



Coat of Many Colors (Dressed to Kill #1)

Author: *Deanndra Hall*

Category: Horror

Description: A dangerous killer, a psychic, and the coat that has all the answers ...

Maisey and Aaron Friedman (Justice for Maisey) are enjoying married life and their new blended family. But everything changes after the social worker's simple trip to a consignment shop where she finally purchases a coat she's had her eye on.

Despite Aaron deeming the coat ugly, Maisey still loves the garment, and she's sure he'll love it too when she models it for him. But when she wakes up on the floor with her deputy sheriff husband standing over her, concern in his eyes, Maisey knows something is terribly wrong. The coat's sad origin reveals an unsolved slaying, and without the victim to help them, the Friedmans begin their attempts to solve the case using the secrets the coat reveals in Maisey's psychic visions as their only clues.

But as they delve deeper into the mysteries of the coat, the murderer refuses to allow them to uncover the truth. Suddenly, Maisey's security is in question, leaving Aaron and his crew of hometown heroes to strategize ways of keeping her safe while unearthing the identity of the culprit. The coat comes with answers, but will those answers be the catalyst that puts them all in danger?

Total Pages (Source): 16

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 1:24 pm

CHAPTER ONE

The woman behind the counter whipped around the end and smiled. “Can I help you with something?”

Maisey pointed to the front window. “Yes. That coat out there. I think I’d like to buy it.”

She followed the woman as they made their way toward the window. “Wouldn’t you like to try it on first?” the woman asked.

“I’m really in a hurry. My husband has a softball game tonight. You allow returns, right?”

“Yes, within seven days of purchase with a receipt.”

“That’s fine. No problem. But I think it’ll fit just fine.”

“Okay. So, your total is ...” Maisey pulled out her debit card and paid for the coat, then waited as the woman put it on a hanger and slipped a bag over it. After placing it carefully on the back seat of her little car, Maisey took off for home.

There were potatoes and green beans that only needed warming, and the meat had been simmering in the slow cooker all day long. The aroma filled the air when she stepped into the house, so she hurried down the hallway to change clothes and came back to pull everything together. She’d barely gotten it plated when the front door opened. “Wow! My beautiful wife’s been cooking something delicious, I can tell!”

Aaron sang out.

Murielle came skipping into the kitchen. “MamaMaisey, that smells so good!”

“It’s your favorite, smashed potatoes, green beans, and pot roast.”

“Yay! Are we eating now?”

Maisey pulled plates from the cabinet. “Yep. Your daddy’s got a ball game tonight, so we need to eat and get ready to go.”

Forty-five minutes later, they were rolling into the parking lot at the ball field. The Whitley County Sheriff’s Department team had been a powerhouse for years. It seemed the Corbin Police Department had decided they could do better, but they hadn’t been able to for at least three years. The rivalry was heating up, and every game was harder and hotter than the one before. All the guys had started talking smack to each other, and loudly enough that everyone could hear them, but they did it in a fun way, so the fans in the stands laughed constantly.

That night was no different. “You should watch out for that one right there,” Aaron’s buddy and fellow officer, Ben, said and pointed at Derrick, a city police officer. “He’s the devil in disguise.”

“Why would I be afraid of him?” Aaron yelled, then turned and pointed toward Maisey. “I’m married to his sister!” They all laughed when Maisey stuck her tongue out at him.

Derrick bellowed with laughter and pointed at Maisey. “Look at that tongue! Now I know why you married her!”

Angie, the police department’s only female officer, stepped up behind Derrick and

slapped him in the back of the head with her cap. “Keep it PG, Officer Do Little!”

“Officer Dolittle? Do you talk to the animals?” a deputy named Ken yelled.

“No. I said Officer Do Little, like you have to stand behind him and throw donuts over his shoulder to see him move!” Angie yelled back as everyone laughed.

“We don’t eat donuts!” Ben barked.

“Yeah, but put a pound of candy out on your desk and it’s gone in ten minutes,” Ken added.

“Yeah, boy. I can attest to that,” Aaron yelled. “You gonna talk about food or you gonna play ball?”

It went like that all evening, and by the time the game was over, the sheriff’s department had once again raked the field with the police department and Maisey’s sides hurt from laughing so much. They collected Murielle—a police officer named Ward had a little boy her age, and they were all pretty sure Murielle and the kid were sweet on each other—and they headed home. By the time Aaron pulled the truck into the driveway, Murielle was sound asleep and stretched out across Maisey’s lap. Aaron picked her up and to carry her inside while Maisey locked up the truck and unlocked the front door.

He was busy putting Murielle to bed when Maisey remembered the coat, so she dashed out to her car to get it. Draping it across the back of the living room chair, she took another look at it, then locked the front door and headed to the kitchen to load the dishwasher. She’d just finished when Aaron stepped back into the kitchen. “Have fun tonight?” she asked, her voice soft and low to keep Murielle from waking up.

“Yeah. It’s always fun. I hope you enjoy it.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss it. You guys really put on a show for everybody.”

“We try.” He’d pulled a beer from the refrigerator and turned, then stopped. “Hey, what’s in the bag?”

“Oh, that? It’s a jacket. Actually, it’s more of a short coat. I’ve been looking at it in the window of the consignment store and today I just decided to stop and pick it up.”

Aaron had picked up the hanger, and he pulled the bag upward to look at the garment. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“What?”

“That’s the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen.”

“Seriously? I think it’s adorable!”

“It’s hideous, babe! You’re not really going to wear that, are you?”

“I fully intend to.”

“Maisey, look, I never say anything about anything you wear, but?”

“Oh, come on. It’ll look much cuter on, I promise.”

“You mean you haven’t seen it on?”

“No. I know it’ll fit. I just stopped and picked it up. I didn’t have time to try it on, but I’ll model it for you now if you want.”

“If you’ll take off everything but the coat, I promise I’ll like it.”

“Oh, yeah, right. I’m sure you would.” Maisey took it from his hands, slipped the coat off the hanger, and twirled it over her shoulders to put it on. She slid her right arm in, and then fished for the other one. When her left arm slid into that sleeve, she grasped the lapels and pulled it forward until it settled on her shoulders.

The room went black, as though someone had turned the lights out. Maisey couldn’t figure out what had happened. And then there was a person, their features partially obscured by a hoodie, someone she didn’t recognize, looming over her and yelling without words. There was no sound, but she could see their lips moving, and they were positively terrifying. Was it a man? A woman? She didn’t know, and her heart had started to thump out of control. She tried to back up, but she couldn’t. Something was behind her, and the figure came closer and closer. In an instant, there was the flash of something shiny somewhere near the center of her body and she felt the slice of a knife’s blade as it entered her midsection, felt the warmth of blood on her skin, felt herself sinking as the figure bent over her, still yelling, their face even more hidden. There was a flash of light, and she gasped as she opened her eyes.

