



A Sterling Predicament (The Aspen Notch Mystery #9)

Author: *Kathleen McKee*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: When her sister vanishes, a mysterious nun turns to Sue for help.

Clare Dolan claims she's a missionary nun, but something doesn't add up. Is she real, or is she hiding something?

Alan and Sue meet Clare on a connecting flight from Japan, and when Clare learns they're from Aspen Notch, she eagerly requests a ride to visit her sister, Liz Sterling.

Upon arrival, Liz's house is empty, yet no one seems concerned. Sue and Alan offer Clare a place to stay, but as days pass, Clare's worry turns into panic. Determined to find her sister, Clare uncovers cryptic clues pointing to a mysterious "J.W." and turns to the SAJ Detective Agency for help.

Sue, ever the clever sleuth, joins Clare to piece together the puzzling hints. But every lead turns into a dead end, and Liz's disappearance only deepens. Is Liz hiding, or is something more sinister at play?

If you enjoy a cozy mystery, a touch of romance, and a woman sleuth with an uncanny ability to make connections, you'll love Kathleen McKee's 9th book of the Aspen Notch Mystery Series. Join Sue for her latest adventure in A Sterling Predicament.

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Chapter One

Alan stood in line at the fast-food eatery near our gate at the O'Hare airport while I saved his seat and watched our carry-on luggage. We had another hour to wait to board our flight to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton, and thought we should get some food to tide us over until we arrived home in Aspen Notch, Pennsylvania.

I watched as he wove his way through the horde of passengers disembarking from an arriving flight at the next gate. Now in his mid-sixties, my husband has remained strong, yet lean. We're close in age, but he's lucky to have a metabolism that allows him to eat anything without gaining weight.

Once he bypassed the crowd, I noticed him walking with a slight limp. His leg sometimes ached due to his being hit with a bullet in the line of duty several years ago, and I assumed that our lengthy flights didn't help matters.

"Thanks," I said when he handed me a soda and wrapped hamburger. "Is your leg bothering you?"

"A little, probably from sitting so long." He took a sip of his Coke and munched on a French fry from the sack. "Traveling to Japan was an adventure, but getting to and from... Let's just say I'll be happy to get home."

"Me, too." I recalled hesitating before we made our travel arrangements a month ago for that reason, though I would never have missed my son's wedding. Michael, who worked for a tech company in Silicon Valley, often traveled to Japan for work and, while there, he happened to fall in love with Suki. "Still," I added, "I'm glad we

went.”

He nodded his agreement. “I doubt I’d have ever seen Japan were it not for marrying you. You sure do make my life interesting.”

“I could say the same about you,” I teased. “I never thought about solving crimes until I met you.”

We both laughed before unwrapping our burgers and taking our first bites. I couldn’t help thinking about my good luck in finding someone to share my life during our golden years. I met Alan almost four years ago at the Alpine Holiday Lodge where we each had booked a reservation: he to spend the two weeks before Christmas skiing, and me to envelop myself in the cozy warmth of a festive environment.

Unfortunately, I ended up in a blizzard on the way to the lodge, then someone accused me of theft. I needed help to clear my name, so the fact that Alan had police credentials convinced me to work with him despite my initial reservations.

Luckily, we resolved our differences and, together, solved a few police cases—including mine. In the process, we fell in love.

Our spouses had died years before and, although neither of us expected to marry again, we decided to tie the knot and spend our remaining years together. Except for a few rough patches as we adapted to each other’s quirks, we definitely made the right decision.

We sold our own homes and bought a new one in Aspen Notch, Pennsylvania—a small town in the Pocono mountains. Initially, Alan served as the interim chief of police, and I started a garden shop in the old log cabin on our property. He has since retired and dusted off his licensure to open the SAJ Detective Agency, using the acronym for our names, Sue and Alan Jaworski.

Since I enjoyed sleuthing, I could finally work with him on a case.

I had just reached my hand into the sack with the container of French fries when the airline agent announced a slight delay for our flight. After an audible sigh, I said, “I suppose we should have taken Alexa up on her invitation to stay with her and Jack when we landed in Denver.”

“We’ll be glad we didn’t when we sleep in our own bed tonight.” Alan looked as though he wanted to convince himself or, maybe, assure me that my daughter and her husband were just as happy to have reached their final destination. “You might want to let Jessica know our flight is delayed.”

“I’m supposed to text her when we start to board the plane. It probably doesn’t matter because they’re bringing Sean, and you know he’ll want to watch the jets on the tarmac.”

Alan chuckled. “I have to admit that I’ve missed that kid.”

“Me, too.” I crumpled my sandwich wrapper while thinking how much I enjoyed having my granddaughter, Jessica, living next door to Alan and me. She had married Ryan Hoffman the previous fall and became stepmother to his young son, Sean. In two months, if all went well, she’d give birth to her first child.

My daughter, Alexa, and I could hardly wait.

A woman, perhaps in her late fifties, took the seat next to me and interrupted my thoughts. “Is this the gate for the flight to Scranton?”

I nodded. “Yes, although the plane is delayed.”

“How long?” she asked.

“We don’t know. I guess they’ll keep us posted.”

“Do you think I have enough time to go to the restroom?”

“I suppose so,” I replied, trying to be helpful. Although the flight placard hadn’t been updated and the representative was no longer in sight, the woman didn’t have far to walk to the ladies’ room.

“Thanks. I’ll leave my carry-on bag here if you don’t mind keeping an eye on it for a few minutes.”

She scurried off before I could suggest that she take it with her. After all, numerous posted signs warned passengers to keep all personal belongings in sight. Alan merely pursed his lips, shook his head, and gathered our trash for the receptacle.

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It was my luck that the bathroom lady had the assigned seat next to mine on our flight from Chicago to Scranton, and she liked to talk. Since she had the window seat, I hoped she’d want to watch the clouds, but she seemed to prefer gabbing with me. Alan, however, pushed back in his aisle seat and promptly fell asleep .

“I should introduce myself,” she commented after the flight attendant demonstrated the emergency features of the plane. “I’m Clare Dolan from Chicago and I’m on my way to visit my sister. She lost her husband last month, God rest his soul, so she’s feeling rather lonely.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I replied. “I’m Sue Jaworski from Aspen Notch, Pennsylvania.”

“What a small world! That’s exactly where I’m headed. Do you happen to know

Elizabeth Sterling? That's my sister, although we call her Lizzie." She gave a slight titter of laughter and leaned over to add, "She's always involved in some charity or another, so I call her 'busy Lizzie.'"

I didn't know what to say, so I smiled my acknowledgement and reached for the magazine in the seat pocket in front of me.

"What brought you to Chicago?" she asked.

"It's the hub for our connecting flight from Los Angeles, then Denver." I thought about telling her my daughter and her husband lived there, but that would only encourage Clare to keep gabbing. Instead, I kept my eyes on the magazine.

She didn't get the hint. "Oh, my goodness! You went all the way from Pennsylvania to California. Do you also have family out there?"

"We do. My son works in Silicon Valley, but he just got married in Tokyo. We attended the wedding."

"You went to Japan?" she exclaimed. "That's fascinating! How long did you stay?"

"We were there for a week, but it took two days going and another two days returning. It was a wonderful experience, yet my husband and I will be happy to get home."

"That's always the way, isn't it? Excited to go and happy to leave. There's a saying about visitors stinking like fish after three days. I can't remember who said that, but it's true."

I put the magazine on my lap and turned to her. "I have to admit that I already miss my son, Michael. He married a sweet Japanese girl and, though they plan to live in

California, I doubt we'll see them very often."

"I know what you mean. Well, not exactly because I never had any children, but I haven't seen my sister in twenty-five years. Of course, we occasionally talk on the phone, yet we're not getting any younger. One of us had to make the first move, so I booked this flight."

"She doesn't know you're coming?" I asked.

"Yes, she does, although I couldn't reach her this week to remind her."

"How are you getting from Scranton to Aspen Notch?"

"If she's not there to pick me up, I'll rent a car," she replied without hesitation. "It looks as if it might be an hour's drive."

"That's about right," I nodded. "Do you need directions?"

She patted the handbag on her lap and smiled. "No, I'll use the map app on my phone, but thank you." After nibbling her bottom lip for a moment, she asked, "Is the route complicated?"

Clare conveyed a dichotomy to me. She radiated an aura of confidence, as if she'd held a position of prominence at one time, then it disappeared behind a shadow of anxiety. It made me want to take her under my wing.

"I find the convergence of the interstate highways a little confusing," I said, "although it's easy driving after you get beyond those. If you'd like, you can follow us."

"Are you renting a car as well?" she queried .

“No, my granddaughter and her husband will pick us up.”

“You’re very lucky.” She smiled nervously. “Would there be room in your car for one more? Just in case.”

Taken by surprise, I paused as I mentally calculated seating arrangements. “I’m sure we could work it out,” I stammered.

“You’re such a dear.” This time, her smile looked ecstatic.

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Chapter Two

Alan awoke when a flight attendant reminded passengers to place seats in their upright position and prepare for landing. He yawned before complying, then turned to me, “What did I miss?”

“A bag of mini-pretzels and a beverage of your choice.”

He grinned. “I’m surprised I slept through the meal service. Are we really almost home?”

“We are, and the pilot made good time.” Clare blocked my view of our proximity to the ground, yet her silhouette reminded me to tell Alan we might have a guest in the car for our drive to Aspen Notch. “Have you met Clare Dolan?” I asked him.

Hearing her name, she turned from the window to face him. My husband gave a pleasant smile as he said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Alan Jaworski.”

“Clare happens to be going to Aspen Notch and asked if she might hop a ride with us instead of renting a car.”

“No problem,” Alan said. “Are you visiting family? ”

“Yes, my sister, Elizabeth Sterling. She lives on Church Street.”

“As do we,” Alan replied. “The name sounds familiar, though I can’t put a face on her.”

“Alan used to be the police chief in Aspen Notch,” I explained. “He knows just about everyone in town.”

A slight bump, then a roar of the engines signaled our touchdown on the tarmac. I squeezed Alan’s hand, feeling relieved to be on firm ground.

Once the plane came to a complete stop, Alan reached to the overhead bins and retrieved our carry-on bags, including the one Clare had asked me to watch earlier. We waited our turn to disembark, then followed the line of passengers to the terminal.

“Alan and I checked our suitcases,” I told Clare after texting Jessica that our plane had arrived, “so we need to go to baggage claim.”

“Same here,” she replied, “although I’d like to stop at the ladies’ room, if you don’t mind.”

“Me, too,” I agreed.

Afterwards, I spotted Jessica and Sean at the bottom of the escalator and waved to them. “That’s my granddaughter and great-grandson,” I explained to Clare. She smiled and waved, too.

“Welcome home!” they called. I didn’t care if we caused a scene as we hugged and kissed.

“Did you bring me a present?” Sean asked.

“That wasn’t polite,” Jess scolded. “You can help find their bags on the carousel since your father’s waiting in the car for us.”

He and Alan scooted ahead while I introduced Clare to my granddaughter. I had no

idea how we'd all fit into Alan's SUV that Ryan used for our pickup, but I knew we could manage.

Luckily, Clare was slender and petite.

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We probably looked like the Keystone Cops when all six of us crammed into our seating positions after tossing our bags into the rear bay. Since ours was the only incoming flight at the time, not too many drivers honked for us to get moving. Still, we didn't want to hold up traffic.

With Ryan already behind the steering wheel, Alan jumped into the front passenger seat. I introduced Clare to my grandson-in-law and explained that we'd drop her off at her sister's home on Church Street.

"My purse is in the back," she replied, "but I think it's number 147."

"That's just down the street from us," he noted. "It's no problem at all."

"You've saved me from having to find my way there, so I thank you. Do you happen to know my sister, Liz Sterling?"

"I can't say that I do," Ryan said. "Anyone else?"

We all shook our heads. "How long has she lived in Aspen Notch?" I asked.

"I guess about thirty years."

"That's a long time," Sean commented. "We've only lived in Aspen Notch for like two years. Right, Dad?"

“Right, son.”

“Where did you live before?” Clare asked.

“My dad and I lived in Massachusetts with my first mother, but she died and now Jess is my new mother. We live in the house next to G-G and G-P, and I’m going to have a baby sister pretty soon.”

She smiled to hear his news. “You’re very lucky.”

He scrunched his nose. “Not really because girls are weird, but I’ll teach her cool stuff.”

Jessica, changing the subject, asked me what I thought about Japan. She’d wanted to join us on the trip, but didn’t want to miss Sean’s first week in second grade.

“It’s a beautiful country with fascinating traditions,” I replied. “Suki’s parents welcomed us to their home, then took us to sightseeing places in and around Tokyo. We were on the go for the entire trip.”

“What’s a sightseeing place?” Sean asked.

Alan turned from the front seat to reply. “It’s something famous to see, like the Empire State Building in New York City.”

Sean shrugged. “I never saw that. Do they have an empire building in Japan?”

“Not exactly, but sort of,” Alan replied. “We went to the Bunkyo Civic Center in Tokyo—that’s the capital of Japan—where we took an elevator to the observation deck and had a pretty good view of Mount Fuji.”

“You mean like a mountain to go skiing?”

“Yes, although I don’t know if anyone skis on it. Maybe they do since it has snow on the top. We got you a t-shirt with a picture of Mount Fuji and, perhaps, you can wear it for show-and-tell.”

“Second graders don’t do show-and-tell,” Sean huffed. “That’s for little kids.”

“Sorry,” Alan replied, hiding his smile. “I didn’t know.”

With Sean’s sudden silence, I gave a brief overview of the traditional wedding ceremony that had captivated me. “It was Shinto style, held at a beautiful shrine, and Suki looked gorgeous in her elaborate kimono.”

Sean found his voice again. “Is that a dress?”

“Yes, though you and I would probably consider it a robe,” I said. “It’s what Japanese people used to wear everyday in Japan. Nowadays, a kimono is worn for special occasions.”

“You saw Suki’s kimono in the photos Mimi sent,” Jessica remarked.

“Oh, I didn’t know what you meant.”

“We bought one for everyone in the family as a souvenir,” I said. “Of course, we didn’t splurge for the ones made of silk. Those are pretty expensive.”

Sean frowned. “I’m not wearing a dress. Only girls wear dresses.”

“Men in Scotland wear kilts,” Ryan stated. “They’re skirts, and the colors in the plaid fabric indicated how people from different clans knew their kinsmen.”

“That’s true,” Jess agreed. “We should ask Irene’s husband, Ian, if he has a kilt he could show Sean. That would be cool.”

“Ah,” Clare sighed. “I love pictures of rugged Scotsmen in kilts. They’re quite handsome, don’t you think?”

Those of us in the back seat stared at her. I even caught Ryan’s wide eyes from the rear-view mirror.

Clare didn’t seem to notice the attention she’d garnered. She sighed aloud before saying, “I’ve watched every episode of Outlander.”

That brought an end to my description of Michael and Suzi’s wedding because Jess and Clare began comparing the novel and the film version. Sean, in the middle, leaned forward to talk to his dad and Alan, and I watched the blur of the countryside until we reached our exit off the interstate.

Thinking Clare might want an introduction to our town, I pointed out some of the shopping centers and convenience stores leading to Main Street. Sean interrupted to tell her about the rest area where a tree fell on their camper.

“Oh, my!” she exclaimed. “Did you get hurt?”

“No, but my dad had to go to the hospital. Sue and Alan and Sophie took care of me.”

“Who’s Sophie?” she asked.

“That’s our dog, and you don’t have to be scared because she’s a good girl. I trained her that way.”

“I love dogs,” Clare replied with a pleasant smile. “Sadly, I might not meet her since

you're dropping me off at my sister's home."

"OK, but if you do see her, rub her belly. She likes that."

"Good to know," Clare said before watching the view from her window.

Ryan drove slowly through town, highlighting buildings of interest such as our bakery, library, pizza shop, police station, gift shop, and Dottie's Café. At our corner of Main Street and Church Street, he explained that the log cabin was the original home of Abe Whitman, the town's founder, and now served as my garden shop, Butterflies and Blooms.

"It all makes me feel as if I'm going back in time," Clare noted. "Aspen Notch is such a quaint town."

Ryan located 147 Church Street, not too far down the block and on the opposite side of the street from our homes. He pulled into the driveway, then helped carry her bags to the front porch. She rang the bell before turning to call her thanks and wave us off.

I could only hope she had the right house.

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Chapter Three

Ryan helped Alan carry our bags inside while Jessica and Sean went next door to get Sophie and bring her home. I walked across the lawn to check on Butterflies and Blooms , which had closed for the day. I didn't bother to go inside since I knew Lydia Perkins, my assistant, would have taken care of everything, so I just peeked through the side window.

My shop looked neat and well-stocked, with nothing out of place. Satisfied that I needn't do anything related to work until noon the next day, I turned toward our mailbox at the curb and noticed Clare still standing on her sister's porch.

Too far apart for her to hear me calling, I crossed the street and walked toward 147. "Is everything OK?"

Clare shook her head with an expression of frustration. "I've rung the bell numerous times and tried calling Lizzie's phone to no avail. Perhaps I shouldn't have come after all."

"You said she stays busy, so she might have had to go out. You're welcome to wait for her at my house. "

"I thought I'd just stay on the porch until she comes home."

"Nonsense," I replied. "It's supper time and we'll probably order pizza from Franco's, so come on over and I'll walk back with you later."

“I suppose I should,” she nodded. “I’ll leave my bags here and just bring my purse.” I knew she’d retrieved a small suitcase from baggage claim and she also had the carry-on that I watched for her at the O’Hare airport.

“Is that all you brought with you?” I asked.

“Other than a few changes of clothing, my nightgown, and a toothbrush, I didn’t think I’d need to bring anything else.”

“That’s great. Honestly, I’ve never been able to travel so lightly, no matter how often I’ve tried.”

She nodded but hadn’t smiled. “I didn’t know what kind of reception I’d get, so I didn’t plan to stay long. However, I never expected this silent treatment.” She sorrowfully shook her head and placed her phone in her purse. “I hate to be such a bother to you and your family.”

“It’s no bother at all,” I said, leading her down the steps. “I imagine we’ll have a bit of chaos since Alan and I have been away for almost two weeks, but it’s all in good fun.”

Clare didn’t respond and I didn’t press her for information. She looked worried enough, as I would be if I’d flown out to see my daughter in Colorado and she didn’t greet me at the door.

Was Elizabeth expecting her sister? I didn’t know what to make of the situation, although it didn’t seem like anything more than crossed wires.

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Clare and I entered my house to find my husband resting in the living room recliner,

Sean feeding Sophie near the back door, and Jess putting paper plates and napkins on the kitchen island. Alan opened his eyes to say, “I called in our order for pizzas and Ryan went to pick them up. Is everything OK?”

“Clare’s sister must have gone out,” I replied. “She’ll eat with us, then meet up with her later.”

“Good,” Alan nodded. “Hope you like pizza.”

“Of course,” she replied. “More importantly, I’m grateful for your hospitality. You’ve been more than kind.”

Alan smiled congenially. “No problem. We enjoy making new friends.”

I showed Clare to our guest bathroom where she could freshen up, then went to see if Jess needed any help. From my view of her standing at the sink, she definitely looked pregnant, much more so than when we left for Japan. “How are you feeling?” I asked.

“Great! The doctor told me that Jolene and I are doing very well.”

Her infectious grin left me smiling. “You picked the baby’s name?”

“We did, and even Sean is happy about it.”

Sean looked at me with his expressive brown eyes. “Yeah, because I can call her Joe, and that’s a boy’s name.”

Jessica rolled her eyes. “Whatever,” she sighed.

She and I went to the living room sofa and made room for Clare when she returned from the bathroom. From there, we could watch Sean insist that Sophie “sit” and

“give a paw” before receiving her bowl of food.

“Your home is lovely,” Clare stated. “It’s so nice that you can participate in what’s going on in the kitchen while you relax in the living room.”

“It didn’t always look like this,” I said. “Alan and I decided on the open floor plan after we bought the house, which meant tearing down walls and painting every room.”

Sean called, “Guess what color the kitchen was.”

Clare raised her shoulders, questioning, “Yellow?”

“Nope, it was orange,” he boasted. “Really ugly orange.”

Alan opened his eyes to join in the conversation. “How do you know? You didn’t live in Aspen Notch when we moved here.”

“I know because I’ve heard G-G talk about it, like a thousand times.”

“That’s probably true,” Alan nodded, stifling a smile.

When Ryan arrived to place the two pizzas on the kitchen island, I suggested that we have a casual supper. “We can serve ourselves; and Ryan, we should have a new bag of potato chips in the cabinet. Would you open it, please?”

I held back until Jess helped Sean get settled, as did Clare, and I wondered what she thought of my kooky family. Eventually, we filled our plates and returned to the living room. “Do you often all eat together?” she asked.

“I suppose we do, depending on our schedules,” I replied. “Tonight is special because

Ryan and Jessica gave up part of their Sunday to pick us up at the airport.”

“We honestly didn’t mind, Mimi, and Sean had a chance to watch your plane land. You know he loves that.”

Jessica’s comment offered a great segue for Sean to tell us about his experience, which he did quite readily. After giving us a detailed description, he turned his attention to Clare .

“I’m going to be a pilot when I grow up,” he announced solemnly. “My dad’s grandfather was a pilot, and he was really brave because he flew planes in a war that had bombs and stuff. I don’t want to be that kind of pilot because it’s scary. Right, dad?”

“Right, son. Last I heard, you wanted to be a doctor-pilot.”

“Yeah. That’d be cool. I’ll fly planes to places where people are sick and I’ll make them better.”

Clare offered a solicitous smile. “That’s a good ambition. Do you know any doctor-pilots?”

“No,” Sean replied. “I met a real pilot one time and I was going to ask him if he was a doctor, but I forgot. My dad told me there are doctor-pilots, and he knows about stuff like that.”

“He’s definitely correct,” Clare said, “because I personally know two of them.”

“Wow! Can I meet them?”

“I’d love to introduce you, but they live very far away in a country called Uganda.”

“Is that near Japan?” Sean asked.

“No, it’s in Africa.”

“Did you visit someone there?” he questioned.

“No, I lived there as a missionary for twenty-five years.”

“What’s a missionary?”

“It’s a person who travels afar to help others. In my case, I opened a clinic and took care of sick people. Sometimes, though, I needed the doctor for someone’s serious injury, and he’d fly his plane to come help me.”

“Wow! That’s really cool!”

I paused, halfway between bites, and caught Alan’s eye. He’d raised an eyebrow with an expression of skepticism. Turning to Clare, I asked, “Are you a nun or something?”

“I am,” she replied, “as well as a physician’s assistant. I’m on a sabbatical and wanted to see my sister before I return to my clinic. Do you think she’s home yet?”

Ryan walked over to the front window and peered across the street. “There are no lights on at her house yet, though it’s still early. Would you like another slice of pizza?”

She handed him her paper plate. “I’d love one. Thank you.”

I had a million questions, although I suddenly felt tongue-tied. Sean, however, filled in my awkward silence with his own inquiries.

Clare kindly enthralled him with her stories about the bush pilot for the next hour.

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Chapter Four

When we had eaten our fill, Jessica collected our paper plates and napkins for the trash, then Ryan offered to take the empty pizza boxes to our bin in the garage. “It’s not quite dark, Sean, so you and Sophie can play in the yard for a few minutes.”

“I want to hear more about the doctor-pilot,” he argued.

“Well,” Ryan noted, “Sophie needs exercise, so maybe I’ll teach her a new trick while we’re out there.”

Sean frowned. “You can’t because that’s my job.”

“I can if you’re too busy.”

I gave Ryan credit for using psychology. His son could get fixated on a topic, though removing the situation usually resolved the issue. Clare helped when she explained that she had to leave, yet she hoped to see him again soon.

Sean reluctantly agreed before telling her that she should show him pictures of the doctor-pilot after school the next day. Sophie pushed past him to follow Ryan outside which led to the boy chasing the dog across the yard. Clare had barely enough time to respond, while the rest of us laughed at their hasty departure.

“Oh, my,” she sputtered. “He’s quite an imaginative child.”

Jess nodded. “Yes, he is, so thanks for entertaining him.”

“Children love stories,” she replied. “Now, I really must go, and I thank all of you for your hospitality.”

“I’ll walk over with you,” I offered.

“If you don’t need me for anything,” Jessica remarked, “I’m going home.”

Alan walked with her to the back door, thanking her for the ride from the airport and dog care while we were away. He called his appreciation to Ryan, as well, said goodnight to Sean, then whistled for Sophie to come in. After closing and locking the door, he turned to Clare and me, “I think I’ll join the two of you.”

“It’s really not necessary,” she commented. “If Lizzie’s not home yet, I’ll wait on the porch.”

From the front stoop, I didn’t see a light on inside Lizzie’s home and suggested that Clare try calling her sister again. It rang four times and went to voicemail, yet Clare didn’t bother leaving a message. “I can’t imagine where she’s been,” she sighed.

“When’s the last time you spoke with her?” Alan asked.

“Two weeks ago from my community’s Motherhouse in Chicago. That’s our headquarters in the United States. Anyway, I asked if she wanted me to visit, which she did, so I let her know when I booked my flight but haven’t been able to reach her since.”

As we walked, Alan remarked that it seemed strange her sister wouldn’t have returned Clare’s calls, and I verbally agreed.

“You have to remember,” she said, “I was in Africa and calls were expensive. When one or the other of us was busy, we didn’t expect a call back. We’d merely leave a

message.”

“Is that why you call her busy Lizzie?” I asked.

She chuckled softly. “She was like that as a child. Mom was older when Liz came along and she loved that my sister could occupy herself, even at a young age.”

“She’s younger than you?” Alan questioned.

“Yes, by almost ten years. She’ll be fifty in a few days, so I planned to stay until her birthday.”

“Her husband died pretty young,” Alan remarked casually after we crossed the street. “I guess I’m assuming they were close in age.”

“Yes, they were, and Ed’s death came as a shock. He died suddenly one Saturday at the golf course. Of course, my sister was devastated, as you can imagine.”

“I’m sure,” I murmured, not knowing what else to say. I didn’t feel the need since she had her phone out and pressed her sister’s number again.

“There’s still no answer,” she sighed. “Maybe there was an event at the country club and she’ll be home later. I’ll just wait here.”

“Could she have placed a key under the mat?” I suggested. Alan, with his police experience, would never have permitted such a custom, but plenty of people didn’t consider hiding a key in a typical place as a threat to their safety.

“I searched there first,” Clare said, “to no avail. It’s too dark to look anywhere else tonight.”

“It’s also getting too chilly for you to remain outside,” I remarked. “Come stay the night with us. We have a guest room, so you’ll be comfortable.”

Alan concurred. “You have your phone and can continue calling your sister. As soon as she gets home, you can head back over. It’s no big deal.”

Clare sighed again. “I suppose you’re right. Once again, Lizzie must be too busy to check her messages.”

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I heard the front door open, then close, just after dawn the next morning. Still groggy, the noise initially startled me until I remembered that Clare had spent the night.

Alan turned to glance at the clock. “I guess ‘busy Lizzie’ is home.”

“Probably,” I murmured sleepily, “yet I need another hour of dozing.” I leaned into his shoulder and immediately fell back to dreamland.

Two hours later, I heard Alan taking a shower and Sophie’s patter of paws on the hallway floor. Figuring she needed to go out, I arose and opened the bedroom door to greet her, though she merely hopped up to the bed. “Come on, girl. I’ll open the back door for you.”

I waited for her to follow me, stopping short at the kitchen.

Clare, sitting on a stool at the island, turned her gaze to me. “I hope I didn’t frighten you.”

I chuckled, embarrassed that she had. “I didn’t expect to see you here since I heard you leave early this morning.”

“You’re right, but my sister isn’t home yet. I searched for a key, then looked around for some sign that Lizzie lives at 147, which she apparently does because the mail in her curbside box is addressed to her. ”

“No key?”

She solemnly shook her head. “No, though I feel certain she has one hidden. I recall her telling me that she locked herself out of the house and swore it wouldn’t happen again. I’ll go back in a little while to search again and, perhaps, ask her neighbors if they know where she might be.”

“That’s a good idea. Let me get my shower, then I’ll make something for breakfast.”

“Don’t go to any trouble for me. I’ll continue saying my prayers while I watch the birds. Oh, and Sophie already did her business when I opened the back door for her earlier.”

I murmured my thanks before returning to my room and closing the door. I felt a twinge of something not yet defined, so I didn’t quite know what to say to Alan who sat on the bed to tie his shoes.

“What’s the matter?” he asked.

I frowned, then pointed to Sophie spread out on the bed. “We don’t have much of a watchdog,” I stated accusingly. She opened her eyes for a moment, then closed them.

“I heard you talking to Clare, so I guess she came back.”

“And Sophie didn’t bark. Not once.” I lowered my voice to a whisper. “Don’t you think that’s strange?”

Alan replied softly. “No, because Clare slept here and didn’t pose a threat to us.” He caught my eyes before saying, “I thought you liked her.”

“I did, but you don’t just leave a person’s house, then walk back in as if you lived there when you’re just a guest. What if she’s not who she says she is? How would we know?”

“I can run a background check if it would make you feel any better,” Alan suggested.

“Am I being silly?” I questioned. “Maybe I have jet lag. ”

“Probably, but you’re right. We were both too trusting, at least in this day and age. I’ll start breakfast while you get dressed, then we’ll take it from there.”

He brushed my lips with a kiss, which made me feel better, and headed to the kitchen with Sophie.

When I stepped into the shower, I urged the warm water to calm my overactive imagination. In no time at all, I relaxed with the memory of my son and his bride when they exchanged vows. It truly was a beautiful wedding ceremony.

Chapter Five

I found Alan and Clare chatting in the kitchen while he scrambled eggs and she buttered toast. Sophie had settled on the sofa in the living room, not even paying attention to the conversation. “Good morning to both of you,” I said in a cheerful voice while reaching for a mug in the cabinet by the sink.

Clare returned my smile, although hers probably appeared more genuine. “I was just telling Alan about how I grew up in Cincinnati, went to Catholic school, and babysat all the little kids in the neighborhood to earn spending money.”

I turned to her after pouring my coffee. “Oh, I thought you were from Chicago.”

“No, that’s where our Motherhouse is located. I’m an Ohio girl at heart.”

“Do you still have family there?” I asked.

“Distant relatives, but no one special. My father’s probably dead, although I don’t know since he took off when Liz was just a toddler. I think my mother eventually died of a broken heart; she always thought he’d come home.”

“Did you raise your sister?” Alan queried.

“Not exactly. Mom didn’t get sick until my second year in college. I guess Liz was in fifth or sixth grade at the time, and the poor kid did what she could to help out.”

I hesitated to ask about the nature of her mother’s illness since it wasn’t any of my

business. Instead, I said, “I’m sure it was a difficult time.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Mom continued to work as long as she could because she didn’t want me to drop out of school, though I transferred so I could live at home. I became fascinated with medicine during her last stages of treatment, so I changed my major to nursing and graduated with my BSN.”

When Alan turned off the burner under his skillet, I handed him three plates, then brought cutlery to the dining room table. He dished our eggs, and Clare added four toast points to each plate before we carried them to our places.

She continued her conversation while we ate, mostly due to Alan’s urging. “I lived at home after I graduated college, so I could help out, and took a job at St. Luke’s Hospital. Mom passed when Liz was a junior in high school, and we comforted each other.”

“You had custody of your sister?” Alan asked.

“Yes, though Liz didn’t make it difficult. She was involved with activities at school and earned a scholarship to Ohio State. We got along well, despite the differences in our ages.”

Her commentary didn’t raise any specific red flags for me. I wished I’d met Liz Sterling prior to Clare’s arrival because I didn’t feel able to make an informed judgment about the truth of her words. She said she was a nun, yet she didn’t look like one; she said they had a good relationship, yet couldn’t get in touch with her sister. It all seemed a bit fishy.

Alan probed for details. “How did you end up becoming a missionary?”

She sipped her coffee before responding. “I admired one of the sisters at St. Luke’s

and we became friends. Eventually, she invited me to accompany her to Chicago for a seminar, and we visited her Motherhouse during one of our free evenings. I don't know why, but I felt called to enter her community."

"Just like that?" I pressed. Her decision seemed somewhat naive to me.

She smiled for a second, then shook her head. "Things are never that simple, are they? Lizzie had a fit when I told her what I wanted to do. We spoke about it often—when she'd come home on school breaks and on the phone—but I finally had to follow my heart."

"So, you're no longer close," I murmured.

"Not very," she admitted. "I was hoping to rectify that by coming to console her after her husband's death."

I felt Alan's eyes on me because he knew I lived with some guilt about the emotional distance between me and my own sister. I just couldn't find common ground between us, and I didn't know why. We, too, had a fairly good relationship as kids.

Maybe he thought I'd share my experience, but I couldn't. Luckily, he picked up the slack by saying, "Hopefully that will change while you're here in Aspen Notch."

"I hope so," she sighed.

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Clare tried phoning her sister after breakfast, again to no avail. Alan suggested that the two of us walk across the street with her, search her porch for a key, and speak to the neighbors. Someone had to know something about Liz Sterling.

I reminded him that I wanted to meet with Lydia Perkins when she came to open my garden shop, though he assured me that it wouldn't take too long to assist Clare. I, usually the gullible one, wondered why he seemed to have no reservations about her story. Something didn't sit right with me, yet I heeded my instinct to be hospitable.

Clare wiped the table while I rinsed the dishes for the dishwasher. "Does Lydia manage your shop?" she asked.

"Yes, and she's a gem. She and her husband, Don, recently moved to Aspen Notch after he retired from the Army. She applied for the position I advertised since she had the experience I needed and thought it would be a way to meet people in town."

"Has that worked out for you?" Clare asked.

"Very much so. I felt confident to leave my business in her charge while Alan and I were in Japan. Now that I think of it, a neighbor who lives directly across the street, Kareen Barclay, also occasionally helps when we have a lot of customers. We could ask if she or her husband have met your sister."

Alan nodded his agreement. "Good idea, honey. Kareen, especially, does a lot of work outdoors with her gardens, and she may have met Liz Sterling, at least in passing."

"I hope so," I agreed. "I think it's strange that we've never seen anyone outside over there, but they may have preferred using the back yard since Church Street tends to be a busy road."

Clare nodded. "That makes sense."

A chilly breeze accompanied our walk across the street and, despite the sunny day, made me wish I'd worn a sweater. Clare first kept her finger on the doorbell, which

we could plainly hear from the porch. Alan and I peered through the front windows and saw nothing awry.

“Let’s try the rear entry,” he said.

Clare knocked on the back door, checked under the mat for a key, and sighed loudly. “Something’s wrong. Do you think I can break a window to get inside?”

Alan firmly shook his head. “That’s not a good idea.”

“Since you’re the police chief, can’t you investigate?”

“I’m retired, though I wouldn’t break into a house unless I suspected foul play or danger to the inhabitants.”

“Well, I do, and it’s my sister whom I’m worried about!”

“I understand,” Alan replied in a soothing voice. “Let’s ask the neighbors if they’ve...”

“No!” Clare stated firmly. “We need to check on the welfare of my sister.”

Alan countered in a calm, rational voice. “We don’t go in without police backup.” He pulled out his phone and called Sergeant Mark Matthews, the current chief of police. “We’ve got a 10-65 at 147 Church Road and would like permission to enter.”

“What’s a 10-65?” Clare questioned.

“A missing person. Mark is on his way, so let’s go around front to meet him.”

I tried to read Alan’s expression, but he didn’t look worried. He probably merely

wanted to placate Clare, which seemed like a good idea given her obvious concern.

As for me, I just wanted to see if there really was a person named Liz Sterling who lived there.

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Chapter Six

Within minutes, Mark Matthews pulled to the curb and exited his vehicle. Alan had mentored the competent young cop with the idea that he'd eventually take over as police chief, allowing for a smooth transition in leadership. We also had an experienced part-time officer, Patrolman Ronald Simpson, who primarily walked the beat in town.

Mark greeted us pleasantly, then Alan introduced Clare. "We met Sister Dolan on our flight from Chicago, and she stayed with us last night since her sister didn't appear to be home."

Clare nodded. "That's correct, officer. I feel certain there's something wrong, so I need to go inside."

"I see," Mark replied before bounding the porch steps to ring the doorbell. "Do you have any documentation to prove your relationship with the resident?"

"For heaven's sake," Clare groaned. "My sister is Elizabeth Sterling and she resides at 147 Church Street. Her husband, Edward, died last month, which you could probably verify through the obituaries. "

Mark continued calmly. "Do you have any other family in town?"

Clare yelped in frustration, closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and managed a controlled statement. "Officer, I've traveled quite a distance to console my sister after the death of her husband, and I'm terribly worried about her. Please help

me.”

Alan interceded. “I’ll pick the lock,” he told Matthews. “You can call it a missing-person search.”

We had entry within seconds.

Clare called her sister’s name from the foyer, yet no one answered. Mark and Alan went from the living room, dining room, and kitchen, all on the first floor, while she and I followed. We found no sign of anyone living there.

“How many bedrooms upstairs?” Mark questioned.

Clare frowned. “I don’t know.”

Mark stared at her. “You’ve never been inside the house?” She simply shook her head before walking to the staircase. Mark and Alan outpaced her.

“Stay here,” Mark stated firmly.

I thought she intended to follow them, yet she changed her mind for some reason. Instead, she returned to the kitchen. “Lizzie’s not here,” she sighed. “She’d always have a cup of tea steeping on the counter near the stove.”

“How do you know she does that if you haven’t seen your sister in twenty-five years?” I asked.

“Because I lived with her until I went into the convent. A zebra’s stripes don’t change.”

We heard the thump of footsteps on the stairs and Mark’s voice calling, “All’s clear

upstairs. Is there a basement?" He didn't bother to wait for her reply.

Clare's eyes wandered to the back door. "There should be a key on a hook nearby." There was, and it fit perfectly into the lock.

I gasped when she pocketed it. "What are you doing?"

"I'm taking the key," she replied firmly. "I'll come back and look around later. If Liz had to go somewhere, she may have left a note for me. She often did things like that."

I thought she should leave it there, probably because I wouldn't take the key to my sister's house without her permission. Then again, I hadn't visited Laura since she moved to Arizona with her third husband.

Mark and Alan returned from the basement to say that nothing raised red flags downstairs. Basically, they saw only a washer, dryer, furnace, and indoor home-putting green. "I guess your sister and her husband liked to golf," Mark noted.

Clare nodded. "That's correct."

