cups of tea and carried them out.

“Thank you for letting me visit Scout,” Kendra said. “I feel better already.”

“You’re welcome.” Millie perched on the edge of the chair, eyeing the woman over the rim of her cup. “I’m sorry the ship’s computers aren’t cooperating. I brought you here to see Scout, but also for another reason.”

A flicker of uncertainty crossed Kendra’s face. “Another reason?”

“To use my computer to FaceTime your family.”

Her eyes grew round as saucers. “Y-you want me to use your computer? But I...I don’t. You don’t...”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to.” Millie waited for them to finish their tea and led Kendra back inside.

In no time, she had logged onto the site, entered Kendra’s information, and connected the call. At first, it looked as if her family wasn’t available.

But suddenly the “Starlink clouds” parted and Kendra received a response on the other end. Within seconds, an image of a woman who looked like an older version of Kendra appeared.

“Kendra. It is you. You have gotten the computer to work,” the woman exclaimed.

“Mama!” Kendra patted Millie’s arm. “I’m using the cruise director’s computer. I’m at her home.”

“The cruise director?”

Millie leaned in and waved hello. “It’s nice to meet you, Kendra’s mama. I’ll give you a chance to catch up.”

“Thank you, Millie.” Kendra’s eyes glistened with tears. Not tears of sadness, but of joy and gratitude.

“You’re welcome.” Millie refilled her teacup, and she and Scout slipped out onto the balcony. While she waited, she sent Cat a text letting her know Kendra was speaking with her family and she was almost positive she would be returning to work soon, in

much better spirits.

Millie had almost finished her tea when the slider opened. A smiling Kendra appeared. "I'm done using FaceTime."

She turned, giving the woman her full attention. "Did you have a nice chat?"

"I can't tell you how much it meant to see my mama's face, to hear her voice and have her see me." Kendra blinked rapidly. "Thank you from the bottom of my heart. You have no idea what it meant to see her just now."

"I think I do. One thing to remember is that we've all been where you are, feeling sad and lonely, missing our families back home. It's only natural."

"You're right. Mama said she is happy for me to be here, to make friends and visit places I wouldn't otherwise get to see."

"Do it while you're young." Millie downed the rest of her tea and stood. "Are you ready to head back to work?"

"I am." Kendra impulsively hugged Millie, her slender shoulders trembling. "This is the best day I've had since I got on board, thanks to you."

Millie hugged her back. "Why don't you freshen up in the bathroom and I'll take you back to the gift shop?"

As soon as Kendra was done, Millie escorted her to Ocean Treasures. She gave Cat a friendly wave and watched as the woman hurried to join her.

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Kendra would be okay. Maybe even more than okay with the support of her family back home. Cat would take good care of her, making sure she felt loved, welcomed, and accepted.

Millie glanced at her watch. It was time to give Carlita a call and get the scoop on Elvira.

Chapter 8

Carlita Garlucci-Taylor's cheery voice echoed across the miles. "You must have been reading my mind. I was thinking I should call you to find out what's goin' on up there. I'm in Ravello's kitchen. Let me step outside where it's not so noisy."

Millie could tell Carlita was on the move. The loud voices faded, and it grew quiet. "Much better. I'm sure you're calling about Elvira."

"Sharky is beside himself." Millie filled Carlita in on what she knew so far, which wasn't much. "We know Elvira is being held in the Whittier jail. Dernice called Sharky to see if he would visit her and figure out what happened."

"I know about as much as you do. Elvira told her sister she had found a promising dig site. Next thing we know, she's in jail. Something about another miner, a woman, who was part of the same group. She and Elvira argued. The woman was attacked after leaving the local bar, and the authorities are charging Elvira with the attack."

"Wow." Millie shifted her feet. "So, there were eyewitnesses to the altercation?"

“Apparently. Not to the actual attack, but to their argument.”

“Between you and me, do you think it’s possible Elvira injured the woman?” Millie asked.

“Maybe. If it was self-defense.”

“Which would be the case for almost anyone. According to Siren of the Seas’ head of security, he spoke with someone from the jail and found out Elvira is allowed to have visitors. Sharky asked me to go with him to see her.”

“I’m worried about her. She comes up with some cockamamie ideas and when she gets obsessed with treasure or gold, all bets are off.”

“Elvira and her group are in a fairly remote area up here. I’m not sure how large the jail or prison system is, but something tells me it might be tricky getting her out if the charges stick. Did Dernice mention the name of the place where her sister and this woman argued?”

“Hang on a minute. She sent me a text with the name.”

The other end of the line grew muffled. Carlita returned. “It’s Bay Bar & Grill in Whittier, Alaska.”

Millie repeated the name. “Thanks. It will give us a starting point, after we see Elvira, of course.”

The women chatted for a few more minutes, with Millie promising to have Elvira check in as soon as possible. “It might take some time.”

“Any help you can give is greatly appreciated.”

After the call ended, Millie gathered up what she thought they might need. Something told her because of the limited timeframe, she and Sharky would need to move fast.

She pulled up a street map of downtown Whittier and began jotting notes. The distance from the cruise port to the jail. The location of Bay Bar & Grill. Millie hadn't thought to ask Carlita about the area where the gold mining team was staying. She added a note to find out when they talked to Elvira.

After finishing, she folded the paper in half and stuck it in her pocket. Saturday was shaping up to be a long day, although probably not nearly as long as Elvira's day. How Sharky had ever become involved with a woman like Elvira was beyond Millie. Perhaps it was a case of opposites attracting.

Maybe it was the excitement. She also suspected Sharky preferred long-distance relationships. Whatever the reason, he cared enough about her to want to try to help.

Something told Millie they would need to hit the ground running if they were going to figure things out. She and her friends had solved some complicated cases, but Alaska had its own unique environment.

Would they be able to figure out what had happened? She hoped so. If not, there was a very good chance Elvira would remain Waylaid in Whittier indefinitely.

Millie arrived at the gangway at exactly eight the next morning. Sharky was already there waiting, sporting a bulging backpack, a bag so full it wasn't fully zipped. She tapped the top of a wooden handle sticking out. "What's this?"

"What's what?" Sharky stretched his neck.

“It looks like a hacksaw.”

“You would be correct. I also have binoculars, bottled water so we can stay hydrated, a pair of vice grips, and some other stuff. I have no idea what we’re getting ourselves into and want to be prepared.”

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“Why the hacksaw? To sneak into the jail and saw off the bars to set Elvira free?” Millie teased.

“In case we’re out in the wilderness. C’mon, Millie. You know a hacksaw won’t cut through steel bars. We would need explosives, and I’m fresh out of them.” Sharky shaded his eyes. “Where’s the rest of the team?”

“On standby. We may need to divide and conquer. Time will be our biggest hurdle today.”

“You’re right. Which is why we’re taking the Flamethrower. So we can get where we’re going fast.” Sharky grabbed Millie’s arm and propelled her toward the bow of the ship.

Parked off to the side, spit-shined and ready to roll was his prized possession, his souped-up fire engine red scooter, which Millie suspected was barely street legal. “Are you sure it’s safe for us to drive this around on the streets?”

“Why not?”

“Remember our last scooter incident,” Millie reminded him.

“I learned my lesson.” He made an “x” across his chest. “Scout’s honor. We’ll ride nice and easy around town.”

“We had better. We won’t be any help to Elvira if we’re behind bars, too.”

Sharky handed Millie a helmet. “Like I said, I’ll be cool as a cucumber. No worries.”

Despite her skepticism about what her friend considered cruising around nice and easy, she climbed on, her helmet firmly in place.

Like Millie, he had done his homework, knew exactly where they were going and how to reach Whittier’s jail on the outskirts of town.

They pulled into the parking lot and found an empty spot near the front. A posted sign designated it for snowmachines.

“This looks good enough for me.” Sharky kicked the kickstand down and waited for Millie to hop off. “Not much to look at, is it?”

“Most police stations and jails aren’t.” Millie removed her helmet and studied the building, consisting of red brick on the lower half and some sort of rustic wooden slats covering the top.

She caught up with Sharky on the sidewalk, making the short trek to the front door. Big, bold arrows directed visitors.

To the right was the fire department. To the left was the EMS station. Straight ahead was the place they were looking for—the police station.

“One stop city services,” Millie quipped. “Saving residents both time and money.”

Stepping inside, they found a large reception desk with clear glass window partitions. Sharky greeted the clerk behind the counter. “Good morning. My friend and I are here to visit Elvira Cobb, an inmate.”

“Elvira Cobb.” The woman peered at them over the top of her glasses, her eyes

flitting from one to the other. “Are you related to her?”

“Do we have to be?” Sharky asked.

“No. I’ll need a copy of your photo identification.”

Millie and Sharky handed the woman their driver’s licenses. She made a clicking sound with her teeth. “You both live in Miami?”

“We live and work on a cruise ship,” Millie explained. “However, we need a physical address, so we use PO boxes in Miami, which is our home port.”

“Ah.” The woman’s eyes lit. “You came in on the mega cruise ship this morning.”

“We did,” Sharky confirmed. “Ms. Cobb is a friend of ours.”

“Do you know if she’s still here?” Millie asked, hoping there was an off-chance Patterson had old information and Elvira had been released.

“She’s still here. The judge hasn’t set bond.” The clerk ran their licenses through a machine and handed them back. “A guard will be up shortly to store your belongings and escort you to the visitor’s area.”

Millie and Sharky thanked her and stepped off to the side.

A guard appeared moments later, calling their names. He led them through a heavy metal door to a side room. “You’ll need to leave your backpacks and bags in here.”

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Making quick work of stowing their stuff, Millie questioned whether she could bring a pen and paper with her, to which the guard cleared both items.

Back in the hall, they followed him to the end and turned left. The trio trekked down another hall to an identical metal door. Using his keycard, the guard unlocked the door and ushered them inside.

Millie's first impression was the room was dark and dreary, or perhaps it was a lingering depression from those who had passed through. Troubled souls, anxious inmates, those who had given up hope.

Hopefully, Elvira wasn't one of them.

On closer inspection, Millie noticed tables and chairs lining both sides, each group strategically placed an equal distance apart.

“Your friend is over there.”

Sharky saw Elvira first. He gave a quick wave and hurried over. Millie slowly trailed behind, giving them a few moments of privacy to greet one another.

“Thank you for coming.” Elvira hugged Sharky and shook Millie's hand. “It looks like I got myself into a real pickle this time.”

“You sure did,” Sharky said. “Between the three of us, I'm hoping we can get to the bottom of what happened.”

“I know what happened.” Elvira pointed at Millie. “And don’t take my comment as me being cocky or unappreciative because believe me, I need all the help I can get.”

“We heard the judge hasn’t set bail,” Millie said.

“Because the woman who was attacked is related to one of the local cops.” Elvira wrinkled her nose. “The good news is Gold Grade Mining Group’s producer knows the judge. He’s working on getting me out of this place and seems to think I’ll be released soon.”

“Unfortunately, we don’t have a lot of time,” Millie said. “We need to have this wrapped up and be back on board the Siren of the Seas by tomorrow afternoon.”

“I figured Millie and I would get a little background info on the woman who was attacked, swing by the bar where the incident occurred and go from there,” Sharky said.

“Talk about being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I thought Wanda and I were like this.” Elvira twined her fingers together. “Friends don’t attack friends.”

“Tell us everything that happened,” Millie said.

“It all started when the mining team headed over to Bay Bar & Grill...”

Chapter 9

Elvira stepped inside the Bay Bar & Grill, her eyes darting around the room as she searched for her gold mining group. Finally, she noticed Alex, the show’s head producer, casually leaning against the wall near the pool tables.

She crossed the room and caught up with her colleagues, including Wanda, a local

who was helping the production team while actively searching for new spots to mine. Being the only women in the group, the two had become fast friends.

Little did the others know Elvira had inadvertently stumbled upon a promising spot, off the beaten path yet less than a mile from where they were currently mining. She'd found it using her handy dandy tricked-out pulse induction or PI machine she'd purchased before leaving Savannah, Georgia.

She'd originally suspected the seller, a guy who was a member of her treasure hunting group back home, had jacked up the price, thinking she had the word "sucker" plastered across her forehead. But after doing a little research, Elvira believed Jude, the name the treasure-hunting guy went by, was onto something.

She promptly plunked down the outrageous sum of twelve hundred bucks and purchased it, lock, stock, and barrel. Elvira, always on the hunt for a bargain, had convinced him to throw in solar batteries that continuously charged, even while the device was being used.

Taking advantage of every free second she had, Elvira mined nearly nonstop, pocketing the samples she found and bringing them home with her each night to test. "Home" being the RV she was renting while in Alaska.

Her hard work was paying off. Her "honey hole" was not only promising, but she'd found genuine nuggets. Thrilled with her find, she was determined to keep her good fortune to herself.

Certain she had literally "struck gold," Elvira was getting the paperwork ready to run down to the county recorder's office and stake her claim. Now, it was only a matter of time before she could mine in earnest. There was only one problem, and it was a biggie.

Elvira eased in next to Wanda. “Hey, Wanda.”

“Hey, Elvira. I was wondering if you were going to grace us with your presence,” she teased.

“I got caught up working on a small...project.” Elvira eyed the bar, noticing two empty barstools on the end. “You wanna grab a drink? My treat.”

“If you’re buying, you betcha.” Wanda followed her across the room. “So, this small project...is it gold related?”

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“Maybe.” Elvira motioned the bartender over. “I’ll have a Bud Light and whatever she wants.”

Wanda placed her order and slid onto the empty seat. “Does it have anything to do with Mount Baldie?”

Elvira could feel the blood drain from her face. Mount Baldie was the exact location of the site. “Wh-what makes you think it had something to do with baldie, whatever you called it?”

“C’mon, Elvira,” Wanda chided. “I saw you coming down from the area with your backpack yesterday and again today. It’s a promising location. Did you find something?”

Elvira lowered her voice. She grabbed hold of Wanda’s arm and pulled her close. “Tell me everything you know about Mount Baldie.”

“People have searched the area for years and never found anything. It’s a remote spot requiring special equipment. You got some sort of special gear you haven’t told me about?”

Elvira’s mind raced. She’d been careful not to show the others her one-of-a-kind induction machine and had kept it safely stashed away in her backpack at all times. Surely, Wanda hadn’t seen it...hadn’t been spying on her, or had she?

Her eyes narrowed. “Have you been spying on me?”

Wanda's face turned beet red. "Spying on you? That's a terrible thing to accuse me of. I thought we were friends."

"Accusing you?" Elvira asked. "I asked a simple question and you're not answering. You better tell me the truth."

"Or what?" Wanda smirked. "You're going to pack your bags and leave?"

"I'm not going anywhere. If I found gold on my own, it's mine." She jabbed her finger in the woman's face. "If I were you, I would be careful about who you're messing with."

Wanda's voice raised an octave. "Don't you dare come blowing into Whittier, throwing your weight around and threatening people," she said in a loud voice.

"I didn't threaten you," Elvira said. "But I am warning you to keep your distance."

A few other insults and accusations were hurled back and forth. Wanda stomped off. She made her way back to their group and said something to Alex and the others before storming out of the bar.

"And that's how it ended," Elvira told Sharky and Millie. "She was hot onto my find. Our conversation got a little heated, and she left. Next thing I know, the cops show up at the bar. Wanda was attacked from behind. Someone hit her in the head and they're arresting me."

"You had an alibi," Sharky said. "You were inside the bar."

"I went to the bathroom right after she left. When I came back out, I went over and

sat with the others from the gold mining group.”

“Did you notice anyone leaving around the time of Wanda’s attack?”

Elvira thought about it. “No. Not that I can recall.”

“What about robbery as a motive?” Sharky asked.

“From what I was told, nothing was stolen. Wanda’s in the hospital and expected to make a full recovery. She claims she doesn’t remember anything about her attacker. She didn’t see who it was. They didn’t say anything,” Elvira said. “The bottom line is she got whacked in the back of the head and her attacker ran off.”

“Randomly attacking a woman outside the bar with no motive.” Millie tapped her chin thoughtfully. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Which is why I’m the prime suspect and the only one the cops have. Several people saw us argue.” Elvira snapped her fingers. “Not even five minutes later, the attack happened.”

“Do you have any idea who it might have been?” Sharky asked. “More importantly, do you think it has something to do with the gold mining?”

She shrugged. “It’s the only thing I can come up with.”

“It’s possible that others know about your honey hole,” Millie theorized. “Maybe Wanda told someone or they, like her, noticed you going to...what was the name of the place?”

“Mount Baldie.”

“Mount Baldie,” Sharky repeated. “How do we get there?”

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“I have a map in my RV. It’s a little tricky to find. Other than a small sample spot, the entire area is pristine and untouched, just waiting for me to dig, nuggets, dig.”

“It wouldn’t hurt for us to go there and check it out,” Millie said.

“To see if someone has been turning up dirt seeing how I’m sitting here in jail,” Elvira said. “If so, we know for certain it wasn’t Wanda. She’s laid up in the hospital.”

“Good point,” Sharky said. “I can see you’ve given this some thought.”

“I’ve had plenty of time sitting in my cell to replay what happened. As far as the attack, either Wanda has an enemy or she, along with someone else, is onto my spot.”

“How do we get there?”

“When you leave here, head down River Street. At the main drag’s stop sign, turn right. You’ll go up a hill, a really steep hill. When you reach the top, make another right. You can’t miss it. There’s a ginormous totem pole with a wooden eagle perched at the very top.”

“Hold up.” Sharky made a timeout. “I’ll never remember this.”

Millie slid her notepad and pen across the table. “Do you think you could draw us a map?”

“With my eyes closed.” Elvira uncapped the pen and reached for the notepad. At first,

Millie couldn't make heads or tails of what she was drawing, but then it started to make sense.

She finished and tapped the top. "Do you think you can find it?"

"I hope so." Sharky glanced at the crude drawing. "If not, we'll have to stop by your RV and pick up the original."

"I hid a key." Elvira told them the location of her RV and where to find the spare key. "You might run into Alex, the producer. I've mentioned your name several times. Tell him I gave you permission to go inside and grab something."

"What are the chances it's Alex, the producer?" Millie asked.

Elvira gave her a thumbs down. "Nil. Zero. It's not Alex. He's straight as an arrow. You'll see what I mean when you meet him."

The guard approached their table. "Time's up."

Millie shoved her chair back. "Good luck getting out of here."

"Alex promised he would do what he could. I believe him," Elvira said. "My cell phone was confiscated. If I get out and they give me my stuff back, I'll call you."

"Sounds like a plan." Sharky darted around the table and hugged his woman. "Hang in there, babe. We'll clear your name as soon as we can."

Millie offered words of encouragement before exiting the visiting area. She grabbed her things from the locker, which is where Sharky caught up with her.

"Elvira appears to be in good spirits."

“Because she thinks she’s getting out.” Sharky wiggled his backpack back and forth, working hard to extract it from the small locker. “I have to say, she’s more optimistic about the situation than I am.”

“I give it a fifty-fifty chance. At least she knows someone who can help get her out of here. The clock is ticking.” Millie glanced at her watch. “We have some solid leads to follow up on, but we need help.”

“It’s time to call in the troops,” Sharky said.

“Precisely. We need to cover as much ground as possible. Let’s go outside and make the call.”

Chapter 10

Annette quietly listened while Millie filled her in on their visit with Elvira. “The good news is we have a ride. Brody rented a truck, thinking we might need an extra set of wheels.”

“Awesome,” Millie whooped. “Sharky and I have his scooter. Maybe he and I should stay closer to town while you check out the mining site.”

“The Flamethrower won’t have any trouble getting around out in the wilderness,” Sharky whispered in a loud voice. “Mountains are no problem for my powerful set of wheels.”

“I don’t doubt this is true, but maybe it would be best if we let them go. They’ll get there quicker.” And in one piece, Millie silently added.

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“Fine, but it would’ve been cool to check out Mount Baldie,” Sharky grumbled. “We might have even found a nugget or two of gold.”

“The plan is to divide and conquer. We can’t do it all.” Millie promised to forward a snapshot of Elvira’s drawing to Annette. She ended the call and did just that.

Annette confirmed she’d received it and wished them luck.

“Where to?” Millie shaded her eyes and scoped out their current location. At least Whittier was relatively compact, meaning it wouldn’t take them long to reach the bar. “I say we head to the bar first. It’s on our way to the mining group’s base camp.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Sharky waited for Millie to straddle the Flamethrower and strap on her helmet. As soon as she did, offthey went, through town and down several side streets until reaching the bar.

Bay Bar & Grill was similar in both size and appearance to several of the other commercial buildings near the harbor. Long and low with a covered front entrance, they found several vehicles, all sporting varying degrees of caked-on mud, parked out front.

Sharky chose a spot near the road and beneath the street sign. He pulled a chain lockset from his backpack and secured the Flamethrower before joining Millie, who stood off to the side. “You planned for everything.”

“This beauty right here is a solid piece of machinery.” Sharky proudly patted the seat. “You better bet I’m not taking any chances. You never know when someone might be

tempted to swipe my prized possession.”

The duo crossed the gravel parking lot and stepped inside. Music blared from a jukebox in the corner, a honky-tonk tune that sounded vaguely familiar.