“Babe! Babe, are you okay? Maisey? Talk to me, baby! What happened? Are you all right? Maisey, come on. Talk to me.”

“Whaaa, what happened?”

“You just fell out, honey, flat on your back, like you were in a trance. Are you okay? Please, baby, tell me you’re okay?” Maisey stared into his eyes and she could tell he was frightened.

“I don’t know. Somebody... Aaron, somebody stabbed me.”

He peered down at her. “Honey, there’s nobody here but us.”

“No. You don’t understand. Somebody... It was dark, and somebody was coming

toward me, and I saw something flash, and I felt it sink into my skin, and there was something warm and wet on my skin, like blood, and I felt weak and tired and..." She stopped. "Did I say anything?"

"You were mumbling something. I think it was 'no,' but I'm not sure. Can you sit up?"

Maisey let Aaron take her hand and help her to sitting. She didn't get a chance to stand before he bent down, scooped her up, and lifted her in his arms. "I'm okay, really. I think I'm okay," she said as he plopped down on the sofa and held her in his lap.

"Are you sure? We can go to the hospital and have you?"

"No, no. I'm okay." But she wasn't. Something felt funny. What was it? It dawned on her in an instant. "Oh, god."

Aaron swept her hair back and away from her face, then grasped her chin between his thumb and forefinger. "What? What's wrong?"

"The coat."

"What about it?"

"It happened when I put on the coat."

"Do you think it's got a knife stuck through it and it stuck you, or is there something on it or?"

"No. I don't think so. I think..." Her mind was churning. Surely not... "You know how I get those feelings?"

“Yeah. I get them sometimes too.”

“I think it has something to do with the coat.”

His brow wrinkled downward. “I don’t get it.”

“I think it has something to do with the coat, something that happened when it was being worn. Or something that happened to the person who wore it. You know, like we talk about things having residual energy? Maybe the person who wore it had something horrible happen to them.”

“You don’t really think?”

“What am I supposed to think? Aaron, somebody was attacking me. I mean, really attacking me. It was dark, and this person was coming toward me, and they were yelling, and?”

“What were they yelling?”

“I dunno. There was no sound, but I could tell they were yelling. The veins were standing out on their neck, and their mouth was wide open, and they?”

“Could you see their face?”

She thought for a minute, trying to replay what she’d seen in her mind. “No. I mean, yeah, but it’s like it was obscured. Like, like, like maybe I didn’t need to because I already knew who it was.” A chill ran up Maisie’s spine and she felt slightly nauseated. “They were wearing something with a hood. And it was dark. But I got the distinct impression that they were known.”

“Do you think you could’ve just imagined it?”

“No. It was real, as real as you are. Do you not believe me?”

Aaron shook his head. “It’s not that at all. It’s just that... It’s kinda hard to believe, you know?”

“And yet strange things happen all the time. Remember Murielle’s accident?”

“Yes. During our first date. I remember well. You knew something was wrong before we got the call. So yes? I believe you. But how will we ever know?”

Maisey slipped the coat off and laid it carefully on the sofa. “I’ll put it on again tomorrow night and we’ll see what happens.”

“You sure that’s a good idea?”

She shrugged. “You got a better one?”

“No.”

“Then tomorrow night I’ll do it again and we’ll see what happens.” The idea terrified Maisey, but she had to know. And in a weird way, it was exciting.

Weirdly exciting.

CHAPTER TWO

There was no way to keep from thinking about the coat. Even as she went about her day, talking to parents and visiting kids in the state's custody in the local group home, she thought about the coat and what would happen when she put it on again. Maybe it was a fluke. Maybe nothing would happen. But she wanted to make sure Aaron was there and Murielle was sound asleep before she tried again.

By the time she got home, she was flustered. The very first thing she did was to pick up the coat and go through the pockets, but she found nothing. That wasn't surprising. Consignment stores were pretty good about emptying out coat pockets and the like. She remembered a coat drive her office had held for the children of the area one time and how as they'd gone through them at the laundromat where cleaning had been donated, they came across several that had used syringes in them, and some had residue and various odd drug wrappers that gave them a fright. Items brought to consignment stores were gone over carefully for just that reason.

When Aaron and Murielle came in, she was surprised to find that she hadn't even thought about dinner. Nothing had been on her mind except the coat. She knew Aaron could tell how rattled she was, because he announced that they'd go to the pizza place for dinner, a thing that thrilled Murielle. As they headed out the door, Maisie turned and mouthed, Thanks . True to his nature, Aaron smiled at her, then leaned over and gave her a kiss on the cheek. He was the one person in the world who always had her back, and she knew it.

Murielle fussed and fidgeted when Aaron sat her down to do her homework, and Maisie didn't think they'd ever get finished with it. They watched a TV show Aaron

liked, and then it was time for Murielle to head to bed. A story was read, a prayer was said, and the lights were turned out. Maisey and Aaron tiptoed out of the child's room and settled on the sofa. "Now?"

Maisey shook her head. "No. Let's make sure she's asleep. And maybe we should go out in the garage. I'd hate for her to hear us, get up out of bed, and be scared."

"Let's just go out on the back deck. And this time, I want you sitting down. No more falling." Maisey nodded. That wasn't a problem. She really didn't want to fall on the floor again.

They made out like teenagers for a long while until Aaron said, "Okay. We've gotta stop. Otherwise, there's going to be no coat. We'll just be going straight to bed. I'm already in trouble here," he said, looking toward his fly between them.

"No. I want to put it on. Let's go." She took his hand and led him to the door, ignoring the hefty rise in his jeans. When they reached the deck, she picked up the coat. "You wanted me to sit down."

"Yeah. Here." Aaron pushed one of the ottomans that went with the deck furniture out into an open space. "Sit down. I'll help you put it on and we'll see what happens. Do you want me to talk to you if you're?"

"No. I want to experience it and see if I can see a little more, maybe hear something."

"Okay. You ready?"

"Yeah."

"Here we go." Aaron moved behind her and she thrust an arm into the coat. He helped her with the other side and she waited until he'd come back around in front of

her. “Ready?”

In answer, Maisey grabbed the front of the coat and pulled it forward until it fell into place on her shoulders. The same darkness fell, and the same shadowy, shrouded figure appeared before her. Whoever it was had serious anger problems and, just like before, they were yelling something. Maisey listened carefully and finally picked up “not letting” and “ruin,” but she had no idea what the context was. Once again, she could see arms in the coat reaching out, trying to push the figure back. There was the flash of what she’d come to believe was a blade, the instant pain, and the warmth and stickiness of blood. The sleeved hands bent inward toward her view, then extended again, their palms covered in blood. From somewhere in her own personal space a voice cried out, “Why?”

The light from the vintage bulbs strung around the deck seeped into her vision, and she could see Aaron, his face pale. “Babe? Are you back?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m back.” Maisey drew her arms back and let the coat drop to the deck floor.

“Anything else?”

“Yeah.” She recounted to Aaron the things she’d seen and heard. “What do you think? What should I do?”

“The first thing we’re going to do is make a trip to that consignment store and see if we can find out where that coat came from.” Aaron squatted in front of her and took her hands. “If we can find out who brought it in, maybe that will lead us to whoever was wearing it.”

“Okay. That sounds doable.” She felt a little weak and disoriented, but Aaron was right. At least they had a place to start.

CHAPTER THREE

The brightly colored sign on the front of New2You Consignment & Trades was awash in midday sun. “This is the place, huh?” Aaron asked as he slipped his pickup truck into a parking spot across from the store.

“Yeah.” They both got out, and he took her hand as they crossed the street. “Oh, look at that sweater in the window! Isn’t it cute? I wonder?”

“One mystery at a time, babe, okay? I don’t think I can handle two.”

The bell on the door jangled as they stepped inside, and the same lady who’d sold Maisey the coat came into view from the back of the store. “Hi there. Can I help you with something?”

Maisey smiled. “Do you remember me? I bought the coat in the window.”

“Oh, yes! Didn’t have time to try it on. Did it fit?”

“It fit very nicely. This is my husband, Deputy Aaron Friedman. We were wondering... I found something very personal inside the pocket of the coat. Could you tell me where it came from so I could return it to the owner?” Maisey and Aaron had discussed it before they got to the store and agreed that was probably the best story they could use. Otherwise, Aaron would be forced to try to get a search warrant, and trying to justify that with the story of “my wife sees a murder when she puts the coat on” didn’t seem likely to compel a judge to hand him what he’d need.

There was a smile on the woman's face, but Maisey detected a touch of irritation in her voice. "That's impossible. We clean out all the pockets before we sell a garment. Nothing ever gets past us."

"Well, this did. It was in the inside breast pocket, so..." Maisey said, trying to use her best poker face.

"Oh. Well, I wouldn't want to deny a person their personal property. If you'll just bring it back to the store, I'll?"

"No, ma'am. Now that the coat is in my wife's possession, that makes it her responsibility to get the item back to the rightful owner. Handing it over to you would be poor judgment on our part."

The woman eyed him for a minute, then glanced at Maisey before looking back to Aaron. "Okay. Let me look it up. Do you have the tag?"

Maisey nodded. "Yes, ma'am." She handed the tag to the woman.

"Oh. Yes. I know where this came from. I don't even have to look it up."

They waited. Finally, Aaron said, "And that would be..."

"Oh! I'm sorry. The WhitleyCounty Morgue."

Maisey's eyelids flew open so widely that the air hitting her eyeballs actually hurt. "The morgue ? You take clothes from the morgue ?"

Aaron shrugged. "It's not like it sounds, honey. They wind up with perfectly good clothing that comes in on bodies, and when the next of kin doesn't pick it up, they don't want to just throw it away. They're really underfunded, so they bring in what

can be resold and make a little money that way. It only makes sense.”

“But... from the morgue ?” Maisey snipped again.

The lady started again. “Ma’am, as I told you?”

“That’s okay, ma’am,” Aaron assured the woman. “We appreciate you taking time to give us the information. That’s all I need right now. If I think of anything else, I’ll come back and we can talk again.”

Maisey half whispered out, “The morgue ?”

“Come on, Maise. Let’s go,” Aaron said and took her arm. “Thanks again, ma’am,” he called back to the woman as he led Maisey to the front door.

Their feet hit the sidewalk and Maisey wheeled on Aaron. “The morgue ? They’re selling clothes that come from THE MORGUE ?”

“Babe, I know what she’s saying. Sometimes they get bodies in there dressed in really nice clothing, but nobody wants it. This is better than just throwing it away.”

“So they sell haunted clothing ? And they think that’s okay?”

“From where I stand, it’s fine. I mean, who cares?”

“I bought a coat that’s haunted ! I care!” Maisey almost screamed.

“Come on. Get in the truck and we’ll drive down to the morgue.”

Maisey shook her head as he opened her door. “I don’t want to go to the morgue.”

“Hey, you started this. You opened this can of worms, and you’re going to be there when we snap it shut or dump ’em out.” He closed the door and Maisie sat there, shocked.

They were going to the morgue to find the previous owner of her coat. The thought sickened her. But one way or another, she needed answers.

Even if they came from the dead.

“Can’t I just stay in the truck?” she whined as they pulled up outside the coroner’s office.

“No. You’ve got to go in with me. Come on.” He rounded the front of the truck and opened her door, then took her hand and helped her out of her seat. “You’ll like Morgan. He’s a good guy. Very smart. All the ladies love him,” Aaron said with a smirk.

“Oh, very funny.”

“You’ll see.” He held the office door for her and waited to follow her inside. “Anybody home?”

There was a sound from farther into the building and a door opened. A second later, the handsomest man Maisie had ever seen was standing in front of her. “Aaron! What are you up to?”

“Just need to ask you a question or two. Oh, this is my wife, Maisie. Maisie, this is our coroner, Morgan Watters.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Maisie,” the man said and held out a gloved hand, then jerked it back. “My bad. You don’t want to shake that,” he said with a grin. Maisie barely

noticed for staring at him. He had gorgeous, dark eyes, a dark, close-cropped beard, and wavy dark hair pulled up in a man bun. A little tendril hung down here and there, and she could hear the blood swooshing through her veins just from looking at him. To top it off, he had the thickest, sexiest Australian accent Maisey had ever heard. He interrupted her thoughts when he said, “So you’ve got some questions for me?”

“Yeah. So Maisey bought a coat at the consignment store and the lady there said you guys brought it in.”

Morgan nodded. “It’s possible. We do take things in there from time to time after we’ve tried our best to get family members to take them. If we still have them six months later, we take them over there. So what did this coat look like?”

Maisey pulled out her phone and poked around until the picture came up. “It was this one.” She handed the phone to Morgan and waited.

“Oh, yeah. I remember this coat. Bright colors. Very unusual.”

“It sure is,” Aaron muttered under his breath.

“Yeah, came in on a woman in her midtwenties.”

Before she even thought about it, Maisey blurted out, “She was stabbed.”

Morgan’s brow furrowed and he quirked one corner of his mouth upward. “Yeah. How did you know?”

“Lucky guess,” Aaron said before Maisey could respond. “So what can you tell me about her? Was it deemed a homicide?”

“Oh, for sure. Yeah. Let me see if I can pull up her file. I remember the last name but

not the first.” They followed Morgan down the hallway and turned left to step into his office.

“How long ago would you say it’s been?”

“About seven, eight months maybe? Something like that. Someone called an ambulance, but she was already dead when they got there. Had been for a bit. Deputies collected some stuff, but that was about it. It was out behind the ball fields off Creekside Drive, near the tennis courts.” He poked around a little bit. “Here it is. Victoria Hunt.”