"Clean as a whistle down there," Alan said, "and no sign of foul play. We'll check the garage, then let Mark be on his way."

"I imagine one of the keys on the hook by the kitchen door opens the garage," Clare suggested. She took all four of them, then we followed the men.

The detached garage, set back from the house, was built for one car and had a side walk-in door, in addition to the front bay entry. Mark peered into the side door's window while turning the knob. "It's locked," he said aloud, "and the vehicle's inside. Where would your sister go without her car?"

Clare bit her lip, slowly shaking her head. She held out the handful of keys as she murmured, “We need to check inside the car.”

The second key Mark tested worked. He unlocked the side door, then proceeded to release the inside latch of the sectional entry and manually raised it as he noted, “No electric garage door opener, and this one’s a bit stiff. A little WD-40 could help.”

I didn’t know if Mark was trying to keep Clare calm or if he was recording his impressions of the scene. I found his verbal observations somewhat annoying because he needed to look in the car. I worried that we’d find Liz’s dead body in the trunk.

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Fifteen minutes later, Mark closed and locked the garage, having found no dead body or sign of anything out of order. “I think your sister may have gone out with someone,” he told Clare in a calm tone. “I don’t have a problem if you want to stay here and wait for her return. I mean, as long as your sister wouldn’t mind.”

“I plan to do that, Officer. Can you put out a missing person bulletin or something?”

“My partner and I can be on the lookout around town if you can get me a photograph of your sister.”

“I’ll look for one,” she nodded. “May I drive her car?”

“Sure,” he said. “Registration’s in the glove compartment and it’s up-to-date. It’s an older model Subaru, so you’ll need to find her extra set of car keys. Luckily, we could pop the trunk from the driver’s seat.”

“I feel somewhat relieved,” Clare remarked, “but I still can’t fathom why Liz hasn’t returned my calls. Two weeks ago, she seemed happy that I planned to visit her.”

“Something must have come up,” Mark said. “It happens.” He gave her a quirky smile and told her not to worry. “Alan and Sue are right across the street and the police station is two blocks away, so let us know when your sister comes home.”

I had to give Mark credit. His calm demeanor and soothing tone always neutralized a situation, which made him an excellent replacement for Alan. As he slid into the driver’s seat of the police car, Clare thanked him for his time.

He smiled supportively. “It’s been mighty quiet around here lately, so I appreciated the diversion.” Glancing at Alan and me, he asked, “Any new business for the detective agency?”

Alan laughed. “We just got back from Japan last night. Give us a break!”

“You snooze; you lose,” Mark replied with a chuckle before starting the engine. “Welcome home, by the way.”

Alan pushed the door close and gave it a pat. “Thanks, and I’ll see you around.”

After Mark drove away, Alan turned to Clare. “Will you be all right now?”

“Yes, though I’ll need to collect the rest of my things that I left at your house. I can go get them, if that’s not a problem.”

“Not at all,” Alan replied with a smile. “I’ll help while Sue meets up with her assistant at the garden shop.”

“You’ve both been so very kind and I truly appreciate it.”

She stuck by Alan’s side as we crossed the street, and I said my farewell at our curbside mailbox. I didn’t bother to remind her that she left her sister’s back door ajar

since I expected that she'd return there shortly. I just hoped Liz wouldn't have a fit that Clare had taken up residence.

They'd have to work that out for themselves.

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Chapter Seven

I had enough time to walk through Butterflies and Blooms before Lydia would arrive, so I started at the greenhouse, located behind the garden shop. It looked as if I'd soon have to place an order for plants needed for the Harvest Gala, although we had enough stock to see us through the next few weeks.

The fall perennials lining the walkway back to the retail shop still had blooms, though only a few hanging plants remained on the pergola. It would soon be time to offer them at a reduced price or store them for the winter months.

Entering through the side door of the old log cabin that had become Butterflies and Blooms, I strolled along the aisles to see that Lydia had added a supply of machine-embroidered aprons, a number of fall wreaths, and herb dish gardens. Without a doubt, they would all sell well.

Comforting vibes surrounded me, and I attributed those to the colorful array of plants, their fragrant aromas, and the unique garden items we stocked, all of which Lydia had inspired. As far as gardening was concerned, her knowledge and skills far exceeded mine—and she understood the business side, as well.

Lydia radiated a tranquil spirit that may have emanated from her Native American roots. As a full blood Lenni Lenape, tall and sinewy, she proudly quoted words of wisdom to me that her parents and grandparents taught her. Every time, I'd learned something of value.

After donning my apron, I checked the register to see how much cash I needed to take

from the safe we'd recently purchased for under the steps to the loft. Bolted to the floor, it provided a prudent option to secure our income while in Japan until I could do a bank deposit upon our return. I totally trusted Lydia with the combination.

I had just added smaller bills to the register when I noticed Lydia's approach from the front window. She always parked in the church lot across the street so as not to take one of the few spots we had for off-street parking, which I greatly appreciated.

I busied myself with preparing for business when she opened the side door and flipped on the lights. She didn't look surprised to see me. "Welcome home, boss. How was your trip?"

I smiled enthusiastically. "Absolutely fabulous! I still have to organize my photos, but I'll show you some of them later. How'd everything go here?"

"No problems at all," she said, returning my smile. "I even found time to have a game booth meeting with Ryan and Jessica since I'm in charge of our part of the Harvest Gala. You'll be glad to know that we'll have everything under control."

"I can't begin to tell you how grateful I am! Last year's festival stressed me so much that I never wanted to see another one. Thanks for taking it on."

"You're welcome. I've also convinced my husband, Don, to help us, along with Kareen and Gerome Barclay."

"What about Evelyn Sandler?" I thought of her as my best friend in Aspen Notch, and she typically assisted me in the garden shop during the festival. She was also on the steering committee and oversaw all of the game booths, making her quite busy in the weeks leading up to the Harvest Gala.

"I spoke with Evelyn the other day and she plans to help ring up sales as she's done

in the past.” She paused before adding, “I can also volunteer my time if you’d like.”

“Our involvement to organize the fundraiser ahead of time is on a volunteer basis, which our mayor truly appreciates,” I said, “but I intend to pay you and Kareen for working in the shop that weekend. You won’t believe how busy it gets, especially with the game booths on our parking lot.”

She grinned. “I can hardly wait!”

I could only shake my head. Lydia had no idea how chaotic it would become in the next few weeks.

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Our first customer came in search of yellow mums for her patio, so Lydia offered to show her what we had in the greenhouse. That gave me time to take a look at the list of things to order that she’d left at my workstation.

After Lydia processed the transaction and helped carry the flats to the woman’s car, she returned to ask, “Who’s the lady with Alan? They’re crossing Church Street with suitcases.”

I glanced out the side window. “That’s Clare Dolan. She was on our flight from Chicago, and her sister supposedly lives across the street.”

“That’s an interesting coincidence,” Lydia stated. “Should I assume that you and Alan know her sister?”

“No, we don’t, which makes me wonder.”

Lydia stood at the side door watching the action. “How so?”

“She says she’s a nun who works as a missionary in Africa.”

“Wow! That’s very interesting.”

“I suppose so,” I agreed, “but it just seemed weird that the three of us were traveling from Chicago to Aspen Notch.”

“That’s definitely unusual since our small town is relatively unknown.” Lydia continued to watch the action across the street. “They’re knocking on Kareen’s front door now.”

“Probably to ask if the Barclays know Liz Sterling. That’s Clare’s sister, who’s not home although her car’s in the garage.”

“Did Clare’s sister not expect her?” Lydia turned to face me with a questioning gaze.

“Supposedly, she did.”

I stood to join Lydia at the side door and we watched as Alan and Clare went from door-to-door speaking for just a few minutes with whomever answered the doorbell. At house number 147, Alan left the suitcase he carried on the porch, then returned home.

Before any other customers arrived, I told Lydia how Clare had stayed overnight with Alan and me, as well as our search of her sister’s house with Mark Matthews’ assistance. “I hate to think she’s hoodwinked us, but her story just doesn’t add up.”

Lydia nodded slowly. “Do you think she concocted the tale to gain your trust, then steal from you or the lady across the street?”

“I don’t know what to think. I tend to be gullible, so maybe I’ve learned to be more

cautious before I trust someone I've never met."

She smiled enigmatically. "Perhaps, though something may have triggered your disbelief. Does she avoid eye contact or act suspiciously?"

"No, but she doesn't look like a nun. On top of that, Alan and I heard her leave the house this morning but found her sitting in the kitchen when we eventually showered and dressed. She must have left our door unlocked so she could come back in."

Lydia chuckled. "That's not a crime and she obviously felt your generous welcome. You should be honored."

I returned to my workstation saying, "I don't usually need such an attitude adjustment, so thanks for your advice. I brought you something from Japan, but I forgot to bring it with me. Do you mind if I go home to get it? I'll be right back."

"You shouldn't have, and I don't mind. In fact, I think you should take the day off for recuperation after such a long flight."

"You're a dear, and I'll take time for lunch and a little rest. Plan on me being back by three. Okay?"

"That sounds perfect," she agreed.

Chapter Eight

I located Alan at the computer in our sunroom, also known as our SAJ Detective Agency office, with Sophie snoozing at his feet. Both of them noticed me standing in the doorway, though neither gave me more than a momentary glance.

“Making it an early day?” Alan asked.

“No, I forgot to bring Lydia’s gift with me. I came home for it, but it’s not too busy there, so I’ll go back later.”

He nodded distractedly. “Pull up a chair and take a look at this.”

I peered over his shoulder. “Do we have a new case?”

“I’m not sure.” He leaned back in the desk chair and ran his fingers through his gray hair. “What do you think?”

I slid an ottoman to sit next to him, urging Sophie to move. The computer screen showed Alan’s Google search for Clare Dolan, which had six thousand hits with photographs. None of them resembled the woman we met at the O’Hare airport .

“What am I looking for?” I questioned. My eyes darted from photo to photo.

He clicked on another search tab for Elizabeth Sterling. This time, there were forty thousand hits. “I’m just showing you why I can’t do a background search on Clare Dolan. I don’t know which one to use. It’ll be worse trying to find anything on her

sister since there are so many women with that name.”

“Let’s just leave it be,” I said. “I don’t want to get involved.”

“Too late for that,” Alan replied. “Clare Dolan would like to hire us to find her sister.”

I sputtered, “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not. Sorry.”

Alan’s expression wasn’t terribly apologetic, and I groaned. “Did you offer?”

“No, she wanted my cell phone number in case she had an emergency and, without thinking, I gave her our business card. That led to her asking about the agency.”

“Of course,” I quipped. “How does she plan to pay us if she’s a nun?”

“We didn’t get into that. I told her that I had to discuss any acceptance of a case with you. Frankly, Sue, I don’t know if there really is one, but I’d like to help her.”

“How would Mark feel about us taking on something in his jurisdiction?”

“I called him. He doesn’t believe we have a missing person, but he doesn’t mind if we want to investigate. He’ll get involved if we need him.”

I stared at the landscape painting hanging on the far wall as I mulled. We wouldn’t have much income for the month since profits from the garden shop were tied up with expenses for the Harvest Gala, and we’d spent a lot of money for our trip to Japan. I supposed searching for Liz could bridge our financial gap.

“If you think it’s worth offering our services,” I said, “I’ll agree to take the case. However, she’ll need to assure us that she can pay our rate and provide a retainer. Deal?”

“That sounds reasonable, and it’s what I’d recommend. Are you available to meet with her this evening?”

I groaned. “So soon? We just got rid of her.”

Alan chuckled as he nodded. “I’ll prepare the contract and set up an appointment for 7 p.m.”

“Okay, but I’d rather go there so we can leave whenever we want.”

“That works for me,” Alan agreed.

I pushed the ottoman back to its place. “I noticed that you and Clare stopped at neighbors’ homes after crossing the street. Has anyone seen Liz?”

“No one knew her,” he replied.

“Honest? That’s really strange.”

Alan laughed and I could see that we didn’t differ much in our assessment of the situation. “We’ll put your ability to solve mysteries to the test on this one, although I have no doubt you’ll come up with a credible resolution.”

“Don’t hold your breath,” I murmured.

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Alan and I drove to a fast-food eatery near the interstate for lunch, and we sat in the car munching on our burgers while we discussed the rest of our plans for the day. Initially, we considered going to the Black Horse Pub for supper, but didn't want to rush home in time for our appointment with Clare Dolan.

"Let's stop at the grocery store," I said. "If you don't mind grilling, we could have barbecued chicken tonight, and I'll do a big shopping tomorrow."

"That works for me, though I also want to go to the county courthouse and find out what I can about 147 Church Street from real estate documents."

"Good idea," I agreed. "See if you can find an obituary for Edward Sterling. If anything, it could give us some background information about his family."

I liked that we could talk about our mundane activities and an investigation, seemingly in the same breath. It didn't work that way when Alan served as the Aspen Notch police chief. He'd have a case that interested me, but he couldn't divulge particulars. I'd want to solve the mystery, but couldn't reveal my sleuthing.

Working together had cemented our relationship, which I appreciated. Adjusting to each other in a second marriage took a great deal of patience and accommodation, especially when each of us preferred our own way of doing things. It wasn't easy.

I collected our trash and Alan started the car. "Ready?"

We laughed about both asking the question at the same time, an occurrence we noticed more often. He pulled close to the bin and I tossed the crumpled bags.

We stayed together at the grocery store and picked out the items we'd previously mentioned, except for the chicken. Alan found two strip steaks on sale that would take less of his attention than basting chicken, and that was fine with me. It didn't

surprise me that he also threw a carton of ice cream and a package of his favorite cookies into the basket.

He dropped me off at the house before continuing on to the court house, and I carried in our three bags. I let Sophie romp in the yard while I put away the groceries and sifted through my suitcase for Lydia's present from Japan.

I'd told Suki about my assistants when we went shopping in Tokyo and she suggested that I buy Juzu beads for Lydia since they have great spiritual significance. They came in a small gift box, which I placed in my jean pocket to carry to the garden shop.

For the garden club girls, I purchased decorative fans which Suki called sensu . They came in long, narrow gift boxes and I put one in my other pocket in case Kareen had come to help Lydia.

Sophie balked when I called her to come inside, though the treat I offered eventually convinced her. At close to three o'clock, I told her to take a rest and Alan would soon be home, then headed over to Butterflies and Blooms .

Lydia finished ringing up a purchase and smiled. "Perfect timing. Do you mind showing Mrs. French our bird feeders while I go with Mrs. Shaw to the greenhouse?"

"Not at all," I said, realizing that I'd missed my little shop.

During our busy time, I looked up to see Kareen helping an older lady carry plants to her car. Thank heavens, I'd thought to bring her gift with me.

Eventually, she sidled up to me and whispered, "Welcome home. Did you have a nice trip?"

“Better than you can imagine. I’ll tell you about it later.”

At five o’clock, Lydia locked the front door, turned off the lights, and sighed her relief. “Whew! That was another busy day!”

“I don’t know what I’d do without the two of you,” I said with great fervor, handing each of them my gift.

“What’s this?” Kareen asked.

“Something from Japan. Open it!”

She smiled to see the fan’s intricate design and beautiful silk-screened cherry blossoms. Fanning herself, she thanked me.

“It’s called a sensu ,” I explained.

She repeated the word, then said, “You shouldn’t have, but I appreciate your kindness.”

We watched as Lydia pulled the lid off her box and smiled when she exclaimed, “Juzu beads! How wonderful!”

Kareen looked more closely. “What are they for?”

“They’re used for prayer,” Lydia said, “but symbolically they ward off evil spirits. Thank you so much!”

I showed them pictures on my phone of my son’s wedding and told them some of the highlights of our trip to Japan before we bid each other good night. Seeing their delight with what I’d brought them made me really happy because I honestly tried to

find mementos that fit their personalities.

As we exited the side door after our closing procedures, I said that I'd probably need both of them during our busy time for the next few weeks. "I'll plan to work with you since we have to get ready for the Harvest Gala, but Alan and I might also be involved with an investigation."

Kareen immediately responded, "Are you going to help the poor woman who can't find her sister?"

Lydia interjected, "I saw her and Alan crossing the street to your house this morning. Did you know the lady?"

"Never met her," Kareen replied .

Alan and I hadn't yet signed a contract for a case; however, I hesitated to talk about it. It didn't matter, though, since they continued chatting as they crossed Church Street together.

Some things were better not discussed publicly, I thought as I collected our mail. Aromas of grilling steaks wafted in the air, so I gave a final wave and went inside to greet Alan and Sophie.

Chapter Nine

During supper, Alan told me about his successful trip to the county court house. Their real estate records indicated that Elizabeth and Edward Sterling purchased their home at 147 Church Street twenty-eight years prior for \$143,000. There were no liens on the home. “So, Clare’s staying at the right house,” he noted.

“She already told us that the mail in the curbside box was addressed to the Sterlings.”

“Right,” he agreed, taking a folded sheet of paper from his pocket. “I made a copy of Edward’s obituary. Do you want me to read it to you?”

“Yes, please.”

Alan took a sip of his ice water, then unfolded the paper. “I’ll just highlight the important parts.”

“Edward Sterling, 53, is predeceased by his parents, John and Ann Sterling of Aspen Notch, and a son, Michael B. Sterling. He is survived by his wife of 30 years, Elizabeth.

Edward graduated from Ohio State University with a B.S. in accounting, obtained his CPA license, and opened the Sterling Accounting Firm. He managed numerous business accounts and was known for his fair and honest practices.

He and his wife hosted many fundraising benefits at the River Mill Golf Club.”

“That’s it?” I questioned.

“Other than the date and time of his funeral service which, by the way, was at the Presbyterian Church across the street, that’s it.”

I frowned. “There’s no mention of Clare—or any family members, except for the son who died. I wonder how old he was.”

“I didn’t have time to search for the son’s obituary because I had to get the steaks on the grill.”

“Okay, we can ask Clare tonight.” I cut the fat off my steak, thinking aloud. “I would have thought they’d have the funeral at the Catholic Church, given that Liz’s sister is a nun.”

“I didn’t even consider that,” Alan admitted, “although I don’t think it’s any big deal. People change religions, and Clare couldn’t have gone to the funeral anyway if she was in Africa.”

For some reason, memories of my own sister crept into my thoughts, and I wondered if Laura would come to Alan’s funeral. I had no memory of her attendance when we buried my first husband. Had I even notified her of his death? I couldn’t recall.

Alan interrupted my reverie. “Did Lydia like her gift from Japan?”

“I’d say so, since she immediately identified her gift as juzu beads and knew their symbolism. I also brought Kareen’s gift to the shop in case she came to help, which she did, and she loved her fan.”

“That’s good. With all of the confusion last night, we forgot to distribute the souvenirs we bought for Jessica, Ryan, and Sean.”

“I know.” I gave him a quirky smile saying, “I haven’t even unpacked them yet.”

“We’ll plan a get-together some evening this week,” Alan said. “I want to see Sean’s expression when he has to put on the kimono.”

We both laughed just thinking about the probable scene.

“You should also invite Judy for dinner this week,” I said. Judy, Alan’s daughter, rented an apartment above the gift shop in town called Trinkets and Treasures . She also worked there as a sales clerk. “Tell her to bring her new boyfriend, Tom, since we bought mementos for both of them.”

“Good idea,” Alan agreed as he took our plates to the sink. “We have ice cream for dessert, but let’s save it until after our meeting with Clare Dolan.”

That sounded good to me.

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While Alan and I waited on the front porch for Clare to answer the doorbell, I glanced up and down the street to see that many of our neighbors had shut their front blinds—or just kept them closed. It made me wonder if they thought people in passing cars on our busy thoroughfare would try to catch a glimpse inside.

I didn’t have time to mention my reflection to Alan because Clare promptly opened the door with a pleasant smile and invited us to come in. She still wore the slacks and knit top she had on that morning and the day before, but I knew she’d brought only a small suitcase and carry-on bag.

She led us to the dining room table saying, “I figured you’d bring a contract and I can sign it here.”

From my position, I could see that the kitchen looked to be a mess. “Are you in the process of housecleaning?”

“Not exactly,” she replied anxiously. “As the time passes without Liz’s return, I’m becoming more frantic. I hope you can locate her before anyone hurts her.”

“I assure you that we’ll do our best,” Alan said. “If you’re not satisfied with our work, you may cancel our services at any time. If Sue and I feel there’s no resolution to the case, we’ll let you know without you having to incur additional fees.”

“Thank you, but I’m not stopping until we find Liz.”

“We understand,” Alan replied, spreading his papers on the table. He calmly explained our retainer fee, our hourly rate, and the expense of any necessary travel.

She didn’t look surprised at the cost.

When she picked up the pen Alan had placed on the table, he asked, “Do you have any questions before you sign?”

“No, because I don’t have many choices. I spoke with the police chief again this afternoon and he recommended that I work with the two of you.” She quickly wrote her name on the contract.

With that finished, she reached into her pocket, pulled out a wad of large bills, and placed them on the table. “There’s \$2000 there, and that should get us started.”

“That’s more than enough to begin,” Alan noted in a gentle tone. I think he recognized Clare’s anxiety. “Why are you so sure your sister is in trouble?”

“It’s only a feeling, but it’s strong. And Liz left clues for me since she knew I had

planned to visit her.”

“What kind of clues?” Alan asked.

“She left notes... and money. Lot’s of it.” Clare stood and asked us to follow her to the kitchen.

She had emptied all of the wall cabinets, leaving the doors open, and spread their contents on the counters. “I know it looks like I’ve made a mess, but I wanted you to see what I’ve found.”

“Wait a minute,” Alan said when she held up a sticky note. “Your fingerprints are now on a piece of evidence. We shouldn’t touch anything unless we’re wearing gloves.”

She placed it on the counter and wiped her hands on the back of her slacks. I peered down to see a hastily-scribbled note which read: For You .

“How do you know your sister wrote this?” I asked.

“I have a feeling.”

“It wasn’t in plain sight this morning,” Alan reminded her. “Where did you find it?”

“In the coffee canister. Liz knows I always have coffee first thing in the morning, so she left it where I’d discover it. Then, I found a sandwich bag with \$500 inside a mug on the second shelf of the cabinet closest to the sink.”

Alan raised his right eyebrow. “Interesting.”

“Right,” Clare agreed. “Our mother always kept extra cash in a sugar bowl, so I

searched for one in the cabinet. Sure enough, I found \$1000 wadded inside the covered porcelain bowl.”

“You had to really search for those things,” Alan noted.

“Yes, that’s what I’ve done all day except for walking to the police station, then to the pizza shop for a sandwich I took back to Liz’s house.”

“What other notes did you find?” Alan asked .

“I spread them out on the counter for you.”

We looked at each of the yellow sticky notes. Besides For You, I saw the following: Use My Money ; River Mill ; J.W .; and Be Careful . I couldn’t help but admire Clare’s imagination.

“There could be more notes,” she said. “I still need to tackle Liz’s bedroom.”

Alan nodded. “That’s a good idea,” he said in a soothing tone. “Just make sure you wear gloves before touching anything. I’ll dust for fingerprints in the morning.”

“Got it,” she said. “I wonder if Lizzie went into hiding because she discovered that her husband was murdered at River Mill. She knew I’d get to the bottom of it.”

“That makes sense,” Alan agreed, placating her. “Where do you suggest we begin our investigation?”

“You’ll need to find J.W., but please be careful. He could be dangerous.”

Alan assured her that he and I would use caution, and we had enough information to begin our investigation. “We won’t take any more of your time,” he added, “as

you've had a very long and frustrating day."

"I am feeling stressed," she admitted. "What time will you come in the morning?"

"How's ten o'clock?" he asked.

Clare nodded. "That's fine because I plan to go to the 8:30 Mass at St. Stephen's."

"Perfect." Alan returned to the dining room and I followed. "I'll take the contract with your signature and bring you a copy tomorrow. Will you be all right tonight?"

She nodded her agreement, although I still saw emotion in her eyes. Was it fear?

I had no idea.

Chapter Ten

Just after nine o'clock when we arrived home, Alan retrieved the carton of ice cream from the freezer while I closed the blinds in the living room. After placing two bowls and spoons on the island, I sat to watch him scoop. "Do you think Liz wrote those notes?" I prompted.

"We won't know until I dust them for fingerprints, so there's no use speculating about it now."

I couldn't help mulling aloud. "Even if you find other prints on the sticky notes, you won't know with certainty if they belong to Liz."

"Right," Alan agreed, pushing a bowl with two scoops of ice cream toward me. "I do wonder if Liz planned to be away when her sister arrived. That house was spotless when we went through it this morning."

"Then why is her car in the garage?" I queried.

He returned the carton to the freezer, then savored his first spoonful of "rocky road." Resuming our conversation, he said, "I have no idea, but let's decide how we'll start our investigation. "

Thinking I'd better take notes, I moved Clare's file from the counter to our office and brought back a legal pad and pen. I first jotted that Alan would take his fingerprint kit to Liz's house in the morning while I went to the grocery store. "How long do you think that'll take you?" I asked.

“I’ll plan on an hour, then I’ll work with Mark to gather any pertinent information about the Sterling family. I’ll probably have lunch with him, if you don’t mind.”

“No problem,” I said, adding it to my notes. “I’ll work in the garden shop after lunch unless you’ll need me.”

“That sounds fine, honey. Do you want to watch TV?” He’d no sooner uttered those words when my phone rang.

Checking the caller ID, I said, “It’s Evelyn, so I’ll take it in the sunroom.” I picked up the call with a cheery hello, swallowed my last spoonful of ice cream, and placed my bowl in the sink.

“Perfect timing,” I told her. “I planned to call you, but the day got away from me.”

“I figured as much,” she said. “Now, tell me about Japan.”

I gave a fairly descriptive rendition of our week, not unlike the ones I’d given Jessica and Lydia. Of course, Evelyn wanted to know about the wedding and its cultural significance, so we spent a lot of time discussing that.

“Did Suki’s parents speak English?” she pressed.

“Fluently,” I said, “and they took us to many interesting sites and restaurants. Alan and I had a wonderful time.”

“I’m glad you did, and I envy you. I told Marty we should do something exciting, but he’s so stuck in his ways.”

I laughed. “He wouldn’t have enjoyed the long flight. That was brutal.”

“I hope you got out of your seats and walked around. They say you can get blood clots from sitting too long in one position.”

“Right,” I agreed. “We couldn’t do too much of that on the plane, but we had time on each layover to walk around the terminal. I’m also happy we agreed to meet up with Alexa and her husband in Denver. Besides the opportunity to stretch our legs, she and I passed the time gabbing.”

“Nice,” Evelyn sighed. “Didn’t you still have another stop?”

“Yes, we flew to Chicago and had a flight delay there. Alan and I didn’t like that part since we just wanted to get home, yet it brought a new case for the SAJ Detective Agency.”

“How exciting!” she exclaimed. “Did you witness a crime?”

“No,” I chuckled. “We befriended a poor nun who needed a ride to Aspen Notch. Have you ever met a woman with the name Elizabeth Sterling?”

“I’ve never met any nuns.”

“The nun’s name is Clare Dolan. She’s a missionary from Africa who came to visit Liz Sterling, her sister.”

“That’s interesting,” Evelyn said. “You can introduce us if you see her again. Oh, goodness! Look at the time. You probably wanted to make it an early night, but I’ve bent your ear. Will you be at the shop tomorrow?”

“Yes, in the afternoon.”

“Good. I’ll see you then.”

After she disconnected, I realized I'd almost divulged the details of our case, and that would have been a disservice to Clare, even if I didn't quite believe her story. I pictured her scribbling cryptic notes on her yellow sticky pad as she ate her hoagie, then hurrying to empty the kitchen cabinets before our arrival .

I considered her ploy of finding money ingenious because I couldn't imagine someone hiding large amounts in a sugar bowl. Of course, I used to keep our income from Butterflies and Blooms in our freezer until we bought a safe, but that didn't immediately come to mind. I did, however, remind myself to stop thinking the worst of someone before I knew the facts.

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Later, after I'd rinsed our ice cream bowls and put them in the dishwasher, I nudged Alan, asleep in the recliner. "I'm going to bed. Do you want me to lock up?"

He mumbled something indiscernible, so I let Sophie out the back door, waited for her return, then closed and locked it. By that time, Alan had turned off the TV and put the deadbolt on the front door.

Our ensuite bathroom had only one sink, so we usually took turns brushing our teeth or one of us used the hall bathroom. This time, Alan did that and I found him asleep in bed by the time I'd finished my nightly cleansing rituals.

Even after I turned out the light, I heard Sophie trying to get comfortable in her bed on the floor by my corner of the room. I tossed and turned, too, unable to drift into dreamland.

I hated to disturb Alan's sleep, so I gently pushed off the covers on my side and padded to the living room. Sophie followed me and took the spot next to me on the sofa. "You don't have to worry," I whispered. "We're home now."

Her tail thumped on the cushion .

For some reason, I wondered if she'd kept Clare company the night before. The fact that Sophie hadn't barked when the nun walked back into the house meant she felt safe. "Did you cuddle with Clare last night?" I asked her.

Her tail thumped again.

I had no idea if Sophie truly understood, but her responses made me wonder. She was a friendly pup, yet she typically let us know if or when she didn't trust a human.

"Okay," I said softly, "let's say Liz Sterling expected her sister to arrive but needed to hide, for some reason. Why?"

Sophie rested her head on my leg. Apparently, she didn't have the answer, but I may have been on the right track.

"If Liz wrote the sticky notes," I murmured, "Why? Had she witnessed a murder? Did she think her husband was murdered? Had someone threatened her?" I mentally itemized the words on each of the notes.

Besides For You and Use My Money , she highlighted River Mill , the golf course where Edward Sterling died. I thought Alan and I should go there to ask for details about his death. I knew the location because I'd once stopped by to check their availability for Jessica's wedding reception venue. We selected Ridgeton Manor instead.

While at River Mill, we could also ask about someone with the initials J.W.; perhaps the person worked there. Regardless, Liz warned Clare to Be Careful . I assumed that meant J.W. posed a danger.

With those thoughts fresh in my tired brain, I decided to jot them on my notepad in the kitchen so I wouldn't forget. Sophie reluctantly followed me and waited patiently by my side.

I scribbled my notes before making a pit stop and heading to bed. "We're going to sleep now, baby doll," I whispered, hoping she wouldn't want to go out one more time. She didn't.

Alan stirred when I crawled back in bed, though he quickly returned to slumber. Sophie, too, found her comfortable spot. For me, it took a while longer.

An hour later, Alan's phone buzzed in silent mode and I nudged him.

He groggily picked up the call.

"Okay," he muttered. "I'll be right there."

Chapter Eleven

After he disconnected the call, Alan slipped into his clothes while he told me that someone had broken a window in Liz Sterling's house. "Clare's frightened and asked me to investigate," he explained.

"I'll come with you," I said without a moment's hesitation.

He shook his head. "No need for both of us to lose sleep. In fact, I'll probably advise her to come back here with me. Would you mind?"

"No, that's fine." I held Sophie by the collar so she wouldn't follow Alan out the front door.

She and I went back to the living room, and I peeked from the blinds to watch Alan cross the street, again with a pronounced limp. Clare had turned on the porch light and stood waiting at the front door.

When they went inside, I told Sophie we should go back to bed, yet my curiosity prevented that. Close to 2 a.m., I didn't feel like getting dressed to check the action across the street, so I kicked back in the recliner, hoping to doze .

Perhaps I did, at least for a half hour, according to the kitchen clock. I startled awake when Sophie bounded to the front door, and I groggily greeted Alan and Clare.

"Everything's fine," Alan told me. "Someone threw a rock into a front bedroom window on the second floor, so Clare's going to stay here tonight, just to be safe."

“Did you call Mark Matthews?” I asked.

“I texted him. I suspect some teens were out on a lark, and he doesn’t need to be bothered by that at this hour.”

I had a feeling he merely wanted Clare to stay calm when he announced he was heading to bed and thought we should, too.

I turned to Clare, who wore a coat two sizes too big for her small frame. “I can lend you a nightgown if you need one.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to sleep.” She took off the coat to reveal a sweatshirt and sweatpants. “Do you mind if I just lie on the sofa?”

“Not at all.” I suddenly felt sorry for her because she looked absolutely exhausted. “There’s ice cream in the freezer if you’d like some comfort food, and there should be acetaminophen in the hall bathroom medicine cabinet.”

She managed a wan smile. “I appreciate your kindness, and I’ll be fine. Go to bed and I’ll see you in the morning.”

As she settled herself on the sofa under her coat, I decided to cover her with the throw that draped the back of the loveseat in the sunroom. Again she thanked me, then closed her eyes.

Sophie didn’t follow me, which was fine because I knew she intended to console Clare through the night.

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Alan, a typical early riser, showered and dressed before me. When he sat on the bed

to tie his shoes, I sluggishly questioned the time. “It’s only seven-thirty, so no need for you to get up yet.”

I nodded my agreement, turned over, and closed my eyes.

“I’ll make breakfast,” Alan told me. “What do you feel like eating?”

I knew we didn’t have many options. “It doesn’t matter,” I murmured into my pillow.

“Maybe I’ll pick up doughnuts at the bakery since I want to talk to Mark Matthews without Clare overhearing me.”

He caught my attention and I turned toward him. “Wasn’t the rock-throwing just a lark?”

“I don’t think so, but I didn’t want to worry Clare. I got her out of there so she wouldn’t disturb the scene.”

“Do you think someone intended to break in?”

“No, I believe someone tossed the rock to frighten her. After Mark investigates, I’ll call a repairman to replace the window today, then she can go do what she needs to do.”

“Maybe I’ll see if she wants to go to the grocery store with me,” I remarked, pushing off the covers.

“Good. That’ll keep her away from the scene while we check out the place. In the meantime, I’ll make the coffee before I leave.”

“Thank you,” I said, hurrying to the bathroom. “I’ll take a quick shower and keep

Clare company until you return.”

He gave me a quirky grin and threw a kiss. “You’re the best.”

I expected to see Clare sipping coffee at the kitchen island, but didn’t. Sophie was sniffing for squirrels in the back yard, yet I saw no sign of our guest. My stomach lurched with the thought that she’d gone to clean up the broken glass in her sister’s upstairs bedroom until I found her sitting on our front stoop.

I opened the storm door to greet her. “Would you like a cup of coffee?” I asked.

She held up her mug. “Thanks, but I have one.”

I gave a cheery smile and thumbs up, then went inside to pour my own coffee. It didn’t feel right to let our guest sit alone outside, so I decided to join her. “Would you like company?”

She glanced up at me with weary eyes. “This is such a busy street with people rushing to work, whether it be by car or by foot. The way my sister spoke about Aspen Notch, I imagined it was more rural.”

I settled myself on the stoop, then responded. “Alan and I have lived here almost four years, and I recall mentioning the traffic to the real estate lady. Honestly, I don’t notice it very often any more, and it’s been good for my business.”

She glanced at the log cabin, my garden shop, so I told her its significance as the town founder’s first home. I couldn’t say the details captured her attention since, no doubt, the incident at her sister’s house occupied her mind.

I sipped my coffee, then tried to make conversation again. “You told Sean about the medical pilot, so I assume your clinic is very rural.”

She gave a nostalgic smile. “It is, though not as much as twenty-five years ago. If I have moments of quiet to sit in my garden, I may hear children playing or neighbors helping one another, but never the ruckus of cars or trucks passing by.”

I didn’t want to sound ignorant, but I was. Other than a few movies I’d seen that took place in Africa, I knew very little about the continent. “Did you have elephants and giraffes nearby?”

“You’d typically find those in the national parks,” she noted, “although less-populated areas have them, too. Monkeys abound in my village, and they’ll sometimes forage for food, so we need to keep everything in secure containers.”

“Oh, my. I have to do that with the bird seed I sell so as not to attract mice.” I gave a little chuckle. “I can’t imagine having to deal with monkeys, though they’re probably cute.”

She laughed, which delighted me. “I suppose you could say that, at least about the baby chimps. I have one that comes to visit since there’s a banana tree in my garden.”

“Have you named him?” I teased.

She grinned, looking somewhat embarrassed. “I call him Chimp. Isn’t that original?”

We both laughed.

Not long after, Alan pulled into the driveway and exited the car carrying a bakery box. With a twinkle in his eye, he led the way into the house saying, “I have doughnuts and bagels for a sweet breakfast treat.”

He placed the box on the kitchen island while I brought out small dishes and prepared

a fresh pot of coffee. The three of us settled on the stools before making our selections.

“I stopped at the police station,” Alan remarked. “Sergeant Mark will meet me in a half hour to process last night’s incident.”

Clare replied immediately. “I want to be there.”

Alan nodded slowly. “I understand, but we could do a more thorough job without you. Did you leave everything in the kitchen as it was last night?”

“No, after I wiped out the cabinets for Lizzie, I returned the dishes and put the money in the freezer. The notes are still on the counter.”

“Did you find any additional money or notes last night?” he questioned.

“No, it was late and I went to bed. I thought I’d resume my search today.”

This time, Alan nodded in agreement. “You can definitely do that later, although maybe not while the window-repair guy is inside. He should arrive around one o’clock.”

Clare looked upset that she couldn’t be with Alan and Mark when they investigated, so I interjected, “Why don’t you come with me to the grocery store? I’m sure you need some food, as we do, and I’m going there shortly.”

She shook her head. “I’d prefer to stay with Alan and the chief of police while they investigate.”

Alan paused before reaching for his second doughnut. “Okay, you can open the door for us, he can scan your fingerprints, and you can describe what you’ve found. Sue

will give you ten minutes, then pick you up for your trip to the grocery store. Will that work?”

She gazed at me, mentally debating her options. “I have to be back in time to meet the window repairman.”

“We won’t dawdle because I have to open my garden shop at noon.” Technically, Lydia would be there, but I didn’t mention that.

“Okay,” she agreed, then took her mug and dish to the sink. Turning back to us, she added, “You’ve both been so very kind, and I thank you.”

Chapter Twelve

Clare didn't talk much on our way to the grocery store, probably due to seeing the broken glass again at her sister's house. I babbled about the things I needed to buy, more as a reminder of my mental list than trying to make conversation.

At the entrance, we each took a cart, and she set off on her own. I wondered how she'd react to the price of everything, but she had plenty of money so I didn't worry.

Eventually, I came across her in the bakery section. She stood at the glass display case, as if waiting for someone to take her order. "It's all self-serve here," I said. "What do you need?"

"I wanted to buy just two of the sticky buns; not a package of six."

"Unfortunately, you can't do that here," I noted. "We could share, if you'd like, or you can keep the extras in your freezer."

She shook her head and returned the box to the counter. I picked it up and put it in my cart, thinking I'd bring her a surprise later. From there, I went to the dairy aisle since I needed milk and cheese, and she followed, although she didn't put anything in her basket.

"I don't need whole packages of things," she sighed. "Why can't I buy just one or two items?"

"I suppose they consider it as value in numbers. The deli section sells smaller

amounts, so let's head there."

We both took a number, although I finished much sooner than she did. I doubted that the next person in line enjoyed waiting for her to get a quarter pound of this and that. She especially liked selecting the pre-made salads and appetizers.

After we checked out and headed to the car, she seemed in a better frame of mind. As we loaded our bags into the trunk, she said, "You must think I've never shopped for groceries, but I have. I just don't know if I should stay here and wait for Liz, or return to the Monastery."

"And you don't want to leave a lot of food in the house. I get it and I'd feel the same way, but give us a chance to investigate." I showed her where we needed to take our carts, then clicked the fob to unlock the car's doors.

"I shouldn't have come," she said, buckling her seatbelt. "I should be raising money for our missions in Africa, yet I'm stuck here with fear and worry—two emotions I rarely encounter."

I couldn't imagine that a single woman living in an African village was never afraid, but I still didn't really understand Clare.

"You might come up with an idea for a fundraiser while you're in Aspen Notch," I said. "Folks in town are generous if they know what you need."

"We've made great strides with guinea worm, but HIV and malaria are still rampant. Of course, even antiseptics and vitamins are scarce, and that contributes to the illnesses I deal with every day."

"What's guinea worm?" I asked.

“Oh, my. It’s a terrible parasitic infection that occurs when someone drinks the larvae prevalent in dirty water. The worm literally grows inside a person until it painfully makes its way out of the leg or foot.”

My face registered disgust. “How awful! What can you do to prevent it?”

“I teach the villagers not to drink stagnant water. It must be filtered or treated with a chemical, but if someone’s thirsty...” She let me imagine the challenges.

I pulled into her driveway and popped the trunk. “I can help carry your bags inside.”

“Thank you, but I only have three.”

I exited the car and met her at my trunk. “We should shop together again. I enjoyed your company.”

“That’s very kind of you to say,” she replied with a fleeting smile before turning to go inside. Almost as an afterthought, she added, “Let me know if I can do anything to help you and Alan with the investigation.”

“We will,” I assured her as I closed the trunk.

I reminded myself that Clare needed support, even if she had a few quirks.

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After putting away the groceries, I added two chicken breasts and cream of mushroom soup to the slow cooker so they’d simmer all afternoon. When finished, I ate an apple with peanut butter for my lunch, pocketed the souvenirs from Japan I bought for Evelyn, then headed to the garden shop.

Lydia and I reviewed the list of items she suggested I order from the wholesale distributor until customers arrived, and we both stayed relatively busy for the first hour.

Shortly after one o'clock, Alan texted to ask if I wanted to go to River Mill Golf Club with him. I didn't hesitate to reply in the affirmative, told Lydia to call Kareen if she needed help during our busy time, and tossed my apron to the back of my chair.

She teased that my expression totally changed whenever I had the opportunity to sleuth. I wondered how she knew because I hadn't mentioned my destination.

"Am I that transparent?" I asked, chuckling.

She laughed. "More than anyone I know."

Alan picked me up at the curb and I buckled in for the twenty-minute ride to the country club. "How was your shopping trip with Clare?" he asked.

I sighed. "Fine, but she really sends mixed messages."

He glanced my way at the stop sign. "In what way?"

"I can't really put my finger on it. One moment, she acts as if she hasn't seen civilization in eons, then she's perfectly normal."

Alan nodded slowly, keeping his eyes on the road. "If this is Clare's first time back in the U.S. after twenty-five years, she probably finds everything overwhelming. You and I would, too."

"I know, yet she's so darn independent one moment, then has second thoughts. For example, she didn't buy a lot of food because she doesn't know how long she'll stay,

but she hires us to search for the sister she thinks is in trouble.”

“Given the rock tossed through the upstairs window, Mark and I think someone may have kidnapped Liz Sterling.”

“Really? Why?”

“It contained a clear message for Clare, written with a black marker. “Go home or you’ll never see your sister alive.”

I gave him an incredulous stare. “All of that was written on the rock?”

“Yes, which is why I didn’t want her to see it.”

“Maybe she already did,” I suggested.

“Maybe, but it was lying face down on the shattered glass. I didn’t contaminate the scene and I don’t think she did either.”

“What about the notes?” I asked. “Were there other prints besides hers?”

“Two sets of prints. Hers and someone else’s. Mark thinks Clare’s story is true, and he wants us to treat it as a missing person case.”

“Why doesn’t he take over?” I pressed.

“He really doesn’t have the time or the manpower.” Alan paused for a moment before saying, “And he likes that we lighten his load.”

“You made a good choice when you selected him from the county police force as your assistant,” I said.

“We made a good team,” Alan agreed. “When we get to the golf club, we’ll want to interview anyone who knew Edward Sterling. If we’re lucky, we’ll also learn about J.W.”

“Right, and I want to know more about his wife. Someone there should be able to tell us about Liz.”

“I hope so,” Alan said as he turned into the entrance and headed toward the main office. “Are you ready, partner? ”

I grinned, feeling excitement course through my veins. “Ready, willing, and able, boss.”

Chapter Thirteen

Although we had no appointment, the office manager at River Mill met with Alan and me after a brief ten-minute wait. She didn't seem to recognize me as the woman in search of a venue for my granddaughter's wedding reception last year, and I felt no need to remind her.

Alan introduced us as a retired couple who wanted to learn how to play golf. "One of our neighbors," he said, "loved the game, and I think he played here although he recently died."

"What was his name?" she asked.

"Edward Sterling. He and his wife live just across the street from us, and we couldn't believe the news."

"May he rest in peace," the manager said with bowed head. "It was a shock for us, too. Ed and Liz were like part of our family here at River Mill Golf Club."

"Sue and I didn't know them very well since we moved to Aspen Notch just a couple of years ago, but we'd chat in passing. In fact, Ed promised to give me golf lessons when we returned from Japan. Imagine our surprise to hear about his death."

She glumly shook her head. "He was out on the green and suddenly keeled over. One of the foursome, Joe Wiley, is a doctor and he tried CPR, but couldn't bring Ed back. It's terribly sad."

“Was Liz part of the foursome?” I asked.

“Not that day. She was having lunch at our bar and grill with friends, but he was gone by the time the caddie drove her to the 14th hole.”

“You mean taken to the hospital?” I questioned.

“No, gone like in dead.”

“She must have been devastated,” I sighed, trying to cover my faux pas.

“I suppose so, although I was in the office, not out on the green. From what I heard, she held it together pretty well when the EMT took Ed’s body to the morgue, and she followed in her car.”

“Well, we feel terrible about missing his funeral due to our travels,” Alan said. “We’ve gone to their house several times to express our condolences, yet Liz hasn’t been home. Could she spend her days here?”

“Gosh, I haven’t seen her. Come to think of it, she hasn’t been around for a few days. You might want to check at the bar and grill because she sometimes hangs out there.”

Alan nodded. “We’ll do that. I didn’t catch your name.”

“Where are my manners?” she replied, shaking her head. “I’m Courtney Bates and I’ll be happy to set you up with those golf lessons if you’re still interested.”

“I think we’ll take a raincheck on those for now,” Alan said. “Where can we find the bar and grill?”

She gave each of us a friendly smile. “Take a right just past the restrooms and follow

the delicious aromas. I absolutely love the hot wings.”

“We’ll definitely have to try those, honey,” I told Alan, loud enough for Courtney to hear as we walked away.

I knew he’d agree because hot wings were his favorite bar food.

^^^

Alan and I continued the charade at the River Mill Golf Club bar and grill, hoping to meet up with friends of Ed and Liz Sterling. It surprised me to see such lively groups of retired men and women at the bar and surrounding tables, all of whom seemed to know each other.

Some of the chatter halted and eyes followed us when Alan and I each took a stool and asked the bartender for two light draft beers and an order of hot wings. The guy to my left turned to greet us. “It’s a great day for golf. Did you play?”

“No,” I said. “How about you?”

“Just nine holes today since my bum shoulder’s giving me trouble. I’ll tell you, if it’s not the knees acting up, it’s something else. Back in the day, I could play all 18 holes, have a beer, then go at it again.”

Alan laughed. “I’ve got a bum leg, so I know what you mean. Are you a member of the golf club?”

“I am,” he nodded. “Stan Parker, here. Aren’t you the police chief in town?”

“Retired. I’m Alan Jaworski and this is my wife, Sue.”

“I forgot you retired. You should come and get to know us.” His arm swept the room.
“We have a nice bunch of people and good times.”

The bartender placed our beverages and food in front of us. “Stan’s right. This place is always hopping. I’m Jim Withers, by the way.”

Alan reached to shake his hand. “Alan Jaworski here. Have you worked at River Mill for very long?”

Several nearby patrons laughed. He replied, “Nearly thirty years. I started as a caddy when I was sixteen, then worked as a groundskeeper for a couple of years. I’ve been bar manager for the last ten.”

“That’s longevity,” Alan said. “They must treat you well.”

Stan laughingly agreed. “He owns the place!”

We all had a good laugh, including Jim.

“I once thought I’d be a golf pro,” Jim quipped, “but never got good enough. At least, I still get to hang around with golfers.”

He and Stan continued their bantering, with a few others joining them. Alan and I enjoyed our brew and wings while taking in the atmosphere at River Mill, and I liked the camaraderie. I let Alan take the lead on when we’d bring up the purpose of our visit.

He waited until Jim asked if we wanted refills.

I shook my head and Alan said, “Sue has to get back to her garden shop on the corner of Church and Main. Have you been to Butterflies and Blooms ?”

“The old log cabin?” Jim queried. “My wife has, and she told me I should see the inside. I will one of these days, but I’m always working.”

“Okay,” Alan replied, reaching for his wallet. After placing a twenty dollar bill on the counter, he remarked, “ We think our neighbors on Church Street golfed here. Do you know Ed and Liz Sterling?”

“Sure,” Jim said. “Of course, you must know Ed died a few weeks ago.” He pointed to the picture window. “I saw him go down, right out there by the 14th hole.”

Alan looked flabbergasted. “Geez, you never know. Sue and I were out of town, so that’s a shock. Was Liz with him when it happened?”

“No, she was having lunch with some friends at the table by the window.”

“Oh, my gosh,” I said, looking around for her. “Is she here now? I need to give her my condolences.”

Jim shook his head. “I haven’t seen her in a few days. That’s odd, now that I think about it.” He called out to the other patrons in the room. “Has anyone seen Liz Sterling lately?”

Most shook their heads and returned to their conversation. One lady said, “I’ve been calling her cell phone, but it goes right to voicemail.”

Another woman remarked, “She might have gone to visit family.”

The first lady replied, “She doesn’t have any.”

“Are you sure?” I asked.

“Fairly certain,” she said with a definitive nod.

“Well,” Alan remarked, “we’ll try reaching out to her.” He slowly slid off the stool and took my hand, which I considered very gallant.

Stan gave a broad smile. “Come again soon. We’ll get you out on the course, bum leg or not.”

Alan teased him. “I’ll play when you play, but it won’t be pretty.”

“That’s a deal,” he chuckled .

As we sauntered out, I managed to catch a glimpse of the ladies at the table near the picture window. They kept their eyes on us, and a few of them didn’t look very friendly.

It made me wonder what they knew about Liz Sterling.

Chapter Fourteen

As we walked to the car in the River Mill parking lot, Alan joked about our “superb acting skills” that could yield additional income if the need should arise. “I have to be careful, though,” he stated, “because my story wasn’t consistent.”

“It only varied slightly because Stan recognized you. Funny that Courtney didn’t remember my request for information about their wedding reception venue last year.”

“Maybe another year with me has aged you,” he quipped.

“I look old? Really?”

“No, I was kidding.” Alan quickly changed the topic as he unlocked the car doors. “Did you notice we have two people with the initials J.W.?”

“Yes, but I doubt that the doctor who initiated CPR on Ed or the bartender/owner of the golf club posed a threat to Liz. We should talk to Dr. Joseph Wiley anyway since he could know Liz’s whereabouts. ”

“Do you have time to make another stop?” Alan asked. “I’d like to pay a visit to Ed’s brother, Damien Sterling.”

“Sure, but how’d you learn about him?”

“Mark did a little digging after we processed the incident at the Sterling residence. Damien lives in his parents’ home not too far from here.”

“Do you want to give him advance notice?”

“No, I don’t think it’s necessary. We’re just neighbors who want to express our condolences to the family.”

“Got it, Shakespeare.”

He gave a hearty laugh as he pressed the ignition. “Buckle up, buttercup.”

I rolled my eyes.

He headed to the main road that traversed the county as if we were going to Ridgeton Manor, the B guilty, no. I wonder if he even has a car.”

“I’ll check motor vehicle registration,” Alan replied. “I’ll also dig a little further into his background to see if he’s had any prior convictions. He looks like a loose cannon.”

I agreed with Alan’s assessment of Damien Sterling before suggesting that we revisit the credibility of Clare Dolan. “The lady at River Mill seemed pretty sure Liz had no family,” I reminded him. “I know I sound like a broken record, but every time I finally accept that she’s telling the truth, something comes along to make me question it.”

Alan paused as if thinking. Eventually, he asked, “Do you often speak about your sister to acquaintances? I mean, maybe you’ve mentioned Laura to Evelyn since she’s your best friend in town, but how about to Carol or Gladys?”

“I doubt it,” I replied haltingly. “It’s not that I wouldn’t. I just don’t think to call my sister since we no longer have anything in common.”

“I could say the same for me and my sister,” Alan nodded. “Maybe we should both take the initiative tonight—just to say hello.”

“I get your point,” I said simply.

Alan slowed to pull into our driveway. “For what it’s worth, I do believe Clare, so I’d like to find her sister. On another note, it looks like a busy time in the garden shop.”

I glanced at the dashboard clock to see that it was just after four o’clock. “Do you mind if I go help Lydia?”

“Not at all, honey. Have fun.”

I leaned over to give him a kiss, then opened the car door. “I enjoyed working with you this afternoon.”

He grinned. “Same here, and I’ll see you later.”

Chapter Fifteen

The tantalizing aroma of slow-cooked chicken breasts caught my attention when I arrived home from the garden shop at five-thirty. Alan glanced up from the TV news station to announce that he'd reached out to his sister, but the call went to voicemail.

"I'll probably experience the same thing," I said. "Laura's never home when I call." After my quick kiss to Alan, I headed to the kitchen saying, "Dinner smells good, but I'm not hungry."

"Me, either," Alan agreed. "Those hot wings and beer at the golf club really filled me up, though I could possibly manage some ice cream before bed."

I laughed despite anticipating his comment. Sophie stood by the counter while I unplugged the crock pot and dumped its contents into a covered casserole dish. "We'll have an easy supper tomorrow," I told her as I cut some pieces of chicken to add to her kibble. "And you're spoiled."

"Me?" Alan called from the living room .

"I was talking to Sophie. Did you let her out in the yard to play with Sean when we got home?"

"I let her go outside while I was in the sunroom, but I didn't see Sean. Is he in the after-school program again this year?"

I put Sophie's bowl on the floor and refilled her water dish. "Oh, I forgot about that.

We have to unpack that suitcase with the souvenirs in case they come over.”

“Right,” Alan agreed, “but you need to call your sister.”

“I’ll do that later,” I assured him.

Emptying the suitcase on our bed brought back more reminders of our trip. Had we really only been home for three days? Between jet lag, the start of a new investigative case, and a booming garden business, I felt pulled in all directions.

The only way to alleviate the stress, I told myself, was to tackle each item on my mental to-do list in the order of priority. Identifying the need to clear the bed first, I pressed Jessica’s number in my phone.

“Souvenir time,” I proclaimed when she connected.

She laughed. “Sean was just talking about that during supper.”

“Can you come over to claim your items? It’s still light outside and Sophie would like a romp, at least for fifteen minutes.”

“Ryan’s working on an article for the Gazette, but Sean and I can visit until dark. We’ll be there shortly.”

I roped Alan into helping me move the gifts to our dining room table and arrange them in piles. Sean’s stack happened to be larger than the others, which we knew would make him happy.

Sophie jumped for joy when Sean and Jess arrived at our kitchen door, then charged outside when I pushed open the storm door. The two hooligans sprinted across the back yard, releasing plenty of pent-up energy, and we kept our eyes on them from

stools at the kitchen island.

Jessica looked especially tired, in addition to being seven-months pregnant, so I asked what I could do to help.

She scrunched her nose. “You have the Harvest Gala coming up, so I don’t expect anything from you. Which reminds me, I can’t take on any strenuous activities during that weekend.”

Making a mental note to place my wholesale order before I went to bed, I assured her, “We’ll have lots of assistants, so no pressure for you. I do, however, have a chicken casserole already made that you can take home for your dinner tomorrow night.”

Her eyes gleamed enthusiastically. “I’ll definitely take you up on that. Thanks, Mimi!” A moment later, she asked, “Did we interrupt your supper?”

Alan gave me a quirky grin, which made me laugh. “No, because we ate earlier at the River Mill Country Club.”

“That’s cool. If you recall, Ryan and I almost had our wedding reception there.”

“I do,” I said. “It would have been a nice venue, but you made a better choice with Ridgeton Manor.”

“Yes, we did,” she agreed wholeheartedly.

She maneuvered off the stool and went to the door to tell Sean he had only five minutes left to play. Turning back to us, she explained, “I read that children respond better when you don’t suddenly end their play time. I think it’s working with Sean.”

“That’s good,” I said. While we waited, I gave her the kimono, zories, and a silver

bracelet with Japanese charms. “ Ryan gets a kimono, zories, and a Japanese writer’s portfolio.”

“These are so beautiful,” she exclaimed, reaching to give us both a peck on our cheeks. “Thank you so much!”

“You’re welcome, honey. I honestly thought it might be a comfy robe for you since there’s plenty of room for you and Jolene.”

She expressed her delight and gratitude before calling to Sean from the kitchen door. He and Sophie sprinted inside, and Jessica praised them. “Come see our gifts from Japan,” she said.

Sean didn’t show much enthusiasm about the kimono, zories, or t-shirt with a picture of Mount Fuji. Hidden below them, however, he found the “really cool and awesome” toy samurai sword. He swished it in the air yelling, “I am Royal Ninja, the powerful king.”

“Just be careful with your weapon, Royal Ninja,” Alan advised. “I picked out a black kimono for you because it looked more like a ninja outfit. Do you want to try it on with the zories?”

Sean nodded, and his expressive doe eyes sparkled. “What are zories?” he asked.

“Flip-flops,” Alan said, helping him take off his shoes and socks. After tying the last sash on Sean’s kimono, he pulled out his phone and took a picture.

“Let me see it,” Sean pleaded. He grinned broadly, picked up the sword, and posed like an ancient warrior. “Now, take another picture.”

Alan obliged, holding it up for everyone to see. Sean gave him, then me, a huge hug.

“This is the most bussin’ present I ever got,” he exclaimed. “Come on, Mom. Let’s go show Dad.”

Despite all the hoopla, I managed to locate a large shopping bag for the casserole and gifts. Sean insisted on wearing his outfit home, and urged Jessica to hurry.

Alan and I stood at the back door to wish them a good night, then burst into laughter when they reached their own yard. “I told you he wouldn’t like the kimono unless we got him the sword,” he sputtered.

“And right you were,” I chuckled.

^^^

Alan reminded me to call my sister before he turned on the TV to watch his favorite crime show. I promised I would as soon as I placed my order with the wholesale distributor. Reaching into my pocket for the list Lydia and I reviewed before we turned out the lights and locked Butterflies and Blooms , I sat at the computer in the sunroom.

As if by magic, my phone rang with a call from Evelyn. I answered with, “I’m sorry. Lydia told me I missed you today, but I had to go with Alan to work on our case.” I remembered that I’d put the souvenirs for Evelyn at my workstation in the garden shop since she planned to stop over, but then I had to leave.

“You could have called to let me know,” she grouched.

“I know. I think I’m losing my mind!”

“You probably have brain fog after traveling through all of those time zones. Don’t worry about it because we really hadn’t set up anything specific, other than I’d stop

by.”

“Believe it or not,” I said, “I even brought your souvenirs to the garden shop. They’re on my workstation.”

“You didn’t need to bring me anything. I’m just glad you’re home. ”

Her simple statement touched me, and I realized how lucky I was to have made such a kind and thoughtful friend as Evelyn. On my first day in Aspen Notch, she stopped by to welcome me with coffee and doughnuts, which saved me from the pity party that would have taken hold if it weren’t for her intervention.

“Alan and I had to go to the River Mill Country Club today, due to our case,” I explained.

“Interesting,” she said, “but I know you can’t talk about it. I called because we should have our garden club meeting tomorrow afternoon. If you can’t host it, I will.”

I paused to think for a moment. “It should be fine to have it here because we need to make some fall wreaths.”

“Do you have the materials?” she asked. “Lydia mentioned that you’re running low on some things.”

“I’m placing my order right now and, if I’m lucky, it will be here by noon.”

“Then, I’ll let the girls know and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thank you,” I replied. “Have I told you lately how much I appreciate you?”

“No, but I know you do—and I feel the same way.”

Her words of support energized me and I was able to finish my order within an hour, making it almost ten o'clock, my time. I yawned, thinking I'd rather go to bed than call my sister.

Still, I wondered why we had let distance separate us. I pressed her number in my contacts, and it rang four times before going to voicemail.

"Hi, Laura. It's Sue, and I was just thinking about you. Give me a call and let me know how you're doing. Love you."

For some reason, I felt sad that we hadn't connected. Could that have been Clare's reaction when her calls to Liz kept going to voicemail?

Alan interrupted my thoughts. "Ready to hit the sack?"

"I am," I sighed, suddenly feeling exhausted.

He placed his hand on my shoulder as I put the computer to sleep. "Did you call your sister?"

I nodded slowly. "She didn't answer, so I left a message."

"Okay, honey. Tomorrow's another day."

I think he felt my sadness, and that comforted me.

Chapter Sixteen

Our conversation at breakfast the next morning centered on our missing-person case. Alan felt we needed more input from Clare about other family members Liz could have decided to visit before her sister's arrival, while I wanted to question neighbors who may know where she went. Certainly, someone had information.

Alan agreed. "Years ago," he remarked, "everyone knew the people who lived next door. I guess it's no longer a priority, but I don't know why. Of course, we've lived here for more than three years, yet haven't made any effort to meet the folks on our street, other than Kareen and Gerome when they moved in last year."

"In our defense, nobody welcomed us to the neighborhood, which used to be a common courtesy. Now, everyone keeps their blinds closed and doors locked. I don't understand it either."

"We'll get the ball rolling," Alan said. "What could we offer everyone we visit?"

With the Harvest Gala on my mind, I suggested tickets to the Butterflies and Blooms game booths. "They're not worth very much, but might provide a conversation starter."

"Good idea. Do you have any tickets on hand?"

"We have rolls of them in the loft. I'd like Clare to come with us, if only to share her concern about her missing sister."

Alan nodded and reached for his phone. While I rinsed our dishes for the dishwasher, he made arrangements with Clare.

“Okay,” he told me when the call ended, “we’ll meet her in twenty minutes. Do you need help getting the tickets?”

I grinned coyly. “Yes, please. While you’re in the loft, I also need my wreath supplies.” We’d replaced the original ladder with steps, but they were narrow, steep, and had no railing. Lydia didn’t have trouble using them but, as much as I tried, I worried about falling, especially when carrying a carton.

We walked to the garden shop together and he headed up the steps to the loft. After handing me a roll of game tickets and a carton marked “wreaths,” Alan questioned why I hadn’t wanted a railing when we renovated. “This is a fall waiting to happen,” he muttered.

“I was going to use the steps as a display since I didn’t want customers climbing up to the storage area.”

“Right, but someone could still wander up there. We also need some type of banister across the front of the loft. The plant display won’t prevent a mishap or lessen our liability.”

I understood Alan’s point, and agreed that my shortsighted plan needed to be adjusted. To my delight, he offered to measure the area and install a railing in his spare time .

I reached to give him a kiss. “Do you know why I married you?”

“Because I can fix stuff?” he quipped.

I laughed. “That counts; but, really, it’s because you’re so sweet. I love you, honey.”

After returning my kiss, he gallantly took my arm. “I love you, too. Now, let’s go see what we can do to help Clare Dolan.”

^^^

Although Clare greeted us pleasantly, she seemed tense when she invited us inside. We followed her to the living room where she said, “I found Liz’s purse in the entry closet.”

“Could it be an extra?” I asked. “I have several for different occasions.”

“I realize some women have more than one pocketbook,” she replied. “This one contained Liz’s wallet and current driver’s license, so I considered it important to mention.”

“You’re right,” I agreed. “Obviously, wherever Liz went, she didn’t need her handbag.”

“Where could she have gone without her purse?” she asked.

“The park is on the next street,” Alan suggested, “and the library is two blocks down on Main. Also, someone could have picked her up to go for a ride where she wouldn’t have needed her wallet. We don’t know now, but we’ll retrace her steps by piecing together the facts as we learn them. ”

Clare sat staring at her clenched hands, then looked at Alan and me. “Where do we begin?”

“We started with two known facts,” Alan said. “Liz and her husband were members

of the River Mill Country Club, so they had to have friends there.”

Clare nodded. “That’s where Ed died.”

Alan agreed. “Yes, and Ed’s brother lives in the county, not far from town. Sue and I paid him a visit yesterday.”

“Does he know where Lizzie is?”

“No, though we’ll probably have another conversation with him, as well as the folks at River Mill. Someone has to know of places familiar to Liz. Did you read Ed’s obituary?”

She shook her head. “Why?”

“Just wondered.” Alan gave a slight shrug. “It didn’t give us much information, other than the son they’d lost. Do you know what caused Michael’s death?”

“Cancer,” she said with furrowed brows. “Neuroblastoma, to be exact.” She exhaled with pursed lips. “When Michael was three years old, Liz mentioned her concern of his distended belly to the pediatrician. A CT scan confirmed a large tumor which turned out to be malignant. That poor baby went through surgery and rounds of chemo, which seemed to help for awhile until the cancer went to his bones. He died just before his ninth birthday.”

“How awful,” I sighed, thinking how devastated we’d be if we lost young Sean. “Did you come home to be with Liz?”

She paused with the distant memory. “No.” After a moment she added, “I couldn’t get away at the time and, for that, I’m very sorry.”

“Did that upset your sister?” I asked.

“Probably,” she said .

Seeing Clare’s distress, Alan moved on. “According to the obituary, Edward was an accountant and had his own business. Is that correct?”

“Yes, and Liz was his bookkeeper, at least until she needed to spend her days with Michael.” She gave Alan a questioning gaze. “Why is that important? Ed’s dead and my sister’s missing.”

“Other than a comment made by someone at River Mill, it’s not critical, as far as we know. Did your sister have an accounting background?”

“No, but they couldn’t afford hiring someone until... until they had to.”

“After Michael’s death, did Liz return as his bookkeeper?”

“I don’t know,” Clare replied forlornly. “I was in Africa at the time.”

“I thought you spoke to your sister on the phone.”

Clare frowned. “We didn’t talk about accounting.”

“Sorry,” Alan said. “I’m just trying to understand if Liz had any further involvement in Ed’s business.”

“I don’t know because she never mentioned it.”

“Okay,” Alan replied, bringing an end to the topic. “Let’s focus on Liz’s friends and family.”

“I’m her only family, and I wouldn’t know her friends.”

“She has a brother-in-law,” Alan noted. “We met Damien Sterling, although he wasn’t very helpful. Any aunts or uncles on either side?”

“I didn’t know Edward’s family at all. My mother’s sister had several kids, so we have cousins. If you think it’s necessary, I’ll try to come up with a list for you, but I have no contact info.”

“Your sister might have had an address book,” I suggested. “See if you can locate that. ”

“Good idea,” Alan stated. “Keep searching in the house for clues, Clare, no matter how unimportant they seem. Do you have any questions for us before we pay a visit to the neighbors?”

“No, just ask if they know where Lizzie went.”

Alan smiled empathetically. “You can do that since you’ll be with Sue and me.”

She nodded. “Thank you for letting me work with you. That means a lot to me.”

Chapter Seventeen

The three of us stood on the front porch discussing which neighbor to visit since the homes on both sides of 147 had closed blinds. Clare hadn't seen anyone coming from or going to those houses in the past three days, making her wonder if anyone lived there.

"I know what you mean," I agreed. "I never paid attention, but they're occupied since the grass on both sides are trimmed. Now that I say that, Liz's lawn looks nice, too."

"Good point," Alan agreed. "They might have a landscaping service, or share the work like Ryan and I do. Let's start at 149 and see if anyone's home."

I rang the front doorbell, and the others stood behind me. We waited for three or four minutes, then heard the turn of a lock. An old woman peered from the space a security-chain permitted.

She squinted at me, then the other two. "May I help you?"

"Hi," I said with an engaging smile. "I'm Sue Jaworski. My husband and I bought the house across the street on the corner, and I use the old cabin for a garden shop."

"Is that so?" It was more a figure of speech than a question. "I suppose I should welcome you to Aspen Notch."

"Thank you. Do you go to the Harvest Gala?" I asked.

She looked confused. “What’s that?”

“It’s a fundraiser for the town,” I said, figuring she wouldn’t want any game tickets.

“How long have you lived here?”

“I guess about seventy years,” she replied. “Everyone’s dead now.”

“Do you mean your husband?” I pressed.

“Yes, he’s gone, and the kids are gone. Everyone’s gone.”

“I’m so sorry,” I said, estimating her to be about ninety.

When Alan stepped forward, she began to close the door. “We need your help,” he said gently. “I’m Sue’s husband, Alan, and this is our friend, Clare Dolan. She’s a nun.”

She took the chain off the door and opened it wider. “Nice to meet you, Sister. Are you from St. Stephen’s?”

“No, I’m a missionary in Africa. My sister…”

“Bless you, sweetie. Lizzie’s been waiting for you.”

Clare gasped. “Is she here?”

“I haven’t seen her today.”

“Yesterday?” Clare asked.

“I don’t think so. She brought me ice cream, and I finished the carton last night.”

“Does Liz do your grocery shopping?” Alan questioned.

“Yes, every Saturday. She won’t take any money, God bless her. Oh, and her husband and son are dead, too.”

“Yes,” Clare said. “When Lizzie brought your groceries on Saturday, did she say where she was going afterwards? ”

The woman paused, thinking. “I don’t think she did, but my memory is failing. I’ve seen her light on at night, so I assume she’s there.”

Clare shook her head. “I’m staying at my sister’s house, though she doesn’t know because she’s not home.”

“Oh, my,” she sighed. “Where could she be?”

“I don’t know,” Clare replied. “That’s why I’m asking you.”

I had a feeling we’d continue going in circles, which Alan must have surmised as well. He reeled the conversation back by asking the woman her name.

“Goodness gracious, I must have forgotten to tell you. I’m Jane Windsor.” She smiled pleasantly. “And your names?”

I doubted she’d remember, but we again went through the introductions. I also gave her five tickets for the Butterflies and Blooms games, not that I thought she’d use them.

“Do you know if Liz Sterling was friends with anyone else on Church Street?” Alan asked.

“Who?” Jane queried.

Clare responded, “Lizzie.”

“Oh, right. Unfortunately, Lizzie and her husband had a falling out with the neighbors on the other side. I don’t recall what it was about, but they don’t speak.”

“Well,” Alan said, “we still need to pay them a visit.”

“They won’t be home,” Jane said with a decided frown. “He’s a doctor, and she meets friends at that fancy golf place just outside of town.”

“River Mill Country Club?” Alan pressed.

“That sounds about right,” she nodded.

“Do you know their names?”

She laughed. “Do you think I’d remember? Wait a minute... Doctor ‘Spyly-Wiley.’ That’s it: Wiley. ”

Alan smiled. “Thank you, Jane. You’ve been very helpful.”

She giggled, looking proud. “Glad I could help. Lizzie came up with that name and that’s why I could remember it. Would you like to come in?”

Alan and I begged off since we intended to visit everyone on our block of Church Street. Clare, however, decided to stay for a while, which I considered very thoughtful.

We gave our farewells and proceeded to the sidewalk. “That was interesting,” I

murmured.

“Very,” Alan agreed. “I think I’ll do a little digging into the background of Dr. Wiley and his wife while you entertain the girls at your garden club this afternoon.”

“Good idea.” I wanted to know more about the Wileys.

^^^

As Jane noted, the Wileys weren’t home, though a frazzled young woman dealing with two toddlers and a baby answered the door at 151 Church Street. She didn’t know Liz Sterling, but gratefully accepted the slew of game tickets I gave her.

No one answered the door at any other home on that side of the block. On the way back, I complained to Alan about the isolation caused by not knowing our neighbors. He laughed, probably because I typically grouched that we hardly had any time alone.

Kareen, pulling weeds in her front garden, called her hello when she heard our voices. “Out for a stroll?” she queried .

Heading her way, I said, “We wanted to meet our neighbors, but didn’t have much luck.”

“If you ask me, people are too busy. I’m glad Gerome and I have retired and can enjoy an easier pace. Of course, we have the grandkids to spoil, and I appreciate the garden club. Those keep me going.”

“Me, too,” I agreed.

Alan, still focused on our case, interrupted to ask, “Have you met Dr. Wiley and his wife? They live next door to you.”

Kareen gazed at the closed-up house. “Yes, though they’re rarely home. I believe they have a summer residence at the shore.”

“Who cuts their grass?” Alan pressed.

“They have a landscaper, like most people on this side of the street. He tried to get our business, too, but we have the time to mow our own lawn.”

Alan gave a quirky grin, no doubt thinking about how much he hated lawn care. At least for now, he and Ryan worked together on our property and his, and that lightened the tedious job for both of them.

“We just met the old lady at 149,” Alan continued. “Her name is Jane Windsor, and I don’t know if she’s able to live alone.”

“Does she have any family?”

“According to her, they’re all deceased. I’ll look into that this afternoon.”

“Maybe I’ll check on her later,” Kareen replied. “We have our garden club meeting at two-thirty.”

I smiled, happy that she’d remembered. “I’m sure Jane would appreciate a visit from you. Anyway, I’ll see you later.”

As we crossed the street, I asked Alan to help me carry the box of wreath materials home, and he didn’t even complain.

Chapter Eighteen

Alan went to our office in the sunroom to start an internet search for information on the Sterlings, Wileys, and Windsors while I set up my craft materials on the dining room table. With the French doors open, we could continue our conversation.

“Do you realize,” I remarked, “we have three people with the initials J.W.?”

Alan paused his search. “What’s that mean?”

“They were the initials on one of Liz’s sticky notes. She also wrote ‘be careful.’”

“Not on the same paper,” Alan said. “One could have been a reminder to look in on Jane Windsor.”

“Maybe, but one of those three could probably lead us to Liz Sterling.” I felt certain of that.

Alan gave a little snort. “You think a sweet old lady like Jane posed a threat to Clare’s sister?”

I sighed before placing several glue sticks on the table. “Not really, and I liked Jim Withers, the bartender.”

“He also owns the Country Club,” Alan reminded me, “so I doubt he’d want any negative press. Anyway, I liked him, too.”

“Given Dr. Wiley’s nickname,” I continued, “he’s a person worth investigating.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” Alan groused.

I stopped talking, but my mind whirled with speculations. Perhaps Liz had found evidence of Joe Wiley spying on her after the death of her husband—maybe even before. That would have made her uncomfortable since she now lived alone, so she decided to stay elsewhere until Clare arrived.

“Hey, Alan,” I called. “Check to see if Liz might be staying at the B&B in town or the motel near the interstate.” I didn’t bother to elaborate.

He nodded his agreement while jotting something on his notepad.

I placed all of the spools of ribbon on the center of the table before searching for my craft scissors in the kitchen drawer. Back in the dining room, I remembered that Liz couldn’t have driven herself any place because her car was in the garage. Or, was it?

“Hey, Alan. Check vehicle registration for the car in Liz’s garage. It’s quite possible that the Sterlings had two cars, and she hadn’t yet sold Edward’s.”

“That’s a good point, honey. I’m having lunch with Mark Matthews at the station, and we’ll look into that.”

I let him continue his search while I made a batch of lemon iced tea for the garden club meeting. My mind wandered to what I could make for supper.

Alan saved me from wasting my time by calling to me from the sunroom. “Do you have any plans for this evening?”

I returned, “Let’s go out to eat. ”

He laughed. I knew that meant we had the same idea, or I could easily convince him of mine. Besides, I wanted another chat with bartender and golf club owner, Jim Withers and, maybe, find someone at River Mill who knew Liz Sterling.

^^^

As planned, Alan picked me up in front of Butterflies and Blooms at four o'clock. We wanted to give ourselves enough time to visit the pro shop at River Mill before heading to the bar and grill for supper.

I had no sooner buckled my seatbelt before he summarized his lunch meeting with the police chief.

"You were right, honey. Liz has a 2019 silver Honda HRV registered in her name, and the vanity license plate is LUV2GOLF. Mark put out a BOLO for her and the car."

I knew BOLO meant "be on the lookout," and I thought Clare would be happy to know the county police would take part in the search for her sister. As Alan drove out of town, I kept my eyes on the road, searching for a silver SUV.

"That shouldn't be too hard to find," I replied. "What else did you and Mark discover?"

"I went off on my own since the mayor called a meeting he had to attend. I'm so glad I don't have to be at Lou Greene's beck and call any more."

"Stepping down as police chief was the best decision you ever made," I said.

He gave me a sideward glance with a quirky smile. "Marrying you was even better."

I laughed. “That’s true, too. Did you go back to the county courthouse?”

“Yes, and I also stopped by Dr. Wiley’s office. He and his wife will meet us at the River Mill bar and grill tonight.”

I stared at him. “You walked into a doctor’s office and had a chance to speak with him personally? I find that hard to believe.”

“Perfect timing. He was on his way to check on a patient at the hospital.”

“Still,” I said, “you’re a stranger. Why would he agree to see us at the golf club on such short notice?”

“He recognized me as the former police chief. Besides, I gave him our business card and told him that Liz Sterling’s sister hired us to find her.”

I would have preferred to meet him as a neighbor, not as a suspicious character in a missing-person case, but I figured Alan knew what he was doing. At least, I hoped he did.

“How did he react to that?” I asked.

“He seemed concerned.”

“Yeah, right.” I didn’t believe “spyly Wiley.”

Alan ignored my facetious comment. “Do you want to know about Jane Windsor’s family?”

“Of course.” She’d already told us they were all dead, so I didn’t expect any earth-shaking news.

Alan turned off the main road onto the winding drive for the River Mill Country Club. As he searched for a parking spot, he said, “Philip Windsor died twenty-four years ago from a heart attack. Their three sons also died of heart attacks within five years of each other.”

“How sad,” I sighed. “Were any of them married?”

“I don’t think so.” Alan took an empty spot and turned off the ignition. “Anyway, her story matches what I found. ”

“Good. What’s next, partner?”

“Let’s see if we can find Jim Withers before we meet with the Wileys. Maybe he can give us some information about them.”

I nodded my agreement as I unhooked my seatbelt. “I’d also like to talk to some of the ladies who knew Liz.”

Alan snickered. “Don’t use past tense. That could bring bad luck and, anyway, it sounds too gruesome.”

The thought of Liz being dead gave me a shiver.

Chapter Nineteen

Despite the late afternoon hour, we saw plenty of people golfing or riding in golf carts, both of which demonstrated the popularity of River Mill Golf Club. No one paid much attention to us, even as I locked my purse in the trunk of Alan's car.

I had on casual slacks, a 3/4-sleeve knit top, and a denim jacket which looked nice at Butterflies and Blooms . Here, though, most ladies wore golf skirts, showing off their lean tanned legs, short-sleeved tops, and sweaters draped across their shoulders.

In other words, they looked classy and I looked dorky. Even so, Alan didn't seem to notice.

Walking together toward the veranda, I remarked, "I'll bet it costs a pretty penny to run a place like this. Landscaping alone must be a fortune."

"I imagine so," Alan agreed. "Of course, memberships don't come cheap here."

"I guess they have an accountant or, maybe, a bookkeeper. "

Alan nodded. "Probably both. I'm sure they need to have an annual audit. Now that I think about it, I'll ask bartender Jim who he uses."

"Do we need one for our detective agency?"

"I've been thinking about it."

After my first husband died, I had an accountant prepare my federal and state taxes because my finances were such a mess. Since our marriage, though, Alan filed our taxes, and I appreciated not having to worry about them.

A booming voice interrupted my musings. We both turned to see Stan Parker, the golfer we'd met at the bar, waving to us. "I guess we made an impression on you," he called. "Welcome back."

Alan immediately recollected his name. "It's good to see you again, Stan. Did you play today?"

"Yeah, just nine holes, but my score was lousy. That's the way it goes some days."

"I guess so," Alan agreed. "We decided to check out the pro shop before we grab a bite to eat. Do you think it's still open?"

Stan glanced at his watch. "They close at five during the week, but you might make it if you hurry." Recognizing that we didn't know the way, he pointed toward the front entrance. "Take a right past the main office and head to the end of the hall. You can't miss it."

We thanked him, then made our way inside. "Why the pro shop?" Alan whispered.

"So we can act as if we want to buy golf stuff while we talk to people who may know Liz Sterling."

"Okay. We don't have much time so let's split up. I'll check out the golf clubs while you look at women's wear."

That suited me fine since the whole scenario reminded me of the ski shop at Alpine Holiday Lodge where Alan seemed to get his kicks because I didn't know what I was

doing. This time we were both out of our element.

I stared at the price tag on a golf shirt, wondering who would pay such an amount. The woman nearby had two of them draped over her arm. “Do these wash well?” I asked.

She paused to pirouette. “I’m wearing one now, and I’ve had it for at least two years. What do you think?”

“It looks brand new,” I admitted. “They offer a selection of colors here, which I like.”

She smiled. “Me, too. Are you new to golfing?”

I giggled. “Is it that obvious?”

“Just a little. I’m Sally Richards, and welcome.”

“Thanks, I’m Sue Jaworski. Do you come here often?”

“Just about every day, at least in the summer. My husband and I are snowbirds, so we go to Florida in the winter.”

Her comment made me think of my dad who had moved to Florida after my mother passed away. He loved to golf, and he, too, had died while golfing. Why I never made the connection with Ed Sterling surprised me.

I nodded, bringing myself back to the conversation. “Lucky you! One of my neighbors golfs here, although I haven’t seen her since the funeral for her husband. Do you know Liz Sterling?”

“Oh, my goodness, yes. In fact, she and I were having lunch the day he passed. By

the time she got to the 14th green, he was gone, poor thing.”

“She must have been devastated.”

“You have no idea,” she sighed. “I mean, she had to close his accounting firm and settle his affairs while trying to carry on despite her grief.”

“Didn’t she have anyone to help her? ”

She paused, thinking. “I believe her sister was coming from Africa where she’s a missionary. Liz was excited about that.”

“I’ll have to keep my eye out for both of them.”

“Me, too,” she agreed. At the sound of a whistle, she added, “Closing time, so I need to pay for my purchases. I hope to see you around, Sue.”

If anything, I thought, I found a talkative woman who knew Liz, and that counted for something. Even better, Sally verified Clare Dolan’s authenticity, and I considered that a real value.

^^^

Alan and I took a table near the entrance to the bar and grill so we could keep an eye out for Joe Wiley. Truth be told, I wouldn’t have known them if they walked into Butterflies and Blooms , thus I depended on my husband for their recognition.

He told bartender Jim that we’d wait to order since we had dinner plans with the doctor and his wife. They chatted casually before Alan asked him, “Do you have an accountant?”

Jim looked surprised. “Why do you ask?”

“Because Sue and I started a business last year and I don’t know all of the tax laws. Should I hire someone?”

“Did you set up an LLC?” he asked.

“What’s that?” I questioned.

“A Limited Liability Corporation,” Alan explained before turning back to Jim. “No, because I didn’t think we’d need it. ”

Jim shrugged. “You might want to check that out, though I can’t recommend anyone because we used Ed Sterling—and he’s now dead.”

“Sorry to hear that,” Alan remarked sympathetically. “I’ll let you know if I find anyone.”

“I’d appreciate it.” He glanced at an arriving couple. “Hi, Joe and Lindsey. I’ll send someone over to take your orders in just a few minutes.”

We introduced ourselves, and they took their seats across from Alan and me. Neither of them looked familiar, which made me wonder how people who lived almost directly across the street could be total strangers.

They both seemed a good ten years younger than Alan and me, and they both dressed in the country-club fashion. I liked the sweater-over-the-shoulder look with the arms crossed in front, and decided to do that next time we came to River Mill.

Doctor Joe started the conversation. “I’m sorry you never got to know our neighbor, Ed Sterling. He was the accountant for my practice and a darn nice guy.”

“How long did you live next door?” Alan queried.

“Gosh, at least twenty-five years. We both had our homes built about the same time, and our families got along great. We’d have backyard barbecues, and their kid played with our two. It couldn’t have been better.”

“Do your children still live in Aspen Notch?” Alan asked.

Joe chuckled. “No, they gravitated to big-city universities after high school. One’s in New York City and one’s in Chicago.”

“They’re still in college?” I questioned.

“No,” he replied with a shake of his head. “They’ve long-since graduated, married gals they met in college, got tremendous jobs, and they’re raising their families in the big-city suburbs.”

Lindsey beamed her pride. “We now have four beautiful grandkids who bring us such joy, even at a distance. We’ll all get together for Thanksgiving, then they’ll join us on a Disney cruise just after Christmas.”

“That sounds wonderful,” I said. “Alan and I just returned from Tokyo where my son married a sweet Japanese girl.” As soon as I mentioned our travel, I wanted to take back the words since they made us sound snooty.

Joe and Lindsey didn’t seem to notice.

We eventually ordered bar food and beverages, and spent the next hour or so getting to know one another. Nothing they told us about themselves raised red flags, although I found it obvious that they had plenty of money.

Alan seamlessly guided the discussion to what occurred on the day Ed Sterling died.

Joe sighed audibly. “I did everything in my power to bring him back, but nothing worked. I’ve replayed that scenario in my head so many times...” He lowered his eyes until he had control of his emotions.

“It must have been a shock,” Alan said. “Were you his doctor?”

“No, I’m a general surgeon, not in family practice. As far as anyone knew, he was in good health.”

“How did his wife take the news of his death?”

Joe frowned. “She was upset, of course. Lindsey and I knew she needed time to grieve, so we haven’t bothered her.”

“When’s the last time you saw her?” I directed my question to Lindsey.

She glanced at her husband before replying, “We golfed last Saturday afternoon, here at River Mill. ”

“Did she seem upset about anything?” I pressed.

“Not really,” she replied. “I mean, she was still closing the books for Ed’s business, but she hoped her sister would help with that.”

I nodded my understanding, then had a second thought. “Is her sister nearby?”

She smiled. “I should clarify. Liz has a sister who’s a nun in Africa, or so she told us. We never met her, did we, honey?”

He gave a shake of his head before taking a final sip of his beer.

She continued. "I believe Janice is her sister-in-law. Janice Walker is Ed's sister, and she lives in town."

"Good to know," I said. Inwardly, I cringed. We now added another J.W. to our possible suspects. "Do you happen to have her phone number?"

"I might," she said, reaching for her phone. "We exchanged numbers when we wanted to surprise Liz for her birthday a few years back." She read it aloud and I entered it into my phone.

"How about Liz's number?" I asked. I entered that one, too.

Joe waved to the waiter for the check and instructed him to put our meals on their tab. Two things became clear to me: one didn't argue with the doctor; and, when he was finished, everyone was finished.

Chapter Twenty

On our drive home, Alan and I discussed our impressions of the Wileys. On the surface, they seemed friendly enough, though a bit self-absorbed. “I thought it strange,” I remarked, “that they hadn’t been more solicitous of Liz after her husband’s death.”

“They wanted to give her time to grieve.”

“Not after at least twenty-five years of close neighborly ties,” I said.

“We don’t know how things changed after the Sterlings’ son died. Maybe they had more of a business relationship when Ed became Joe’s accountant.”

I let that thought sink in, which left me feeling uneasy. “You know, money can be a powerful motivator. Didn’t someone tell us that Ed oversaw people’s wealth?”

Alan nodded. “His brother said something like that, but the obituary emphasized Ed’s honesty and trustworthiness.”

“Why?” I asked redundantly. “Who puts that in an obituary unless there were questions about it?”

“What’s your point? ”

“Well, Ed apparently died unexpectedly of natural causes.”

“Right,” Alan agreed.

I paused, thinking. “Based on his brother’s comment, what if Ed invested his clients’ money, but things went badly? Maybe he had a Ponzi scheme going, then he suddenly died. Poor Liz had to close out his accounts, but one hinged on another so she went into hiding.”

Alan laughed. “You have a wonderful imagination, honey.”

“It’s not far-fetched,” I contended.

“I suppose it’s not, but a small town such as Aspen Notch wouldn’t have enough people with a lot of money.”

“I’ll bet River Mill Country Club has plenty of cash flow, and so does our doctor neighbor. In fact, while I think about it, how many members used Ed Sterling as their accountant? That’s what we need to investigate.”

Alan didn’t look very convinced. “We were hired to find Liz, not investigate fraud.”

“I think the two go hand-in-hand. When we get home, I’ll call Janice Walker. She may be helping her sister-in-law clean up the money mess.”

“Why wait?” Alan queried. “You’ve got her number in your contacts.” He gave me a quick glance with a quirky expression, and it looked like a dare to me.

“I’m not sure what I should say.”

When he laughed, I knew I was on my own.

Showing my independent side, I pressed the number in my contacts. “Hi,” I said in a

friendly tone. “I’m Sue Jaworski and I live on Church Street across from your sister-in-law. You might have seen me at my garden shop in the old log cabin that I call Butterflies and Blooms. ”

I disconnected after hearing the click .

“What did she say?” Alan questioned.

Placing the phone in my pocket, I murmured, “Nothing. She hung up on me.” I didn’t like the sound of his guffaws.

^^^

We weren’t home five minutes before Alan received a call from Clare. He’d let Sophie out to the back yard while I scooped kibble into her bowl, though I heard him ask if the issue could wait until morning. Evidently, it couldn’t.

“Clare needs to show us something in Liz’s house,” he said.

I chuckled. “I’m glad she called you, and not me.”

“We should both go. She said it’s important.”

I called Sophie in and watched as she ate. “She’s been alone most of the day, Alan.”

“Then, we’ll take her with us. After all, she likes Clare.”

I conceded, thinking a walk would be good for both of us. Seeing her tail wag when I returned from the laundry room with her harness and leash reinforced that she liked the idea.

I let Alan do the honors since Sophie didn't pull as much when he walked her and, with the descending darkness, we had to cross the busy Church Street. Luckily, her collar and harness had reflectors on them.

Clare greeted us at the door, and Alan explained the reason we had to bring Sophie. "I'm glad you did," she said while rubbing our dog's ears. I've missed her."

After Alan let her off the leash, we followed Clare inside and up the stairs. It made me smile to see our curious pup sniffing so many new scents .

"After I left Jane this morning," she explained, "I decided to explore the bedroom Liz used for her office. Ed had an office in town, though he must have stored some things on the computer up here."

"Do you have the password?" Alan asked, giving me a sideward glance.

She held up a stack of index cards. "I found these in the desk drawer."

I took a closer look. Each card identified a website, ID, and password. Grinning, I congratulated her with a "Well done!"

Alan gazed at the computer screen. "What's this file?"

"It looks like a listing of Ed's clients with their addresses and phone numbers. I think Liz didn't close the spreadsheet when she turned off the computer because it popped up when I entered the right password."

"That's amazing," Alan muttered. "Can we print a copy?"

While Clare turned on the printer, I looked for Sophie. She had apparently gone exploring, though I located her in the master bedroom sniffing the contents of the

closet. I managed to lure her back to the office where she received more head rubs from her new friend.

After retrieving the pages from the printer, Alan turned to Clare. “Do you happen to know the address for Ed’s office?”

She reached into the top desk drawer and handed him the business card. “It won’t do you much good. I walked into town to check it out this afternoon, but there’s already a new renter. He told me the place had been cleaned out and freshly painted before he took over the lease.”

“Did he mention if someone put everything in storage?”

She shook her head. “I didn’t think to ask. I mean, I just assumed Lizzie had taken all of Ed’s stuff.”

“Probably,” Alan agreed, “but where’d she put it? Sergeant Mark and I went through this whole house and the garage, yet we didn’t find any office equipment or supplies.”

“You’re right,” she sighed. “Where could my sister have stored all of it?”

I spoke up. “There are storage units near the interstate.” The memory of an unsavory character locking me in one of those made me cringe.

Alan caught my eye and gave a slight shake of his head. I knew he recalled the incident I wanted to forget, though he put it aside. “That’s a possibility, Sue. I’ll give the office landlord a call in the morning.” Pocketing the business card, he turned to leave.

I called for Sophie who had disappeared again. We found her on the bed in the master

bedroom, lying on a lady's vintage print scarf.

Clare laughed. "That's so sweet. Maybe she bonded with Liz at some point."

"I guess that's possible if your sister ever came to my shop. Do you have any photos of her?"

She pointed to the framed picture on the bureau. "That's Ed and Liz, maybe from their 25th wedding anniversary."

I nodded slowly. "Yes, I've seen her before, probably in my garden shop, though she never mentioned living across the street. You definitely share a family resemblance."

"We do," she agreed with a nostalgic smile.

I coaxed Sophie to come, but she refused to leave the scarf. She carried it downstairs where Alan hooked her to the leash. Clare insisted that she take it home since it didn't look expensive.

Approaching the front door, I asked, "Do you know where Liz's sister-in-law lives?"

"Janice? Not offhand, but I found an address book in my sister's office."

"Maybe you could text the street and number to me," Alan said. "We'll pay her a visit tomorrow."

Clare pulled open the door and turned on the porch light. "I think I should go with you."

"Sure," Alan agreed readily. "We can figure out a time in the morning."

On the porch, Sophie dropped the scarf to sniff a rag doll on the top step. “What’s that?” I asked. “It wasn’t there when we arrived.”

Clare picked it up, then immediately dropped it. “Ouch! Be careful, it’s sharp!”

Alan grabbed the doll with two fingers, holding it out of Sophie’s reach. He handed me the leash, and I used all my strength to hold her at bay.

Retrieving the forgotten scarf, I was able to lure her across the street, even as I called my goodnight to Clare. Sophie was still somewhat hyper, so we went from the front door to the back where I let her out to the yard.

She ran around in the dark clutching the scarf in her mouth like a flag-bearer at the Olympics. The sight made me laugh.

Alan returned a few minutes later with the doll that he laid far back on the kitchen counter. “Don’t touch it,” he warned. “It has sharp needles, like a voodoo doll.”

I peered closely to view a crudely-written note: Go back to Africa. I could only hope Clare didn’t see it.

Chapter Twenty-One

I stared at the effigy while Alan washed his hands at the kitchen sink. It looked like a child's cheap floppy toy, but large pins with black plastic balls on top had been thrust into various body parts. The gruesome sign on its belly was particularly disturbing.

"Whoever left this on the porch," I said, "knew about Clare staying in Liz's house."

"Apparently," Alan agreed. He took several photos of the ugly thing, then put it in a plastic bag. "I'll take this to the county police station for processing tomorrow."

"Did Clare see the message?" I asked.

"I don't think so, but she's smart enough to figure out that someone wants her to leave. That's the second warning in four days."

"Third, if you count the sticky notes," I suggested.

Alan raised an eyebrow. "Don't you think Liz wrote those? I speculate that the person who wants Clare to leave tossed the rock and voodoo doll. "

"It could still be Liz. Maybe she wants to come home, but can't with Clare there."

Alan groaned while I went to let Sophie in. "This is another crazy case," he said.

"I'm just playing devil's advocate," I teased. "You're the one with the police credentials. Didn't you tell me that every case has a motive, opportunity, and

means?”

“Yes, but this one’s different because we don’t know why Liz is missing.”

I raised a shoulder in a half shrug. “I gave you a motive for Liz to hide out. Did you check with the motel and B&B?”

“Yes, and she’s not at either of those places. Did you ask Irene on the off-chance that Liz is staying at Ridgeton Manor?”

“I didn’t discuss our case at the garden club meeting. By the way, the girls loved their souvenirs from Japan.”

Alan gave a quirky smile before heading to the freezer for the carton of ice cream.

“That’s nice, but don’t change the subject. Irene’s B&B would make a great hideout.”

I thought he had a good point, and agreed to call my friend in the morning. Even if Liz had booked a reservation at Ridgeton Manor, the county police would easily identify her car with the vanity license plate.

As those thoughts crossed my mind, I began to doubt my theory. After all, if I told my sister of my intention to visit her, would she leave me stranded? I couldn’t imagine that, despite the number of years we hadn’t seen each other.

I voiced my musings to Alan as we savored our ice cream. “I don’t think Liz is avoiding Clare of her own volition.”

He raised an eyebrow. “You have a new hypothesis?”

“No, but she wouldn’t leave her high and dry.”

“What’s that mean?”

“Sisters have a special bond,” I said, “even if they don’t see each other very often. I mean, I wouldn’t avoid Laura if she came for a visit.”

He nodded, letting me express myself.

“Nor would she do that to me,” I continued. “Mind you, she might leave me on my own if something came up suddenly, but she’d let me know when to expect her.”

“Unfortunately,” Alan said, “Liz didn’t do that.”

“That’s so strange, don’t you think? She cleaned the house and left notes that only Clare would understand, yet didn’t say when she’d return.”

Alan cautiously agreed. “As far as we know.”

The ringtone on his phone startled both of us. He picked up saying, “Jaworski here.”

I rinsed our bowls while he took the call in our sunroom. When he returned, his expression looked bleak, and he gave a slow shake of his head.

“Mark located Liz’s car near lovers’ lane.”

“And Liz?”

“Still missing.”

I gave an audible sigh of relief.

^^^

I wanted to blame Alan's snores for my inability to fall asleep, but I knew the insomnia came from my sense of déjà vu . Not very long ago, I inadvertently solved the mystery of why the fiancé of my friend, Ruth Jeffers, had gone missing before their wedding .

Most people, including the police, assumed Adam became nervous about his upcoming marriage, yet Ruth didn't believe so. She waited more than forty years for his return, and never gave up hope that he'd find his way back to her.

The day when Jessica and I hiked the trail near the creek, I noticed that the landscape looked identical to the artwork I'd found at Trinkets and Treasures. Later, I learned that Ruth's fiancé had painted the canvases, and they became the clue for solving the mystery of what happened to Adam Jenkins.

We located his bones in the coal mine that ran next to and under the creek. Locals called the area lovers' lane because it was secluded, yet offered clearings to park a car.

As police chief at the time, Alan closed off mine entrances that could entice thrill-seekers to explore. Unfortunately, the old mines began disintegrating, so land subsidence became another concern.

I couldn't imagine why Liz would have abandoned her car in that area since the police routinely conducted safety checks. On the other hand, she may have merely gone there to walk the scenic paths, as Jessica and I had done, yet became lost or disoriented.

Before he fell asleep, Alan told me that Mark would have the car towed in the morning. County police would scan for prints and possible blood residue inside the vehicle, then search the area for Liz. He asked that we notify Clare, which I thought should wait until she had a good night's sleep.

I would not mention Adam Jenkins or his bones.

I didn't know what time I finally fell asleep, but a volley of thunder woke both of us. Despite the closed blinds, lightning lit up our room like strobe lights, and booms followed. Frightened, Sophie jumped to the bed, wiggling her way between us.

Alan reached across her to take my hand. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, but I'm glad you're here. I think Sophie is, too."

He chuckled softly. "Remember the time the two of you hid in our closet?"

"In my defense," I whispered, "it sounded like a tornado."

"It did," he admitted. "This storm is nothing to worry about, so go back to sleep."

"I feel sorry for Clare. Maybe we should invite her to stay with us until... well, until her sister returns."

He squeezed my hand. "It's fine with me, honey, but give it some thought. I get the sense that she's used to dealing with tough things, so she might prefer to be on her own."

"True," I agreed.

In no time at all, Alan drifted off to sleep, and I was left with my thoughts and a dog that took up more than a third of the bed. As the storm dissipated, I wondered what led Clare to forsake love and spend her life as a missionary in Africa.

She had to be a very courageous woman, although I had a feeling she experienced fear like everyone else. I wanted to ask her about that.

Chapter Twenty-Two

In the morning, I heard Alan open the back door to let Sophie out, while I tried to grab a few more minutes of sleep. That didn't happen, so I dragged myself to the bathroom in the hope that a shower might get me moving.

I heard him whistling some tune in the kitchen as I dressed, and wondered how he could be so chipper. Sometimes it drove me crazy, although I wouldn't trade him for anything. He meant more than the world to me.

"Good morning, sunshine," I said dully as I plodded to the kitchen. "Did you sleep well?"

Turning from his task of making the coffee, he gave me a quirky smile. "I did—with you in my dreams."

I figured he didn't remember the storm or Sophie sharing our bed. Thinking about her, I filled a clean bowl with water and another with kibbles while asking what I did in his dream.

"We were at Michael's wedding, holding hands, and you told me how much you loved me. "

I shimmied around the island to give him a kiss. "I think I had a similar dream," I murmured softly.

After our romantic moment, I offered to scramble a couple eggs while he showered,

then we could plan our day. I thought we'd need sustenance to give us strength for informing Clare that the police found Liz's car, and Alan agreed.

I called Sophie in before I buttered the toast, and she came running. To my surprise, she headed directly to the living room in search of her treasured scarf, then dragged it along the floor to her bowl of food.

I wondered what scent garnered her interest, but didn't try to take away her precious prize. In time, I knew it would lose its appeal.

While Alan and I ate our breakfast at the kitchen island, she found a spot on the floor between us, nestled on the soft scarf. "You know," I said, "Sophie's got a good nose, so she might be able to help us find Liz."

Alan glanced down, then back at me. "She's not trained as a sniffer dog."

I shrugged. "She may not need training. Anyway, what did you do with the list of Ed's clients?"

"It's on the entry table. Why?"

"I could start calling them after we inform Clare about Liz's car."

"Don't you have to work today?"

I nodded, forking a mound of eggs. "Yes, although I could ask Kareen to help Lydia, if necessary. We've got a lot going on."

"It's also Friday, which means family night."

"Right," I agreed.

Typically, Alan ordered a couple of pizzas from Franco's, and family members were welcome to join us. That started when Jessica, my granddaughter, lived with us, then it included Judy, his daughter, during her stay with us. By proxy, anyone associated with them could also come.

Alan finished his coffee, then said, "Let's play it by ear. I'd like to meet Liz's sister-in-law this afternoon, if Clare finds her address, and I'll pick up the pizzas on the way home."

"I want to meet her, too."

His eyes twinkled. "I figured that."

I called Kareen and she cleared her calendar to substitute for me at the garden shop. That freed me to spend the afternoon working with Alan on our case which, for some reason, energized me.

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If Alan and I surprised Clare, she didn't show it. She invited us into the kitchen where she had a full pot of coffee on the warmer. "Freshly brewed," she said, reaching into a cabinet for the mugs.

"We've already had ours," Alan remarked, "but don't let us interrupt your breakfast."

She poured one for herself, then added creamer. "I found Liz's address book, in case you were wondering."

Alan nodded. "Good, but there's another matter. Sergeant Mark found Liz's car in a wooded area not too far from here."

I probably would have softened the information, but Clare seemed to take it in stride. She breathed in with pursed lips, then asked, “And Lizzie? ”

“She wasn’t there. The county police will process the scene today, so we’ll take it one step at a time.”

Clare’s eyes misted and she brushed off the moisture. “I’d like to see her car.”

“They may have already towed the vehicle,” Alan advised. He thought for a moment, then shrugged. “I’ll get my car and meet you out front.”

“Thank you,” she said softly.

I waited in the living room while she went upstairs to get the address book and her purse. As before, there wasn’t anything out of place, and the room looked sterile. Surely she would have turned on the TV, but I saw no remote for access. If she had read a book or magazine, wouldn’t she leave it on a chair or coffee table?

When she returned, I didn’t bother to ask. Nuns probably learned to keep things neat, and she may not have had TV in her African village.

“Ready?” I questioned.

She handed me the old-fashioned address book. “Ready.”

I let her sit in the front passenger seat since Alan could tell her about the location. I kept my mouth closed about that, too.

He told her about the scenic path for hiking, and the area which locals called lovers’ lane. “At one time, a company mined coal there, but the industry ended years ago.” He didn’t elaborate.

After pulling onto the wooded lane, he proceeded slowly until he reached the wider area for parking. Mark had parked his police vehicle next to the silver SUV. “You’re in luck,” Alan said. “The car’s still here.”

Mark lowered the driver’s side window of his car when we approached. “The tow truck’s on its way,” he told us. “There’s no sign of anyone on the trail, so it’s my opinion that someone merely dumped the car here.”

I looked for any subtle signal from Mark to Alan, the silent kind that police officers might share, but I saw nothing of the sort. Clare, too, watched their body language, then looked at the SUV.

“Did you check for fingerprints?” she asked tentatively.

“Yes, but someone must have wiped the vehicle. Still, it’ll take a while to do a complete forensics investigation.”

“In the meantime,” she questioned, “what are you doing to find my sister?”

He tried to reassure her. “I arrived here at daybreak and thoroughly searched the entire trail, including the areas that have collapsed due to subsidence. Those are barricaded, and have not been breached.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly. “May I look in Liz’s car?”

He shook his head. “Not until the forensics team finishes its investigation. I know this is very difficult for you, but let us do our job.”

She nodded before turning toward the tow truck that made its way to the clearing. “I suppose we should leave,” she told Alan.

He agreed, and the three of us walked back to our car. I sure hoped Mark's hypothesis about someone dumping the SUV was correct because I wouldn't want to find Liz's bones in an old mine.

That thought gave me the creeps.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Alan expertly maneuvered his car along the rural lane and paused before turning onto the main road back to Aspen Notch. “I’ll drop you off at your sister’s house,” he told Clare. “Will you be okay?”

“Yes.” She hesitated a moment. “No, I can’t sit there while waiting for word about Lizzie. What if she’s fallen in these woods? She could be hurt...” She unbuckled her seatbelt and reached for the door handle.

“Stop,” Alan commanded, using his police voice. “Mark, his partner, and the county police will thoroughly search this area. They have maps of the mine adits and locations of subsidence, and they don’t need you interfering.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “I need to find my sister.”

I reached to the front seat, touching her shoulder. “I know you do, so let’s go talk to your sister-in-law, Janice Walker.”

She turned to face me. “I don’t know where she lives. ”

Opening the address book to the W’s, I silently sighed my relief. “She lives nearby—589 Chestnut Street,” I said aloud.

Alan nodded and made a right turn. “Should we assume you’ve never met Janice?”

“Correct,” she replied. “I know Liz likes her.”

It didn't take Alan long to reach the fifth block of Chestnut, which had homes similar to those on Church Street. He parked at the curb in front of 589, a ranch home like ours. With the inside door open, we expected to find someone at home.

Alan led us up the path and knocked on the storm door. A dog barked ferociously and a woman, possibly in her early forties, told it to "calm down." She came to stand behind the glass. "Can I help you?"

Clare stepped forward. "My sister is Liz Sterling, and I don't know where she is. Can you help?"

The woman eyed Clare, then Alan and me.

He reached into his pocket to show her our business card. "I'm Alan Jaworski, and this is my wife, Sue."

She turned the lock on the storm door and opened it for us. "I didn't recognize you out of uniform, Officer. Please come in."

We stood in the entrance, and the dog sniffed us before she told it to go lie down. She invited us to sit on the sofa when she removed the basket of folded clothes, then flipped off the TV soap opera. "Sorry. I was doing laundry since I have Fridays off. What's this about my sister-in-law?"

"She's missing," Clare reiterated.

"No, I was with her last weekend when we were closing accounts from her husband's business. Who are you?"

"I'm her sister, Clare."

Janice frowned. “I don’t know what scam you’re trying to pull, but Clare’s a nun in Africa—and you don’t look anything like the pictures I’ve seen.”

“We haven’t worn habits for at least ten years,” she replied defensively, “but I assure you that I’m Clare Dolan, and Liz knew I planned to visit her. She must have mentioned that to you.”

“Maybe she did,” Janice said with a slight shrug. “It’s been crazy here, what with my brother dying and all. I guess you knew that.”

Clare nodded. “Yes, and I’m so sorry for your loss. It’s the reason I came to Aspen Notch.”

“Well, she lives at 147 Church Street and, if she’s not there, look for her at River Mill Golf Club.”

Alan intervened. “She’s at neither location, and police just located her car near lovers’ lane.”

Janice stared at him. “What are you talking about?”

“My sister is missing!” Clare replied, frustrated. She closed her eyes while trying to calm her breathing. When she regained control, she said, “I arrived on Sunday, but Lizzie wasn’t home so I stayed with the Jaworskis that night. Alan and Sergeant Mark searched the house on Monday, and I’ve been staying there ever since.”

Janice gave a firm shake of her head. “I have no idea where she could have gone. Like I told you, the only other place she goes is River Mill.”

“Sue and I have been there several times this week,” Alan said, “and no one has seen her since at least Saturday. When were you working with her on Ed’s accounts?”

“Saturday morning at her house. All day Friday, too. He left some loose ends, if you must know.”

“Did you get everything worked out?” I asked.

“No, but Liz promised to meet a friend for lunch, then still had to get to the grocery store for her neighbor, Jane. We decided to put the spreadsheets away, and she’d look at them on Monday.”

“You didn’t plan to work on them on Sunday?” I pressed.

“The bank statements didn’t look right, so she intended to talk to someone at the bank on Monday morning.”

“Did she do that?” Clare asked abruptly.

“I don’t know. It’s not like we’re best friends or something. She has her life and I have mine, but I offered to help her after the funeral. That’s all.”

“You don’t socialize?” Alan questioned.

“Things changed after their kid died,” she stated matter-of-factly. “They joined the country club, then preferred hanging with the hoity-toity, if you know what I mean.”

“Yet you’re helping her close the accounts,” I remarked.

“Sure,” she agreed. “After all, family’s family. Right?” She kept her eyes on Clare as if to reinforce her statement.

“That’s very generous of you,” Alan said. “Do you recall the nature of the bank discrepancy?”

“It’s not my place to share that information, nor is it my concern. I’m sure Liz’ll get it straightened. In the meantime, look for her at River Mill because that’s where she hangs out.”

She stood and walked to the door, clearly indicating that we should leave. We followed Alan’s lead of shaking her hand, though Clare held it longer than necessary.

“I’m sorry we’ve never met,” she stated, “but I know Liz thought highly of you. Thanks for being there for her when she needed help.”

Janice’s eyes went from Clare’s head to her feet. “You don’t look anything like what I expected. What do you do in Africa? ”

“I’m a physician assistant, so I take care of medical needs for the people in my village.”

“Yeah, that’s what Liz told me. I think she’ll be happy you came to visit her.”

Clare sighed, looking as if she held back tears. “I told her I was coming.”

Janice nodded pensively. “Right, but she wasn’t sure. You know what I mean?”

Given no response, I suspected that Clare understood.

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With the time approaching noon, and my recall of Clare not finishing her breakfast, I suggested that Alan stop someplace for a quick lunch. He had a similar idea, but took the route out of town instead of heading to the fast-food eateries near the interstate.

“I think Clare might prefer the River Mill bar and grill,” he said, catching my eye

through the rear-view mirror.

“That’s a fabulous idea,” I replied, though I couldn’t see her expression from the back seat. I wondered if nuns drank beer, but decided not to ask.

She watched the passing scenery with interest, occasionally asking the route number or street name. I had a feeling she would find her way back without us, if Ed’s car would start.

Alan had her attention as he described Jim Withers, the bartender. “He also owns the golf club, so don’t let his simplicity fool you. He’s a good talker, though, and a nice guy. ”

I didn’t think Alan should be so cavalier when Jim had the J.W. initials. I wanted to stay cautious.

“Have you met any of Liz’s friends here?” Clare asked.

“Sue and I had dinner with Joe Wiley and his wife, Lindsey. They’re also Liz’s next-door neighbors.”

“Right,” she said with a slight nod. “‘Slyly Wiley.’ So many J.W.s. Do you trust them all?”

Alan pulled into a perfect parking spot near the entrance. “We’ve met with all of them, and no one raises a red flag.”

“Good to know,” she murmured.

We meandered to the bar and grill, not in any hurry. Clare gave a friendly smile to everyone we passed, even asking a couple of people if they knew her sister, Liz

Sterling. Each of them replied in the affirmative before offering their condolences on the death of her brother-in-law. No one knew where she might find Lizzie.

When we entered the eatery, Jim waved and pointed to a table with a nice view of the 14th hole. I didn't particularly relish eating there, given the location of Ed's death, so I took the chair with my back to the window.

We must have arrived at a good time because he came over fairly quickly to tell us our choices of food. "We have hot dogs on a bun with French fries or pork barbecue on a roll with coleslaw for lunch. Of course, you can always get a burger. What's your fancy?"

We each chose the barbecued pork sandwiches before Alan introduced him to Clare. His smile broadened.

"This is the nun from Africa?" he asked. "You don't look like a missionary."

She returned his smile. "Sorry, this is all you get. Have you seen my sister lately?"

He gave a shake of his head. "Not this week, which is really strange, though she told me she was working hard to close Ed's business. Maybe she had to go into Scranton or something."

"Maybe," she agreed. "Do you have any beverages?"

"Soda and beer; bottles and draft," he said.

"I'd like a draft beer in a glass, please," she replied.

Alan grinned. "Make that three."

Chapter Twenty-Four

We had a leisurely lunch, and Clare seemed to relax while she ate her sandwich and sipped her beer. I gave credit to Alan for calmly explaining our initial steps to identify Liz's typical patterns and speak to the people with whom she usually interacted.

"Finding her car in the woods rattled me," she stated. "Liz wouldn't have gone there alone, and she surely wouldn't frequent lovers' lane."

"Probably not," Alan agreed, "although the location makes a good hiding place for a vehicle, at least temporarily."

"You think my sister hid her car there?"

"It's a possibility. We have no reason to suspect foul play, and I've checked reservations at local motels and B though sometimes the chief assigns me elsewhere. I just go where I'm told."

"Me, too, Officer."

Alan nodded. "Can I turn around at the end of the lane?"

"Guess that'd be okay. Be careful of my mother's roses."

I made sure to pretend to be looking for something on the floor when we passed by him again. With the tinted windows, I didn't think he recognized me, which was just

as well.

Back on the main road, Alan suggested I call in our order to Franco's and he'd run in to get the pizzas. After doing that, I texted Jessica and Judy, reminding them of family night. They had probably remembered, but I wanted to mention that we'd have a guest.

Chapter Twenty-Five

At four o'clock, Alan dropped Clare off at Liz's house before pulling into our driveway. She wanted some time for herself, then planned to come to our family night. Since I thought I should lend a hand in my garden shop until we closed, Alan told me he'd let Sophie out while he did some yard work.

Lydia, watering the perennials and hanging baskets, gave me a hearty welcome. "Kareen's inside with a customer. How was your day?"

"Good, though I'm not sure if I accomplished anything. We still can't find Liz Sterling." I hadn't divulged details about our investigation, but she knew our neighbor was missing.

"It's strange that no one has seen her. Kareen told me that she and Gerome hadn't met anyone on their side of the street, so she wouldn't know her if she bumped into her."

"Same here, though I saw her picture and think she's been in Butterflies and Blooms . Anyway, did you have a busy day? "

"Not too bad, but enough that I needed Kareen's help. Did you place the wholesale order yet?"

"I did, but it won't arrive until Monday."

She nodded while turning the nozzle to the off position. "I sold the last rake today, so

we should start another list.”

“I made a lucky guess,” I boasted. “Three dozen should be in Monday’s delivery.”

“You’re so smart.” She chuckled while she dragged the hose to its place at the side of the house.

I waited for her at the pergola. “Don’t forget, you have the weekend off.”

She scrunched her nose. “Our plans fell through, so I can come in if you need me.”

“You haven’t had a day off since before I went to Japan.”

“I know, but this is my happy place.”

“Well, let’s play it by ear,” I said as we walked inside. I had no idea if we’d unearth any leads for our investigative case, but I wanted the freedom to work with Alan if anything should pop up. At the same time, I had the responsibility for my business, and needed to stay on top of things at the shop. Balancing both wasn’t easy.

Kareen finished processing a transaction before greeting me. “Look what the cat dragged in,” she teased. “Any luck today?”

“Not yet,” I replied cryptically.

She had a line of customers, so I helped with bagging or gift wrapping purchases while Lydia took care of those needing items from the greenhouse. By five o’clock, we were able to lock the door and tidy the shop.

I didn’t want to delay the beginning of their weekend, even if they seemed in no hurry to leave. We chatted briefly about the upcoming Harvest Gala, which neither

had yet experienced, and Lydia offered a few suggestions for merchandise she thought we may want to stock for the occasion.

“They’re great ideas,” I acknowledged, “and the garden club girls had some, too.” Kareen nodded her agreement. “Since Alan and I are involved with an investigation, the two of you should be our team leaders.”

Neither of them had a problem with taking charge, and just the thought of their assistance removed much of the stress I felt in advance of the town’s fundraising event. As we prepared to leave, I told them I’d handle Butterflies and Blooms for the weekend, and would only call on them in an emergency.

They didn’t look as if they believed me, yet I seriously intended to spend the weekend in my garden shop.

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At home, I grabbed a cold bottle of water from the fridge, then put paper plates and napkins on the kitchen island. Alan had placed the three boxes of pizzas in the warm oven before he went outside, and I knew none would go to waste. We even liked it cold the next day.

I never knew what time to expect everyone for family night, and it didn’t really matter. Jessica or Ryan had to pick up Sean from his after-school program, depending on which of them could leave work a little early. On the other hand, Judy closed Trinkets and Treasures at five, though Tom had band practice until five-thirty. I suspected they’d arrive together.

At the beginning of the summer, Tom Franklin arrived in Aspen Notch to begin his new job as high school band director. He hoped to get settled in town before starting the academic year, but our mayor, Lou Greene, wanted him to organize a rock band

to perform for the 4th of July.

Luckily, Tom met Judy who had once planned events for her deceased husband's professional rock band. I considered Judy fortunate as well, because she found someone who shared her interests. I had to admit, we all considered them a perfect match.

Alan came in to wash up at the kitchen sink. "Sean's in the yard playing with Sophie, and Jessica's changing her clothes. Any word from Judy?"

"No, but I'm sure she'll be here. What about Ryan?"

"He's on location for a late-breaking story, but he'll be here eventually. I hope he doesn't mind interviewing Clare."

I retrieved a cold bottle of water for him while he dried his hands. Loosening the cap, I asked, "Do you think that'll help?"

He nodded pensively. "We might gain some leads."

"We usually don't talk about an investigation, so why is this one different?"

"We're searching for a person of interest, and we need to find her before the trail goes cold."

That made sense, plus no one committed a crime—as far as we knew. Alan figured that a news story about a missing person in town might go viral, which could bring favorable results, and we needed a helpful tip from someone who may have seen Liz during the week.

As a worst-case scenario, the police, or a concerned citizen, would find her lifeless

body. I didn't want to think about that.

Clare tapped on the storm door before pulling it open and walking in. "Am I too early? "

"Not at all," I assured her. "Sean's outside playing with Sophie, and the others will arrive soon."

She handed me Liz's day planner. "My sister had a few things on her schedule for this week, so you and Alan should take a look."

"We will, thanks." I put it on the entry table, and noticed Tom pull into our driveway with Judy in the passenger seat.

As they exited the vehicle, I explained their relationship to us, then introduced them when they walked in. Soon after, Jessica entered through the back door, followed by Sophie and Sean, and everyone began talking at the same time.

The chaos could have overwhelmed Clare, but she took it in stride by sitting on the sofa and rubbing Sophie's ears. Judy and Tom also took their seats in the living room before engaging her in conversation.

Alan handled the kitchen scene, letting Sean help set up the pizzas and beverages, while I added food and water to Sophie's bowls. Jessica leaned over to murmur, "Has Clare's sister come home yet?"

I kept my voice low. "No, not yet. We're hoping Ryan will interview Clare tonight, then write an article for the Gazette about Liz having gone missing."

She glanced at her watch. "He should be here soon, and I'm sure he'll be happy to help. It's just so strange, don't you think?"

“I do, yet we have no leads. It’s been almost a week since anyone has seen Liz, although Mark found her car abandoned in lovers’ lane.”

Jessica’s eyes widened. “That’s creepy. Remember when I was tied and left in the coal mine next to human bones? ”

I nodded. “Yes, and they belonged to Ruth Jeffers’ fiancé. I’ll never forget my panic when you went missing.”

“Could something similar have happened to Liz?” she whispered. “I mean, maybe she took a walk and somehow entered a mine entrance.”

“What would be the odds of that? Besides, all of the adits are sealed now, so I don’t think so.”

She shrugged. “Well, as an alternative theory, Liz may not have wanted Clare to visit, so she’s hiding.”

I knew that possibility existed, but I didn’t believe it. With all we’d learned about Liz Sterling, she’d certainly have had the courage to tell her sister not to bother visiting. Something else was at play, but what could it be?

Chapter Twenty-Six

Sean, hyper from his lack of enough playtime during the week, had more interest in returning to whatever game he'd designed with Sophie than eating pizza with a bunch of adults. He sat at an island stool gobbling a slice until Sophie finished her kibbles, then urged his mother to let him go outside again.

Jessica gave her permission, yet reminded him about the shorter, cooler evenings. "If you're cold, come in for your sweater. And, no rough-housing," she added before he called to Sophie.

Our dog hesitated, perhaps preferring to stay with Clare, yet eventually heeding Sean's insistent calls. Sophie's lack of interest seemed strange to me, though I figured they'd work it out.

By the time Ryan arrived, we'd settled in the living room to eat and talk. He knew the drill: grab a slice of pizza and something to drink, then join the rest of us.

Surprised to see Clare, he asked, "Did your sister return home? "

"Not yet, and I'm hoping you can put an alert in the county newspaper."

Ryan glanced at Alan for endorsement, then replied, "I'll be happy to help. Maybe you and I could talk after supper."

"That's the plan," Alan said before folding his slice and taking a bite.

Judy headed to the kitchen for second helpings. On her return, she asked, “Can someone fill me in, please?”

Clare obliged, and she didn’t leave out any details from the time of her arrival until the present. Jessica, Ryan, Judy, and Tom all stared at her, stunned about her situation.

Judy gasped when she heard about the rock being tossed through a bedroom window and the voodoo doll left on the porch. “Why would someone do those things?”

“Maybe to scare her,” Tom muttered.

“That’s what I assume,” Clare replied, “but I’m not leaving until I know my sister is safe.”

Ryan pulled a notepad and pen from his breast pocket and jotted a few notes. “Could your sister have gone to visit other family?”

“There’s no one left on our side, and her husband’s brother and sister don’t have any idea where she might be, other than the golf club, which we’ve checked.”

My mind wandered during the conversation as I reflected on what we knew and what might lurk below the surface. Liz had a number of acquaintances, none of whom seemed worried about her. Clare referred to her as “busy Lizzie,” not pejoratively, which aligned with what people knew of her: Liz was occupied, but she’d be available later .

Sean caught my attention when he came inside for another slice of pizza. Sophie, sitting on the back stoop, begged for entry, too. I walked over to open the door for her.

“Hey,” Sean groused. “We’re still playing.”

“I thought you were finished and, besides, it’s almost dark outside.”

“The stars aren’t out, so can we have five more minutes?”

Given the topic of conversation in the living room, I didn’t want him to have nightmares. “Yes,” I agreed. “I’ll call you when it’s time, and we’ll have no further negotiations. Deal?”

“Deal,” he grinned before urging Sophie to follow.

When I returned, Jessica gave me a smirk and whispered, “You’re a softie, Mimi.”

I thought I’d done a good job setting boundaries, though I admitted the little stinker had a way of wrapping me around his pinky finger.

^^^

While Ryan interviewed Clare, Jessica and I wrapped six slices of pizza in foil for her to take home. Judy and Tom didn’t want any leftovers since they had plans to eat out during the weekend.

“I remember those carefree days of dating,” Jessica teased. “It’s not like that for me any more.”

“I don’t know how you manage to handle everything, what with being seven months pregnant,” Judy replied good-naturedly. “That reminds me. We’d better soon have the baby shower. Do you have a date in mind?”

“It has to be after the Harvest Gala and before the baby comes in November.”

“Right,” Judy nodded. “I’ll check my event calendar and get back to you.”

“We can have it here,” I suggested.

Judy slowly shook her head. “I’m thinking we might want to rent the hall at Ridgeton Manor since we’ll have a lot of guests.”

“That’s where she had her wedding reception,” I noted.

“It won’t matter,” she replied. “It’s a great space.”

“Yes, it is,” I agreed.

I gladly handed Judy the responsibility for organizing the shower since she was now an event planner, in addition to working at Trinkets and Treasures . She quit her second job of waitressing at the Black Horse Pub earlier in the summer so she could devote more time to her new endeavor—and, I supposed, Tom.

After Judy promised to plan the baby shower, she and Tom bid farewell and departed. Jessica decided to take Sean home, rather than have him listen to details about Liz’s disappearance. She let Ryan know of her plans, grabbed the munchkin’s sweater from a dining room chair, and wished everyone a good night.

I walked her to the door and called Sophie in. “Are you doing all right?” I queried.

“Really good, Mimi. Thanks, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I loved having my granddaughter living in the house next door, and I could hardly wait for the new baby to arrive.

When I returned to the living room after letting Sophie in, Ryan had finished his

interview with Clare. Closing his notebook, he assured her, “I’ll write this up tonight and submit it in the morning. Hopefully, it’ll run by this Sunday’s edition.”

She smiled her relief as she rubbed Sophie’s ears. “I really appreciate it. One of the older Sisters at the Motherhouse offered to come stay with me until we find Liz, but she wouldn’t be able to manage the stairs.”

“That’s too bad,” Alan stated. “She could help keep an eye on your place since we don’t have anyone standing watch 24/7.”

She gave him a questioning gaze. “I’m not in any danger. Right?”

“We don’t know.”

“I don’t think I am, so I’ll play it by ear. In the meantime, would you and Sue take a look at Liz’s day planner?”

I retrieved it from the entry table and handed it to her. She gave it back to me saying, “It doesn’t make sense to me because she had things lined up for this week and, even, the rest of the month. Liz did not plan to go missing.”

I flipped through the past weeks to see planned activities and appointments every day, including when she scheduled golf, lunch dates with friends, working on Ed’s accounting files, and shopping for her neighbor’s groceries.

When nothing struck me as out-of-the-ordinary, I gave it to Alan. He looked specifically at the previous Sunday and said, “Liz knew your plane would arrive last week. It’s on the calendar.”

Clare nodded gloomily. “I know.”

“Did you see her at the airport?”

“No, although I’d intended to rent a car since she hadn’t returned my calls, then Sue told me you lived in Aspen Notch. It felt as if my guardian angel had interceded, although I don’t know what to believe now .

“That’s quite plausible,” Alan said. “Would you like to stay with us tonight?”

“No, thank you. I’d rather continue searching Liz’s house for clues.”

Alan nodded his understanding, and Ryan offered to walk with her across the street. She stood and thanked us for inviting her to our family night.

“You’re very lucky,” she said, walking to the door.

We followed, and Alan draped his arm across my shoulders. I leaned into him, feeling his warmth and comfort. As she and Ryan made their way down our front steps, I whispered to my husband, “I agree. We’re very lucky.”

We kissed after he closed the door. “Yes, we are.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“Peace at last,” Alan groused with an audible sigh as he picked up the TV remote and settled into the recliner. He didn’t fool me with his fake complaints about the earlier pandemonium because I knew he loved our weekly family get-togethers.

I sat across from him on the sofa and put Liz’s day planner that I’d retrieved from the coffee table on my lap. Sophie, cuddling next to me, sniffed it with curiosity, then closed her eyes.

“We forgot to give Judy and Tom their souvenirs from Japan,” I muttered while he channel-surfed.

He glanced toward me. “Oops. I never gave it a thought. Do you realize this time last week we were halfway around the world? It doesn’t seem possible.”

“I know.” I smiled with the pleasant memory of our last evening with Michael and Suki. “Maybe we should invite Judy and Tom for supper some night this week so I can give them their gifts.”

Alan shrugged distractedly. “Or, we wait until we see them next Friday night.” He turned his attention back to a crime show he enjoyed.

I wasn’t as enthralled with the program since I didn’t like all of the blood and gore they showed, but I listened as I paged through Liz’s schedule. Eventually, I paid more attention to her record of activities than the television.

The first part of the year included flight arrangements and car rentals to and from Orlando. Activities in Florida involved golf and dining at a nearby country club, with occasional mentions of volunteer work at a local food bank.

“Liz and Ed Sterling were apparently snowbirds,” I noted.

“Uh-huh,” Alan replied, nodding.

“That’s probably why we never saw them,” I said. “I mean, they went to Florida for part of the year, although I don’t know if they owned a home there or just rented.”

I headed to the office for a notepad and pen so I could jot my questions for Clare, then continued reading. At the commercial, Alan padded to the kitchen for the package of cookies and poured himself a glass of milk. He offered to bring back something for me, though I declined.

“It must be nice,” I said when he returned. “They took a ten-day cruise from Cape Canaveral in February, then flew to Las Vegas at the end of March.”

“Jet-setters, huh?” Alan replied. He didn’t seem fazed.

“Looks like it, and loads of dinners with other couples. Ed’s business must have done quite well.”

Alan turned his attention to me during the next commercial. “When did they return from Florida?”

“End of May, although they took a river cruise in Europe at the beginning of July. That lasted several weeks. I wonder if Clare knew how much Liz traveled. ”

“She and her sister didn’t talk very often, so probably not. You should ask her.”

“I will,” I said, writing a note for myself. “From what I see, Liz and Ed lived lavishly, though not pretentiously. They held fundraisers for various charities, yet wined and dined themselves. I don’t get it.”

“It’s not that unusual, honey.” He gave me a quirky grin. “Once we make our first million bucks, we’ll take a cruise, too. Heck, we just got back from a trip to Japan.”

I laughed at his expression. “See that? We’re part of the Aspen Notch elite, not that I want such a reputation. I’m happy the way we are.”

He smiled with contentment. “Me, too.”

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Alan drifted into slumber as the next show started. Rather than wake him, I continued reading Liz’s activities, especially those after Ed’s sudden death at the end of August. I could only imagine her struggle to arrange his funeral and the luncheon afterward, though I suspected the funeral home handled much of that.

The ringtone on my phone startled me, and I wondered who would be calling me after ten o’clock. Caller ID identified my dear sister, Laura, and I connected as I walked to the sunroom.

“Well, stranger,” I teased. “You’re not easy to reach.”

“I’m sorry.” She paused, taking a deep breath. “I have a lot going on.”

I figured she and Liz Sterling had some things in common. “You’re running a fundraiser at the country club?” I asked.

“We had that in August, and raised enough money to buy a new fleet of golf carts.

So, that's all good, but my personal life is in shambles."

That didn't surprise me, though I wanted to be supportive. "Would you like to talk about it?"

She took another deep breath. "I'm sure Dick's having an affair, and I've hired a private investigator to prove it. If he thinks I'll let him off easy, he's got another thought coming."

I didn't know what to say. Dick was Laura's third husband, though I'd never met him, but she'd stayed with him the longest. "Do you want to come here for a visit? Maybe you'd like time away to think about it."

"I might." She paused, thinking. "No, he'd bring that bimbo to my home while I'm gone. Honestly, I think he did that while I was busy with the fundraiser because I found evidence."

I didn't want those details, so I diffused the situation. "That sounds horrible, but you know you're welcome here. Did you get my postcard from Japan? I mailed it at the San Francisco airport."

"When did you go there?"

"At the beginning of September. My son, Michael, married a sweet Japanese girl he worked with. They're going to move to California, but she wanted a traditional wedding, so Alan and I went there."

"Wow! You're really getting around. Did Alexa go, too?"

"Yes, she and Jack went, but not their kids. It was definitely the trip of a lifetime."

“That’s nice, Sue. How’s your garden shop?”

“We’re doing well.” I told her about Lydia and Kareen whom I’d hired as assistants, and the upcoming Harvest Gala which they’d manage for me. I didn’t mention the investigative case that had Alan and me stymied because the missing person reminded me of her.

“Good to hear, Sue. You sound happy and I’m glad for you.” Her voice had a wistful quality, which didn’t happen very often.

“Thanks, though we can credit that to all of the wonderful people who surround me. I’d love for you to come stay with us for a while.”

“I’ll think about it,” she promised before begging off. “Dick is waiting for me, so I have to go. I’ll be in touch.”

She disconnected and I sat mulling in the darkened room. Her abrupt end to our conversation didn’t surprise me. She often did that whenever we finally connected, making me feel that other people or things were higher priorities. I wondered if I did that to her, as well.

I hadn’t been very present to Evelyn Sandler since Alan and I returned from Japan. I considered her my best friend in Aspen Notch, and I felt sure she understood when I couldn’t devote time to her.

Pangs of guilt pestered me but, according to my phone’s clock, it was too late to call her. I’d reach out in the morning to see if she’d like to join me in the garden shop, at least for a little while. I could also pick her brain for ways to convince my sister to come visit me.

I heard Alan letting Sophie out before bedtime, so I went to join him. “That was my

sister, Laura. She thinks Dick is cheating on her.”

“Is that her fourth husband?”

“Third, but he probably won’t last too much longer. She’s already hired a P.I. to catch his infidelity.”

Alan raised an eyebrow before calling Sophie in. Obviously ready, she sashayed through the open door and headed to the bedroom while he closed and locked it. We both found it funny that she had a set pattern from which she rarely deviated.

“I guess it’s time for bed,” Alan said with a chuckle as he flipped out the lights. He yawned before adding, “Why don’t you invite Laura for a visit?”

“I did. and she’s thinking about it.”

As we walked together to the bedroom, I thanked my lucky stars for the wonderful man who happened to cross my path. I had no doubt that we’d spend the rest of our lives together.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Alan and I discussed our plans for the day at breakfast. Given that we knew the Sterlings wintered in Florida, he intended to ask Clare for their address, then touch base with law officials there. He thought Liz may have sought solace in a place that brought her comfort before the arrival of her sister.

I disagreed. “There’s nothing in Liz’s day planner about flight arrangements to Florida. Besides, she was closing out accounts for Ed’s business and needed to verify something with the bank on Monday. Remember?”

“Maybe it was a bank in Florida.”

“I understood her sister-in-law to mean the bank in town,” I said gently. “I do agree that we need to investigate the Florida connection, but her pattern indicates she would’ve scheduled the trip in her day planner. Maybe you could stop by Aspen Notch’s bank and ask if she had met with someone this week.”

Alan nodded slowly. “I doubt they’ll tell me anything, but I can try. I’ll meet with Mark to bring him up to speed, then talk to folks at River Mill again. Did Liz have plans to meet anyone there last week?”

“Yes, she had a one o’clock appointment with Courtney Bates on Wednesday. It’s strange the manager didn’t mention that to us.”

“Right. I’ll ask about that, then pick Jim Withers’ brain. As bartender and owner, he knows more than he’s letting on. Do you want to come with me?”

I gave a slight shake of my head. “The garden shop needs me today, so I’ll be busy. In fact, I want to call Evelyn to see if she’d like to lend me a hand. I’ve barely seen her this week.”

“I’m sure she’d appreciate that. Do you want to go to the Black Horse Pub tonight?”

“You must have read my mind,” I teased.

Alan cleared the island while I stacked the dishwasher, then let Sophie out to the yard. “She’s still fixated with that scarf,” he remarked.

I glanced to see it draping her favorite spot on the sofa. “I suppose it’s soft and comfy. At least she’s not dragging it outside.”

Alan smiled as he pressed a contact on his phone. After a few moments, he left a message for Clare Dolan. “I wonder where she went so early on a Saturday morning.”

“Maybe to the grocery store. It wouldn’t surprise me if she intends to shop for her neighbor, Jane Windsor.” I reached for my phone and called Evelyn.

She seemed delighted about my invitation, and promised to join me at the garden shop after lunch. When we disconnected, I finished tidying the kitchen, then threw a load of dirty clothes into the washer. Glancing out the window, I saw Sean chasing Sophie in the yard, while Alan attempted to rake the first batch of fallen leaves .

The view made me smile—and I counted my blessings.

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Evelyn brought me a plastic container filled with her scrumptious spritz cookies, which I had to immediately sample despite having just finished my lunch. “I don’t

know what your secret is, but you make the best cookies!” I exclaimed.

“I just beat the butter and sugar until the combination is light and fluffy.” She replied casually, yet I knew my compliment had pleased her.

“Well, they’re delicious and I thank you.” We put on our aprons embroidered with the Butterflies and Blooms logo before I unlocked the front door and turned the “closed” sign to “open.”

“You’re welcome. What would you like me to do?”

I retrieved cash from the safe behind the loft steps. “Talk to me. We’ve been like two ships passing through the night.”

She smiled nostalgically. “I’ve missed you.”

“Same here, though it’s my fault. Fall is always busy, yet I didn’t expect to take on an investigation before we even unpacked. I would have liked some time to catch up with you, but that didn’t happen.”

“I understand,” she said supportively. “Have you found any sign of your neighbor?”

“Unfortunately, not yet.” I shook off my frustration while rearranging a few of the garden gnomes on a shelf as we waited for customers to arrive. “Would you leave town if you knew your sister planned to visit?”

Evelyn shook her head. “Of course not, unless I didn’t want her to come. I guess in that case, I’d have told her that I was busy or something.”

I agreed, even though it looked as if Liz had cleaned her house and left notes for Clare. She must have known she wouldn’t be there when her sister arrived, but why?

Three cars pulled into the lot in front of the shop, so Evelyn and I stayed busy with those patrons until the next group arrived. At one point, I caught her eye and we both smiled as we pretended to take deep calming breaths.

We had a lull at three o'clock, so we sat on the bench near the hearth with the container of cookies. "Fall flowers are popular around here," I said, munching. "It's a good thing I ordered plenty before going to Japan."

She reached for a spritz and nodded. "Do you remember that first year when we didn't know what we were doing?"

I laughed. "How could I forget?" It always tickled me when Evelyn acted as if the garden shop had been her idea. I had to admit, though, without her egging me on, Butterflies and Blooms would probably never have come to fruition.

"We make a good team," she said, adding her encouraging smile.

"Yes, we do," I agreed.

The sound of jingle bells alerted us to someone entering the front door. I greeted Clare Dolan as she stepped inside carrying a sheaf of papers, then introduced her to Evelyn.

She smiled pleasantly. "I'm happy to meet you." Turning to me, she added, "I hope you won't mind if I hang this flyer in your front window."

I took a look at it, admiring her technical skill to make an eye-catching sign with an enlarged head-shot of her sister. "You're offering a reward?" I questioned, wondering how she'd come up with \$1,000 .

"Yes. Do you think it's enough?"

Evelyn gave an immediate response. “I’d say so, and I’ll plan to start looking for Liz Sterling as soon as I finish helping Sue in the garden shop.” She leaned in to view the photo more closely. “I don’t think I’ve ever had the pleasure of meeting your sister.”

“She was a snowbird,” I said.

“What does that mean?” Clare asked.

“She and her husband flew south for the winter. They went to Florida.”

She nodded. “Yes, they owned a home in the Villages near Orlando. Edward had a lot of business contacts there, and they’d connect with the friends they’d made through the years.”

I begged the obvious question. “Could she have gone there this week? Maybe she wanted to put the house on the market.”

Clare gave a firm shake of her head. “I don’t think so. I’ve called the landline repeatedly, and no one has answered. The management company hasn’t heard from her, and there was no flight information in her day planner.”

I picked up a roll of tape on my workstation and took one of the flyers to hang in the front window. “Good job, Clare.” She had gone a step beyond me by calling possible contacts. “Did you talk to Alan this morning?”

“No, I went to the grocery store in Ed’s car, then took food next door to Jane. She’s a sweet lady, but so very talkative.”

“That was kind of you,” Evelyn remarked. “I heard you’re a nun.”

Clare smiled enigmatically. “I am, and I provide health care to the people who live in

a small village in Uganda. Providing food for the poor is also my mission.”

“I think Liz tried to emulate you,” I said. “In Florida, she volunteered at a local food bank.”

She nodded. “Apparently, she did that here, as well. I didn’t see it recorded in her planner, but Father John at St. Stephen’s told me their food pantry was stocked because of her fundraisers.”

“You must be proud of her,” Evelyn stated.

“I am, but I’m also terribly worried.”

“Alan had a meeting with our police chief this morning, “ I said, “and he’s continuing our investigation at the golf club this afternoon. Hopefully, he’ll have some good news later. We plan to go to the Black Horse Pub for supper tonight, and you’re welcome to join us.”

Clare paused, thinking. “I could do that since I’d like him to fill me in. What time?”

“We’ll pick you up around five-thirty. How about you and Marty, Evelyn?”

She sighed with a roll of her eyes. “You know Marty’s a man of predictability. I have to pick up hoagies from Franco’s when we finish here today, but maybe I’ll see you at brunch tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a plan.” I chuckled as we waved Clare off to hang her flyers, watching as she set out on foot, heading down Main Street.

“She’s one determined lady,” Evelyn noted.

“Yes, she is.” I no longer questioned her integrity. She’d already shown that she had spunk, and I gave her credit for that.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

The hostess at the Black Horse Pub had seated the three of us at a booth away from the bar, and our waitress had already brought the round of beers Alan ordered. He explained to Clare that the place was the best eatery in town, other than Dottie's Café which only served breakfast and lunch.

"Earlier this summer," he noted, "some guy wanted to buy this place and turn it into a gentleman's club of sorts."

"Do you mean like Hooters or something?" Clare asked.

Alan stifled a laugh. "Yes, exactly. Our daughter, Judy, who was a weeknight waitress here, quit when she was told she'd have to wear a skimpy outfit."

Clare gazed around the room, then back to Alan. "I suppose that didn't go over very well since the staff is fully clothed."

"Right. The mayor got wind of the deal and put a stop to it. He actually found a clause in the town's bylaws prohibiting such a business within the borough. "

"Did your daughter get her job back?" she asked.

"No, Judy decided to start an event-planning business, but she also works during the day at the gift shop on Main Street."

Clare nodded. "She was very helpful when I asked to hang a flyer in the front

window; and, of course, we chatted over pizza last night.” She reached into her purse to retrieve a copy for Alan.

He looked impressed. “Well done. If you have any others, I can take them to post at River Mill.”

“Great. I appreciate that you’ll save me the trip.”

The waitress arrived with our food and didn’t hesitate to glance over Alan’s shoulder. She paused, platter in hand. “What’s this about Mrs. Sterling?”

“My sister is missing,” Clare explained.

“That’s not possible. She was here last Saturday night with her neighbor.”

“Which one?” Alan asked, making room for her to put his plate on the table.

“Gosh, I don’t know,” she said as she gave each of us our meals, adding a basket of fried onion rings for the center of the table. “She was old. I mean, like, really old, but she could hold her beer. I think she had three glasses of the dark ale.”

“Was her name Jane?” I queried.

“I’m not sure, but she lives next door to the Sterlings. Sad to say, he died a month ago, out of the blue. He was playing golf and just keeled over. He always gave me a great tip.”

Clare interrupted. “Did my sister say where they were going afterward?”

“Not really. She teased about getting her home to bed, and they were out of here by seven o’clock. No later, I’m sure. Anyway, give a holler if you need anything else,

and I'll check back soon."

When she scurried off, Alan reached for the onion rings. He put several on his plate, then passed the basket. "Well, we can identify Jane as the last person to see Liz. That's a help."

"Maybe not," I said. "Did you ask at the bank?"

Alan took a sip of beer. "I did, and Liz hadn't made any appointment. She also never arrived for the one with Courtney Bates on Wednesday."

"Who's that?" Clare asked.

"She's the office manager at River Mill Golf Club. Her boss, Jim Withers, reiterated that no one has seen her all week, so I'd say we need to talk to Jane Windsor again. She's apparently the last contact Liz had."

I forked a piece of Swiss steak and a mushroom. "Did Mark Matthews have any information about Liz's car?" I asked Alan.

"The door handles and steering wheel were wiped clean, so we know she didn't abandon the vehicle. Someone who didn't realize the police patrolled lovers' lane probably hid it there."

I tried to mentally reconstruct the scenario while Alan and Clare chatted about the lack of fingerprints on the car. According to the waitress, Liz left the pub with Jane by seven o'clock and took her home. She would have parked in the driveway between their houses and walked the neighbor to her door.

She apparently had her purse to pay for their meal, though Clare found it in the hall closet. That meant Liz had returned to her own home after leaving Jane. Would she

have gone out again? Not without her pocketbook, I thought. She must have gone to bed.

I wiggled my way into their conversation. “What did Liz do on a Sunday morning?”

Clare shrugged. “She went to the eleven o’clock Mass at St. Stephen’s.”

“How do you know that?” I asked.

She looked puzzled. “I assumed, because Father John told me she would do a reading at that Mass when she was in town.”

“Would she have taken her purse?” I questioned.

“Probably not since the church is within walking distance from her house. I’ve walked there myself every day this week.”

Alan kept his eye on me. “What’s your point, honey?”

“I’m thinking Liz walked to church last Sunday morning, but we need to verify that somehow.”

“If she used a church envelope, they’d keep a record of her donation,” Clare said.

“Okay, so even if she chatted with people after the service, she still had to walk home and get a bite to eat before driving to the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton airport. Of course, she’d have needed her purse.”

As usual, Alan poked a hole in my theory. “What makes you think she intended to drive to the airport? She wrote Clare’s arrival on her calendar, but she may have asked someone else to pick her up.”

“I would want to meet my sister at the airport if she were coming for a visit.”

“What if I offered to pick up Laura for you because you were making a nice supper to welcome her.”

He made a good point, so I had to think of a comeback .

“Well,” I said, “I suppose it’s possible she asked someone to go to the airport for her, given her pocketbook in the closet and the house in perfect order, but who? We’ve spoken to her family and friends, yet no one has mentioned such a request—and it wasn’t in her day-planner. She only recorded her sister’s arrival date, but not a specific time.”

Clare nibbled on an onion ring, deep in thought. “The fact that Liz ate here last Saturday evening is important information. I can ask Jane about it tomorrow since she may have been the last person to see Liz.”

“Right,” Alan agreed. “Then, find out if Liz went to church on Sunday morning. Sue gets really good vibes, and I’ve learned to not ignore them.” He gave me that quirky expression I loved.

When our waitress returned, Alan asked for the check and insisted that she include all three meals, despite Clare’s offer to pay for hers. She finally gave in when he teased that her retainer had covered it.

“I usually challenge Sue to a game of pool after we eat,” he remarked as he pulled his credit card out of his wallet. “She loses just about every time.”

I rolled my eyes before admitting the truth of his words.

“How about a threesome?” Clare suggested. “I think I could take you on.”

I couldn't tell if she meant her challenge, or if the beer had relaxed her, but I gave her credit for baiting Alan.

"We're on a case," he said with a shake of his head.

"We can't do anything else tonight," she contended, "so we might as well have some fun."

"Do you know how to play eight-ball?" he asked her.

She grinned. "I guess you'll have to wait and see. Are you nervous?"

Alan glanced at the tab our waitress brought, then handed her his Visa card. Back to Clare, he asked, "Why would I be nervous?"

"Because you're going to lose, Alan Jaworski."

I could only chuckle with the repartee. I thought Alan must have met his match because the Sister didn't retreat. I prayed that she and I would take him down.

Chapter Thirty

The next morning, Alan and I met Evelyn and Marty for Sunday brunch at Dottie's Café. We had a table for four by the front window and could watch patrons come and go. The self-serve box of newspapers on the corner had a steady stream of customers, and it seemed that everyone in town now knew that Liz Sterling was missing. The flyer taped to the door reinforced the message.

After taking our order to the kitchen, Dottie returned to pour cups of coffee for each of us. "She and her husband had come for breakfast occasionally, so I recognized her picture on the flyer. Her poor sister traveled all the way from Africa to see Liz, but she wasn't at her house. Where could she have gone?"

"Sue and Alan are working on the case," Evelyn replied in a low tone.

I refrained from kicking her under the table since Alan reminded her that we couldn't discuss an open investigation. It probably didn't matter because Ryan had provided those details in his article .

Marty reached for his folded newspaper on the floor. "It says here that Mark Matthews found her car on lovers' lane. What would she have been doing there?"

"I think someone kidnapped her," Evelyn said with a firm shake of her head. "You watch. There'll be a ransom note sent any day now."

Dottie nodded. "They had money; that's for sure. I have to admit, they didn't flaunt it, but they always gave me a substantial tip."

“As well they should,” Evelyn remarked. “Still, they could have bought one of those pretentious houses out by the golf club they belonged to. I wonder why they didn’t. I mean, those homes on Church Street are old and dated, as Sue and Alan are aware.”

She referred to the mess of a house we bought in Aspen Notch. Luckily, she knew a painter who knew a project manager, and our renovations were well worth the money.

My assistant, Lydia, would remind me that everything in life is connected because that painter we hired had dated Dottie awhile back, and I brought them together again. They had since married, to everyone’s delight.

She left us to greet newcomers and pick up our orders, but that didn’t stop the speculations about Liz Sterling’s whereabouts. Once everything arrived, we tackled our food instead of grousing about having to fear the bad intentions of robbers and kidnappers.

Eventually, Marty asked about our trip to Japan, so we told them about the traditional Japanese wedding and our impressions of Suki’s parents who had shown us the sights in Tokyo. “I’ll never forget their kindness and generosity,” I added.

“Maybe you could invite them to Aspen Notch someday,” Evelyn said. She immediately giggled, saying, “I guess that would be culture shock for them.”

“We’ve already suggested that,” Alan replied. “Once Suki and Michael get settled in California, I think we’ll see them all at some point. It is, however, a very long flight to and from Japan.”

“Better you than me,” Marty chuckled. “How’d you meet the missing lady’s sister?”

“She sat next to Sue on the plane from Chicago to Scranton. They got talking, and

next thing you know, we're giving her a ride to Aspen Notch."

Marty and Evelyn laughed at Alan's expression, but my mind wrestled with the thought that Clare didn't expect Liz to pick her up at the airport. She had intended to rent a car until I told her of our destination. I tucked that twinge away until Alan and I could discuss it.

Alan continued to say, "You'd never know she's a nun."

Marty raised his eyebrows. "A nun from Africa?"

"She's a missionary, but let me tell you. She knows how to handle a cue stick. She walloped Sue and me last night when we played pool at the Black Horse Pub."

Marty's guffaws resounded through the café. "A nun beat you at pool? I think I'd like to meet that lady."

I caught Evelyn's eyes, and we could only shake our heads at the ridiculous conversation between two grown men. I thought Alan had recovered from the stab to his ego when he'd grouched about it as he got into bed the night before, but obviously not.

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Alan dropped me off at Butterflies and Blooms in time to open the shop at noon. He then drove across the street to talk to Jane about being the last person to speak with Liz. He hoped Clare had returned from church so they could take a look at Ed's business files together, then he'd let Sophie play in the yard while he raked leaves.

Evelyn would have helped me in the garden shop again, but Carol Steinway had called a Harvest Gala steering-committee meeting for one o'clock. Marty couldn't

complain too much because he, as chair of traffic management, was also required to attend.

I thought about asking Kareen for her assistance, yet hated to beg after all of the times she helped Lydia while I was away. I'd have to manage myself—and hope everyone in town didn't need to buy fall flowers or garden equipment.

When I unlocked the cabin's front door, I stared at Liz's picture on the missing-person flyer. "Where are you?" I muttered aloud. "Why didn't you return your sister's calls? You recorded the date of her arrival on your calendar, yet left her stranded."

I ended my rant to the photo when two cars pulled into the parking lot. After welcoming my customers, I spent the rest of my busy afternoon trying to manage everything while remaining calm.

At the register, I heard several people discuss the reports of a missing person in Aspen Notch. None appeared heart-broken, just surprised. When one of the chatty ladies in line brought her purchases to check out, I asked how well she knew Liz Sterling.

"I didn't know her at all," she replied, carefully placing her wares on the glass counter. "Her husband was our accountant, and he recently died suddenly, so I felt sorry for her. I'm hoping she just needed time away. "

"I hope so, too. Apparently, the Sterlings live right across Church Street, but I'd never met them."

"From what I've heard, they traveled extensively," she said.

I nodded as I rang up the merchandise. "I heard that, too. I wondered if she had to

close out accounts for his business.” I went out on a limb with such a brazen statement and waited for her to tell me it was inappropriate. She didn’t.

“Maybe corporate accounts had more money invested with the agency, but we just had Ed do our taxes each year. Actually, lots of people in Aspen Notch used him as their accountant, not a broker. He was a nice guy.”

“I wish I’d known him,” I said, bringing an end to our chat.

She scooted off after I processed her credit card, then I had a similar conversation with the next lady in line. One-by-one, no one could imagine where Liz had gone, and each customer hoped foul play wasn’t involved, as did I.

As the afternoon wore on, I heard Sophie’s exuberant bark in the backyard, and assumed Alan had let her out to play with Sean. I hadn’t touched base with Jessica since Friday night, but I liked our proximity as neighbors which enabled the munchkin to walk next door by himself.

Apparently, Jess had come with him because she surprised me by entering the side door. “Would you like some company?” she called with a playful grin. All heads turned her way.

“More than that,” I said, taking a moment to pull the chair from my workstation to the cash register, “I could use your help.”

She processed credit cards while I rang up the items and bagged them. Before long, the line cleared, permitting me to assist those who wanted flats of plants in the greenhouse.

“You’re wonderful,” I said, locking the front door just after five o’clock. “How’d you know I needed you?”

She smiled her understanding. “Just a guess. Now, I’d better collect my son and get supper on the table.”

“Do you want to eat with us?” I had no idea what to whip up, though I’d remembered to defrost a package of chicken.

“Thanks, Mimi, but I have a casserole ready to take out of the oven whenever Ryan finishes cutting the grass.”

I envied my granddaughter’s ability to multitask. “Okay, and thank you for helping this afternoon. Tell Ryan his article has caused a big stir, given all of the conversations I heard today.”

She nodded her agreement. “I heard some of the talk, too, and I hope we soon find Liz.”

As we walked across the lawn together, I thought the same thing. I also wondered if I was cut out to be a sleuth, because I had absolutely no idea where Clare’s sister could have gone.

Chapter Thirty-One

I washed my hands at the kitchen sink before noticing condiments and a box of tin foil left on the counter, but no chicken. Figuring Alan had decided to grill while he kept an eye on Sean and Sophie, bless his heart, I gazed from the window to see him talking with Clare. Both had glasses of wine in their hands, with an empty glass next to the bottle on the picnic table.

I brought out napkins, a box of crackers, a knife, and a wedge of cheese. “Are we celebrating?” I questioned, taking a seat next to Alan. Sophie sidled up to me.

My husband shook his head before pouring me a glass of wine. “No, we’re brainstorming while our supper is cooking. Hope you don’t mind barbecued chicken and baked potatoes.”

“That sounds marvelous,” I said, slicing the cheese. “Did you invite Clare to join us for supper?”

“Yes, and she’s planning on it. So you know, we didn’t find anything too alarming with Ed’s accounts. Either he did a lot of finagling or he was as honest as his obituary implied.”

“That’s good. A few ladies waiting for me to ring up their purchases talked about Ed as their tax accountant, and they were sorry to hear of his death. They thought maybe Liz just needed some time to get away.”

“Did they read the article in the paper?” Clare asked.

“Yes, and I’ve rarely heard such chatter as I did today. Ryan did a great job raising awareness.” I hoped my words brought her comfort, but worry emanated from her eyes.

“Alan and I went through the sticky notes I’d found in the kitchen again,” she said, “and he thinks we should make J.W. the hinge for our search.”

I turned to face him. “Haven’t we done that?”

“As far as we know, none of the J.W.s we’ve identified have any grudge against Liz, or even Ed. There must be another J.W. we don’t know about.”

I took a sip of my wine, trying to recall the words on the pieces of paper. “One of them told Clare to use the money she found, and another had River Mill written on it.”

“Right,” Alan agreed, placing a slice of cheese on a cracker. “Others said For You , Be Careful , and J.W .”

“Okay,” I nodded. “Lydia Perkins, who happens to be a full-blood descendent of the Lenape, once told me to look below the surface whenever I became stuck on something. I think we need to do that here.”

Alan waited for my theory, but I didn’t have one because I needed to talk it out.

“Bear with me,” I said, giving Clare a glance. “You assumed Liz left you those notes, but you don’t know that for sure.”

“I guess not.” She nibbled on a piece of cheese .

“What if J.W. was the signature. In other words, J.W. left the notes and money for

Liz.”

“Does that really matter?” she asked. “We’ve spoken to three J.W.s, but none of them knows where Lizzie went.”

“But we didn’t ask if they gave her money and told her to be careful.” The more I mused about the possibility, the clearer it became.

Alan raised an eyebrow. “Why would Liz have hidden the notes and money in the kitchen cabinets?”

“She might not have been hiding it.” Ideas took shape. “We know she kept a tidy house, and her mother used to keep things in sugar bowls or coffee cans. So, let’s say she gets these notes from J.W. that he or she wants her to have money, but she should be careful.”

Alan stifled a laugh. “She receives lots of cash, then hides it before disappearing? I don’t think so, honey.”

“Look below the surface,” I repeated. “I have a feeling we’ll see the indentations of J.W.s writing on the sticky pad, if you still have it,” I told Clare.

“I can go get it,” she offered.

Before Alan could tell her not to bother, I encouraged her to bring it to us—mostly because of my curiosity. “I’d also like to look through Liz’s address book, if you could bring that, too.”

“Okay, I’ll be right back.”

When she scurried off, Alan rose to check on our supper. “This is a wild guess, isn’t

it?" he teased.

I gave him a quirky grin, then shrugged. "Yes, but I could be on to something."

He laughed, and I picked up the bottle and my glass to take inside. "I'll set the table in case you want to eat before we test my theory."

He thought that was a good plan.

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Clare helped by clearing the table while I stacked the dishwasher, and Alan wiped off the grill. During supper, she asked about our decision to start a detective agency, and that became the topic of conversation. She seemed most interested in the stories about the cases I'd helped to solve.

No one wanted dessert, so we settled in the living room to test my theory. As I'd suspected, we could see the faint outline of the initials, J.W., on the top sheet of the sticky pad.

Alan, the skeptic, reminded me that it didn't mean J.W. wrote all of the notes. Clare agreed with him since she still felt her sister had left them for her to find.

I accepted the criticism and moved on to search for other J.W.s in Liz's address book. Nothing popped out, so I returned it to Clare with a sigh. "I guess that was a silly theory."

She offered me a conciliatory smile. "No worries. We're grabbing for straws, as my father once told me."

"Have you ever heard from him?" I asked.

She firmly shook her head. “No, but he broke my heart when he left us. My poor mother thought he’d return, yet he didn’t.”

“You were young, and that makes it worse.” My husband had done something similar, though he kept in touch with my two children.

“I was thirteen,” she said, “and Liz was only three years old. For so long, I blamed myself.”

I understood completely since I thought I’d caused the rift in my first marriage. “You weren’t to blame. You were a child.”

“Ah, but I was stubborn. Sometimes I’d do things just to irk him, although I don’t know why.”

Alan smiled, thinking back to his early-adult years. “Typical teenager behavior. I have two sons and a daughter who tried my patience, but I’d never have left them.”

“It takes a long time to get over feeling abandoned,” Clare stated. “I’m no longer angry, and I’ve forgiven my father, but he missed all of the special occasions of two wonderful girls who loved him dearly.”

I could hear the hurt in her voice and see pain in her eyes. “I’m so sorry,” I murmured. I thought, perhaps, talking about him might help. “What’s his name?”

She blinked to clear her blurry eyes. “John Dolan. I don’t know if he’s still alive, but I hope he’s found peace.”

I had no idea what made me ask, “What’s his middle name?”

She stared at me, taking a deep breath. “John William Dolan. Oh, my gosh, J.W.”

Alan caught my eye. “Honey, if you’ve solved this mystery, I’ll eat my hat.”

I laughed nervously. Could Liz have gone to help her father? If so, why would her car have ended up at lover’s lane. “I might have just muddied the waters,” I mumbled.

Chapter Thirty-Two

It was after nine-thirty when Alan put Sophie on her leash to walk Clare home. I decided to join them despite having been on my feet for much of the day. The fresh air, already tinged with vibes of fall, would do me good, if only to clear my brain.

After I'd presented the possibility that J.W. could have written the notes warning Liz of danger, then Clare's admission of her father having those initials for his first and middle names, we took a step back. I wished they'd have dismissed my premise as a ridiculous idea, but Alan thought it had merit.

"We have nothing else," he remarked, "so I think we need to explore this as a potential lead."

He wanted to first Google John William Dolan's name to determine if he had an obituary. Using his phone, he found eight photos, yet Clare rejected each of them, one-by-one.

"My father could still be alive, yet none of these match my memory of him. He'd probably be about 82 years old now."

"So, he might have wanted to help Liz," I suggested.

She nodded. "Maybe."

"Well, we can't do any more tonight," Alan said. "I'll inform Mark in the morning, then check global police and real estate records for John Dolan. If he's alive, we'll

find him.”

She stood, heading for the front door. “I’ll pray that we do, then hope I can handle whatever follows.”

“I have a feeling you’ve dealt with some difficult things in your life,” Alan said with a reassuring smile. Sophie tried to pull ahead of him, but he had a firm arm and made her heel. “We’ll take it one day at a time.”

Her eyes clouded, yet she nodded her agreement. “You’re right, and thank you. I’m particularly grateful to have both of you helping me.”

Alan replied as he opened the door. “You’re welcome.”

We waited for a few cars to pass before crossing the street, which gave me an opportunity to view the neighborhood. Directly across, the Presbyterian church had security lights by the entrance and the parking lot.

Kareen and Gerome lived next to it, although shrubbery and a few trees separated their property. They had turned on their living room lights, so I assumed they were home.

Next to them, the doctor and his wife had lights on in a few downstairs rooms, as well as the front porch. That, and an extra car in their driveway, made me think they had company.

Clare had left lights on in every room, including the porch. She must have wanted to eliminate any potential security breach by making it look as though she had a crowd. With the blinds closed, no one would know.

The house next to her, however, was in total darkness. “I guess Jane Windsor goes to

bed early,” I said aloud.

“I think so,” Clare replied. “I’ve tried to be neighborly, like going to the grocery store for her, but when she finally answered the door, she merely took the bags from me and closed it again.”

“She’s a strange bird,” Alan remarked. “She wouldn’t even come to the door when I stopped by earlier.”

As we approached the porch, he told us to wait while he and Sophie examined the perimeter. He checked to see that the front door was locked, then strolled around to the back. When they returned, he gave his approval to enter the house. I figured Clare would find his police persona somewhat reassuring.

She unlocked her door and went in with a goodnight wave to us, then I heard the sound of the deadbolt. We turned to head home.

“What took you so long out back?” I queried.

“Sophie followed a scent from the garage to the back stoop,” Alan said. “I used my phone’s flashlight, but didn’t see anything.”

“It could have been a squirrel.”

Alan chuckled. “Probably. Are you ready for ice cream?”

“Of course.” I would have preferred bedtime, but I knew how much he loved his nightly treat.

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Sophie stopped at the curb and wouldn't continue. "Let's go," Alan urged. She pulled to go back to Liz's house.

"Maybe she heard something," I suggested as I turned my head. I knew her ears picked up sounds long before mine did.

In a moment, I heard Clare opening her door and calling to my husband. He bounded up the steps with Sophie in tow, though it may have been the other way around. I followed, listening to the fear in Clare's voice.

She held up a beaded necklace. "This was on the kitchen table—and it wasn't there earlier." Her eyes pleaded for Alan's help. "I sent this to Liz from Africa last year, and she told me how much she loved it. Could my sister have been here?"

"I doubt it," he replied, "though Sophie had followed a scent out back. Do you want me to search the house?"

"Yes, please."

He and Sophie went from room-to-room while I stayed with Clare in the kitchen. Although she held the necklace with her thumb and index finger, I told her she should place it in a plastic bag so Alan could take it to the forensics department of the county police for analysis.

While she did that, I gazed around the room and found nothing out of place. I tried turning the knob on the back door, but it didn't budge. The kitchen windows remained locked, and no one could have entered. Either someone had a key or Clare made up her story.

"I don't know what to think," I said, trying to again dispel a twinge of disbelief seeping through me.

“Lizzie was here,” she muttered. “I’m sure of it, but why wouldn’t she tell me she’s okay?”

“Let’s think rationally,” I said. “Wouldn’t Liz have stayed to greet you if she’d stopped by? ”

Her eyes became misty. “I don’t know. We haven’t seen each other in over twenty-five years.”

“Then, help me understand. You traveled from Africa to Chicago to Aspen Notch in order to comfort your sister after the sudden death of her husband. Wouldn’t she have been grateful for that?”

Clare blinked to clear her eyes, then pulled out a chair to sit. “It wasn’t exactly like that. My community brought me home because I’d disobeyed a doctor who prescribed a medicine which would have killed my patient. He reported me for misconduct and malfeasance.”

“No one listened to your side of the story?”

“They did, but the Sisters in charge decided I should have a sabbatical before receiving a new assignment. I didn’t want to start over in another location, so I made the excuse that my sister needed me.”

“Was Liz happy when you told her?”

“Let’s just say she wasn’t overly enthusiastic.”

I nodded slowly. “Twenty-five years is a long time.”

“Right, and she really needed me when her son died—but I couldn’t come then. I

don't think she ever understood that."

"She might have thought you abandoned her the way her father, mother, and child did when they left or died."

"Yes, I suppose so."

We sat quietly musing the words that had passed between us until Alan returned with Sophie. She trailed behind him, carrying another of Liz's scarves between her teeth. I smiled to see her canine pride, though I told her to "leave it."

"There's no sign that anyone has broken in," Alan said, "nor did I find anyone lurking upstairs or in the basement. If you feel uncomfortable staying alone, you're welcome to spend the night in our guest room."

"I think I'll be all right." She handed him the plastic bag with the necklace. "Would you check for fingerprints, please?"

He hesitated for a second, then accepted it. "I'll drop it off in the morning. Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"I'm positive." She gave a firm nod that counterbalanced the worry in her eyes. "If Lizzie wants to talk to me, she'll stay longer the next time."

Alan had no idea what she meant, but I intended to tell him over a dish of ice cream.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Alan received a call early Monday morning from the county police dispatcher asking if he would substitute for an officer who called in sick. He didn't hesitate to accept, although it meant a change in his plans.

He hopped into the shower while I dragged myself out of bed to make the coffee and open the back door for Sophie. By the time he joined me in the kitchen, looking quite handsome in his uniform, I presented him with his mug and toaster waffles.

"Don't forget the beaded necklace," I reminded him.

He picked up the bag from the counter and placed it in his pocket. "As I told you last night, we won't get a clue from this."

"I know, but you'll have done your duty."

He nodded, dousing his waffles with syrup. "I feel sorry for Clare, especially losing her position because of someone's ego, but there's no way her sister left that necklace on the table. "

"Liz could still have her keys," I reminded him. "You told us Sophie followed a scent, and she likes Liz's scarves. It's possible that Liz stopped by; and, maybe, she left the necklace as a peace offering."

Alan sputtered, rolling his eyes. "Is that why she dumped her car at lover's lane?"

I shook my head. “That doesn’t make sense, does it?”

“No, and given what Clare told you last night, I don’t think Liz wants to see her sister.”

I poured myself a cup of coffee and sat next to him at the island. “My sister and I have said or done things through the years that may have been hurtful, but we don’t hold grudges. We barely talk on the phone, yet I’d want to see her if she came.”

“I guess I could say the same about my siblings.”

“Right,” I agreed, “so I do think Liz is being held captive somewhere. She could have stopped to see someone on Sunday morning—and she could have been wearing the beaded necklace.”

“How would it have landed on the kitchen table?”

“Whoever kidnapped her has her keys. He dumped the car so it wouldn’t trace to her location and, tonight, put the necklace in the house.”

Alan sipped his coffee, thinking. “That’s a good deduction. If you’re right, someone’s watching Clare’s comings and goings. After all, he or she knew when to get access.”

“Creepy,” I sighed. “I wonder why?”

“Given the rock and voodoo doll, I’d say someone is trying to scare Clare so she’ll leave. There must be something in that house the person wants.”

“Who would do that?” I wondered aloud. “My first guess would be one of the neighbors since they can see when Clare goes out.”

Alan nodded. “The driveway’s on the right, so I’d say Jane is our suspect, and she has the J.W. initials.”

“She’s too old, can barely walk, and had no one but Liz to visit her. She certainly wouldn’t kidnap Clare’s sister or throw a rock through a second-floor window.”

Alan chuckled as he placed his dishes in the sink. “That’s all I’ve got, Sherlock. Get your moxie working.”

I watched as he put on his police paraphernalia, then said, “We need to find Liz quickly. Once the creep no longer needs her, she’s a goner.”

He turned to me, and our eyes met. “I think you’re right, honey.”

The enormity of our discussion weighed heavily. I added kibbles and water to Sophie’s bowls and called her in to eat, then went to shower and dress. A mantra echoed in my mind: Where are you, Lizzie?

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After breakfast, I prepared my bank statement at the kitchen island. Sophie had been lying at my feet until she heard a noise that drew her toward the open front door. Her tail swooshed with excitement, so I went to greet our visitor.

“Good morning,” I said as Clare reached the stoop. “Come in and have a cup of coffee.” I regretted my words instantly since “the creep” could have seen her leave the house.

“Thank you, but I’m not going to stay. I just wanted to report that I was fine last night. ”

“That’s good news.” I gave her a supportive smile. “Alan took your necklace to the county police this morning.”

“I hoped he’d remember.” She reached to pet Sophie. “He must think I’m really flaky.”

“Not at all, Clare. In fact, we think someone wants you to leave Aspen Notch.”

She shook her head. “Lizzie?”

“No, and your sister may not even know you’re here.”

“She knows,” Clare whispered, “but I’m not leaving until I have full assurance she’s okay.”

I hesitated to reveal the earlier conversation between Alan and me, yet considered it necessary. “We believe the person who left Liz’s car at lovers’ lane has your sister’s keys, which probably includes her house key. That’s who put the necklace on the table.”

“Maybe it was Liz telling me she’s okay.”

“You can believe that, but I don’t. That rock through your window, the doll on your porch, and the beaded necklace are sick messages of warning.”

Her back stiffened; she stood taller. “If I go, Liz will win.”

“This is not Liz making you pay for neglecting to be with her after her son died, Clare.” I wanted to tell her to get over it, yet her forlorn expression held me back. Instead, I said, “Why not ask one of your nun friends to come stay with you?”

“How will that help?”

“You wouldn’t be alone in the house, and I wouldn’t have to worry about you.” My comment brought a faint smile.

“I’ve probably faced more fears in the bush than you ever will, so don’t lose sleep over me. I’ll talk to the Sisters and let you know if I can arrange for one of them to visit, but I intend to come and go whenever I want.”

I had a sudden inspiration. “You know, I had the locks on the log cabin changed after someone caused mischief there. Let’s have the locksmith come out today.”

She paused, pondering. “I wouldn’t want Liz to think I’ve locked her out of her home.” After a moment’s consideration, she said, “If you believe that’s wise...”

“I do.” I reached for my phone, searched my contacts for the locksmith’s number, and called.

He thought he could be there by mid-afternoon.

“He must not be very busy,” Clare noted when I ended the call.

“Alan and I have used his services more than once, and he does his best to fit us in. He’s a nice guy, so you’re in good hands.”

“I appreciate your help,” she murmured, leaning down to pet Sophie again.

I felt good about giving her a reason to stay home, at least for a little while. Another brainstorm had me say, “I have to run errands this morning, and hate to leave Sophie alone. Would you like her company until the locksmith comes?”

Sophie must have understood my words because she gave a pleading look and wagged her tail.

Clare laughed. “I think we’d both enjoy the company.”

I gathered Sophie’s water bowl, Liz’s scarf, and a couple of her toys, then attached the leash to her collar. As we walked to the curb together, I told her my plan to go to the bank and grocery store before working in the garden shop.

“Would you like me to bring anything back for you?”

“I’d love one of those Italian hoagies from Franco’s,” she replied, somewhat hesitantly .

I smiled. “Good idea. I’ll pick up one for each of us and we can have lunch together at your house.”

“Liz’s house,” she interjected.

“Yes, Liz’s house.”

For some reason, I felt as though we’d connected—at least a little, and that meant a lot to me.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I put away my groceries without Sophie under my feet, which felt strange, then grabbed two bottles of water from the refrigerator to take with the bag of sandwiches to Clare. First, though, I stopped to tell Lydia that I'd return to Butterflies and Blooms after lunch.

"It'll be good to have you back," she said as she unlocked the front door of the garden shop. "How'd you make out over the weekend?"

"Evelyn helped me on Saturday, but I tried to wing it alone yesterday. Thank goodness, Jessica came in the nick of time."

Lydia chuckled. "I've had moments like that, too. That's when I call Kareen."

"I didn't want to bother either of you on the weekend, and I mistakenly thought I could manage alone. It all worked out, thank goodness."

She went to greet our first customer while I headed across the street. I felt so lucky to have hired such an experienced garden shop manager as Lydia Perkins, especially now that I had a case to work with Alan. She would have told me that our interconnection was meant to be, and I concurred.

I heard Sophie bark as I rang the doorbell, but she settled down immediately when Clare opened the door to greet me. "I have napkins at the kitchen table, so let's eat there."

Agreeing, I bent down to give Sophie a hug, although she seemed more interested in the aromas emanating from the bag I carried. I stood quickly to avoid a grab-and-run, yet laughed at her antics. Clare did, too, which made me think my dog would make a good therapy animal.

As we ate, Clare told me that she'd decided against asking any of her Sisters to come stay with her in Aspen Notch. "You have to understand," she explained, "my best friends serve in the foreign missions as I did, and they certainly can't travel from Uganda or Nigeria or Peru just to keep me company."

"That makes sense," I said, thinking of her inability to come and comfort Liz and Ed when their son was dying. "I believe that changing the locks will give you peace of mind."

She took a bite of her sandwich after pushing some lettuce back inside the roll, and it looked to me as though she reflected on something bothering her. Finally, she said, "I like having Sophie with me, and she seems comfortable here."

I nodded, thinking. Looking down at Sophie lying between us I said, "I don't know if she'd want to stay overnight because she's never done that with someone other than family. Come to think of it, I did board her during our home renovations, and she adjusted with no problem. "

"Do you think we could try it for a night? I'd be willing to pay you."

The thought tickled my funny bone. "Usually, it's the other way around. The owner pays to board the dog."

She chuckled, too. "Everything about this trip is backward and upside down, so it makes perfect sense."

I looked down at my dog. “What do you say, Sophie? Do you want a sleepover here?” Her tail thudded on the floor.

Turning to Clare, I said, “I think that’s a yes. We’ll do a test run tonight and see how it works. The only thing she’ll miss is running around the yard with Sean.”

“I can bring her over for a romp around supper time.” Her eyes pleaded with me.

“Perfect, and you can eat with Alan and me.”

“I don’t want to be a bother,” she said.

“You’re not,” I assured her. “I bought a microwavable pasta dinner and store-made coleslaw. Easy-peasy.”

I could tell she liked the idea.

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When I watered all of the outdoor plants around four-thirty, I saw Clare walk Sophie across the street. She had pretty good control, despite my dog’s tendency to pull. I waved as I put away the hose, yet didn’t have to rush home because Alan had finished his police duty and would entertain her.

Lydia locked the front door just after five o’clock while I took off my apron. I’d already told her about expecting Clare for supper, so she urged me to leave .

“I’ll put the extra cash in the safe, then straighten up,” she remarked. “Did I see Clare walking Sophie earlier?”

I smiled conspiratorially. “Yes, they’re keeping each other company.”

“That’s sweet. Don and I have talked about adopting a dog since he’s retired, but we still like to travel. You’re lucky your granddaughter lives next door and doesn’t mind pet sitting.”

“We’re grateful for that, and Sean is still at an age when he likes playing with Sophie. Besides, she’s a great watchdog.”

“That’s a good point.” She chuckled, then waved me off.

I focused on that thought when I retrieved our mail and crossed the front yard. I’d always felt safe with Sophie at my side.

The house was quiet, so I assumed I’d find everyone outside enjoying the sunny but breezy fall day. From the kitchen window where I stood watching as I washed my hands, I saw Alan and Clare sitting at the picnic table, each with a bottle of beer, while Sean and Sophie chased each other in their Ninja game.

I planned to sit outside with them, but first wanted to set the table and begin the cooking process for the microwavable meal. When I finished those tasks, I brought a bottle of beer out for me.

Alan welcomed me when I greeted everyone. “We were just talking about our therapy dog. Good thinking, partner.”

I gave him my happy smile. “It was Clare’s idea.”

“And who thought about calling the locksmith?” he asked.

I straightened my spine and grinned. “Okay, that was my idea. Did the guy change the front and back door locks?”

She nodded. “Yes, and he checked every window lock. I won’t have to worry about someone entering if I go out.”

“Right,” Alan agreed. “I think after supper I’ll head over to the home-supply store and buy security cameras for the front and back doors. They’ll also deter an unwanted visitor.”

“I’d like to go with you,” she replied, “and I can pay for them. I found more money today.”

“Where?” he asked.

“In Liz’s top bureau drawer, inside a little box for rings. It had a sticky note with the initials J.W.”

“J.W. has certainly been generous,” Alan noted. “I hope we find out which J.W. is rolling in money.”

Clare had a far-off look in her eyes. “I doubt it’s my dad. He took most of my parents’ savings when he left, and my mom struggled to make ends meet.” She put her lips to the bottle of beer and sipped slowly.

“Well,” I said to Alan, changing the subject, “Did you drop off Liz’s necklace today?”

He reached into his pocket and gave the bag to Clare. “I picked it up at the end of my shift because they couldn’t identify any of the partial prints. Forensics suspects it was wiped clean before someone left it on your kitchen table, so only yours remained.”

She groaned her frustration. “I shouldn’t have touched it, but I didn’t expect it to be evidence.”

As usual, Sean overheard part of the conversation. “What’s evidence?” he asked, picking up the bag. “Hey, this is cool.”

“Evidence is something that can help solve a crime by looking at fingerprints,” Alan explained. “However, if you touch the evidence, but you’re not the guilty person, the police might put you in jail anyway.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Your fingerprints say you did.”

Sean placed the bag on the table and stared at the tips of his fingers. “Everybody has the same fingerprints.”

“No, they don’t,” Alan said, holding out his hand. “We all have swirls, but they’re different on each person. That’s how the police catch the bad guys.”

“Do dogs have fingerprints?”

“No, but they have nose prints.”

Sean laughed. “That’s pretty cool. Hey, Sophie. Come here.”

My eye roll coincided with Jessica’s call for Sean to go home. To my surprise, he complied without too much grousing, although he did make a close inspection of Sophie’s nose before offering her a goodnight kiss.

“Do we get kisses, too?” Clare asked.

Sean’s doe eyes opened wide before he shook his head. “I’m not allowed to kiss people.”

“How about hugs?” she pressed.

“Nope, not those either.” He looked nervous.

Alan interjected, “Clare’s teasing, buddy. Go on home for supper and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay, but can I have the evidence?”

We all struggled to keep a straight face as Alan replied with a firm, “No.”

Sophie followed Sean to the gate, Clare placed the bag with the necklace in her pants pocket, and we headed inside. “That kid’s a riot,” she whispered to me.

“Yes, he is,” I agreed wholeheartedly.

Chapter Thirty-Five

After breakfast on Tuesday morning, Alan and I took our second cups of coffee to our office in the sunroom with the intention of working on our case. Unfortunately, we first had to sift through numerous emails the SAJ Detective Agency received from people who wrote that they had seen Liz Sterling during the past week.

“Why did Ryan have to use our email address?” I groaned.

“At the time, we thought it would be a good idea. However, I didn’t expect so many fake sightings or bogus claims.” Alan shook his head as he read, “I saw that lady sitting at a dive bar in San Antonio, Texas. Trust me, she’s not interested in returning to Aspen Notch.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “That’s a good one.”

After an hour, we determined that most of the responses weren’t credible. The few that had merit mentioned having seen Liz during the previous week at River Mill Golf Club.

“Could Mark get a warrant to search the place thoroughly?” I asked .

Alan shook his head. “There’s no probable cause. I also feel certain that Jim Withers would gladly lead a search party on his property, and we wouldn’t need a judge’s order. He’s seriously concerned that Liz hasn’t returned home yet.”

“Do you want to ask him if we could do that today?”

“Sure,” he agreed.

“I think we should bring Sophie,” I said. “She knows Liz’s scent.”

“As I’ve said before, Sue, she’s not trained as a sniffer dog.”

“I know, but humor me.”

He rolled his eyes as he pressed the phone number for Jim, then brought me into the conversation using the speaker mode.

“We’ve been on high alert around here,” Jim noted. “I have all my employees searching the areas they oversee, and we haven’t found a trace of Liz.”

“What about the grounds?” Alan asked.

“There, too, although we probably could do a better job by dredging the ponds or searching the wooded areas.”

“Can you do those things this afternoon?”

“I’d probably need equipment for the ponds, so I’ll have to think about that,” Jim replied. “Otherwise, I can organize a search team for the woods this afternoon, if you could help.”

“I’m planning on it,” Alan said.

I interjected, “Me, too. Do you mind if we bring our dog?”

“Not as long as you pick up its waste, if you get my drift.”

“Of course,” I agreed, giving Alan my silent message of triumph. “I have a feeling Liz’s sister will want to participate, too.”

“As far as I’m concerned,” Jim replied, “the more people searching, the better our chances of finding Liz.”

I liked his openness and his sense of immediacy. We agreed to meet him at the bar and grill around twelve-thirty, and he promised to have a team organized by then.

^^^

I stayed outside near the golf carts with Sophie while Alan and Clare went in to meet up with Jim and whomever he gathered for the search team. While we waited, I worked on training Sophie with Liz’s scarf, not that I knew the particulars. I’d seen enough TV shows where an officer or military guy holds a piece of clothing near the dog’s nose and says, “Find So-and-so.”

The dog runs off and, sure enough, locates the person.

Sophie, on the other hand, considered the exercise more like a game of keep-away. I had a feeling she’d prove Alan right, and he’d probably enjoy the gloating.

Ten minutes later, about twenty men and women joined me, most of them wearing golf outfits, which meant that Jim must have cajoled them into helping when they’d gone inside for lunch. Stan Parker confirmed that fact when he greeted me while petting Sophie.

“We’re not going to find Liz in the woods unless someone dragged her lifeless body there,” he said.

“You seem pretty certain of that,” I remarked casually.

“I occasionally played nine holes with her, so I know she’s afraid of snakes. She’d forfeit a game before she’d retrieve her ball if it landed in the woods.”

Jim overheard Stan’s comment. “As a kid, I played in those woods but never came across any snakes.”

Stan laughed. “You must not have gone very far because I’ve seen them.” Noticing my expression, he added, “Just the garden variety, so don’t worry.”

After the banter, Jim introduced Alan as the former police chief of Aspen Notch, then asked him to organize the search team. My husband explained the process clearly, noting he wouldn’t permit anyone to leave the group and fan out on his or her own. “We stay together at all times,” he instructed. “Yell if you see anything out of the ordinary, and we’ll pause to check it out. Any questions?”

One guy raised his hand. “Is that dog trained as a sniffer?”

Alan caught my eye. “No, though my wife has been working with Sophie, and we think she may be able to pick up Liz’s scent.”

I smiled, recognizing another of my husband’s redeeming qualities: he always supported me in public.

Clare offered to take charge of Sophie when we crammed into four golf carts for a ride to the woods. I chatted with the ladies, each of whom spoke about Liz in glowing terms, and they all agreed with Stan. The gal they knew wouldn’t have gone into the woods.

We passed two groundsmen knee-deep in water, retrieving golf balls from one of the ponds, so Jim must have decided to use human power to search for a body while doing their normal chore. The scene gave me the creeps, and I looked at Clare to see

if she felt the same way. She kept her eyes on the two ladies who had her ear while her hand rubbed Sophie's back .

As a physician assistant in a rural village of Africa, Clare must have witnessed death, but this time, I thought, would she be prepared to identify her own sister? I tried to put myself in her shoes, and didn't think I could handle it.

The guys driving the golf carts lined them up at the edge of the woods where we scooted out and followed Jim and Alan along the trail. At least five people had walkie-talkies, which I figured would help us stay together.

Two hours of hiking the numerous paths resulted in zero sightings of Liz or signs that she'd been there. Sophie pranced at Clare's side, enjoying the scent of squirrels or deer. She definitely associated nothing with the aromas from her favorite scarf.

As we squeezed into the golf carts again, I saw expressions mingled with relief. Stan proclaimed, "I told you Liz wouldn't have gone in the woods," which elicited some chuckles. Clare wrapped her arms around Sophie.

Jim used his transmitter to communicate with his men at the pond as we headed back to the main building, then announced that they hadn't found any trace of Liz. "I think we're all tired, yet relieved," he said. "I can offer free soft drinks for everyone at the bar and grill."

"No beer?" Stan grouched.

Jim chuckled. "I've got a business to run, Stan, so give me a break."

"You're rolling in the dough," Stan countered.

"Not since we lost Ed Sterling," he said with a shake of his head.

Alan caught my eye with that comment, but neither of us gave a response. He did say, “We appreciate your thorough search for Liz Sterling today. I know that cost you, so thank you. ”

“We had a bunch of volunteers, and we’d do anything to help our friend and benefactor.”

The golf-cart drivers pulled close to the outside entrance of the bar and grill, and most of us went inside for a cold beverage. Clare wanted to stay with Sophie, so I promised to bring both of them something to drink.

I returned to find Clare sitting on a bench, staring at the sky. I handed her a bottle of water and poured another into a bowl Jim lent us for Sophie.

I opened mine and took a sip. “Are you okay?”

She nodded, but didn’t look at me. “Sometimes finding nothing is better than finding something,” she murmured.

“That’s true,” I agreed. My heart broke for her.

Chapter Thirty-Six

On our return to Aspen Notch, Clare mentioned that we should stop at the bakery to pick up something to bring to Jane Windsor. “I’m a little worried about her because she hasn’t answered the door any time I’ve tried to pay a visit.”

“I thought you said she took the groceries you offered her on Saturday,” Alan remarked.

“Yes, but it’s now Tuesday. I wanted to ask where Liz might have gone after they ate at the Black Horse Pub the night before I arrived. Unfortunately, we didn’t know about that until later.”

Alan nodded. “Right. We can try again, and bringing a tasty dessert might convince her to open the door. I’d also like to stop by the police station to update Mark on our search at River Mill.”

“Do you think he’ll return Liz’s car now that they didn’t find any clues to her whereabouts?” Clare asked.

“I believe forensics finished processing it,” Alan said. “If so, we might save him a trip to pick it up if you have a key.”

I swiveled from the front seat to see Sophie lying with her head on Clare’s lap. It would have been a sweet picture if I could have reached the phone in my pocket before they moved. “Maybe there’s an extra car fob in a kitchen drawer or something,” I noted.

“Yes, I found one and have it with me, just in case.”

“Good,” Alan stated. “We’ll see if Mark has unearthed any new information. He was going to investigate reservations for air and ground transportation when I spoke with him yesterday.”

Clare took a deep breath. “Okay.”

When they reached Main Street, Alan pulled into a parking spot in front of the police station, and we all trooped in, much to Mark’s surprise.

He looked up from his phone, wrapped up his call, then greeted us with a half-hearted smile. “I had a lead on your sister,” he told Clare, “but it was bogus.”

“We had some of those, too,” Alan acknowledged. “What’s with these people who have a warped sense of humor?”

“They have nothing better to do than waste our time,” Mark complained. “I wanted you to know that Elizabeth Sterling hasn’t taken a plane, train, or bus in the past three weeks; at least, not under her own name.”

“We appreciate you checking on that,” Alan stated. “We’ve just returned from River Mill Golf Club where we joined a group of people searching the woods for Liz. The owner also had workers checking the ponds.”

“I gather you didn’t have any luck. Is that why you brought the dog?”

Alan nodded. “We hoped Sophie would catch a scent.”

Mark distractedly reached down to pet her. “There’s a BOLO throughout the East Coast and mid-Atlantic regions, so we should get some good news soon. Someone

has to have seen her.”

“Whoever dumped her car knows where she is,” Alan said.

Mark frowned, shaking his head. “And whoever dumped it, knew how to wipe a car clean. Forensics picked up nothing.”

“The jerk probably used an oxy-cleaner,” Alan remarked. “Smart move.”

Clare interjected, “Do they still need my sister’s car?”

“I wouldn’t think so,” Mark replied. He pressed a number on his phone, then asked about the status of the missing person’s vehicle. Disconnecting, he said, “You can pick it up today if you have a key fob. They’re open until six o’clock.”

She thanked him, without much enthusiasm. I figured she was exhausted and frustrated, though maybe still hopeful that Liz would be found alive and well.

“If anything,” Mark commented, “this case has caught the mayor’s attention. He’s found money in the budget to hire two more part-time cops this year, and Ronald Simpson will go full-time in January.”

Alan laughed. “Lou wants that third term as mayor, so it’s a good strategy.”

Mark nodded his agreement. “His election platform hinges on maintaining the safety of Aspen Notch’s residents, so a missing person in town is a big deal. I’d appreciate your help with vetting the applicants, sir.”

“Gladly,” Alan replied. “Let me know if or when you get any responses to the BOLOs.”

Before we piled into the car, Alan suggested that he could take me home, then drive Clare to the police's impound yard. "We'll pick up something at the bakery to bring to Jane," he added.

"You might as well also buy something for dessert tonight," I said. "Clare, we're having chicken pot pies for supper if you'd like to join us."

"Thank you," she said. "I'd enjoy that."

^^^

I helped Lydia in the garden shop during the last forty minutes before closing, then rushed home to put our pot pies in the oven, make a salad, and set the table. Sophie, asleep on the sofa, barely raised her head to watch me fill her water bowl and prepare her supper.

"You've had quite a day," I told her, understanding why she looked so tired. I, too, felt exhausted.

In a way, I hoped Sean would find something else to occupy his attention before supper, but I knew he'd head to our place as soon as he returned home from his after-school program. Then again, I liked giving Jessica a chance to unwind after work without his incessant chatter.

As I stood chopping an onion for our salad, he rapped on the kitchen door. "Come in," I called. Sophie didn't budge, though she did open her eyes for a moment.

"Hey, G-G. What are you making?"

"A salad for supper. Would you like to help?"

“No, thank you. I’d rather play with Sophie.”

Those must have been the magic words because my dog came alive, and the two of them headed to the back yard for an evening romp. Jessica arrived shortly after .

“I had an ultrasound today. Would you like to see Jolene at seven months gestation?”

“Of course,” I exclaimed, quickly reaching for a towel.

She handed me two photographs of a perfectly-formed baby, not the grainy shadows they’d captured long ago when I was pregnant with my two children. “Isn’t she beautiful?”

I smiled, filled with motherly instincts. “Yes, she is. Look at that little button nose. May I take a picture with my phone?”

“Sure, but I already sent them to Mom in case you planned to do that.”

We both laughed when I received a ping on my phone with a text message from my daughter, Alexa. “She sent copies to me,” I chuckled.

I returned a congratulations message to her, promising to call later. Jess munched on a stalk of celery, saying, “You know my mother’s going to want to visit.”

“We already planned everything during our trip to Japan.”

She rolled her eyes. “I should have known.”

As much as she teased, I knew Jessica wanted her mother’s presence during this most important time in her life. I did, too.

“All will be fine,” I said comfortingly.

She held her round belly with both hands and spoke to her unborn daughter. “Be a good girl, baby doll. We’re not quite ready for you yet, but almost.”

“We need to have that baby shower soon,” I pressed.

“I’m on schedule for Jolene to come in mid-November, and Judy’s working on the event, so don’t worry, Mimi. Everything will work out.”

I smiled, realizing we were keeping each other calm, and I liked that. “I know it will, Jess. I wish I felt as positive about our case because we keep hitting brick walls.”

She laughed. “You say that every time, then you suddenly get an inspiration. I think the same thing will happen soon.”

“This one’s a doozy,” I said, shaking my head.

“I guess that means Ryan’s article didn’t help.”

“Well, other than responses from kooks, it captured the mayor’s attention. In fact, he intends to fund more part-time cops in town this year, so that’s good.”

“Yes, it is,” she agreed. “I’ll tell Ryan when he gets home from work.” She glanced at the clock on the wall. “That should be any time now, so I’d better start supper preparations.”

She stuck her head out the kitchen door and called to Sean, “Five more laps around the yard, then we’re going home.”

He groaned, yet complied. I would have slowed my speed, but he apparently didn’t

think of that. Besides, Sophie had enough running, and she left him mid-lap. By then, Jessica had met up with Sean, so they walked home together.

This time, I snapped a picture of the touching scene.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I couldn't imagine what kept Alan and Clare, but I turned off the oven, placed the salad and dressings on the table, poured iced tea for the three of us, then sat on the sofa with Sophie. I imagined there could have been car trouble, or Jane invited them to sit with her, both of which seemed feasible to me.

When I twisted my body to look outside for them, Sophie opened an eye out of curiosity, then returned to her nap. Finally, I texted Alan: Is everything okay?

He returned a thumbs-up emoji, which wasn't much help. A few moments later, he wrote: Heading home now .

I watched as he waited for traffic to clear before backing onto Church Street, then turning into our driveway. Clare sat in the front passenger seat, and they were deep in conversation.

Alan announced their arrival while I placed an over-done pot pie on each plate. "Sorry, honey," he said, looking apologetic. "We lost track of time." He put two pastry boxes on the island .

"Did you solve the case?" I asked, motioning for everyone to sit.

He gave a rue chuckle. "No, we had to wait for someone from the county's Adult Protective Services to come and evaluate Jane."

"Oh, no! What happened?"

“Apparently, she hadn’t been eating or drinking. She could barely unlock the door when we stopped by with the doughnuts, then almost collapsed in the hallway. Clare’s medical background came in handy because she knew the symptoms of dehydration.”

“Will they have to put Jane in a nursing home?” I asked.

Clare shook her head. “Jane refused, but they set up daily meal delivery and a weekly home visitation. I’ll look in on her each morning and call them if there are any other incidents.”

“Right,” Alan nodded. “Jane gave Clare a house key, so all is well.” He picked up his fork and broke through the dark crust. To my relief, the inside still looked creamy.

I passed the salad bowl. “Did you ask Jane where Liz may have gone that Saturday night after they went out to dinner?”

“She didn’t know,” Clare replied hesitantly. “She still may be somewhat confused or have memory problems, but she insisted that they both exited the car and went to their respective houses.”

I wondered if we should trust Jane’s recollection, yet didn’t press the topic. Clare, however, seemed anxious to continue the conversation.

“We know,” she stated, “my sister prepared for my arrival the next day, so I imagine she did go home after making sure Jane was safely inside. She put her purse in the hall closet, straightened the kitchen and living room, then went to bed.”

“Would Liz have gone to bed by eight o’clock?” I doubted it.

“Maybe she watched TV,” Clare suggested.

“Has anyone checked her phone records?” I asked.

Alan nodded. “Mark did, but I don’t think he sent me that report.”

“Well, we need it,” I said. “If it were me, I’d probably call a friend to talk. I certainly wouldn’t go to bed while we still had daylight.”

Alan reached for his phone and pressed Mark’s number. I noticed Sophie had moved to lie next to Clare’s chair.

He disconnected, saying, “Mark will send a CSV file to our agency email address, so we can take a look at it after supper.”

Clare added dressing to her salad as she commented, “I don’t know that she’d have been talking on the phone. Liz never liked spending time like that. If anything, she’d have gone to visit someone—or, maybe, invited someone in.”

“We’ll find out when we receive the file,” Alan noted.

While eating, my mind worked to recreate the scene. Before Alexa, my daughter, visited me, I cleaned the house and shopped for groceries. She never expected me to have a perfect home, but I always wanted to make the place comfortable for her.

“Clare,” I said, mulling, “What was in the refrigerator when you arrived?”

She rested her fork on her plate. “Not much. She had coffee creamer on the top shelf and condiments on the door. I remember thinking that she must have recently cleaned it.”

“No actual food?” I pressed .

She paused, thinking. “Yes, she had some eggs in a carton, a package of cheese, several small containers of yogurt, a partial head of lettuce, and a jar of applesauce.”

“Okay,” I said. “She cleaned out the refrigerator, probably in preparation for your visit, yet still needed to go to the grocery store. I would have gone on Saturday night.”

Alan caught my eye. “What’s your point, Sue?”

“I’m trying to recreate the setting.”

“Liz couldn’t have gone to the grocery store on Saturday night,” he remarked, “because Clare found her purse in the hall closet and there was hardly any food in the refrigerator when she arrived.”

“Right,” I agreed. “You told us, Clare, that you found mail in her curbside mailbox, so you knew you had the right house.”

“Yes,” she said, giving me a questioning gaze.

“How much mail?” I asked. “A week’s worth?”

“No, I wouldn’t think so. I don’t know how much mail you get each day in the U.S., but it didn’t look like much. I know there was an ad for a free dinner if she wanted to learn about a nursing home called Shady Acres. The rest were store ads.”

“Shady Acres is giving away free dinners?” Alan asked. “Did we get that offer?”

“I tossed the ad,” I replied. “I thought you never wanted to see that place again.”

“I wouldn’t mind a free dinner,” he mumbled.

I laughed as I collected everyone's dishes, especially when he told Clare about the case we accepted a few months prior. "I have to admit, Sue used her remarkable skills of deduction again to solve that one."

"Connection," I corrected him. "Not deduction. I merely make connections. What did you buy for dessert? "

"Take a guess," Alan said with a quirky grin.

"Apple pie."

"You looked!" he groused.

"No, I didn't, but you're so predictable. We have vanilla ice cream in the freezer, and you like a scoop on apple pie." I opened the box and gloated. "See? I was right."

He rolled his eyes and Clare laughed. I did, too, although I wished I could have solved her case as easily.

^^^

After supper, we retreated to the sunroom where Alan searched for Mark's email on the computer. After finding it, he clicked on the link, opening it as an Excel spreadsheet.

Clare and I stood behind him, looking over his shoulder. He scrolled through the list, stopping at that Saturday evening. "I think you're onto something, Sue. Liz received two calls, probably while she and Jane had supper at the Black Horse Pub. It appears that she returned them after she arrived home."

"Who'd she call?" I asked.

“I need to use a reverse phone directory for that,” Alan said. “Give me a minute.”

We waited while he pulled up a website, then plugged in the first number. “Interesting,” he remarked. “She called Lindsey Wiley, her neighbor, and Janice Walker, her sister-in-law.”

“She didn’t talk very long to either,” I remarked, “which makes me think she made plans to visit both of them.”

“It would be easy to walk next door,” Clare remarked.

“Right,” I agreed. “She would have had to drive to Janice’s house, which she could have decided to do on Sunday morning.”

“After church,” Clare added.

I nodded. “Possibly. She spent that Saturday morning working with Janice on Ed’s accounts, so she may have forgotten something there.”

Alan closed the directory and saved the spreadsheet on the desktop. “I’d say Liz either went next door or invited Lindsey over to her house. The only way to find out is to pay the Wileys a visit.”

I glanced at my watch. “It’s only eight o’clock, so we could walk over there now.”

“Why don’t we just call?” Clare asked.

“We could,” I agreed, “although I’d like to watch her body language.”

Alan smiled, giving me his expression of pride. I figured he realized I’d paid attention to what he’d taught me, and that delighted me.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

As dusk descended, I turned on the lamps in the living room, then closed the blinds. “Lights are on at the Wiley residence,” I said, “so I think we could walk over there now.”

“I’d like to bring Sophie,” Clare noted, “if you don’t mind me borrowing her another night.”

I glanced at Sophie who still looked tuckered, though she followed Clare from room to room. “It’s fine with me.”

Alan concurred, clipping her leash while telling her to be a good girl. I tossed a sweater around my shoulders, hoping for a trendy look. As we crossed the street, I wondered if we should have given them a heads-up before arriving at their door.

Too late for that, Alan rang the doorbell, which triggered the porch light. A moment later, Dr. Wiley pulled open the inside door. He seemed surprised to see us, as well as our dog, which may have been why he didn’t invite us in.

“We’re sorry to bother you,” Alan said. The storm door still remained closed between us. “I wanted to introduce you to Clare Dolan, Liz Sterling’s sister.”

He smiled politely. “Nice to meet you.”

Alan continued. “We’ve been trying to piece together Liz’s last contacts before she went missing.”

“As I told you last week, we haven’t seen her.”

“Right,” Alan replied, “though your wife played golf with her on the Saturday afternoon before Clare arrived.”

“I’m not sure about that.”

Alan raised an eyebrow. “That’s what your wife told us when we had dinner with you at the bar and grill. Would you ask her to confirm that with us?”

Joe Wiley didn’t look pleased, but he complied. When the two of them came outside, he relayed that they could give us only five minutes of their time. They stood stiffly while Alan introduced Clare to Lindsey.

Clare offered a warm smile. “I’m happy to meet you.”

With the residual glow of the porch light, Lindsey seemed focused on Clare’s facial features. “You’re the missionary?”

“I am,” she replied simply. “My sister isn’t home yet.”

“We read that in the Gazette on Sunday,” Joe noted. “You have our sympathy.”

“The last time we spoke,” Alan remarked to Lindsey, “you told us about the round of golf you played with Liz. Did she give any indication of her plans for the next day?”

“No, but she didn’t talk much. We only played nine holes, so I figured she was tired.”

“Were you close friends?” Alan asked.

She frowned, then looked at her husband for direction. He merely shrugged. “No, I

wouldn't say we had a close friendship, at least not in recent years."

Alan pressed on. "Lindsey, phone records indicate that you and Liz spoke briefly on that Saturday evening before she disappeared. May I ask about the nature of your call?"

She shook her head, frowning. "I don't remember speaking with her on the phone." She again looked to her husband for his guidance.

"I think you did, honey. Didn't you tell me you wanted to ask if she'd found your bracelet?"

She paused a moment. "Oh, that's right. I thought it fell off in the golf cart, but she didn't see it."

"What time did you call?" Alan asked nonchalantly.

"Since you have the phone records," she replied stiffly, "you would know." She gave her husband a smug smile.

"The time stamp is eleven p.m.," Alan said, "but that seems rather late."

"That sounds about right. I mean, by the time I realized my bracelet was missing, I was desperate. Wasn't I, honey?"

"I imagine so," he replied, glancing at his watch. "I'm sorry to end our discussion, but we have plans. I hope we've been some help to all of you this evening." Sophie sniffed his pants when he turned to go inside.

Clare tugged at the leash. "Thank you for your help. Please pray that my sister returns soon."

“We will,” Lindsey stated, following her husband. As they went inside and turned off the porch light, we made our way to the sidewalk.

“She’s lying about something,” Clare said, matter-of-factly.

“Apparently,” Alan agreed, “but start looking in Liz’s house for a bracelet. I imagine it’s a key piece of evidence.”

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It felt strange to return to our house without Sophie, yet she didn’t hesitate to go with Clare. I commented about that when Alan put his key in our front door.

“She seems to sense that Clare needs her,” Alan remarked. “Does that bother you?”

“Not at all, but I do miss her. Anyway, we have another call to make, unless you want to pay Janice Walker a visit.”

Alan glanced at the kitchen clock. “It’s after nine o’clock, so I don’t think she’d be too happy to see us at this hour. Don’t you have her number?”

I reached for my phone and connected. “Hi, Janice. It’s Sue and Alan Jaworski here, and I have you on speaker phone.”

She yelled for someone to turn down the TV. “Did Liz come home?” she asked.

“No, not yet. We’re retracing her steps from the day before her sister arrived, and we know she was with you that morning.”

“I already told you that.” She sounded miffed about the statement, as well as the interruption to her favorite show.

“Yes, and you mentioned that she had afternoon plans. Did you happen to talk to her later?”

She paused, probably processing my question. “Yes, I knew she intended to go to the grocery store, so I asked if she’d pick up some things for my brother. It would save me the trip.”

I caught Alan’s eye as I asked, “What time was that?”

“It was supper time or thereabouts, and Damien didn’t have any food in the house, or so he said. I would’ve gone, but she was going anyway.”

Alan interrupted. “Do you know if she took food to him?”

“I guess she did because he didn’t pester me again. ”

“You don’t know for sure?” he pressed.

“No, but I could call him on his house phone.”

“We’d appreciate it, as well as a call back to let us know.”

Placing my phone on the coffee table, I stared at Alan. My mind whirled with the implication that Damien may have been the last one to see Liz Sterling, yet he’d denied knowing where she was. “You need to notify the county police,” I insisted.

“You’re speculating, Sue.”

I shook my head. “Now it’s making sense. No wonder that jerk walks around with a rifle. He’s probably hidden Liz in his barn or something.”

“Pure speculation,” Alan reiterated. “Why would Liz have gone to the grocery store on Saturday evening? We know she went earlier to shop for Jane.”

“Maybe she brought Damien what she’d bought for herself, figuring she could go back to the store on Sunday morning.”

“Then, Damien’s not implicated because we know her purse was in the hall closet. In other words, she drove home that night.”

“Wait a minute.” Alan’s valid point made me think. “That darn purse! What if the same person put the handbag in the closet and the beaded necklace on the kitchen table.”

“How would he or she know it belonged in the hall closet?” Alan queried.

I sighed. “I have no idea.”

“That’s why I’m telling you we can’t yet involve the county police. We have nothing but speculation.”

“Then we’ll have to pay Damien Sterling a visit in the morning, and see what we can find. Sophie’s coming with us.”

Alan nodded. “We can do that, although Janice hasn’t yet verified that Liz brought groceries to her brother-in-law that evening. Of course, it’s getting late, so we may not hear from her tonight.”

“I should have told her to call at any time.”

“We could have more of that apple pie while we’re waiting,” Alan suggested.

His expression made me laugh, although I brought the pie and two plates to the island. He went to the freezer for the vanilla ice cream while I cut slices for both of us.

I had to admit, our late-night dessert calmed me, and I felt somewhat amorous by the time we headed to bed. Maybe letting Sophie give comfort to Clare brought additional benefits for us, and we took full advantage of our empty nest.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

At breakfast the next morning, Alan and I discussed those details about our case that stymied us. First, we couldn't understand why Lindsey was so evasive about the time she spoke to Liz on the Saturday evening before Clare arrived; then, what did Damien Sterling have to do with our missing person.

"Do you think we should call Janice Walker this morning?" I asked. "It's rather rude that she never called us back."

"Later," Alan said after sipping his coffee. "Damien might not have answered his house phone last night. If you recall, he doesn't have a cell phone."

"Well, she could have let us know." I dabbed jelly on my toast while I thought through the particulars. "We should focus on the J.W.s, and eliminate those who couldn't have anything to do with Liz's disappearance."

Alan gave me his attention. "Okay. I'd say we don't worry about Jane Windsor because she's old and frail. Besides, Liz took her out to eat and bought her groceries each week."

"True," I agreed. "What about Jim Withers?"

"He went above and beyond to search his property for Liz. What motive would he have to kidnap her?"

"I can't think of any reason, other than the accounts Ed managed for him. If I recall,

he mentioned money being tight.”

“Detaining Liz wouldn’t help his income stream,” Alan said. “He needed her out raising funds, so I’d take him off our list.”

I agreed with a twinge of reluctance because it led us to the next person. “That leaves us with Janice Walker.”

“Don’t forget about Joe Wiley,” Alan cautioned.

“A respected doctor in the community wouldn’t risk his reputation by doing anything nefarious,” I said. “Initially, I didn’t trust him because Jane called him “spyly Wiley,” but he’s not the type to get his hands dirty, if you know what I mean.”

Alan nodded. “I agree, which is the reason why Lindsey was so evasive.” He smiled at my confused expression. “She didn’t know what time Liz returned her call because she hadn’t received it. I’d say “spyly Wiley” intercepted it.”

“There’s no missing bracelet?” I questioned.

“I don’t know. Lindsey may have been the one to call, but she didn’t receive the call back.”

I leaned in to think, but didn’t fully buy Alan’s rationale. “It makes perfect sense that someone wants Clare to leave so he or she can search the house for something. Do you really think Joe Wiley is the type to throw a rock into her second floor window?”

He shook his head. “No, but I’m guessing Lindsey could, especially since she’d have a strong arm from golfing.”

“Hmmm,” I murmured. “Do we eliminate Janice Walker?”

“I believe she knows something, so she’s not off the hook.”

I took a deep breath. “According to the phone records, did Liz make any calls on Sunday?”

“No, she didn’t use her phone after the two I mentioned.”

“Were there any calls from Clare?”

Alan nodded. “Numerous ones, but I don’t think she ever received them. That’s what makes me believe she was kidnapped on Saturday night.”

“How’d you get so good at this?” I asked.

He laughed. “How many years have I served on a police force?”

“Were you just pretending I solved those other cases?”

“No. You have a remarkable ability to make connections, and I don’t have that gift. You’ve said it’s like finding the missing puzzle piece, so get looking, pal.”

I ate my last half of toast while Alan took his dishes to the sink. This case seemed impossible but, somehow, I had to urge my brain into overdrive. What important element had I missed? Liz’s life could be at stake.

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Alan called me into the sunroom to read an email that arrived in the SAJ Detective Agency inbox during the wee hours of morning. It was from “Anonymous Tipster” who saw a person who looked like Liz Sterling getting gas at the Xpress Station on route 690 about a week ago.

“Where’s that located?” I queried.

Alan opened the map app on his phone. “Not too far from Sterling Lane. I think we need to take a ride out there.”

“I want Sophie to come with us.”

“That’s fine,” he agreed. “First, give Janice a call to ask why she didn’t report back to us about whether or not Liz brought food to Damien that Saturday night. If we can trust the anonymous tip, she did.”

I pressed Janice’s number, but it went right to voicemail. I left a message for her to return my call.

Alan looked annoyed about her lack of response, but shook it off before reaching out to Clare. When she connected, he asked, “Would you like to pay a visit to Damien Sterling this morning?”

She agreed without hesitation, saying she’d walk over with Sophie in a few minutes.

In the meantime, Alan called another number. “Cyber Unit, please.” He waited for the transfer, then identified himself, as well as his badge number. “I’d like the name for the following IP address, please.” A moment later, he thanked the person and disconnected.

I caught his astonished expression. “What was that about?”

“I called the county police’s cyber unit.”

“I figured that much,” I said with a chuckle.

“Our anonymous tipster is Janice Walker.”

I gasped. “Are you serious?”

“Very much so.” He kept shaking his head.

I sat next to him on the loveseat, trying to make sense of everything, at least until Clare arrived with our dog. Sophie jumped on me, giving me wet doggy kisses, even as she worked to unhook the leash.

Clare apologized. “I think she missed you.”

I wrapped my arms around my sixty-pound love bug. “We missed her, too. Did you have a good night?”

“We slept well, but didn’t find any bracelet. Did we, girl?”

Sophie wagged her tail. In fact, she seemed to have a new mission of helping Clare.

“I wouldn’t worry about the bracelet,” Alan said. “It might have been a red herring.”

She looked confused. “What does that mean?”

Alan replied, “Something to throw us off. We’ve had a few of those lately. In fact, we just learned that a credible witness who recently saw your sister was none other than Liz’s sister-in-law.”

“Janice Walker?”

“You’ve got it,” Alan muttered.

“I thought we were going to see Damien,” she remarked.

Alan nodded. “We are, but I doubt he knows anything.”

I contradicted him. “I think he does.”

She stared at the two of us. “Is this how the SAJ Detective Agency works? The two of you bounce ideas back and forth?”

I nodded. “I hadn’t thought about it like that, but I guess we do.”

Alan smiled cunningly. “Just wait until Sue’s intuition kicks in. She’ll solve the mystery, and all will be well.”

“I’m not even close on this one,” I said begrudgingly.

Alan grinned. “Just you wait,” he told Clare.

Chapter Forty

Before we piled into Alan's SUV, I texted Lydia to tell her I might be late returning from our work on the case. I knew she wouldn't mind calling Kareen for help if she needed it.

As Alan turned onto the country route, he explained to Clare what we had surmised thus far, though we couldn't be certain about any of it. She seemed pleased that we'd eliminated Jane Windsor and Jim Withers as suspects because she liked both of them.

"By the way," she said, "Sophie and I checked on Jane this morning. I made her drink one of the protein shakes I bought her the other day—in my presence—and she seemed more chipper already."

"How'd Sophie react in her house?" I asked.

"Fine," she replied. "I thought you took Jane off your list."

"We did, but I wanted to triangulate."

Alan laughed. "How'd you come up with that word?"

"I've been studying investigative principles," I boasted. "We can better verify a hypothesis by using multiple points of study. In other words, we felt Jane was too old and feeble to have caused any trouble for Liz. However, if Sophie had sensed Liz's presence in Jane's house, we might question our theory."

“She’s not trained as a sniffer,” Alan said, as if he hadn’t reiterated it enough.

I ignored him. “Sophie didn’t react to Jim Withers at River Mill either, so I hypothesize that he’s also innocent.”

Alan gave me a quick glance. “You triangulated him, too?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, so what’s our next step?” Alan pressed.

“We try to get inside Damien Sterling’s house and barn.”

Alan frowned. “We’re not breaking and entering, Sue.”

“Of course not. We’ll knock on the door and ask to come in. I’ll make up some story or something.”

“All right,” Alan said. “Are you a police officer or my wife?”

I turned to explain to Clare what he meant, then replied to Alan. “You can be off-duty, but we should be honest about me because Janice may have told him about us.”

Clare interjected. “Why not tell him that I hired you both to find my sister. That’s the truth.”

Alan glanced at her in the rear-view mirror. “That sounds good to me.”

I thought about telling her we’d introduced ourselves to Damien as off-duty police officers, but I decided it didn’t really matter. I just wanted to get inside his house and search for Liz.

^^ ^

Alan pulled into the driveway next to the old Sterling farmhouse and honked our arrival. We heard a bark from inside, but Damien didn't come to the door. I looked around the yard and down the lane, expecting to see the unkempt man with his rifle, yet didn't.

"That's weird," Alan remarked in a low tone. "Stay in the car while I look around."

I felt a sense of dread. "Do you have your weapon?"

"In the glove compartment." He reached in front of me to retrieve it, then checked it for ammunition. "The safety's on," he assured me as he opened the car door.

"Take Sophie," I insisted.

He didn't reply. Rather, he slowly made his way toward the porch, carefully watching and listening.

I thought we could make faster progress by involving our dog, which I told Clare. She looked hesitant, reminding me that Alan asked us to remain where we were.

From the porch, Alan gazed through the front windows, then turned to us, shaking his head. He raised his left hand, not the one holding his gun, to indicate that he'd head around back.

I took that as a signal to follow him.

"What are you doing?" Clare whispered.

"Alan needs backup," I said, exiting my side and opening the back door. I grabbed

Sophie's leash and let her direct me.

She sniffed the ground, found several spots which needed her markings, then went to the porch, which apparently had many interesting scents. Clare followed us, then pulled open the rickety screen door .

"We need to wait for Alan," I advised. Sophie's tail wagged before she sat whimpering. "What are you telling us, girl?"

"Maybe Liz is inside," Clare said, turning the knob and pushing open the door. "It's not locked," she explained.

I grabbed her arm. "We can't go in without Alan."

She reacted quickly with the sound of ferocious barking by closing the screen door and trying to calm Damien's dog, as well as mine who barked in response. Alan came running.

"Cheese and crackers!" he exclaimed. "What's going on?"

"I think my sister's in there," Clare muttered.

Alan pulled out his phone and pressed 9-1-1. He asked for emergency backup on Sterling Lane, raising his voice to talk above two barking dogs. Disconnecting, he took Sophie's leash from me. "We'll all wait in the car until the police arrive."

I knew by his tone and volume that he was upset. Still, we saw no sign of Damien, and that triggered my own distress. Clare helped settle Sophie, which gave her a focus on something other than her sister, although that couldn't have been easy for her.

“I asked you to stay in the car,” Alan murmured.

“I thought you signaled for us to come,” I said.

He slowly shook his head as if he couldn’t believe my explanation.

“Something’s happened to Damien,” I continued. “I don’t know where he is, but that racket should have alerted him.”

“I agree,” Alan said tersely.

“There’s an odor of injury in the house,” Clare stated. She had wrapped her arms around Sophie .

We sat in silence for at least five minutes before two county police vehicles arrived. Alan went to meet the four officers.

I watched as they first worked to carefully remove the dog who tried to protect his owner. Once they had him safely confined to the rear of the van, they worked in tandem to enter the front and back of the house. Alan stayed to watch for interference on the porch, while Clare and I kept our eyes on the yard and field.

There was still no sign of Damien.

Within minutes, one of the officers came out to the porch. I heard him radio to the dispatcher that he needed an ambulance, and I caught Alan’s eye.

Clare gasped, bolting from the car. Sophie followed before I could grab her leash, so I ran after them. The officer failed to stop Clare or our dog, but I stood by Alan. “Did she die?” I asked.

“Who?” the officer questioned.

“Liz Spaulding, the missing lady.”

“We didn’t see any woman, although the other officers are searching for more victims. A man’s on the floor in the dining room with a gunshot wound, and he’s not in good shape.”

Relief poured over me, and I prayed that they wouldn’t find Liz. “The woman who went in is a physician assistant, so she can give help until the ambulance arrives.”

“Good to know,” the officer said. “Alan, I’d appreciate it if you continue to stand watch out here, then direct the emergency personnel to the victim. Ma’am, you need to stay clear.”

Alan nodded his understanding. As for the second part, he probably figured I wouldn’t comply, but I did. I decided to serve as backup for my husband.

Chapter Forty-One

It all seemed a blur with another police vehicle arriving, then the ambulance carrying the EMT personnel who looked familiar to me. I'd experienced several trips to the hospital since Alan and I moved to Aspen Notch, and the two of them recognized me, but we didn't stand around to chat.

Alan led the EMT's inside, and I followed behind, keeping my distance. Clare sat on the floor, attending to Damien's raw leg wound while occasionally checking his pulse. When she saw that help had arrived, she rattled off medical jargon.

From what I understood, he'd lost a lot of blood from the bullet to his leg, and he had a head wound, perhaps due to his fall in the dining room. His breathing was shallow, and she wondered how he'd survived his injuries over the past several days.

"How do you know when this occurred?" one of the EMT's asked .

"I'm speculating," she said. "I introduced myself to Damien about five days ago, and he was fine then."

"What brought you here?" the ambulance driver asked.

"He's my sister's brother-in-law, and she's missing." Clare pressed his leg harder where a trickle of blood escaped.

One of Damien's eyes opened and his mouth moved when the EMT put a tourniquet on his leg. The other one was busy with his blood pressure and oxygen levels.

“I think he’s saying something,” I whispered.

“He might be feeling pain,” the EMT lady said. “We need to get him to the hospital STAT.”

Clare nodded in agreement, then tried to stand. I couldn’t imagine how, but Damien gripped her hand and his mouth moved again. “What is it,” she asked, leaning in to listen.

The EMT’s asked her to move so they could transfer him to the gurney. She complied and stepped back to stand with me. By the time Alan came looking for us, she had tears in her eyes.

“What did he say?” I asked.

“I don’t know. It sounded like roof or something.”

“Maybe he said ‘woof,’ like in take care of my dog,” Alan suggested. “Speaking of, where’s Sophie?”

I looked around the first floor, but didn’t see her anywhere. To my chagrin, none of the cops saw her either, and I feared that she’d gone exploring in the fields.

Clare stayed with Damien until he was lifted into the back of the ambulance, then she joined Alan and me to search outside for Sophie. I could only pray that she didn’t wander off to an area that would pose a danger to her—or that she’d jeopardize the local fauna, such as Mr. Sterling’s chickens .

I mentioned my worry aloud, and the three of us headed to the coop. There we found Sophie digging a huge hole in the dirt; something she’d often done in our yard as a puppy.

“No, Sophie,” I yelled.

Alan grabbed her leash and pulled her away. “That’s very bad!” he shouted, using an angry voice.

I stared at the hole, then the area beside it, which appeared to be connected to the chickens’ yard. “What is this?”

I turned to Clare. “Did he say ‘coop?’”

She paused, thinking. “I don’t think so. It had an R-sound, like roof.” She emphasized the R.

Alan cast his eyes to the ground. “Could it have been ‘root,’ like in a root cellar?” Without waiting for a response, he used his hand to search for some sort of handle. When he located it, he tugged to reveal concrete steps.

He called into the dark abyss. “Are you there, Liz?”

We all heard the feeble response. “Is that you, Damien?”

Clare cried, “I’m here, Lizzie.” She stepped forward as if to descend the stairs, but Alan halted her.

“We need the police to secure the site,” he insisted.

Luckily, I noticed two officers preparing to leave, so I ran to catch their attention. “Come quickly,” I called. “I think we found Elizabeth Sterling.”

They rushed to the site, and one of them called, “Identify yourself.”

The faint voice returned, "I'm Liz Sterling. Who are you?"

"We're the county police, ma'am. Are you alone?"

"I think so, but the lightbulb died so I can't see and I feel a bit weak. "

Clare pleaded, "I need to check on my sister!" She didn't wait for an answer.

Alan handed me Sophie's leash, then descended the steps with the two cops while explaining to them Clare's relationship to Liz. "She's also a physician assistant," I heard him say, "so she can determine if we need to send for another ambulance."

Before long, Clare led Liz up the stairs one-by-one, telling her to breathe deeply. One of the officers ran to his patrol car for bottles of water; the other called for emergency transport.

I gazed at the deathly-pale woman who could barely catch her breath, thankful that we had found her before it was too late. I felt emotional watching Clare as she cared for her younger sister, yet the nun looked strong.

"I'm here, Lizzie," she murmured. "Everything will be okay now. I promise."

"Damien protected me," she cried. "If someone came down the lane and I had to go into the cellar, he brought food and water while keeping me company. Then, suddenly, he didn't come. Is he okay?"

"Someone hurt him," Clare replied, "but we'll visit him in the hospital."

"I was afraid of that." Weeping, she turned away.

I quickly wiped my eyes so nobody could see my reaction. Watching her, plus my

own sense of relief, brought those tears to the surface. We still had so many questions, yet they'd have to wait. For now, Liz was safe.

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Clare went to the hospital with her sister, I put Sophie in the back seat of Alan's SUV, and he helped his county police pals process the scene.

When he finally slid behind the steering wheel, he sighed. "Finding Liz was a miracle!"

"Could we agree that Sophie found her?" I suggested.

He gave a grim chuckle. "I suppose we can." Glancing at her as she reclined across the back seat, he told her, "You're really something, girl."

"It's a good thing we brought her," I commented.

Alan gave me a quirky grin. "Don't push your luck. Anyway, we've locked the house and secured the root cellar. One of the cops will return to install a couple security cameras because whoever shot Damien will return to search for Liz."

"Do we know why?" I asked.

"Nope, nor do we know who did it. We think just one perp, and not a professional."

"When?" I pressed.

"Maybe twenty-four to forty-eight hours ago. Any longer and they'd have died."

"Do you think they'll both make it?"

“Liz will. I don’t know about Damien.”

I took a deep breath, trying to wrap my brain around how anyone could be so despicable. Alan interrupted my thoughts.

“Do you want to stop for a burger or something?” he asked.

I glanced at the dashboard clock. “It’s past three, so I guess we’d better.”

Alan placed our order and we sat in the car to eat. I pulled a French fry out of the bag, but my thoughts stayed on Damien .

“You know,” I mused, “Liz’s brother-in-law once told us he merely followed directions, so someone must have instructed him to hide Liz.”

Alan paused before taking a bite of his burger. “Why?”

“I have no idea, though I suspect Janice Walker.”

“His sister? I guess that’s possible. She’s the one who sent us the anonymous tip.”

I nodded slowly, putting myself into the scene. “Liz met with her on that Saturday morning before Clare’s arrival, and they worked on Ed’s accounts.”

“Right,” Alan agreed. “Afterward, Liz ate lunch and played golf with Lindsey Wiley, went grocery shopping, then took Jane Windsor out to dinner.”

I nodded. “Yes. When she returned the calls she received during their supper at the Black Horse Pub, she connected with her sister-in-law who said Damien needed food. I’d say Janice met them there and insisted that he hide her.”

“Why?” Alan questioned again.

“She must have found something in the ledgers,” I said. “Yes, she told us that, and Liz needed to check on it at the bank.”

“Which she never had a chance to do,” Alan muttered.

“Oh, my gosh,” I exclaimed. “Janice had all of Ed’s account numbers. By convincing Damien to hide Liz in the root cellar, she could siphon the remaining money into her own accounts. Maybe she promised a few extra bucks to her brother.”

“Why offer an anonymous tip?”

I took a sip of soda, thinking. “Because they had a fight and she shot him in the leg with his rifle.”

Alan laughed. “At that close range, she’d have blown off his leg. ”

“I don’t know what she used, but she shot him.” The more I thought about it, the more convinced I became. “We need to inform Mark Matthews to arrest Janice for attempted murder and grand larceny.”

Alan must have concurred since he pressed Mark’s number on his cell phone. “I’d like to report a crime,” he said calmly.

I only hoped we solved the mystery before Ed’s sister took all of his money—and that of his clients. After all, as his obituary reported, he was a good and honest man.

Chapter Forty-Two

I tossed our trash in the bin while Alan explained the situation to Mark, although he downplayed my hypothesis about Janice's role in Liz's disappearance and her brother's injuries. He didn't have me on speaker phone, so I patiently waited for him to finish.

Alan ended the call and filled me in. "He's going to drive by the Walker residence throughout the rest of his shift, just to keep an eye on things there. She's probably still at work, given what she told us last week, but he'll know when she gets home."

"If I were Janice, I'd head out to the old homestead to see how everything went down."

Alan laughed. "You're so dramatic. She might have invested in a police scanner, so she's already aware."

"Maybe, but I'll bet you ten bucks that she goes there after work today. Either that, or she'll play the devoted sister visiting him in the hospital, then finish him off."

"Geez, honey, that's pretty gruesome. Which theory is your money on? "

"Both of them." With such strong vibes, I thought someone should protect Damien, even though we had no proof of who had turned a gun on him. "Let's go to the hospital as soon as we take Sophie home."

Alan pressed the ignition, then picked up his phone. "I think I need to notify the

county police chief of your suspicions since the hospital and the Sterling homestead are in his jurisdiction. Janice resides in Aspen Notch, so Mark will keep an eye on her in town.”

Alan relayed the information while he drove, painting a realistic picture of what could occur without added security. Even Liz remained at risk if Janice wanted her out of the way. The chief apparently listened, then thanked Alan for the update.

Sophie seemed content to be dropped off, and she claimed her spot on the sofa while I scurried to the hall bathroom. When I met up with Alan at his SUV, I noticed the full parking lot in front of Butterflies and Blooms , then breathed a sigh of relief to see Kareen assisting Lydia.

I buckled my seatbelt. “I don’t know what I’d do without my trusted helpers. If it weren’t for them, I couldn’t be a part of the SAJ Detective Agency.”

Alan waited for traffic to clear. “And I’d still be the Aspen Notch Chief of Police. Horrors!”

We both laughed.

Musing aloud, I said, “I wonder if Mark has had second thoughts about taking on that responsibility.”

He nodded as he backed onto Church Street. “Probably, but it’s water over the dam. Anyway, he’s doing a good job.”

I watched the house directly across from us. “We still have to figure out how the Wileys played into all of the havoc with Liz. Do you think they bear any guilt?”

“You’re the master of hypotheses. What do you think? ”

Nothing immediately popped into my head. “I have to mull, but there are some things only Liz can reveal. For example, why did she call Joe ‘spyly Wiley?’”

“Because she caught him spying on her,” Alan said with certainty.

I focused on all of the clues thus far while Alan drove, using them as puzzle pieces. I cited them aloud, more for emphasis than verification.

“Someone wrote those sticky notes and signed them J.W.,” I said. “That person also left money for Clare to use.”

“The cash might have been for Liz,” Alan suggested. “Do you still think that J.W. is Liz and Clare’s father?”

I paused, thinking. “No, there’s been no indication that he’s in the picture. I’d say it could be Dr. Joe Wiley.”

“Would he give her cash?” Alan asked. “I doubt it.”

“Yes, if they had an affair.”

Alan laughed. “Do you believe that?”

I focused on the puzzle pieces. “Yes, I do. He called her that Saturday evening, using Lindsey’s phone. It’s why Lindsey didn’t know what time Liz returned the call.”

“Was he warning her?”

Again, I paused. “Yes, I think so. In fact, I’m changing my opinion that they had an affair. I believe he felt guilty about not being able to save Ed when he collapsed on the 14th green.”

Alan quietly processed my musings. When he pulled into a spot in the hospital parking lot, he said, “You might be right about that.”

I liked his validation, but knew we wouldn’t unearth the facts until we spoke to Liz. I prayed she could verify those in just a few moments.

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We found Liz reclining in the bed, hooked up to a machine, and Clare seated on a chair next to her, holding the hand without the IV needle. It looked as if both of them had been weeping.

“Damien’s in surgery,” Clare noted.

I couldn’t help but think about the time Alan took a bullet to his leg, and I had to wait for word from the surgeon. I panicked, thinking my husband would die on the table. They admitted me for observation and medication, which still embarrassed me.

Alan spoke first. “We’ve never had the opportunity to meet, but we live across the street from you.”

She looked at us as Clare said, “Let me introduce Alan and Sue Jaworski. I met them at the airport in Scranton and they took me to your house. They’re detectives, so I hired them to find you.”

Liz appeared to be trying to process all of that. “I’m glad to meet you,” she said hesitantly. Her eyes caught mine. “I’ve seen you at the log cabin—the garden shop.”

“Yes, I should have taken the time to get to know you.”

She smiled briefly. “It goes both ways, you know.”

Alan spoke again. “We need to ask you a few questions.”

She nodded. “Yes, sir. I recognize you as our Police Chief.”

“I’ve retired, but Sue and I have the SAJ Detective Agency now. We’ve involved the county police and the Aspen Notch police to locate you, so you’ll see additional police presence as we determine what happened.”

“I told Clare everything I know,” she relayed. “My sister-in-law called to say Damien needed food, so I brought over what I’d bought that day. Eventually, he told me I needed to hide because someone wanted to hurt me, so we decided I should go into the root cellar.”

“Why didn’t you call the police?” Alan asked.

“Because I trusted Damien. He’s always looked out for me, but more so after Ed died.” She closed her eyes for a moment.

“Who wanted to hurt you?” Alan pressed.

“I don’t know, but Damien seemed scared. He promised to talk to the police, but we didn’t think it was safe to leave.”

“You stayed in that root cellar for ten days?” I queried.

“No, only if somebody came by.”

I stared at her, wondering if she’d been drugged. “Did you forget about your sister’s arrival?”

She slowly shook her head. “I didn’t think she’d come, but I prayed she would.”

I couldn't make sense of it all, and I felt sorry for Clare who had done everything in her power to be with her sister. I wanted to ask so many more questions, yet her nurse arrived with medication and requested that we let Liz sleep.

"We'd like you to limit visitors," Alan told her.

She gave him a wary look. "Who are you?"

"Detective Jaworski. Clare Dolan will stay with her sister until she's released. Don't let anyone else in, other than the police."

She nodded as she left the room. "We'll see about that."

"I'm not sure she understands," I whispered.

Alan turned to Clare. "Call me if anyone tries to see Liz, including your sister-in-law. I'm serious about no visitors."

She looked worried. "Is Liz in danger? "

"We don't know, but it's better to be safe than sorry. We'll hang around until the police arrive, and that should be soon."

Chapter Forty-Three

Alan and I stopped at the nurse's station so he could emphasize the importance of no visitors for Liz Spaulding, other than Clare Dolan, her sister. "If it's not in her chart, you should know that she has been in hiding for ten days until we found her today. For at least one of them, she had nothing to eat or drink."

"Yes," the head nurse said, "and her friends and family will want to visit her."

"Until we determine she's out of danger," Alan insisted, "no one should be admitted."

"Sir, I understand the urgency, but we don't have the staff to keep anyone from walking in. If it's that important, her sister will have to be vigilant."

Alan nodded, though he didn't look pleased. "My wife and I will return after we check on her brother-in-law's condition."

She thanked us and moved on to her next task. I recognized, as did Alan, that nurses couldn't be expected to keep an eye on every patient at every moment. We did, however, worry about things out of our control.

On the surgical floor, we were directed to the waiting room for word from Damien's surgeon. My stomach lurched when I saw the large clock on the wall, although I tried to dismiss the feelings.

"I hate that clock," I whispered to Alan.

He chuckled softly, trying not to disturb others who waited for news about their loved ones. “Is it the same one from when I was in surgery?”

“Yes, and it ticked all through the night. That clock has the loudest tick I’ve ever heard.”

He laughed out loud, and everyone turned their eyes to us, which embarrassed me.

Eventually, we spoke quietly about one of us staying near Damien in the ICU waiting lounge, if he pulled through, and the other sitting outside of Liz’s room. We’d stay together, however, until we spoke to the surgeon. I couldn’t help but notice that the clock didn’t tick loudly at all.

An hour later, a doctor in medical scrubs walked toward us. “Are you the couple waiting for news about Damien Sterling?”

We nodded. “His sister-in-law is in room 308, and we told her we’d check on him,” I explained.

“Unfortunately, he’s not conscious yet and hasn’t identified who may have access to his health information.”

“Can you just tell us if he made it through the surgery?” I pleaded.

“Yes,” he said with an encouraging smile. “He did.”

He walked away before we could ask any other questions, and I glanced at the clock to see that it was after six p.m. It had been a long day, yet we couldn’t leave until we knew both Liz and Damien were no longer in danger.

In the hallway, Alan connected with the county police chief who told him his team

picked up Janice Walker for questioning. As we expected and cameras confirmed, she had gone to Damien's house after her work day, then tried to get into the house. Police caught up with her there.

"She attempted to talk her way out of everything," Alan told me afterward, "though she didn't realize a security camera on the front porch recorded her actions. In fact, she said she didn't know Damien had been shot."

"I don't believe it," I exclaimed.

"Well, the cops have everything saved digitally, so it can be used as evidence."

"Are Liz and Damien safe now?"

"Let's hope so," Alan said. "We'll stop to tell Clare, then we can go home."

That sounded really good to me.

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Clare graciously accepted the milkshakes we'd brought for her and Liz. "My sister's dozing, but she's doing very well," she noted after taking a sip. "How's Damien?"

"His surgeon couldn't give us any information other than he made it through the surgery," Alan said. "Maybe you and Liz could check on him in the ICU after supper since she's a family member."

Clare nodded. "I'll see if she feels able. Of course, Janice is his sister, so she might visit him. "

"The county police have her in custody as she was caught on camera going to

Damien's house," he explained.

"Was she checking on him?" she asked.

"We don't know," Alan said, "but we think she may have been involved in the shooting."

"That doesn't make sense," she replied with a questioning gaze.

He raised his shoulder in a shrug. "Forensics will have to analyze everything. If we're lucky, she'll confess to her crimes."

Liz awakened. "Who will confess to what?"

Clare took her hand. "Police are questioning Janice."

"I don't think she knows anything," Liz remarked groggily. "It's why I had to keep hiding in the cellar."

Alan interceded. "We believe Janice created the ruse to get you out of the way, though we don't yet know the motive. It may have had something to do with your husband's accounts or her wanting access to your house. We won't know until police finish questioning her."

"Oh, my gosh," she sighed. "Joe Wiley told me to be careful, but I didn't understand his cryptic notes."

"The pad of sticky notes?" I asked.

"Yes. He left them on my back porch, along with money to hire someone to settle my husband's accounts. I thought he had overreacted because Ed and I didn't have any

enemies.”

Clare raised an eyebrow. “Why’d you hide the notes and money in places I’d be sure to find?”

“I honestly didn’t know if you’d actually come, but I tidied my house in case you did. I used my typical hiding spots.”

Clare nodded her understanding, but still had questions. “Jane Windsor told me you called Joe ‘spyly Wiley,’ yet you seem to have trusted him.”

Liz gave a gentle smile. “He and Lindsey were friends of Ed and me for many years. Joe felt terrible that he couldn’t save Ed, and he became extremely solicitous of me after the funeral. I made up the rhyme as a joke, though I appreciated his concern.”

“Well,” Alan said, “I think you should rest now. Sue and I will let you have time with your sister, but we’ll check back with you tomorrow.”

I had more questions, though I doubted Liz had answers. I supposed Alan considered that, as well. It had been a long day for everyone, so we both gave our farewell.

Clare walked us to the door. “I’ve already checked with the head nurse, and I can stay with Liz through the night.”

Alan nodded. “That’s good. Call me when you need a ride home; otherwise, I’ll talk to you in the morning.”

She put out her hand to shake his, then mine. “Thank you, both. I’m so grateful that we found Lizzy.”

I smiled happily. “Me, too, and I think we can give credit to Sophie.”

She chuckled. “She’s a smart dog.”

I had no doubt of that.

Chapter Forty-Four

The evening sky displayed dark clouds toward the west end of town when Alan pulled into our driveway. I reached for my phone to see if we should expect rain anytime soon, then remarked that I should let Sophie out to the yard before the predicted showers.

With his eyes on the rear-view mirror, Alan replied distractedly. “Good idea, honey. Dr. Wiley just turned into his driveway, and I’d like to talk to him.”

I swiveled to look, reminding him we worked as a team. We both exited the car, and I waved to catch Joe’s attention before he went into his house. He waited for us to cross the street, then greeted us pleasantly.

“What are the odds,” he remarked with a chuckle, “that we’d return home at the same time tonight, yet never noticed each other before?”

Alan smiled. “We live busy lives and, probably, spend more time out back due to the traffic on Church Street.”

“Definitely,” he agreed. “Besides, if I’m not working, I’m at River Mill Golf Club. ”

“And you travel,” Alan noted. “Anyway, I wanted to tell you that we found Liz today.”

He looked ecstatic. “That’s fabulous news! Where was she?”

“With her brother-in-law.”

“Ed’s brother, Damien?” he queried rhetorically. “I wonder why she didn’t let anyone know.”

“That’s a mystery,” Alan replied, “but we’re glad she’s okay. She wanted me to tell you that she appreciated the money and notes you left her.”

His brow furrowed. “What money and notes?”

“A pad of yellow sticky notes,” I interjected, “as well as some large bills.”

He laughed. “Liz must have a fairy godmother, and it’s not me.”

“Sorry,” Alan said. “I’ll let her know when I see her.”

Joe’s eyes darted to the house next door where Clare must have set up lights on timers. “We could tell her now.”

Alan gave a quick shake of his head. “No, she has her sister with her, so let’s give them time to catch up.”

“True,” Joe agreed. “Well, I’d invite you in, but I have early appointments tomorrow morning.”

“Not a problem,” Alan said, turning to leave. “We’ll have you and your wife over soon.”

“Sounds good,” he replied with a hasty wave back to us.

I caught up with Alan on the other side of the street where we paused to make sure

“spyly Wiley” went inside. “I’d say Dr. Joe has some explaining to do.”

Alan raised his right eyebrow, which I detected even in the increasing darkness. “I agree, Mrs. Jaworski. Let’s give Sophie her run while we discuss our case. Shall I open a bottle of wine?”

“Sure,” I said, figuring it would be a long night .

Alan took my hand to walk inside where Sophie greeted us enthusiastically. It felt good to be home.

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Alan opened the wine and brought out two glasses, while I gathered cheddar cheese, pepperoni, and crackers to take to the sunroom. Neither of us felt in the mood for a full meal, yet we wanted something to munch on while we talked business.

“Consider this my version of a charcuterie,” I quipped.

“It’s just a snack with a fancy name,” Alan said, filling our glasses and setting the bottle on the coffee table. “Cheers.”

“Cheers,” I said, taking a sip. “We’ll have to really put on the dog if we have the Wileys over.” Sophie, already exercised, fed, and watered, gave me a quirky look before she closed her eyes.

Alan had his sip, then cut a wedge of cheese. “So, who left the money and notes for Liz if Joe didn’t do it?”

“It had to be another J.W.,” I said, cutting more slices of cheese. “I need my notebook because I’ve already forgotten what was written on the sticky notes.”

Alan made the extra effort to retrieve my spiral pad from the desk behind us. “You’ll have to read it because I don’t have my glasses.”

I figured he couldn’t decipher my scribbles. Flipping pages, I paused when I found my notes. “ For You , Use my money , River Mill , Be Careful , and J.W ,” I read aloud. “Why would Liz think Joe Wiley wanted her to be careful? ”

“Right,” Alan agreed. “What about Jane? She could have been watching out for Liz.”

“Yes, but she has nothing to do with River Mill, so I still say we eliminate Jane. That leaves Jim Withers, and he owns the golf course. Why would he give Liz money and tell her to be careful?”

Alan reached for a couple of crackers. “This is crazy. We have Janice Walker in custody, and she’s a J.W. we wouldn’t want to cross in a dark alley. Does it really matter who left the notes for Liz?”

“We could have a crime within a crime here,” I suggested. “We know J.W. was warning Liz to be careful at River Mill. Wait a minute! What if her husband was killed by J.W. at River Mill.”

Alan sipped his wine, thinking. He slowly nodded. “Jim Withers watched the action on the 14th green. He saw Ed go down and Dr. Joe Wiley attempting to revive him. Do you actually think Joe could have killed Ed Sterling?”

“I don’t know, but you could call Jim to ask if he left the sticky notes for Liz.”

“I could,” Alan said. “We didn’t mention those notes to Joe, did we?”

“No, why?”

“Because Joe has access at the hospital, so Liz could still be in danger. Maybe Janice isn’t guilty, after all.”

“She’s guilty of something,” I said assuredly. A rumble of thunder in the distance caught Sophie’s attention. “It’s just a little storm,” I told her.

Alan pressed a number on his phone, which I thought was a call to Jim until he said, “Clare, I need you to be extra vigilant tonight. I’m not sure how long the police will detain Janice, and we don’t know if Joe Wiley has any involvement.” He laughed before disconnecting .

“What did she say?”

“She reminded us that Liz called him ‘spyly Wiley.’”

I chuckled wryly. “True, though I’d add ‘wily Wiley. He’s pretty shrewd.” After I took a long sip of wine, I said, “Don’t forget to call Jim Withers.”

“I need to watch his body language,” Alan replied. “Let’s go to River Mill tomorrow morning and present your hypothesis to him.”

“I thought it was yours.”

Alan grinned. “Maybe we came up with it together.”

I leaned in to give him a kiss. “Maybe we did.”

Rain pounded on the sunroom windows before the lights flickered. “Maybe we should head to bed,” Alan whispered in my ear.

I yawned, which made me laugh. We put away the food and capped the wine for

another evening, but Sophie had no interest in going outside. With another rumble of thunder, we locked up, turned out the kitchen lights, and made our way to the bedroom.

When Sophie jumped up on the bed, I told her we still needed to solve our mystery. She didn't seem very interested, but I wanted to determine who left the notes and money for Liz, and why she stayed in hiding for ten days.

Chapter Forty-Five

I expected to hear Alan's snores after he turned off the lamp by his side of the bed but, instead, he sat upright and took his phone off the charger. "I have to give Mark and the county police a heads-up."

I turned on the lamp by my side of the bed. "What for?"

"I don't trust 'spyly Wiley.'"

"You think he'll do something to Liz?"

"I don't know, but I just thought of something else. Do you remember that the county police believed someone used oxy-cleaner on Liz's car? I doubt Janice or Damien would know that it can literally eliminate traces of blood or fingerprints, but a doctor would."

"You might be right. I guess we both agree that Joe Wiley's involved somehow."

Alan nodded. "I believe he desperately wants to get inside Liz's house. He knows she and her sister are together now, but not where."

"He could take a chance on them staying with Damien, if he doesn't know the brother-in-law is clinging to life at the hospital."

"I'm wondering if he's the one who shot him," Alan stated.

My stomach churned. “If that’s the case, why would he risk his whole career?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet, but I’m worried Joe will break into Liz’s house if he realizes the lights are on a timer.” With that, he pressed Mark’s number and related his concerns to him.

I glanced at the clock on my bed when the call ended. “It’s after eleven, so I doubt he’ll cause any mischief tonight.”

“Mark will check Liz’s place now, and again in the morning. He knows the locks have been changed, so he’ll look for signs of breaking and entering.” Alan pressed another number and gave a similar request to the county police for extra vigilance on Sterling Lane.

“Do you feel better now?” I asked when he ended the call.

“Somewhat, but I want to check from the front windows.” He pushed off the covers and padded to the living room. Within minutes, he returned. “The lights are still on at 147, but the Wiley home is in darkness. I might just have an overactive imagination.”

“I must be rubbing off on you,” I teased when he joined me under the covers.

“You have to admit, this is a really strange case.” He sighed as he reached to turn out the lights.

I totally agreed, and my mind focused on the many theories we’d considered. It struck me that they all made sense, yet until we found the key piece of the puzzle, we couldn’t be sure of which one to believe. What had we missed?

It took me at least an hour to fall asleep, yet Alan dozed peacefully by my side. I envied his ability to separate work from relaxation, and promised myself that I’d

learn to do that. For the time being, I counted sheep, and that eventually helped.

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The next morning, Clare called at seven-thirty to say that Liz would be discharged in two hours, and hoped we wouldn't mind picking them up. After Alan confirmed, I took a shower, then dressed.

Over toast and coffee, he told me that Mark reported no incidents at Liz Sterling's home, and he'd heard nothing from the county police. "According to Clare," he added, "Damien made it through the night."

"That's great news! I wonder what the cops will do with his dog while he's in the hospital."

Alan shrugged. "I don't know, though they might have to take him to a shelter."

I spread jelly on a toast point, thinking aloud. "If only dogs could talk, that one could solve our mystery."

Alan chuckled. "In our New York City precinct, the chief used a robbery victim's dog during a lineup. Believe it or not, the dog identified the perp, evidence supported his arrest, and the jury convicted him."

I smiled. "That's what I'm saying. We could present all of the J.W.s and let Damien's dog find the guilty person. "

We both laughed, although I considered my suggestion a good one.

Alan glanced at his watch. "I'm going to give Jim Withers a call to ask if he left the sticky notes and money for Liz."

“I thought you wanted to see him in person so you could watch his body language.”

“I did, but Liz will be discharged soon. I’d also like to check on Damien.” He pressed Jim’s number on his phone and waited for a response. Hearing none, he disconnected. “I’ll try later. Do you want to come with me to the hospital?”

I nodded as I popped my last bite of toast into my mouth. “I don’t know Liz’s size, but I’ll bring a set of clothes for her to use until she’s home.”

“Good idea, honey.” Alan took a final sip of his coffee, then carried our plates to the sink.

I stuffed a few items of clothing into a grocery bag, texted Lydia that I hoped to be home in time to assist during our busy hours later in the day, and met Alan at his car. Buckling in, I said, “We should ask Liz if she’d take care of Damien’s dog. It’s not right to leave him at a shelter.”

Alan shrugged. “Fine by me.”

I expected more, but he kept quiet during the drive, so I did, too. I liked that we didn’t have to fill every moment of our day with conversation.

At the hospital, the door to room 308 was open, yet a nurse stood by the bed giving Liz instructions for home care. We waited in the hall until she left, pushing the computer cart with her to the nurses’ station. “If you’re her ride, did you think to bring clothes?” she asked after greeting us pleasantly .

I gave her a proud smile and held up my bag. “Yes, I did.”

“Good,” she said, ready to move on. As a second thought, she added, “I’ll call for transport, so you can bring your car to the front entrance and wait for her there.”

“We were hoping to see her brother-in-law,” Alan noted.

“She visited with him earlier, and I think she wants to get home. Maybe one of you could do that, while the other meets her with the car.”

Alan and I discussed our options briefly while she scurried to answer a patient’s call bell. “I’ll give Liz the clothes, then go get the car,” I said. “We’ll wait for you at the front entrance.”

He nodded, heading for the elevators.

Liz was sitting on the side of the bed when I entered. She gratefully accepted what I’d brought which, I told her, would be a little large. She didn’t seem to mind.

With Clare helping her, I offered to wait in the hallway. The clock at the nurses’ station caught my eye, not because of the time. Rather, its size matched the one in the surgical waiting area.

Suddenly, a man’s voice startled me. “What a surprise to see you here, Mrs. Jaworski.”

I turned to face Liz’s next-door neighbor, Joe Wiley, and greeted him with a fake smile masking my nervousness. “And you as well, Doctor.”

“Are you visiting someone?” he asked nonchalantly.

My insides shook with fear that he’d bump into Liz. “No, I just had to drop off something for a friend. I can’t stay to chat since I don’t want to be late opening my garden shop, but I hope you have a great day.” I strolled to the elevators, forcing myself to calm down.

From there I watched as he went into a patient's room, and I prayed that he'd stay or leave before the transport person came. At the entrance, I sat behind the steering wheel, watching while waiting. Finally, I saw Liz in the wheelchair and Clare beside her.

Shortly after, Alan emerged, I moved to the passenger seat, and the other two settled in back. As we departed, Liz remarked, "I just saw my neighbor, Joe, and tried to get his attention, but he was talking to another doctor at the end of the hall."

Alan raised his eyes to the rear view mirror. "I'm sure you'll catch up with him when you're both home."

"Probably," she agreed.

Alan continued. "I had a chance to speak with Damien. He'd like you to take care of Buddy until he gets home."

"Of course," Liz exclaimed. "His poor dog must be sick with worry."

"I called the county police, and they let me know we can stop by and pick him up."

She gave a grateful smile. "Thank you, Alan. That's very kind of you."

I didn't know how much she remembered or what Clare had told her, so I figured we had a long afternoon ahead of us. We still needed answers to so many questions. In the meantime, they chatted about activities they wanted to do, including a celebration of Liz's birthday that had been delayed.

Seeing the two of them interacting so well made me smile, and I had no doubt they would finally span the gap of twenty-five years.

Chapter Forty-Six

Alan parked in Liz's driveway, and we all disembarked. Liz held Buddy by the leash the county police used, giving the large dog a moment to relieve himself in the grass. Clare pulled the house key out of her pocket, unlocked the front door, and explained that she had the locks changed.

"That wasn't necessary," her sister remarked. "Ed and I have lived here a long time, and we've never had a problem."

I glanced at Alan, not sure how much we should reveal until Liz got settled. He didn't respond, so I waited as well. Buddy explored the living room, dining room, and kitchen. "Do you know his breed?" I asked.

"Damien thinks maybe German shepherd and Lab, but he's not sure. He found him as a puppy out on the road about eight years ago, and tried to find the owner, even though Buddy had no collar. We think someone dumped him. Isn't that awful?"

"Yes, it is," I agreed, shaking my head. "If you have a bowl or pot, you could give him some water, and Clare may have some food left from Sophie."

"Who's Sophie?" she asked, heading to the kitchen.

Clare followed. "She's Alan and Sue's dog, and she stayed with me a couple of nights."

Liz stared at her sister. "You live in a remote African village, yet you were scared on

a busy street in town? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, now that I know you're safe." With that, Clare filled a bowl with water and scooped dry dog food into another. Buddy sniffed the kibble and walked away.

It felt awkward to watch Liz try to acclimate to her return with all of us surrounding her. I recalled that unease after my hospitalization a few years ago, so I thought Alan and I should leave, at least for a little while. He had a different opinion.

"Do you feel up to talking about your ordeal?" he asked.

She smiled. "It really wasn't that bad until the bulb burned out in the cellar and Damien didn't come to tell me the coast was clear."

We followed Alan to the living room where he asked us to take a seat. He sat directly across from Liz and Buddy. "What did you do when you weren't in the cellar?" he queried.

"We took walks, fed the chickens, collected the eggs, and things like that. Damien has some quirks, yet he feels more comfortable with me than he does most people, including his sister. Janice doesn't have much patience with him."

Alan nodded. "Okay, so we know Janice called you, asking if you could bring Damien some groceries. Had you intended to have those on hand in case your sister came?"

"Yes, but I'd have time after church the next day to go back to the grocery store, then to the airport. "

"But you didn't," Alan pressed.

“No.” She lowered her eyes, shaking her head. “Damien was acting strange, so I stayed with him.”

“You didn’t tell him that you needed to pick up your sister at the airport?” Alan pressed. “Clare had called several times to remind you.”

She raised her eyes to look at Clare. “I’m sorry. I was so busy closing Ed’s accounts, and I didn’t feel like talking.”

“Yet on that Saturday,” Alan reminded her, “you met friends at River Mill golf club, went grocery shopping, and took Jane Windsor to the Black Horse Pub for dinner. That seems like a lot of talking to me.”

“So, I didn’t have time to speak with anyone else,” she sputtered.

“Oh, but you did,” Alan continued. “You received a phone call from Janice Walker and Lindsey Wiley, or was it Joe Wiley?”

She frowned. “Have you been checking up on me?”

“That’s what detectives do,” Alan stated, “when someone hires us to find a missing person. Who are you trying to protect, Liz?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Alan caught her eye. “I think you do.”

She stood and pointed to the door. “I’d like you to leave, please.”

Clare reached for a hand, but Liz pulled it away. Buddy gave a low growl.

Since I'd also had similar reactions to Alan's police persona in the past, I tried to diffuse the situation by changing the topic. With a soft tone, I said, "Jane Windsor has missed you terribly, although Clare has brought groceries to her."

Clare gave her sister a hesitant smile. "She likes her ice cream, doesn't she?"

Liz nodded, but words escaped her. She choked back emotion before saying, "Please tell her I'm okay."

"We will," I said consolingly.

Liz sank back onto the sofa. Her bottom lip quivered and a tear dropped to her cheek. "Ed was my rock, and now he's gone."

"I understand," I said gently. "My first husband died, leaving me with a pile of debts, and I didn't know where to turn."

She leaned into Clare and wept.

Suddenly it hit me. The whole sordid mess that I had to face when my husband hid his gambling addiction and another family in the background came tumbling forward. "You didn't have the cash to clear Ed's accounts," I said softly.

She shook her head, mumbling, "I used our savings first, then closed out our investments, and I still didn't have enough. I planned to put our Florida home on the market, but I'd have to fly down there to sort through our things."

"I can go with you to help," Clare said, "but what happened with Ed's accounts?"

She closed her eyes, shaking her head. "He left such a mess, mostly with the investment side of the business. In some cases, he covered clients' money with our

own, but never mentioned it to me. Other times, he borrowed from one client to pay another. It's a nightmare."

"Yes, it is," I agreed, having dealt with something similar.

"Joe Wiley gave me some money," she continued, "though I hadn't told him my dilemma. I guess he knew I was worried. "

"We asked him," I said, "but he denied leaving any notes or money for you. Could Jim Withers have tried to help?"

She reached for a tissue on the coffee table and blew her nose. "Maybe," she said tentatively. "He's been a good friend to Ed and me, and I've helped him through the years."

"Alan plans to go ask him in a little while," I remarked, "and we'll hope to soon have an answer for that question. There's another problem, though. One I never had to face."

She dabbed at her eyes while looking at me. "What's that?"

"Someone tried to scare Clare away from here three times, but she wouldn't leave until we found you. That's why we suggested she change the locks and keep our dog, Sophie, with her at night."

Liz stared at me. "Who would do that?"

"We don't know," I replied, "although we suspect someone wanted something from your house." I paused a moment. "Was Ed having an affair with Lindsey Wiley?"

She gasped before closing her eyes. "I believe so," she whispered.

My heart skipped a beat because I'd found the missing puzzle piece. "Where's her gold bracelet?" I asked.

"It's in the cup of the putting green in the basement," she murmured.

"Very appropriate," Alan muttered.

"I found it on the floor under our bed this summer. Of course, I immediately knew the implications because I'd suspected it many times, though I still found it hard to believe. How could my husband have betrayed me like that?"

I wanted to tell her it would take a long time to get over such duplicity, but she probably already knew that. Instead, I tackled the one remaining part of the puzzle, though I tried to do it gently. "We know you didn't want to stay at Damien's for ten days, especially when you'd hoped your sister would arrive the next day. Who kidnapped you?"

Clare morosely shook her head. "I don't know. The last thing I remember was stopping for gas, figuring I needed enough to get home, and I might as well fill up for my trip to the Scranton airport." She reached up to touch the back of her head. "Someone knocked me out, and I woke up on Sterling Lane with no car and no phone. Damien found me, and the groceries I'd brought, on Sunday morning."

"We spoke to Damien several times," I said gently, "and he told us he hadn't seen you."

"We were scared. He got calls on his house phone with constant threats that I'd be killed if I didn't release \$10,000 in unmarked bills. I didn't have that kind of money, so I stayed hidden."

"Did you recognize the voice of the person who called him?" Alan asked.

“It was mechanical, so I couldn’t even tell if it was a man or a woman.”

“It was Lindsey Wiley,” I stated, feeling absolutely certain. “She needed you out of your home so she could search for her bracelet. She must have followed you, then knocked you out. Of course, Clare thwarted her plans by staying in your house. Lindsey must have felt desperate, trying to scare your sister away while making sure you stayed at Damien’s.”

“For a bracelet?” Liz queried.

Alan caught my eye before raising an eyebrow, daring me to totally solve the mystery. I don’t know how, but I figured it out .

Nodding, I said, “Yes, her husband had been pestering her about the expensive gift he’d given her, and Lindsey knew it must have fallen off during an afternoon of passion at the Sterling residence. I think we can prove her involvement in everything by introducing her to Buddy.”

Alan understood my point immediately. “Let me get Mark over here,” he said, pulling his phone from his pocket, “then Liz can take me to the bracelet.”

As he spoke with our police chief, Liz shook her head. “What are we doing?”

“You’re going to call Lindsey and tell her to come pick up her bracelet.”

She shook her head. “I don’t have a house phone and my cell phone is missing.”

“Okay,” I shrugged. “I’ll do it.” I pressed the number for Lindsey in my contacts, hoping to find her at home. When she answered, I handed the phone to Liz.

Her voice gathered strength as she told Lindsey that she was home and found a gold

bracelet. “Could it be the one you lost?” After a pause, she added, “You’re welcome to come get it. I’ll meet you at the back door.”

I prayed Mark would arrive in time, and Buddy wouldn’t let me down. Alan and Liz headed to the basement, then returned with her waving the gold trinket. From the living room window, I saw Mark pull into the driveway behind Alan’s car. Moments later, Lindsey sashayed across the yard.

When Alan gave the signal, Liz opened the inside door for Lindsey. Buddy peered through the glass of the storm door and growled.

She stepped back, then noticed Mark Matthews in uniform. “What’s going on?” she questioned, looking as if she wanted to bolt .

Liz dangled the bracelet. “Is this what you were looking for?” she asked through the storm door.

Lindsey pulled the door open and reached to grab it. Buddy barked ferociously before literally knocking her off the stoop as he prepared to attack. Alan grabbed his leash as he yelled, “Heel, boy. At ease.”

Mark quickly cuffed her, then read her the Miranda rights as Alan pulled Buddy inside, closing the inside door behind him. “Keep him in,” he told Liz before scooting out the front door. I managed to follow.

Lindsey screamed in anger, swearing to report Mark to the mayor and the media for a false arrest. Two county police officers arrived to assist Mark, while Alan filled in the details. One of them took a long look at her before saying, “I’m sure this is the lady who returned to the crime scene on Sterling Lane.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she shrieked.

Alan intervened. “She didn’t intend to shoot Damien. She just wanted to scare him.”

She gazed at him with misty eyes. “It was dark. I covered my face with a mask and wore a hoodie, so I couldn’t see very well. Then, that dog attacked me and the gun went off. I ran away, but I was afraid I’d killed Damien. Is he alive?”

“Luckily, yes,” Alan replied. “Was the gold bracelet worth all of that mayhem?”

A blush crept up her neck. “I knew how and when I lost it, but Joe kept reminding me how much it cost. Worse than that, I lent Ed \$10,000 to cover some of his debts, then he died. I had to get that money back before my husband discovered it missing, so I concocted the ransom scheme.”

“On top of that,” Alan stated, “you stole Liz’s car. ”

“No, I left it at lovers’ lane, and the police found it.” She gave him a smirk.

“Where’s her phone?”

“Not far from where I left the car. Look in the bushes.”

“When you get to the police station,” Alan said, “ask to call a lawyer, because you’re going to need one.”

He nodded to one of the officers who gently took her arm and led her to the police van parked at the curb. She glared at Alan as she passed by.

We could only shake our heads, knowing her devious ways had caught up with her. Alan left us to talk to Jim Withers at River Mill Golf Club and asked if I would help the two sisters debrief from their very stressful experience.

I agreed, mostly because I had once walked in Liz's shoes. I felt a kinship with her, even though we'd never previously met, because we'd both experienced betrayal.

She also had her sister, whom she needed more than she knew. Maybe I could help them reconnect—or, perhaps, they could do that on their own.

Chapter Forty-Seven

We had a full house for our pizza supper on Friday since I invited Clare and Liz, in addition to our family. That morning, I'd bought a birthday cake and tub of ice cream at the grocery store while Alan worked a half day for the county police. It felt good to have things back to normal.

As Lydia and I closed the garden shop at five o'clock, I noticed Clare and Liz crossing Church Street, which reminded me to pick out a potted plant as a birthday gift. "Don't forget," I said, "You have the entire weekend free, and I'll catch up here."

Lydia smiled enthusiastically. "I'm so glad your case has come to an end and everything turned out all right."

"Me, too." I fiddled with the plant's bow before saying, "You know, I learned an important lesson."

"What's that?" she asked.

"I misinterpreted clues and falsely judged someone. Then, because I reported her to the police, she had to experience hours of interrogation. I'm really sorry about that."

"I imagine that happens in any investigation. "

"Perhaps, but I shouldn't have been so quick to judge without all of the facts. It's just strange how easy it was to believe something not true."

“Right,” Lydia agreed, following me out the side door. “I suppose it’s why my grandmother would remind me to ‘keep my counsel.’ I didn’t know what she meant until I mentioned something one of my friends told me about a girl at school. Later, I learned that I’d believed a lie.”

I locked the door. “Then, you know what I mean.”

She nodded. “I do.”

After our farewells, we parted ways, then I caught up with Clare and Liz at our front stoop. “Perfect timing,” I said with a welcoming smile. “Come in and make yourselves at home.”

Sophie gleefully greeted both of them and, given all of her sniffing, must have recognized Buddy’s scent on Liz. To my surprise, she scurried to the sunroom and returned with the scarf she’d pilfered.

I couldn’t help laughing. “Sophie took this from your house,” I explained, “but I’ll buy you a new one.”

“That’s probably how she found me in the root cellar,” Liz said, rubbing Sophie’s ears.

“I think so,” I agreed.

Liz smiled. “Then, she should keep the scarf as her reward.” My dog must have understood because she pranced around the living room with it hanging from her mouth.

Alan walked in carrying three pizza boxes. “Good to see you, ladies. I trust you’ve had a good day.”

“The best I’ve had in almost two weeks,” Clare said. “We slept in, then had lunch at River Mill. I even practiced hitting a golf ball, although I wasn’t very good at it.”

“I have a feeling your sister will instruct you,” he said, placing the pizzas on the kitchen island. “Did you have a chance to visit Damien today?”

“We did, and he’s doing remarkably well. Liz tried to convince him to stay with us for a few weeks when he’s discharged from the hospital, but he wants to go home. I don’t blame him, since he’s lived on Sterling Lane his whole life.”

Alan nodded, giving Clare an extended gaze. “What about you? Are you pining to return to the missions?”

She gave him a quirky grin. “I think I’m starting a new phase of my life, but time will tell.”

“What’s that mean?” he asked.

“Liz and I want some time together, so I’m planning to stay with her for a few weeks. Then, I’ll see what’s next.”

That seemed to satisfy Alan’s curiosity, and Liz looked pleased with Clare’s response. I knew how she felt because Laura, my sister, had accepted my invitation to come for a visit, and we’d meet her at the Scranton airport in less than a week. I could hardly wait.

Sean, wearing his baseball cap backward, appeared at the kitchen door and called for Sophie to play. Before I could grab the scarf, she ran outside with it. I didn’t bother to chase after her because I knew she’d eventually lose interest.

Ryan and Jessica arrived, then Judy and Tom. Alan introduced them to Liz, while I put out the napkins, paper plates, and beverages. “Come and get it,” I called.

Given the crowd, most of us took seats at the dining room table, then Judy and Tom moved two kitchen stools close to us. “We’re so glad you’re safe,” Judy told Liz. “I heard Sophie found you.”

“Yes, and my brother-in-law’s dog, Buddy, identified the person responsible. ”

“Who was that?” Tom asked.

“My neighbor, Lindsey Wiley.” She didn’t elaborate.

“What’s going to happen to her?” Ryan queried.

“I’m not sure, though she’ll have to go to trial for shooting Damien. Luckily, he’s going to be fine.”

“He’ll always have a bum leg,” Alan groused.

On that note, Sean came inside with Sophie. “Hey! No one told me it was time to eat.”

“You know what we do on Friday nights,” Jess replied. “Go wash your hands, then you can pick out your slice of pizza.” He stood on his tiptoes, reaching for the faucet at the kitchen sink.

“Wow!” I exclaimed. “You’re getting tall.”

He rolled his eyes. “I’m eight years old, G-G.”

“That’s what I meant. You’re growing up before my eyes.”

I thought that satisfied him, until he said, “Then, can I have a soda?”

Typically, our answer would be “no.” This time, though, Ryan gave his approval, which elicited great cheers from the munchkin as he scooted up to a stool at the island.

The rest of our guests continued discussing Liz’s case. “I don’t understand why you didn’t contact the police,” Tom said.

“I was afraid,” she replied simply.

Judy nodded. “I get it. Someday, I’ll tell you my story, but it’s not pretty.”

“I suppose we all have our challenges,” Liz said. “Mine is trying to pay back money my husband owed to the people who’d trusted him.”

Alan scooted out to the sunroom and returned with an envelope he handed Liz. “Sue and I want you to have the money Clare used to pay our retainer.” Clare gasped and stared at him.

“No,” Liz said, pushing it away. “You earned it.”

He pushed it back. “We came together as neighbors and, if it weren’t for your disappearance, we might never have met the folks who live across our busy street. Besides, Jim Withers left that money to help you get back on your feet.”

“Are you sure about that?” she asked.

“Yes, although he’d rather you think of it as an anonymous gift from J.W.”

“All that time, I thought it came from Joe Wiley. He, by the way, stopped by to apologize for his wife’s behavior.”

Alan nodded. “That’s good. Sue and I paid Janice Walker a visit last night and told

her how sorry we were for misjudging her. She had only gone to Sterling Lane to ask if you'd ever arrived with Damien's groceries."

"She could have done that days ago," Clare said.

"We live busy lives and don't always think to check on our loved ones," Alan replied. "Interestingly, after our initial questions to Janice when we stopped at her house ten days ago, she called Lindsey Wiley to ask if she'd seen Liz."

"Lindsey knew everyone was looking for you," Jess noted.

"Right," Alan agreed. "And Lindsey had followed Liz when she took the groceries to Damien, so she told Janice about seeing her at the gas station, which Janice eventually relayed to us as an anonymous tip."

Ryan frowned. "Lindsey Wiley must have known all along where Liz was."

"Not entirely," Alan said. "She'd knocked Liz out, then dumped her on Sterling Lane. Damien was smart not to divulge where he was hiding her. "

"And he got shot for that," Ryan said. "Did he ever get his groceries?"

Liz nodded. "She left the bags on the ground, so I suppose she had to get rid of any connection with me. I'm just glad it's over and Damien will be okay."

"Details are still coming in," Alan noted, "but you sure do have a lot of J.W.s in your life."

"Gosh," Jessica directed to Ryan, "maybe Willow isn't a good middle name for Jolene."

We laughed, which caught Sean's attention. "What's so funny? I like that name

because it sounds like a tree.”

“It is cool,” I agreed. “Would you help me find the birthday candles to put on the cake?”

“Sure, but who’s birthday?”

“Mrs. Sterling’s,” I said, pointing to Liz.

He stared at her before whispering, “I don’t think we have enough candles.”

I stifled a chuckle. “We’ll use eight, since that’s how old you are.”

“Okay,” he agreed.

^^^

Later, when everyone had gone home and we’d tidied the kitchen, Alan and I sat close to each other on the sofa while Sophie dozed on the floor. I leaned my head on his shoulder, basking in the comfort of his arm around my waist. “All’s well that ends well,” I said softly.

He nodded. “Thank heavens, and we made new friends.”

“I’m glad Clare’s going to stay with Liz for awhile. ”

“I think it’ll be good for both of them.”

He reached for my hand. “I thought Judy and Tom might have announced their wedding date tonight.”

“They will when they’re ready,” I said.

“They’re right for each other, aren’t they?”

I smiled. “He’s her perfect match, so don’t jinx it.”

He laughed before his lips found mine. After his kiss, he said, “They belong together just like we do.”

I totally agreed.