A cluster of men stood off to the side playing pool. They gave the newcomers a passing glance before continuing with their game.

Millie and Sharky veered left and approached the bar.

“Morning folks.” The bartender made his way over. “Welcome to Bay’s. What can I get you?”

“A Diet Coke,” Millie said.

“Sprite for me,” Sharky said.

“A Diet Coke and Sprite coming right up.” He filled two glasses with ice and soda and set them on the counter. “Do you want to look at menus? The kitchen stops serving breakfast at eleven.”

“No thanks.” Millie fished a ten-dollar bill out of her purse and slid it toward him. “We’re crewmembers from the cruise ship. Our friend was in this bar the other night when a woman was attacked. She’s been arrested and we’re trying to figure out what happened.”

“Elvira Cobb,” the man said. “I was working the night of Wanda’s attack and heard them arguing. You said you were friends?”

“We are,” Sharky replied. “Elvira’s insisting she wasn’t behind the attack and we’re here to see if maybe someone else can shed some light on what went down.”

“It’s pretty simple.” The man introduced himself as Lyle. “Alex and his crew came in the other night for dinner, drinks and to hang out, something they’ve done almost every night since they set up camp here in Whittier. Wanda and Elvira argued. Wanda left. Elvira followed her out and attacked her. I wasn’t the only one who saw them arguing.”

“Seeing them argue and seeing Elvira hit the woman over the head are two entirely different things,” Millie pointed out. “We’re wondering if there was anyone else who didn’t like the woman and may have had a reason to attack her.”

“Wanda is a Whittier local. She’s lived in this area her entire life. As far as I know, she doesn’t have any enemies other than your friend.”

“No neighbors or co-worker she may have had a beef with?” Millie pressed.

“Wanda has plenty of neighbors. She lives in the Valley Shore Apartment building. It’s one of two in town where almost every other person, including myself, lives.”

“Valley Shore,” Sharky repeated. “Is it nearby?”

“Walk out of this building and look to the west. You can’t miss it. It’s the second tallest building in Whittier. Like I said, the Tillman family is well known. All the locals know Wanda.” The bartender excused himself to help another customer.

Millie waited until he was gone. “Elvira mentioned stopping by the bathroom after she and Wanda argued. I want to take a quick look around.”

“I’ll hang out here until you get back.”

Millie slid off the barstool and followed the restroom sign down a long hall. Near the front was an open door leading to the kitchen. On the other side was a narrow door. It

appeared to be some sort of closet.

She continued walking and found the restrooms near the end. Millie slowly eased the women's bathroom door open, making sure no one was standing on the other side.

She took care of business and made her way to the sink. While washing her hands, Millie noticed a handicapped stall at the far end. She tossed the paper towel in the trash and made her way to the empty stall.

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It had all the standard features...toilet, sink, hand towel dispenser and...a window.

With a quick glance to make sure the coast was clear, Millie locked the stall door and walked over to the window. She flipped the latch and slid it open. Bouncing on the tips of her toes, she stuck her head out.

Directly behind the bathroom was a gravel alley running the length of the building. A dumpster sat next to the rear entrance door. She took a step back, trying to envision Elvira climbing onto the sink, leveraging her weight and launching herself through the open window.

It was possible. She was small enough and could have made it through. But there were several obstacles, namely sneaking out of the bathroom, attacking Wanda, and returning to the bathroom before another patron realized the end stall was empty.

She slid the window shut and made her way back to where Sharky sat waiting.

“Well?”

“I noticed a window inside one of the stalls. Elvira could have climbed out.”

“Somehow I can’t picture her sneaking out of the bar, attacking Wanda, and then sneaking back in. How big is the window?”

Using her hands, Millie gave him a rough guesstimate of the dimensions.

“She’s agile, but I’m not sure she has those capabilities,” Sharky said.

“I was thinking the same thing.”

The bartender wandered over. “Can I get you folks anything else?”

“No. I think we’re all set.” Millie and Sharky thanked him for the information, quickly downed what was left of their sodas and headed out.

“Well?” Sharky asked. “Where to next?”

“According to my map, we’re not too far from base camp. We’ll start working our way in that direction. Hopefully, Annette, Brody and Cat are having better luck than we are.”

“This is a pretty awesome ride, Brody.” Annette studied the decked-out truck, a four-wheel-drive pickup with mud tires, a three-inch lift kit and a set of floodlights mounted on the roof.

“It’s my dream machine.” Brody’s eyes lit as he ran a light hand over the metallic blue hood. “She’s a beaut. When Danielle told me you needed a set of wheels to do a little back roading, I figured I might as well go all out seeing how it’s only for a few hours.”

“We’ll be riding in style.” Annette hurried around to the passenger side. She scooched across the seat, making room for Cat.

Brody, with a look of pure joy on his face, climbed behind the wheel. Once inside, he spent a few minutes familiarizing himself with the features. “If I ever give up ship life, I’m gonna buy me one of these trucks, a bunch of land out in the middle of nowhere, and live happily ever after for the rest of my life.”

“With Danielle?” Cat asked.

“Sure. I mean, if she wants to and if we’re still together.” Brody told them he saved every dime he could, stashing it away in retirement and interest-bearing accounts. “Thanks to Majestic Cruise Lines covering all of my living expenses, I’ve been able to sock away some serious cash.”

“Same here,” Annette said. “One day I’ll have seen enough of the world and want to plunk down roots in a quiet little spot somewhere in the US. I might even grow a garden and raise a few chickens and goats.”

“Maybe with Jose?” Cat teased.

Annette’s face turned bright red. “Jose?”

“C’mon, Annette. Everyone knows you and Jose are dating.”

“I heard it too,” Brody said. “He’s been telling everyone you’re his girlfriend.”

“He had better not be.” Annette frowned.

“Why not? It’s true, isn’t it?”

“I-uh. W-well. I mean, we have been hanging out,” Annette stammered.

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“You liked Jose or Gary, whichever name he goes by way back when,” Cat reminded her. “There’s nothing wrong with having a boyfriend.”

Annette shifted uncomfortably. “Can we talk about something other than my love life?”

“I’m sorry if I upset you,” Cat apologized. “Andy and I are going to buy a sailboat and sail around the world.”

Brody’s jaw dropped. “Seriously? That’s sounds sweet. Not as sweet as buying a bunch of land and living in the country, but sweet in a different way.”

“I’m kidding.” Cat tugged on her seatbelt. “To be honest, we haven’t talked about it much. Although Andy has mentioned returning home to the UK.”

“And you won’t mind living there?” Annette asked.

“Maybe not year-round. We could split up our time between my hometown and Andy’s hometown. At least I don’t have to worry about Jay.” Cat’s ex-husband, now in prison for her attempted murder, would hopefully be locked up for the rest of his life.

“Time to hit the road, ladies.” Brody revved up the motor and shifted into drive. Smooth as silk, the truck coasted out of the port’s parking lot and onto the main road. “Which way?”

Annette tracked down the map Millie had sent her. “According to Elvira’s map, we’ll

need to head north.”

They sped out of town, along a side street and up a hill. Reaching the top, they made another turn. The paved road turned to gravel and eventually became nothing more than a rutted path.

“I hope we’re going the right way.” Cat anxiously peered out the window at the rugged terrain and towering trees with nary a single structure in sight.

“We are.”

The road narrowed again.

Brody slowed to a crawl. The truck jostled over the ruts and the tires started to spin. “Time to put it into four-wheel drive.” He pushed a button on the dash. The tires stopped spinning.

“How on earth did Elvira find this place?” Annette leaned forward, studying the vast wilderness. Every few feet, they found dirt paths branching off in different directions. “It looks like mining crews have been all over this area.”

“Can you imagine getting lost out here?” Cat asked.

“No, which is why we’ll be sticking with the map Millie sent me.” Annette clicked on the photo and enlarged the drawing. “It looks like we’re getting close. I say another half mile and we should almost be on top of it.”

The truck continued inching along the path, traveling deeper and deeper into the wilderness.

“I hope we have plenty of gas,” Cat joked.

“The tank is full,” Brody said. “We could drive around for days on this tank.”

“I wonder if we’ll run into a bear or some other wild critter.”

“It’s possible.” Brody patted his pocket. “Which is why I brought my gun.”

Annette lowered her gaze. “We’re almost at the spot Elvira marked with a big x.”

“This is the end of the road for us.” Brody shifted into park and shut the engine off.

“We’ll have to walk the rest of the way.”

The trio climbed out of the cab and gathered near the front.

Annette tapped her phone to make the map bigger. “It looks like we need to go left.”

“Down that trail?” Brody pointed to a rocky, rutted path a few feet away.

“I see a boulder near the hill,” Cat said. “Her gold mining spot should be on the other side.”

“I’ll go first.” Brody stepped onto the trail. Cat followed close behind while Annette brought up the rear.

Walking single file, they made their way down a sharp incline, walked across a roughly ten foot flat spot and began climbing.

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The hill was higher than it initially appeared and by the time they reached the top, Cat was out of breath. “I hope we’re close,” she gasped.

Annette consulted the drawing again. “According to Elvira’s map, the spot is only a few feet away.” She started to move forward.

Brody stopped her. “I think I should scope it out first.”

“Be careful.”

The women waited on the trail while he circled past the boulder. He came to an abrupt halt. “Did Elvira mention what kind of condition this honey hole of hers was in?”

“According to what she told Millie, it’s a pristine spot, and she’s itching to start digging.”

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news.” Brody motioned to them that the coast was clear. “Unless the map is wrong, someone beat her to it.”

Chapter 11

Annette hurried down the path and caught up with Brody. “Whoa!”

Cat, who was hot on her heels, nearly collided with her friend. “Whoops.”

“Sorry for the sudden stop.” Annette checked the map, confirming they were in the

exact location Elvira had drawn. “This is it. It looks like a colony of gophers got loose.”

“We need to take a picture and send it to Millie,” Brody said.

“Good idea. Unfortunately, I don’t have much of a signal. Hopefully, the message will go through.” She snapped a photo, added a brief message, and pressed the send button.

Tink. Millie replied in a nanosecond. “Are you positive?”

Annette: It’s the spot on the map. I thought you said Elvira hasn’t been digging around.

Millie: She said she dug a small sample, but the location was in pristine condition otherwise.

Annette: Someone has definitely been here digging around.

Millie: It wasn’t the woman Elvira argued with. She’s still in the hospital. At least she was the last we heard.

Standby for more info. Annette stepped lightly, dodging a series of fresh holes. “I wonder if whoever it was found anything.”

“If they didn’t, it wasn’t for lack of trying,” Brody joked. “We should’ve brought some tools with us.”

Cat placed her hands on her hips. “Your gun won’t dig holes. Although if I had to choose between excavating tools and a gun, the gun wins, hands down.”

“We’re already here,” Brody said. “We might as well look around.”

“Let’s maintain a visual on our starting location,” Annette said. “I don’t want to get lost in Alaska’s wilderness because of Sharky’s kooky girlfriend.”

“Me either.” Cat rubbed the sides of her arms, warily eyeing their surroundings. “Call me paranoid, but it feels like we’re being watched.”

“Paranoid,” Annette teased. “Although I have to admit, this isn’t my cup of tea.”

While the women talked, Brody ambled off.

Annette followed suit, heading in the opposite direction, with Cat following close behind. “I wonder if whoever was digging around here had anything to do with the woman who was attacked.”

“There could be a connection.” Annette snapped another picture. “I’ll see if Millie can somehow get this to Elvira to confirm we’re in the right place.”

Cat straddled a freshly dug hole. “How on earth did Elvira find this spot?”

“Millie mentioned she has some sort of special tool.”

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“I see a shiny object.” Cat clambered over a pile of rocks. She swooped down and grabbed hold of what was left of a shovel, lifting it over her head. “Look what I found.”

“A busted shovel?”

“It’s better than nothing.” Cat dug into the ground and scooped up a pile of dirt.

“Good luck.” Annette walked along a small embankment, mindful to keep a visual on Brody and Cat. Every few feet, she found small piles of dirt, all fresh, as if someone had recently been there.

She wondered if Millie and Sharky were having any luck in figuring out who may have attacked the woman. What if it was Elvira? Annette had only chatted with her briefly during her previous cruise.

How Sharky had ever become involved with the annoying woman was beyond her. Maybe it was one of those “opposites attract” situations. But then, Sharky was a one-of-a-kind in his own right.

Annette thought about Jose, how he had come back on board the Siren of the Seas and sought her out. On the one hand, she was perfectly happy with her life, uncomplicated by romantic relationships. She had her friends, her career. But Jose had a way of turning her thoughts inside out.

He made Annette’s heart pitter-patter. The way he looked at her. His easygoing, soft-spoken manner. Running the galley was stressful. Day in and day out, putting out

fires, handling one crisis after another, always on the go.

Jose was like a breath of fresh air. Calm. Cool. Never seeming to be stressed. She knew Amit wasn't a fan and was leery of him. Annette couldn't blame her friend. The first time he'd worked on board the ship and after they had started dating, Jose had shown up in the galley one day out of the blue and announced he was transferring to another ship.

To be honest, she'd been devastated. Her heart healed and then she became angry. Finally, she'd convinced herself it was for the best. And just like he'd left, he waltzed back into her life, determined to pick up where they left off.

She had given him the cold shoulder. To Jose's credit, he was persistent, had pursued her, sending her notes, buying her flowers, planning a romantic afternoon on their day off. And he'd apologized multiple times, claiming he had fallen for Annette and been scared.

Annette was no dummy. A small part of her suspected there was more to it than Jose getting cold feet. History could very well repeat itself and she was setting herself up for another round of being letdown. But she wasn't getting any younger.

Her friends were all happily committed. Millie and the captain. Cat and Andy. Danielle and Brody. Shoot, even Sharky and Elvira.

Maybe she felt she was missing out, and there was no harm in giving Jose another shot. People could change. Maybe he had. One thing was certain, he'd come back to Siren of the Seas, had sought her out, and wooed her.

She hadn't fallen for Jose hook, line and sinker, but she was open to seeing what happened—at a slower pace, of course.

Cat began waving her broken shovel in the air. “I think I found something.”

Annette changed direction and hurried toward her friend. “What is it?”

“This.” Cat held a rock in her hand. “I found gold.”

Brody jogged over and inspected her find. “That isn’t gold.”

Cat’s smile vanished. “It has flecks of gold. Are you sure?”

“Positive.” Brody flipped it over. “I take it back. It is gold...fool’s gold, also known as iron pyrite. See the streak? If it was real gold, the streak would be yellow.”

“Crud.” Cat took the rock from Brody and threw it on the ground. “What a bunch of baloney.”

Annette patted her arm. “You aren’t the first person to be fooled by fool’s gold, and I’m pretty sure you won’t be the last.”

“I’m ready to head out. It’s a shame I didn’t plan ahead and bring a few tools with me so we could take a proper look around.”

Cat kicked at a pile of dirt. “And waste our time finding more faux gold?”

“At least you’ve gotten a glimpse of the real Alaska, not the tourist traps in town.” Annette flung her arm around her friend’s shoulder. “Panning for gold or digging for gold isn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

The trio returned to their starting point and climbed back into the truck.

“I wonder how Millie and Sharky are doing,” Brody said.

“I don’t know. So far, we’re striking out.” Annette buckled her seatbelt. “All we know for certain is someone has been digging around in Elvira’s spot.”

“The same someone who attacked Wanda,” Cat added. “What’s our next step?”

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“Head back into town.” Annette patted her stomach. “I don’t know about you two, but I have a hankering for a bite to eat. I noticed a fast-food joint on our way up here.”

“Food sounds good to me.” Brody swung the truck around.

“I’ll give Millie a buzz.” Annette pulled her phone from her pocket and dialed her friend’s number.

“Hey, Annette. Are you still at the dig site?”

“We just left. We’re on our way to Whittier.”

“Were you able to find anything else?”

“Nope. I have you on speaker.” Annette nudged Cat. “Cat found some fool’s gold.”

“What a joke,” she griped.

“You didn’t notice anyone lurking around?” Millie asked.

“No one was around, but someone has been there, as you can see from the photos.” Annette switched her phone to her other hand. “Where are you?”

“Sharky and I are heading back to the ship.”

“You’re done searching for clues?”

“Danielle needs help in handling a passenger issue. Sharky and I will be back on the hunt as soon as I’m done.” Millie told her they planned to check out the gold mining group’s base camp. “Do you want to meet us there?”

“Sounds perfect. It will give Brody, Cat and me a chance to grab a bite to eat.” Annette asked Millie to forward the camp’s address.

“It’s on the way.”

Annette confirmed receiving it. “How long do you think it will be before you get there?”

“I’m not sure. Danielle wasn’t specific. It has something to do with a behind-the-scenes tour I was scheduled to host this morning.” Millie told her as soon as she figured out what needed to be done, she would let her know.

“I’ll keep my phone handy.” Annette ended the call and waved her cell phone in the air. “I don’t know about you two, but a double-decker cheeseburger with a large order of French fries is calling my name.”

Chapter 12

Beep...beep...beep.

Millie watched Sharky’s oversized backpack slide into the scanning machine. She held her breath, not surprised when the crewmember flipped the switch and the machine came to a halt.

The security guard’s eyes flitted from the screen to Sharky. “Your backpack is being flagged.”

Sharky grunted. “Flagged for what?”

“You have a hacksaw, a contraband item,” the guard lectured. “You, more than anyone, should know you’re not allowed to bring weapons on the ship.”

“I’m not bringing it on,” he argued. “I’m bringing it back on board and now I’m returning it.”

“It doesn’t matter how it got in your bag. It’s not allowed.”

“Call Patterson down here,” Sharky said. “He’ll give my backpack the a-okay clearance.”

“You know the rules.”

“We’ll see about that.” He pulled his radio from his jacket pocket and turned it on. “Dave Patterson, do you copy?”

“Go ahead Sharky.”

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“Millie and I are down at the gangway. My backpack is being flagged. I need you to override the confiscation and let it through.”

“Flagged for what?”

“Some stuff I thought Millie and I might need for our investigation.”

“Such as?”

“A few hand tools, binoculars, bottles of water...”

Patterson cut him off. “I’m on my way.”

Sharky clipped his radio to his belt and crossed his arms. “He’ll be here in a minute.”

The guard set the backpack on the floor and began scanning the items for the next person in line.

Millie tugged on his arm. “You know Patterson is going to lecture you,” she whispered in his ear.

“It was a chance I had to take to help my girl.”

She glanced at her watch. Millie had promised Danielle she would meet her in the atrium in less than five minutes.

“You don’t have to stay,” Sharky said. “How long before we head back out?”

“The issue involves a group who requested a behind-the-scenes tour.” Millie did a rough mental calculation. “Tours take about an hour and a half. Why don’t we meet at quarter past twelve?”

“Quarter past twelve,” he repeated. “Sounds good. I see Patterson coming now.”

Millie watched as the head of security strode across the gangway to where they stood waiting.

“Before we discuss your backpack, how is it going?” he asked.

Millie tipped her hand back and forth. “Elvira seems to think she’ll be released soon. Someone found her super-secret honey hole. The owner of the bar confirmed Elvira and the woman who was attacked argued right before the attack happened.”

“In other words, it’s not looking good for her,” Patterson summarized.

“Nope. Danielle needs help. There’s some sort of issue with a tour group I need to address, but first.” She made a sweeping motion toward the guard who was scanning bags. “Sharky needs his backpack.”

Patterson heaved a heavy sigh. “You are both fully aware of what items are not allowed on board the ship. Sharky, even more so.”

“I figured maybe security would let it slide, seeing how I was the one who took the items off in the first place.”

“Stay here.” Patterson approached the man working the scanning machine. He said something in a low voice, too low for Millie to hear.

The guard nodded and handed him Sharky’s backpack.

Patterson returned to where they stood waiting.

Millie's eyes slid to the side, noticing several of the crewmembers were watching them to see what happened. "We have an audience."

"Let's go over behind the curtain." Patterson took the lead, with Millie and Sharky trekking behind.

He set the backpack on top of the metal table and pulled the curtain around them. "Show me what you have."

Sharky shot Millie a quick glance. He cleared his throat and unzipped the front pocket. Reaching inside, he removed two bottles of unopened water followed by a pair of binoculars which were still inside the case, a tube of sunscreen, lip balm, a plain white t-shirt, a ball cap and a bottle of Advil.

"So far, so good," Patterson said.

"There's more. Now, don't freak out." Sharky set the hacksaw on the table, along with a pair of vice grips, and a multi-purpose pocketknife. Last, but not least, was a roll of duct tape.

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Patterson snatched the duct tape off the table. “What in the world did you plan to do with this?”

Sharky shrugged. “It’s a versatile, multi-purpose tool used for a variety of purposes.”

“As I said before, you know the rules,” Patterson lectured. “I could throw all these items in the trash.”

“It’s Siren of the Seas’ property. I’m not sure you want to do that.”

Patterson placed a light hand on the back of his neck, and Millie figured he was silently counting to ten. “I’m going to let it slide, but you need to promise me you won’t leave the ship again with company property.”

“Not even one more time when Millie and I head back out?”

She held her breath at the thunderous expression on Patterson’s face. “Not even one more time,” he gritted out. “If you do, I’ll write you up.”

“Fine.” Sharky began placing the items back inside. “I doubt we’ll need vice grips or the hacksaw, anyway. But I am okay with the duct tape, right? I mean, it’s not a weapon.”

“I have to agree,” Millie chimed in. “Duct tape isn’t on the contraband list.”

“Fine. Take the duct tape,” Patterson said. “But leave the rest here.”

“Aye, aye.” Sharky shoved the water back in the bag and snapped to attention, giving him a mock salute. “Your wish is my command.”

“Don’t press your luck.” Patterson strode off, looking back once before he stepped into an elevator.

Sharky waited until the doors closed. He swiped his hand across his forehead. “I have to say, it was touch and go there for a moment.”

“I wouldn’t risk it,” Millie warned. “Something tells me if you get flagged again, he’ll keep his promise.”

“No doubt.” Sharky slung the backpack over his shoulder. “See you at quarter past.”

“See you then.” To save time, Millie made a beeline for the center set of stairs, a straight climb to the atrium where Danielle told her she would be waiting. She made it with two minutes to spare before the tour was scheduled to start.

Danielle spotted her. She gave Millie a quick wave and hurried over. “Thank you for getting back here so fast.”

“You’re welcome. What’s going on? I thought the new passenger’s embarkation went off without a hitch.”

“It has until a few minutes ago. The leader of the cruise group who booked the behind-the-scenes tour isn’t happy.”

Millie frowned. “Not happy about what?”

“Here he comes now.” Danielle grew silent, waiting for the man to approach. “Hello, Mr. Zevron. I would like to introduce you to Millie Armati, our cruise director.”

“So good of you to deem our group worthy of your time,” he said sarcastically.

Millie, in no mood for rudeness, snapped back. “Every passenger on board this ship is worthy of my time. You are the reason I’m here.”

“It seems you may have forgotten that, at least momentarily,” he replied.

“I haven’t forgotten anything.” Millie forced a smile. “My job is to ensure each and every one of the people on board this ship has fun, enjoys their vacation and loves it so much they can’t wait to cruise with us again.”

“You’ve got your work cut out to convince me.”

“Please explain to me exactly what is making you so unhappy.”

“I signed our group up for a behind-the-scenes tour,” Zevron explained. “Specifically requesting at the time I made the reservation that you be the guide.”

“An emergency came up.” Millie motioned to Danielle. “Danielle has done dozens, if not hundreds, of tours. She knows this ship inside and out. Rest assured your tour will be topnotch.”

“As I’m sure you’re aware, these tours aren’t cheap. We requested and expected you.”

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Millie, wisely deciding this wasn't a battle worth fighting, lifted both hands. "Fair enough. I'm here. Shall we get started?"

Her refusal to argue appeared to have taken the wind out of Zevron's sails. He actually looked disappointed that Millie was there and would be giving them the guided tour. She secretly suspected his next step was to raise a stink with plans to get the tour fee refunded.

"We'll start your tour in one of the most important areas of the ship—the engine room." While they walked, Millie rattled off some statistics. "Siren of the Seas uses between 30 and 50 gallons of fuel per mile. Of course, this figure depends on the ship's speed, along with several other factors."

Using her keycard, she accessed the crew-only stairwell leading down to the engine room. Reaching the designated area, Millie introduced the guests to the staff, including the chief engineer.

She stood off to the side while he greeted the group and answered questions.

Up next was a tour of the laundry facility. Rahul, the laundry center's supervisor, shared interesting tidbits about his department, including how much laundry was washed in a day, pointed out the highlights of their conservation efforts, and answered a handful of questions.

Moving on, they trekked upstairs to the galley. Because Annette was on shore, Amit was on hand to share anecdotes about working in one of the busiest departments on board, rattling off some facts and figures, the number of eggs consumed per day,

slices of bread, gallons of coffee.

The galley tours were the longest and most detailed portion, where passengers were allowed inside the refrigerators and freezers, and given a glimpse of where provisions were kept. After they left for the up close look at the inner workings of the galley, Millie stepped off to the side to check her phone.

While she was checking her messages, a new one from Sharky popped up. She's out! Elvira has posted bond.

Millie promptly texted back. Great. Maybe we can meet her at her RV.

Sounds like a plan.

Millie's group circled back around, returning to their starting location. Amit passed out special treats—cookies shaped like Siren of the Seas, with the ship's initials etched in frosting, thanking them for stopping by the galley.

The tour continued downstairs and backstage, where Millie gave them a brief glimpse of the dressing room, along with a sneak peek at the props and then introduced them to Felix, who had just wrapped up a ballroom dancing class.

“What a good-looking group you have today,” he gushed. “Are you enjoying your tour so far?”

“Felix is in charge of our stage team,” Millie explained. “He's one of our most talented dancers and performers on board Siren of the Seas.”

A woman spoke up. “I saw you last time I cruised on this ship. You were phenomenal.”

Beaming at the unexpected compliment, he took a small bow. “Thank you very much.”

“I thought you might give them a quick rundown of what a headliner show entails,” Millie said.

“So much work.” Felix twirled around. “Every moment, every lyric, every song is fine-tuned until our performance is seamless, magical and, most important, memorable.”

While Felix talked, Millie sneaked off to make sure her office was tidy. She turned to find a passenger coming up behind her. It was her grumpy group host. “Hello, Mr. Zevron. Are you enjoying your tour so far?”

“The engine room visit was interesting. We could’ve skipped the laundry part. Other than that, I guess it’s okay.”

“I’m sorry you found a part of the tour not to your liking,” she apologized.

“It’s okay. I knew going into it we would see the laundry center. My wife is asking if we’ll be touring the bridge.”

“Yes. The bridge is our last stop where you’ll meet Captain Armati.”

“Captain Armati,” he repeated. “Your last name is Armati.”

“It is,” Millie confirmed. “The captain is my husband.”

“Ah.” Zevron arched his eyebrow, and she could see his wheels spinning. “No wonder you have a top job.”

“My husband has nothing to do with my position as cruise director.” Millie bit back the rest of what she wanted to say and wisely left it at that.

“No? Seems to me your relationship would work in your favor.”

It took every ounce of willpower not to want to wipe the smirk off the rude man’s face. “The employment department doesn’t function that way. For the record, each and every crewmember, officer and staff employee on board this ship works long hours to provide you with the best vacation possible, including myself.”

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“I wasn’t saying you didn’t work hard. All I was saying is being married to the ship’s captain must have its advantages.”

Thankfully, Felix was wrapping up his speech.

Millie pointedly sidestepped him. “If you’ll excuse me.”

She called the rest of the group to her office, allowing them a brief look inside before leading them up several decks to the bridge. During the walk, Millie radioed her husband, giving the bridge crew a heads up she was bringing a group through.

Nic, always eager to welcome guests to the bridge, invited them to gather around the controls. She stood near the back, beaming with pride as he shared snippets of what it was like being captain. It was clear he loved what he did, loved the people, the ship, and his crew.

She glanced at her watch. The tour was wrapping up, and not a moment too soon. Millie needed to head down to the gangway to meet Sharky.

She took a group photo with Nic front and center, and the guests gathered around him. Zevron slipped away and marched over to where Millie stood snapping photos.

“Are we touring the captain’s quarters?”

“No. We’ve suspended tours of this area.”

Zevron’s eyes narrowed. “I thought we were gonna get to see where the captain lives.”

“It wasn’t on the schedule, nor mentioned at any point, so I’m not sure where you got the impression you would tour his private quarters.”

“S-someone online mentioned touring the captain’s apartment,” he blustered. “Why not?”

“Because it’s currently not available to view.” Millie’s answer was only partially true. Depending on her mood, she sometimes invited the guests in. Zevron’s combative attitude had helped her decide the apartment was off limits.

“That’s disappointing.” He stalked off.

Millie positioned herself near the door. “This concludes the tour of the ship. We’ll be returning to the atrium. A complimentary photo of your group and the ship’s captain will be delivered to your stateroom before the ship docks at the end of our cruise.”

She herded the group out of the bridge, holding the door until the last guest had exited. Millie caught Nic’s eye. He winked. She blew him a kiss and slipped out.

It was a quick jaunt back to their starting point. Millie thanked them for accompanying her on the tour. She answered a few questions. One by one, the passengers drifted away. Everyone except for Zevron.

“Thank you for the tour, Millie.”

“You’re welcome. I love Siren of the Seas and I love showing it off to guests,” she said sincerely.

“I want to apologize if I offended you about...well, suggesting you got your job because of the captain. My wife has already planned our entire week—all the shows, trivia, bingo, shore excursions.” Zevron told her his wife had finished cancer

treatments, and the cruise was their way of celebrating. “She was so excited to meet you in person. I guess when I found out you weren’t hosting the tour, I got a little cranked up about it.”

Millie touched his arm. “I’m so sorry to hear about your wife. I’ll add her to my prayer list.”

“Thanks. She’s gonna be okay. I just...thank you for being understanding.”

“I hope you have a wonderful cruise and you have many years left together.” Millie could feel tears burn the back of her eyes as Zevron made his way over to his wife, a woman she had chatted with several times during the tour.

“You never know what battles people are fighting,” she whispered under her breath. “Always...keep your cool.”

With a final glance at the couple, who rounded the corner and disappeared from sight, Millie hurried back to the apartment to swap out her work uniform for street clothes. It was time to figure out if they had a shot at clearing Elvira’s name.

Chapter 13

“What are we waiting for?” Millie anxiously glanced at the tunnel burrowing straight through the mountain, the only way to get from the port area to their meeting spot and the gold mining group’s camp on the other side.

Sharky scratched his head. “I think I read somewhere this tunnel is used by the railroad and for vehicle traffic, so we gotta take turns. I see a light coming in our direction.”

Millie leaned to the side, looking past Sharky. Sure enough, a round beam of bright

light grew even brighter.

Clickety-clack. Toot...toot. A massive locomotive appeared, barreling out of the tunnel and veering left along the tracks. Railcar after railcar emerged.

The minutes ticked past. Finally, Millie, Sharky, and the long line of vehicles behind them started to move. Not only move, but move at a brisk clip.

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“I had no idea we were driving through a tunnel,” Millie said. “You know how I feel about enclosed spaces.”

“This isn’t just any tunnel,” Sharky said. “It’s the longest highway tunnel in North America. At least that’s what I read.”

“Great,” she groaned. “And knowing I’ll be in the longest tunnel is supposed to make me feel better?”

“You’ll be fine. The Flamethrower will have us on the other side before you know it.”

The pair had almost made it to the tunnel’s entrance when they came to an abrupt halt.

“Now what?”

“There’s something blocking the road.” Sharky placed his foot on the pavement. “It looks like a moose.”

“A moose?”

Bam. Bam. Bam.

A man emerged from around the side and began banging large metal discs together in an effort to get the moose to move.

Appearing utterly unfazed by the racket, the enormous creature took his time meandering past the entrance and rounding the corner.

Traffic crept forward. By the time they reached the entrance, they were once again traveling at a decent speed.

“It’s pitch black in here.” Sharky flipped his emergency flashers on, alerting the drivers behind him to the small scooter.

The farther they went, the darker it got, to the point Millie could feel her claustrophobia kicking in. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“You doing okay?” Sharky asked.

“Yes. As long as I keep my eyes closed.”

“I’ll let you know when we’re close to the other side.”

“Thanks.” She forced her thoughts to other, more pleasant things. At least Elvira was out of jail. If she didn’t board the Siren of the Seas while they were in Whittier, she would be out of luck. They were heading south...much farther south...in a matter of days.

As much as she loved Alaska, Millie was ready for new adventures. From what Nic had said, they were either going to Hawaii for the next repositioning cruise or to the Mediterranean.

Millie had never been to the Mediterranean, and she was secretly hoping it would make the cut. Visiting Greece, the islands, Italy, maybe even the French Riviera would be a dream come true.

“I see daylight up ahead.”

She opened her eyes, relieved to discover they were almost through. “Thank goodness.”

“I gotta admit, riding on the scooter through the tunnel was a little scary.” Sharky slowed. “Which way?”

Millie consulted the directions. “Turn left at the stop sign.”

“You got it.”

The route took them away from the tunnel, down a dirt road, and into a clearing. On one side of the clearing was a long, low wooden structure.

To the left was a two-story clapboard building. Beyond the buildings was an open field with a cluster of RVs arranged in a semi-circle.

Sharky let out a low whistle. “This is quite the setup.”

“Rustic living at its finest,” Millie quipped. “I see Brody, Cat and Annette over by their fancy set of wheels.”

“I see them too.” Sharky hit the gas. The scooter sped along until reaching the trio.

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Annette waited for it to stop and for them to climb off. “We were wondering if you got lost.”

“We got stuck trying to get through the tunnel.” Millie unclipped her helmet and placed it on the seat. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“No biggie. We’ve been here maybe ten minutes,” Cat said. “We haven’t seen Elvira.”

“Let me check on her. She was running a little behind. She might’ve gotten caught up in the same traffic jam we were in.” Sharky tapped out a quick text.

Tink. “She’s only a minute or so away.”

Brody pointed at Millie. “What’s the plan, boss lady?”

“I figured we would search Elvira’s RV for potential leads,” Millie said. “If the producer is around, maybe we can ask him a few questions. Hopefully, with Elvira out of jail, we can shift our investigation into high gear.”

“The clock is ticking,” Cat said. “We need to figure this out, and fast.”

“I see her coming now.” An old jalopy, a rusty pickup truck with a faded truck bed topper on the back, rambled down the road, rattling and clunking.

Millie shaded her eyes, watching as the truck bounced over the ruts. As it drew closer, she could see Elvira behind the wheel. But there was something different

about her...something odd and out of character. “What in the world?”

Chapter 14

Elvira, with a brown cowboy hat perched atop her head, climbed out of the truck. Her ripped jeans had seen better days. A long-sleeved flannel shirt hung loosely over her hips. She strutted across the road, her steel-toed work boots kicking up dust as she walked.

“Elvira meets the Wild West,” Annette whispered under her breath.

Millie said the first thing that popped into her head. “You look...rugged.”

“No sense in wearing nice clothes when you’re digging in the dirt.” She tapped the rim of her hat. “Besides, it’s important to blend in with the locals. It helps when you’re trying to get a foothold in the mining business.”

“You don’t look any worse for the wear as far as sitting in jail,” Cat said.

“You remember my friends.” Millie introduced Elvira to Brody, Annette and Cat.

“It’s nice to see you again.” Elvira politely shook hands. “Thanks for offering to help me.”

“You’re welcome,” Annette said. “We’re kind of tight on time. Millie already filled us in. The bottom line is you think you found gold. So did this other miner, Wanda. You argued at the local bar. After she left, she was attacked.”

“In a nutshell,” Elvira said. “I didn’t do it.”

“Do you think it was someone who found out about your promising dig location?”

Cat asked.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense. Wanda and I are...were friends. She got a little too curious about my honey hole. I warned her to back off. She caught me off guard, that’s all.”

Millie started to pace. “She was attacked, but not robbed.”

“Correct,” Elvira confirmed. “If you visit the bar, you’ll see it’s in the heart of town, meaning it was easily accessible to whoever attacked her.”

“Millie and I already swung by there and spoke with one of the bartenders. He told us Wanda lives in Valley Shore Apartments. Have you ever heard of the place?”

“Sure. Everyone in Whittier knows Valley Shores. In fact, most of the residents live there or in the Begich building. If you’re thinking about stopping by, I have a word of warning. At least a few of the locals aren’t keen on chatting with outsiders.” Elvira tugged on her shirt. “Another reason I’m wearing these carefully selected duds.”

“The guy working at the bar didn’t seem to mind chatting,” Millie said.

“I’m only telling you what I know.” Elvira turned to Brody. “You drove up to the potential site and looked around?”

“We did.” Annette turned her cell phone on and showed Elvira a photo of the dig site. “Someone has been up there.”

“I figured it was only a matter of time.” Elvira scowled. “Are you sure you were in the right place?”

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“We went by the map you drew.”

Elvira fished her keys from her pocket. “I had better take another look at the original drawing. My coordinates may have been off.”

“Which camper is yours?” Sharky spun in a slow circle.

“The little one on the end. The one that looks like a bubble.” Elvira led them across the open field to the smallest RV. The group gathered at the door, watching as she stuck the key in the lock. “It looks like someone scratched the lock.”

A sinking feeling settled in the pit of Millie’s stomach as she unlocked the door and stepped inside.

“Great.”

“Let me guess. Someone broke in,” Millie said.

“Yeah. And they tore my place apart.”

She stuck her head around the corner and peered inside the camper. Sure enough, the place was a mess. Cupboard doors and cabinet drawers were open. Utensils, dish towels and papers were strewn across the bench seat. The bed’s mattress stood on end.

Elvira began frantically digging through the kitchen cabinets. “It’s gone.”

“The map?” Sharky asked.

“Is missing. Hang on. I remember now.” She dropped to her knees, wiggled the register’s cover from the floor and removed a folded sheet of paper. “Whew. For a minute there I was freaking out.” Elvira rocked back on her heels. “Someone broke into my RV while I was sitting in jail. They had to have been looking for my map.”

“How on earth did they know it was here?” Millie eased past Sharky. “Did you tell anyone about it?”

“I may have mentioned it to Wanda, although I guess by then she already knew the location.”

Millie began poking around the kitchen area. “Is there any chance Wanda broke in here?”

“No way.” Elvira told her she was late arriving at the bar because she got caught up exploring Mount Baldie. As soon as she finished, she ran home to shower and meet the others. “Wanda was already there. Besides, she didn’t need a map. Like I said, she already knew how to get to my special spot.”

“And then she was attacked,” Millie said. “We can cross her off the list.”

“I usually keep it with me, but decided to leave it behind,” Elvira said. “Someone must’ve come here looking for it.”

“Came looking for it and made a mess.” Millie ran her hand along the counter. “Maybe someone is spying on you.”

Elvira squared her shoulders. “Not a chance. I own a PI company and can spot surveillance devices from a mile away.”

“But only if you were specifically looking for them,” Millie pointed out. “It’s a shame we don’t have a hidden device detector.”

“You mean like this?” Sharky unzipped his backpack and removed a rectangular, black box. “This little gem can detect wireless cameras, body wires, locate wiretapping devices, phone taps, GPS trackers, you name it.”

Brody admired Sharky’s gadget. “I need one of these. What kind of Gs can this track?”

“1.2G, 2.4G, all the way up to 5.8G.”

Brody rubbed his palms together. “I can’t wait to see how it works.”

“It works great. The best thing is the price. It only set me back forty bucks.”

“You’ll have to send me the link to where you bought it.”

“Will do.” Sharky handed it to Millie.

“This is slick. I’ll admit I’m curious. What do you use it for?” She answered her own question. “Never mind. I’m sure I don’t want to know.”

“Probably not. All you have to do is extend the antenna, flip the switch and start pointing it. The faster the beeps, the closer you are to a hidden device.”

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“You’re wasting your time.” Elvira stuck her hands on her hips. “I’ve already checked around.”

“Only one time?”

“Yeah. When I first got here.”

“Someone may have installed a device after you checked.” Millie aimed it at the cabinets and along the bunk bed. Working her way down and right to left, she ran the detector over every nook and cranny of the main living area.

Up next was the dining room followed by the compact kitchen, comprising of a single sink, a mini fridge, a two-burner stove and tabletop microwave.

“The bathroom is on the other side of the door,” Elvira said. “Don’t blink or you’ll miss it.”

Millie eased the door open, anticipating the same mess they had found in the main section, but was pleasantly surprised. The bathroom was neat and tidy. She finished her inspection and returned to where the others stood waiting. “It’s clean.”

Sharky took the detector, his attention focused on the window in front of the sink. “Your window blinds are open.”

“I leave them open most days. In case you haven’t noticed, this camper is the size of a shoebox. I like the natural light.”

While Elvira talked, Sharky turned the detector on and aimed it at the window. It beeped loudly in rapid succession. “Detecto-meter is onto something.”

His girlfriend scrambled to her feet. “Where?”

“Over here. Hold this.” He handed the device to her. Using his fingernail, he popped the screen off.

“Bingo.” Sharky began wiggling a round dot, not much bigger than a thumbtack, which was wedged inside the window frame. “Someone has been spying on you.”

Elvira took the device and turned it over in her hand. “I can’t believe I missed this. I should fire myself.”

“Again, the device could have been installed after the fact,” Annette said.

“True.” Elvira placed it back where Sharky had found it, shifting it in a slightly different angle. “They don’t know it yet, but I’m gonna spy on the spy.”

“How will you do that?”

“I have my ways.” She stood back to inspect the slightly revised angle. “I still can’t believe I didn’t see this before.”

Millie patted Elvira’s shoulder. “Don’t beat yourself up too badly. You had no reason to suspect you were being spied on.”

“If you want my two cents, I believe whoever attacked Wanda also broke in here looking for your map. They couldn’t find it, so they installed a camera,” Annette said.

“It stands to reason. Perhaps Wanda has a partner,” Millie theorized. “You’ve been

with this group for several days now.”

“Almost two weeks if you’re keeping track.”

“Are there any others you think could be behind the attack?” Sharky asked.

“We have the producer, Alex. Carter Morley is the co-producer. There’s Wanda, me and three other miners.” Elvira made air quotes with her fingers. “The experts.”

“How many of them live here in Alaska?”

“Wanda and the so-called experts. Alex and Carter are only here for the show. As soon as they finish taping, they’re hightailing it back to LA.” Elvira darted inside and returned with a glossy 8x10 photo. “Here’s a photo of us.”

Millie studied the group. “The goldminers are in the back. Alex and Carter, the production guys are in the front standing next to you and the other woman, I’m guessing is Wanda.”

“Correct.”

“So, potentially five suspects.” Millie shifted her gaze toward the open field and circle of travel trailers. “How many people are staying at this site?”

“I’m not sure. The RVs are all rentals. I met a few people who are here to mine. Others are hiking the Horsetail Falls Trail. I haven’t checked it out personally, but I heard there’s a glacier nearby. People from all over the world come here to stay,” Elvira said.

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“Which means we might need to widen the list of suspects,” Annette said. “Especially if other gold miners are staying in these RVs.”

“I can’t see any reason they would target me or know about the spot I found, other than Wanda.”

“All roads, at least at this point, lead back to Wanda. It looks like we need to find out more about her.” Millie glimpsed a dark SUV pulling into the RV area, along with a van with lettering on the side. “Someone just pulled in.”

“That’s Alex and Carter. I’ll introduce you to them.” Elvira took off, returning less than a minute later with two men by her side.

As they drew closer, Millie noticed one was younger, in his late twenties or early thirties if she had to guess, while the second man looked closer to his mid-forties.

“Alex, Carter, these are my friends from the cruise ship, Siren of the Seas.” Elvira nudged the forty-ish man’s arm. “This is Alex, my hero, and the person who helped get me out of jail.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” Sharky shook their hands. “Sharky Kiveski, head of maintenance on board Siren of the Seas.”

Millie was next. “Millie Armati, cruise director.”

“Brody Rourke, night security supervisor.”

Annette held out her hand. “Annette Delacroix, in charge of the food.”

“I’m Cat. I run one of the ship’s gift shops.”

“You have an interesting group of friends,” Carter said. “I’ve never been on a cruise ship, but after talking to Elvira, she’s convinced me maybe I should try it sometime.”

The group chatted about Elvira’s incarceration and Wanda’s attack, both Alex and Carter expressing deep concern about the incident.

Millie almost mentioned someone ransacking Elvira’s RV, but caught herself before she slipped. She thought Elvira was going to tell them but didn’t. “I hope she’s going to be all right.”

“Carter and I just left the hospital. Wanda has a few staples in her head and sprained her wrist when she fell. The doctor is releasing her and has told her she should make a full recovery.”

“It probably wouldn’t hurt to be on guard,” Brody said. “Considering her attacker is still on the loose.”

Carter motioned to Elvira. “Will you be packing up and leaving to board the ship?”

“It was my original plan. Unfortunately, I’m not allowed to leave Whittier pending the outcome of Wanda’s investigation,” Elvira said. “I’m keeping my fingers crossed the charges will be dropped.”

“That sucks.” Sharky frowned. “I thought it was a done deal, and you were free to leave.”

“What about all of your gear and belongings?” Carter asked. “Are you leaving

everything behind?”

“Otis was kind enough to rent me his old truck cheap, way cheaper than a rental company would’ve charged me, so I’m giving some of my stuff to him,” Elvira said. “I’ll hang out here tonight. If we have any luck figuring out what happened, I can load up and move out pretty quickly.”

“We’re packing up ourselves, getting ready to head back to LA.” Alex consulted his watch. “Best of luck, Elvira. I hope you make it out of town.”

“Thanks again for everything and for helping get me out of jail. I need to run back down there and sign off on the bond papers, so I had better get going.” Elvira watched the men walk away. “Maybe it was Otis. He’s been getting chummy with me.”

“I hate to sleuth and run, but I gotta get back to the galley,” Annette said.

“I need to head back too,” Brody said. “I’ll give you and Cat a ride.”

“I guess that leaves Sharky and me to do a little poking around at the apartment complex to see what we can find out about Wanda.”

“I’ll catch up with you after I’m done,” Elvira promised. “It’s probably best you go without me. The building’s manager was a jerk to me the last time I was there.”

“What did you do?”

Her eyes slid to the side. “The details are a little fuzzy, but I may have thrown a fit when the post office wouldn’t let me mail a package, claiming the contents were hazardous.”

“The post office is near the apartment building?” Cat asked.

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“Not near, but in,” Elvira said. “The store, the post office, most businesses and facilities are under the same roof, similar to the more well-known Begich building.”

“I have to see this,” Millie said.

After Elvira locked up, the group caravanned out of the RV camping area and headed back toward town. Luck was on their side when Millie noticed vehicle traffic proceeding through the tunnel.

She and Sharky were sandwiched in between Elvira’s junker and Brody’s rental. They slowed, almost clearing the yield sign, when the traffic came to a sudden halt.

“Now what?” Millie groaned. “Please tell me there isn’t an accident.”

“I’ll check it out.” Sharky hopped off the scooter and jogged toward the entrance. He approached a couple who had exited their vehicle and began waving his arms.

He motioned to Millie, nodded his head, and ran back. “We have a big problem.”

“What sort of big problem?”

“Caboose the moose.”

Chapter 15

Millie blinked rapidly. “Caboose the moose?”

“The same moose we saw on our way through earlier. He’s blocking traffic.”

“Doing what?”

Sharky shrugged. “Resting.”

“Can’t someone get him out?”

“You mean like banging pots and pans to drive him away?” he teased.

“What if Caboose decides he’s never going to move?”

“I spoke to a couple of locals. Apparently, he’s done this before. He’ll move when the train shows up. He likes to follow it. Hence his name.”

“How long is this going to take?”

“I have no idea. Until the train comes along.”

Brody tapped his horn and stuck his head out the window. “What’s the hold up?”

Millie and Sharky jogged over. “Caboose the moose is blocking the tunnel. The locals said he won’t move until the train comes through.”

“When is the train coming?” Annette asked.

“Let me check with Elvira.” Millie ran to Elvira’s truck. “Caboose, the moose is in the tunnel. What time does the train come through?”

“Figures. It seems he’s in the tunnel more than he’s out of it,” Elvira sighed. “The train rolls through every half an hour on the hour. It should be soon.”

“What if he decides he’s not moving for the train, forcing it to stop?” Millie asked.

“I don’t know. Caboose is a stubborn fella. He can’t be bribed by food or scared by noises. In other words, we’re stuck until he’s ready to leave.” Elvira snatched her cell phone from the center console. “I might as well call the court clerk and let her know Caboose is holding up tunnel traffic.”

Millie rubbed her forehead. “Only in Alaska.”

“You know it. Hang on.” Elvira made the call, explaining to the person who answered she was stuck on the other side of the tunnel. “Thanks. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

While she talked, Millie noticed Sharky rummaging around in his backpack. He removed a package and began walking toward the tunnel entrance. “I wonder what Sharky is doing.”

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“Hopefully, he’s not trying to lure Caboose out of the tunnel. He gets a little ornery when someone disturbs his rest.”

Millie called out to him. It was too late. Sharky stepped into the dark tunnel, disappearing from sight.

“I need to warn him.” Elvira sprang from the driver’s seat and took off at a dead run, all the while calling her boyfriend’s name.

Millie whispered a prayer under her breath. Sharky was no match for the massive moose.

Bang. A loud bang reverberated from within, so loud and so pronounced it seemed to shake the ground. The bang was followed by a bloodcurdling scream.

Elvira picked up speed and ran into the tunnel.

For a split second, Millie thought about following them, but figured it was safer for her to stay where she could monitor the situation.

Elvira reappeared, her face a ghostly white and moving at breakneck speed, right past Millie.

Sharky was a nanosecond behind, the same terrified look on his face and clutching the bag he’d carried inside with him. “Run!”

He didn’t have to tell her twice. Millie took off at a dead run, away from the tunnel.

She didn't stop or look back until she reached Brody's truck.

He flung the door open. In one fell swoop, he lifted Millie up and deposited her in the truck's bed.

Elvira dove into her vehicle. Sharky was right behind her. He hopped inside and slammed the door.

Caboose charged out of the tunnel, an enraged gleam in his eye as he galloped down the road. His front leg bumped the Flamethrower, tipping the scooter over. Skittering to the side, he threw his head back and bellowed loudly.

Millie ducked down, praying he hadn't seen her. She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath as Caboose continued his rampage. She heard the clatter of metal, or maybe it was glass shattering.

As quickly as the rampage began, it grew eerily quiet.

Millie braced herself, cautiously lifting her head, fully expecting to see the moose standing next to her, ready to chew her up and spit her out. But he was nowhere in sight.

Brody scrambled out of his truck. "Are you okay, Millie? I didn't mean to throw you in the back," he apologized.

"It's okay. You probably saved my life. What happened to Caboose?"

"He went back inside the tunnel," Annette said. "Whatever Sharky did set him off."

Elvira's driver's side door slowly opened. The couple climbed out and jogged over to Brody's truck.

“What did you do?” Millie asked.

“I went in the tunnel to try to persuade Caboose to come out. He started huffing and puffing and then he charged me,” Sharky said. “How was I to know a bag of beef jerky would send him on a rampage?”

“I tried to stop you. Caboose won’t come out until the train goes through.” Elvira tapped the top of her watch. “It should be any minute now. We got him all stirred up. It might not be a bad idea to wait in our vehicles until he takes off after the train.”

Annette and Cat hunkered down in Brody’s rental truck while Sharky, Millie, and Elvira hopped into her junker.

Sure enough, the train’s headlight appeared. Clickety-clacking along the tracks, it chugged out of the tunnel and passed by the open gate.

The conductor tooted the horn and waved. Car after railcar passed by. The train’s locomotive rounded the bend. Finally, the caboose cleared the tunnel. And then nothing.

Millie reached for the door handle.

Elvira stopped her. “Hold on. Caboose should be along shortly.”

The moose’s massive antlers appeared. With nary a care in the world, the giant beast calmly trotted past the long line of vehicles pulled off to the side, allowing the train to pass. Through the rearview mirror, Millie watched him follow it.

Elvira dusted her hands. “And just like that, the tracks are clear and so is the coast. I’m heading to the police station. When can we meet up?”

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“I gotta be back on the ship by five,” Sharky said. “My shift ends at ten.”

“Five,” Elvira repeated. “I’ll check in with you later. I’ll need some time to settle the paperwork, clean up my trailer, and pack my bags.”

“But what if you’re not allowed to leave Whittier?” Millie asked.

“Positive vibes,” Elvira said. “Besides, Sharky sings your praises. I’m confident with all the brain power we have between us, we can figure this out.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Sharky hustled toward his fallen scooter. “Caboose knocked the Flamethrower over like it was a toy.”

“I’m sure it’s fine.” Millie watched him stand it upright. “See? Caboose barely touched it.”

“He scratched the paint.”

“Think of it as a souvenir from Whittier.” Millie emphasized the “ier” end of the town’s name. “Get it? A souvenir from Whitti-ear.”

“Haha. You’re hilarious.” Sharky handed her the helmet. “Let’s get through the tunnel before Caboose decides to come back and reclaim the tracks.”

Chapter 16

Sharky parked the Flamethrower in front of the bicycle rack and wrapped the chain

lock through the bars. “What’s the plan?”

“We need to find out as much as we can about Wanda.” Millie checked her wallet and found she had a few five-dollar bills, a ten and a couple of ones, “persuasion cash,” if needed. “I have to admit, I’m curious about how these people live in such tight quarters, almost on top of each other.”

“More like literally on top of each other,” Sharky joked. “Probably the same way we all live on board a cruise ship day in and day out.”

“Good point, although I don’t think I could handle the long winters hunkered down in one building. At least on the cruise ship, we’re able to go out and explore.”

Stepping inside the compact yet well-lit lobby, she placed her hand on the concrete wall and shivered. “I’m not getting a warm and welcoming vibe.”

“It seems a little dark and depressing,” Sharky said. “Maybe the other building, the even bigger one, has a nicer setup.”

Millie wandered over to a bulletin board covered in Plexiglas, similar to the ones used in office buildings. “Check this out. It looks like this used to be some sort of resident directory.”

“Until somebody figured out that it might not be safe to post personal information.” Sharky grabbed his phone. “Elvira mentioned what unit Wanda lives in, but I forgot.”

“The Caboose incident traumatized you,” Millie teased. “I would be rattled if I had a moose charging me too.”

“It’s a day I’ll never forget. Oh boy,” he muttered. “That figures.”

“What figures?”

“Nothing. Elvira sent a message. She’s at the cop shop, having trouble getting her paperwork processed. She said Wanda lives in unit 504, on the fifth floor.” Sharky shoved his phone back in his pocket. “Where are the elevators?”

“Hidden away, down some dark, dreary corridor.” Millie scoped out the lobby. “There’s only one way to go.”

A woman passed by them, giving them a second look, more than likely wondering who they were.

Sharky must’ve thought the same thing. “We’re getting the old side eye.”

“Maybe we should have asked her if she knew Wanda,” Millie said. “Let’s check out her unit first, before we get sidetracked. After we’re done, we’ll knock on the neighbor’s door.”

Following in the general direction the woman had taken, they found the elevators at the end of the hall. Millie jabbed the up button. The elevator made a grinding noise. Seconds later, the button’s light went off.

“It sounds like the elevator is on its last leg,” Sharky joked.

“Where are the stairs?” She stepped to the side and began looking for the emergency exit and stairs sign.

“No need. The elevator is here.” He grabbed her arm and whisked her inside. “See? Nothing to worry about.”

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“Other than the fact you know I’m not a fan of elevators. I dislike elevators that make a grinding sound and are super slow even more.”

“For such a fearless leader, you sure picked an odd thing to dislike.”

“I have my reasons.”

The doors finally closed. The elevator shuddered and the grinding sound resumed.

Millie instinctively grabbed the handrail. “We’re taking the stairs on our way down.”

The elevator shuddered, and Millie’s heart started pounding. “I wonder if there’s an emergency button if this thing breaks down.”

Sharky plucked a yellow placard tucked in above the button panel from its spot. He flipped it over.

Millie clutched her chest when she read the sign. Out of order. Please use stairs. “Something tells me this thing breaks down pretty regularly.”

“I wasn’t gonna say anything, but Elvira mentioned it in passing. It was out of service the last time she was here visiting Wanda.”

The elevator shuddered to a stop. The lights flickered but stayed on.

“Great. We stopped.” Millie gazed at the bar of buttons over the door and noticed the number three was flickering. She strained to hear noises...any noises, even the

grinding sound.

Sharky jabbed the number button. Nothing happened. He pressed six, then seven, then one, followed by the “door open” button. “I hate to say it, Millster, but it looks like we’re stuck.”

She reached past him and pressed the emergency button. “Hopefully, someone monitors this relic and will rescue us.”

“Let me try my cell phone.” Sharky pulled it from his pocket. “Nope. Deader than a doornail.”

“Did you have to use the word dead?” Millie could feel the onset of a full-blown panic attack and combatted it by taking measured breaths. It would be all right. Eventually, someone would realize they were missing and come looking for them.

Cat, Danielle, Brody, all knew where they were headed. On the downside, they didn’t plan on seeing them until later...much later.

“What time are you supposed to be back on the ship?”

“I gotta be there to check in a special delivery at five. It’s three thirty. No one’s gonna notice me missing until at least five,” Sharky said. “Except for Elvira. She knows where we are.”

Millie attempted to make light of the situation. “Great. We’re leaving our fate in Elvira’s hands.”

“We’ll get out soon.” Sharky eased onto the floor. “I’m sorry I didn’t go with your idea to take the stairs.”

“It’s all right. It’s not your fault we’re trapped. I’m a magnet for elevator malfunctions.” Millie followed suit and plopped down. “Believe it or not, I feel fairly calm.”

“Maybe you’re finally conquering your fear.”

“It’s not a fear, more like an intense aversion if that makes sense.”

Sharky started to say something and stopped.

“What were you going to say?”

“Earlier, when we were talking about Elvira, I got the impression you don’t like her.”

Millie thought about his comment and carefully chose her words. “I don’t know her very well. I will say she’s an interesting person. If you’re happy, then she’s good in my book.”

“I’ve been thinking a lot lately.”

“About what?”

“The last time we talked about the future, I told you I was socking some money away and thought maybe I would buy a houseboat or find a small place near the water,” Sharky said.

“I remember.”

“Elvira’s been hinting around, asking what my plans are for when I retire.”

“You think she’s trying to figure out if you two have a future together?” Millie asked.

“Yeah. It’s still a few years down the road, but it’s never too early to plan for retirement.”

“I agree,” she said. “Regardless of what you decide, it’s going to be a drastic change. Going from living at sea to being on shore or, in your case, near land.”

“Right. I’m still leaning toward a houseboat to keep expenses low, docking it somewhere I can dip my toes in the water whenever I want. I’m thinking waterfront property will probably be out of my price range, so living on a boat would make more sense.”

“Clearly, you’ve given it some thought. It will be important to make the right decision.”

“Because I’ll be using a hefty chunk of my savings,” Sharky said. “If you don’t mind me asking, when did you realize Captain Armati was the man for you?”

Millie drew her knees to her chest. “I remember going to the bridge with Andy. He introduced us. My first thought was he wasn’t particularly friendly. In fact, I was pretty sure he didn’t like me.”

“It wasn’t love at first sight.”

“Not at all. He called me to the bridge not long after. I don’t remember the exact timeline. I thought he was going to fire me.” Millie chuckled at the memory. “He invited me to his apartment.”

“Ah.” Sharky made googly eyes. “The captain inviting you to his place was where the love story began.”

She laughed out loud. “He introduced me to Scout and asked if I would take him with me around the ship because he was lonely. Looking back, it may have been a ploy to get to know me better. I’ll have to ask him.”

“He has a lot of patience with you.”

“He does. Nic is my soulmate. I believe God brought us together. He gave us both a second chance at love.” Millie explained that Nic’s first wife had died. “The bottom line is you never know what the future holds.”

“True.”

“About Elvira. You two seem compatible yet different enough to keep your relationship interesting.”

“We are. The distance between us can be a bummer,” Sharky said. “Or maybe it’s a good thing. Elvira and I might drive each other nuts.”

“Distance makes the heart grow fonder.” Millie picked at a piece of lint. “Are you disappointed she might not join us for our cruise?”

“Sort of. Once I got used to the idea, I figured we would have fun. My main concern

right now is trying to help clear her name,” Sharky said. “I know she didn’t attack the woman unless Wanda started it.”

“My gut tells me it ties into her gold mining site. The map. The hidden camera. All we need to do is figure out who it is.”

“My money is on someone from her group.”

“Mine too.”

The elevator made a grinding noise. The lights flickered again, and they started to move. Instead of continuing up, the elevator went back down.

Millie grabbed hold of the handrail and pulled herself to her feet. “I survived being trapped in an elevator.”

“Trapped in an elevator with me, no less,” Sharky joked. “It must be your lucky day.”

Chapter 17

The elevator doors opened on the ground floor. Standing on the other side was a small cluster of people.

An older woman with thick oval glasses and ringlets of white hair springing up all over her head shuffled forward. “Welcome back.”

“Thank you to whoever rescued us,” Millie said.

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“It was me. I figured this old relic was getting ready to break down,” she said. “It’s Saturday, after all.”

“What does Saturday have to do with the elevator breaking down?”

“Old Ellie. That’s our nickname for her, is on a regular schedule. She breaks down on Saturdays and Wednesdays.”

“Almost always on those days,” the man standing behind her added. “Although Ellie is occasionally ahead of schedule.”

“We’ve learned how to fix her. All you have to do is press a certain sequence of buttons and voila. She’s back in action.” The elderly woman stepped into the elevator. “Do you still want to go up?”

“Yes please. To the fifth floor,” Sharky said.

“That’s where I’m going. I live on five.” She pressed the button and waited for the doors to close. “You’re not from around here. Are you visiting friends?”

Millie and Sharky exchanged a quick glance. “Actually, we’re here to find out more about a resident. Do you know Wanda Tillman?”

“Wanda lives across the hall and down from me,” she said. “She was attacked the other night by a friend of hers.”

“Elvira Cobb,” Sharky said. “We’re friends. Not Wanda’s friend, but Elvira’s.”

A flicker of confusion flitted across her face. “You don’t say.”

The elevator stopped on the fifth floor, and the doors opened.

“Wanda and Elvira seemed to hit it off. At least that’s what Wanda told me last time I talked to her.”

“Elvira didn’t attack her. We’re trying to figure out who did.” Millie pointed to herself. “I’m Millie and this is Sharky. We work on board the cruise ship that docked this morning.”

“Oh, yes. Your ship is beautiful. The big cruise ships dock every Saturday in the summer. Sometimes they leave the same day, while other times they stay overnight.”

“We’ll be in port overnight,” Millie said. “I’m sorry. I don’t think I caught your name.”

“Because I didn’t give it to you.” She lowered her voice. “My children keep warning me bad people prey on older adults. I promised them I wouldn’t share personal information about myself with strangers.”

“I suppose that’s a good idea. We live in different times these days.”

“I guess this means you aren’t willing to share information about Wanda, who she associated with, if you knew anyone who may have had a reason to attack her,” Sharky said.

“I don’t mind talking about Wanda. She’s been busy lately, hardly ever at home and always on the go. I finally stopped her last week to ask her what she was up to. That’s when she told me she was working with a production company, the one who is filming a show about gold mining.”

Millie's heart skipped a beat. "She and Elvira were part of the same group. I believe a few others in the group are locals. From what we were told, they're wrapping things up for the season."

Wanda's no-name neighbor coyly placed her hand on her hip. "She's been busy entertaining at least two of them at her place. I've seen them come and go."

"Do you remember what they looked like?"

The woman described Alex, the producer and Carter Morley to a 't.' "Wanda is a looker. Why, she's had plenty of boyfriends, but I've never seen her juggling two at the same time."

While No-name talked, Sharky stepped off to the side and began tapping the top of his phone. He motioned toward Wanda's neighbor. "Our friend forwarded me a photo of the gold mining team. I was wondering if you could confirm these are the men you saw."

The woman pressed on the bridge of her glasses. "I'll try."

Sharky held up his phone and turned it toward her.

No-name squinted her eyes and studied the photo. "It's a bit small. My eyesight isn't what it used to be."

"Let me make it bigger." Sharky double-clicked on the photo and turned the screen back around.

"Yes. I believe I recognize the two men standing in the front."

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Sharky glanced at the photo and tucked his phone back inside his pocket. “Thank you, Miss...Wanda’s neighbor.”

“You’re welcome.” She shifted her purse to her other arm. “I should run along now. It’s almost five and time for my early evening news show to come on.”

“Almost five?” Millie glanced at her watch. “We need to get going.”

“Don’t you want to look at Wanda’s unit?”

“The Flamethrower can get us back to the ship on time, even if we hang around for a few more minutes,” Sharky said.

“And the elevator doesn’t break down again.”

“Ellie shouldn’t strand anyone until Wednesday. Like we said, she’s on a regular routine.” No-name continued talking as she walked down the hall. She stopped in front of the door with the number “504” on the front of it. “This is Wanda’s apartment.”

“And from your place you noticed the men coming and going?” Millie asked.

“Yes. Now, don’t think I’m a nosy neighbor who was spying on her. The reason I noticed them was because they were talking loudly, like this.” The woman made a loud honking sound. “It was blah, blah, honk. Of course, my hearing isn’t the greatest at my age, so I don’t know what they were saying.”

“Is there anything else you can recall about Wanda, anything that seems out of character or unusual for her?”

“No. Wanda is a good person, not to mention a great neighbor. I’m relieved to hear she’s going to be all right.”

“So are we.” Millie thanked No-name for the information and she and Sharky backtracked down the hall to the bank of elevators.

The woman stood watching while Sharky jabbed the down button.

“She’s waiting until we’re gone before going into her apartment,” Sharky whispered.

“No-name is taking her children’s don’t give out personal information advice seriously,” Millie whispered back.

The elevator made a grinding sound. It took another thirty seconds for the doors to open.

She hesitated. “I’m getting a bad feeling.”

“So am I,” Sharky said. “We have eight minutes to get back to the ship. I say we don’t risk getting stuck in Ellie and take the stairs.”

“I agree.” Millie stepped over to the sign labeled “emergency exit” with a picture of a set of stairs next to it. She eased the door open and waited for Sharky to follow her inside the stairwell.

They descended several flights before reaching the first floor. Taking the side exit, they circled around to the main parking lot. In a flash, they were back on the Flamethrower, speeding through town and to the ship.

Passing through security was quick and easy. They were on board with minutes to spare.

“Elvira should be checking in soon,” Millie said. “Your shift ends at ten?”

“Yep. We need a game plan. Someone from the gold mining group is behind Wanda’s attack. Now, all we need to do is figure out who.”

“The next logical step is to track down their names so I can start researching them on the internet.”

“Consider it done.” Sharky promised as soon as he heard from Elvira, he would get a list and send it to her.

“Let’s meet up in the galley at ten. By then, we should have something to go on.” Millie crossed her fingers. “At least that’s what I’m hoping.”

“If not, something tells me Elvira’s going to be stuck in Whittier for a lot longer than she wants.”

Millie took off, making her rounds, greeting guests and welcoming them. The first night of the cruise was the most exciting, at least to her...if she were to put herself in the passengers’ shoes.

A new ship, new shipmates, exploring the entertainment venues, checking out the cozy nooks and crannies, eagerly awaiting the evening’s headliner show, poring over the day’s schedule, savoring the first meal on board the ship...knowing you didn’t have to cook or clean for an entire week.

Meals from morning until late in the evening. The buffet, the formal dining room, the pizza station, the deli stand, the ice cream counter, room service. Or what was

Millie's personal favorite...coffee and croissants on her private balcony. All you had to do was hang your order on the door and it would be delivered when you wanted.

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The pampering didn't end with room service. Passengers left their cabins in the morning, beds unmade, towels hanging from the hooks, dirty dishes on the desk, only to return and find the room steward, part-magician and part-ninja, had breezed in and made it look like you had never even stepped foot inside.

The most pressing concern was what activity to attend, making sure you didn't miss the shows—comedians, magicians, the singers and dancers. It was no wonder cruises were top vacation destinations.

She ran upstairs and grabbed Scout to help her host a pre-dinner cruise director chat in the Paradise Lounge, sharing a few of the highlights of the upcoming voyage, and thanking them for choosing Siren of the Seas.

After the talk ended, passengers hung around to thank her and greet the ship's unofficial mascot.

Joy Turner, a server and friend of Millie's, swung by to grab a handful of empty glasses. "Hey, Millie."

"Hello, Joy. I haven't seen you around lately."

"I've been working in the elite passenger's private dining room and lounge. The suites and VIP packages have been sold out for the last few cruises."

Millie wasn't surprised. Many of the passengers were returning guests to Siren of the Seas, with Alaska being a favorite destination. "Are you ready to head back to warmer weather?"

“Yes, and no. I’m going to miss the mountains, the glaciers. There’s so much to explore.” Joy shifted her tray. “What about you?”

“I’ll miss it, but I’m looking forward to being closer to home.” Millie helped carry a tray full of glasses to the back before swinging by guest services to chat with Nikki Tan, the supervisor, to make sure there weren’t any issues she needed to address.

Thankfully, nothing pressing had popped up, at least not yet, and she made her way downstairs for her first round of bingo. After finishing, she dropped Scout off at home and returned to the theater to introduce the headliner show.

With Felix in charge, the show went off without a hitch, the aerial acrobats floating and flying while the Siren of the Seas’ band played along. The show ended and received a rousing round of applause.

Millie returned to the stage, reminding guests they were docking overnight and would leave the following day. She also reminded them to stay on the ship’s time, knowing many of them had traveled through various time zones in order to reach Whittier.

After finishing, she grabbed a quick bite to eat and returned to the apartment. As promised, Sharky had sent the names of the people who were part of Elvira’s gold mining group. She forwarded the list to her email and printed a copy.

Yip. Scout trampled over the top of her foot, demanding her attention.

She scooped him up and scratched his ears. “It’s been a long day, huh?”

The pup pawed at her sleeve, his signal he wanted to play. She tracked down his favorite ball and played catch until he grew tired of the game.

Knock. Knock.

“I wonder who that could be.” Millie hurried down the hall. She opened the door and found Danielle standing on the other side. “Hey, Millie. I hope I’m not bothering you.”

“Not at all. I was getting ready to research the people who are in Elvira’s gold mining group.”

“I talked to Brody. He told me what happened.”

“I haven’t had a chance to tell him that Sharky and I got stuck in an elevator.”

Danielle’s eyes widened. “You got stuck in an elevator?”

“In Wanda Tillman’s apartment building.” Millie filled her in about meeting the woman’s neighbor. “I’m almost certain the person who attacked Wanda is part of the gold mining group.”

She pulled an empty chair around the table and next to hers. Starting at the top, she and Danielle began working their way down the list. “Alex Smith is the producer.” She typed his name and Gold Grade Mining Group into the search bar.

Millie clicked on the link, and a website popped up.

Danielle let out a low whistle. “This looks like a big operation.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Millie skimmed the main page before clicking on the “about us” tab. Photos and detailed profiles appeared.

Alex Smith’s was near the top. She pulled up his bio, her breath catching in her throat when she read the first paragraph. “Will you look at that?”

Chapter 18

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“Alex Smith, the gold mining show’s producer, lives in LA but made a comment about having a cabin here in Whittier,” Millie said. “How interesting.”

“I guess it would explain him wanting to produce a show about gold mining in this area,” Danielle said.

“True. Let’s look at some others.” Millie moved on to the next person in the group, another local but without a lot of background information available.

Ditto for the next person and the next.

They reached Wanda’s name. Millie already knew some information about the woman, including where she lived. Nothing hit her radar. “She doesn’t have a lot of information out there.”

“Try social media,” Danielle suggested.

“Good idea.” Millie pulled up a popular social media site and typed Wanda’s name into the search bar. Her profile appeared. She listed a few friends and ticked the box, stating she was single.

The profile included several snapshots. Standing with a group of women in front of what Millie recognized as her apartment building. A photo of Wanda beaming and holding a whopper of a salmon caught her eye. “She looks like an outdoor gal.”

“I was thinking the same thing. You said you talked to Wanda’s neighbor. She didn’t seem to think there was anyone who might have it in for her?”

“Nope. Although she mentioned Alex the producer and Carter, the co-producer had both visited Wanda at her apartment recently,” Millie said. “She didn’t strike me as being thrilled with her having people coming and going.”

“Maybe it was her,” Danielle said.

“Her the neighbor lady?” Millie arched her eyebrow. “She looks like she’s in her eighties.”

“You don’t think she would be strong enough to whack Wanda in the head?”

“I suppose it’s possible. I don’t think it was her. We need motive. Attacking your neighbor for having visitors isn’t a motive.”

“I dunno. I’ve seen shows about feuding neighbors. To me, it would depend on how annoying Wanda may have been.”

“We’ll put her on the list of potential suspects, but I’m almost certain it wasn’t the no-name neighbor lady.” Millie finished working her way to the bottom, reaching Carter Morley last. She clicked on his profile and found, like Alex, he had ties to Whittier.

Danielle peered over her shoulder. “He’s a hottie.”

“He’s a nice looking guy, clean cut and polite,” Millie said. “I thought he was from somewhere else, but it appears he’s also a local. No doubt he’s interested in gold mining.”

“I think it would be one of those things where, if you found a nugget, it would get in your blood. Brody said the dig site Elvira is staking a claim to...”

“Mount Baldie.”

“Mount Baldie is in the middle of nowhere.”

“I haven’t made it there yet, but based on the pictures I’ve seen, I wouldn’t be surprised.” Millie pivoted. “Elvira is packing up and plans to sail south with us.”

“You mentioned that before. She’s leaving her promising site behind? I would think she would settle in for the winter.”

“Elvira said the roads will be impassable. Plus, she claims even though Brody, Cat and Annette noticed someone digging around in the general vicinity, she doesn’t seem to think anyone will find her exact spot.”

“Unless they followed her.”

“I suppose it’s possible. She’s coming back here next spring. If she’s allowed to leave Alaska. It all hinges on clearing her name.” Millie scrolled through the screen, noticing several stories about the Gold Grade Mining Group and television series.

The women skimmed through each, searching for clues. Nothing struck Millie as being significant. “I’m stumped. Anyone on this list could have been behind Wanda’s attack, but why her?”

“If we can figure out the why, we can start narrowing it down.” Danielle reached for the list. “Some event triggered Wanda’s attack. Refresh my memory. What were Wanda and Elvira talking about right before they argued?”

Millie repeated what she remembered about the confrontation at the bar. “Wanda knew about Mount Baldie. She point-blank asked Elvira if she found something. Elvira accused her of spying on her and told her to watch her back. They said a few

more unpleasant things to each other and Wanda left.”

“She argued with Elvira and walked right out the door.”

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Millie blinked rapidly. “To be honest, I’m not sure. Let me ask her.” She sent a brief text, asking Elvira if Wanda had left right after they argued.

Her reply was quick:She went over, said something to Alex and the others, and then left.

Millie:Did anyone follow her out of the bar?

Elvira:I don’t know. I went to the bathroom. When I finished, I caught up with the others. We stood chatting until the cops showed up and we found out about Wanda’s attack.

Millie:Meaning, someone from your group could have left right after or even before you argued and you would not have known?

Elvira:It’s possible. The details are a little fuzzy.

Millie:Did anyone see you go into the bathroom?

Elvira:Another woman was in one of the stalls. I have no idea who she was.

Millie thanked her and put her phone on the desk. “Can I get you something to drink, maybe a bottle of water?”

“Sure. Thanks.” Danielle took the seat Millie vacated and reached for the mouse.

She returned and handed her the water. “What are you doing?”

“Delving a little deeper. I’m working my way back down the list, thinking maybe we missed some minor detail.” Danielle typed Carter Morley’s name into the search bar.

The stories she and Millie had already read appeared. She scrolled through the first page and clicked on page two. Near the top was a news article about Morley Mines.

“What is that?” Millie tapped the screen.

“Let’s find out.” Danielle clicked on the article. At the top of the page was a photo of a miner. Vivid blue eyes stared back at them through bushy brows. Deep creases lined his forehead. Sparse tufts of gray hair poked out from beneath his hardhat.

Millie’s first impression was the man had lived a hard life. He stood in front of what appeared to be the entrance to a mining shaft. She read the caption aloud, “‘Local miner Gold Morley ends his mining career with a pot of gold.’ What are the odds this man and Carter Morley’s last name are the same?”

“I’m sure they’re related.”

“I agree.”

The story stated the Whittier local, who owned several plots of land and had mined for decades, was preparing for his retirement when he hit on a vein of gold. The lucky strike led to him finding larger nuggets near the banks of a nearby river.

He claimed he’d been working the spot for years, convinced he was close to striking it rich. The article gave a brief history about how Morley’s father had moved his family to Alaska when he was a child. “Morley Mines is the key to Whittier’s gold,” he insisted. “I believe generations of Morleys, including my grandson, will continue to find gold in this area. In fact, I’m certain of it.”

“Ten bucks says Carter Morley is Gold Morley’s grandson.” Danielle scrolled to the bottom of the article and found another photo of the man. He stood leaning against a sprawling two-story metal structure. “It says he passed away about a year ago.”

The building reminded Millie of an old warehouse, perfectly square and surrounded by water. A long ramp was at one end of the building, resembling a metal arm. On the opposite end was some sort of conveyor belt. At the tippy top of the structure were metal beams forming a square and protruding out, almost like a deck but without wooden floorboards.

“That’s one creepy looking building.” Danielle shivered involuntarily. “Imagine wandering around at night and stumbling upon that old place.”

“I wonder where it is.”

“147 Port Park Road.”

“Is it in Whittier? Maybe it’s close to the ship.”

“Already on it.” Danielle’s fingers flew over the keys. “It’s less than two miles from here.”

Millie hovered over her shoulder. “Click on the satellite image, please.”

Danielle did as she asked, zooming in on the exact location. “It looks like a remote spot.”

“Morley claimed his mine is the key to finding gold in Whittier. I think we should check it out.” Millie consulted the clock. “The evening events are covered, which means we can skate out of here without anyone noticing.”

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Danielle's eyes grew round as saucers. "You want to check out this creepy mine tonight?"

"I'm sure we'll be fine." Millie pointed out a small note at the bottom of the story, an update to the original. "I bet this place is abandoned."

"And if not?"

"We'll find out soon enough."

Chapter 19

After everyone had assembled inside the galley, Millie brought them up to speed and laid out her plan. "We need to check out the Morley gold-mining site to search for clues."

"And risk being shot at?" Cat pressed her hand to her chest. "The folks up here are serious about their gold and guns."

"Morley died a year ago. From what Danielle and I could tell from looking at the satellite image, his mine is in a remote location, off the beaten path and shut down."

"I'm in." Sharky clapped his hands. "Creepy old mines at night in remote locations are what scary movies are made of. This is right up my alley."

"Not mine," Cat said. "It sounds like a disaster waiting to happen."

“Is Elvira planning to meet up with us?” Millie asked.

“I don’t know. She’s been running a bunch of errands. She’s packing up and plans to drop her gear off here. If she makes it in time, she’ll head our way.” Sharky told them Reef was expecting her and would escort her to his cabin to drop her stuff off.

“I’ll stay here and bail you out if needed,” Cat said.

“Before I forget.” Millie nudged her friend. “How is Kendra?”

“Much better. Ever since you talked to her, it’s been like night and day.”

“Kendra who works in the gift shop?” Danielle asked.

“Yeah. She’s been struggling lately.”

“What happened?”

“She’s homesick,” Millie and Cat said in unison.

“Ah. It happens to the best of us.”

“I let her use my home computer to FaceTime her family.” Millie tapped Danielle’s arm. “Back to the Morley mine trip. So far it’ll be Annette, me and Sharky, for sure. What about you?”

Brody spoke up. “I rented the truck until tomorrow. I plan on getting my money’s worth and am ready for some nighttime four-wheeling.”

“If Brody is going, count me in,” Danielle said.

“Cat will stay behind and be our backup. It’s ten-thirty now. I need to pack up a few supplies. I say we meet near the security checkpoint at eleven.”

“Sounds good.”

With a plan in place, the group split up.

Millie was one of the last to leave. Annette stopped her at the door. “Do you think it’s safe for us to go wandering around private property in Alaska’s wilderness at night?”

“I think we have a better chance of running into wildlife. The satellite photo we found is only a few months old. If someone hasn’t started the mining operations in the last couple of months, I think we’re safe.”

Annette’s cell phone rang. “I need to take this call.” She hurried over to her desk and began talking in a low voice, occasionally looking in Millie’s direction.

Finally, the conversation ended, and she returned. “Sorry. Where were we?”

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“I think you were getting ready to chicken out,” Millie teased.

Annette waved dismissively. “We’ve been in sketchier situations.”

“Unless we get caught, and then it might make it to the top five.”

“True. Alaska is a long way from Miami.”

“I have no intention of getting stuck up here.” Millie motioned toward her friend’s phone. “Was that Jose?”

“Yeah. We were gonna meet up after I clocked out. I told him I would need to take a raincheck. He wanted to know what I was doing.”

“Did you tell him?”

“Nah. He’s not too enthused about me getting involved in other people’s business.”

“Even if it involves a friend who asked for your help?”

“He thinks...” Annette’s voice faded.

“He thinks I’m a bad influence.” Millie meant it as a joke, but she could tell from the look on her friend’s face she’d hit the nail on the head. “He does. He thinks I’m trouble.”

“In his defense, he doesn’t know you. Jose has only heard the rumors, how you’ve

been involved in a few...in a lot of issues on board the ship.”

“But not without a reason. And, I might add, we’ve done a pretty good job of catching the bad guys, even saving Scout from being kidnapped and Sharky killed.”

“He doesn’t understand. I’m sure once he gets to know you, he’ll change his mind,” Annette said. “I need to run back to my cabin to grab a few things and will meet you out at the gangway.”

“See you soon.” Millie trudged out of the galley, her concern over her friend’s budding romance with Jose weighing heavy on her mind.

To be fair, the group of friends had been involved in some sticky situations through the years. Millie had even been written up for misconduct. But all the mysteries, all the involvement, had been for a reason.

It was possible someone was filling Jose’s head with half-truths. On the flip side, perhaps he felt threatened by Annette’s friends and was trying to drive a wedge between them.

She hoped not. Millie had been one of Annette’s closest confidants, her friend, for years now. What right did Jose have to waltz back into her life and think he could tell her who she should and shouldn’t hang around?

Something told her eventually she and Jose would clear the air. Whether it would be a positive thing or a day of reckoning remained to be seen.

Millie paced. “Brody is late. Maybe he can’t make it after all.”

“There’s always the option of renting an Uber,” Annette suggested.

Sharky counted heads. “You, me, Danielle and Millie all in one vehicle being dropped off at a supposedly abandoned mining site? I’m sure it won’t raise any red flags.”

“Last I heard, he was on his way. He should be here any moment,” Danielle said. “What about Elvira?”

“She’s back at base camp, keeping an eye on the others. She told me she wasn’t ready to leave yet, and seems convinced the culprit is going to break into her RV again.”

“To steal what?” Millie asked. “I thought she was all packed up and ready to hightail it out of there.”

“To be honest, I’m not sure why,” Sharky said. “She was being slightly evasive and said something about setting some sort of trap.”

“Setting a trap?” Millie folded her arms. “Maybe she’s feeding you a line. She went back to Mount Baldie, found a bunch of gold and is hoarding it in her RV until she boards Siren of the Seas.”

“Letting us do all her dirty work,” Annette added.

“You never know with Elvira. I do know one thing. She’s freaking out that she might be stuck in Whittier.”

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“All the more reason she should have some skin in the game,” Danielle said. “If we get picked up for trespassing, she needs to bailusout.”

“I see Brody.”

The night security supervisor wasn't hard to miss. A head taller than most people, the former bouncer was an intimidating figure, which made him the perfect person to accompany them on their late-night intel mission.

“Sorry if I'm late. I had a minor issue to handle upstairs in the casino. The good news is no one needed to be jailed. It's already full.”

“Great. And this is only day one of the new passengers being on board,” Millie groaned. “Hopefully, this isn't a sign of things to come.”

“Eh.” Brody gave them a thumbs down. “The first night is typically busy for security. Everybody is jacked up, ready for a good time. A few of them are a little rambunctious. It'll calm down.”

“Does Patterson know where we're going?” Annette asked.

“I didn't mention it to him,” Millie said.

“Me either,” Danielle said.

“I haven't seen Patterson all day,” Sharky chimed in.

“I told him we had a small errand to run,” Brody said. “When he found out it involved Millie, he told me it was probably best if he didn’t know what we were up to.”

Danielle playfully punched her friend in the arm. “He knows Millie all too well.”

“I would love to stand here and let each of you take a jab at me, but we have more important things to do.” Millie and Danielle climbed into the front seat with Brody while Annette and Sharky hopped in the back.

Using her phone’s GPS, Danielle directed Brody away from the port, through downtown, and to the other end. Beyond the main drag, the buildings became fewer and farther in between.

Bam. Brody slammed on the brakes.

Millie’s head flew forward. “Whoa.”

“Sorry,” he apologized. “I thought I saw something run across the road.”

“Was it a bear?” Sharky peered into the darkness. “Seeing a bear at night in the wild would be pretty awesome.”

“Not to me,” Millie said. “I would be perfectly fine if I never ran across a bear up close.”

Brody picked up speed again, cruising along at a decent clip. A mile past town, the road turned to gravel.

“We’re almost there.” Danielle warned Brody he needed to slow down. “Start looking for a mailbox or some sort of marking with the number 147.”

“I see something up ahead on the left,” Sharky said.

“I see it too.” Brody took his foot off the gas and coasted toward the wooden stake with the neon numbers 147 painted on it. “This is the place.”

He cranked the wheel and turned into the driveway. It was surprisingly wide and Millie suspected it was because large pieces of equipment had been transported to the mine.

Rows of pine trees lined both sides of the property. The driveway curved right. The trees cleared and opened onto a strip of flat terrain. A long, low shack with a metal roof was on one side.

Millie glimpsed the top of the structure she’d seen on the satellite image. “I think the mine is over there.”

Brody tapped the gas, moving at a snail’s pace. Clusters of thick weeds clumped together and spread out.

Judging by the condition of the driveway, vehicles still accessed the site. Hopefully, they didn’t plan on showing up anytime soon.

The farther they went, the closer they got to the rambling metal structure.

Brody reached a tree stump and shifted into park. “This is as far as we go, ladies and gent. I’ve been keeping an eye out. I don’t see any sort of surveillance equipment.”

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“I didn’t either.” Millie reached for the door handle. “We’ll get in and out fast. What we need to look for is some sort of clue linking Carter Morley to Mount Baldie.”

“Even if we can prove Carter is interested in Elvira’s honey hole, how are we going to prove he may have been involved in Wanda’s attack?” Annette asked. “Short of finding the weapon.”

“Finding the weapon would be a bonus,” Millie said. “Something tells me we won’t get that lucky.”

“Unless Carter is dumb,” Sharky said. “He doesn’t strike me as being stupid.”

Millie handed out flashlights. “We need a clue to Elvira’s RV break-in or Wanda’s attack.”

Brody shined his light along the front of the structure. “I see a walkway across the water.”

“One way in and one way out. For safety’s sake, two of us should scope out the building while the others check out the shack.” Sharky puffed up his chest. “The brawn of the bunch will search the building while you lovely sleuths investigate the shed.”

Danielle patted her pocket. “Keep your cell phones close at hand in case we need to stay in touch.”

“What about this?” Sharky reached into his backpack, pulled out a whistle and

whistled loudly.

Millie whacked his arm. “Sharky Kiveski. Talk about drawing attention.”

“Sorry. I mean, it’s not like anyone can hear me.”

“You hope not. Try to stay away from the water.”

“Falling in the water is the least of our worries.” Brody, with Sharky by his side, began making his way along the walkway.

Meanwhile, Millie, Danielle, and Annette turned toward the other structure.

“This place gives me the heebie-jeebies,” Danielle whispered.

“I have to say, it’s kinda creeping me out,” Annette agreed.

“I could think of worse places to search,” Millie said.

“Like where?”

“I don’t know. I’ll have to get back to you on that.”

“If we figure this one out, Elvira Cobb is going to owe us,” Danielle said. “Do you believe what Sharky said about her setting a trap?”

“It’s possible. Or she could be making a last ditch effort to find more gold before leaving Whittier,” Millie said. “Hopefully, whatever she’s up to doesn’t put her back in jail.”

Chapter 20

“I dunno if it was a good idea for you to check yourself out of the hospital.” Elvira cast a concerned glance at her former friend turned friend again, Wanda Tillman, who looked pale and frail sitting in the wheelchair alongside the curb.

“I’m feeling much better. Besides, I feel somewhat responsible for your arrest after my attack. I know we argued, but we’re solid, like we’ve had each other’s back since almost day one when you got here. I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. Someone knows we’re close to finding gold and is trying to get rid of us,” Wanda said. “We need to figure this out before you sail off into the sunset with that beau of yours. If not, I’ll be dealing with this after you’re gone.”

“I’m not going anywhere if we can’t get to the bottom of who might be behind it,” Elvira grimaced.

“I’m not pressing charges,” Wanda said. “Either way, you’ll be free to leave.”

“Seriously?” Elvira pressed her hand to her chest. “You’re a good friend, Wanda Tillman. Someone attacked you and I agree wholeheartedly. I hate the idea of leaving my partner, my friend, to deal with this alone, which is why I have a hidden camera strategically placed outside my RV. The bait is ready for the taking, although I’m not sure anyone will show.”

“I want to help,” Wanda said. “I say we swing by your place to see if they went after the bait and go from there.”

The attendant, who had stepped away to sign off on the release papers, returned. “Who is driving you home?”

“Me.” Elvira jangled her keys. “My truck is around the corner. I’ll be right back.” She scurried across the parking lot, climbed into her rust bucket, and drove back to the pickup area.

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The attendant helped Wanda into the passenger seat and waited for her to buckle up. “Take care Ms. Tillman.”

“I’m gonna try.” Wanda thanked the man and pulled the door shut. “Would you mind stopping by my place so I can shower and change into some clean clothes?”

“Of course not.” Elvira drove straight to the apartment building and escorted her upstairs to her unit. She waited near the door while she showered. Wanda reappeared, looking much better than she had earlier. “You don’t look like death warmed over anymore.”

“Thanks. The shower helped.” Wanda gently placed her fingertips on her bandage. “It’s a good thing I have excellent reflexes and ducked when I saw my attacker coming at me.”

“If you had to name someone, who do you think it was?” Elvira asked.

“Obviously, the person was at the bar the night of my attack and a part of our group,” Wanda said. “Maybe Otis or Alex.”

“Alex?” Elvira blinked rapidly. “I was thinking more along the lines of Carter.”

“Carter Morley?” Wanda thought about it. “Maybe. I mean, he seems like such a sweetheart.”

Elvira tapped the side of her forehead. “Sweet and flying under the radar, making him the perfect culprit because no one will suspect him. Like I said, I left the bait. The

team was heading up for one of the final takes, which means camp is empty, giving whoever it is time to sneak in and try to get the goods.”

“Did you leave a map?”

“A fake map that’ll send whoever it is on a wild goose chase,” Elvira snickered. “Whenever you’re ready, we’ll hit the road.”

“I’m ready.” Wanda grabbed a jacket on her way out. They reached the elevator, only to find it was out of service. “The elevator has broken down again.”

“How annoying. Why don’t you get it replaced and be done with it breaking down?”

Wanda rubbed her index finger and thumb together. “Money. Too many cheapskates live in the building who don’t want to pay to have it replaced. They would rather it break down multiple times a week and inconvenience everyone.”

“An inconvenience until it goes haywire and someone gets hurt,” Elvira said.

“Not a chance.” Wanda waved dismissively. “It’s been acting up for years, maybe even decades. Ellie is a temperamental old broad. I guess we’ll have to take the stairs.”

Taking the side stairs and exiting out at the rear of the building, the women circled around and returned to Elvira’s rented pickup. They drove to the tunnel, barely passing through before vehicle traffic was waylaid and the train took over the tracks.

During the drive, they chatted about life in Alaska, how Wanda loved living there...loved the outdoors. She even loved the long winters.

“Better you than me,” Elvira said. “I’m happy as a clam living in Savannah,

Georgia.”

“I’ve never been to Savannah. What’s so special about it?”

“The history. The architecture. Not to mention we have tons of things to do. If you ever get down my way, you’ll have to come and stay with me.”

“Do you have family close by?”

“My sister, Dernice and my other family, the Garluccis,” Elvira said. “They’re mafia.”

Wanda clutched her throat. “Your family is part of the mafia?”

“Not my real family, although it feels like we’re flesh and blood. I know it might be hard to believe, but sometimes I’m not the easiest person to be around. Carlita, the matriarch, kind of took me under her wing. In fact, I was a tenant of hers until she kicked me out.”

Wanda’s jaw dropped. “She kicked you out?”

“It was kinda my fault. I accidentally set my apartment on fire.”

“Good grief. I think I would kick you out too. And you’re still friends?”

Elvira twined her fingers. “Like this. I’ll be traveling to New Jersey to see her son.” She gave out a flirty whistle. “He is one smoking hot, babe. Would you like to see his picture?”

“Sure.”

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Elvira waited until they reached base camp. She shut the engine off, plucked her phone from her pocket and pulled up a recent picture Dernice had sent of her and Vinnie Garlucci looking cozy. She handed it to Wanda. “That’s Vinnie and my sister, Dernice.”

“You’re right. He looks like he should be on the cover of GQ magazine.” Wanda handed the phone back. “It’s good to have close friends who are like family.”

“The Garluccis are the best.” Elvira swung the driver’s side door open. “It looks like the others are still out at the mine.”

“Hopefully, we’re not missing something good.”

“No way. You and I both know Mount Baldie is where it’s at.” Elvira unlocked her trailer door and waited for Wanda to step inside.

After verifying the camera was still where Sharky had left it the other day, she set her backpack on the table, logged into her phone’s app and clicked on the play button. “Like I said earlier, someone bugged my RV, broke in and ransacked it looking for the map, and now I’m going to turn it right back around on them.”

“You’re using their camera?”

“Yep. Most people don’t know there’s a way to bypass the original app and reroute the device to wherever you want,” Elvira said. “I learned this nifty trick not too long ago.”

“What happens when they try logging in and checking their recordings?” Wanda asked.

“When they open the app, they’ll see inside my RV, but it doesn’t move. In other words, it’s stuck in a perpetual loop.”

“Clever.” Wanda appeared impressed. “They think they’re getting live feeds, but in reality, they’re looking at the same thing over and over.”

“Precisely.” Elvira grew quiet. “I see someone coming to the door.”

Wanda ran around the table and peered over her shoulder. “It’s Carter Morley.”

“I knew it. He’s trying to get in.”

“He’s trying the handle.”

They watched as Carter moved out of camera range. He returned, tried the door again, and then walked away.

Elvira drummed her fingers on the table. “We’re gonna have to figure out a way to catch Carter, to find out if he’s the one who hid the camera.”

“And attacked me. To think I invited Carter to my apartment and even made him dinner,” Wanda said indignantly. “I want him to pay for what he did.”

“We’ll need some help setting up a stakeout.” Elvira started to pace. “Proving he was behind your attack and my break in is going to be tricky unless he trips up.”

“Maybe your friends, the ones from the cruise ship, will have some ideas,” Wanda said.

“I hope so. I mean, I have my own ideas, but I think implementing them might get me into more hot water than I’m already in.”

Chapter 21

Millie swallowed hard, peering through the twilight at the abandoned mine, casting dark shadows across the murky pond.

Woot, woot, woot, woot.

She stumbled back, clutching her chest. “What was that?”

“An owl,” Annette said. “He sounds close by.”

“I bet he’s not the only creature lurking in the vicinity,” Danielle said. “Did either of you think to bring some sort of protection?”

“I have my mace.” Millie showed them the pepper spray. “I thought about bringing an air horn. I heard they’re good at driving wildlife away. Unfortunately, we’re fresh out.”

“I bet Sharky has one.”

“And we could be listening to him blow the air horn instead of his whistle,” Annette joked.

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Millie shined her light along the front of the long low metal structure. “I don’t see any sets of beady eyes watching us. I think it’s safe.” Taking the lead, the women crept toward the building.

“I have my doubts about what we’ll find out here,” Annette said.

“Morley told reporters this mine held the key to Whittier’s gold. I’m looking for some sort of clue linking Carter, who I’m almost certain is related to him, to Wanda’s attack. My thought is maybe he hangs out here.”

“Ah.” Danielle snapped her fingers. “The younger Morley is trying to soak up some of his relative’s lucky vibes.”

“Something along those lines. Besides, we have nothing else to go on, short of breaking into the other miners’ RVs to search for the weapon,” Millie said.

“I wouldn’t take it off the table,” Annette said. “Searching this place is like looking for a needle in a haystack.”

“Back to Elvira. I think she should be here,” Danielle said. “I’ll help Sharky or any of my friends at the drop of the hat, but it seems to me we’re doing all her dirty work while she’s kicking back doing who knows what.”

“Knowing what little I do about the woman, I wouldn’t be surprised if she was at Mount Baldie tonight, scrambling to find gold,” Millie said.

“I hope you’re wrong.” Danielle swiped at a pile of dirt with the tip of her shoe. “I

wonder what Sharky sees in that woman.”

“I think sometimes he wonders too,” Annette said.

Millie thought about their conversation while they were stuck in the elevator. Perhaps what it boiled down to was the fact Sharky knew he was getting older. Someday he would retire, and then what? He bought a houseboat and lived all alone?

Sharky was unique in his own way and, as he pointed out, he didn't have much luck with women. Perhaps Elvira had come along, shown some interest in him and he jumped headfirst into a relationship without giving it much thought.

Or maybe her appeal was the distance between them. He wanted to be with someone, yet not have them too close.

“I don't know if Elvira is the right person for Sharky, but maybe she's the right person for now,” Millie said. “If this makes sense.”

“We'll find out more about how well they get along if she leaves with us tomorrow.” Annette stepped in front of a row of cement blocks running the length of the shed. “Those look like old washing stations.”

Millie shined her flashlight. “I think you're right.” She beamed her light toward the ceiling, noticing an old wooden sign hanging from the rafters. “This place has been around for a long time.”

“Decades, I'm sure. Let's spread out.”

The trio split up. Annette searched one side. Millie searched the other while Danielle took the center aisle.

Old tools, bits and pieces of equipment, along with stacks of wash pans were scattered about. It was almost as if the workers had left in the middle of a shift and never returned, leaving the mining site a snapshot frozen in time.

“Talk about tedious work.” Danielle picked up a trowel. “This wouldn’t be my dream job.”

“Mine either.” Millie finished making her way to the other end and waited for her friends to catch up. “I see some sort of outhouse or storage building over there.”

“Leave no stone unturned. We’re here. We might as well check it out.” Annette tiptoed through the thick grass while the other two trailed behind.

Millie circled the structure, inspecting the perimeter before reaching for the door handle. She twisted the knob. “It’s locked.”

“It has one of those old skeleton keyholes,” Annette said. “I bet if I had the right tool, I could pick this thing.”

“You’re in luck.” Millie reached into her body bag, pulled out a multipurpose tool, and handed it to her. “Sharky almost had this confiscated earlier.”

“If security sees it, they’ll flag it for sure,” Danielle said.

“I ran it by Suharto on my way out. He promised he would let me back through.”

“It pays to have friends in charge of security.” Annette began flipping through the various gadgets. “This might do the trick.” She inserted the Phillips-head screwdriver in the hole and wiggled it around. “Too big. I need something smaller.”

“Try the needle-nose pliers,” Millie suggested.

Annette extended the pliers, eased them into the opening, and wiggled them around.
“This lock is one tough cookie.”

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“It’s probably rusted shut,” Danielle said.

“Hold your flashlight a little closer.”

Millie did as Annette asked and moved closer, watching as she wiggled the pliers right, left, up and down. “It’s no use.” She tucked them into their empty slot and handed the gadget to her. “It was worth a try.”

“I’m not ready to give up.” Millie stepped back and studied the exterior. “This doesn’t fit in with the other structures.”

Annette tilted her head. “Good point. The other buildings are much older. This one appears to be fairly new.”

“If Morley died almost a year ago, I would say this was constructed around the time of his death or shortly after.”

Danielle tapped the top of the doorknob. “But why put an old doorknob and lock on a new or newer building?”

“Who knows? Maybe the Morley family is into repurposing stuff. Waste not, want not.” Millie led them around to the side. “See the overhang? Right beneath the overhang is a section of screen.”

“You’re wondering what the screens are for,” Danielle guessed.

“To vent something, but what?”

“Maybe it’s not for ventilation,” Annette said. “Short of kicking the door in, I don’t think we’re going to find out.”

Millie tapped her chin. “Busting down the door is a thought.”

“You can’t be serious,” Danielle said.

“I’m not, but I do have another idea.” Millie ran over to the truck and flung the driver’s side door open. “I hope Brody doesn’t mind if I borrow his fancy set of wheels.”

Chapter 22

Millie climbed into the driver’s seat of the fancy four-wheel-drive pickup truck. She rolled the window down, fired up the engine and shifted into reverse.

Annette waved her arms, motioning her back. “Back a little more...a couple inches. Perfect. Stop.”

Leaving the engine running, Millie climbed out to check her location. “I couldn’t have maneuvered any more perfectly if it was broad daylight.” She reached inside and shut the engine off.

Danielle dropped the tailgate. “Using the tailgate as a stepladder is a pretty slick trick, Millie.”

“I’ve been known to come up with a clever idea a time or two.” She grabbed hold of the tailgate and tried pulling herself into the truck bed. It was higher than it looked.

Danielle chuckled. “Do you need a hand?”

“I need to be another six inches taller,” Millie gasped.

“That’s what the nifty little sidestep is for.” Her friend tapped the step.

“Why didn’t I notice this before?” Millie stuck her sneaker in the cutout and grabbed onto the truck’s frame. With a little momentum, she easily stepped up and into the bed.

“These newer trucks have all the bells and whistles,” Annette said.

Millie reached down and gave Danielle a hand up, and then Annette. “You can see a lot more from up here.”

“And even see inside the screen vents on top of the mystery building.”

“You know it.” Millie scooped onto the lowered tailgate and turned her flashlight on. Leaning as far forward as possible, she shined the light through the screen. “It’s empty.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.” Millie shifted to the side. “See for yourself.”

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Danielle, who was a few inches taller, leaned forward and looked inside. “You’re right. It’s clean as a whistle.”

“I hate to admit it, but so far, this trip has been a waste of time.” Millie dusted her hands. “Hopefully, Sharky and Brody are having better luck.”

Annette checked her watch. “They’ve been exploring the creepy building for a while now.”

Millie hopped down and ran around to the driver’s side. She took the keys from the console and locked the truck. “I see a flash of light coming from the second floor. They must be upstairs.”

Falling into step, the women trudged across the gravel driveway. Walking single file along the bridge, they entered the metal building.

Danielle lingered in the doorway. “This is exactly how I pictured this place to look.”

“Right out of a scary movie,” Annette said. “Remember those movies about the redheaded doll that stalked and killed people? It could easily have been filmed here.”

“I was thinking the same thing.”

“Horror movies?” Millie grimaced. “I make it a rule not to watch them. Real life is scary enough.”

“It’s a good thing because this place nailed the backdrop,” Annette said. “I’m not one

to get spooked, but you couldn't pay me to spend the night here by myself."

Creak. Pop.

Millie froze in her tracks. "Did you hear that?" she whispered.

"It sounds like the building is settling." Annette spun in a slow circle. "Old building. Metal walls. Earthquake prone area."

"There are earthquakes in Alaska?" Millie shot her friend a worried glance. "Are you sure?"

"Positive."

"Huh," Danielle murmured. "Who would have thought?"

A scurrying noise echoed from somewhere nearby.

"Sharky?" Millie called out. "Brody?"

Neither answered.

"Let's keep moving." Danielle nudged Millie forward. "You're doing an excellent job of taking the lead."

"Scaredy-cat," Millie teased.

"Not always, but in this instance, yes. I would rather be on the commercial where a bunch of teens are standing in front of a barn with the sharp tools hanging on the wall and a killer is lurking in the shadows watching them."

“Seriously?” Millie paused. “What happens?”

“I don’t know. The clip ends when they decide not to escape in their vehicle but head for the barn where the killer is waiting.”

“You should stop watching those kinds of shows and commercials.”

“I like being scared. Although I can tell you, I wouldn’t watch a thriller or horror movie involving a cruise ship.”

“I don’t think I would watch that kind of show either,” Annette said. “We have enough action happening on board in real life.”

“Seeing how we both like scary movies, we should hang out one night, pop some popcorn and get the daylights scared out of us,” Danielle said.

“I’m up for it. When is your next night off?” Annette asked.

“On Wednesday. Dawn of the Dead is playing. It starts at ten.”

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“I can make it. My cabin or yours?”

“We can watch it in mine,” Danielle said. “You bring the popcorn. I’ll grab some sodas and the rest of the junk food.”

“Dawn of the Dead. It sounds like a nice, wholesome family movie,” Millie said sarcastically.

“It’s about zombies,” Danielle said.

“No kidding. What a coincidence.”

“Why is it a coincidence?”

“Because we might have a zombie group booked on one of our upcoming Caribbean cruises.”

Danielle made a choking sound. “For real?”

Millie grinned. “You should see the look on your face. I thought I mentioned it to you. I don’t recall the name of the club or group, although it’s on the tip of my tongue. The coordinator and I even had a zoom call to discuss a few event ideas.”

“Like what?” Danielle clapped her hands. “I have a bazillion ideas for zombie-themed activities. A zombie costume contest. A zombie scavenger hunt. Whodunnit zombie murder mystery.”

“I put all of those on the table.”

“How many passengers are we talking about? Is it a large group?”

“The bigger, the better, if you ask me,” Annette quipped. “It would be fun making zombie dishes.”

Millie eyed them with interest. “You two are really into this zombie theme.”

“It’s all I’ll be able to think about,” Danielle said. “You have the handy dandy group cruise calendar. Can you check to see if they booked?”

“Right now?”

“Sure. Why not? What better place to find out if you have a zombie group booked than when you’re standing inside one of Alaska’s spookiest buildings?”

Millie turned her phone on. She logged into her Majestic Cruise Lines’ account and tracked down the group cruise coordinator app. She scrolled through the screen to the first set of group bookings after their return to the Caribbean. “They did. The zombie group is booked.”

Danielle threw her hands in the air and shimmied around. “Seriously?”

“Yep.” Millie turned the phone around so her friend could see. “Mark it on your calendar.”

“You know it. Can you forward me the coordinator’s contact information? I’ll reach out to them with some other themed event ideas. I can’t wait. A zombie group.”

“Had I known you would be this excited, I would’ve told you weeks ago.” Millie

slipped her phone back into her pocket.

“Back to the Dawn of the Dead. Do you want to hang out with Annette and me for movie night?”

“No thanks. Gone with the Wind is more my speed. Besides, like Annette pointed out, we have enough real life action on Siren of the Seas as it is. Thank you for the offer, though.”

“You’re welcome.”

The building groaned and creaked again.

Millie tightened her grip on her flashlight. “Surely, Brody and Sharky have had enough time to scope this place out.”

“Let’s track them down and get out of here,” Annette said.

“You read my mind.” Millie cautiously crept forward, her eyes moving from side to side. “I wonder what sort of critters have taken up residence inside this old building.”

“We probably don’t want to know.”

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Moving at a steady pace, the trio continued making their way toward the stairs.

Thunk. A dull thunk echoed off in the distance. The hair on Millie's arms stood straight up. She got the distinct feeling they were being watched.

Suddenly, from out of the shadows, a hulking figure lunged at them.

Millie froze in her tracks, screaming at the top of her lungs as the shadowy figure came at her.

Chapter 23

Millie, frantically trying to get away from the figure lunging at them from the shadows, collided with Annette, nearly knocking both of them to the ground.

"Gotcha!" Brody burst out laughing.

"You jerk." Danielle slugged him in the arm. "You scared us half to death."

Sharky emerged from behind a post, snorting loudly. "I wish we could've seen the looks on your faces."

"Very funny." Millie turned to Annette. "I didn't mean to crash into you."

"I'm fine. We should've known these clowns would pull some stunt."

Brody sobered. "I'm sorry if you got hurt."

“The only thing hurt is my bruised ego.” Millie straightened her jacket. “I’m not much of an intrepid sleuth if my friends can scare the daylights out of me, now am I?”

“Friends who were intentionally trying to frighten you.” Danielle wagged her finger at them. “You know what they say about paybacks.”

Millie changed the subject. “Did you find anything, any sort of clue?”

“Nope. Nada. Zip.” Sharky shoved his hands in his pockets. “What about you guys?”

“Same here. If Morley hid gold mining clues on his property, he hid them well,” Millie said. “Although in our defense, it’s tricky conducting a thorough search when you’re working by twilight.”

“This was a big fat nothing burger.” Sharky sighed. “We’re not any closer to getting my babe exonerated.”

“Which could be viewed as a good thing, seeing how you weren’t keen on her surprising you in the first place,” Annette pointed out.

“I’ve gotten over my initial reluctance and was actually looking forward to spending time with her. Which reminds me, she should be on the ship by now. Reef offered to escort her through security and show her to my cabin.”

As soon as they were back in the truck and on their way, Sharky called the night supervisor, his friend Reef, who worked in the same department.

He put the call on speaker and let Reef know.

“Hey, everybody. Did you find anything?”

“Nope. Not a clue,” Millie said. “It looks like Elvira might be on her own in figuring a way out of this mess.”

“Speaking of Elvira, she’s here,” Reef said. “Or at least she was.”

“Did she bring a lot with her? Cuz I don’t have a lot of room in my cabin to store extra items.”

“Not too much. She had a big suitcase, a backpack crammed full of stuff, and a smaller bag. Maybe it’s normal behavior for her, but to me, she was acting kinda squirrely.”

“Acting squirrely,” Sharky repeated.

“Secretive. I tried to help her with her bags. She nearly went ballistic. She didn’t want me touching them.”

“She can be sort of...protective with her belongings,” Sharky said. “Do you know where she is now?”

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“No. I took her to your cabin and let her in.” Reef told them he started to leave when she stopped him. “She wanted to know if it would be possible to check out the maintenance area. Like if I thought anyone would question what she was doing.”

“The maintenance area,” Sharky said. “I wonder why.”

“She didn’t say. I went back to check on her a little while ago to see if she needed anything. She didn’t answer the door.”

“Maybe she’s out exploring the ship,” Brody said.

“Or grabbing a bite to eat,” Danielle added.

“Could be. The bottom line is Elvira either is or was on board.”

“But maybe not for long,” Millie muttered under her breath. “Hopefully, she didn’t unpack and settle in because things aren’t looking too good for her right now.”

Sharky thanked Reef and signed off. “What’s the plan?”

“I don’t have a plan. We need Elvira’s help if we’re going to crack this case.”

Ping. Ping. “Speaking of the devil. She’s calling now.” Sharky answered his phone. “Hey, Elvira. How’s it going?”

Although Millie could only hear one end of the conversation, it was clear she was making headway with whoever was behind Wanda’s attack.

“You and Wanda are on your way to Bay Bar & Grill. You want to know if I have time to meet you there? I’ll see if Brody can drop me off.” Sharky covered the receiver. “Elvira claims she knows who was behind the attack.”

“I gotta get back to work,” Danielle said.

“Ditto for me,” Annette said. “I need to make sure the galley is ready for the morning meal.”

“The bar is right around the corner,” Sharky said. “What about you, Millie?”

“I...”

“I can cover for you,” Danielle offered. “Go with Sharky. He might need help.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. I’ve always been optimistic about nabbing the bad guy, but I have to say, this one might get away. Hopefully, Elvira has something solid.”

“I’ll drop you off,” Brody said.

Sharky resumed his conversation. “Brody is dropping Millie and me off. We’ll wait for you out front.”

Making a quick U-turn, Brody drove into town and followed Sharky’s directions. Within minutes, they arrived at the bar.

“Can you find a ride back to the port or will you need me to swing back by and pick you up?”

“Elvira still has her junker. I’m not sure if she’s spending the night on the ship, although I think she is based on what Reef said and the fact she brought all her stuff.” Sharky hopped out and started to close the door. “Thanks for trying to help. I’m sure Elvira appreciates it.”

“We did it for you,” Annette said. “Good luck.”

“Thanks. We’ll need it.”

After they left, Millie flung her arm around Sharky’s shoulder. “I’m not sure Elvira deserves a great guy like you,” she teased.

“Or maybe she does deserve me,” he laughed. “I hope she gets to cruise with us. It would be a bummer to see her standing on the dock watching us sail off into the sunset.”

Millie caught a faint rattling sound, similar to the one Elvira’s junker made. The truck flew around the corner and careened into the parking lot.

Elvira parked near the road and emerged, along with an attractive woman who was in her late twenties or early thirties, if Millie had to guess. The woman was on the thin side and she walked with a slight limp.

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Sharky greeted them first. “That was fast.”

“The old jalopy has some get-up-and-go.” Elvira made the introductions. “This is my beau Sharky and his friend, Millie Armati, the ship’s cruise director.”

Wanda shook their hands. “I’ve never been on a big ship. Elvira has been telling me about her last cruise and how she met you.”

“It was an interesting adventure,” Millie said. “I’m sorry to hear about your attack. How are you feeling?”

“I have a rip-roaring headache, but other than that, I’ll be okay. I have exceptionally keen reflexes, if I say so myself. Which probably saved me from a more serious injury.”

“You do seem fast on your feet, like you could definitely defend herself.” Elvira patted her stomach. “I don’t know if you guys are hungry, but we’re starving and I’m buying. The bar’s late-night menu has really good food.”

“If you’re buying, we’re eating,” Sharky held the door. “After you, ladies.”

They stepped inside and found the place jam-packed. The only empty seats were at the bar.

“I guess we’ll have to sit at the bar,” Sharky said.

The bartender Millie and Sharky had met during their previous visit greeted them and

brought them drinks. He returned a short time later and jotted down their orders.

While they waited for their food, Wanda and Elvira told them about swinging by the RV and catching Carter Morley trying to open Elvira's door.

"I found a story about a man named Gold Morley," Millie said. "Any chance he's related to Carter Morley?"

"Yeah. Carter is Gold Morley's grandson."

"That's what I thought, or at least suspected." Millie noticed the bartender looking their way. "Who is the guy who waited on us?"

"Lyle Gardner. He owns this bar," Wanda said. "He's been around for a long time. Why?"

"He keeps looking our way."

"Maybe he thinks we need more drinks while we wait for our food." Sharky lifted his hand and signaled for him to come over.

Instead of Lyle, another bartender made his way over. "Can I get you something?"

"Another round of Diet Cokes for the gals and I'll take another root beer," he said.

"You got it."

The food arrived a short time later, delivered by Lyle this time. "Burgers for three and a salad for this young lady." Lyle placed the salad in front of Millie. "Can I get you anything else?"

“Thank you. This’ll do it.”

He turned to go and then swung back around. “Wanda. I didn’t recognize you at first.”

“Hey, Lyle.”

“I thought you were in the hospital.”

“I was. I got out earlier today.”

Lyle tipped his head in Elvira’s direction. “I see you two worked out your issues.”

“We did,” Elvira said. “Wanda is dropping the charges. She knows it wasn’t me who attacked her.”

“I think investigators are taking a closer look at someone else,” he said.

Millie’s heart skipped a beat. “Who?”

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“Carter Morley.”

“Carter?” Wanda and Elvira exchanged a quick glance. “My brother didn’t say anything about Carter.”

“Your brother wasn’t one of the cops who showed up asking questions. He may not have heard yet.”

“Why do they think it’s Carter?” Wanda asked.

“While they were here questioning me, I got to thinking about it. I was working the night of your attack and remembered seeing Morley leave and come back in the bar after you and Elvira argued.”

Millie lifted her eyes, studying the ceiling. “I see you have cameras. I’m sure the investigators went over the video recordings.”

“They would have had they been working. I have a wiring issue and need to get an electrician to come by. They’re on the fritz.” Lyle leaned his elbows on the counter. “Other than your bandage, you look pretty good for someone who got hit with a crowbar.”

“Like I was just telling Elvira and the others, I have excellent reflexes and only got grazed during the attack.” Wanda turned to the side and showed him her bandage. “The clunk could’ve been worse.”

“I’m glad to see you’re going to be all right. Maybe it’s a good thing the gold mining

season is ending,” he said.

“Right?” Wanda squirted a glob of catsup on the edge of her plate. “Elvira and I are gonna be partners.”

“You still have your eye on Mount Baldie?”

“Yeah.” Elvira bit into her pickle. “The place is huge, with a lot of ground to cover. Having a partner makes more sense.”

The group made small talk, and Lyle eventually walked away.

Millie waited until he was gone. “I hate to say it, but Carter Morley is looking more and more like the person who attacked Wanda.”

“It seems we’re all going in the same direction. Proving it’s him might be tricky,” Sharky said. “We searched Gold Morley’s place before we got here.”

“I knew old Gold. Did you find anything?” Wanda asked.

“Nope.” He gave her a thumbs down. “It was clean as a whistle.”

“And creepy as all get out,” Millie added.

“Someone was murdered there.”

Millie’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding.”

Wanda grinned. “Yeah, I’m kidding. It would make a great story for a scary movie, though.”

“Sounds like a place I want to avoid.” Elvira gobbled up her burger and slurped her soda. “The food was delish.”

“It appears the authorities are on top of the investigation. The issue now is confirming it was Carter,” Millie said.

“Wanda and I are gonna hide out near Mount Baldie tomorrow morning to see if Carter shows up while the team is working on their final taping of the season.”

“Like Lyle mentioned, Alaska’s DNR—the Department of Natural Resources is shutting the mining sites down for the season after tomorrow,” Wanda explained. “If he’s gonna make a move, it will have to be within the next few hours.”

“How early are we talking?” Millie began mentally calculating whether she could fit a stakeout into her schedule.

“The team heads up at eight,” Elvira said. “I figure if we’re in position at 7:30, we can stake out our spot and catch whoever it is.”

“I’m in,” Sharky said. “I can make it.”

“Me too,” Millie said. “I think we’re close to figuring this out.”

After finishing their meal, the group piled into Elvira’s truck. She dropped Wanda off first, promising to pick her up in the morning before they drove off.

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Reaching the port, Elvira parked her clunker next to Brody's spiffy rental, and the trio trekked up the gangway. Thankfully, their bags weren't flagged and soon they were back on board.

Millie sent a group text to Danielle, Cat, Annette and Brody, bringing them up to speed. She swapped out her jeans and shirt for her work uniform, making her rounds around the ship to check in on the final late night activities.

While she worked, a nagging clue lingered in the back of her mind. Exhausted from a long day, no matter how hard she tried, she couldn't quite figure out what it was.

Finally, her shift ended. She met Nic at home and they turned in, knowing tomorrow would be another long day.

As Millie drifted off to sleep, the little niggling bounced around in her head.

With any luck, Elvira would be on board, in good standing with the Whittier authorities, and Siren of the Seas would embark on its final journey through the Alaska frontier.

Chapter 24

Within minutes of wrapping up her early morning staff meeting, Millie's radio went off. "Millie, do you copy?"

"Go ahead Sharky."

“Where are you?”

“Finishing my staff meeting. What’s up?”

“Elvira is MIA.”

“MIA on board the ship?”

“Yeah. Can you meet me at my cabin?”

“I’m on my way.” Millie took the side stairs to deck one, where the crew’s quarters and Sharky’s cabin were located.

She found him standing in his doorway, a concerned expression on his face. He quickly ushered her inside. “Thanks for getting here so fast. I can’t find Elvira.”

Millie’s eyes flitted around the cabin, taking note of Sharky’s messy living quarters. “Did someone ransack your place and kidnap her?”

“I know my cabin looks a little rough. I haven’t done my monthly cleaning and now with Elvira’s stuff here it’s even messier.”

Fin stalked over and rubbed up against Millie’s leg. She scooped him up. He promptly began purring. “Good morning, Fin.”

Sharky patted his head. “This is the calmest he’s been since Elvira got here.”

“Fin doesn’t like her?”

Sharky shrugged. “Nope. I think he might be a little jealous.”

“Poor Fin-ster,” she cooed. “You can come and stay with Scout if you want.”

“I might take you up on that. The two aren’t hitting it off.”

Millie set him on the floor. “Back to Elvira. What’s going on?”

“Remember when Reef said she was acting squirrely and secretive?” He didn’t wait for her to reply. “She offered to run down to the dining room and grab some breakfast sandwiches while I took a shower.”

“Which isn’t something I would consider out of the ordinary,” Millie pointed out.

“She left and never came back. She’s been gone for over an hour. I’ve tried calling and texting her multiple times. She’s not answering her phone.”

“Do you think something happened to her?”

“I hope not.”

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Millie remembered Reef's other comment about how she'd freaked out when he tried helping her with her bags and mentioned exploring the ship's maintenance area. "Is it possible she brought something on board she doesn't want you to know about?"

"I hate to admit it, but I was thinking the same thing. She spent the whole night talking about the Mount Baldie site." He twirled his finger next to his forehead. "She's obsessed with finding gold."

"You knew that. She even found some nuggets," Millie reminded him. "Did she show them to you?"

"Yeah. They were kinda small, but I guess she's convinced there are more where those came from."

"Maybe she showed you a few nuggets, but not all of them."

"Could be. All I know is she's super-obsessed, even more than normal."

"Let's start searching. If her comment to Reef was a clue about where she may have gone, at least we have a general vicinity of where to start looking for her."

Reaching the main drag, the "I-95 corridor," the pair split up, each going in opposite directions.

Millie swung by the crewmember's dining room first, followed by the lounge. Thinking Elvira may have decided to use the employee work stations where the computers were located, she looked there next.

Backtracking, she ran into Suharto, the gangway supervisor. “Good morning, Millie. It is very early in the morning for you to be in my neck of the woods.”

“I’m looking for Sharky’s girlfriend, Elvira Cobb.” She gave Suharto a brief description of the woman.

“I remember her. Reef met her at the gangway,” Suharto said. “She was very...protective of her belongings.”

“Was there anything she brought on board that struck you as suspicious?” Millie asked.

“To be honest, I noticed she had a few unusual items.”

“Such as?”

“She had a bag of rocks.”

Millie’s scalp tingled. “Rocks?”

“Yes. They were in a special black bag.” Suharto told her the crewmember working at the scanning equipment had called him over. “She allowed me to look in the bag. It had dirty rocks.”

“Interesting.”

“I let her bring them through. It was very odd, and she seemed happy when she cleared security.”

“I bet. Do you know where she went after she left?”

“Reef was with her. I believe he escorted her to Sharky’s cabin,” Suharto said.

Millie thanked him and watched him walk away. Something told her Elvira hadn’t brought a pile of “rocks” with her. More like a pile of unwashed gold...gold she didn’t want Sharky to know about.

She tapped her lower lip. If she put herself in Elvira’s shoes, where would she hide the bag?

Thinking Sharky, who knew every square inch of the ship, might have a better idea where the best hiding spots were located, she radioed him, asking him to meet her in front of his office.

He showed up less than a minute later, looking even more stressed out.

“Any luck?”

“Nope. She’s still not answering my calls. How about you?”

Millie told him what Suharto had said. “I don’t think they were rocks. I think she brought unwashed gold on board and hid it before we got back last night, or maybe even this morning while you were taking a shower.”

“I can picture her doing something along those lines.”

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“Putting yourself in her shoes and not being familiar with the layout of the ship, where do you think she might hide her gold?”

“There’s a coupla spots. Knowing Elvira, she would avoid the recycling center.”

“Thinking someone might incinerate or crush her gold in the compactor,” Millie said.

“Yep. The only other spots I can think of are the pipe tunnel or the duct keel. We’re closest to the pipe tunnel. We’ll try looking there first.”

Millie kept pace with Sharky, both moving at a fast clip along the corridor to the other end of the ship.

He abruptly stopped in front of a metal door, only about half the size of a standard door. He eased it open, revealing a surprisingly spacious room filled with pipes.

She stepped over the threshold and paused, giving her eyes a chance to adjust to the lack of light.

“Elvira?” Sharky’s voice echoed loudly in the cavernous area.

No answer.

“She’s not here.” He turned to go.

Millie stopped him. “Hang on. While we’re here, we should check for potential hiding spots.”

Sharky showed her several easy-to-reach spots, all of which were empty. He tapped the side wall. “If Elvira was sneaking around in here, she wouldn’t get my phone calls. The metal would block the signal.”

“Excellent point. To me, this means there’s a good chance she’s been scurrying about somewhere down here hiding her stuff. You mentioned the duct keel.”

“Which is where we’re heading next.” Sharky escorted Millie out of the pipe tunnel, through a maze of corridors to another door, similar in size and shape to the one they’d just exited.

He flung it open and straddled the lower ledge. “Watch your step.”

“Thanks.”

Massive metal pipes ran the length of the room for as far as the eye could see. Metal runners ran horizontally, supporting the bulky pipes and offering plenty of hiding spots.

“Elvira?” Sharky called out.

No one answered.

“At the risk of sounding stupid, what exactly is this place?”

“The duct keel carries the fuel lines, hydraulic lines, stuff like that.” Sharky climbed over a metal runner. “Chances are she wouldn’t go too far down the pipeline.”

“I’ll start looking over here.” Millie veered left and began checking the nooks and crannies, while Sharky scoured the other side.

“Hey, Millie.”

Millie ran to the other side and found Sharky holding a black bag. “Ten bucks says we found Elvira’s stash.”

Chapter 25

Sharky removed a rock from the black bag.

“It looks like an ordinary old rock,” Millie said.

“Looks can be deceiving.” Using his fingernail, he scraped off a chunk of dirt. “It looks a little shiny.”

“We need something to polish it.”

Sharky untucked his shirt and rubbed the spot. A glimmer of gold appeared. “Sure enough. This belongs to Elvira.”

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Millie eyed the bag with interest. “How many gold nuggets are in there?”

“Enough to make it worth her while to hide them.”

The doorknob rattled.

Sharky shoved the nugget inside the bag and held his finger to his lips. He motioned for Millie to follow him to a hiding spot a few feet away.

They made it just in time to see Elvira scurry around the corner. She stopped in front of the spot where Sharky had found the bag and swooped down to grab it.

“What the?” Elvira fell to her knees, frantically feeling around.

Sharky stepped out from behind the pipe, dangling the black bag in his hand. “Looking for this?”

Elvira jerked back, her eyes round as saucers. “I...uh. What are you doing here?”

“A better question is...who gave you permission to sneak into a restricted area and use it as your hiding spot?”

“I-I...well...you see. I needed to keep my find on the down-low,” she stammered.

Millie emerged. “To keep your boyfriend from finding out how much gold you actually found?”

“The thing is, I mean, you have a lot of friends, people I don’t know. Not to mention those room stewards, the cleaning ninjas, are everywhere.”

“Everywhere in passenger cabins.” Sharky rolled his eyes. “No one comes and cleans my cabin. It’s my responsibility.”

A flicker of skepticism filled Elvira’s eyes. “Seriously? I would think having someone take care of your cabin, keeping it neat and tidy, would be a given.”

“You thought wrong. The housekeeping department comes in every few months to do a deep cleaning. The rest of the time, it’s all on me.”

“Elvira Cobb,” Millie scolded. “Those friends you seem so worried about, including me, spent our own time, what little we have when we’re not working, trying to save your neck and this is the thanks we get?”

Elvira hung her head. “I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You were thinking you would pull a fast one, smuggle your gold out of Whittier, and no one would be the wiser.” Sharky clenched his jaw. “I hate to say it, but I’m seeing you in an entirely different light and not necessarily a good one.”

“I’m sorry,” she apologized. “It was uncool of me to hide it from you.”

“You two discuss this in private. Let me know if we’re still on for heading to the stakeout site.” Millie whispered, “good luck,” in Sharky’s ear and took off.

She ran upstairs to pre-record “Fun Times at Nine with Millie.” After finishing, she treated herself to a shot of caffeine from the specialty coffee shop, along with a gourmet banana nut muffin, and made her early morning rounds.

All the while, she monitored her cell phone, waiting for Sharky's call to let her know if the stakeout was a go, or if he'd decided he'd had enough of Elvira's antics, helped pack her bags and escorted her off the ship.

The small clue bouncing around in the back of her mind from the previous night continued nagging her, but no matter how hard she tried, Millie couldn't figure it out.

Finally, at quarter past seven, Sharky sent a text letting her know the surveillance mission was still on. She promptly ran upstairs and swapped out her work uniform for street clothes. Reaching the gangway, Millie found a somber Sharky and a sullen Elvira waiting.

"Thanks for meeting us, Millie. Elvira has something she wants to say."

Elvira blew air through thinned lips. "I'm sorry...genuinely sorry I didn't trust you enough to let you know I found gold."

"Sharky mentioned you had found some. One would only conclude you wouldn't leave it behind. As you pointed out, we have a lot of people...crewmembers on board the ship. Having said that, you need to trust someone. At the very least, trust your boyfriend, who has been trying to help you," Millie lectured.

"I know, and I'm truly, truly sorry. Please don't tell the others what I did."

"Apology accepted." Millie made a zipping motion across her lips. "My lips are sealed. Moving on, we should hit the road."

Elvira brightened. "Thanks, Millie. You're as awesome as Sharky says. In fact, you're a lot like Carlita. Between you and me, she's put up with a lot of my cockamamie antics over the years."

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“We have the patience of saints,” Millie joked.

It was a short trek from the gangway to Elvira’s old jalopy. Millie climbed in the back and set her bag next to her. “Do you really believe there’s a chance whoever was behind Wanda’s attack and your break in will show up?”

“The DNR is closing the roads leading to the mining sites tonight. If they’re gonna make a move, it will be today. The closings coincide with it being the last day of the show’s taping. They either hit it hard or wait until spring.” Elvira reached the end of the port’s parking lot and turned left. “Wanda texted. She’s outside waiting for us.”

“You two must be good friends for her to drop the charges,” Millie said.

“She knows it wasn’t me. Wanda and I have a lot in common. You know the saying, ‘birds of a feather.’” Elvira glanced in the rearview mirror. “I would like to mention something else.”

“What?” Millie asked.

“Wanda thinks I only found a small chunk of gold.”

“You want to keep it from her? I thought you were partners.”

“We partnered after I found the nuggets. Therefore, I don’t consider what I already found to be part of our partnership.”

“It’s your call.” Millie shook her head. “To be honest, I’m glad I’m not your partner.”

Taking a shortcut down a side street, they arrived at Wanda's apartment complex in no time and found her standing on the sidewalk. As soon as the truck stopped, she hopped in the back. "Thanks for picking me up. I called Alex and Carter this morning to confirm the show's filming was wrapping up today."

"Smart move. It's good to make sure we have all of our ducks in a row." Millie shot her a side glance. "Aren't you a part of the show?"

"I was. They're doing a final take and I wasn't in it." Wanda tapped her bandage. "Probably a good thing with this little gem. I called Neil to let him know we might be onto something. He's hanging around the courthouse with papers in hand."

"Who is Neil?"

"My brother."

"He's a cop," Elvira added.

"He's going to get a search warrant as soon as we confirm Carter is behind the attack and has gone to our special spot. It gives the cops probable cause, clearing the way for them to search for evidence," Wanda explained.

"All of which hinges on him showing up, and if there's evidence to find," Millie pointed out. "That's a lot of ifs."

"Even if we don't find anything, at least we tried," Elvira said.

Passing through the tunnel, they turned onto a dirt road Millie had never noticed during their previous trips. She peered out the window. "Are you sure we're going the right way?"

“Positive.” Wanda explained the shortcut to Mount Baldie was relatively unknown and only a handful of locals knew about it. To her knowledge, the route hadn’t been shared with the production crew. “We’ll be driving up from the opposite side, so there’s no chance we’ll be spotted.”

The road narrowed. Deep ruts appeared, forcing Elvira to slow to a crawl and jostling the truck’s occupants despite straddling as many of the pockets as possible.

“I would hate to break down out here,” Sharky said.

“Or run out of gas.”

“We have plenty, a quarter tank.”

Millie stared at Elvira. “You’re kidding.”

Sharky leaned over to check the gauges. “Actually, it’s more like an eighth of a tank.”

“Don’t you think it would have been a good idea to make sure we had plenty of gas?”

“I’m giving this clunker back to Otis. You think I should fill the tank for him too?” Elvira asked incredulously. “I’m a generous person, but not that generous.”

They continued at a snail’s pace, climbing higher and higher while the trees and clumps of brush grew thicker. Finally, she pulled off and into a small clearing. “This is it. We’ll have to hoof it the rest of the way.”

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Millie grabbed her bag, exited the vehicle, and met up with the others near the front.

Elvira patted her backpack. "Time to hit the trail."

Millie let the others take the lead, slowly following behind. A feeling of dread settled in the pit of her stomach. Something told her she was going to regret this stakeout. She hoped for once she was wrong.

Chapter 26

"We might as well get comfortable." Elvira eased in behind a towering pine tree. Crossing her legs, she set her backpack in front of her. "I figure we have half an hour before the crew starts their final taping, giving whoever attacked Wanda...aka Carter...the opportunity to show up to search this area."

Millie perched on a boulder a few feet away, hidden from view by a clump of scrub brush. "You seem certain he'll show."

"Because he's running out of time. Besides, I dropped plenty of clues and CTA. There's no way he won't."

"CTA," Sharky repeated. "Can't tell anyone hints?"

"Call to action. Any last-ditch effort to find something will have to be today. Whoever attacked Wanda knows she and I are hot on the trail of finding gold."

"Or at least have a general idea of the vicinity," Sharky said.

Wanda settled in next to Elvira. “I have my emergency remote phone ready to call my brother. As soon as we get a visual, he’ll secure his search warrant and bam!” She slapped her palms together. “We’ll have proof. My brother once worked as an undercover cop. He knows how to get the goods and get them fast.”

“I hope you’re right.” Millie watched Elvira unzip her backpack and begin rummaging around inside. She removed several Siren of the Seas’ RTG meal bags, one right after another. “You brought food.”

“Breakfast. I didn’t have time to grab something earlier and I’m starving,” she said.

“Even though grabbing breakfast is the reason why you left this morning while I took a shower.” Sharky gave his girlfriend a pointed stare.

Elvira had the decency to look slightly embarrassed. “I was running behind after taking care of a few errands.”

“Giving yourself permission to access an unauthorized area of the ship,” he reminded her.

Wanda sat quietly watching the couple bicker. “Something tells me there’s a story here.”

“You don’t want to know,” Millie said. “Trust me.”

“I brought enough food for everyone. Call it my peace offering.” Elvira handed out the ready-to-go-meals. “Annette hooked us up.”

“I had to hustle to get out the door as well.” Millie took the bag of food. “Thank you.”

“It must be pretty awesome living on a cruise ship.” Wanda unwrapped her breakfast sandwich and inspected the contents. “Ham, egg, and cheese on a ciabatta bun. Yummy.”

“Along with fresh fruit.” Millie opened the plastic bag and popped a grape into her mouth. “Amit and Annette do a great job of making sure the RTG meals are balanced and nutritious.”

“Even the healthy stuff is tasty.” Sharky peeled back the lid on his yogurt. “Did I ever tell you that Annette and I once dated?”

“Annette from the ship, Annette?” Elvira asked. “No. I don’t recall you ever mentioning it.”

“It was a long time ago.”

“What happened?”

“We didn’t connect romantically.”

“And now she’s dating Jose Juan Carlos what’s-his-name aka Gary.”

“You don’t like him?” Sharky asked.

Millie tipped her hand back and forth. “I’m on the fence. I heard he dumped Annette, transferred to another ship, and now he’s back. What about you? You worked on Siren of the Seas when he was here before. Did you know him?”

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Sharky belched loudly. “Excuse me. That one came out of nowhere. He had a reputation for being a womanizer.”

“And now? Are you hearing the same thing now?” Millie’s inkling of concern over her friend’s budding romance skyrocketed.

“Nothing yet. Although I’ll keep my ear to the ground,” Sharky said. “I would hate to know he’s mistreating her.”

“Annette doesn’t strike me as the kind of person to put up with a cheater,” Elvira said.

“She isn’t,” Millie said. “But clearly there’s something about him she’s attracted to.”

“You can’t fake a genuine attraction,” Sharky said. “As far as Annette and I are concerned, we realized we were better friends than lovers.”

Millie, who had bitten down on another grape, started choking. Cough. Cough.

“Are you okay?” Wanda patted her on the back.

“Yeah,” Millie croaked. “I was getting a visual of Annette and Sharky as lovers.”

“Hard to visualize, eh?” Elvira chuckled. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Sharky scowled. “What’s so hard about visualizing Annette and me having a romantic relationship?”

“You’re both good friends, not to mention it was a long time ago. A lot has happened since then.” Millie wisely changed the subject and motioned to Wanda. “Your color is much better this morning. How are you feeling?”

“Almost back to a hundred percent.” Wanda lifted the corner of her bandage and showed them her purple lump. “I don’t know what my attacker used, but whatever it was, he or she had a wicked hook.”

Millie stared at her. “What did you say?”

“I said I don’t know what my attacker used, but he or she had a wicked hook.”

“Did the police ever find a weapon?”

“Nope,” Wanda said. “Neil thought it might have been a tire iron.”

“Or a crowbar.” Millie’s mind whirled. This was it. This was the clue that had been bouncing around in her head after they ate at the bar the previous night. “I know who attacked you.”

“Who?”

“Lyle Gardner.”

Wanda blinked rapidly. “Lyle who owns Bay Bar & Grill?”

“No one has mentioned the weapon used to attack you. It hasn’t been found,” Millie said. “Yet I specifically remember him saying something about a crowbar.”

Elvira and Wanda exchanged a glance.

“What is it?”

“Wanda and I have been meeting up every night at the bar to compare notes. Lyle is always working. He’s chatty, asking a lot of questions. I figured he was curious about the show, but maybe it was our gold mining.”

“Do you recall discussing specifics while you were there?” Sharky asked. “Maybe you said something. He happened to be listening in and took note.”

“Mount Baldie has been a hotspot for decades,” Wanda said. “The buzz around Whittier has always been this specific area was rumored to have gold.”

“It’s massive, with miles and miles of ground to cover.”

“Ground where you and Wanda happened to find a promising spot,” Millie said. “It’s possible he overheard you talking about finding gold and planned to stake a claim.”

Sharky picked up. “He needed to get you out of the way so he could claim it for himself. You two got into an argument at the bar. Lyle saw his chance when he watched Wanda leave.”

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“And me head to the bathroom,” Elvira said. “He probably slipped out the kitchen’s back door where he wouldn’t be seen and attacked her, not to kill her, but to take her down.”

“Because time was running out,” Millie said. “The roads and mining areas were only hours away from being shut down for the season. He’s the one who told the authorities you two had argued. The cops arrest you. Wanda is in the hospital leaving your so-called honey hole wide open for him to dig.”

Sharky shoved the rest of his breakfast sandwich in his mouth and scrambled to his feet. “If the bar owner shows up, we’ll know we have our guy.”

“If he didn’t throw the weapon away, there’s almost a one hundred percent chance the crowbar is at the bar, in his vehicle, or at his house,” Millie said.

Wanda patted her walkie-talkie. “Neil is itching to nab my attacker. All I have to do is say the word.”

“As soon as we have a visual, make the call.” Millie shaded her eyes and surveyed their surroundings. “You’re sure this is the right spot?”

“One hundred percent.” Wanda stepped in beside her and pointed to a dirt path and a narrow incline. “There are two ways to the spot. They intersect at this location. Veering off the path will get you lost pretty darn quick.”

While they waited for Lyle to show up, Millie tried to envision what sort of person he was. Attacking a local, someone he knew. Swooping in and helping himself to their

claim. If this was the case, she wondered what else he might be capable of.

Sharky consulted his watch for the umpteenth time. “Are you sure this is the last day?”

“Very last,” Wanda confirmed. “At sundown, the DNR will close the roads.”

“I’ll bet people disobey the rules and sneak back here,” Elvira said.

“Like you would try to do?” Millie joked.

“I won’t lie. I might be tempted.”

“Tempted and caught. The DNR patrols these sites. If you get caught, you’ll pay a hefty fine and they’ll confiscate whatever you found and is in your possession.”

Elvira clutched her gut. “The punishment seems extreme.”

“You have to understand, when the weather turns, the idiots who come out here end up risking the lives of rescuers. It’s to set an example and discourage others from trying it.”

“It makes sense. Rules should apply to everyone without exception,” Millie said. “It’s not fair to those who obey, while others don’t.”

Wanda began waving her arms in the air. “I see someone coming,” she hissed.

Millie ducked down, watching as a figure appeared on the horizon. At first, the person was too far away, but as they drew closer, she realized it was Lyle Gardner.

Wanda must’ve recognized him at the same time. She reached for her radio and hit

the side button. “Hey, Neil. It’s Lyle Gardner. I repeat. Lyle Gardner who owns Bay Bar & Grill.”

Thank goodness the group was a safe distance away...too far for him to hear Wanda talking.

Neil’s reply was prompt. “Dispatching officers now to his vehicle at the trailhead and the bar. Will keep you posted.”

“10-4.” Wanda adjusted the volume, turning it down. “Should we go chase him down?”

“No way.” Millie shook her head. “He could be armed.”

Elvira stood in a small clearing and snapped a picture of him right before he disappeared around the bend. “I can’t believe it’s Lyle. All this time, I thought he was a cool dude.”

“He’s a cool dude with motive and opportunity,” Millie said. “With any luck, your brother will get the evidence. We can wrap up this mystery and be back on board the Siren of the Seas with plenty of time before we set sail.”

Chapter 27

“I don’t know how I can ever repay you guys for helping save my butt,” Elvira said. “I thought I was gonna be stuck in Alaska for months.”

“Wanda was the one who set you free,” Millie reminded her. “Catching Lyle helped save your honey hole.”

“Once we discovered the bar’s owner might be behind the attack, the authorities

obtained a search warrant,” Millie said. “Lyle Gardner never even realized he’d slipped and mentioned the crowbar, the weapon no one knew about.”

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“Poor Carter,” Elvira said. “I feel bad for thinking he was behind it when I saw him trying my doorknob.”

“It was merely a matter of narrowing down the suspects,” Danielle said. “Not only Carter, but also the members of the mining group and filming crew.”

Elvira shook her head in disgust. “I could kick myself. I should have installed a surveillance camera on day one and avoided all of this. What kind of PI / security services owner am I?”

“A distracted one.” Sharky gave her a quick hug. “You have a one track mind, my sugar blossom. You were hot on the hunt for the gold, not realizing Lyle made it a point to eavesdrop on the miners’ conversations when they were at his bar.”

“You may have already told me, but why did you think Carter Morley was involved to begin with, before Elvira saw him trying her door?” Cat asked.

“Sharky and I went over to Wanda’s apartment to look around. We happened to run into her neighbor when we got stuck in the elevator. She told us Wanda had visitors and described both Alex Smith and Carter Morley.”

“Which in itself isn’t a huge red flag seeing how they were working together on the gold mining show,” Annette said.

“At least it was a starting point.” Danielle picked up. “Millie and I did some digging around and found out one of Carter’s family members owned Morley Mines. Fast forward...Wanda confirmed Carter was Gold Morley’s grandson. He’d filled his head

with tales about gold near Mount Baldie.”

“While we were all distracted, thinking it was Carter, Lyle was hot on the trail of my honey hole.”

“So Lyle’s surveillance camera was the one we found in your window?” Millie asked.

“Yep,” Elvira said. “Little did Wanda or I know he was spying on us, spying on all of us. He knew we were onto something and decided he needed us out of the picture.”

“The night when the entire crew and miners were at the bar, he witnessed Elvira and Wanda arguing and saw his opportunity to get rid of them both, leaving the Mount Baldie gold mining spot wide open,” Sharky said. “Wanda would be in the hospital—or dead—and Elvira would be in jail.”

“He didn’t anticipate my babe’s determination to help figure out he was behind it,” Elvira said proudly.

“Along with Millie and my other friends,” Sharky reminded her. “I couldn’t have done it without them.”

“The cops found a crowbar with a splotch of blood in Lyle’s dumpster and have sent it in for DNA testing. The authorities dropped the charges against me, although Wanda had already gotten that in the works.” Elvira pulled a crumpled paper from her pocket and waved it in the air. “I’m sure you’re probably wondering why I seem to be taking all of this in stride.”

“The thought had crossed my mind,” Millie said. “I have to admit, I figured you would stay behind to keep an eye on your spot.”

“I secured the site via the county and BLM.”

“What is BLM?” Danielle asked.

“It stands for Bureau of Land Management. They’re the ones who process claims to the gold-mining sites. Wanda and I need to protect our territory. I’m almost certain there’s enough gold for both of us.” Elvira told them they planned to partner. Wanda would handle the crew while she would be more hands off.

“Are you sure you trust her?” Millie wrinkled her nose. “I mean, it was touch-and-go for a while there. You weren’t exactly the best of friends.”

“Nah.” Elvira waved dismissively. “She’s cool. We even decided to bring in a third partner.”

“A third partner?” Sharky echoed.

“Alex, the producer. He’s on the up and up. Besides, he’s the reason I got my foot in the door in the first place,” Elvira said. “I figured if I was gonna trust someone, it would be him.”

“I guess you’ll be coming back to Alaska,” Millie said.

“I plan to fly to Whittier and meet the new mining team when the season starts up again in the spring.”

“I’m sure the nuggets you brought on board will tide you over,” Millie said.

Elvira held a finger to her lips and lowered her voice. “We need to keep that on the down low.”

“No one here is after your gold,” Danielle said. “As far as your claim, we won’t be returning to Whittier anytime soon.”

“You don’t strike me as the type of person to sit idly by twiddling your thumbs. What will you do in the meantime?”

Elvira rubbed her palms together. “I have enough in Savannah to keep me busy. The archaeological team working over at Pete Taylor’s place should be wrapping the project up any day, and I’ll be counting my riches.”

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Millie's eyes widened. "They found treasure?"

"Not yet, but I can feel it in my bones." Elvira pulled a pen from her pocket. "I have Carlita's lucky pen right here. As soon as we get back home, the workers are going to find plenty of pirate's treasure, mark my words."

"I hope you're right," Millie said. "Like Danielle mentioned, Siren of the Seas won't be returning to Alaska. Hopefully, you'll be able to stay out of trouble next time."

"You know it." Elvira tapped the side of her forehead. "You can bet your bottom dollar...or in this case...chunk of gold that I'll be going over my next rental place in Alaska with a fine-tooth comb to make sure it isn't bugged."

"Which is probably a wise idea," Annette said.

"In the meantime." Elvira reached into her backpack and pulled out a pair of binoculars. "I figured I would head up to the promenade and check out the scenery. Cruising Alaska's inside passage is a once in a lifetime adventure."

"Adventure being the key word," Millie said.

The end.