“I remember that case. No one was ever arrested.” Aaron had pulled out his tablet and was looking through the department’s case files. “Yeah. Almost eight months ago.”

“Right, right. They brought her in, but I wasn’t here. I was over on the other side of the county at that house fire. Remember that one? Where the mom and two kids died.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” Aaron answered. Maisey did too. Her office had been following the mom and kids, and when it all sifted down, the dad had killed the three of them and set the house on fire, then shot himself. But he’d lived, and he’d been in jail ever since. It had been a dark, sad day for her office.

“So they brought her on in because the deputy who worked the scene said to just go ahead and transport. She was here when I got back.”

“Great. Almost no forensics done at the scene. And the coat was on her?”

“Yep. It wasn’t in really terrible shape. She’d been found sitting up against a stump, so most of the blood had run down into her lap, between her legs, and under her. The coat had a little on it, but not much.”

“And why couldn’t I see that?” Maisey asked, truly puzzled. It should’ve had stains on it, but it didn’t.

“We have chemicals that we use to clean up bloodstains and the like. Tressa cleaned it up.” Before Maisey could ask who that was, Morgan added, “She’s an aide here. Runs errands, cleans things up, stuff like that. She’s really good with cleaning the garments. We made enough last year by selling them to buy some supplies, which really helped us. Every little bit helps.”

“Yeah, like everything else, grossly underfunded,” Aaron said under his breath.

“You know it.”

“So one stab wound to the abdomen and she bled out.”

“Yeah. Abdominal aorta. Didn’t take long.”

“Gotcha. I’ve also got the medical examiner’s notes in here from the autopsy, so I’ll just sit down and read all of them, yours and theirs. And I appreciate you taking the time to talk to us,” Aaron said.

“Not a problem. If I can help, let me know.”

“Thank you,” Maisey said, still not feeling any better about the situation.

“You’re welcome. You two have a good day,” Morgan said with a grin. “I’ve got to get back in here to old Mr.Spiceland. He was cranky in life, and I have no reason to think he’s any different now.”

Aaron laughed. “Get back to it, and thanks again.” Aaron and Maisey made their way to the front door, and Maisey said nothing. Once they were both in the truck, Aaron

turned to look at her. “So?”

“What?”

“What did you think?”

“I think he’s even better looking than you said.”

Aaron rolled his eyes. “No, I mean about the information.”

“Just as I expected. Is there any way I can?”

“See the case file? Oh, you’re absolutely going to see the case file. I’m bringing the actual physical file home tonight and we’ll go over it.”

“Thank you, babe.” Maisy leaned over and gave him a peck on the cheek. “Thank you for believing me.”

“I always believe you. Except when it comes to what you spend on Christmas gifts. You’re one terrible liar when it comes to that stuff.”

“Yeah, but you always like your gifts, right?”

Aaron grinned. “Yep. But if all you gave me was you, naked and in our bed, that would be fine by me,” he said as he drove along.

“Oh, yeah? Well, I’ll just save my money then!” Maisy answered and laughed. Aaron had no idea how much she loved him.

She thought about the young woman as Aaron drove her to her office. Who had loved Victoria Hunt? And who had wanted her dead? Those were the questions she wanted

answered in that moment. But what she wanted most of all was to finally see that murderer's face.

Once they got Murielle to bed, Aaron went back out to his cruiser, got the file, and brought it in. "Does SheriffMcEvers care for you doing this?" she asked.

"Nah. I told her I might have a lead on the case and she was fine with it. You know Carly. She's pretty easy to get along with." Maisie knew that to be true. She and CarlyMcEvers had become good friends, and the two of them, along with her friend CherilynHarrison, got together as often as possible. Carly and Ross, her husband, had a sweet little baby, Belle. Cherilyn had two adorable girls, Maya and Lara, and she and her husband, Shaw, were hoping for another one. They'd also taken on Candace, Shaw's daughter from a previous marriage, and she had grown to be part of the group too. Only Maya and Candace were close in age, but that was fine. Candace, Murielle, and Maya loved playing with Belle and watching out for Lara, who was severely handicapped. Not only did the three women get along great, but they had become excellent babysitting resources for each other.

Aaron opened up the file and started pointing out information to Maisie. She was surprised to see that Victoria had two sisters. Hadn't one of them wanted her coat, especially since she was wearing it when she died? And if not, why not? There was a lot of information in the file to take in, and she knew it wouldn't be a one-night thing. As though he was reading her mind, Aaron said, "I know this is a lot of info, but there's no one working this case right now, so Carly said to keep the file as long as we need to."

"Did she ask you what your lead was?"

"No. She trusts me. And if there's anything I've learned about Carly, she likes a good mystery," Aaron said with a grin. "There's nothing she likes better than getting information out of left field and trying to piece it together so she can nail somebody."

Loves it. I laugh at her and call her JessicaFletcher. Makes her laugh,” he said with a chuckle, referencing the crime mystery show Murder, She Wrote.

“I like one too, as long as I’m not right in the middle of it. Actually, I’d prefer that it was on TV and resolved in under an hour.” Maisey kept looking through the file. It was neat and orderly, and she wondered how many of the deputies had worked on it before and who they were. “Can you tell which of the deputies worked this?”

“Babe, I think everybody had a finger in it at some time. It was a pretty high-profile case until the trail went cold.”

“High-profile? Why?”

“VictoriaHunt was a pageant contestant, remember?”

“I totally forgot!” Maisey remembered it all then. Rumors had flown about who would want the pretty twenty-something dead?twenty-four, according to the file, Maisey noted. But everyone had gone on and on about how sweet she was, and how kind she was, and how they couldn’t understand why anyone would hurt her. “What was that called again?”

“The Miss Southern States Pageant. Said it would be the next big deal, and she was the Kentucky entry. Folks were really cranked up about it. Put them in a bind when they had to find a replacement for her. Gave it to the first runner-up in the Miss Southern States Kentucky Pageant. Every southern state had to have a pageant and then send their winners to the big pageant.”

“And who did they wind up sending?”

“I don’t remember who the runner-up was. Girl out of Elizabethtown, I think.”

“Huh. Yeah, I don’t remember much about that.”

“Yeah, I’m not into that stuff, but I do remember the fuss when they had to come up with a contestant on the fly. Seems like something had happened to the first runner-up and they had to go to the second runner-up or something. I don’t remember. But as I recall, losing her wiped out their hopes of actually having a winner from Kentucky in the big pageant.”

Maisey flipped through the file a bit more. “So where’s the medical examiner’s report?”

“Uh... Here. Take a look.”

Maisey started reading through it. “Looks pretty... average.” She read through it a second time, but nothing stood out. “So do you have a list of suspects in here anywhere?”

“Yeah, but they were all ruled out.”

“Do you have pictures of them?”

“I’m sure we do.” Aaron paged through the file again. “Well, most of them. I don’t think we have pictures of a couple of them, but they were ruled out pretty quickly, so there was no need.”

“Think you could get them?” she asked.

“Oh, I’m sure I could. They were locals, so that won’t be any trouble. We should be able to get their driver’s license photos pretty easily.”

“Good. I want to see them.” She closed the file folder and laid it on the table. “And

now you know what I have to do.”

Aaron groaned. “Not again.”

“It’s the only way we’ll ever get answers.”

“Okay. Let me check on Murielle while you get the coat. I’ll be right back.” Maisey watched him go, thankful that she had a partner who was supportive. She didn’t know what she’d do without him. Then she stifled a giggle when she remembered what she did before she’d met him. It was a lot less fun back then.

She ran to the closet, pulled out the coat, and waited. As soon as he came back into the room, she asked, “Outside again?”

“Yeah, I think that worked pretty well.” Maisey hadn’t realized she was grinning like an idiot. “What’s so funny?”

“Nothing’s funny. Just thinking... Do you have any idea how sexy you are?”

Aaron took the jacket out of her hand, tossed it onto the sofa, wrapped his arms around her waist, and pulled her up against him. “No. Why don’t you tell me?”

“You’re damn sexy. Fucking hot as hell.”

A low chuckle rumbled in his chest. “Oh, yeah? It’s the uniform, isn’t it?”

Maisey couldn’t help the grin that made her cheeks ache. “No. I like you a whole lot better without it.”

“You keep this up and you’re not putting that coat on.”

Maisey sighed. "I feel like I have to."

"Right, right. Okay then." She could hear the frustration in his voice as he pulled his arms away from her and turned toward the back door. "Grab that thing and let's get this over with."

Maisey wanted to just forget about it, grab his hand, and lead him to the bedroom, but she couldn't. Victoria Hunt had died, and they needed to know what had happened to her.

Once she was seated on the ottoman again, she drew on the coat and waited until Aaron was in front of her before she clutched the lapel and pulled it up to rest on her shoulders. Just like before, everything went black, and the figure was there, screaming at her. She could feel Victoria's fear, and the woman was terrified. The dark figure had a hand on her throat, something Maisey hadn't picked up on before, and he was yelling. She caught the same phrases as before, "not letting" and "ruin," but there were other things too. It was confusing, but she was trying to piece it together when the blade flashed and she felt that pain again, watched the arms bend inward, watched them stretch out, and saw the blood on the hands. But then she felt herself sinking, like her knees were buckling, and something hard and bumpy scratched up her back. The dark, shadowy figure was backing away, and she reached toward it, but it disappeared into the darkness just as the light from the vintage bulbs on the deck crept into her consciousness.

As soon as the coat hit the floor, she heard that voice she loved ask, "Maise, you here?"

"Uh, yeah. Yeah, I'm here."

"Anything?"

“Yeah.” It was hard to make sense of it, but she was trying. “Something about not letting me do this to someone.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. And something about how it would ruin something, but I don’t know what. And he said something about a good man.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. But I think the good man is the same person I’m not supposed to do whatever it is to.”

“Which is ...”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to do it again.”

“Not tonight.”

“No. It’s too draining.” Then she remembered something. “Oh, and he said something about it being just a stupid high school something.”

“Like a high school prank, or a high school game?”

Maisey shrugged. “I have no idea.”

Aaron let out a long, exasperated sigh. “I don’t like you doing this.”

“I don’t like doing it either, but every time I do it, I learn a little more, and eventually I’ll figure it out.”

“I hope so. I’d hate to think this was all a waste of your time and energy.”

“Yours too.”

“I’m not worried about me. I’m worried about you .”

Sadness filled her chest. He had enough on his plate. He had a stressful job, a small child, a wife, and a home. He was trying to take care of it all, and she was just adding to it. But a woman had died. If she could help solve that murder and put a killer behind bars, didn’t she owe it to society to do that? “I’m sorry. I’m just adding to your load and I never meant to?”

“No, babe.” Aaron took her hands and squeezed them. “It’s fine. I understand, really. You want to see justice served. That’s what my whole life is about. When I still worked for the FBI in Texas, nothing thrilled me more than finally catching the bad guy and making sure he could never hurt anyone else ever again. I’m glad you feel that kind of responsibility for the people in your community. I just wish it didn’t have to be so hard on you.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve got you.” Maisey leaned out and gave him a soft, sweet kiss on the lips, then pulled back and smiled. “How ’bout I show you how much I love you?”

“With carrot cake?” Aaron wiggled his eyebrows up and down to make Maisey laugh.

“Nope. Something softer and warmer. And maybe even sweeter.”

“I’ll go for that.” He rose from where he’d squatted in front of her and pulled her to standing. “And I expect it to be served in bed.”

Maisey pressed her fingertip to his lips. “That’s my plan.”

CHAPTER FOUR

At Maisey's suggestion, Aaron made a trip to the high school in Corbin to talk to the principal, and he insisted Maisey come along. She wasn't sure how she felt about that, but he felt it would be best, so she decided he might be right and she'd see what happened. The only reason she could come up with was the shadowy figure's comment about high school, but it meant something.

Mrs. Albright invited them into her office and asked them to take a seat, and Maisey felt like she was a sophomore in high school again, about to be railed at by the principal for something she had no part of. "So, what can I do to help you, deputy?"

"We're looking into the death of Victoria Hunt and I wondered if you could answer a few questions."

"I can't think of anything I might have to contribute, but sure. I'll try."

"Thank you. Miss Hunt died about eight months ago. I was wondering if there was anything unusual happening at the school during that time?"

"What on earth could it have to do with her death? She wasn't a student here," Mrs. Albright pointed out.

"Yes, ma'am, but we received a tip that her death might have been related to something going on here during that time."

"Hmmm. Can you refresh my memory with the exact date she died?" When Aaron

told her, she shook her head. “No, I can’t think of anything. I mean, she came here once to talk to the students. Matter of fact, it was about that same time.”

“What was she presenting on?”

“The value of pageants and how they could help young women get scholarships, increase their self-esteem and confidence, things like that.”

“I see. Was there like a big school rivalry, or a problem between a couple of students?” Maisey watched as the teacher shook her head again. There was no indication in her expression that she was being untruthful. “Or maybe someone acting out?”

“Nothing that I can think of.”

“Anything with a teacher? Got fired? Got sick? Got divorced? Maybe?”

“Um, Mr. Skidmore won the lottery. I don’t remember the exact date, but it was close to then.”

“Wow. A lot of money?” Aaron asked. Maisey couldn’t imagine what that had to do with anything.

“Yes. About a hundred and fifty million.”

“Wow,” Maisey whispered under her breath.

Aaron snorted. “Yeah, I’d call that a significant win. Could we talk to him?”

“He’s not here. Not too long after he won the money, he retired.”

“Is there anything else you can think of?” Aaron asked.

Mrs.Albright stood. “No, but if I do, I’ll call you.”

“Thanks. I’d appreciate that. And thank you for your time.” Aaron stood and reached down for Maisey’s hand. When she was standing, he reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a business card. “Please take this. They can find me anywhere.”

“Thank you. Have a pleasant day and good luck.”

“Thanks.” As they left the office, Aaron reached for Maisey’s hand, and they walked up the corridor and out the front door. “Well, that wasn’t the least bit helpful.”

“Yeah, but we had to try.” As soon as she was in the truck and Aaron had closed her door, she started to think. Something about Mr.Skidmore was tickling the back of her mind, but she couldn’t figure out what. Once Aaron was in the truck, Maisey turned to him. “Is Mr.Skidmore still around here? And do you think you could get a picture of him?”

The corners of Aaron’s mouth turned down and his chin wrinkled as he thought. “I have no idea. I guess we could check.”

“I think that would be a good idea.”

“Why? You thinking something?”

Maisey shook her head. “No. Just curious.”

“Then I’ll find out.” Aaron slipped the truck into gear and pulled out of the visitor’s space in the school parking lot.

When Aaron dropped her off at her office, Maisey's head was spinning. Why did she get a weird feeling when she thought about Mr. Skidmore, a man she not only didn't know but hadn't ever seen? It didn't make sense. Then she chuckled.

If there was anything she'd learned, it was that nothing had to make sense in order for it to be important.

By the time Maisey got home, Aaron had been home with Murielle for a couple of hours and had even made dinner. "Oh, wow! I feel like a queen!" she said as she kissed him on the cheek.

"You are a queen. My queen. Dinner in about thirty minutes. Murielle, are you working on your homework?" he called out.

A little voice answered from down the hallway, "Yes, but I don't get it."

Maisey dropped her bag in the chair by the door. "I'll go help her."

"Thanks, babe." She crossed the room and watched as the muscles in his shoulders bunched and released while he stirred whatever was in the pot. Just the sight of him there made her tingle all over.

Murielle was struggling with a math problem, so they sat and talked about it, with Maisey showing her several ways to understand it. They'd been at it for fifteen minutes when Murielle sang out, "Oh! I get it!" and worked the problem flawlessly.

"You're so smart," Maisey said as she reached for Murielle, pulled the child's head to her, and kissed the top of it.

"I love you, Mama Maisey," Murielle crooned.

“I love you too, sweetie. Got more math problems?”

By the time Aaron called them for dinner, Murielle’s homework was finished. They ate, talked, and laughed throughout dinner. After a little TV, it was time for Murielle to hit the sack. Aaron read to her while Maisey lounged across the end of Murielle’s bed. When the story was finished, they kissed her goodnight, first Aaron and then Maisey. As Maisey hugged the child, Murielle whispered, “I miss my mommy, but I love you so much, Mama Maisey.”

“I love you too, doll baby. And I know you miss your mommy. But I’m always here for you. You know that.”

“I know. Thank you.”

“Thank you for being my little girl! Now, get some sleep so you’ll be ready to go in the morning.”

“Okay. Night.”

“Night, baby.” Maisey stepped to the doorway, switched off the light, and closed the door.

Aaron was sitting on the sofa when Maisey reached the living room and he looked up, his eyes sad. “She told you she misses Bailey, didn’t she?”

Maisey sighed and sat down beside him. “Yeah.”

“Does that bother you?”

“No. Of course not. Bailey was her mom, and she gave her life for her child. Murielle remembers all of that. She’ll never forget it. She knows her mom loved her, and I

would never take that away from her. I mean, would I like for her to call me Mom? Sure. But if we ever have one of our own, it'll call me mom, and she'll follow suit. I know she will."

"Yeah, I'm sure that's right." Aaron leaned forward and picked up a folder from the coffee table's worn wooden surface, then opened it. "Okay, I managed to find a picture of Mr.Skidmore. Looks like a pretty average guy." He handed Maisey the picture, and he was definitely right?Mr.Skidmore looked just like you'd expect a high school teacher to look. "He still lives here, but he retired from teaching, bought a house out in the county, and moved out there."

"What does he do now?"

Aaron shrugged. "I dunno. What would you do if you won a hundred and fifty million dollars?"

Maisey shrugged at that question. "I dunno. I mean, I have everything I need and want right here."

Aaron smiled and snatched a kiss from her lips. "Right answer! So here's all the information we have on Mr.Skidmore." He handed Maisey a sheet of paper and she skimmed over it.

VinceSkidmore. Forty-nine. Taught chemistry at the high school for twenty-three years. It was the only place he'd ever taught. He was a widower. His wife, Amelia, had been killed in a car accident years earlier. In addition, he had a son, Colin, who'd been eight when his mother died. There wasn't a lot of information on the boy. "Do you know how old his son is now?"

"Looks like he's nineteen. Think that's relevant?"

“Maybe.” Why did a shiver run up and down her spine when she heard Colin Skidmore’s name? Poor kid had lost his mother, just like Murielle had. “Were there any interviews with any of the kids at the school? Vince’s students? Friends of Colin? What about Victoria’s friends? And when exactly was Victoria at the school compared to when Mr. Skidmore won the lottery?”

Aaron looked lost. “Wait... what? Why does that have anything to do with anything?”

That seemed simple enough to Maisey. “They’re the only significant occurrences anywhere near the time Victoria died. And what about her phone records?”

Aaron reached into the folder and pulled out a sheet. “Odd that you’d ask. There were several calls to her phone from a burner phone over the two weeks or so before she died, but we were never able to find out who it was or where they were calling from. And the phone calls all lasted less than thirty seconds.”

“Long enough for someone to threaten her.”

“Yeah, I remember thinking that at the time.”

“Wait! Here’s a call, one of the very last ones, and it was on the day she died. From that number. And it lasted for almost two minutes. That’s different.”

“It is. Looks like she made two calls after that. One was to her sister. Just a few seconds, so apparently her sister didn’t answer. The other was to the sheriff’s department. We pulled our logs and saw that at the time that call was made, we got one at the department and no one spoke. It just lasted for a few seconds and they hung up.”

“So whoever called her, she called her sister and the sheriff’s department after they’d

called.” Victoria had been afraid and she’d felt threatened. That was the only thing that made sense. “She called her sister, but she has two sisters. Which sister?”

“Let’s see... Augusta. She lives here. The other sister, Lenore, lives in Parkersburg.”

“West Virginia?”

“Yeah.”

“And Lenore couldn’t have helped her because she was too far away, so she called Augusta.”

“I’m guessing that was it.”

“Did anybody talk to Augusta?”

“Yeah.” Aaron looked over some notes. “She was at a movie with a friend, so she didn’t answer her phone. Had it on airplane mode.”

“Well, at least she’s polite when she’s at the movies.” The only thing worse than a phone going off in the movies was one going off at a wedding or a funeral. “And Victoria didn’t leave a message?”

“No. We actually checked her phone records and she wasn’t lying. There was no voicemail from that call.” He stopped for a minute before he asked, “I’m guessing you’re going to put the coat on again tonight?”

Maisey sighed and slumped back into the sofa. “I don’t think I can. I’m exhausted.”

“Yeah, and you look it too. Let’s pack it in. This will all be here tomorrow, and she won’t be any more dead then than she is right now.”

“That’s true. I’m beat.” She hated to pass up the chance, but he was right. Once you’re dead, you don’t get any deader.

CHAPTER FIVE

Work was crazy. Maisey had two families who were in danger of losing their children, and most of the problems stemmed from unemployment. After looking for something herself, she called a friend at the state career office and asked if they could help. One couple didn't even have transportation, so she picked them up and took them to the office, then drove them back. Hopefully at least one of them could get a job and they'd find a way to keep their family together.

But all day long, even though she was busy, she thought about the coat. It felt like she was missing something, but what? All they knew was the victim's name and that she'd been stabbed. Otherwise, they knew nothing. Could it have been one of the other pageant contestants? Someone who was jealous? But for reasons she couldn't understand, she got the impression that the murderer was a man.

Her phone pinged just before four thirty and she checked the screen.

Hey, baby, it's BOGO at the Burger Barn today. Want me to pick up dinner?

Maisey smiled. She had one of the considerate ones, and they were few and far between.

That would be so great. Thanks, babe. Love you.

The dots on the screen wiggled and she smiled even broader.

Anything for my girl. XOXOXO

Three forms later, she was finished with paperwork and started to gather her things up. Her bag was tossed into the passenger seat, and her water bottle fit perfectly in the cup holder. As she drove along, she thought about the game earlier in the week, burgers for dinner, and suddenly realized that she had stopped her car right in front of the coroner's office. Well, this is weird, she told herself as she sat there for a few seconds. But for some reason, it felt like she should go inside, so she climbed out and headed in through the front door.

"Be right there," a voice called out, and in less than a minute, Morgan came into view. "Oh! Maisey! Good to see you. Can I help you with something?"

"I don't know. It feels like..." She wanted to say, It feels like you forgot to tell me something, but instead, she answered, "...there was something I should've asked you when I was here the other day."

Like magic, Morgan said, "You asked if she was stabbed, but when I said she was, you didn't ask with what."

No, I didn't ask. I said she was stabbed and you said I was right. Not the same thing, she thought. "You're right. I didn't, and I was hoping you could tell me."

"I'm no medical examiner, but from what I could tell, it was a large blade. Relatively speaking, that is. Like a hunting knife. Maybe a Bowie knife."

"Hmmm. That's interesting." Maisey hadn't gotten a look at the knife yet, but she wondered if his theory would be proven right when she did. And she had no doubt she would eventually see it.

"Yes. Use of a knife like that would suggest that it wasn't an impulsive kind of thing. Whoever did it planned to do it. Either that, or they had some kind of job that required them to carry a knife like that. And since we don't live near the ocean and

don't work on commercial fishing vessels, I think that's unlikely. Most likely a hunter, unless it was bought for the express purpose of killing her."

"I'll give that some thought. Thanks, Morgan. I appreciate it."

"Anytime. Glad to help."

As soon as she sat down in the car, Maisey thought about what he'd said. Every word confirmed what she'd intuited from the beginning. Whoever killed Victoria had set out to do it. It wasn't just an argument gone wrong. The situation was designed for exactly what had happened?she'd been lured there.

Murielle was sitting on the porch floor, her legs dangling over the front edge, when Maisey pulled up to the house. The little girl had her plastic horses and two potholders. "Hey, honey. You playing with your ponies?"

"Uh-huh."

"What are the potholders for?"

"They're the saddle blankets."

"Oh, well, that's pretty smart. Daddy has burgers?"

"Uh-huh. Do I have to come in and eat?"

"Yes, ma'am. Let's go." Maisey waited until Murielle was standing, then helped her pick up the horses and other things she'd laid out.

They chatted all through dinner, but Maisey was distracted. She had to put on the coat later. That was the only way they'd ever figure out what had happened. The three of

them played four rounds of Go Fish and watched a cartoon on a streaming service before time for Murielle to go to bed. With a kiss on the forehead, she told her little stepdaughter good night and let Aaron tuck the child in while she made her way to the bathroom.

Maisey brushed her teeth, brushed her hair, and splashed some water on her face. As she stood there, she gazed at herself in the mirror. “I really am a weirdo,” she whispered to herself. The first time she’d realized she had some kind of strange power was in junior high school. Her best friend, Valerie, had been hit by a car, but the night before, Maisey had told her mother, “I don’t know what to do, Mom. Valerie’s going to get hit by a car.”

She remembered the look her mother had given her. “What? What are you talking about?”

“I can just feel it, Mom. She’s going to get hit by a car.”

MollyKendall had stared at her, frowning the whole time. “Maisey, that’s a horrible thing to say. I hope you don’t say that to her. How awful.” Then she simply walked away and left Maisey standing there, miserable.

I hope you don’t say that to her , Maisey remembered her mother saying. Maybe she shouldn’t. It was probably just a silly thing, right? Nothing to worry about.

Until a little after four the next afternoon, when she, Annie, and Stephanie had been playing basketball in the school gym and heard sirens. A sick feeling grew in the pit of Maisey’s stomach as they ran toward the door. There, in the street, was Valerie, her leg bent at an impossible angle, and a woman standing beside a small car, screaming and crying. She remembered standing there, unable to move, her whole body shaking as she looked at her friend lying on the pavement.

But when she got home, her mother met her at the door. “Maisey, where were you when Valerie was hit by the car?”

Word travels fast, she’d thought in that moment, then turned to her mother. “Why? Do you think I pushed her or something so I would be right?”

“Maisey! You go to your room right now and don’t you ever say anything like that again!” Maisey turned to drag herself down the hallway when her mother called out, “And you didn’t answer me. Where were you?”

“I was in the gym. With Annie and Stephanie. You can ask them. They’ll tell you.” She wanted to ask how Valerie was and how her mother had found out, but she was too angry, afraid, and sad. She might’ve been able to help Valerie if she hadn’t listened to her mother and had told her friend what she thought was about to happen. Maisey vowed to herself that it would be the last time she didn’t warn someone when she had a chance.

That had been twenty-five years earlier, and she still felt the pain of that criticism from her mother, even though Molly had acquiesced later on and acknowledged that Maisey did indeed have a gift. As for Valerie, she’d spent three weeks in the hospital and another six months in therapy and secondary surgeries before she was finally able to walk. Even then, her gait was never the same. When she’d limped down the aisle at graduation, it broke Maisey’s heart. She could’ve stopped that, and she hadn’t.

This time, the horrible thing had already happened, and Victoria Hunt seemed to be reaching out to her from the grave, begging her to find the man responsible for her murder. At least Maisey thought it was a man. She supposed it could be a woman, but she didn’t think so.

A voice cut through her silent ruminations and a pair of strong arms wrapped around her from behind. “Hey, you okay?”

“Yeah. Just thinking about stuff.”

“Planning to put on the coat tonight?”

“Yes. If that’s okay with you.”

She let Aaron spin her, and he smiled down into her face. “Of course it’s okay with me. Hell, I know you well enough to know that you’d do it anyway even if it wasn’t okay with me. But I want you to do what you think you need to do.”

“Then I need to put on that coat.”

“Okay. Let’s go out on the deck like before. That seemed to work well.” She let him take her hand and lead her toward the back door, stopping to pick up the coat on the way out.

The ottoman was right where they’d left it the time before, so she sat down, making a mental note that the outdoor furniture needed new cushions. Maisie reached for the coat but before he turned it loose, Aaron sighed and looked down into her eyes. “I know this is scary for you. I hate that you feel like you have to do this.”

“But I do, and you know I do.”

“Right.” He loosened his grip on the coat, and Maisie took it from his hands.

She slipped it onto her arms, then waited until he was in front of her and ready to grab her if anything happened. A couple of deep breaths and she was ready. “Okay. Here we go.” Hesitantly, she pulled the coat forward by its lapels and let it settle on her shoulders.

Total darkness. No, wait?there were lights off in the distance. Security lights maybe?

The figure was in front of her, pushing her, yelling at her, and she caught the same phrases as before, with a few more words. Concentrate! she told herself through her panic, the panic she felt from Victoria. Just as the blade disappeared into her flesh, she took a good, long look.

The blade was bigger, just as Morgan had guessed. She made note of its length and shape so she could look for it later. The hand holding it was obviously male. It was bonier than most women's fingers and had knobby knuckles. There was something else she noticed too.

It was not an old hand. It was someone young.

Just as she felt herself sinking, the roughness of the tree stump riding up her back, she whispered out, "Why?"

And the figure growled back, "If you do the right thing, you'll ruin everything."

Suddenly, there was light from the vintage bulbs shining in her eyes and Aaron was right there in front of her. "You okay, babe?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine."

"Did you see anything else?"

Maisey took a deep breath and let it out slowly before she answered. "I think I need to go inside. Sit down. Get some water."

"No problem. Let's go." Aaron helped her to her feet and kept an arm around her waist until they got to the sofa. Once she was settled there, he grabbed a bottle of water from the refrigerator, twisted off its cap, and held it out to her. "There ya go."

“Thanks.” Maisey took a long, deep swig and felt some kind of normalcy creeping into her being. “That’s much better.”

“So you saw something else?”

“Yeah. The knife. Morgan said he thought it was a pretty good-sized blade and?”

“When did you talk to Morgan?”

“I stopped by there today.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. He said he’s no medical examiner, but it wasn’t a pen knife or a pocketknife. It was something a lot larger.”

“Gotcha. And could you hear anything else?”

“Yeah. Just as Victoria was dying, she asked why it was happening.”

“And?”

“It was definitely a male voice. It was definitely a male hand on the handle of the knife. And it was definitely young. He said, ‘If you do the right thing, you’ll ruin everything.’

“What does that mean?” Aaron pondered aloud.

“I have no idea. But that makes me ask... Did Victoria have a boyfriend?”

“Yeah. She did. But he had an ironclad alibi for that evening.”

Maisey let out a frustrated sigh. “Do you think we could talk to him anyway?”

“Sure. I think he’s still around here.”

“Good.” Maybe the boyfriend could shed some light on what had happened, because at the rate she was going, it would take the rest of her life to piece it together.

CHAPTER SIX

When Aaron called Maisey mid-morning the next day, he told her he'd found the boyfriend. "I think we should pay him a visit."

"Oh, yeah. Where does he live?"

"No, I'm thinking we'll go to the place where he works. And you'll enjoy it." That was certainly a weird thing for Aaron to say, and she wondered what would make him say that.

They pulled up in front of a building with a huge red and gold sign on the front. "Kendall's Furniture?"

"I wondered if you were related."

"I am. He's my Uncle Bill." A bell tinkled when they opened the door and in less than a minute, a man came into view.

His eyes went wide and he laughed. "Hey, Maisey! How ya doin'?"

"I'm good. This is my husband, Aaron Friedman."

"Deputy," the younger man said in greeting and held out a hand, which Aaron took.

"Babe, this is my cousin, Will."

“Pleasure to meet you,” Will said.

Aaron nodded. “Same here. So we need to ask you about somebody. Won’t take more than a minute,” Aaron said, and Maisey watched Will’s face go from happy and welcoming to sour and skeptical in a nanosecond.

“Oh, please don’t tell me this is about Victoria,” Will said on a groan.

Aaron nodded slightly. “Actually, yeah. It is.”

“But I already told everybody everything I knew, which wasn’t much. I was here, helping unload a truck, when it happened.”

“It said in the interview that they asked you if anything had been bothering Victoria, and you said she’d seemed preoccupied, but she said nothing was wrong.”

Will nodded. “That’s right. Every time I asked, she just brushed it off. Said she was tired from all the travel.”

“You didn’t travel with her?” Aaron asked.

“No. Dad’s going to want to retire soon enough, and I need to be ready to take over the business. If something is going on here, I’m expected to be here.”

“You’re sure nothing like your brother,” Maisey said with a snort.

Will shook his head and frowned. “Oh, hell no. Nothing like Ward. Good for nothin’ asshole.”

Aaron glanced at Maisey. “Got his high school girlfriend pregnant, flunked out of the army, couldn’t hold a job at a burger joint,” Maisey explained. “The boy’s not

stupid.”

“No. Just lazy,” Will added.

Aaron made an attempt to bypass more talk of Ward. “Okay. So you didn’t travel with her. Where had she been when she was killed?”

“Nowhere. She was doing stuff here in town or in the immediate vicinity. She’d been speaking at schools and colleges. Went to the University of the Cumberland one day, over to Laurel County High School, and went to Whitley County another day. Matter of fact, I think Whitley County was the last one before... before it happened.”

Now Maisey had some questions. “Did she say anything about something happening there?”

“Not really. But I do remember her saying she had to go back to talk to the principal.”

Aaron blurted out, “That wasn’t in the file.”

“Yeah. I just remembered it one morning. I was thinking back, trying to remember if she’d said anything that would give me a clue.”

For some reason, that seemed very significant to Maisey. “So you don’t know why she needed to go back?”

“No. She didn’t say. I asked her, ‘Why? Did you forget something?’ She said, ