



Breaking Rules (Sam Mason K-9 Dog Mystery #8)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: There's a body under the ice

Sam Mason faces a chilling discovery that plunges him and his team into a whirlwind of mystery and danger. The victim, found beneath the frozen surface of a local lake, holds a key in his pocket – a clue that unlocks a tangled web of secrets stretching back decades.

But it gets complicated, especially when one of the last people to see the victim was mayoral candidate Marnie Wilson. Rumor has it the victim knew something that could jeopardize her outcome in the race for mayor.

Now, more than ever, they have to rely on K-9 Lucy to unearth the chilling truths that will solve the case.

Not everyone at the station is focused on this case, though, Kevin's big secret is gnawing at him and it's got him a bit distracted.

Jo continues to try to convince her landlord to sell, Bridget makes a career move and deals with a secret from her past and the FBI starts digging up bodies buried behind the Webster house except the outcome is something no one expected.

Total Pages (Source): 34

CHAPTER ONE

George Bennett lowered his jigging rod into the freshly drilled hole, the cold air biting at his cheeks as he settled on his makeshift seat. Lake Whitepine lay serene under the early-morning sky, its frozen surface a mirror to the faint pink hues of dawn. The solitude of ice fishing had always appealed to George. It was a peaceful escape, a world away from the daily grind.

He worked the rod with practiced ease, rhythmically moving the jig in the frigid water. Every tiny vibration, every subtle shift in the line's tension, he felt it all, attuned to the nuances of the sport. George savored these moments of tranquility, the soft creaking of ice his only companion.

As the sky brightened, he felt a weight on the line. George's heart skipped a beat. He jerked up, setting the hook.

"It's a big one," he muttered, a grin spreading across his face. He adjusted his grip, ready for the fight. The line danced under his expert guidance, the promise of a hefty catch sending a thrill through him.

But the excitement quickly morphed into unease. The tug on the line felt wrong, heavier and less lively than a fish. The usual chorus of morning birds fell silent around him, as if nature itself held its breath. A chill crept up his spine, one that had nothing to do with the winter air.

He peered into the hole, expecting the glint of fish scales. Instead, what he saw made his blood freeze. Through the clear, dark water, a human face, blue lipped and ghostly

pale, appeared. Dead eyes stared back at him, void of life. A scream stuck in George's throat. His grip on the rod faltered, and it clattered to the ice. He stumbled backward, feet slipping, and landed hard on the cold surface. The breath whooshed out of him, his mind reeling in shock and disbelief.

For a few heartbeats, George lay there, staring at the hole in the ice, his heart pounding in his ears, his breath coming out in quick puffs. Slowly, he pulled himself up, his body trembling. By some miracle, his rod hadn't slipped into the water.

With a deep breath, George edged closer and picked up the rod, his hand shaking. The hook was still snagged on something, something he didn't dare imagine. He didn't want to know which part of the body he had caught.

With the rod gripped in his left hand, he scrambled for his phone with his right. His fingers felt numb as he dialed nine-one-one, his voice barely more than a hoarse whisper.

"There's a body... in the lake."

The cold air was filled with the distant hum of approaching snowmobiles as Chief Sam Mason and his team worked around the hole in the ice. George Bennett stood nearby, his hands still wrapped around the fishing rod, his face a mask of shock and disbelief.

Sam gently took the rod from George's unresisting grip. "We'll take it from here," he said softly. "Thanks for keeping a hold on that. If you had let go, the body would have drifted off, making it almost impossible for us to find under the ice."

Officer Kevin Deckard, meanwhile, was busy attaching a grappling hook to a sturdy rope, preparing for a more secure hold on the body submerged in the frigid water.

Sergeant Jo Harris approached George, her voice calm and steady. “Can you tell me exactly what happened, George?” she asked, guiding him a few steps away from the growing crowd of onlookers.

As George recounted his morning’s horrifying turn of events, Kevin and another officer began drilling additional holes around the original one, creating a larger opening to retrieve the body. The sound of the augers drilling into the ice echoed across the lake, drawing more curious fishermen from their bob-houses as they abandoned their lines to witness the commotion.

Lucy, the German shepherd police K-9, paced around, her nose twitching, sensing the tension in the air. She occasionally paused to sniff at the ice, her ears perked up, attentive to every movement around her.

With the expanded hole, Sam and Kevin, aided by a couple of fishermen, carefully maneuvered the body onto the ice. The deceased’s features were bloated, making immediate identification difficult.

The murmurs of the crowd grew louder as someone near the front peered more closely at the body now laid out on the ice. “Isn’t that Alex Sheridan?” the onlooker questioned, a hint of disbelief in his voice.

Recognition sparked in a few others as they nodded.

“I recognize the jacket. And it sort of looks like him. Hard to tell.” A tall man with a bushy beard grimaced and looked away.

Alex Sheridan, known in the small town as an avid hiker, seemed an unlikely victim for such a grim fate. Questions and speculations started to ripple through the crowd.

“How did an experienced hiker end up under the ice? Could it have been an

accident?” they whispered among themselves.

The name caught Jo’s attention. Alex was the campaign manager for Marnie Wilson, who was running for mayor. Jo was no fan of Marnie—she thought the woman was shady—so it was something of a coincidence that her campaign manager was now dead.

Jo’s attention was split between George’s recounting and Lucy’s meticulous sniffing. Lucy was better than any human at finding clues, so when the dog’s attention lingered at the feet of the victim, Jo took notice.

“Sneakers,” she muttered under her breath, her eyes narrowing. The body was indeed clad in light sneakers, wholly unsuitable for hiking in the snow-covered terrain around the lake.

“Who goes hiking in the snow wearing sneakers?” She voiced her thoughts aloud, more to herself than anyone else.

The victim was wearing an expensive jacket, thick gloves—well, at least one glove; the other had probably fallen off in the water—and jeans.

Her gaze shifted to Lucy, who was now intently sniffing around the side of the body.

Sam overheard Jo’s comment, and his gaze immediately flicked to where Lucy was still sniffing. He nodded and signaled to Jo that he saw the discrepancy too.

“Here comes John.” Kevin jerked his chin toward the shore about fifty feet away.

John Dudley, the medical examiner, was attempting to navigate the slippery surface in his impractical loafers. They watched as he half walked, half slid over to them. Behind him, his crew was getting a gurney out of the back of the ambulance.

Sam reached out to steady him. “John, those loafers aren’t exactly ice friendly,” he chided lightly.

John grumbled in response, regaining his balance. “I don’t get those fancy cleats like you police folks,” he said half jokingly. “One of these days, I’ll learn.”

While John began his preliminary examination of the body, Lucy seemed intrigued by Alex Sheridan’s jacket. She sniffed eagerly, particularly interested in the chest area. Noticing Lucy’s behavior, Jo carefully inspected the jacket, her gloved fingers probing for hidden compartments. It was a good brand, now waterlogged and with a few rips in the outer shell, probably from getting snagged on branches under the water.

“Look at this,” Jo called out softly. She’d discovered a small, sewn-in pocket on the inside of the jacket, cleverly hidden in the lining. With a gentle tug, she pulled out a key too small to be for a house or car. Safe deposit box? It was an unusual place to hide something, suggesting its importance.

“Why would Alex go to such lengths to hide a key?” Sam asked.

“Clearly, it must be important,” Jo said. “Lucy sniffed it out.”

Sam petted Lucy on the head. “Good girl.”

Kevin put the key in an evidence bag.

“Is that an evidence bag?” someone from the crowd asked.

“Is this a crime scene?” another added.

Jo, overhearing the query, exchanged a glance with Sam. Her instincts were already

buzzing with the suspicion of foul play, but she kept her thoughts to herself. The hidden key was too peculiar a detail to be dismissed, yet without concrete evidence, they couldn't jump to conclusions.

Sam, sensing the growing tension among the crowd, stood up and addressed the group. His voice, authoritative yet reassuring, carried over the murmurs. "Everyone, please stay calm," he began. "It's standard procedure to bag any items found with a body in unusual circumstances. Until we get more information from John's examination, we really don't know what we're dealing with."

His words seemed to settle some of the nerves among the onlookers, though a buzz of speculation continued to ripple through the crowd. It was clear that the discovery on Lake Whitepine had already ignited a wave of curiosity and concern in the small community.

"Let's get him back to the lab and see what else we can find," Sam directed while the body was carefully moved onto the stretcher.

John blew into his hands and stomped his feet, which would have slid out from under him if Sam hadn't caught his arm.

"Thanks. I'll let you know what I find." John nodded at Sam and headed toward shore.

Lucy gave one last sniff at the hole then lifted her nose to sniff the air, turning about a quarter of a circle. Jo looked in that direction. It was due east from where they were. Was Lucy able to sense where the body had gone in?

The condition of the body indicated it hadn't been underwater that long. Would they be able to determine from the currents and the time he had been under where he fell in? Jo hoped so, because that location could hold vital clues to how Alex had ended

up in the water.

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CHAPTER TWO

The chill from the lake still clung to Sam as he pushed open the door of the White Rock police station. The familiar scent of brewed coffee and hard work greeted him, a comforting reminder of the countless hours he'd spent within these walls. The station, with its history etched into every brass post office box and weathered metal desk, always felt like stepping back in time.

Lucy, her tail wagging, trotted ahead toward Reese, stationed at the reception desk. Reese's long dark hair was pulled back today, and her brows rose in curiosity as she saw them.

"I've been getting calls all morning," she started, her voice tinged with concern. "People saw the police cars down at Gilham Bay. It's true, then? There was a body?"

Sam nodded, the weight of the morning's discovery pressing down on him. "Yep. George really did find a body under the ice. Someone in the crowd thought it was Alex Sheridan."

"Wait, Alex Sheridan." Reese screwed up her face and looked at the ceiling. "Isn't that Marnie Wilson's campaign manager?"

They all glanced out the front door at the "Marnie for Mayor" sign that Wilson herself had hammered into the half-frozen dirt last month.

"I think so," Jo said.

“So was it an accident?” Reese asked.

“Not sure.”

As Sam told Reese some of the details, Major, the station’s resident cat, made his appearance, his sleek black fur contrasting against the freshly painted walls. He sauntered over, taking a curious glance at the humans before sniffing Lucy. Sam braced himself, waiting for the usual skirmish, but none happened. After a few sniffs, Major simply sauntered off, his tail high in the air.

“It’s almost as if they have their own weird way of communicating now,” Jo said.

Just then, Kevin walked in, a white bag of donuts in his hand.

“Thought we could use a pick-me-up,” he said, heading past the post office boxes and into the bullpen area.

The squad room was simple. A few metal desks lined the walls, and a coffee machine and filing cabinet sat near the entrance. Sunlight streamed in through the tall windows overlooking the town square and highlighting the scratches in the wide pine floors.

Wyatt, hunched over his desk with his eyes fixed on the computer screen, spoke as soon as they came in. “John’s got some prelim info,” he said in his usual concise manner. “Victim’s Alex Sheridan. Rents an apartment over at 34 Maple Street. Unmarried, no siblings. Parents, uh, Thomas and Elaine Sheridan, living in Florida. He was the campaign manager for Marnie Wilson and, before that, worked as an IT consultant.”

“Good work,” Sam took a donut out of the bag Kevin had handed to him and passed the bag to Wyatt. “Can you check on his finances? Particularly where he banked and if he had a safe deposit box?”

Wyatt's brows rose a notch. "Sure."

"We found a small key in his pocket. Seemed important." Jo busied herself with the K-cup machine next to the filing cabinet, where Major sat perched like a silent overseer, his eyes following her every move.

Kevin pulled a chair aside, making himself comfortable, while Sam leaned casually against a nearby desk, his posture relaxed but his mind racing. Reese chose to lean against the wall, her position strategic to keep an eye on the reception area.

Wyatt looked up over the screen of his laptop. "John's still working on the autopsy. No word yet on the manner of death," he reported. "Oh, and I put the phone number for Alex's parents on your desk."

Sam rubbed his chin thoughtfully, his gaze distant. "Water probably washed away any DNA we might have found on the victim," he mused aloud. The possibility of losing crucial evidence was always a bitter pill to swallow.

Jo leaned against the desk, her arms crossed. "That's assuming he was murdered," she pointed out. "Could've been an accident."

Sam nodded slowly, his eyes still fixed on the evidence photos. "It does seem strange he'd end up in the water like that... And those sneakers—if he was walking around the lake in the snow, you'd think he'd wear boots."

"Good point," Jo agreed. "The logical place to begin is by talking to his coworkers. That means a visit to Marnie Wilson's campaign headquarters."

Sam sighed, knowing what came next. "Right, but first, I need to make that call to Alex's parents in Florida." His voice was tinged with the solemnity that always accompanied the task of notifying next of kin. It was a part of the job that never got

easier, no matter how many times he had to do it.

Sam walked into his office, the door closing behind him with a soft click. The room felt like a sanctuary, steeped in the history of the building. His desk, a massive wooden piece that had once served as a table in the old post office, bore the blue stamped postmark ink and staple holes—silent witnesses to its past life. Behind the desk, a large corkboard stood empty for now, but soon, it would be covered with crime-scene photos and notes, a visual map of the investigation.

Lucy followed him in, her presence a quiet comfort. She stayed close by his side, choosing to forgo her usual spot in the sun-drenched corner of the office. It was as if she sensed his need for her companionship, her intuitive nature attuned to his emotions.

On his desk, the phone number for Alex Sheridan's parents glared up at him. It was a call Sam had made too many times before, yet it never got easier. He let out a heavy sigh, steeling himself for the task. Picking up the phone, he dialed the number, each beep echoing slightly in the quiet room.

As he waited for the call to connect, Sam glanced at Lucy, her brown eyes watching him knowingly. The comforting weight of her presence grounded him, a silent reminder of the bonds that made the difficult parts of his job bearable.

After the initial shock and exchange of information, Thomas Sheridan's voice came through the phone, tinged with a mix of confusion and apprehension. "Chief Mason, what exactly happened to Alex? How did you find him?"

Sam took a deep breath, choosing his words with care. "Mr. Sheridan, I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but we found Alex's body this morning under the ice at Gilham Bay. It appears he may have fallen through the ice, but we're still investigating to understand exactly what happened."

A sharp intake of breath was audible on the other end of the line, followed by a stifled sob. The reality of the situation seemed to hit them anew. “Under the ice?” Thomas repeated, his voice barely above a whisper, struggling to grasp the magnitude of what he’d just been told.

“Yes, sir.” Sam’s voice was gentle, infused with empathy, as he navigated the delicate conversation. “Mr. and Mrs. Sheridan, I’m sorry to have to ask, but were you close to Alex recently? Had you noticed anything unusual about his behavior?”

There was a pause on the other end of the line, a heavy silence filled with unspoken grief. Then, Thomas Sheridan, Alex’s father, cleared his throat. “Why do you ask? Is there something suspicious?” There was a cautious edge to his voice, a father’s protective instinct even in the face of tragedy.

“We’re just covering all our bases,” Sam assured him softly, his words careful. He could hear the faint sound of crying in the background—Alex’s mother, no doubt overwhelmed by the news. Sam’s heart ached for them, but he knew these questions were necessary.

Thomas’s voice was firmer when he spoke again. “Alex was a bit out of sorts, but that’s understandable. His grandfather, Frank Milson, just passed away. They were very close. In fact, Alex is the executor of his will.”

Sam’s detective instincts kicked in, a flicker of alertness at the mention of a will. “Did Mr. Milson have a lot of money?” he asked, trying to tread lightly.

“No, nothing significant,” Thomas replied. “Frank lived a simple life.”

“Would anyone else be jealous of Alex being the executor?” Sam probed further, aware that family matters, especially those involving wills, could often be more complex than they appeared.

Thomas hesitated before answering. “I wouldn’t think so. I don’t think he had much of value, so I don’t think Alex’s cousins would care. From what my in-laws said, they were glad not to have the responsibility.”

Sam mulled over this information. A seemingly insignificant inheritance could sometimes hold unexpected value. “Thank you, Mr. Sheridan. This information is very helpful. And please know we’re doing everything we can to figure out what happened to Alex.”

CHAPTER THREE

Marnie Wilson's campaign office, bustling with the fervent energy of campaign work, was alive with the sound of ringing phones and clicking keyboards. Brightly colored posters adorned the walls, their slogans vying for attention, while a table laden with donuts and coffee cups hinted at the long hours spent here. The air was tinged with a mix of determination and exhaustion.

Lucy was immediately the center of attention, drawing smiles and gentle pats from the campaigners. The soft clatter of her nails on the tiled floor mixed pleasantly with the hum of conversation.

Amid the congenial chaos, a young woman approached them. She was the embodiment of youthful dedication, with honey-blond waves framing her face and a Marnie Wilson campaign T-shirt hugging her frame. Her enthusiasm was almost palpable, a bright note in the otherwise mundane room.

"Hi there! Can I help you?" she asked, her voice ringing with an upbeat tone that echoed around the room. "Alex, our campaign manager, isn't in yet, but I'll try to assist. I'm Amelia Donovan. Are you here to volunteer for Marnie?"

Exchanging a glance with Jo, Sam raised a brow. Clearing his throat, he braced himself to deliver the news that would undoubtedly dampen the vibrant atmosphere.

"We're actually here about Alex," he said, his voice steady yet sympathetic.

The eagerness in the young woman's eyes dimmed, replaced by a flicker of concern.

“What about him?” she asked, her brows knitting in worry.

“He’s been found dead,” Sam disclosed, the words casting a palpable shadow over the room.

The reaction was immediate. The once-lively space fell into a hushed stillness, the only sounds now the muffled rustling of papers and the low murmur of disbelief. The campaigners’ faces, moments ago alight with the zeal of political ambition, now mirrored shock and grief.

“What? How?” someone whispered, their voice a mere breath in the suddenly oppressive air.

“We’re still investigating.” Sam didn’t want to give them the disturbing details. Glancing around, he noted Marnie’s absence, a fact that brought a sense of relief. With her out of the picture for the moment, he could probe deeper without the complication of her scrutinizing presence. He cleared his throat, his voice firm as he addressed the crowd.

“Does anyone know if someone wanted to hurt Alex?” he asked, his gaze sweeping over the sea of faces.

A young man with a nervous twitch in his eye stepped forward, wringing his hands. “No, no way. Alex was well-liked. We’re all here for the same cause, right?”

Sam nodded, taking in the earnestness in the young man’s eyes. “Maybe someone else. A friend or even some altercation that might have happened?”

The crowd all looked at each other, shaking their heads.

“What was his mood like recently?” Sam pressed on, watching the reactions ripple

through the group.

A woman with streaks of gray in her hair and a motherly demeanor chimed in, her voice heavy with sadness. “He was grieving, of course. His grandfather’s passing hit him hard, but Alex was strong. He wouldn’t let it derail him.”

“They were close, weren’t they?” Sam prodded further, his eyes scanning for any flicker of hesitation or unspoken words.

“Oh, very,” added another campaign worker, a tall man with stooped shoulders. “His grandfather was like a mentor to him. But to suggest that his sadness... It’s just unthinkable.”

Continuing his questioning, Sam shifted his focus, delving deeper. “Had Alex been arguing with anyone lately? Any unusual visitors or calls?” he asked, his voice even but probing.

A bespectacled young woman, her hair tied back in a practical ponytail, stepped forward. “Not that I know of,” she said, her voice steady but her hands betraying her nerves as they fidgeted with the hem of her cardigan. “Alex was easygoing. He avoided conflicts, mostly.”

As he listened, Sam’s attention was partially divided. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Lucy trotted off toward the back of the room. The campaign staffers continued to pet her absentmindedly as she passed, but her focus was unwavering.

She headed straight toward someone in the back who was on their phone, back turned to the crowd. Lucy sniffed the person then looked back at Sam. Sam took note as the person hung up and turned back around, eyes widening upon seeing Sam watching them.

Sam continued asking questions, wondering in the back of his mind why Lucy had called attention to that individual. A few minutes later, his questions were answered when the front door burst open and Marnie Wilson marched in.

Her presence was commanding, her strides purposeful as she made a beeline toward Sam.

“I heard about Alex,” Marnie stated, her voice laced with a mix of urgency and control. “Is it true?”

Sam met her gaze, his expression solemn. “I’m afraid so.”

Marnie’s face contorted briefly with shock and sadness, but she quickly regained her composure. She straightened her back, narrowing her eyes slightly. “You surely don’t think this has anything to do with my campaign, do you?”

“It’s standard procedure to start our investigation at the victim’s workplace.” Sam replied smoothly without really answering her question.

“Victim?” Marnie echoed, her voice catching on the word. “You mean... he was murdered?”

Sam half shrugged, his eyes not leaving hers. “We haven’t determined the cause of death yet.”

Marnie’s reaction was calculated. She glanced around at her team, who were hanging on every word.

Turning back to Sam, she composed herself. “Well, please do whatever you need to. Alex was a valuable member of our team. We want to help in any way we can.”

Seamlessly transitioning into her role as a politician, she turned to address the room, her voice resonating with a blend of grief and determination. “Everyone,” Marnie began, her tone commanding the attention of all present, “today, we’ve suffered a tremendous loss. Alex was not just our campaign manager; he was a friend, a confidant, and a pillar of our team.”

A hush fell over the campaigners as they listened, some nodding in agreement, others wiping away tears.

“But we must remember,” Marnie continued, her voice rising, “Alex believed in what we are doing here. He worked tirelessly for this campaign because he believed in a better future for our community.”

She paused, letting her words sink in. “In his memory, let’s honor his dedication. Take the time you need to grieve, but let’s also carry forward his passion. We owe it to Alex to make this the best campaign ever!”

Applause broke out, a mixture of respect for Alex and admiration for Marnie’s leadership.

Sam took that as his cue to leave.

“I don’t think we learned very much in there,” Jo said as they got into the Tahoe. “What did you think of Marnie’s reaction?”

“She acted upset, but it seemed just that—an act,” Sam observed, squinting thoughtfully.

Jo nodded, her expression mirroring Sam’s skepticism. “Yeah, she didn’t miss a beat before turning it into a campaign rally. No doubt she’s not letting anything slow down her run for mayor.”

“She’s a politician through and through,” Sam mused, his mind already turning over the day’s events. “But we can’t rule out anything or anyone yet. This is just the start.”

CHAPTER FOUR

After leaving Marnie's campaign headquarters, Sam and Jo went back to the station.

Reese was sitting at the reception desk, looking exceptionally pleased with herself. "I managed to sort out that issue with Nettie and Rita over the phone," she said, beaming, a hint of pride in her voice.

"What was it this time?" Jo asked with a smile. The police department was always fielding calls from Nettie Deardorff and Rita Hoelscher. If it wasn't Nettie complaining about Rita's goat, Bitsy, it was Rita complaining about Nettie's chicken. Jo thought they just wanted attention, but the department always responded to each call.

"Nettie said that Bitsy is a peeping Tom. She said she might not have known, but there were hoofprints in the snow under her window." Reese shook her head. "I told her that we'd talk to Rita. That seemed to appease her."

Sam laughed. "Keep it up, and you'll be an officer in no time."

"And if you're lucky, one of them will send you a fruitcake," Jo added as she headed toward the squad room.

Major was in his usual spot atop a filing cabinet. He regarded both Jo and Sam with a disdainful hiss as they entered.

"Looks like Major's in a foul mood today," Jo said.

But Major's mood seemed to soften as Lucy trotted in. The cat eyed her calmly.

Sam, Jo, and Wyatt exchanged raised-brow looks. "Guess Major's mood doesn't extend to Lucy."

"Where's Kevin?" Sam glanced around.

Wyatt answered, still typing away. "Went to Golden View. That's the assisted-living place where Frank Milson lived. Should be back any minute.

Jo made coffees, and Kevin came in just as she was finishing.

"Hey, everyone." Kevin accepted the coffee that Jo was holding out. "Thanks. Did you guys find anything out at the campaign office?"

Wyatt stopped typing and looked up to hear the response.

Kevin pulled his chair out into the center of the room, settling into it with a purposeful air, while Sam leaned against the edge of the desk. Lucy made herself comfortable in the stream of sunlight that came from the tall windows.

Jo had settled behind her desk. "At the campaign headquarters, people seemed shocked about Alex's death."

Kevin leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, his attention fixed on Jo. "Do you think that was genuine for everyone?"

Jo shrugged and started tapping the eraser end of her pencil against the smooth surface of her desk. "Hard to tell. There were a lot of people there, and I couldn't study everyone at the same time."

Sam sipped his coffee then added, “Someone there was making a call, though. I think they alerted Marnie. She said she was informed before she arrived. But she acted shocked... emphasis on ‘acted.’” He made air quotes with his fingers to stress his point.

Jo nodded in agreement, her pencil now paused in midair. “Then she turned it into a rally for her cause. Nothing much changes with her.”

Wyatt glanced up from his screen, his expression thoughtful. “Sounds like she’s more concerned about her campaign than the death.”

“Did you expect anything more?” Kevin asked. They all shared a similar opinion of the mayoral candidate, though the current mayor, Henley Jamison, wasn’t much better.

Sam turned to Kevin. “What about you? Wyatt said you went to Golden View. Did you discover anything useful?”

“Everyone there said Alex was a doting grandson. But the cost of that place... They said Alex insisted on the best for Frank. I don’t know if Frank had money that Alex used to pay for it, but they said Alex paid the bills,” Kevin said. “I asked if they noticed anything strange about Alex or anyone he didn’t get along with, but they all said he’d been fine except for his understandable grief over the loss of his grandfather.”

“I’ve been digging online,” Wyatt said. “I doubt Frank had much. His career in the sewer department wouldn’t have left him wealthy, and most of his savings were likely eaten up by his illness. Reese got a warrant for Alex’s bank information, and he had minimal savings.”

“What about the safe deposit box? He had that key, and he could have kept cash in

there,” Jo said.

Wyatt shook his head. “No record of a safety deposit box.”

“Do you think he made a lot as a campaign manager?” Kevin asked.

Wyatt snorted. “Doubtful. Before that, he was an IT consultant at the bank, so maybe he got some good investing advice? I didn’t find any investment portfolio at his bank, though.”

“Maybe his parents have money or one of Frank’s other kids. They could have been paying for Frank’s care,” Sam suggested.

“I’ll dig in and see what I can find,” Wyatt said.

“Did you find out anything else from his social media?” Sam asked.

Wyatt glanced at his screen. “Looks like Alex kept to himself. He had some friends. Lots of pictures of him hiking, snowshoeing, skiing, boating in the summer.”

“That doesn’t sound like a ton to go on. Maybe we’ll find out more at his apartment tomorrow.”

The sound of the door swinging open was accompanied by Reese’s curious and cheerful voice, “Hey! Wow, what have you got there?”

“Pies,” came Bridget’s voice, light and musical, just a moment before she stepped into view. At first glance, no one would have pegged her as Jo’s sister. While both were of a petite build, Bridget sported a short, stylish haircut that matched her vibrant, flowery demeanor. In contrast, Jo’s auburn curls, which fell in longer waves, were usually tucked up under her police cap, her manner more serious and focused on

the tasks at hand.

Bridget stopped a few steps into the room. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything important.”

Jo exhaled, a smile tugging at her lips. “Actually, a break is just what we needed.”

“Good, then,” she said, placing a foil-covered pie plate on Jo’s desk. “Apple pie for your visit to Garvin McDaniels,” she said with a wink.

“You’re bribing your landlord to sell to you with pie?” Wyatt asked.

Jo laughed. “I wouldn’t put it that way, exactly. He’s a lonely old man who doesn’t get any home-cooked food.” Both were true, and Jo did feel empathy for her elderly landlord, but she also wanted to sweeten him up a bit so that he’d decide to sell her the cottage she rented. She’d approached him with an offer previously, but he’d been reluctant to sell.

Jo lifted the foil off and took a whiff.

“That smells delicious.” Kevin craned his neck to see the pie across the room on Jo’s desk.

Lucy must have thought so, too, because she stood, stretched, and sniffed the air.

“Don’t worry, I have one for you all to share too.” With a flourish characteristic of her warm personality, Bridget revealed her next surprise: a ricotta pie with a mouthwatering golden crust and creamy filling. She set it down on the edge of Kevin’s desk.

Reese, who had come in to join them, leaned over the pie. “That looks amazing,

Bridge.”

“Thanks. I made a special one for you since I know you love coconut cream.” Bridget’s smile broadened as she handed it over, acknowledging the friendship that had blossomed between them.

Reese, ever practical, fetched paper plates, and the team gathered around to enjoy the pies.

The atmosphere in the office shifted from the usual high-stakes tension to a lighter, more relaxed mood.

Sam leaned back in a chair and let out a breath. “Well, I guess that was supper.” He patted his stomach.

“Speaking of which.” Reese glanced at her watch and then turned to Bridget. “Do you want to eat at the diner with me tonight?”

“That sounds great.” Bridget smiled, her gaze cutting quickly over to Kevin, who was engrossed in his piece of pie.

Sam wondered what that was about but didn’t ask. He stood and grabbed Lucy’s leash. “We might as well call it a day. Hopefully, we’ll get into Alex’s apartment tomorrow. That might reveal something. Thanks for the pie, Bridget.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Jo's steps crunched on the frostbitten path leading to Garvin McDaniels's house. The air nipped at her cheeks, a harsh whisper of the season's turn.

Garvin's house was remote, surrounded by fields and forest. The old farmhouse had seen better days. Paint was peeling, and a few porch balusters were missing. Yet it looked better than it had the last time Jo had been here. Now that it was blanketed under a blanket of snow, the house seemed to reclaim some of its lost dignity, its weed-infested lawn mercifully hidden from view.

As she drew closer, a knot of apprehension tightened in Jo's stomach. She hoped Garvin wouldn't mind her stopping by. He had refused to sell to her, mentioning that he'd also refused Marnie Wilson, who had expressed interest too. Hopefully, Marnie didn't have something more persuasive than pie.

Jo approached the door and knocked.

Garvin opened the door, his expression shifting from surprise to a warm welcome. "Sergeant Harris, what brings you here?" he asked, his eyes landing on the pie.

"Please call me Jo. I thought you might like some homemade apple pie," Jo said, offering it to him. The scent of the pie seemed to fill the space between them, a symbol of her goodwill.

Garvin accepted the pie, a smile touching his lips. "Thank you, Jo. That's very kind of you. Please come in."

In Garvin McDaniels's modest living room, Jo settled into an armchair, its fabric worn from years of use. The room was a capsule of memories, the furniture holding the imprints of a family's history. On the walls, photographs in faded frames told stories of joyous gatherings, holidays, and milestones. Each image was a window into Garvin's past, a life rich with moments now frozen in time.

Garvin, sitting across from her, gestured toward one of the photos. "That's my Essie," he said, his voice carrying a mix of pride and lingering sorrow. "She's been gone five years, but it feels like just yesterday."

Jo followed his gaze to the photograph, noting the way Essie's laughter seemed to echo through time. "How long were you married?" she asked softly, her voice respectful in the hallowed space of Garvin's memories.

"Would have been fifty years this spring," Garvin replied. His voice, tinged with sadness, barely rose above a whisper, as if speaking too loudly might disturb the delicate balance of the past and present.

"Do you have kids?" Jo inquired, her curiosity gentle but genuine.

Garvin nodded. "Yes, but they live far away. Got their own lives." His glance drifted, momentarily lost in thoughts of distance and time. Then he suddenly brightened, his eyes lighting up with a new thought. "How about some pie?" he offered, a hint of enthusiasm creeping into his voice.

Jo had initially planned not to stay long, but observing his lifted spirits at the prospect of sharing the pie, she decided to stay. It was clear he could use the company.

Garvin carefully pulled out china dessert dishes from the cabinet, his best, no doubt reserved for special occasions. Together, they moved to the kitchen table, a sturdy, well-used piece surrounded by chairs that bore the patina of many years.

Jo sensed the depth of his loneliness, his attachment to the cottage now more understandable. It was more than a building; it was a vessel of memories, of a life he had shared with his wife.

Garvin cut two pieces of pie and slid a plate in front of her. “Coffee?”

“That would be great. Black is fine.”

Garvin made the coffee, and they both dug into the pie.

“Lordy, this is delicious.” Garvin dug his fork into the golden sugar-sprinkled crust. “Been a while since I had anything homemade.”

“My sister made it. She’s getting to be an excellent cook. That’s sort of one of the reasons I want to buy the cottage,” Jo ventured.

Garvin’s eyes narrowed, and for a moment, Jo wondered if she’d crossed the line, but then, he smiled. “Tell me more about why you want to own that property.”

“I’ve really made it my own, you know,” she began, her eyes brightening with enthusiasm. “I’ve picked up furniture from yard sales. Each piece has its own story and was bought to fit in a specific place in the cottage.”

Garvin listened, a gentle smile playing on his lips as he took a bite of the pie. “Sounds like you’ve put a lot of work into it.”

Jo nodded, gesturing animatedly as she described her efforts. “And the porch! I’ve put up window boxes full of flowers. You should come by and see them in summer.” Her voice softened, a wistful tone creeping in. “It’s quiet, serene. The stream out back adds just that right touch on quiet nights. And it’s the perfect size for me.”

Garvin's eyes followed her gestures, his expression one of understanding. "I haven't been there in a long time, but it is a nice spot, that's for sure."

Jo's gaze drifted, picturing her cherished space. "It's become more than just a house to me. And now, with my sister staying, it's even more important. It's our sanctuary, a place that truly feels like ours. There's even a stray kitten in the woods we've been feeding."

Garvin frowned, and Jo, remembering his strict rule about not having pets, hurried to say, "But don't worry, we're not having it inside or anything."

Garvin nodded thoughtfully, absorbing her words. His smile was warm but held a hint of reluctance. "I can see why you love it so much," he admitted. "But I still don't know about selling. It's a big decision."

Jo reached out and touched his arm. "I understand. Don't worry. I'm not going to pressure you. I have enjoyed talking to you, though."

"Does that mean you'll stop by again?" Garvin looked hopeful.

"I sure will. Maybe next time, I'll even bring dinner."

After leaving Garvin's house, Jo returned home, her thoughts still lingering on their conversation. Pulling into the driveway of the cottage always made her feel good. The yard was covered in a twinkling blanket of snow. Bridget had put white fairy lights along the porch and shrubs, which made the place look even more cozy. Snow glistened on the boughs of the stately pines in the forest behind the house.

Pickles, the marmalade-striped stray cat they'd been feeding, was on the porch. He lay curled up in the box they had set up for him, now lined with blankets to ward off the chill. Despite the cold, Pickles remained steadfast in his reluctance to venture

inside the house.

“Hey there, Pickles,” Jo murmured, reaching out to gently stroke his fur.

The cat, in response, leaned into her touch, his purring a soft, comforting sound in the quiet evening.

“Don’t worry, buddy. Garvin’s warming up to the idea,” she whispered, half to Pickles, half to herself, harboring hope for her purchase of the cottage.

Bridget was in the kitchen. Jo smelled something delicious cooking as usual.

“How did it go with Garvin?” Bridget asked, eager for an update.

Jo shrugged off her coat, settling down at the kitchen table. “It went well, I think. He’s still undecided about selling, but I feel like we made a connection. Gave him the pie, talked about the cottage. He’s considering it. What are you cooking? It smells fantastic.”

Bridget turned from the stove, a plate in hand. “I know you’ve had a long day, so I made you some stuffed peppers,” she announced, placing the dish in front of Jo. The peppers were beautifully prepared, their vibrant red skins slightly charred from the oven, stuffed to the brim with a savory mixture of seasoned ground meat, rice, and herbs. Steam rose from them, carrying with it the mouth-watering scent of garlic and tomato.

Jo looked at the dish, her stomach rumbling despite the fact that she wasn’t particularly hungry. “This looks amazing, but you really don’t have to go to all this trouble, especially since you already ate.”

Bridget waved away Jo’s protests with a smile. “I enjoy doing it, and I want to make

sure you're well fed. Consider it a thank-you for letting me stay here."

Jo took a bite of the stuffed pepper, the flavors bursting on her tongue, a perfect blend of spice and comfort. It was a simple yet profound reminder of the care and love that Bridget brought into their home.

"How was your dinner with Reese?" Jo asked again, eager to hear about Bridget's evening.

"It was great. She's such a nice person,"

Jo nodded her agreement, her mouth too full to talk.

"She suggested I take this pastry certificate course at the college." Bridget looked up at Jo, seeking her opinion.

Jo smiled, her heart swelling with pride. "I think that's a fantastic idea. You have such a talent for baking. And cooking." She held up her forkful of stuffed pepper.

Bridget's smile broadened. "I'm seriously considering it. I can't keep relying on you forever. It's time I stood on my own two feet, and maybe I'll get a job in the culinary field."

Jo reached out, touching Bridget's hand gently. "You're not a burden, you know. But I support you, whatever you decide."

"Thanks. Oh, I fed Finn."

Jo glanced toward the fish tank in the living room. Finn, her goldfish, swam back and forth amid the air bubbles drifting toward the surface. "Thanks."

They talked a bit about their day, and then the conversation shifted to a more somber topic. Bridget's expression turned serious. "Holden called earlier. They've found five bodies at the Webster residence. They'd been there a long time. None of them are Tammy, though."

Jo's heart skipped a beat at the mention of their sister, who had been abducted when she was a child. They'd recently caught the killer after decades of searching and discovered where all the victims were buried. They'd given DNA samples to the FBI, hoping for a match that might bring closure to their family's long-held agony.

"That's... both relieving and heartbreaking," Jo murmured, a mix of emotions swirling within her.

Bridget nodded solemnly. "He said some of the families might finally get closure. But there are a few they can't identify yet. It's tragic, thinking about those lost children. How can it be that no one knows they are missing?"

Bridget methodically cleared the dinner table, surrounded by the comforting hum of the kitchen appliances. The plates clinked as she stacked them, her movements efficient and practiced. Wrapping up some leftovers, she thought of Pickles on the porch. Providing for him had become a small but significant part of her daily routine, instilling a sense of purpose and connection in her new life.

Stepping into the chilly night, Bridget carried a plate of food to Pickles, who was still nestled in his makeshift shelter. The cat, recognizing her presence, looked up with cautious amber eyes. "Here you go," she murmured softly, setting the plate down. The cold air bit at her skin, but caring for Pickles filled her with a warm sense of responsibility.

Kneeling beside the box, she gently stroked Pickles's fur. "You know, winter's coming," she said thoughtfully. "Maybe think about coming inside? But if not, I'll

make sure you're warm and fed." Her words, meant for Pickles, echoed her own longing for safety and comfort, a subtle reminder of her need for a secure haven.

As she stood, her gaze drifted into the dark night beyond the porch. Memories of her tumultuous past surfaced, contrasting starkly with the tranquility she had found living with Jo. The darkness seemed to hold both fears and possibilities.

A shiver ran through her, not from the night's cold but from a lingering fear. She'd recently thought she'd seen someone following her—a shadow from her past that she hadn't mentioned to Jo. This person knew things that Bridget didn't want anyone to discover.

"Maybe it was just my imagination," she whispered into the night, trying to dismiss her fears. The possibility of her past catching up with her loomed in her mind, unsettling her newfound peace.

Resolutely, Bridget stood taller, a determined glint in her eyes. She was building a new future here, one she was fiercely determined to protect. Maybe she would have to take steps to guard herself. Just as a precaution. Fear would no longer dictate her life. She was prepared to do whatever she needed to secure her future.

CHAPTER SIX

Sam and Lucy arrived at the White Rock Police Department early the next morning. They met Reese coming out of the door with a trash bag. Lucy sniffed the bag and then backed away.

“What’s in there?” Sam asked.

“Litter box cleanout.” Reese wrinkled her nose.

“Oh, right.” Sam made a mental note to show his appreciation for Reese more. She did a lot of the little things that kept the station running, and she would be missed when she graduated from the academy. Sam had been lobbying to add an additional position so he could hire her, but so far, no luck.

Jo was already there, poring over some files at her desk. Wyatt was tapping away at his computer, looking unusually serious. Kevin was at the filing cabinet, filing something. Major looked down with his luminescent gaze as if mentally trying to direct Kevin as to where to put the file.

“Just got the ME report from John.” Wyatt tapped his computer screen. “Alex had water in his lungs. Cause of death is drowning, but that’s not all.”

Jo leaned in, her eyes narrowing. “What else did they find?”

“Alex had alcohol in his blood,” Wyatt continued, “and also temazepam.”

Kevin frowned. “Temazepam? Isn’t that a sedative?”

Wyatt nodded. “Yes, and Alex didn’t have a prescription for it. Someone probably drugged him.”

Sam rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe someone slipped that into his drinks at the bar.”

Jo nodded. “He might have been unconscious or too drugged to help himself when he drowned.”

“It increasingly looks like homicide,” Sam concluded, his tone resolute.

Reese poked her head into the squad room. “Chief, I just got a call from Alex’s landlord. He’s okay with us checking the apartment and will meet you there in half an hour.”

“Great,” Sam said. “Let’s head out.”

Alex’s apartment was a short ride from the police station. The building manager, a tall man with a hawkish gaze and stiff posture, met them at the entrance. His eyes followed their every move, and he stayed close to the door as if guarding a secret.

As they entered the apartment, a faint smell of lemon-scented cleaner hung in the air. Lucy padded ahead, her nose twitching as she sniffed around the unfamiliar environment. The team moved with quiet efficiency, each step deliberate, their expressions a blend of professional focus and empathetic awareness.

The apartment’s stillness was eerie. Every surface was clean, every item in its place, creating an atmosphere that was strangely unsettling in its perfection.

The weight of their responsibility sat heavily on Sam's shoulders. It was his job to get answers for the grieving parents, and he intended to do so.

"Let's split up," he directed, his voice low but commanding.

The team nodded, each member already knowing their role in this choreographed dance of investigation.

Sam headed to the bedroom, his shoes making a faint sound on the polished wooden floor. The room was as meticulously arranged as the rest of the apartment, the bed made with military precision, the closet doors closed.

As he opened the closet, a faint scent of cologne wafted out, a lingering hint of Alex's presence. Sam scanned the neatly hung clothes, a mix of professional and casual wear, all arranged by color and style. The precision spoke of a controlled, orderly personality.

He then moved to the desk, a clean workspace with a laptop, neatly stacked papers, and a few pens lined up parallel to the keyboard. "Everything's so organized," he muttered to himself. He flipped through the papers, searching for anything out of the ordinary. Each document was filed, labeled, a testament to Alex's meticulous nature.

Jo appeared in the bedroom doorway, her sharp hazel eyes taking in everything in one glance.

"I don't see anything out of place," she said. "The whole apartment is spotless. I bagged up the laptop for Wyatt to check out, but if someone had a reason to kill Alex, there's no evidence of it here."

Sam nodded, his jaw tightening. He didn't know what he'd been expecting to find, but there was little here to tell them about Alex's final day.

“Let’s go see if Kevin’s found anything,” Jo suggested.

They found Kevin in the second bedroom, focused intently on an open cardboard box on the floor. He held up a small photo, the colors faded with age.

“This fell out of this book.” Kevin lifted a heavy bible. “Looks like the box is from Frank Milson.”

Sam stepped closer, examining the old photo. Two men in their thirties sat at a table with paperwork in front of them. He imagined one of them must be the grandfather, Frank Milson. Frank had been a sewer worker, so he was probably the guy in the suit that was a little too large. The other man’s suit was more tailored. Sam wondered what they were discussing. A business venture?

Sam put the photo down and glanced into the box. It looked like a regular box of personal items. Books, a few pictures, some trinkets. Remembering Kevin’s earlier report about the costly monthly fees at Golden Pines, he said, “Maybe we’ll find something enlightening in here. Let’s bring it in for evidence.”

Just then, Lucy let out a sharp warning bark from the living room.

The team exchanged glances, immediately on alert. Jo rested her hand casually on her holstered gun as they headed toward the sound. Sam felt the familiar spike of adrenaline, his senses heightened.

They hurried into the living room, following Lucy’s insistent barks. She was pawing aggressively at the large area rug in the center of the room, her nails scratching at the fibers.

“What is it, girl? What do you see?” Sam knelt, examining the spot on which she was focused.

Lucy whined and barked again, nosing at the edge of the rug.

“I think she’s found something under there,” said Jo.

The landlord appeared in the doorway, his face pinched with irritation. “Now listen here, I won’t have you damaging my floors. This building is old, and these floors are hard to replace. If you start ripping up those boards, you’ll pay to have ’em fixed.”

Sam shot him a hard look. “This is police business. We’re investigating a homicide.”

The landlord pressed his lips together but refrained from making further complaints.

Sam stood and motioned for Kevin to help him. Together, they grasped the corner of the heavy rug and dragged it aside, revealing the weathered hardwood floor beneath.

Lucy immediately began pawing at one of the boards, her nails scraping urgently.

Jo knelt, examining the board closely. “This one looks loose,” she said. Carefully, she worked her fingers around the edges, wiggling it. With a soft pop, the board came free.

Beneath was a shallow compartment, a space between the hardwood floor and the subfloor. Sam shined his flashlight inside. “Well, I’ll be,” he muttered. “There’s a compartment in here. Let’s get these other boards up.”

The boards on either side came up easily. Reaching in, he grasped the handle of a small suitcase tucked inside. He hauled it out, resting it on the floor as they gathered around. It was vintage looking, made of worn brown leather with brass clasps. It was heavy, as if containing something substantial.

He tried the clasps, but they held fast. Locked tight.

Kevin peered at the locks. “Looks like it takes a small key like the one you found in Alex’s pocket, Jo.”

“Or we could just break into it,” Jo suggested.

“We can’t damage it. It could be evidence,” Sam said. “Let’s get this back to the station and get the key out of evidence. Then we’ll see what’s inside.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

“What’s the deal with the suitcase?” Reese asked as they rushed into the station.

“It was tucked away under Alex Sheridan’s apartment floorboards,” Sam said, his mind already sifting through the possibilities of what the case could hold. “Lucy alerted us to it.”

“Good girl.” Reese petted Lucy, who wagged her tail in excitement.

“We think the key we found in his pocket might open it,” Jo said as they all hurried into the squad room.

“I’ll go grab it from the evidence room.” Reese headed toward the closet in which they kept evidence for active cases. Once the cases were closed or inactive, they transferred evidence to a bigger facility in another town.

Kevin placed the suitcase on the nearest desk with a thud, and they all gathered around.

“Did I hear you say you found it under the floor?” Wyatt got up from his desk and joined them.

“Yep.” Jo turned to him. “We also got his computer for you to sift through. It’s still out in the Tahoe.”

Major hopped onto the deck, sniffing around the suitcase as if doing his own

investigation. His sleek black fur looked silky, like he'd just been brushed. Probably Reese, Sam thought.

"Looks like Major knows enough not to touch the suitcase," Kevin said. "Wouldn't want him to mess up any prints."

Lucy came over to the side of the desk and sniffed the lock, too, her nose only a few centimeters from Major's. Sam braced for a fight, but the two animals simply sniffed and then exchanged some sort of look. Were they communicating? Sam had no idea, but at least they weren't battling each other.

"Got it!" Reese came running into the room, and her gloved hand pressed the key into Sam's gloved hand.

Sam put the key in the lock.

Click!

Sam opened the suitcase, and everyone peered inside.

"What the..." Jo gasped.

"Holy smokes," Wyatt said.

Reese let out a low whistle.

"Well, maybe that explains how Alex could afford the expensive assisted living for his grandfather," Kevin said.

"And possibly why someone would want to kill him," Sam said.

Nestled in the worn blue lining of the suitcase were huge stacks of hundred-dollar bills.

“That’s a lot of cash,” Reese said.

Kevin put on gloves and grabbed a stack of bills and rifled through them. “All hundreds. This stack alone is ten grand.”

“How many stacks do you think are in there?” Jo asked.

Wyatt tilted his head, scrutinizing the suitcase. “I’d estimate around fifty stacks. Maybe more.”

Reese let out another whistle. “Fifty stacks of hundred-dollar bills? That’s...” She trailed off, clearly doing some mental math.

“Five million,” Wyatt supplied. “If there are fifty stacks of hundred-dollar bills, with one hundred bills per stack, that’s fifty thousand bills. At one hundred dollars each, that’s five million dollars.”

“Over five mil in cash just casually stashed under the floorboards,” Kevin murmured in disbelief. “What was Alex Sheridan up to?”

“And why was it in this old suitcase?” Jo asked.

Sam nodded. “Good questions. We need to trace the origins of this money before we jump to any conclusions. Wyatt, run the serial numbers on some of these bills and see if anything pops up.”

Wyatt nodded, grabbing a stack and heading to his computer. The others watched in tense silence as Wyatt typed rapidly, cross-referencing the serial numbers against law

enforcement databases.

After a few minutes, Wyatt swiveled his chair around. “Well, this is interesting. I traced one of the hundreds back to a bank robbery at the old White Rock Bank and Trust fifty years ago. The corner branch on Main that’s now a florist.”

Jo’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “A fifty-year-old bank heist? Alex Sheridan wasn’t even born yet.”

Kevin’s left brow quirked up. “Frank Milson was.”

“Is there a record of how much was stolen from that bank?” Sam asked. “I don’t remember anyone ever talking about it, but that was way before my time.”

Wyatt nodded. “Yup. The reports show a little over ten million dollars was taken. The robbers were never caught, and only a fraction of the cash was ever recovered.”

Kevin shook his head. “And now, all these years later, we find some of the missing money hidden under the floorboards of Alex Sheridan’s apartment. This case just got very interesting.”

“You can say that again.” Sam gestured to the money. “Reese, log this into evidence. Wyatt, contact the archives and pull the case files on that old White Rock Bank robbery. We need more details. I want to know everything about that heist and who was involved.”

“Did you say the White Rock Bank robbery? That was one of my old cases,” Harry Woolsten said, appearing behind them.

Lucy bounded over to Harry, tail wagging. He chuckled and gave her a good scratch behind the ears.

“Hey there, girl,” Harry said. He looked up at the others. “That bank job was one of the biggest cases we ever had around these parts. Strange, since heists like that usually happen in the big city, where there’s more money to grab. But I suppose the appeal to those thieves was that our small-town force wouldn’t have the resources to catch them.”

Sam tilted his head. “Really? I never heard anything about it.”

“The hubbub had died down years before you were old enough to pay attention to these things. It was a real mess, though,” Harry said, shaking his head. “Those crooks created one heck of a distraction by setting off an explosion near the records room next to the vault in the bank. Blew the whole thing to smithereens.”

“An explosion as a distraction, huh?” Kevin murmured. “Clever tactic.”

“Yup. Blew the vault wide open for ’em too,” Harry continued. “Then, the masked thieves made their escape on a helicopter that landed right on the roof! Darndest thing. Never did find that chopper or those crooks.”

“And now, fifty years later, we’ve got a suitcase full of cash from that robbery right here.” Sam gestured to the money lined up on the desk.

Harry whistled appreciatively. “Well, ain’t that something. My first big case, coming back around full circle.”

“You must have been new to the force. Must have been tough handling such a major crime,” Kevin said.

“You bet it was. I was just in my late twenties. My boss was a real piece of work too. Guy named Dominic Hartman,” Harry said, shaking his head. “He and I did not see eye to eye, I’ll tell ya that much. Always butting heads. In my opinion, Hartman did a

lousy job investigating that case.”

Sam raised an eyebrow. “Is that so?”

“Oh yeah. Rushed through everything, didn’t follow up on leads. Just wanted it wrapped up as quick as he could,” Harry said. “In fact, we did end up finding a duffel bag of the stolen cash a few months later. It was in the woods. Looked like it had fallen out of that escape copter or something. But ol’ Hartman didn’t think it was worth the effort to keep digging.”

Kevin and Jo shared a look. “Interesting,” Kevin said. “Maybe there’s more to uncover here after all this time.”

“Could be.” Harry nodded. “Sure wish I’d handled things differently back then. But you know how it is, being the new guy. Didn’t have much choice but to go along with the boss.”

“Well, maybe we can use your help now,” Sam said. “Reese, get Harry copies of those old case files on the heist. Let’s see if his years of experience shed any light on this.”

“You got it, Chief,” Reese said, already heading off.

The look of excitement on Harry’s face brightened Sam’s mood. He wouldn’t have Harry go out in the field or get into danger, not after what had happened before, but there was no harm in letting the old guy read over some files. Maybe Harry would remember something important. Sam had a soft spot for Harry, who had been the chief of police before him, and loved seeing the gleam in his eye when Sam asked him to consult on cases.

Sam clapped Harry on the back and headed to his office. He needed some thinking

time to come up with a plan. Was the money the thing that had gotten Alex killed, or was that just a coincidence? And if it was the money, why hadn't the killer taken it?

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kevin scrolled through the digitized case files on his computer, the click of the mouse echoing in the quiet squad room. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed Jo staring blankly at her monitor, tapping a pencil in a rhythmic beat. Wyatt's rapid keystrokes filled the background as he typed away on some task. Harry sat at one of the empty desks, a look of concentration on his face as he flipped through the paperwork on the old robbery that Reese had given him.

Kevin was grateful no one was paying attention to what he was researching. With the vintage suitcase of cash found in Alex Sheridan's apartment, he now had a valid reason to access the cold case records to find out more about the decades-old unsolved bank robbery case that was likely the source of the money. But Kevin had an ulterior motive: a chance to follow up on the old narcotics case that had held the password that unlocked the thumb drive found among his belongings when he had been hospitalized last year.

The thumb drive had contained information that led them to a serial killer's burial ground. Kevin still couldn't remember how he obtained the thumb drive or what had led him to think he would find the password in that old notebook that was part of the evidence in the narcotics case. But he had, and he'd taken the information from that case without authorization. If anyone found out, it could cost him his reinstated position with the White Rock Police Department.

But now that he was the only one that knew there could be a connection, the duty to figure out why lay heavy on his shoulders. If only he could find a way to do it and not let anyone know about his indiscretion.

So far, he had kept his fragmented memory hidden, but he had noticed Jo eyeing him strangely when he occasionally referenced the small notebook he now kept in his pocket to remind him of details he should know. He had to keep up the charade, at least until he figured out what had really happened during those gaps in his recollection.

Kevin continued scrolling through the digitized narcotics case files, skimming for any details that might trigger his spotty memory. Most of it was familiar territory—records of arrests, evidence logs, investigative notes.

There were a few references to Thorne Industries, but Kevin already knew about the company's connection to the case, didn't he? He did remember that they had been cleared of any wrongdoing, though.

Harry sneezed, jolting Kevin's attention from the computer.

"Darn cat." Harry pulled a hanky out of his pocket and blew into it.

Kevin's gaze met Jo's, and she shook her head and rolled her eyes. Kevin smiled and discreetly closed the file on his computer. Accessing that right in the station might not be so smart. It was close quarters.

He opened the file for the old robbery case. Based on the vintage suitcase full of cash they had found hidden under Alex Sheridan's floorboards, it seemed likely the money was from that old heist. But how had Alex gotten connected to it?

As Kevin skimmed through the bank robbery file, something caught his eye. Someone walking their dog had found a duffle bag of money in the woods. It turned out that money had come from the bank. According to the file, the bag appeared to have fallen from a great height. Like maybe out of the helicopter.

The case reminded Kevin about D. B. Cooper, the man who hijacked an airplane and jumped out with a bag of cash. There was no hijacking here, though. So where had the robbers gotten a helicopter? How had the bag fallen out? Was it the only thing that fell out?

The report included pictures of the find and the area around the bag. There was no evidence of a person, no clothing or blood or anything. Just the bag.

The coordinates of where the bag had been found were familiar. Why? Kevin consulted his notebook and sucked in a breath. They were very near the coordinates the thumb drive had pointed to. Right next to the Webster property, where the FBI were right now digging up graves. What a strange coincidence.

Harry slapped the file folder down on the desk. "If I had been lead on this case, we would've found those crooks."

Jo raised an eyebrow. "Oh yeah? What would you have done differently?"

"For starters, I wouldn't have just sat around, waiting for clues to fall in my lap." Harry jabbed a finger at the paperwork. "It's almost like Hartman wanted them to get away with it."

Kevin leaned forward, intrigued. "What makes you say that?"

Harry waved a hand dismissively. "Ah, Hartman was an arrogant SOB. Thought he knew everything. But he barely followed up on any solid leads. Like that bag of money they found in the woods."

"I was just looking at that part of the file," Kevin said. "Were you in on the search?"

Harry nodded. "We searched only for one day. Never found anything else. No tracks,

no clothing, no other money bags. Just the one busted-open bag.”

Jo furrowed her brow. “That is strange. Why only one bag?”

“Exactly!” Harry exclaimed. “The whole thing seemed off to me. But Hartman dismissed it, said we’d found all there was to find.”

Kevin pulled out his notebook, scanning his scribbles. “It looks like the bag was found near the Webster property.”

Harry thought for a moment. “You know, I think it might be pretty close. That land doesn’t belong to the Websters, though. It’s owned by some company...” He snapped his fingers, trying to conjure the name. “Obsidian something. We tried to get info on them but hit a dead end. Probably some shell corporation.”

Sam came out of his office, phone in hand. “That was John Dudley from the ME’s office. He finished the autopsy on Alex Sheridan.”

Wyatt swiveled his chair around. “And? What’s the official cause of death?”

“Drowning,” Sam replied. “They found water in his lungs. Looks like he went into the lake alive.”

“So it was just an accident?” Wyatt asked. “He wandered onto the ice and fell through?”

Sam shook his head. “Not likely. The tox screen showed alcohol and drugs in his system.”

“Alex was an experienced hiker. He wouldn’t mix drinking and drugs before going out on the ice,” Jo said.

“Not to mention the lack of hiking shoes,” Kevin said.

“Right,” Sam agreed. “It points to this not being an accidental drowning.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair. “Someone could have forced the alcohol and drugs on him to knock him out. Then dumped him in the lake to drown.”

“That’d be a pretty cold way to kill someone,” Wyatt said with a frown.

Jo nodded. “Especially in the dead of winter. The frigid water would finish the job quickly.”

“We’ll need to dig more into Alex’s background,” Sam said. “Figure out who might have wanted to get rid of him. The money is an obvious motive.”

“But it might not be the only motive,” Harry said. “That money’s been hidden for fifty years, and no one’s been killed over it. Maybe Alex’s death is about something else.”

Jo crossed her arms. “You know, Alex was managing Marnie Wilson’s campaign. Could be someone from that world who wanted him gone.”

“Political types can certainly play dirty,” Kevin agreed. “We should take a closer look at Wilson and her crew.”

“Did anyone else come up with anything on Alex?” Sam asked, glancing around at the team.

“I checked out his social media,” Jo said, tapping her pen on her notepad. “Doesn’t show much personally. He belonged to a hiking group on Facebook, but there’s no animosity there, at least not about him being executor of Frank’s will.” She flipped a

page. “Oh, and it seems he was pretty into politics, especially his grandfather’s support of Marnie Wilson. That could be why he left his IT job to work on her campaign.”

Sam nodded and turned to Wyatt. “Did you find anything on his computer?”

Wyatt leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head. “Well, Alex was a big gamer, part of some online groups. Bit of a loner in real life, it seems, but he had some pretty high-tech equipment and apps.” Wyatt, a big gamer himself, sounded a little envious.

“Anything on his schedule leading up to his death?” Sam asked.

Wyatt shook his head. “Nope, calendar’s empty the past few days. No appointments or plans logged. I also did a check in the parking lot of his apartment and the campaign headquarters, and his car isn’t in either place.”

“Guess it must be at the murder scene. We need to find it.” Sam turned to Kevin. “Kev?”

Kevin felt a tingle of nervousness, worried Sam would somehow know he had been looking at the old narcotics case file. But he straightened in his chair and flipped open his notebook, pretending to consult his notes. “The money they found in the woods seems odd. It was on a property abutting the Webster farm.”

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance. Hazel Webster was the serial killer they’d arrested not that long ago, and her land was where she’d buried many bodies. In fact, the FBI was up there digging right now.

“I don’t think we should read too much into that. The Webster property is out in the middle of nowhere, and that area is heavily wooded, so it makes sense the getaway helicopter would fly over it,” Sam said.

“We searched back in the day. Never found a thing beyond that one busted money bag.” Harry glanced down at the paperwork. “Though looking at this now, I can see we would have caught the guys if I’d been in charge back then.”

“I bet you would have.” Sam clapped Harry on the back then turned to the rest of them. “We need to figure out what Alex did on his last day. Let’s start at the place he would normally be on a workday. Marnie Wilson’s campaign headquarters.”

CHAPTER NINE

“H arry, I’m not sure you should investigate with us.” Sam looked at Harry as they left the police station and headed down Main Street. Marnie’s campaign headquarters was just a few blocks away, so it made sense to walk.

“I know. I’m just going to visit my girl Marnie.” Harry smiled at Sam, and then his face scrunched up, and he doubled over in a fit of sneezing. “Ugh, that smoke,” Harry sputtered, doubling over in a fit of coughing as the door to the cigar bar swung open.

Sam patted Harry firmly on the back. “You okay there?”

Jo looked on, concern in her eyes. “Deep breaths, Mr. Woolsten.”

Lucy whined softly, nudging Harry’s leg with her nose.

Sam glanced through the haze of smoke wafting from the open doorway. He caught sight of Victor Sorrentino, the Convale public liaison, sitting at a table near the window, smoke wafting out of an ashtray in front of him. Victor gave Sam a curt nod, which Sam returned before the door swung closed again. Sam didn’t much like Victor. He didn’t trust the guy, and he was wary of Convale, the big energy company that loomed at the edge of town, but it was still smart to maintain a cordial relationship.

Harry waved a hand, still coughing slightly. “I’m fine, I’m fine. I’m allergic to cigar smoke. Triggers my asthma.” He took a few more breaths. “Whew. Anyway, as I was saying, Marnie’s got some great ideas for supporting our seniors here in White Rock.

You know she wants to start a community garden at the rec center? And fund more activities and classes at the senior center downtown. She'd make a fine mayor."

Sam nodded absentmindedly as they continued down Main Street.

"Have you decided who you'll endorse yet?" Harry pressed. "Marnie could really use the support of the chief of police."

"I'm still weighing my options," Sam replied. "The election's not for a few more months anyway."

"True, true," Harry conceded. "But if you wait too long, Marnie might not need you anymore!" He let out a chuckle that turned into more coughing.

Jo gave Sam a knowing look. They both knew Sam had no intention of endorsing Marnie, but neither wanted to burst Harry's bubble.

"We'll see, Harry," Sam said diplomatically as Marnie's campaign office came into view. "We'll see."

"Afternoon, folks," Amelia said as Sam, Jo, and Harry entered Marnie's campaign office. She was sitting at the main desk, the one that had belonged to Alex until yesterday. Apparently, she hadn't wasted any time claiming Alex's former position as her own. Her smile seemed a little less inviting today, and her eyes held a glint of wariness.

"Hello, Amelia," Sam replied. "We were hoping to speak with Ms. Wilson about Alex's death and the ongoing investigation."

Amelia frowned slightly. "I'm afraid Marnie isn't in the office currently. Was there something I could help with instead?"

“Well, we had a few questions for the staff,” Sam explained. “Trying to build a timeline of Alex’s last known movements and interactions.”

Harry piped up eagerly, “Say, where is Marnie anyway? She’s usually here this time of day.”

“She had a last-minute speaking engagement added to her schedule,” Amelia said briskly. “I’m sure she’ll want to be fully briefed when she returns.”

“Of course,” Sam said. “To start, we’d like to know if Alex was in the office as usual yesterday. And if anyone saw him or spoke to him later in the day or evening.”

The staffers glanced around at each other uneasily, but no one spoke up.

“Anyone?” Jo prompted. “Anything you can recall would be helpful.”

Finally, a nervous young man with glasses said, “Alex was here yesterday, at least in the morning. We have a staff meeting at ten a.m. every day, and he ran that as usual.”

An older woman with short gray hair chimed in, “That’s right, he was here. Poor boy. He seemed down after losing his grandfather recently, but I never thought... well, it’s just awful.” She dabbed at her eyes with a tissue.

“So no one saw or spoke to him after he left work?” Sam clarified.

Headshakes all around.

“Did he say where he was going after work yesterday?” Jo asked. “Any appointments, errands, plans?”

Again, no one seemed to have any useful information.

Sam surveyed the group. “If any of you do recall something that could help us determine Alex’s movements yesterday, please give me or Sergeant Harris a call.” He handed Amelia his card to pass around the office.

“We’ll do that,” Amelia said briskly, placing the card on the desk in front of her. “Now, if there’s nothing else, we should really get back to work. The election is coming up quickly, and we need to honor Alex by continuing the hard work he started.” Her no-nonsense tone left no room for argument.

“Of course,” Sam said. “We’ll be in touch if we have any other questions.”

He and Jo turned to leave, Harry shuffling out behind them.

“Well, that was a bust,” Jo muttered as they stepped outside. “No one seems to know anything useful about what Alex was up to yesterday.”

“Or no one wants to say,” Sam said grimly. “We’ll keep digging.”

He glanced back through the glass door at Amelia, who had already returned her attention to her computer screen, fingers clicking rapidly across the keyboard.

Sam, Jo, and Harry continued down Main Street, away from Marnie’s campaign headquarters.

“Hey!” a voice called from the narrow alley between the hardware store and the bakery. “Chief Mason!”

Sam turned to see a young woman peering out from the alley. She was one of the campaign staff, though he couldn’t recall her name at the moment.

“I’m glad I caught you,” she said, glancing around furtively. “Can we talk for a

minute?”

Sam exchanged a look with Jo, and they changed course, heading for the alley. Harry made to follow, but Sam held up a hand.

“Let’s speak to her alone first,” he said.

Harry harrumphed but stayed put on the sidewalk.

In the semidarkness of the alley, the young woman wrung her hands nervously. “I’m Monica, by the way. I didn’t want to say anything back there, but I saw Alex yesterday evening.”

“Where?” Jo asked intently.

“Here, at the office,” Monica said. “I had to come back to finish up some work. I was just leaving when I heard voices coming from Marnie’s office.”

“Alex and Marnie?” Sam clarified.

Monica nodded. “They were arguing about something. I couldn’t make out details, but it was definitely heated.”

“What time was this?” asked Jo.

“Around seven thirty,” Monica said. “I didn’t want to interrupt, so I just slipped out quietly. I felt weird about it after, you know, hearing them fight like that.”

Sam studied her face. She seemed genuinely uneasy recalling the incident. “Did you hear any of what they said specifically?”

Monica shook her head. “Just raised voices. Sorry I don’t have more details.”

“Did Alex argue with anyone else recently that you know of?” Sam asked.

Monica shook her head. “Not that I ever witnessed.”

“What about Amelia?” Sam said. “They didn’t have any conflicts?”

“No, not really,” Monica replied. “I mean, they disagreed on campaign strategy sometimes, but nothing major.”

Sam nodded. “I noticed Amelia’s already taken over Alex’s desk as campaign manager.”

“Yeah, she got promoted quick,” Monica said uneasily. “I know it sounds awful, but someone has to manage the campaign, and Amelia was eager to step in.”

Monica glanced behind her nervously. Sam realized he probably couldn’t keep her much longer without drawing suspicion.

“Did Amelia know she was next in line for Alex’s job?” he asked.

“Oh yeah, everyone knew that,” Monica said hurriedly. “Anyway, I should get back. Let me know if you need anything else.”

Before Sam could respond, Monica hurried back down the alley, taking the back way to the campaign office.

Sam’s phone chirped. It was Reese.

“Hi, Sam. I tried to call you through the system in the Tahoe.” Reese loved using that

antiquated police radio in the car, but Sam avoided it as much as possible.

“I’m not in the car right now.”

“Oh. Okay. Well, I figured you’d want to know this right away, so I called. They found Alex Sheridan’s car in the parking lot of the Drunken Moose.”

CHAPTER TEN

The gravel parking lot of the Drunken Moose was sparsely populated, and most of the cars were parked close to the entrance except one. A dark-blue sedan sat in the back near the woods. Kevin squatted beside the right front tire, his head tilted to look underneath the car.

“Anything stand out, Kevin?” Sam asked as they approached.

Kevin straightened. “No signs of struggle that I can see. It’s locked up tight. I jimmied the door to take a look inside but didn’t want to mess with it too much before the tow truck gets here.”

Jo walked around to the passenger side, shining her flashlight beam across the interior. “He kept it real neat in here, just like his apartment.”

“Yeah, kinda weirdly clean for a twenty-something guy,” Kevin said.

Lucy circled the car, nose to the ground. She completed two full laps then sat down near Sam, looking up at him and whining softly.

“I guess Lucy’s not catching any interesting scents either,” Sam said, scratching the dog behind her ears. “Good girl, Luce. You did your best.”

Jo peered upward, surveying the vehicle’s position beneath the towering pines. “Why park all the way out here, though? The only lights are up closer to the building, and it must get dark back here at night.”

Sam nodded. “Maybe the lot was full last night when he got here.”

“Or he didn’t want anyone to see his car,” Kevin added.

“Could have been meeting someone secretly,” Jo said.

Sam crossed his arms. “Or doing something he shouldn’t have been.”

Tires crunched on gravel, and all three turned to see the tow truck rolling up.

“I’ll talk to the lab about giving the car a thorough going-over back at the impound lot,” Kevin said.

“Okay.” Sam looked at Jo. “Let’s go inside. Maybe someone will know what Alex was up to in here last night.”

Sam pushed open the heavy wooden door, the familiar smells of stale beer and fried food washing over him as he stepped inside the Drunken Moose. Jo and Lucy followed close behind, Lucy’s nose twitching as she took in the new scents.

The interior was dimly lit, with a long wooden bar running most of the length of the room. A few patrons sat on barstools, nursing beers or watching a basketball game on the TVs mounted above the liquor shelves. In the back corner, the steady clack of pool balls could be heard from the game room.

Sam scanned the space until his eyes landed on the bartender, a burly man in his forties with a bushy beard. “Hey, Pete,” Sam called out with a wave.

Pete looked up from the glass he was wiping and nodded in greeting. “Chief Mason, Sergeant Harris. What brings you in today?”

Jo leaned against the bar. “We just have a few questions about someone who was in here last night—Alex Sheridan. Did you happen to see him?”

“Yeah, I remember Alex coming in,” Pete replied, setting down his rag. “Nice kid. He’d come in sometimes with his grandpa, get food and chat. Real shame what happened.”

Sam nodded solemnly. “So Alex was definitely here last night? What time did he arrive?”

Pete furrowed his brow, thinking. “Must’ve been around eight or so. I didn’t notice him come in, but later on, I saw him sitting in a back booth with a couple of other guys.”

“Back booth, huh?” Jo asked. “Any idea who he was with?”

Shaking his head, Pete said, “Nah, I didn’t recognize ’em. It was busy.”

“How’d he seem?” Sam asked. “Anything off about his behavior?”

“Well, he got pretty lit,” Pete said with a chuckle. “His buddies practically had to help him stand.”

Jo and Sam shared a look.

“Did he leave with them? When did they leave?” Jo asked.

Pete shook his head. “I didn’t see him leave. Place was packed last night. I barely remember even seeing Alex, let alone some random guys. When I saw the car here this morning, I was glad he’d gotten a ride home with someone. Sorry I can’t be more helpful, but I had my hands full here behind the bar.”

“No problem. Thanks for the help,” Sam said. “Anything else comes to mind, give me a call.”

“You got it, Chief.”

Sam turned and headed for the exit, Jo and Lucy on his heels. Pushing out into the crisp afternoon air, Sam paused outside the front door. “So Alex was here getting drunk with some mystery pals,” he mused. “And then what happened?”

“Good question,” Jo added grimly.

Sam looked up at the small camera over the door. “We need to figure out who those ‘friends’ were ASAP, and I think I might know how we can do it.”

“We’d better stop for donuts,” Jo said as they got into the Tahoe. “This case is going to require some brain food.”

Sam started the engine. “Can’t argue with that logic. Brewed Awakening it is.”

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Jo brought up the mystery surrounding Alex’s presence at the bar. “So do you think someone lured Alex to the Drunken Moose, or did he go there to meet up with people?”

“Hard to say at this point,” Sam replied, turning onto Main Street. “Could’ve been a planned meetup or just a chance encounter.”

Jo nodded. “Yeah, no way to know yet. We gotta find the guys he was drinking with.”

“Agreed. Pete didn’t recognize them, so likely not regulars.” Sam slowed for a stop sign. “You think they slipped Alex something?”

“Maybe,” said Jo. “No drugs turned up at his place, so if they did dose him, it was probably just for that night, to incapacitate him.”

Sam turned left toward Brewed Awakening. “Incapacitate him in order to drown him in the lake, make it look accidental.”

“Right.”

Sam pulled up to the window and turned to Jo. “The usual?”

“Yep.”

Lucy poked her head between the two seats as if to say she wanted “the usual” as well.

“Morning, Chief, Jo,” the teenage girl greeted them cheerfully from the drive-thru window.

“Hey, Emily,” Sam replied.

Lucy popped her head further into view and gave a little woof.

“Well, hi there, Lucy!” Emily grinned, leaning down to get a better look at the police dog. “Here for a snack too?”

Lucy’s tail thumped against the seat in response.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Emily laughed. She turned her attention back to Sam and Jo. “So what’ll it be today? The usual dozen with two coffees?”

“You got it,” Sam confirmed.

Jo leaned across Sam. “Can we get three jelly?”

“Of course!” Emily headed off to grab their order.

A minute later, she returned with a large paper bag and two steaming cups of coffee. “Here’s your dozen assorted with three jellies, two black coffees, and...” She held up a small paper bag. “Two donut holes for Lucy.”

Lucy gave an approving woof and wagged her tail excitedly.

“Thanks, Emily,” said Sam, passing her cash through the window.

“No problem. Enjoy!”

“Will do,” Jo replied, grabbing the bag. “I need some brain fuel.”

They pulled away from the drive-thru window and continued toward the station. Jo opened the bag, and the sweet scent of baked goods filled the SUV. She fished out a jelly donut and took a big bite, getting raspberry filling on her cheek.

“Mmm, that hits the spot,” she mumbled through a mouthful.

Sam chuckled and grabbed a napkin, handing it to her. “Try not to get jelly in the police car.”

Lucy let out an impatient huff, eyeing the bag with the donut holes.

“All right, all right, here you go.” Sam passed one back, and Lucy gobbled it up.

“So what’s our next move?” Jo crumpled up her napkin, having polished off the first donut.

“We need to figure out if the money had anything to do with Alex’s death. Who knew he had it? Was he spending more than usual?”

“Good call,” said Jo, nodding. “And we should...” She trailed off, looking back at Lucy.

The dog had sat up and was whimpering softly, claws scratching the window as they drove past a long dirt road.

Sam glanced in the rearview mirror. “Lucy okay back there?”

“She’s scratching at the window, looking down that dirt road to Fish Cove,” said Jo. She watched the dog, whose amber gaze was fixated on the road.

Sam slowed the Tahoe. “Huh, weird. She doesn’t usually react like that.”

“No, she doesn’t,” Jo agreed. “Isn’t that the road that Thorne Industries is building that storage facility on?”

Sam nodded. “Sure is.”

Jo leaned back in her seat. “We should check that out. Why does everything always seem to lead to Thorne?”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Back at the station, the atmosphere buzzed with the urgency of piecing together Alex Sheridan's last night. Sam leaned against one of the desks, arms folded, as Jo perched on the corner with a furrowed brow.

Jo handed around the donut bag, and Wyatt, Kevin, and Reese pulled chairs into the middle of the room.

"So Alex was seen arguing with Marnie in her office." Reese nibbled on a chocolate cruller. "And then he ends up at the Moose later on?"

"Yep." Jo nodded and took a sip of coffee.

Kevin chimed in, scrolling through notes on his tablet. "And these two mystery men had to carry him out because he couldn't walk straight."

"Pete didn't actually see him leave, but he said they were holding him up. John said there were drugs in the tox report, but the question is did Alex take them on his own, or did someone spike his drink?"

"And then the next question is who would do that and why," Jo added.

Above them, Major watched with unblinking eyes from atop the filing cabinet.

"What did Alex do that made someone want him dead?" Kevin glanced at Major and broke off a piece of his donut. He walked cautiously to the cabinet and offered the

piece to Major. “Do cats like donuts?”

Major hissed and swatted at the morsel dismissively. It arced through the air and landed on the floor. Lucy gobbled it up. She chuffed at Major as if they had planned it.

“Guess not,” Kevin muttered.

Sam shifted his gaze from Major’s high perch to his team, each member locked into the rhythm of the investigation. “We need to pin down where Alex went into the water. That’s our primary crime scene.”

Kevin, his face lit by the screen’s glow, looked up. “Currents could have carried him from anywhere. We need to trace it back.”

Reese perked up, a spark in her eyes. “I know someone from the academy who’s an expert in currents and hydrology. She could probably give us an idea about where to start looking based on where Alex ended up.”

“Do it,” Sam said, his voice steady and commanding. “Get her on it as soon as possible.”

Jo stood, brushing crumbs off her jacket. “We also need to find out who Alex was drinking with at the Moose.”

“There was a camera over the front door,” Sam said, remembering the placement from their visit. “Give Judy Glover a call and see if she’ll send us the tapes.”

Jo made a face, a slight twist of her lips betraying her thoughts about the owner of the bar. “Judy’s not exactly a friend of the force, but I’ll see what I can do.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair. “We need to dig into Alex’s finances too. Was he spending more than usual? Did he give anyone a large sum of money?”

Wyatt tapped away at his keyboard. “I’ll look into that. If he was throwing around cash, that might have put a target on his back.”

Sam nodded at Wyatt. “Keep me updated on what you find.”

“I thought of another thing,” Wyatt said. “We’ve checked Alex’s cell phone record, but what about his phone at campaign headquarters? They have landlines there that go through a central switchboard.”

Sam frowned. He hadn’t even thought of that. “That’s a good idea. Can you look into it?”

“I’m on it.” Wyatt’s fingers danced across the keys.

“I’ll talk to Marnie about the argument with Alex,” Sam said, thinking about Marnie Wilson’s calculated demeanor.

“Why wouldn’t she mention something like that?” Reese wondered aloud, frowning.

Sam pursed his lips, weighing the possible reasons. “She might not want to tarnish Alex’s reputation. Or maybe?—”

“She’s hiding something,” Kevin interjected, leaning forward. His chair creaked beneath his shifting weight.

Reese swiveled her head between them. “You think she had something to do with it?”

Before anyone could respond, the squad room door swung open. All eyes snapped

toward the sound, conversation halted.

Reese hopped off her chair. “Can I help you?”

A gruff male voice answered. “Detective Dominic Hartman. I heard you folks have new evidence on an old case I worked.”

Sam’s brow furrowed as Reese ushered the man inside. Hartman was broad-shouldered, his face creased from years on the force.

“This is Detective Hartman,” Reese said, introducing him. “He’s here about an old case he worked.”

Sam rose from his desk, extending his hand. “Chief Sam Mason. What case are you referring to?”

Hartman’s grip was firm as they shook. “The helicopter bank job. Heard some of the stolen cash resurfaced.”

A hush fell over the room. Sam studied the older man, unable to read his expression. Harry thought Hartman had done a shoddy job investigating the case in the first place, so why would he care now? The silence lingered as Sam contemplated Hartman’s motives. Was the detective’s sudden interest an attempt to obscure his mishandling of the original investigation? Sam didn’t want to share too much information with Hartman but thought he might have valuable insights into the case.

“We did recover a large sum,” Sam said carefully. “But we’re still piecing together the details.”

“Mind if I ask where the money turned up?” Hartman’s eyes narrowed slightly.

“Sorry, I can’t say. It’s tied to an ongoing investigation.” Sam’s tone remained even, unyielding.

Hartman nodded slowly, lips pressed into a thin line. “Fair enough.” His gruff voice carried a hint of respect for police protocol.

An uncomfortable silence lingered for a beat before Sam spoke again. “Since you were the lead on the original investigation, is there anything that might help us now? Any loose ends or suspicions you had back then?”

Hartman stroked his jaw, brow furrowed in thought. The team watched him intently, the only sound the ticking of the wall clock.

Finally, Hartman grunted. “There was this guy, Eric Feldman. Worked at the bank.”

Jo perked up at the name. “What about him?”

“We looked into him hard but could never get enough to charge him.” Hartman shook his head slowly. “Just had a feeling about that one, you know?”

Sam nodded, knowing that detective’s gut instinct well. “What made you suspicious of him?”

“Little things, really.” Hartman’s gaze grew distant, drifting back decades. “He acted nervous whenever we brought up the case. Kept changing his story about where he was that day.”

Kevin made a note, pen scratching against paper. “Anything else?”

Hartman snorted humorlessly. “We put a tap on his line for a while, but he must’ve figured it out. Never said anything incriminating on the phone after that.”

The room hung on Hartman's words, everyone picturing the investigation unfolding in their minds.

"So you had him pegged as being involved?" Sam pressed.

Hartman's jaw tightened, a muscle twitching. "Like I said, we could never prove anything concrete."

Reese frowned. "What happened to this Feldman guy?"

A grim look passed over Hartman's weathered face. "Killed himself. Before we could even wrap up the case."

The words settled over the room like a heavy pall. Even if Feldman had been involved with the bank job, he couldn't have anything to do with the Alex Sheridan case.

Hartman turned back toward the door. "I'd appreciate it if you could keep me in the loop if you turn up anything new on that robbery case."

"I'll try," Sam said.

Hartman glanced around the squad room. "Looks a lot better than that dungeon we were in when I was a cop. You guys have a good day."

"Well, that was unexpected," Jo said, leaning back in her chair.

"You think he's just curious about an old case?" Kevin asked, raising an eyebrow.

Sam shook his head. "I don't know. Something doesn't feel right."

“What do you mean?” Reese asked, her brow furrowed.

“Why show up now?” Sam mused, pacing the room. “After all these years?”

“Maybe he just wants closure,” Wyatt suggested, shrugging.

“Or maybe he’s trying to cover his tracks,” Kevin countered, tapping his pen on the desk.

“We need to look into this Feldman guy,” Sam said, his voice firm. “See if there’s anything there.”

“I’ll dig into his background,” Wyatt offered, already typing again.

“Don’t spend too much time on that. Feldman can’t be connected to the Sheridan case. Jo, you and Kevin follow up on those leads from the Moose.”

“On it.” Jo nodded, grabbing her jacket.

“Reese, keep working on those currents and hydrology with your academy friend.”

“You got it, Chief,” Reese said, picking up the phone.

Sam snapped his fingers, and Lucy trotted over to his side. “While you guys are doing that, Lucy and I are going to have a little chat with Marnie Wilson.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sam strode into Marnie Wilson's campaign headquarters, Lucy at his side. Amelia's eyes widened when she saw him.

"Chief Mason!" She glanced nervously at Marnie's office door. "Ms. Wilson is quite busy at the moment."

"I'm sure she can spare a few minutes." Sam's tone left no room for argument.

Staffers gathered around Lucy, cooing and petting her. One hung back, speaking urgently on the phone—the same one who'd done so the first time they'd been there. Sam avoided eye contact with Monica. He didn't want anyone to guess that she'd given him information.

Marnie emerged from her office, a practiced smile on her face. "Chief Mason, what a pleasant surprise. Please, come in."

Sam and Lucy followed her inside, closing the door behind them.

Lucy sat next to Sam, eyeing Marnie warily. The dog didn't seem to like the politician. She probably sensed something humans couldn't sense.

"Are you here to give me your endorsement?" Marnie asked, her voice honey sweet. She perched on the edge of her desk, crossing her legs.

Sam ignored her flirtation. "Why did you lie about the night Alex was killed?"

Marnie's smile faltered. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Someone told us that Alex was in your office that night."

Marnie glanced out the glass office wall into the room. "Who?"

Sam crossed his arms over his chest. "Someone reliable. Is it true?"

"I..." Marnie's composure cracked. "I must have forgotten."

Sam studied Marnie's face. "Forgotten? Or deliberately misled us?"

Marnie slipped off the desk and stepped behind it, putting a barrier between them. "I would never mislead the police, Chief Mason."

"Then why didn't you mention this before?"

"Alex was my campaign manager. He came in here a lot at night." Marnie waved her hand dismissively. "We would go over what happened during the day, discuss whether there was anything I needed to do or pay attention to. All the times blend together. I don't keep track."

"Did you usually argue with him?"

"Never." Marnie shook her head vehemently.

"But the person overheard you arguing that night."

Marnie's brow furrowed. "I don't recall..."

Sam waited, watching her closely.

“Wait, there might have been one argument,” Marnie said slowly, as if the memory was just coming back to her. “But it was nothing. That’s why I forgot about it.”

“What was it about?”

“Campaign strategy.” Marnie shrugged. “Sometimes, we disagreed on the best approach.”

“And that’s all it was? A disagreement about strategy?”

“Of course.” Marnie’s tone turned indignant. “What else would it be?”

Sam held her gaze. “You tell me.”

Sam watched Marnie closely, searching for any signs of deception. Her explanation seemed plausible, but something about it didn’t sit right with him. Lucy’s ears perked up, and she swung her attention to the door just before a knock sounded.

Amelia cracked the door open, an apologetic look on her face. “I’m sorry to disturb you, Ms. Wilson, but Mr. Rickman is on the line. You told me to interrupt no matter what.”

Marnie’s eyes darted to Sam then back to Amelia. “Thank you, Amelia. I’ll take the call in a moment.” She turned to Sam, her smile tight. “Are we done here, Chief Mason?”

“For now. But if you remember anything else about that night... or your argument... it could be important to our investigation.”

Marnie nodded, her fingers tapping on the desk. “Of course. I’ll let you know if I recall anything else.”

Amelia held the door open as Sam and Lucy exited the office. He paused, turning to Amelia. “I have a question for you, if you don’t mind.”

Amelia glanced at Marnie’s office then back at Sam. “Of course, Chief Mason. What can I help you with?”

“Did you ever happen to overhear Ms. Wilson and Alex arguing?”

Amelia’s eyes widened slightly, and she hesitated before answering. “No. Of course not. Why would they argue?”

Sam studied her face, noting the way she avoided direct eye contact. “You worked closely with Alex?”

Amelia nodded, her fingers twisting together. “Sort of. I mean, yeah.”

“Did you notice anything unusual about Alex’s behavior in the weeks leading up to his death?”

“No, not really. Well, maybe he was a little more tense than usual, but I figured it was just the stress of the campaign.” Amelia glanced behind her and then leaned closer. “Alex might not have been the good guy everyone thought he was.”

Sam tried to hide his surprise. “What makes you say that?”

Amelia’s eyes darted away. “I mean, he was kind of secretive. And yeah, he doted on his grandfather, but smoking cigars and drinking with an elderly man is a bit weird, don’t you think?”

Sam frowned. “What are you talking about?”

Amelia shrugged. “Just that maybe there was more to Alex than any of us knew.”

“And what about last night?” Sam asked. “How late did you work?”

“I left at five,” Amelia said. “Alex was still here when I took off.”

“And what did you do after that?”

Amelia looked down at her shoes. “Went straight home. It was a work night, so I went to bed early.”

Sam’s phone pinged. He glanced at it briefly before turning his attention back to Amelia. “Thanks for your time. If you hear anything or remember anything else, please get in touch.”

Amelia nodded, relief evident on her face as Sam turned to leave. Lucy padded along beside him, her nails clicking on the linoleum floor.

As they exited the building, Sam pulled out his phone to read the text more thoroughly. It was from Jo.

Bad news. Glover wants a warrant to hand over the surveillance tapes.

Sam sighed and did an about-face. It looked like he’d be making a trip to the mayor’s office to see if Henley could speed things up.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Sam headed straight to the town hall to see if he could get Mayor Jamison to fast-track the warrant. Jamison wasn't in his office. His assistant pointed Sam toward the campaign office on the other side of town. It was nearly five o'clock. He hoped Henley would still be at campaign headquarters.

Jamison's makeshift campaign HQ was in an old mill building that had been vacant for more than a year. The brick building's weathered exterior was a stark contrast to the sleek campaign posters plastered on the windows. Sam pulled into the gravel parking lot, the Tahoe's tires crunching beneath him. As he approached the door, Lucy at his heels, it swung open, and the pungent aroma of cigars assaulted his nostrils.

Lucy stopped short and let out a low growl.

Victor Sorrentino let the door close. He wasn't smoking a cigar, but the stench clung to him. His polished suit and expensive shoes seemed out of place in the rustic setting.

"Chief Mason." Victor smirked. "Is someone under arrest, or is this just a social call?"

Sam met Victor's gaze, refusing to be intimidated by the man's presence. "Just business as usual with the mayor."

Victor chuckled. "Of course. Well, don't let me keep you."

As Sam made his way inside, he couldn't shake the feeling of unease. Henley had seemed wary of Victor previously. It was one of the reasons Sam had initially preferred Henley over Marnie for mayor. Sam didn't trust Convale or anyone tied to it. But now, with Victor's unexpected appearance at Henley's campaign office, Sam found himself questioning his assumptions.

The interior of the mill was bustling with activity, volunteers and staff members hurrying about with purpose.

Jamison emerged from a back room, a broad smile on his face. "Chief Mason! What brings you here today?" Jamison's face softened as he knelt to greet Lucy, his hand outstretched.

The German Shepherd's tail wagged enthusiastically as she nuzzled Jamison's palm. Sam couldn't help but smile at the interaction. Lucy's instincts about people were rarely wrong, and her affection for Henley was another of the reasons Sam had initially preferred him over Marnie for mayor.

"She's a good girl," Jamison said, standing up and brushing off his slacks. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Sam's expression sobered. "I'm here on official business, Mayor. It's about the Alex Sheridan case."

Jamison's brow furrowed, a flicker of worry crossing his features. He glanced around the bustling room before gesturing toward a closed door. "Let's talk in the conference room."

As they entered the makeshift meeting space, Lucy padded alongside them, her nose twitching as she investigated the unfamiliar surroundings. The room was sparse, with a long folding table and mismatched chairs scattered around it.

Henley closed the door behind them, muffling the chatter from outside. “What do you need, Sam?”

Sam leaned against the table, his arms crossed. “I need a search warrant for the surveillance tapes at the Drunken Moose. Alex was there the night he died, and I believe those tapes could provide crucial evidence.”

Jamison’s shoulders tensed, and he avoided Sam’s gaze. “A search warrant? I don’t know, Sam. I don’t want to call in too many favors with the judge.”

Surprise etched itself onto Sam’s face. “This is a murder investigation, Henley. I thought you’d be more than willing to help.”

Jamison ran a hand through his thinning hair, his eyes darting around the room. “I understand, but... I just don’t want to ruffle any feathers, you know?”

Sam’s instincts prickled at Henley’s reluctance. Something wasn’t adding up. He fixed Henley with a steady gaze, his voice low and serious. “Mayor, I need those tapes. If there’s something you’re not telling me...”

Henley held up his hands in a placating gesture. “No, no. It’s nothing like that. I’ll see what I can do, Sam. I’ll talk to the judge and try to get that warrant expedited for you.”

Sam nodded, his suspicion not entirely abating. “Thank you, Henley. I appreciate it.”

As they exited the conference room, Sam couldn’t shake the feeling that Jamison was hiding something.

As he got into his car, he noticed a text on his phone. Jo and Bridget wanted to meet at Holy Spirits.

“Looks like you’ll have to hold the fort at the station for a bit.” He glanced at Lucy in the rearview mirror. “Try not to get into it with Major, okay?”

Lucy simply stared back at him, but Sam thought he saw a glint of mischief in her eye.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jo and Bridget sat at the bar in Holy Spirits, the repurposed church-turned-drinking establishment. Stained glass windows cast a kaleidoscope of colors across the worn wooden floors, and the lofty ceiling created an airy atmosphere. The bar, with its amazing backdrop of colorful stained-glass windows, was lined with an eclectic mix of liquor bottles and beer taps.

Bridget sipped her soda water, the bubbles fizzing against her glass. Jo nursed a cold beer, the condensation dripping down the bottle.

“I messaged Sam to come by after work,” Jo said, setting her phone on the bar. “Last I heard, he was talking to Henley Jamison, trying to expedite a warrant.”

“It will be great to see him.” Bridget nodded, her eyes sparkling with excitement. “I applied for the pastry chef course. It starts next week!”

Jo grinned, reaching over to squeeze her sister’s hand. “That’s fantastic, Bridge! I’m so proud of you.”

Bridget beamed, her cheeks flushing with pride. “I can’t wait to get started. I’m finally getting my life together.”

“You’re going to be amazing,” Jo said, raising her glass in a toast. “To new beginnings.”

Bridget clinked her glass against Jo’s, the sound echoing through the bar. “To new

beginnings.”

As they sipped their drinks, Jo leaned in toward Bridget. “I’m going to bring Garvin another pie tomorrow, and I was thinking maybe something else too.”

“Like what?”

“I was thinking maybe a home-cooked meal. All the guy eats is peanut butter.”

Bridget’s eyes lit up. “I’d be happy to whip something up. Maybe a hearty casserole or a comforting soup.”

“Sounds perfect. What kind of pie would be good?”

“Blueberry goes perfect with casseroles.” Bridget’s phone pinged, and she looked at it. “That’s Holden. He’s going to swing by. Says he has some information on the Webster case.”

Jo’s eyes grew distant as she reflected on the long journey that had brought her to White Rock. The search for their missing sister, Tammy, had consumed her for years. Now, with the killer caught and the FBI excavating the grounds where she had buried her victims, Jo felt a mix of emotions.

Bridget reached across the bar, her hand resting on Jo’s arm. “When they find Tammy...” Her voice trailed off, the unspoken words hanging heavy in the air.

Jo met her sister’s gaze, a grim understanding passing between them. “It’s going to be hard,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. “Like ripping the wound open all over again.”

Bridget nodded, her eyes glistening with unshed tears. “But it will also bring closure.

We'll finally know what happened to her."

Jo took a deep breath, steadying herself. "You're right. It's just... It's been so long."

"I know," Bridget said, squeezing Jo's arm. "But we'll get through it together." A moment of silence stretched between them before Bridget spoke again. "I was thinking... I'd like to do something special for Kevin. He really went above and beyond to help us with that case."

Jo nodded, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "He did. He saved the day." She paused, studying her sister's face. There was a softness in Bridget's eyes when she spoke of Kevin, a hint of something more than gratitude. Jo decided not to press the issue, at least not now.

Jo's brow furrowed as she turned to Bridget. "You know, as grateful as I am to Kevin, there are still some things that don't quite add up."

Bridget's shoulders tensed. "What do you mean?"

"That thumb drive he had. Where did he get it? And don't you think it's weird that it led straight to the Webster property?"

Bridget's eyes narrowed. "It is kind of weird, but I'm sure it's not anything nefarious. Didn't seem like it was from what I could tell."

Jo decided to let the matter drop, at least for now. "You're probably right. My cop's mind thinks everything is suspicious."

Bridget laughed. "You can say that again."

Jo smiled, eager to change the subject. "So, about doing something special for

Kevin... I have an idea.”

Bridget raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“Why don’t you make a double batch of whatever you’re planning to cook for Garvin? I’m sure Kevin would appreciate a home-cooked meal. He’s a single guy and probably doesn’t get that very often.”

Bridget’s face lit up, a smile spreading across her features. “That’s a great idea! I could make a big batch of that casserole and drop some off at the station.”

Jo nodded, pleased to see her sister’s enthusiasm. “He’d love that. And it would be a nice way to show your appreciation without making a big fuss.”

Jo felt a presence behind her, and her shoulders tensed.

“Evening, ladies,” Sam said, sliding onto the stool next to her. “Mick’s on his way. Said he had to make a quick stop first.”

Mick was Sam’s childhood friend, now a private detective, whom they used sometimes to dig into things that were best done through unofficial channels.

Jo relaxed, taking a sip of her beer. “Don’t sneak up on me like that. I was ready to go for my gun.”

Sam simply raised a brow and ordered his favorite Moosenose beer.

“Anything new?” Jo asked.

“I stopped by Henley’s office and asked him to expedite the warrant for those surveillance tapes,” Sam said, accepting the beer the bartender placed in front of him.

Jo raised an eyebrow. “How’d that go?”

“He said he’d do it, but he seemed a bit hesitant. Not sure what that’s about.”

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t my favorite crime-fighting duo.” Mick appeared behind them, clapping Sam on the shoulder.

Sam chuckled, gesturing for Mick to take a seat. “Glad you could make it.”

Jo leaned in, her voice low. “Wyatt and Kevin were still hard at work when I left, but they’ve probably gone home by now. Reese contacted her friend, so we should have more information tomorrow.”

Sam nodded, his expression growing serious. “Listen, Mick, we need your help with something.”

Mick leaned forward, his eyes glinting with interest. “I’m all ears.”

In hushed tones, Sam and Jo filled Mick in on the details of the case, explaining the potential connection to the decades-old bank robbery. Mick listened intently, his brow furrowing as he processed the information.

“We need you to dig into Eric Feldman’s background,” Jo said, her voice barely above a whisper. “See if you can find anything that might tie him to the robbery or to Alex Sheridan’s death.”

Mick nodded, his expression determined. “I’m on it. I’ll see what I can uncover.”

Sam glanced around. The bar was getting a bit crowded, and he didn’t want anyone to overhear them discussing police cases. “What do you say we get a table? That one in the corner looks good.”

As the group settled into a corner table, Holden Joyce joined them, his expression grim. He slid into the booth next to Mick, his eyes darting around the room to ensure no one was within earshot.

“I’ve got some news from my FBI contacts,” Holden said, his voice low. “They’ve been excavating the Webster property, and they’ve found more bodies.”

Jo’s heart sank, her stomach twisting with dread. “And Tammy?”

Holden shook his head. “They haven’t found a match for the DNA samples you and Bridget provided.”

Bridget’s hand found Jo’s under the table, squeezing it tightly. Jo returned the gesture, drawing strength from her sister’s presence.

“But there’s something else,” Holden continued, his brow furrowing. “Not all the bodies are children. Some are adults.”

A heavy silence settled over the table as they processed this information. Sam was the first to speak, his voice rough with emotion. “What does that mean? Was Hazel Webster killing people of all ages?”

“Or was there another killer?” Mick added, his eyes narrowing.

Holden sighed, running a hand through his hair. “It’s too early to say. The FBI is still processing the scene, trying to identify the victims and determine the cause of death. They think there are more bodies.”

Jo’s mind raced with the implications. If there was another killer, someone who had been working with or alongside Hazel Webster, it meant that the danger might not be over. There could still be someone out there, someone who had escaped justice.

“What does Hazel say?” Jo asked.

Holden shrugged. “She’s acting like she has no idea about any of it.”

“She confessed to us!” Jo said.

“Well, now, she’s playing dumb. Probably trying to get an insanity plea.” Holden sighed.

“What do we do now?” Bridget asked, her voice small.

Holden met her gaze, his expression softening. “The FBI has the resources, expertise, and jurisdiction to deal with this, so we let them handle it. For now.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next morning, Bridget drove into town, mentally checking her grocery list for the shepherd's pie she planned to make for Garvin and Kevin. The thought of cooking for them brought a smile to her face, but it was tinged with worry about her past. She checked her phone one last time, confirming the message from Carl, a friend from her old life who still had connections.

As she pulled into the Roadside Diner's parking lot, Bridget spotted Carl sitting in a booth. She could see even through the window that the diner's walls looked greasy and dirty, the once-gleaming stainless steel counter now dulled and sapped of vibrancy. Fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, casting an unflattering glow over the handful of patrons scattered among peeling vinyl booths.

Bridget hesitated for a moment, questioning her decision, but the need to protect herself and those she cared about propelled her forward. She stepped inside, the bell above the door jingling. She carried a large purse, its contents soon to be altered.

Sliding into the booth across from Carl, Bridget managed a tight smile. She could see the tension on his face, his eyes darting around the diner.

"Hey, Bridge," Carl greeted her, his voice low. "How you doing?"

"Good. You?" Bridget replied, trying to keep her tone casual.

The waitress approached their table, her expression bored. "What can I get you folks?"

"Just coffee for me, please," Bridget answered, her stomach too knotted to consider food.

"Me too." Carl nodded in agreement, and the waitress walked away to fetch their drinks.

Bridget glanced around the diner, ensuring no one was paying attention to them. There was only one other patron, a disheveled man sitting on one of the stools at the counter, his back to them. She reached down, grasping the large purse at her feet. With a subtle movement, she handed it to Carl under the table.

Carl took the purse, his fingers brushing against hers briefly. He unzipped a pocket, retrieving the envelope filled with cash that Bridget had carefully placed inside earlier. In exchange, he slipped a small, cold object into the purse—the gun Bridget had requested.

The waitress returned with their coffees, setting them down on the table. Bridget and Carl thanked her, waiting until she was out of earshot before continuing their conversation.

"So, how's Jackie doing these days?" Bridget asked, sipping her coffee and trying to appear that they were two old friends catching up.

Carl shrugged. "Last I heard, she was still working at that dive bar downtown. You know, the one where we used to hang out?"

Bridget nodded, memories of their past lives flickering through her mind. "Yeah, I remember. Those were some crazy times."

They reminisced about old acquaintances and haunts, their voices low and their laughter forced. The weight of their transaction hung between them, unspoken but

ever present.

"Well, guess I better get going. Nice seeing you." Carl stood and tossed a ten-dollar bill onto the table.

"You too. Thanks." Bridget took another sip of coffee as she watched him walk out. She wanted to wait a few minutes, just in case. She didn't want anyone to notice them leaving at the same time.

A familiar car pulled in. What the heck? Was that Kevin? What was he doing here?

Kevin pulled into the Roadside Diner parking lot, and his brow furrowed as he spotted Bridget through the window. He'd just been to Rita's to pick up a fruitcake, the dense, unappetizing brick now sitting on the passenger seat like a forgotten paperweight. Taking his usual route past the diner, he was surprised to see Bridget there again, and wasn't that the same shady guy he'd passed on the road?

Kevin's mind raced with questions. Was that a boyfriend? No, he hadn't gotten that vibe the last time he saw them together. But why did Bridget keep meeting with him? Kevin hoped she wasn't in trouble. He cared about her, more than he wanted to admit.

As he stepped out of the car, the cold air nipped at his face. He made his way toward the diner entrance, the bell above the door jangling as he pushed it open. The familiar sounds of clinking dishes, sizzling grills, and murmured conversations enveloped him.

Kevin approached Bridget's booth with a grin. "Don't tell me you come here because you like the coffee?"

Bridget made a face. "They do have a mean corn muffin, though."

Kevin laughed as Bridget gestured for him to sit. He slid into the booth across from her. “Was that your friend that I saw you with before that I passed on the road out there?”

Bridget’s smile faltered, a flicker of unease in her hazel eyes. “Yeah, he’s just an old acquaintance.”

Kevin leaned forward, his voice gentle. “If you’re in trouble, you can tell me. I’m here for you.”

She shook her head, shaggy brown hair brushing her freckled cheeks. “I’m not in trouble. Just being careful.”

He nodded, understanding the need for caution all too well. Lowering his voice to a whisper, Kevin said, “I know you noticed I’d misfiled some things at the station. And I know you never mentioned it to anyone.” His blue eyes met hers. “That’s how I know I can trust you. And you can trust me too.”

Bridget’s gaze softened as she squeezed Kevin’s hand. “After what we went through at Hazel Webster’s place, I know I can trust you. If it wasn’t for you, Jo might not even be alive.”

Warmth spread through Kevin’s chest at her words. It felt as if their shared experience and secrets were forging a bond between them, and he liked that.

Bridget’s lips curved into a smile. “That’s why I’m making you a special surprise.”

Kevin chuckled. “I hope it’s not a fruitcake. I already have one of those.”

Bridget laughed, the sound like a bright melody in the dingy diner. “Nope, a casserole. I’m making one for Jo to take to Garvin McDaniels, and I’m going to

double the recipe and make one for you too. I'll bring it to the station tomorrow afternoon."

Kevin's heart swelled with gratitude. Bridget's thoughtfulness touched him deeply. He knew he would protect her, no matter what secrets she held close. Whatever she was up to, he would keep her confidence. But a part of him longed for her to open up, to share the burden she seemed to carry alone.

"Thanks. I never get anything home cooked. I'm sort of a macaroni-and-cheese-in-the-box kind of guy," Kevin said.

"Jo figured you'd appreciate some home cooking. That's why she suggested it when I mentioned I wanted to do something special to thank you for the whole Hazel Webster thing."

The fact that Jo had suggested it and it wasn't something Bridget had thought of dampened his spirits a little. Maybe he was making too much of it. Best to slow down and not read too much into that.

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment, the diner's clatter fading into the background. Kevin wished she would confide in him, but he knew he had to be patient. Bridget would tell him when she was ready.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sam stood by the K-cup coffee brewer, filling his navy-blue-and-white WRPD mug. Major, perched atop the filing cabinet, swiped his paw down every few seconds as if trying to catch the steam rising from the mug.

Lucy snoozed peacefully next to Jo's desk, her tail twitching occasionally. The office hummed with the usual morning bustle.

Kevin strode in, a triumphant grin on his face. "Guess what I've got." He held up a fruitcake double wrapped in plastic wrap.

A collective groan rose from the team. Sam raised an eyebrow. "Rita's fruitcake? Again?"

Kevin chuckled. "Yeah, but that's not all." He produced a white box and placed it on the desk. "I also got some corn muffins."

Jo leaned forward, intrigued. "Corn muffins? Where'd you get those?"

"The Roadside Diner," Kevin replied, opening the box to reveal a dozen golden muffins.

Jo wrinkled her nose. "I didn't know that sleazy diner had anything edible. You actually go there?"

Kevin shrugged, a smile tugging at his lips. "Sometimes. The muffins are pretty

good.”

The team gathered around, each grabbing a muffin and a plate. The sweet, buttery scent mingled with the coffee aroma, creating a cozy atmosphere.

Sam took a bite of his muffin, savoring the gritty texture. He swallowed and cleared his throat. “All right, let’s go over things. Did anyone learn anything new about the case?”

Wyatt sat back behind his desk. “I’ve got a couple of things.” He paused, ensuring he had everyone’s attention. “First, the phone system at Marnie’s headquarters has been switched to go through one number. I can’t tell who made what calls. It looks like Alex used that number along with everyone else.”

Sam furrowed his brow. “Is that normal? Routing all calls through one number?”

Wyatt shook his head. “It seems suspicious, given the circumstances. With Alex’s computer skills from gaming, he could’ve done it easily without anyone knowing. But why would he?”

Reese walked in and grabbed a corn muffin. She leaned against the desk, taking a bite and dropping crumbs, which Lucy promptly hoovered up.

Sam rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe if he didn’t want anyone to know who he was calling?”

Wyatt nodded. “Yeah. The other strange thing is that the phone system change happened just over a week ago.”

Jo’s eyes widened. “That certainly is odd timing.”

Kevin, who had been quietly listening, spoke up. “A week ago? That’s around the time Alex’s grandfather passed away, right?”

Sam nodded. “And just before Alex was found dead.”

The room fell silent, the weight of the new information settling over them. The pieces were starting to come together, but the picture remained unclear.

“I’ll ask Marnie if she had the phones switched for some reason.” Sam took a sip of coffee. “What else?”

Wyatt pinched off a piece of the corn muffin top. “I also looked into the Feldman case. It seems there was some question about whether it was really a suicide.”

Jo leaned forward, her green eyes narrowed. “Why is that?”

Wyatt scrolled through the file on his screen. “It’s just a note in the case. The coroner had some doubts, but it was ultimately ruled a suicide.”

Kevin, who had been quietly mulling over the information, spoke up. “Feldman worked at the bank, right? What if he knew something about the robbery, and someone didn’t want him to tell?”

The room fell quiet as the implications of Kevin’s words sank in.

Jo broke the silence. “So someone murdered him and staged it to look like a suicide, and no one found out?”

Kevin shrugged. “It was a long time ago, and they didn’t have the forensics and modern tools that we have now. Easier to get away with stuff like that back then.”

Sam held up his hand, his expression serious. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. We’ll look into Feldman’s case further, but we can’t jump to conclusions.”

Wyatt nodded, his eyes still glued to the screen. “There is something else interesting about the Feldman case.”

The team looked at him expectantly, bracing themselves for another bombshell.

“The investigating detective for that case was Hartman,” Wyatt revealed, his voice heavy with significance.

“Interesting, but again, I don’t think they had a lot of people to investigate back then, so maybe it’s not as coincidental as it seems.” Sam turned to Reese. “Did you get the warrant for the tapes from the Drunken Moose? Jamison said he’d try to rush it to us.”

Reese shook her head. Her phone beeped in her back pocket. She pulled it out, her eyes scanning the text message. “I didn’t get the warrant yet, but I just got a message from Susan, my hydrologist friend.”

As everyone turned to Reese, eager to hear what she had to say.

“Susan said the currents and where the body ended up point toward it going in somewhere near Fish Cove,” Reese explained, her voice tinged with excitement.

Sam’s eyes widened, and he turned to Jo. “Isn’t that where Lucy made a ruckus when we were in the car?”

Jo nodded, her expression serious. “Yeah, she was really agitated when we passed by that dirt road near Thorne Industries’ new storage facility.”

Sam stood up, grabbing his coat from the back of his chair. “All right, let’s go check it out. Jo, you’re with me. You too, Lucy.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Jo gazed out of the passenger window of the Tahoe as Sam navigated the dirt road winding through the dense pine forest. Thorne Industries' skeletal storage facility loomed ahead, an intrusive presence in the otherwise pristine landscape.

Lucy, perched in the backseat, stared intently at a small path leading down to the water. Her ears stood upright, alert and focused.

Jo glanced at Sam, noticing the furrow in his brow.

"I don't like this," Jo said, gesturing toward the construction site. "Sticks out like a sore thumb."

Sam nodded, his eyes fixed on the road. "I agree. It's a shame to see nature get ruined."

As they drove closer to the water, the road became rockier, and the terrain turned swampy. The Tahoe bounced and jostled, but Sam maintained a steady grip on the wheel.

"This place is so remote," Jo mused, her eyes scanning the surroundings.

"Definitely not a nice beach spot." Sam glanced out over the swampy area that went out about twenty feet before they could see a trickle of open water. "Good place to catch bass, though."

“Also a good place to commit a crime with no witnesses.”

Lucy whined softly, her nose pressed against the window.

Jo reached back and patted her head, trying to soothe the agitated dog. “Easy, girl,” Jo murmured. “We’re going to check it out.”

As they approached the end of the dirt road, Sam pulled the Tahoe to a stop. The construction site stood silent, the steel beams casting long shadows across the ground.

Sam and Jo exited the vehicle. Lucy bounded ahead, her nose to the ground, her tail wagging with purpose. The air was still and heavy, the only sound the crackling of ice.

This part of the lake was swampy, with reeds and humps of grass sticking up from the frozen water.

“Look,” Sam said, pointing to a spot where the brush had been trampled. “Someone’s been here recently.”

Jo nodded, her eyes scanning the area. “And there,” she said, gesturing toward a section of the swamp where the ice had been broken. “Looks like something happened farther out.”

Lucy barked sharply, her ears pricked forward.

They picked their way through the swamp. Here, they could see that farther out, the water was moving enough that ice hadn’t formed.

“That could be where he went in,” Sam said.

Jo surveyed the scene, her mind racing. “If they dragged Alex, he was already incapacitated when they brought him here.”

Sam nodded, his eyes narrowed. “They could have met him at the Moose and slipped something into his drink. Once he passed out, they brought him here and pushed him under the ice.”

“We just need to find solid evidence.” Jo scanned the area for something that might be clear evidence that Alex had been here. She remembered the tears in his orange jacket, but she didn’t see any fabric sticking up on the broken branches. That would have been too much to hope for.

“Let’s see if Lucy can find anything,” Sam said.

Lucy was already familiar with Alex’s scent, since she’d been with them when the body had been pulled from the lake, so she knew just what to do when Sam instructed her to sniff for Alex’s scent.

They watched her zigzag around a path toward the open water. Then she veered off and stopped at something else. She looked back at Sam and Jo and gave a little woof.

“Guess she found something.” Sam and Jo headed toward the dog.

“What is it?” Sam asked, petting Lucy on the head.

Lucy snuffled around a grass clump.

“Feathers?” Jo pointed to a clump of white feathers and then looked up into the sky. “This seems like a good place for ducks, but maybe those aren’t from any of the ducks around here.”

“Alex’s down jacket,” Sam said. He pulled out an evidence bag and began collecting them. “That would explain why the killer didn’t clean them up. They could have spilled out if the jacket got ripped but would look perfectly natural here.”

“Good job, Lucy.” Jo petted Lucy, who wagged her tail.

Sam stood, holding the bag up. “Maybe this is a long shot, but it’s worth a try.”

“If they did drag Alex out here, they would have needed a vehicle to transport him. It’s too remote to carry a body on foot.” Jo’s gaze drifted back toward the construction site.

Lucy’s sharp bark startled Jo. She noticed the dog was no longer beside them. The bark had come from up near the road.

“Looks like Lucy was thinking the same exact thing you were.” Sam headed back up the path.

Lucy was standing on the side of the road, her ears alert and her body rigid, staring intently at something in the dirt.

“Tire tracks.” Jo crouched, examining the tracks, then took out her phone and started snapping photos. “These are recent. And they’re not from any construction vehicles.”

“We need to get Wyatt or Kevin out here to make some casts.”

Sam was about to call the station on his own phone when Lucy’s whine distracted him. He noticed the dog’s gaze fixed on a spot near the tire tracks. Curious, Sam approached and crouched, his eyes widening as he saw a pile of ashes amid an area of tamped-down snow.

“Someone was standing here,” Sam said, his voice low. “Smoking.”

Jo joined him, her brow furrowed. “Maybe assessing the construction.”

Sam shook his head. “Don’t think so. The construction is on the other side of the car. The person was standing facing the swamp.”

Jo’s eyes widened as the realization hit her. “You think the killer stood here and watched Alex’s body sink beneath the ice?”

Sam nodded, his jaw clenched. “That’s cold. Really cold.”

Jo shook her head in disbelief. “Who even smokes cigarettes these days besides Hazel Webster? And she’s in prison.”

Sam leaned closer, examining the ashes. “These aren’t from cigarettes. The ash is too coarse. Too big. This is from a cigar.”

Jo pulled out her phone and began snapping photos of the ashes and the surrounding area. “A cigar smoker? That narrows down our suspect list.”

Sam stood up, brushing the snow from his pants. “And who do we know that’s associated with Thorne Industries and smokes cigars?”

Jo’s eyes met Sam’s, a knowing look passing between them. “Victor Sorrentino.”

Sam pulled out his phone and dialed on speaker. “I’ll call Reese and get someone out here to take a cast of those tire marks. Maybe we’ll get lucky, and they’ll match Victor’s car.”

“Or Beryl’s.” Jo couldn’t help the sarcastic remark.

“Hey, Sam,” Reese answered the phone. “I’m glad you called because I have good news!”

Sam glanced at Jo. “Really? We could use some. What is it?”

“Judge Warner just signed off on your warrant for the surveillance tapes from the Drunken Moose.”

Sam smiled. “That is good news. We’ll be back at the station in ten. Have the paperwork ready.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sam picked up the warrant at the station and drove directly to Judy Glover, who studied it as if she was looking for a loophole. Her sharp eyes scanned the document, her lips pursed in concentration. Sam waited patiently, his hands clasped behind his back.

“This all seems to be in order,” Judy finally said, her tone clipped. She handed the warrant back to Sam with a guarded expression.

Sam had no idea why she didn’t like the cops, but he tried to remain friendly as he accepted the video file. “Thank you for your cooperation, Ms. Glover. This tape could be crucial to our investigation.”

Judy merely nodded, her eyes already drifting back to her computer screen. Sam took that as his cue to leave.

By the time he got back to the station, Kevin had sent the ashes to the lab for analysis along with the feathers to see if they matched those in Alex’s jacket.

Wyatt, who had been sent out to make the tire cast, was also back and hunched over his desk, carefully examining the cast he had made.

“Find anything interesting?” Sam asked, leaning against Wyatt’s desk.

Wyatt looked up, his eyes bright with excitement. “Actually, yeah. Looks like the size of a car tire, so we’re looking for some sort of sedan. I’m running the tread

pattern through our database now to see if we get a match.”

Sam nodded, impressed by Wyatt’s thoroughness. “Good work. Let me know as soon as you find something.”

Sam held up the thumb drive Judy had given him. “Anyone want to watch a really boring movie that hopefully has an exciting ending that helps solve the case?”

Kevin grinned, grabbing his chair and rolling it over. “I’m always up for a good mystery. Let’s see what we’ve got.”

The rest of the team gathered around, their faces illuminated by the glow of Kevin’s computer screen as he inserted the thumb drive and pulled up the video.

At first, the footage was uneventful. People came and went, their backs mostly to the camera. Sam leaned forward, his eyes narrowed in concentration as he tried to spot anyone familiar.

“There’s Alex,” Jo said, pointing at the screen. Sure enough, Alex Sheridan entered the building alone, his head down and his hands shoved into his pockets.

“He’s alone, so he must have been meeting someone there like we thought,” Jo said.

The team watched as more people filtered in and out, none of them recognizable. Sam drummed his fingers on the desk, frustration mounting. Would this video really give them the break they needed?

As the footage neared closing time, a few stragglers exited the building. But there was no sign of Alex.

“Wait, who is that?” Jo asked, leaning closer to the screen.

Kevin paused the video, zooming in on the person in question. The team collectively held their breath as the image sharpened, revealing a woman with wavy honey-blond hair.

“Isn’t that the woman from Marnie’s campaign?” Jo asked.

“Amelia Donovan,” Sam confirmed, his voice grim.

Jo’s brows rose. “She got Alex’s job as campaign manager.”

“You think she killed him for the position?” Kevin asked, his eyebrows raised skeptically.

Sam sighed, leaning back in his chair. “No. And besides, she’s leaving alone. But if she’s not involved, then why lie to us? She said she was at home the night Alex was killed.”

The team exchanged glances, the implications of Amelia’s deception sinking in. If she had lied about her whereabouts, what else could she be hiding?

“I’ll dig into her background, see if I can find anything,” Wyatt said.

As the tape continued to play, Sam suddenly sat up straighter, his eyes narrowing. “There’s another strange thing,” he said, pointing at the screen. “Look there. That’s the bartender locking up.”

Jo leaned in, her brow furrowed. “So? What’s so strange about that?”

“Alex never left the bar,” Sam said grimly.

A heavy silence settled over the room as the team processed this new information. If

Alex had never left the bar, then how had he ended up dead in the lake?

“I planned to have a chat with Marnie about why those phone lines were switched. And while we’re at it, I can find out why Amelia lied,” Sam said.

Kevin raised an eyebrow. “But if Amelia had something to do with it, what about the cigar ashes at the crime scene ?”

Jo nodded thoughtfully. “If it’s tied to Alex’s death, she might not have acted alone.”

“Maybe she smokes cigars,” Wyatt suggested.

Jo frowned. “Could be, but does she have a car that matches the tire tracks? Or maybe those tire tracks are not related.”

“Of course, we need to prove the area where we think he went in is tied to the murder,” Sam said, his mind already racing ahead. “But there’s something else bugging me. That bag of money Harry said they found in the woods back in the day.”

Sam continued, “Harry made it sound like they didn’t search very thoroughly back then. And besides, they didn’t have Lucy. Maybe there’s something there that could help us.” He reached down to give the German Shepherd an affectionate pat.

At the mention of her name, Lucy’s ears perked up, her tail wagging slightly. Major, on the other hand, continued to snore softly atop the filing cabinet.

Wyatt frowned, his fingers flying over his keyboard. “I couldn’t find anything on Obsidian Enterprises, so how could we get permission to search again?”

Jo leaned forward, a mischievous glint in her eye. “Maybe we don’t need permission. The FBI is up there digging already. Who would think a few cops searching would be

out of place?” She shrugged. “And who would even be watching?”

Sam considered this for a moment, weighing the risks and benefits. On one hand, an unauthorized search could land them in hot water. But on the other hand, if they found something crucial to the case, it could be worth it.

“All right,” he said finally, his jaw set with determination. “Let’s do it. I want to get over to Marnie’s campaign headquarters, and it’s already late in the day. First thing tomorrow. But we need to be careful. No drawing undue attention to ourselves.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Sam, Jo, and Lucy strode into Marnie's campaign headquarters, their presence commanding attention. The bustling activity ground to a halt as curious eyes darted their way. Sam scanned the room, his gaze lingering on each face, searching for a flicker of guilt or unease.

Amid the sea of desks, one stood out—Amelia's, conspicuously empty. The sight of it sent a ripple of suspicion through Sam. Where was she? And why had she lied about her whereabouts the night of Alex's murder?

Before he could ponder further, Marnie emerged from her office, her expression a mix of surprise and annoyance. "Chief Mason, Sergeant Harris. What can I do for you?" Her tone was clipped, her smile tight.

Sam met her gaze head-on. "We need to talk. In private."

Marnie's eyes narrowed slightly, but she maintained her composure. "I'm rather busy at the moment. Can this wait?"

Sam's jaw clenched, his patience wearing thin. "I'm afraid not."

A beat of silence passed between them, the tension palpable. Finally, Marnie relented with a sigh. "Very well. Come into my office." She gestured for them to follow, her movements stiff and controlled.

Marnie settled behind her desk, her posture regal and unyielding. Jo and Sam

remained standing while Lucy settled at their feet, her ears alert and her eyes watching Marnie with suspicion.

“What’s this about?” Marnie asked, her fingers steepled before her.

Sam glanced out into the other room then back at Marnie. “I noticed Amelia’s desk is empty. Is she out today?”

Marnie’s brow furrowed, a flicker of confusion crossing her face. “She took the day off. Why do you ask?”

Sam shrugged, his tone casual. “Just curious.”

Marnie’s lips pursed, a hint of defensiveness creeping into her voice. “I’m not a tyrant, Chief Mason. I allow my people to take time off when they need it.”

Sam nodded, his gaze unwavering. “Of course. I was just wondering how well you know Amelia.”

Marnie’s eyes narrowed, her guard rising. “Not particularly well. She’s a relatively new hire.”

Jo stepped forward, her voice cutting through the tension. “She seems very ambitious.”

Marnie’s gaze shifted to Jo, a flicker of agreement in her eyes. “She is. The girl is a hard worker, always eager to take on more responsibility.”

Sam’s voice took on a thoughtful tone. “I imagine she was thrilled to be promoted to Alex’s position.”

Marnie nodded, a hint of pride in her voice. “She was. She pushed hard for the role, made it clear she was ready for more.”

Suddenly, Marnie’s expression shifted, suspicion clouding her features. Her eyes bored into Sam’s, and her voice was low and measured. “Why the sudden interest in Amelia? Do you suspect her of something?”

Sam shrugged, his expression nonchalant. “It’s probably nothing, but Amelia lied about where she was the night Alex was killed. In fact, we have surveillance that shows she was in the same bar. Might have been one of the last people to see him.”

Marnie’s brows shot up, surprise etched on her face. “I hadn’t noticed anything odd with Amelia or anything between her and Alex. As far as I know, Amelia will be back tomorrow. If there’s nothing further I can do to help...”

Sam held up a hand, interrupting her. “Actually, there is. Why did you switch the phone system over?”

Genuine confusion clouded Marnie’s features. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“The phone system was switched to go through a common number shortly before Alex’s death,” Sam explained.

Marnie shook her head, bewildered. “I ordered no such thing. I don’t even know how phones work or that it didn’t go through a common number before. Alex was the tech whiz.”

Sam nodded slowly, giving Marnie time to process the information, to let the implications sink in. He watched as a flicker of nervousness danced in her eyes.

“Did you ever remember what you and Alex really argued about?” Sam asked, his voice measured. “It could be important, and you wouldn’t want to hold anything back that could be important to the investigation. Might not look good for your campaign.”

Marnie hesitated, her gaze darting away from Sam’s intense scrutiny. “I didn’t want to say anything because I didn’t want to get involved or have you looking into my contributors. And it seemed petty, especially now that Alex is... gone.” She sighed, her shoulders slumping. “I caught him in my office, going through my calendar.” She pointed to a leather binder on her desk, a day planner thick with pages and notes sticking out. “I still prefer to keep my information on paper. I avoid technology when I can, which is why I’m not familiar with the phone system.”

Sam raised his eyebrows, intrigued. This was not the response he had expected. He leaned forward, his eyes locked on Marnie. “Did you have any idea what he was looking for?”

Marnie shook her head, her expression perplexed. “No, I don’t. He shut the folder pretty quickly when I walked in. I confronted him about it, but he lied and said he wasn’t looking in there. I saw him with my own eyes!”

Sam’s mind raced, trying to piece together this new information. What could Alex have been searching for in Marnie’s personal calendar? And why the secrecy?

He reached for the day planner, his fingers brushing against the worn leather. “May I?”

Marnie hesitated for a moment then nodded. “Of course. I have nothing to hide.”

Sam flipped through the pages, his eyes scanning the neat handwriting and colorful sticky notes. Meetings, appointments, reminders, contact information—nothing seemed out of the ordinary at first glance.

He turned to Marnie, his expression serious. “Can you think of any reason why Alex would be interested in your schedule? Any events or meetings that might have caught his attention?”

Marnie shook her head, her brow furrowed in thought. “I can’t think of anything specific. He has everything on his own calendar.” She paused, glancing at the planner. “But I did think maybe he was looking at the contact list.”

Sam leaned forward, his interest piqued. “The contact list? Why would that upset you?”

Marnie sighed. “Some of the donors prefer to remain anonymous. If word got out, it might jeopardize future donations.”

Jo’s eyes narrowed. “So you think Alex was trying to figure out who these secret donors are?”

Marnie nodded, her expression troubled. “It’s possible. But I can’t imagine why he would do that.”

Sam’s voice was low, his tone serious. “Maybe he was planning to leak that information to the newspaper for money.”

Marnie’s head snapped up, her eyes wide with shock. “No! I don’t believe Alex would do anything like that. He was dedicated to this campaign, to our cause.”

Not for the first time, Sam wondered exactly what Marnie’s cause was, but that was a conversation for a different day. “Apparently, Alex did something that got him killed. We need to explore every possibility, no matter how unlikely it may seem.”

Marnie’s shoulders sagged in defeat. “I understand. It’s just hard to believe Alex

would betray me like that.”

Sam’s gaze flicked to the day planner. “In the meantime, I’m going to need a copy of your contact list.”

Marnie hesitated, her fingers tightening around the leather binder. “I don’t know, Chief Mason. Those donors trust me to keep their information private.”

Sam met her gaze, his expression sincere. “I give you my word, Marnie. We will keep the donors’ identities secret. But we need that list. It might contain important information about Alex’s murder.”

Marnie sighed, her resolve crumbling. “Fine. I’ll make some copies and send them over.”

Sam nodded. “Thank you. We’ll be in touch if we have any more questions.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

As they walked out of Marnie's office, Sam turned to Jo, his brow furrowed. "What do you think? Was she telling the truth?"

Jo shrugged, her expression skeptical. "Hard to say. She's a politician, so lying comes with the territory." She glanced back at the closed door. "But something about her story doesn't sit right with me."

Sam nodded, his thoughts racing. "Yeah, I got that feeling too. Why would Alex risk everything to snoop through her calendar? And why was she so reluctant to share that contact list?"

Jo sighed, running a hand through her hair. "I don't know, but I have a hunch it's more than just protecting her donors' privacy."

They stepped out into the parking lot, the cool evening air a welcome respite from the tension inside.

"And is it a coincidence that Amelia took the day off?"

Jo glanced back at the building. "Good question."

Jo opened the car door for Lucy, who hopped in eagerly.

"I bet you know, don't you?" Jo said, scratching the dog behind the ears.

Lucy chuffed, her tail wagging.

Sam chuckled, shaking his head. “If only she could talk, right?” He pulled out his phone, his eyes scanning the screen. “Hey, Mick just texted. He’s got some news on the Feldman case.”

Jo’s eyebrows shot up, her interest piqued. “Oh yeah? What’s he got?”

“Not sure, but he’s stopping by my place in a few minutes.” Sam glanced at his watch. “It’s almost quitting time anyway. You want to join us?”

Jo hesitated for a moment, weighing her options. She had a pile of paperwork waiting for her at the office, but the prospect of a breakthrough about Feldman was too tempting to pass up.

“Sure, why not?” she said, clicking her seat belt into place. “I could use a break from staring at my computer screen.”

Sam grinned, starting the engine. “Great. Maybe Mick’s found something that will help us crack this case wide open.”

Sam’s home was a log cabin nestled in the heart of the woods, a sanctuary from the chaos of police work. As they pulled up, Jo spotted Mick waiting on the porch, his leather jacket gleaming in the fading light.

Inside, the cabin felt warm and inviting. A stone fireplace dominated the living room, flanked by worn leather couches. Rustic wooden beams stretched across the ceiling, and the walls were adorned with mounted fish that Sam and his grandfather had caught. Jo had spent many evenings here, unwinding after tough cases or celebrating victories. The place didn’t have too many feminine touches, but she really liked it.

Lucy bounded through the door, making a beeline for her water bowl in the corner. Sam headed to the kitchen, grabbing a couple of beers from the fridge.

“Make yourself at home,” he called over his shoulder, rummaging through the cabinets. He emerged with a bag of chips, a sheepish grin on his face.

“Not quite as fancy as what Bridget’s been serving up at your place,” he said, tearing open the bag. “But it’ll have to do.”

They settled in the living room, and Sam handed them each a beer and put the chips on the coffee table. “So what have you got, Mick?”

Mick leaned forward, his elbows resting on his knees. “I talked to Feldman’s brother today. He’s convinced there’s no way Feldman killed himself.”

Jo frowned, her fingers tapping against her beer bottle. “What makes him so sure?”

“He said his brother was happy, never talked about killing himself, but apparently, Feldman had been acting nervous and scared even before the robbery,” Mick said, his voice low. “His brother said he was jumpy, always looking over his shoulder like he was expecting someone to come after him.”

Sam’s brow furrowed, his mind racing. “So you think Feldman knew something? Something that got him killed?”

Mick nodded, his expression grim. “That’s what it looks like. And whoever did it made it look like a suicide to cover their tracks.”

Jo leaned back, her eyes widening. “So either Hartman is incompetent, or he was covering up.”

Sam stood up, pacing the room. “Think about it. Feldman worked at the bank. He would have had access to all kinds of information about the robbery. Maybe he saw something he wasn’t supposed to, or maybe he was even involved somehow.”

Jo nodded, her mind whirling with possibilities. “And when the heat got too close, someone decided to shut him up permanently.”

Sam nodded. “But who?”

Mick leaned back, his expression serious. “I can’t tell you how I found this out, but apparently, there was some sort of an investigation going on. Something to do with a big loan the bank had made to Convale.”

Sam’s brows shot up. “Convale? What was the investigation for?”

Mick shrugged. “That was so long ago, there weren’t many people for me to talk to, but something about some rules being bent to give the loan. The state banking commission was looking into it, but get this... all the documents were destroyed in the explosion when the bank was robbed.”

“Whoa.” Jo glanced at Sam. “You don’t think the robbery was a cover-up?”

“If it was, then that sheds a whole new light on the old case and maybe even the Alex Sheridan case,” Jo said.

“Sure does. But what would Alex know about the old bank robbery?” Sam asked.

“Wouldn’t surprise me if Convale was behind it. Is it any coincidence we found the cigar ashes at the crime scene and Victor Sorrentino smokes cigars?” Jo asked.

“I was thinking about that too,” Sam said. “And if that site out by the storage facility

is where Alex went into the water, it's on Beryl Thorne's property," Sam said.

Mick chuckled. "And we all know how close Beryl and Victor are."

"But then, there's Marnie and Amelia." Sam sipped his beer. "And I also saw Victor coming out of Henley's campaign office. There might be another angle we haven't thought about."

Mick raised a brow. "Campaign espionage gone wrong?"

"Crazier things have happened."

Jo put her empty beer bottle on the table and stood. "Well, either way, it looks like we have our work cut out for us, which is why I'd better get home and get a good night's sleep. It's going to be a busy day tomorrow."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jo awoke to the aroma of cinnamon buns. She stretched, the events of the previous day still swirling in her mind. The information Mick had found about the old bank loan was quite interesting, but what did that have to do with Alex's death? Alex's death was the case they were working, and she needed to keep her investigating thoughts on that.

She padded into the kitchen, where Bridget was bustling about, her hair pulled back from her flushed face. "Morning, sis," Bridget said, sliding a plate of warm cinnamon buns across the counter.

Jo smiled, grabbing a roll and taking a bite. "Thanks, Bridge. These are amazing."

Bridget grinned. "I was thinking about making a shepherd's pie for Garvin and one for Kevin. Are you going to Garvin's again tonight?"

Jo nodded, her mouth full of cinnamon and sugar. She swallowed then said, "Yep. Gonna stop by after work."

Jo walked over to the window, cinnamon bun in hand. She peered out at the porch. Pickles was snoozing contentedly, his tail twitching occasionally. Jo smiled. "Looks like Pickles has finally decided to make himself at home."

Bridget joined her at the window, grinning. "About time. He knows where his bread is buttered."

Jo nodded, her expression thoughtful. “I’ll see if I can work on Garvin about him. He didn’t seem to mind when I told him we were feeding a stray cat on the porch, but maybe I can get him to agree to us having the cat inside.”

“I’ll be sure to make the shepherd’s pie extra tasty so he’s in an agreeable mood.”

Jo laughed and turned away from the window, her mind already back on the case. “I gotta get to work. See you there later?”

“Yep. I’ll drop off the pies later this afternoon so you can go straight to Garvin’s with his.”

“Perfect.”

On her way to work, Jo stopped at Brewed Awakening and arrived at the station with a box of donuts.

“Donuts!” Reese jumped up from her desk. “I hope there’s a Boston cream.”

Jo opened the box and tilted it toward Reese. “There’s only one. Better take it before one of the guys gets it.”

Wyatt, Kevin, and Sam were already in the squad room. Jo passed around the box and sat on the edge of her desk. “Are we going to search the woods today?”

Sam nodded, grabbing a chocolate glazed donut. “That’s the plan, but let’s give it some time to warm up. It’s frigid out there.”

Jo eyed Sam. “Are you sure you even want to? It’s been decades, and it’s a long shot there is anything there.”

Sam shrugged. "I know, but it's been bugging me, and you know how I hate to leave any stone unturned."

The team gathered around the box of donuts, sipping their coffee. Lucy watched each bite intently, her tail wagging in anticipation of a crumb falling her way. Major sat perched on the edge of the filing cabinet as if paying attention to the conversation.

Sam leaned forward, his expression serious. "Before we get started, I need to fill you all in on something Mick discovered about the Eric Feldman case."

The team exchanged curious glances as Sam continued. "It turns out there was an investigation into a loan between the bank and Convale, and all the records were destroyed in the robbery explosion."

Kevin's eyes widened. "You think the robbery might have been a cover-up for the fact they wanted those records destroyed?"

Sam shrugged. "Maybe. It's convenient, but we don't have any positive proof. It's all just hearsay right now."

"Do you think this is related to Alex's murder?" Wyatt asked.

Sam held up a hand. "I'm not sure, and it's not something we should be focusing on right now. Our priority is finding Alex's killer. We can't spend too much time on this old case, but it's something to keep in the back of our minds when considering motive."

Reese handed a paper to Sam. "Joe from the crime lab faxed this over. They found some fingerprints on the suitcase and money we found at Alex's. Some match Alex Sheridan, and some are unidentified."

Sam looked at the paper and nodded. “Well, that doesn’t help much right now. Maybe if we can make an arrest, we’ll match those unknown prints.”

Reese nodded. “So what’s next?”

Sam stood up, grabbing a donut. “We’ll search the area the other money was found at this morning. It’s a long shot that we’ll find anything related to Alex’s case there, but I want to be thorough.”

“I got some coordinates from the files of the original case.” Reese licked a blob of cream from the side of her donut. “Put it on your desk.”

“Good work,” Sam said. “That will help narrow it down. And I invited Harry to join us. Figured he might remember something.”

“I fired up the metal detector earlier. Works fine.” Wyatt pointed to a gizmo leaning in the corner. They didn’t use the department metal detector too often, but Sam figured it might come in handy this time.

“Sounds good. That should help with this snow cover.”

“I found something interesting too...” Wyatt wiped his hands with a napkin and headed back behind his desk. “About Amelia Donovan.”

Sam raised a brow. “Oh?”

Wyatt leaned forward, his expression serious. “Amelia has some trouble with the law. A restraining order was taken out against her a few years ago. Turns out she might be a bit of a stalker. The restraining order was from a boyfriend that tried to break up with her.”

Sam rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “Maybe Amelia didn’t just want Alex’s job. Maybe there was more.”

“And maybe that explains why she wasn’t around yesterday,” Jo said. “I’d be curious to see if she’s in today.”

“Right. Don’t want to jump to conclusions. She really could have just taken the day off,” Sam said.

Jo sipped her coffee. “Sure, but there’s another thing too. Remember Amelia mentioned something about Alex drinking and smoking cigars with his grandfather?”

Sam nodded. “Yeah, thought that was weird.”

“How would she know that if she didn’t know Alex a lot better than she says she did?” Jo asked.

“Good point. Guess she would have had to know him on a personal level to be with him and his grandfather,” Sam said.

“Unless she just ran into them around town,” Wyatt interjected.

“So you never got to ask Amelia why she lied about being at the Drunken Moose the night Alex was killed?” Kevin asked.

Jo shook her head. “But we did get to question Marnie about the argument. She suddenly remembered what it was about. Said she caught Alex looking through her day planner.”

“So Marnie was lying,” Kevin said, leaning back in his chair.

“Yeah, but she used the excuse that she didn’t want to cast Alex in a bad light,” Jo said, her brow furrowed.

“What’s so bad about looking in her day planner?” Reese asked.

“She said it contained confidential information, like a contact list of her donors and supporters.”

Reese’s eyes widened. “Oh! That reminds me. Marnie faxed over something for you. I bet it’s that list.”

Wyatt nodded. “We should compare that to the outgoing calls. Alex changed that phone system for a reason.”

The station door squeaked, and Harry walked in. “What are you all sitting around for? We have a big patch of woods to search.”

Sam glanced out the window. “Has it warmed up?”

“Little bit.” Harry turned to look out the door. “Sun is out, so it should be good by the time we get there.”

“Okay, then. Let’s go.”

Lucy was the first to jump up. She trotted over to Reese and nuzzled her hand as if to say good-bye, then she looked back at Sam and trotted to the door.

“Guess someone is ready.” Sam followed Lucy.

Jo was the last one out, noticing that Major jumped down from his position on top of the filing cabinet and trotted behind her. As she walked out the door, she looked back

to see Major had hopped up onto Reese's desk, and both were watching them wistfully as if wishing they could go along.

Harry rode in the back seat of the Tahoe with Lucy. Jo rode shotgun and Sam drove, Wyatt and Kevin followed in the Crown Victoria police car. As they drove out to the Websters' property, Harry regaled them with stories of the original search. "We scoured that place," he said, his voice gruff with memory. "Never found a damn thing. But I always had a feeling we missed something."

Jo glanced at him in the rearview mirror. "Like what?"

Harry shrugged. "Just a hunch. I mean, the bag was there, but there had to be more. How did it get there? Someone must have been on that helicopter and either pushed it or jumped out with it."

"Maybe there was a fight on the helicopter, and it got pushed out," Sam said.

"Or fell," Jo added.

"Maybe. I bet Lucy finds something today." Harry settled back in his seat, his eyes drifting closed. "Wake me when we get there," he mumbled.

Lucy rested her head on his knee, her eyes watchful. Jo couldn't help but smile at the sight. Despite his gruff exterior, Harry had a soft spot for the dog.

As they pulled up to the Websters' property, Harry sat up, his eyes alert. "Let's do this," he said, reaching for the door handle.

After walking around a bit, Harry pointed to a crop of birch trees. "I think we found the bag over there. I remember those birches. They were just saplings back then."

Lucy trotted over, sniffed around, and seemed to agree.

They spread out and crunched through the snow, searching.

“This isn’t the best time to search. Anything we might spot by eye is covered in snow,” Sam said.

Jo glanced over at the Webster property that they could barely see through the tree trunks. Digging was still going on.

“No word yet, huh?” Kevin looked at Jo sympathetically.

Jo shook her head. “No.”

Wyatt looked grim. “There’s a lot of bodies there.”

Sam frowned. “Too much for one old lady.”

“She must have been doing that for a long time,” Kevin said.

Wyatt was still staring at the graves. “Or she had help.”

Suddenly, Lucy started chuffing and digging in the snow. They all headed over to the spot which was in an area dense with underbrush.

Jo moved closer, her boots sinking into the powdery snow. “What is it, girl?”

Lucy barked excitedly, her tail wagging as she looked at Wyatt.

“You think I need to use this?” Wyatt asked, turning on the metal detector and sweeping it over the area.

Suddenly, the detector let out a sharp ping. “There’s something here,” Wyatt said, his brow furrowed in concentration. “Let’s see if we can narrow it down.”

He handed a long, thin device to Kevin and instructed, “When I sweep over the area and the detector goes off, I’ll move it in circles to locate the center. Then you can go in with the smaller instrument to find the exact spot.”

They worked together, Wyatt moving the detector in ever-tightening circles until Kevin marked a spot. He brushed the snow away carefully, using the device again to make sure he hadn’t cleared away the target.

“I think I’ve got it.” Kevin held up a small object about the size of a dime. They wiped away the grime to reveal a gold pin. In the center was a tiny pinhead-sized ruby, glinting in the weak winter sunlight. Engraved on the pin were the number ten and a delicate tree design.

“Probably someone lost that in the woods,” Jo said, examining the pin. “Likely not related to the case.”

Harry held out his hand. “Let me see that.” He squinted at the pin, turning it over in his fingers. “Why, that’s an old service pin.”

Wyatt frowned. “What in the world is a service pin?”

Harry explained, “They don’t do it much anymore, but back in my day, companies used to give out pins for years of service.”

Jo’s eyes widened. “So this could be from the time of the robbery?”

Harry nodded. “It could be.”

Sam's brow furrowed. "But is it related?"

Harry shrugged. "That's a good question. If it fell off of someone on the helicopter, it could be."

Harry shrugged. "More likely, it's just been sitting here."

"Probably, but Lucy thought enough about it to alert us, so we might as well bag it up as evidence."

Harry nodded and handed it to Kevin, who had produced an evidence bag. "Can't hurt."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sam, Jo, Kevin, Wyatt, and Harry trudged into the police station, snow clinging to their boots. Lucy bounded ahead, her tail wagging as she spotted Major perched on Reese's desk. The cat bent his head down, and Lucy raised hers so the two could sniff each other.

Reese looked up from her paperwork. "Did you guys find anything good out there?"

Kevin held up an evidence bag containing the small gold pin. "Just this old service pin. Might be related to the robbery. Might not be."

Reese examined the pin through the plastic. "So we aren't sure if this is part of the case?"

"We'll have to investigate further to determine if it's connected," Sam said.

Harry's phone buzzed in his pocket. He fished it out and glanced at the screen. "It's the wife. She's requesting me home for lunch."

He answered the call, his voice softening. "Right away, dear." Hanging up, he turned to Sam with a conspiratorial grin. "The wife doesn't need to know about our little foray into the woods today, does she?"

Sam laughed and clapped him on the back. "It'll be our secret, Harry."

Harry bid the team farewell and headed out into the crisp afternoon air.

Sam turned to the others. "I'm going to go study my corkboard. Got some new pictures to tack up." He disappeared into his office, closing the door behind him.

Kevin settled at his desk and logged in the gold service pin they'd found. As he typed, his thoughts drifted to their foray into the woods. He hadn't said anything to the team, but he'd remembered exactly where he and Bridget had gone after finding the coordinates on the thumb drive. That had to be a good sign for his memory, right?

His stomach grumbled, reminding him of the peanut butter sandwich waiting in his lunch bag. As he unwrapped it, Kevin's mind wandered to Bridget's promise of a home-cooked casserole. The thought of a hearty, comforting meal was appealing. He wasn't much of a cook, so his meals consisted mostly of spaghetti and takeout. Maybe he could ask Bridget to join him and make an evening of it. The idea of her company, sharing a meal and easy conversation, brought a smile to his face.

Kevin forced himself to focus on the paperwork in front of him, scrolling through the endless lines of text. The words blurred together as his thoughts alternated between the casserole and Bridget's warm presence.

"Hey, I think I got something here," Wyatt called out, breaking Kevin's reverie.

Jo glanced up from her computer. "What is it?"

"It's the tire tracks from the scene where we think Alex went in. I just got the reports back, and measuring tire to tire, it looks like a very long car. Like maybe a limo."

Jo's eyebrows shot up. "A limo? You're saying Alex may have been brought to the scene of his death in a limo?"

Wyatt rose from his desk. "Kind of looks that way. I mean, at least it shows a limo was there. I need to look at the pictures on Sam's board."

They filed into Sam's office, where a corkboard displayed a collage of photos and notes related to the case. Pictures of Alex's apartment, the mysterious key, the suitcase full of money, and the area near the storage sheds where they suspected Alex had entered the water were all pinned up.

Wyatt tapped a photo showing several tire tracks. "I made a cast of one, but this wider-angle shot captures more of them. It looks like the car sat for a while. These impressions of the tires are deeper in two spots. Look at the length in between those two spots."

The team studied the images, their minds racing with possibilities.

"We still haven't proven this was where Alex went in," Kevin noted, "but we haven't disproven it either."

"I think we might have." Reese appeared in the doorway holding another paper. "Just came in."

Jo took that paper. "It's the analysis of the feathers we found. They compared them to the down inside Kevin's jacket. They say it matches."

Sam took the paper and read it. "It's eider duck down on both."

Wyatt looked skeptical. "Could it just be from a duck that was in that area?"

"Nope." Reese waved her phone in the air. "I looked it up. No eider ducks near here. They stick to the coastline, and we're pretty far from that. Plus the individual DNA points match up on the report. Those feathers are from Alex's jacket."

Sam nodded. "So with the hydrologist report and this, it looks likely that that's the spot Alex went in. Just one of those might be shaky, but two makes it much more

likely.”

Sam glanced at Lucy, remembering how she had sniffed out the feathers. No one might have thought them unusual if it hadn't been for her. She opened one eye and blinked at Sam as if she knew exactly how valuable her services were.

“But why would a limo be out there?” Jo wondered aloud.

Sam's gaze landed on a picture of the Thorne Enterprises logo. “It's one of Beryl's properties. Maybe she likes to check on her investments in style.”

“Or Victor,” Jo added. “He seems like the type to ride in a limo.”

Sam sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Guess we need to have a chat with Beryl or Victor.” He grabbed his jacket from the back of his chair. “I'll pay Beryl a visit, see if she can shed some light on this limo business.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The sun was low in the sky when Sam parked the Tahoe at Thorne Enterprises' latest project, a big hotel and conference center that was swallowing a swath of wilderness whole. Sam hated it.

Lucy had sat alert on the passenger seat the whole ride as if she knew this was important. Her gaze swiveled from the structure to the construction trailer, her eyes narrowing as if she knew Beryl was in there and didn't trust her.

Sam patted Lucy's head. "I feel the same way, but we have to talk to her."

Sam and Lucy got out of the car and walked up the rickety steps to the trailer door.

The door swung open before he could knock. Beryl Thorne stood framed in the artificial light, the day's fading glow casting long shadows behind her. She was as poised as ever, but her gaze held a flicker of surprise, veiling the shrewd calculations beneath.

"Sam, and Lucy," she greeted them with what Sam suspected was a fake smile. Unlike most people, she did not bend down to pat Lucy. She probably knew the dog did not like her. "To what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?"

"I have a few questions," Sam said bluntly. "Mind if we step inside for a moment?"

"Of course." She opened the door wider.

The interior of the trailer looked more like it belonged in a high-rise office building than a construction site. Across from the door was a large mahogany desk, and a sitting area had been set up at the other end. The filing cabinets were mahogany to match the desk.

Beryl had added some feminine touches since she'd taken over for her husband, Lucas Thorne, who was in jail. It looked like she didn't expect him to come back.

"I see you've made a few changes," Sam commented dryly.

Lucy sat by the door, silent but vigilant.

Beryl perched on the desk's edge, every inch the composed executive. "Gotta make the place my own. I'm sure you didn't come here to talk about my decor, though. What's this about?"

Sam leaned against the filing cabinet, arms crossed. "I assume you've heard about Alex Sheridan?"

Beryl's brow furrowed. "I have. Marnie told me. She said you suspect foul play."

Sam nodded solemnly. "Yes. He was found in the bay, but experts in currents think he was put in at the site where you're building the storage facility."

He watched Beryl's reaction closely. Her eyes widened, and she seemed genuinely surprised. "What? That's terrible!" Then her eyes narrowed. "Surely, you don't think I had something to do with that? I didn't even know him."

Sam held her gaze, searching for any hint of deception. "We have to consider all possibilities and ask all the questions."

“The only time I go out there is with the construction manager to assess progress,” Beryl said.

“You don’t go and check it out at other times?” Sam asked

“No. Why would I?”

Sam nodded and waited a few beats before asking the next question. “We found limo tracks out there. Do you know anything about that?”

Beryl let out a delicate chuckle. “A limo? You think I visit my construction sites in a limo? I don’t even have one.”

“What about Victor Sorrentino?” Sam asked pointedly.

Beryl’s laughter faltered, her demeanor shifting. “What about him?”

“He seems like the type to ride around in a limo,” Sam continued, unfazed by her reaction. “I bet Convale has one at his disposal.”

“It’s preposterous to suggest Victor would be involved in murder,” Beryl countered quickly, a defensive edge sharpening her voice.

Sam locked eyes with her. “Found cigar ashes at the crime scene, too,” he added, watching the play of emotions across her face—a flash of concern, a mask of composure quickly restored. He pressed on. “Did Victor know Alex?”

Beryl’s eyes flashed with a mix of annoyance and defensiveness. “I don’t think Victor knew Alex at all. He never mentioned him to me.” She crossed her arms, her posture stiffening. “And what possible motive would Victor have to harm Alex? I don’t appreciate either of us being accused like this.”

Sam held up his hands in a placating gesture. "I'm not accusing anyone of anything, Beryl. I'm just asking questions, trying to piece together what happened."

Beryl's expression softened slightly, but her gaze remained sharp. "That's good, because you and I need to remain allies. We have a common interest, after all."

Sam raised an eyebrow, curiosity piqued. "And what interest might that be?"

Beryl leaned forward, her voice low and conspiratorial. "Keeping my husband in jail."

Sam's mind raced, trying to connect the dots. He kept his expression neutral as he replied, "Hopefully, the evidence will take care of that."

Beryl's lips curved into a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. "Don't be too sure, Chief. Lucas has a new lawyer, and he thinks the evidence is a bit... flimsy."

Sam's thoughts flashed back to the golf shoes Beryl had given him, the very evidence that had helped put Lucas Thorne behind bars. A nagging suspicion crept into his mind. Did Beryl know something about those shoes that he didn't?

Sam moved toward the door, signaling the end of their conversation.

Beryl stood up. "Are you done interrogating me, Chief Mason?" Her tone was sharp, a challenge in her eyes.

Sam paused, his hand on the doorknob. "It wasn't an interrogation, Beryl. Just questions."

"Be careful, Chief Mason," she said, her eyes glinting with a veiled threat. "Digging can unearth more than just answers. Sometimes, it's better to let sleeping dogs lie."

Sam nodded, acknowledging her warning. Lucy was already at the door, impatient to leave, her gaze still fixed on Beryl.

As Sam walked out into the crisp evening air, a thought nagged at him. Beryl had never denied that Victor had a limo. It was a small detail, but it stuck out in his mind like a burr.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Kevin spent the rest of the day chasing down information on Feldman and following up on the social media of Alex Sheridan. He didn't find much. The guy had no enemies.

"Bridget!" Reese's voice carried in from the reception area. "Wow, looks like you've been busy."

The sweet smell of fresh-baked pies wafted in a few seconds before Bridget appeared in the squad room, a wicker basket of food dangling from her arm. "Special delivery!" Bridget announced cheerfully, setting the basket down on a nearby table.

She carefully placed a pie and a casserole in front of Jo, who looked up from her work with a grateful smile. "Thanks, Bridget. Garvin's going to love this."

Bridget then turned to Kevin, presenting him with his own set of homemade goodies. "And for you, Detective Deckard."

Kevin grinned as he accepted the offering. "You didn't have to do this, Bridget."

She shrugged, a playful glint in her eye. "Consider it a thank-you for your concern earlier."

Wyatt, who had been quietly observing the exchange, smirked as he slipped on his jacket. "Those look delicious." He glanced at the clock. "And just in time for quitting hour."

“Speaking of which...” Jo gathered her things, including the food from Bridget, and headed for the door right behind Wyatt. “I better get these to Garvin while they’re still warm. Thanks again, Bridget.”

As Jo left, Reese popped her head into the room. “Hey, Bridge! When does chef school start?”

Bridget’s face lit up with excitement. “Next week! I can’t wait to get started.”

Reese’s phone buzzed, and she glanced at the screen. “Oh shoot, I gotta run. Dentist appointment.” She waved a quick goodbye and hurried out.

And then there were two.

Kevin found himself suddenly nervous as he stood there with Bridget, the delectable pie and casserole between them. He hesitated, his mind racing with the possibility of extending their time together.

Kevin peered into the basket, admiring the golden crusts and savory aromas. “These look incredible. You’ve really outdone yourself.”

Bridget beamed at the compliment, a hint of pride in her smile. “Thanks. I hope they taste as good as they look.”

Kevin nodded, his stomach rumbling in anticipation. Then, before he could second-guess himself, he casually said, “It would be a shame to eat all this alone. Maybe you’d like to join me? My place is just a few blocks away.”

Bridget’s eyebrows rose in surprise, but a pleased expression quickly followed. At least, Kevin hoped it was a pleased expression. His heart hammered in his chest as he awaited her response.

“I’d love to. That sounds perfect.”

Relief and excitement flooded through him as he returned her smile. “Great! Let me just grab my coat, and we can head out.”

Good thing he’d tidied up before he left for work, Kevin thought as he pulled into the driveway of his small ranch house. As he stepped out of his car, Bridget pulled in behind him, her headlights illuminating the darkening evening.

Kevin hurried to open the driver’s door for her, a gentlemanly gesture that earned him a warm smile.

“What a cute house,” Bridget remarked as she stepped out.

“Thanks,” Kevin replied, leading her up the walkway. “It’s not much, but it’s home.”

Once inside, Kevin took Bridget’s coat and the basket of food then headed to the kitchen.

“I’ll help set the table,” Bridget offered, already rolling up her sleeves.

Side by side, they moved around the small kitchen, gathering plates, glasses, and utensils. As they worked, their bodies brushed against each other a few times, and he couldn’t help but steal glances at Bridget, admiring the way she moved with such grace and efficiency.

“We might need to reheat the shepherd’s pie,” Bridget suggested, peering into the basket. “It’s got ground beef, onions, carrots, peas, and a creamy mashed potato topping.”

Kevin’s stomach growled in response, and he chuckled. “Sounds perfect. I’ll pop it in

the oven for a few minutes.”

Finally, everything was ready, and they took their seats at the small kitchen table.

Kevin had worried it might be awkward, just the two of them, but the conversation flowed easily.

“This is great.” Kevin lifted his fork, which was loaded with a big chunk of shepherd’s pie.

Bridget smiled, her hazel eyes sparkling in the warm light of the kitchen. “I’m glad you invited me. And thanks for the compliment on the meal. Cooking has become a real passion of mine.”

“I can tell,” Kevin said, savoring another bite. “You’re a natural in the kitchen. You’re starting a pastry chef class soon?”

“Yes! I can’t wait to learn more techniques and expand my skills. Baking is like therapy for me.” Bridget’s expression turned thoughtful. “Honestly, discovering my love for cooking saved me. After everything I went through on the streets, I needed something to hold on to, a purpose.”

“I know it couldn’t have been easy. But look at you now. You’ve come so far.”

“I owe so much to Jo,” Bridget said, her voice filled with gratitude. “She never gave up on me, even when I was at my lowest.”

“Jo’s an incredible sister,” Kevin agreed. “But don’t sell yourself short. It takes a lot of strength and courage to turn your life around like you have. You should be proud of yourself.”

Bridget ducked her head, a slight blush coloring her freckled cheeks. “Thank you. That means a lot.” She took a sip of water and then met his gaze again. “Enough about me, though. What about you? Is your memory getting any better?”

Kevin nodded, a sense of optimism bubbling up. “I think it is getting better, actually. At work, I remembered where I filed some old cases, and when we searched the woods earlier, I knew exactly where we’d found those trees from the photos on the thumb drive.”

Bridget’s eyes widened. “The ones from the serial killer’s burial ground?”

“Exactly.” Kevin hesitated for a moment, a sudden urge to confide in Bridget welling up inside him. He was tired of keeping this secret bottled up, and he knew he could trust her. “There’s something else about that thumb drive, something no one else knows.”

Bridget leaned forward with a mix of curiosity and concern. “What is it?”

Taking a deep breath, Kevin revealed his suspicions. “I think the thumb drive is related to an old narcotics case. I even found the password to open the drive in the evidence for that case.”

Bridget furrowed her brow. “Why haven’t you told Sam and Jo about this?”

Kevin sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Because I used the evidence clue without telling anyone, and I’ve had the drive for so long now. It feels like it’s too late to come clean. I need to figure out what’s on the drive myself first.”

“I get it,” Bridget said softly, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. “It’s a tough situation. But you know what? I’ll help you. And I promise I won’t tell anyone.”

Kevin felt a wave of relief wash over him. “Thank you. That means a lot.”

Bridget smiled, but there was a flicker of something else in her eyes, a hint of vulnerability. “Actually, I have a secret, too, something I don’t want anyone to know.”

Kevin’s eyes widened, but he didn’t pull away. Instead, he leaned closer, his voice gentle. “Bridget, you can trust me. I won’t tell anyone.”

Bridget hesitated, her fingers fidgeting with the napkin on her lap. “When I was an addict on the streets, I was forced to do something terrible,” she whispered, her voice trembling.

“Hey,” Kevin said softly, reaching out to cover her hand with his. “Whatever it is, it’s not your fault. You weren’t in control then.”

Bridget nodded, blinking back tears. “I know that, mostly. But now, I’m afraid that certain people who know what I did are coming for me.”

“Why would they?” Kevin asked, his brow furrowed.

“I have no idea,” Bridget admitted, shaking her head. “Maybe to silence me.”

Suddenly, a realization dawned on Kevin. “The guy at the diner. He has something to do with this, doesn’t he?”

“No, no,” Bridget said quickly. “He’s from my past and knows about it, but he’s helping me. He has contacts.”

Kevin’s mind raced, putting the pieces together. “You had him get you a gun for protection.”

Bridget nodded, her eyes downcast.

Whatever Bridget had done, it must have been serious. He didn't need to know the exact details, and he didn't want to press her. As he looked at her, he saw the pain and regret on her face. She wasn't a bad person. She'd done what she had to do. She was a survivor, someone who had been through hell and come out the other side.

Kevin reached across the table and took her hand in his. "Listen to me. That's not who you are anymore. You've changed. You've built a new life for yourself."

Bridget sniffled, a single tear rolling down her cheek. "I know, but I'm scared. I'm afraid that my past will catch up to me, that I'll lose everything I've worked so hard for."

Kevin squeezed Bridget's hand reassuringly. "Don't worry. You're not alone in this. If you see anyone or feel unsafe, call me right away. I'll be there for you, no matter what."

Bridget's eyes widened, a glimmer of hope shining through the tears. "Really? You'd do that for me?"

"Of course," Kevin said without hesitation. "I care about you, and I want to make sure you're safe. I have your back, always."

A small smile tugged at the corners of Bridget's lips. "Thank you, Kevin. That means more to me than you know."

Kevin returned her smile, his heart swelling with a newfound sense of protectiveness. "And don't worry about your secret. It's safe with me. I won't tell a soul."

Bridget let out a shaky breath, the tension visibly leaving her body. "I trust you,

Kevin. I know you'll keep my secret, and I'll keep yours."

In that moment, Kevin felt like they'd forged another bond, one that couldn't easily be broken.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Jo arrived at Garvin's house just in time for supper. Garvin greeted her at the door with a warm smile, his eyes crinkling at the corners.

"Come on in. It's mighty cold out there." He ushered her inside, taking the basket from her. "Something smells delicious."

Jo grinned, shrugging off her coat. "Bridget made shepherd's pie and pecan pie. She insisted I bring them over."

Garvin's face lit up. "Well, isn't that just the sweetest thing. Would you join me?"

They settled at the kitchen table, the shepherd's pie steaming as Garvin served generous portions onto the faded china plates. Jo couldn't help but notice how his hands shook slightly, a reminder of his advancing age.

As they ate, Garvin regaled Jo with stories of his late wife's cooking. "Essie made the best beef stew, you know. She'd simmer it all day, letting the flavors meld together just right."

Jo listened attentively, savoring each bite of the hearty pie. She could almost picture Essie bustling around the kitchen, her apron dusted with flour.

Garvin set down his fork, his expression curious. "Say, how's that stray cat you were talking about last time?"

Jo nodded, a smile tugging at her lips. “He’s been staying on the porch more often. I think he’s starting to feel at home.”

Garvin chuckled, his eyes twinkling. “Well, that’s just fine by me. In fact, why don’t you invite him inside? No sense in leaving the poor fella out in the cold all winter.”

Jo’s heart swelled with gratitude. “Really? You wouldn’t mind?”

Garvin waved a hand dismissively. “Not at all. I know you’re taking good care of the cottage and would fix any damage.”

They lapsed into a comfortable silence, the only sound the clinking of forks against plates. As Jo helped herself to a slice of pecan pie, Garvin leaned back in his chair, a wistful look on his face.

“You know, I always hoped my kids would move back here, take an interest in the cottage.” He sighed, shaking his head. “But they’ve got their big-city houses and fancy jobs. No time for our little town.”

Jo’s heart skipped a beat, a glimmer of hope igniting within her. She leaned forward, her voice gentle. “Have you been thinking more about selling the cottage?”

Garvin nodded slowly, his weathered hands clasped on the table. “I have. I didn’t want to let it go, but seeing how much you care for it, how you’ve made it a home...” He trailed off, his eyes misty. “Maybe it’s time to let someone who will truly enjoy it own it.”

Jo’s breath caught in her throat, hardly daring to believe what she was hearing.

But then Garvin’s brows furrowed, a hint of mischief in his eyes. “Of course, there is the matter of that other interested party.”

Jo's heart sank, a twinge of apprehension coursing through her. Was she about to get into a bidding war? She studied Garvin's face, trying to discern if there was truly another buyer or if he was simply trying to sweeten the deal for himself.

"Who did you say that was?" Jo asked, her voice measured. "I thought you mentioned Marnie Wilson."

Garvin nodded, a flicker of distaste crossing his features. "Someone from her crew came by. But I wouldn't sell to her. Don't trust her." He shook his head emphatically. "Nope, if I sell, and I'm getting close, I'll sell to you."

Jo felt a wave of relief wash over her, a smile spreading across her face. "Garvin, that means the world to me. I promise, I'll take such good care of the cottage. It'll be cherished, just like it deserves."

Garvin reached across the table, patting Jo's hand with his own. "I know you will. But I'm not quite ready yet. I need to figure out a fair value and let the other party know, of course. I mean, if they want to make a crazy offer, then I might want to hear it."

"Of course." Jo laughed.

They sat in comfortable silence for a moment. Jo couldn't quite believe the possibility of owning the cottage she had grown to love so deeply.

Jo arrived home, the scent of Bridget's cooking still lingering in the air. She found her sister at the kitchen sink, elbow deep in sudsy water.

"You'll never guess what happened at Garvin's," Jo said, a grin spreading across her face.

Bridget glanced over her shoulder, curiosity sparking in her eyes. “Did he finally agree to sell you the cottage?”

Jo nodded, barely able to contain her excitement. “He said he was getting close, and he gave us permission to let Pickles inside!”

Bridget’s face lit up, a squeal of delight escaping her lips. “That’s amazing! I know how much you’ve wanted this.”

They made their way to the front porch, where Pickles lay curled up on the worn welcome mat. Jo cracked open a can of tuna, the pungent aroma wafting through the air.

As Jo set the plate just inside the doorway, Bridget leaned against the railing, a contented sigh escaping her lips. “I can’t believe my first cooking class starts next week. I’ve got all my supplies ready to go.”

Jo looked up, pride shining in her eyes. “I’m so happy for you, Bridge. You’re going to do great.”

A comfortable silence settled between them as they watched Pickles eyeing the plate of tuna. The cat stretched, looked up at them, looked at the tuna, looked at the door, and then sat down as if deciding what to do.

“It’s strange, isn’t it?” Bridget mused, her brow furrowing. “That they haven’t found Tammy’s remains. Do you think it’s possible she’s not buried there?”

Jo shrugged, a heaviness settling in her chest. “I don’t know. But we can’t lose hope. Not yet.”

Bridget nodded, her eyes distant. Then, as if remembering something, she turned to

Jo with a smile. “How did Garvin like the food?”

“He loved it. I bet Kevin liked it too.”

A faint blush crept into Bridget’s cheeks, and she ducked her head. “Actually, Kevin invited me over to eat with him.”

Jo’s eyebrows shot up, a teasing grin tugging at her lips. “Oh, really? He’s never invited me over.”

Bridget laughed, swatting at Jo’s arm. “Stop it. It’s not like that.”

As they dissolved into giggles, Pickles ventured closer to the threshold, stretching his neck to nibble at the tuna. It was a small victory but a victory nonetheless.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“ Things just don’t add up,” Sam said the next morning as they discussed the case in his office. Wyatt, Kevin, and Jo stood on one side of Sam’s desk. Sam had swiveled around in his chair, and they were all looking at the corkboard. Lucy lay in the sun under the window. Major had decided to join them, too, and was lounging in the doorway.

Wyatt nodded. “Kevin and I did a deep dive into Alex’s social media. There’s nothing on there that would indicate any enemies.”

Jo nodded, her fingers wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee. “The people at the campaign didn’t know of anyone that would want to hurt him either.”

“The woman at the assisted-living facility said he was a doting grandson. Always visiting, making sure Frank had the best care,” Kevin added.

Sam leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowed. “It has to go back to the robbery. Now that we know about that investigation, I think we need to consider that the robbery might have served as a cover-up for that.”

“And things were going along just fine and staying covered up until Frank’s death,” Jo said.

“Alex must have had the money prior to that. He was paying for that top-notch assisted-living facility for months before Frank passed. That’s not cheap,” Kevin said.

Sam rubbed his chin, his mind whirring with possibilities. “What if Frank confessed to something on his deathbed? Told Alex about the real reason for the robbery?”

Sam spun around in his chair. “Maybe Alex got greedy. If Frank told Alex something about the robbery that he could use for blackmail, he might have been messing with the wrong person.”

Jo nodded slowly. “It’s a possibility. But who is the wrong person?”

Sam shrugged. “The investigation involved a bank loan to Convale.”

Jo snorted. “Plenty of suspects there.”

They all stared at the board for a few beats, then Jo spoke again. “So what did you get out of Beryl? Anything interesting?”

Sam shook his head, a hint of frustration in his eyes. “Not really. She seemed evasive, especially when I questioned her about Victor.”

Jo snorted. “Beryl? Evasive? There’s a shock.”

“Truth,” Sam agreed with a wry smile.

Kevin leaned forward, his brow furrowed. “But how could Beryl possibly be involved in all this? She wasn’t even around when the robbery happened.”

“Who knows? She’s involved in lots of things, and now that she’s hooked up with Victor, I wouldn’t be surprised if the two of them were up to something,” Jo said.

“It’s a long shot,” Sam said. “We need to find more about Frank and that robbery. It’s too bad it was so long ago. None of us were around back then.”

“We should talk to Harry again,” Jo said, tapping her finger against her mug. “He was around back then, and he’s had a while to think about this. Maybe he remembers something else.”

Sam nodded thoughtfully. “Good idea. He might have some insights we missed.”

“And we need to find out who Alex met in that bar,” Kevin added urgently. “That was potentially the last person to see him.”

Wyatt frowned, his brow furrowed. “Why did he never come out? That’s the real question.”

Jo set her mug down on Sam’s desk. “I checked on that. They have no interior surveillance cameras, but they do have a back door.”

“Why would someone take him out the back?” Kevin asked, his eyes narrowing.

“Because they didn’t want to be seen,” Sam said grimly.

Jo crouched to pet Lucy, who flapped an ear and sighed. “We need to talk to Amelia too. I have a funny feeling she might be avoiding us.”

Sam nodded. “Which means she has something to hide.”

“And given what we’ve discovered with her record as a stalker, she might be more adept at lying, avoiding, and hiding things than she looks,” Wyatt added.

Jo nodded. “She was in that bar the night Alex died. Maybe she was a part of what happened to him, or maybe she saw something.”

“Either way, we need to find out. Looks like we’ll have to pay another visit to

Marnie's headquarters, and if Amelia isn't there, we might have to surprise her at home." Sam took out his phone. "In the meantime, I'll give Harry a call and see if I can get him in here."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Harry was more than happy to come in and talk about the case.

He settled into a chair in the squad room, a wistful smile on his weathered face. “That bank robbery case, it was something else. Nothing like that ever happened in our sleepy little town before.”

Sam leaned forward, his eyes intent. “What about Hartman? Do you think he was just incompetent, or was he purposely botching the investigation?”

Harry scratched his chin. “Hard to say for sure. But there was definitely some evidence that went missing. Poof, like it never existed.”

“Interesting.” Sam tapped his pen against the desk. “You think Hartman had something to do with that?”

“I couldn’t prove anything, but it always seemed fishy to me.” Harry’s eyes narrowed. “You reopening the case, Chief?”

Sam hesitated. “We’re exploring all angles. This money showing up in Alex Sheridan’s apartment, it could be connected.”

Harry’s face lit up. “Well, I’ll be. Never thought I’d see the day. If there’s anything I can do to help, just say the word.”

“Actually, I was thinking we could take a trip to the evidence room in the next town

over. See if we can dig up anything on the old case.”

“Count me in.” Harry pushed himself to his feet. “I’ve been waiting fifty years for another crack at this one.”

Sam grabbed his jacket and whistled for Lucy. The German shepherd trotted over, her tail wagging. “Looks like it’s going to be a long day, girl.”

As they headed out, Sam glanced at Harry. “What do you say we make a pit stop at Brewed Awakening? I have a feeling we’re going to need the caffeine.”

Harry chuckled. “You read my mind, Chief. A good cup of joe and a fresh set of eyes, that’s what this case needs.”

Lucy hopped into the back of the cruiser, her nose pressed against the window. Sam slid behind the wheel, the weight of the past and the promise of the future hanging in the air. The engine rumbled to life, and they set off, ready to unravel the secrets that had lain buried for half a century.

Ray Child, a cop in his fifties, greeted Sam and Harry as they entered the evidence room. “Well, well, if it isn’t Chief Mason and old Harry Woolsten.” He grinned, shaking their hands.

“Good to see you, Ray,” Sam said. “How’s the family doing?”

“Oh, you know, same old same old. Kids are growing up too fast.” Ray chuckled. “How about you, Harry? Enjoying retirement?”

Harry nodded. “Can’t complain. Keeps me out of trouble, mostly.”

Ray’s eyes twinkled. “Speaking of retirement, mine’s coming up in a couple years.

Any advice, Harry?”

Harry laughed. “Just one thing: keep the wife happy. That’s the secret to a long and peaceful retirement.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Ray paused, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. “You know, it’s funny you should mention retirement. Another retired guy was here today, looking at some old evidence.”

Sam’s ears perked up. “Oh yeah? Who was that?”

“Dom Hartman,” Ray replied.

Harry and Sam exchanged a glance. Interesting coincidence.

“Does he come here often?” Sam asked

Ray gave a half shrug. “Not really, but sometimes, guys like to come in and go over their cases that never got solved. Retirement hobby, I guess. Of course, once on the force, you’re always welcome in here.”

Sam and Harry carefully sifted through the evidence boxes, their eyes scanning the faded photographs and yellowed documents. The images showed the aftermath of the heist—the vault blown open, its door hanging off its hinges, and scattered bills littering the water-soaked floor.

“Why didn’t they take it all?” Sam asked, holding up a picture of the remnants of cash left behind.

Harry shook his head. “They didn’t have enough time. The explosion triggered the alarm, and the cops showed up pretty quick. They had to make a run for it.”

He pointed to a photograph showing a gaping hole in the floor. “They escaped through there, into the sewer system. Had to get to the helicopter before the cops figured out their exit strategy.”

Sam’s brow furrowed. “The sewer system? That explains how Frank was involved. They needed his knowledge to navigate the tunnels and ensure they could get out to wherever the helicopter was waiting.”

Harry nodded. “Makes sense. And whoever owned that helicopter, they had to have some serious cash. Helicopters don’t come cheap.”

“Why would someone with a lot of money rob the bank?” Sam’s mind raced, piecing together the puzzle. “Which means there was probably another motive behind the heist. It wasn’t just about the money.”

A bank pamphlet touting high CD interest rates caught Sam’s eye, but it wasn’t the interest rate but the design that drew his attention. “Look at that. Looks like the tree design on that pin we found in the woods.”

Harry squinted at the photo. “Sure does. Yep. I remember now that was the logo for the bank.”

Sam glanced at Harry. “So the pin was from the bank?” The bank had gone out of business decades ago, so it was no wonder no one had recognized the tree design. Looked like this little trip to the evidence room was paying off.

“Looks like it. Ten years of service. Whoever had this pin worked at the bank for ten years.”

“And then robbed it?”

Harry nodded, his eyes distant as he dredged up old memories. “Must have been someone high up. They probably weren’t directly involved in the robbery itself, but they had the power and influence to orchestrate it.”

“And rode in the getaway helicopter. Then dropped the pin when the bag fell out?”

Harry shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe we will never know what happened in that helicopter.”

“If that person was a person in power, then they also might have had the power to bribe Hartman to throw the investigation,” Sam added, his jaw tightening.

Harry frowned, his forehead creasing. “You know, I don’t recall Hartman ever coming into a lot of money after the case. But that doesn’t mean he didn’t get paid off somehow.”

“Frank never flashed his cash around either,” Sam mused. “Whoever was pulling the strings knew how to keep things quiet.”

They sat in silence for a moment, the weight of their realization settling over them. Finally, Sam spoke, his voice low and determined. “So we’ve got a mastermind who’s still out there, someone who found out Alex knew about the robbery and wanted to silence him.”

Harry nodded. “Or maybe Alex got greedy, tried to blackmail them, and they took him out.”

“Whoever it is would have to be around your age.” Sam’s eyes widened as a sudden thought struck him. “Hartman was here today, looking at the evidence. You don’t think he took something, do you? Something that could be critical to the case?”

Harry's face darkened. "It's possible. He's always been a slippery one."

Sam scanned through the box again. What could possibly have been in here that would tie into the investigation into Alex's death?

Finally, Sam put the cover on the box and shoved it back onto the shelf. "It seems likely these cases are linked, but I don't know if the answer is here in the old evidence. I think the answer lies in Alex's last hours, and there's one person who might be able to clue us in to who he was with at the Drunken Moose right before he died."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

The ride back to the station was filled with comfortable silence, punctuated by the occasional comment from Harry about the old days.

As Sam pulled the cruiser into the parking lot, he turned to Harry, gratitude plain on his face. “I can’t thank you enough, Harry. Your insights have been invaluable to this case.”

Harry waved off the compliment, but a pleased smile tugged at his lips. “It’s my pleasure, Chief. I’m just glad I could help. If you need anything else, just give me a holler.”

Sam nodded, shaking Harry’s hand firmly. “I will. Take care.”

As Harry ambled off to his own car, Sam and Lucy headed into the station.

Jo, Kevin, and Wyatt looked up from their work as Sam and Lucy entered.

“How’d that go?” Jo asked.

“Found something interesting. The design on the pin we found out in the woods matches the bank’s logo. If it fell out of the helicopter during the heist, it points to someone from the bank being in that chopper.”

Wyatt’s eyes widened. “It’s a ten-year service pin, so it would have to be someone who had been there ten years. High enough up the ladder to orchestrate something

like this.”

Kevin tapped his pen against his chin. “Maybe the same someone who was at the bar with Alex that night.”

Jo frowned. “But that was fifty years ago. They’d have to be pretty old by now.”

A glimmer of hope flickered in Sam’s eyes. “That makes our job easier, don’t you think? An older person would stick out in a bar crowd.”

Wyatt nodded. “True. But how do we prove the pin fell from the helicopter?”

Sam sighed. “That’s the tricky part. We might not be able to. But we still have one person to talk to that was in the bar that night.” He gestured to Jo. “Let’s go see if Amelia Donovan is in today and willing to talk.”

It was a short walk to Marnie’s campaign headquarters, and Jo and Sam could see the buzz of activity through the large windows as they approached. Of course, that also meant people inside could see them coming, and Sam wasn’t totally surprised to find Amelia’s desk empty.

Sam scanned the room. Members of the staff looked up at them, their faces a mixture of surprise and apprehension.

“Where’s Amelia Donovan?” Sam demanded, his voice cutting through the tense silence.

A young woman pointed toward the back of the office. “She’s in the break room, but I think she was rushing out...”

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance and hurried toward the back, their footsteps echoing

on the tiled floor. They reached the break room just as Amelia was slipping out the back door, her purse slung over her shoulder.

“Amelia!” Jo called out, her hand on her holster. “We need to talk to you.”

Amelia froze, her eyes wide with panic. She glanced around as if looking for an escape route, but Sam and Jo had her cornered.

“Please,” Amelia said, her voice shaking. “Can we do this outside? I don’t want to cause a scene.”

Sam nodded, his jaw tight. “Fine. But no funny business.”

They stepped out into the alley behind the building, the cool air a stark contrast to the stuffy office. Amelia leaned against the brick wall, her arms crossed defensively.

“I know I lied,” she blurted, her eyes downcast. “But I swear, I had nothing to do with Alex’s death.”

Jo raised an eyebrow. “Then why did you lie about being at the bar that night?”

Amelia sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Because of my record. I didn’t want it to come out, to cause any trouble for the campaign. I thought if I just kept my head down, no one would find out.”

Jo’s expression softened slightly. “Okay, so you were at the bar. Did you see Alex there?”

Amelia nodded, her hands twisting together. “Yeah, I saw him. He was sitting in a booth with three or four other guys. I didn’t recognize them, but they looked like they were having a pretty intense conversation.”

Sam leaned in, his voice low. “Did you hear anything they were saying?”

Amelia shook her head. “No, I was too far away. But I could tell it was serious. But Alex also looked pretty drunk.”

Sam and Jo exchanged a glance, their eyebrows raised. “How did Alex look drunk?” Sam asked, his voice sharp.

Amelia shrugged, her eyes darting away. “He was weaving a bit when he walked to the bathroom. His friends had to help him walk. Needless to say, he got cut off.”

“Did you talk to him?” Jo pressed, her arms crossed.

Amelia shook her head. “No, I didn’t.”

Jo narrowed her eyes. “But you must have known him pretty well, though.”

Amelia shook her head again. “Not really.”

“Are you lying again?” Jo asked, her voice rising. “You mentioned something earlier about Alex smoking cigars with his grandfather. I don’t think you would have known that unless you’d been with the two of them. And if you were with his grandfather, you must have known Alex pretty well.”

Amelia’s eyes widened. “What? I never said I saw him with his grandfather.”

Jo frowned. “That’s what you told us.”

Amelia shook her head vehemently. “No. I might have said he smoked cigars with old men, and you assumed it was his grandfather. That’s what he was doing that night in the Drunken Moose, but his grandfather was already dead, so I have no idea who

the old guy was.”

“One of the guys was an old guy?” Sam asked, thinking of Victor Sorrentino. Victor was only in his late thirties or early forties, but Amelia was young, so she might think he was old.

“Yep,” Amelia confirmed, her voice shaking slightly. “Gray hair and the whole bit.”

That left Victor out; he had dark hair.

“Could you recognize him if you saw him?” Sam asked urgently.

Amelia hesitated, her eyes darting between Sam and Jo.

Sam leaned in, his voice low. “I know you don’t want to get involved, but this could be important.”

Amelia sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Maybe. It was dark in there.”

Jo stepped forward, her eyes narrowed. “Was Alex still there when you left?”

Amelia shook her head. “No, he left around nine. The others practically carried him out.”

Sam frowned. Sternly, he said, “Amelia, we’ve seen the surveillance of the front door. He didn’t leave at nine.”

Amelia shook her head. “Not the front. They took him out the back.”

Jo placed a hand on Amelia’s shoulder, her voice gentle. “It’s okay. You did the right thing by telling us now. Just don’t run from us next time we have questions.”

Amelia nodded, her face pale. “I won’t. I promise.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Sam and Jo went straight back to the station.

“Amelia admitted to lying. She saw Alex at the bar that night, drunk with some guys, including an old man smoking a cigar,” Sam said.

Kevin frowned, leaning forward. “Did she say who the old man was?”

Jo shook her head. “No, but she said they took Alex out the back door around nine.”

Wyatt’s eyes widened. “The back? We only have footage of the front entrance.”

Sam nodded, his jaw tight. “Exactly. We need to review the tapes again, see if we can catch anything from the side or back.”

They gathered around Wyatt’s computer, their eyes glued to the screen as he fast-forwarded through the footage. Suddenly, Jo pointed at the screen. “There! Pause it.”

Wyatt hit the space bar, freezing the image. It was grainy and dark, but they could just make out the back of a black car pulling away from the bar.

Kevin squinted at the screen. “Can you enhance that? Get the license plate?”

Wyatt zoomed in, but the image only revealed the last two letters of the plate. “That’s all we got,” he said, his voice frustrated. “Could match thousands of cars.”

Kevin sighed, running a hand through his hair. “Is that even a limo? Hard to tell. And how do we narrow down matches for the plate numbers?”

Wyatt was already cracking his knuckles, a determined glint in his eye. “I’ll get to work on some code,” he said, his fingers flying over the keyboard.

Sam clapped him on the shoulder, a small smile on his face. “Good man. Keep at it.”

Kevin leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowed. “So if Alex was there acting drunk and they took him out back, seems like they might have planned this. Maybe slipped something into his drink.”

Sam nodded, his eyes narrowed. “Agreed. This was premeditated.”

Jo tapped her pen against her notepad. “Which means they planned to meet him there. This wasn’t some random encounter.”

“Exactly,” Sam said, his voice low. “And that’s why his phone records are so important. Maybe that’s why he had the phones switched to go through one number. He was planning on calling someone about something and didn’t want it traced.”

Kevin’s eyes widened. “And that got him killed.”

Jo sighed, her shoulders slumping. “Yeah, but by whom?”

Jo pressed her lips together, her eyes narrowing. “I can think of one old guy that had to do with that bank robbery, and he is also acting suspicious. Dom Hartman.”

Sam leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrowed. “And he’s been asking about the case. Never came in asking about an old case before.”

“You have to wonder what he was looking for in the old evidence files,” Kevin said.

Jo leaned forward, her voice low. “Do you think he smokes cigars?”

They all chuckled, the tension in the room easing slightly.

Wyatt shook his head, a small smile on his face. “But where would Hartman get a limo?”

Sam rubbed his chin, his mind racing. “That could be another clue that this is part of something bigger. Maybe he’s working with someone else.”

Kevin’s eyes lit up, his hand shooting into the air. “I’ve got an idea. The assisted-living place has a visitor log. Maybe I should go look through it and see who visited Frank the week before he died.”

Sam nodded. “Good idea.”

Wyatt’s fingers flew across the keyboard, his eyes glued to the screen. “I’ll get a log of the calls coming out of Marnie’s HQ the day Alex died,” he said, not looking up from his computer. “Might give us some more clues.”

Jo tapped her pen against her notepad, her brow furrowed. “You think we should go question Hartman?”

Sam shook his head, his eyes narrowed. “Not yet. Let’s wait until we have something more to surprise him with.”

Kevin stepped into the assisted-living facility, the scents of antiseptic and fresh linen filling his nostrils. He approached the front desk, his eyes searching for a familiar face.

“Well, hello there, Detective Deckard,” the nurse said, her eyes crinkling with recognition. “What brings you back to our neck of the woods?”

Kevin smiled, leaning against the counter. “Just following up on a few things about Frank Milson. I remember you were quite helpful last time.”

The nurse nodded, her expression softening. “Ah, yes. We sure do miss Frank around here. He was such a character.”

“Did he have a lot of visitors?” Kevin asked, his voice casual.

The nurse tilted her head, thinking back. “Mostly just his grandson, Alex. Such a tragedy, what happened to him.” She shook her head, her eyes sad. “But there were a few times when Frank had a visitor around his own age. I’d find them sitting in the common room, laughing and reminiscing. Not too many left for him to do that with, you know?”

Kevin nodded, his mind already racing. “Would you mind if I took a look at the visitor logs? Just want to check something.”

The nurse hesitated for a moment then shrugged. “I don’t see why not. Just give me a second to grab them.”

She disappeared into a back room, returning a moment later with a thick binder. Kevin flipped it open, his eyes scanning the pages. He focused on the week before Frank’s death, his finger running down the list of names.

“Alex, Alex, Alex,” he muttered under his breath. Then, his finger stopped. “Wait a minute.”

There, scribbled in barely legible handwriting, was a name that seemed to start with

H and end with “man.” The time stamp showed the visitor had only stayed for an hour.

Kevin squinted at the name, trying to make it out. Could it be Hartman? And if so, what had they talked about?

He snapped a photo of the page with his phone then handed the binder back to the nurse with a smile. “Thanks for your help. I really appreciate it.”

As he walked out of the facility, his mind was already churning with possibilities. He needed to get this information back to the team, and fast. If Hartman was involved, they needed to know what he was up to.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sam, Jo, and Wyatt huddled around a desk, poring over the phone logs from Marnie's campaign office. Stacks of paper and empty coffee cups littered the surface, a testament to the long hours they'd spent trying to make sense of the calls.

"This feels like a wild goose chase." Jo sighed, rubbing her temples. "We don't even know if Alex made these calls."

"It was smart of him to switch the phone lines to one central line," Wyatt said. "Which seems to indicate he had reasons for not wanting anyone to be able to know who he had called."

Jo nodded. "Too bad those reasons got him killed."

"Hopefully, we can find something that stands out. Marnie said she caught Alex looking through her address list of big donors. Let's see if any of these numbers match up," Sam said.

They divided the list, each taking a section to cross-reference with the logs. The room fell silent save for the rustling of papers and the occasional scratch of a pen.

"Got one," Wyatt announced, breaking the silence. "Dottie Smalls, that big real estate developer. Several calls to her number."

Jo perked up. "I've got another. Nathan Rickman. Who is he?"

Wyatt typed into the computer, and his eyes widened. “He’s on the board of Convale.”

Jo tapped her pencil on the desk. “Interesting. So someone at Convale is a big donor to Marnie’s campaign? That makes me suspicious.”

Sam looked up from his list. “I think he’s the guy that I saw in the cigar bar with Victor Sorrentino.”

Jo narrowed her eyes. “Interesting.”

Wyatt brought up another screen and started typing. “Yep, Rickman has been on the board of Convale since retiring from banking a few years ago. Guess some people don’t know how to just rest when they retire.”

Sam snorted and continued the search, finding two more names that matched both Marnie’s list and the outgoing calls: Thaddeus Blackwell, a wealthy retired businessman, and Evelyn Sinclair, a prominent local philanthropist.

“So what are we thinking?” Sam mused, leaning back in his chair. “Maybe Alex called one of them to meet at the Drunken Moose?”

“Yep, and he had something on one of them? Was he blackmailing them? That would be a reason to kill him,” Jo said.

“It has to tie back to the bank robbery. What else would be enough that someone wouldn’t want anyone to know?” Sam wondered.

Jo nodded. “We know Alex was dragged out into the water at the Thorne Industries property, and Beryl Thorne’s been hanging around with Victor Sorrentino.”

“And Victor smokes cigars,” Sam said.

“And works at Convale,” Wyatt added.

“And hangs around with this Rickman guy,” Jo added.

Just then, a commotion drew their attention. Major had jumped onto Jo’s desk and was batting at her half-eaten tuna sandwich.

“Hey!” Jo shouted, spotting the feline’s antics. “Get away from that, you little thief!”

Major, startled by the sudden outburst, bolted off the desk. In his haste, he knocked the sandwich to the floor, where it landed with a soft plop.

Before anyone could react, Lucy darted forward and gobbled up the fallen sandwich in one swift motion.

The room erupted in laughter, the tension momentarily broken.

“Well, would you look at that.” Sam chuckled. “You’d almost think those two were working together.”

Wyatt grinned. “I don’t know, Sam. We all know Lucy and Major don’t exactly get along. I doubt they’d plan something like this.”

“You know, maybe we’re doing the same thing with this case. Looking for connections where there aren’t any,” Jo said.

Sam nodded slowly, considering her words. “You might be onto something. We’ve been so focused on trying to tie everything together that we might be forcing connections that don’t exist.”

Kevin came into the squad room, his phone clutched in his hand. “Guys, I think I’ve got something.”

“What is it, Kev?” Sam asked.

Kevin held up his screen, which showed an image of the assisted living visitor log. “I went to the assisted living facility to check out Frank Milson’s visitor log. Guess who was there the week before he died.”

Jo leaned forward, squinting at the image. “Is that Hartman? As in, our retired detective Hartman?”

Kevin nodded. “It could be.”

Wyatt stared at it. “It’s a scribble. Could be lots of different names.”

“Including Rickman.” Sam turned to Wyatt. “Does it show anyone calling Hartman from the campaign headquarters in that log?”

Wyatt shook his head.

“Hartman has been all over this case, and he was around back in the day.” Sam looked at Kevin and gestured toward the door. “I think it’s time we pay him a visit. Something tells me he’ll be much easier to get a hold of than Nathan Rickman.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Sam and Kevin pulled into the driveway of Hartman's modest ranch home, nestled in an older neighborhood with large, tree-lined lots and neatly manicured lawns. The houses were small but well maintained, with a certain charm that came with age. As they exited the car, Kevin felt a swell of pride at being back out in the field. Sam asking him to ride along was a sure sign that he'd regained Sam's trust after his recent struggles with memory. He patted Lucy reassuringly, and she nudged her cold, wet nose into his palm as if sensing his need for comfort.

"Ready?" Sam asked, glancing at Kevin.

"Yep," Kevin replied, trying to sound confident.

They approached the front door and knocked. No one answered.

Lucy darted around the back of the house, her tail wagging with purpose. Sam and Kevin exchanged a look before following her, their hands instinctively reaching for their weapons.

As they rounded the corner, they saw the reason for Lucy's sudden interest. The back door's glass had been shattered, jagged edges glinting in the sunlight. Sam furrowed his brow, and Kevin felt a chill run down his spine. This was not a good sign.

"Looks like a break-in," Sam muttered, drawing his gun. "Stay sharp."

Kevin nodded, his own weapon already in hand. They carefully stepped over the

broken glass, the crunch beneath their feet sounding unnaturally loud in the quiet neighborhood. Lucy sniffed the air, her ears perked and alert.

“Hartman, you in here?” Sam called. When there was no answer, he called out again. “Police! Put your hands up!”

There was no sound. The house was eerily still. Sam and Kevin moved methodically from room to room, their footsteps muffled by the worn carpet. No one else was inside.

As they entered the dining room, they found a scene of disarray. Papers were strewn across the table, some fluttering to the floor as a breeze from the broken door swept through the room. Sam holstered his gun and picked up one of the sheets, his eyes scanning the contents.

“Looks like Hartman was going over the old case files,” he said, his voice low and pensive. “But there are gaps—like someone took some of the papers.”

Kevin leaned in, studying the table. He noticed the empty spaces, the outlines of missing documents visible in the thin layer of dust. A sense of unease settled in his gut.

He took out his phone and took some pictures of the scene.

“Whoever broke in must have taken them,” Kevin mused, his mind racing with possibilities. “Maybe they contained something incriminating, something that could implicate someone in the robbery.”

Sam surveyed the room, taking in the dated but well-maintained furniture and outdated carpeting. Kevin followed his gaze, trying to piece together the puzzle of Hartman’s life.

“Does this look like the house of someone who has a lot of old bank-robbery money?” Sam asked, his voice laced with skepticism.

Kevin shook his head. “No, it doesn’t. Maybe he was saving it or gave it to his kids.”

“We’ll have to look into that,” Sam noted, his brow furrowed in thought. “But maybe he didn’t get any bank-robbery money at all. Maybe he was in the evidence room because he was investigating.”

“But why?” Kevin asked. “He was the investigator back in the day.”

Sam shrugged. “Maybe he figured he missed something and wanted to find out if he could solve the case now.”

Kevin glanced at the table. “Yeah, and maybe he got too close.”

Lucy caught Kevin’s attention. She was standing at a side table loaded with framed family photos. Kevin walked over, picking up a picture of a younger Hartman with two girls.

“Looks like he’s a family man,” Kevin said softly, a twinge of sadness in his voice. As he studied the photo, something clicked in Kevin’s mind. He turned to Sam, excitement building in his chest. “I might have an idea,” he said, his eyes wide with realization.

“What?”

“Remember, there was a photo in the box that Alex had from his grandfather’s belongings. It was a photo of who I assumed was his grandfather and another man. It was from their younger days, and they were sitting around a table with some sort of blueprints in front of them.”

Sam's eyes lit up with understanding. "Cigars. You think those men might be the ones that were involved in the robbery?"

"Exactly," Kevin said, nodding eagerly. "If we can identify the other man in that photo, it might give us something to go on."

Sam surveyed the disarray in Hartman's dining room once more, his expression grave. "There's no way Hartman left this mess. And the broken door? Someone took him. We need to treat this like a crime scene."

Kevin nodded, his mind already shifting into investigative mode. "And that means he must have been on to something. I'll start processing the scene, see if I can find any clues or evidence that might help us figure out who did this."

"Good idea," Sam agreed, pulling out his phone. "I'm going to head back to the station and grab that photo. I have a feeling that other man might be Nathan Rickman."

As Sam turned to leave, he paused, placing a hand on Kevin's shoulder. "Good work, Kevin," he said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Looks like your memory is much better. Keep it up."

Kevin felt a surge of pride and happiness at Sam's words. It meant the world to him to know that he was regaining his chief's trust and proving his worth as a detective once more. "Thanks, Sam," he said, his voice filled with gratitude. "I won't let you down."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Sam pushed open the door to the police station. “We’ve got a situation. Hartman’s house was broken into, and it looks like someone was searching for something.”

Jo’s eyes widened, her fingers freezing on the keyboard. “What do you mean? Is Hartman okay?”

Sam shook his head, his jaw clenching. “He’s missing, and his dining room was a mess. Files everywhere, and it looks like some are gone.”

Wyatt leaned forward in his chair, his brow furrowed. “Do you think it’s connected to our case?”

“It has to be,” Sam said. “Kevin is back there processing it.”

“Well, I guess that rules Hartman out as the killer,” Jo said.

“Maybe.” Sam turned to Reese. “Do we still have the boxes from Alex’s place here at the station?”

Reese nodded.

“Good. There’s a cardboard box with some personal effects. Can you get that?”

“Sure thing.” Reese headed toward the area where they kept current evidence.

Sam turned to the others. “Kevin remembered an old photograph that fell out of a book in that box of Frank’s belongings that we found in Alex’s apartment. He thinks the person in it might be our killer.”

“Really?” Jo looked surprised. “What makes him think that?”

Sam shrugged. “Something about Frank didn’t look like he fit in with the other guy.”

“It’s worth a look,” Jo said as Reese returned with the box.

Inside the box near the top was an old photograph with yellowed edges. The photo showed two men, one Sam recognized as Frank Milson from the other photos he’d seen.

“This must be it.” Sam picked up the frame, and Wyatt, Jo and Reese moved in to get a closer look.

Jo leaned in closer, her eyes narrowing as she studied the photo. “What’s that on the table behind the men? It looks like some kind of blueprints.”

The team squinted at the image, trying to make out the details. “What are they blueprints of?” Sam said, his finger tracing the faint lines on the table.

Reese’s brows shot up. “Of the bank? Or the sewer system? Is this a picture of them planning the getaway?”

Sam frowned. “Why would they take a picture of that?”

Reese shook her head. “No idea. And why keep it?”

“Maybe for leverage?” Jo said. “It was in that book. Maybe Frank kept it so he would

have something on the other guys.”

“Guys?” Reese asked. “There’s only one guy there.”

Jo shook her head. “Must have at least been three. Someone had to take the picture.”

Wyatt took the photo from Sam, scanning the faces of the two men. “The other guy...” He paused, his brow furrowed in concentration. “I feel like I’ve seen him before.”

Sam nodded, a nagging sense of familiarity tugging at the back of his mind. “Me too, but I can’t quite place him. Whoever he is, he’d be pretty old by now, so he wouldn’t look anything like this.”

“Hold on a second.” Wyatt took out his phone and snapped a quick picture of the photo then AirDropped it to his computer. His fingers flew across the keyboard as he typed away, his face illuminated by the glow of the screen.

A few tense moments passed before Wyatt’s eyes widened and a triumphant grin spread across his face. “Aha! I thought he looked sort of familiar. Check this out.”

Sam hurried over to Wyatt’s desk, Jo and Reese close behind. On the screen was a series of photos, each one showing the same man at different stages of his life, from a young, fresh-faced youth to a distinguished, silver-haired gentleman.

“The internet had all his photos because he’s a prominent figure in town,” Wyatt explained, his voice tinged with excitement. “That man is Nathan Rickman. And look.” Wyatt pointed to one of the pictures from years ago.

It was from a pamphlet showcasing the bank officers. Nathan Rickman smiled into the camera in his expensive suit, a ten-year service pin just like the one they’d found

in the woods gleaming on his lapel.

Sam's mind raced as he processed the new information. "If Alex saw this photo, he must have put two and two together. Or maybe Frank even confessed to him before he died. The old man knew his time was running out and might have wanted to clear his conscience."

Jo nodded, her eyes widening with realization. "And Alex knew Rickman was a big donor to Marnie's campaign, so he knew he could get his contact information from Marnie's planner. Remember that call made to Rickman from the campaign office that night?"

"Alex must have arranged a meeting with Rickman," Sam said, his voice tight with tension. "Smart of him to choose a public place like the Drunken Moose."

"But instead of getting blackmail money, he got drugged," Wyatt added, his face grim.

Sam's jaw clenched, his eyes hardening. "Rickman is wealthy, and Convale has a limo. I bet the license plate's last numbers match the ones on the surveillance video."

Wyatt's eyes widened as another thought struck him. "Hartman must have made the same discovery. Maybe he saw the picture when he visited Frank the week before he died. Frank could have confessed something to him or let something slip."

Sam's heart sank as the pieces fell into place. "And if Rickman found out that Hartman knew..."

"He would have wanted to silence him," Jo finished, her voice barely above a whisper.

“We have to find Hartman before he meets the same fate as Alex,” Sam said, his voice filled with urgency. “Maybe Kevin has found something at his house.”

Sam put his phone on speaker. “Hey, Kev, we’ve identified the man in that photo,” Sam said, his voice carrying a note of excitement. “It’s Nathan Rickman.”

“That’s huge,” Kevin replied, his voice crackling slightly through the speaker.

“What have you found at the house? Anything?” Sam asked.

“Nothing. Just the mess you saw and the broken glass. Looks like there was a bit of a struggle outside the door, and they pulled the car around back in the grass,” Kevin said.

“We need to figure out where they would have taken Hartman,” Jo said. “I think it’s probably a very long shot that they took him to the same place they took Alex.”

“It has to be somewhere out of the way. He wouldn’t risk taking him to his home or Convale,” Wyatt said.

“What about that Obsidian Enterprises company?” Kevin suggested. “The one that owns the land we searched. Maybe they have other properties?”

Sam smiled. He’d been impressed with Kevin’s progress since his accident and had been trying to give him more responsibility, but still, he’d been hesitant. But this past week, all the contributions Kevin had made, including remembering the photo and Obsidian Enterprises, proved that he was truly back up to speed, his memory sharper than ever.

“Great idea.” Wyatt’s fingers flew across the keyboard. “Got it! There’s another parcel of land owned by Obsidian. Looks like there’s some kind of structure on it.”

“We need to check it out,” Sam said determinedly. “Kevin, we’re heading out now. We’ll pick you up on the way.”

Lucy jumped to her feet, eager to join the action. Sam got her bulletproof vest out of the closet.

When they had all their gear, they headed to the door. Lucy and Sam were in the lead. But this time, they had an addition in the rear. Major had hopped down from the filing cabinet and was following them to the door.

Reese, who had been standing near the desk, scooped up the black cat. “Not this time, Major,” she said softly, stroking his fur. “You’re staying here with me.” She glanced up at the others. “You guys be careful.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The SUV bounced along the dirt road, kicking up dust in its wake. Sam gripped the steering wheel, his jaw clenched. Beside him, Jo scanned the surroundings, her green eyes sharp. Lucy sat at attention in the back.

“There.” Jo pointed. “That must be it.”

Sam followed her gaze. Nestled on a cliffside, a small cabin came into view. Obsidian Enterprises’ property. Remote. Isolated. The perfect place for shady dealings.

He slowed and pulled off to the side. In the car behind them, Kevin and Wyatt did the same. They didn’t want anyone in the cabin to know they were there, so they spoke in whispers and kept out of view.

“Someone’s here.” Kevin nodded toward the car parked beside the cabin.

They approached on foot, steps measured, hands hovering near their holsters. The cabin was a ramshackle affair of weathered boards and peeling paint. But the view—that was something else. Breathtaking vistas of the valley below stretched to the horizon.

Sam gestured to a grimy window. They peered inside.

“Shoot,” Jo breathed.

Dominic Hartman, bound to a chair. A young, wiry man pacing nearby—probably one of Nathan Rickman’s thugs that he had do his dirty work. And there, in the corner, the unmistakable figure of Nathan Rickman.

Sam’s pulse quickened. He met Jo’s gaze, a silent understanding passing between them. It was time to move.

“Kevin, Wyatt, take the back,” Sam whispered. “Jo and I will take the front. Wait for my signal.”

Kevin and Wyatt disappeared around the corner, footsteps silent. Sam caught Jo’s eye again. They’d been in tough spots before, but this—this felt different.

Lucy chuffed, her body tense, waiting for the action. Sam laid a hand on her head, a silent reassurance.

“Ready?” he mouthed to Jo.

She nodded, her jaw set. They moved into position, and Sam tried the knob. The door opened, and they rushed through.

“Police! Hands where I can see them!”

Chaos erupted. Shouts, scuffling, the unmistakable bang of gunshots. Sam and Jo dove for cover behind a cabinet as splinters flew.

“Drop your weapons!” Jo yelled, her voice steady.

Across the room, Kevin and Wyatt burst through the back door. More shots.

The thug swung his gun toward them, cool and calculating.

Sam's heart pounded. He risked a glance around the cabinet. Hartman struggled against his bonds, chair scraping the floor. Rickman, a cruel sneer on his face, had his gun leveled at Jo.

Lucy growled, hackles raised, ready to spring. Sam's breath caught. In a standoff like this, one wrong move...

He met Kevin's gaze, a split-second decision. They had to end this, fast, before things spiraled out of control.

But then came the unexpected. Hartman made his move.

The scene unfolded in slow motion. Lucy coiled, ready to spring. Kevin's finger tightened on the trigger. But before either could act, Hartman sprang into action.

With a grunt of effort, Hartman surged to his feet, the chair still tied to his back. He lunged, slamming into the thug with the full force of his weight.

The two men crashed to the floor, a tangle of limbs and splintered wood. The minion's gun skittered across the floorboards, spinning out of reach.

"Gun!" Sam barked.

Wyatt, quick as a cat, dove for the weapon. His fingers closed around the grip, and he rolled, coming up in a crouch, the gun trained on the struggling men.

Sam kept his sights locked on Rickman, heart pounding. The man's face was a mask of fury, his own gun still leveled at the room.

But Rickman didn't shoot. Instead, he turned and bolted for the back door.

“He’s running!” Jo shouted.

Sam cursed under his breath. They couldn’t let Rickman escape. Not now, not when they were so close.

“Kevin, Wyatt, secure the scene,” he ordered. “Jo, with me. We’re going after Rickman.”

Lucy, hackles still raised, fell into step beside them as they raced out the back, hot on Rickman’s heels.

Sam’s lungs burned as he ran, Jo at his side, Lucy rushing ahead. Rickman was fast for an older man, his desperation fueling his speed.

Low brush whipped at Sam’s legs as branches snatched at his clothes. The forest was a blur of green and brown, the ground uneven beneath his feet.

“Where’s he going?” Jo panted, her words punctuated by ragged breaths.

Sam’s mind raced. The property backed onto the cliff, he remembered. But surely, Rickman wouldn’t...

A sickening realization hit him. “The cliff,” he managed, his voice tight. “He’s heading for the cliff.”

They burst from the tree line, the sudden brightness of the open air momentarily blinding. Sam blinked, his eyes adjusting.

The view was breathtaking: a vast expanse of sky, the valley stretching out below like a painted canvas. But there, at the edge, was Rickman.

Sam's heart stopped. The cliff's edge was a jagged thing, all sharp rocks and crumbling earth. It was a long, steep drop to the winding river below, the water churning and frothing over boulders.

Rickman stood at the precipice, his chest heaving. He glanced back, his eyes wild.

"Rickman!" Sam shouted, his hand outstretched. "Don't do it. There's nowhere to go."

But even as the words left his mouth, Sam knew. He saw it in Rickman's face, in the set of his shoulders.

The man was going to jump.

Lucy growled, her body coiled tight. Jo's hand hovered over her holster.

"It's over, Rickman," Jo called, her voice steady despite the chaos. "Come back from the edge."

Rickman's laugh was a bitter, broken sound. He shook his head, his feet shifting on the uneven ground. "You don't understand," he spat. "I won't go to prison. I don't have much time left, and I won't spend it rotting in a cell."

He took a step back, his heel hanging over the void. Sam's breath caught in his throat.

Time seemed to slow. Rickman's eyes met Sam's.

And then he jumped.

But even as Rickman's body tipped backward, a blur of fur and muscle shot past.

Lucy leaped, her jaws wide. She seemed to hang suspended in the air, a silent, snarling guardian.

Her teeth closed on Rickman's sleeve, and the two tumbled to the ground, a tangle of thrashing limbs and snapping jaws.

Sam's heart stopped. They were too close to the edge, the crumbling rock giving way beneath their struggle. Rickman hung from the edge. The only thing keeping him from dropping was Lucy's grip on his sleeve.

Lucy's claws scrabbled for purchase, her powerful haunches straining. But Rickman fought like a man possessed, his free hand clawing at the dog's face.

"Lucy!" Sam's voice cracked, fear and desperation warring in his chest.

He lunged forward, his fingers closing around Lucy's vest. The fabric bit into his palms, his muscles screaming as he heaved backward.

But it wasn't enough. Inch by terrible inch, they slid closer to the abyss.

Jo appeared at Sam's side, her hands joining his on Lucy's vest.

"Hold on," she gritted out, her face a mask of determination. "Pull!"

Together, they strained against the inexorable pull of gravity. Sam's heart hammered against his ribs, his breath coming in ragged gasps.

Rickman twisted, his hand finding Lucy's throat. The dog yelped but kept her grip.

"You'll never take me alive," he snarled, his eyes wild. "Never!"

With a final, desperate heave, the fabric of his sleeve tore, the sound sharp and sudden in the chaos.

With a scream, Rickman pitched backward into the void.

Lucy lunged, her jaws snapping shut on empty air. Sam and Jo hauled her back, their chests heaving, their hearts in their throats.

They collapsed in a heap, the ground solid beneath them. Sam clutched at Lucy, burying his face in her fur, his body shaking with adrenaline and relief.

But even as they caught their breath, the reality of what had just happened began to sink in.

Rickman was gone, and with him, the answer to many of their questions.

Sam and Jo approached the cliff's edge, their steps cautious on the uneven ground. The adrenaline of the chase still thrummed in Sam's veins, his heart pounding in the aftermath.

They peered over the precipice, the wind whipping at their hair and clothes. Far below, the river churned, its waters white and frothing as it wound through the jagged rocks.

And there, on a narrow ledge beside the raging torrent, lay Rickman.

Even from this distance, Sam could tell the man was dead. His body was splayed at an unnatural angle, his limbs twisted and bent in ways that made Sam's stomach turn. He lay face down, his head at an odd angle. One arm was stretched out, fingers clawing at the rock as if he'd tried to stop his fall at the last moment.

A dark stain spread out beneath him, seeping into the cracks and crevices of the stone.

“We need to call it in,” he said. “Get a recovery team out here. And we need to make sure Kevin and Wyatt have things under control.”

Jo nodded, already reaching for her radio. She spoke into the receiver as they hurried back to the cabin.

Wyatt and Kevin had the thug tied up in the chair. Hartman had been untied and was sitting at the table, Kevin dabbing at a cut on his face with a tissue.

“What happened to Rickman?” Kevin asked, his voice tight.

Sam shook his head. “Dead. Went over the cliff.”

Wyatt let out a low whistle. “Darn.”

“Hartman,” Sam said, crossing the room. “You okay?”

The old man shrugged, wincing slightly at the movement. “I’ve had worse.”

“That was quite a move.” Sam nodded toward the thug, “Rushing him while tied up.”

Hartman rubbed his wrists, his eyes distant. “It was the least I could do. I figured it was time I tried to redeem myself. Even if it was just a small chance.”

Sam felt a pang of sympathy. He knew the weight of past mistakes, the burden of trying to make things right.

Sam turned back to Kevin. “He give you anything?” he asked, jerking his chin toward

the prisoner.

Kevin shrugged. "Says he works for Rickman. Does whatever the boss tells him."

Sam crouched, bringing his face level with the thug's. "That include dragging bodies into the lake?"

The man's eyes widened, a flicker of fear passing over his face. He licked his lips, his gaze darting between Sam and the others. "I think," he said slowly, his voice trembling slightly, "I want a lawyer."

Sam sighed. They'd lost Rickman, but maybe this guy could give them some answers. "Okay, let's get this guy back to the station and processed. We may have a long night ahead of us."

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Kevin reached for a potato skin, piling it high with gooey cheese and a generous dollop of chive-dotted sour cream. “These are nothing like Bridget’s,” he said, taking a bite. The others murmured in agreement, their mouths full of the savory snack.

Holden, ever the voice of reason, chuckled. “Well, we’ll just have to make do with these for now. Can’t expect Bridget to feed us all the time, especially with her starting culinary school.”

They were sitting at a big table at Holy Spirits. Sam noticed the usual group was growing. Tonight, they had Sam, Jo, Kevin, Wyatt, Reese, Holden Joyce, Mick, and Harry. Even Dominic Hartman had joined them to celebrate closing the Alex Sheridan case.

“How is your new class going?” Mick asked.

Bridget’s eyes sparkled, and her voice brimmed with enthusiasm. “It was incredible! The instructor is so knowledgeable, and I learned so much in just a few hours.”

Bridget animatedly described the techniques she had learned and the dishes she couldn’t wait to try. Her passion was infectious, and the group found themselves hanging on her every word.

“I think I’m really going to love it,” Bridget concluded, a contented smile on her face. “It’s like I’ve finally found my calling. And now, if Garvin will sell to Jo, everything will be perfect.”

“He’s getting closer,” Jo said, a smile tugging at her lips. “I’ve got a good feeling about it. I think we might be able to make it our permanent home.”

“And he gave permission for us to bring Pickles in.” Bridget transferred a section of gooey nachos from the main plate to her little dish.

“Pickles?” Hartman looked confused.

“It’s a stray cat,” Harry informed him, and the two men rolled their eyes.

Sam was glad to see that Harry was getting along with his old boss. It had turned out that Hartman wasn’t a bad guy after all. He’d been investigating the case all along, trying to finally solve it, which was why he’d been in the evidence room.

Holden leaned forward, his expression somber. “I heard from my contacts at the FBI,” he said, his voice low. “They’re almost done searching Hazel Martin’s property.”

At the mention of Hazel’s name, Jo and Bridget’s faces tensed, their earlier excitement replaced by a palpable sense of unease.

“They haven’t found Tammy’s body, have they?” Sam asked, his eyes locked on Holden.

Holden shook his head, his shoulders slumping. “No, they haven’t.”

Reese, who had been sitting quietly, looked up, her eyes filled with sympathy. “But then, where is it?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

The group fell silent, each lost in their own thoughts. Sam glanced at Jo, trying to gauge her reaction. She shrugged as if trying to brush off the weight of the situation, but Sam could see the pain and frustration etched on her face.

“We may have to live with the fact that it will never be found,” Jo said.

“Maybe.” Holden nodded. “Hazel sure isn’t talking about it, but we’ll keep trying.”

Everyone was quiet for a beat, then Mick broke the silence. “What about that guy you arrested in the cabin with Rickman?”

“Tommy Soucy.” Sam said. “According to Tommy, Alex had called Rickman to blackmail him.”

“Apparently, Alex did know about Rickman’s involvement in the robbery all those years ago,” Jo added.

“I wonder how he knew. Do you think his grandfather told him?” Kevin asked.

Sam shrugged. “We’ll probably never know about that.”

“Soucy verified that Alex was drugged in the bar, taken out to the storage building site, and dragged into the open water, then pushed under the ice,” Sam said.

Mick shook his head. “That’s cold.”

“It gets worse,” Jo said. “Apparently, Rickman stood back at the limo and smoked a cigar while he watched them push Alex under.”

“It’s a shame we didn’t get to bring Rickman to justice.” Wyatt said.

“At least he won’t be able to hurt anyone else,” Jo added. “I hate to think of some of the other things that guy has done.”

“Somehow, I doubt Alex was his first victim,” Harry said.

Hartman nodded. "I still think he killed Eric Feldman. I sure wish we could prove that."

Harry nodded then looked at Sam. "Will you be able to open that old case back up? Maybe get justice for Feldman."

"I'm not sure." Sam glanced at Jo. "Maybe we could look into some things in our spare time."

"We owe Dom that much." Jo smiled at Hartman. "Things might have ended up differently without your quick thinking."

Hartman blushed. "Just doing what came naturally."

Harry, who had been listening intently, clapped Hartman on the back. "I heard about your fancy moves out there," he said, his eyes twinkling with amusement. "Not bad for an old guy."

Hartman chuckled, shaking his head. "Watch who you're calling old, Harry," he said, his tone light and playful. "I've still got a few tricks up my sleeve."

"So, Hartman, what made you decide to get involved in this case after all this time, anyway?" Harry asked, his voice tinged with genuine interest.

Hartman's expression grew serious, his eyes distant as if lost in thought. "When I heard about Alex Sheridan's death and the discovery of the robbery money, something just didn't sit right with me," he said, his voice low and pensive. "I started digging around because I never got a chance to solve the robbery case."

The group listened intently, hanging on Hartman's every word. Sam could sense the weight of the man's past bearing down on him, the burden of unfinished business.

“Back in the day, when I was investigating the robbery, I always suspected Rickman was involved,” Hartman continued, his voice growing stronger with each word. “But every time I got close, someone higher up would shut me down, stonewall my investigation.”

Harry’s eyes widened, a look of realization dawning on his face. “You think Rickman had someone in his pocket?” he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

Hartman nodded, his jaw set with determination. “I knew he was dirty, but I could never prove it,” he said, his words laced with a mix of frustration and regret. “But now, with Tommy’s confession and the evidence we’ve gathered, I guess I was right.”

Harry leaned back in his chair. “I have to apologize, because I thought you were throwing the case on purpose back then.”

“I may have been a lot of things in my day, but I was never dirty. I had to take my orders from above, and every time I got close to anything, things happened to turn the investigation another way.” Hartman’s voice was firm and unwavering. “I’ve always been straight as an arrow, and I always will be.”

Harry held up his hands. “I know that now,” he said, his voice warm with genuine respect. “You’re a good man, Hartman.”

Hartman nodded, a hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “Darn right I am,” he said, his gruff voice tinged with a hint of pride.

As the laughter died down, Jo’s expression grew pensive. “You know, Rickman had a lot of connections to Convale,” she said, her voice low and thoughtful. “I wonder what other secrets he was hiding.”

“Seems like a lot of shady things are tied to Convale,” Kevin said, his words heavy

with implication. “The robbery cover-up scheme, Alex’s murder... makes you wonder what else they’re involved in.”

Rickman’s death had brought a sense of closure to Alex’s case, but Sam still felt there was more. What other secrets had died with the man?

As the last of the potato skins disappeared and the glasses ran dry, Sam felt a sense of contentment wash over him. Things were good despite everything. His town was safe, his friends were happy, and the future was bright with possibility.
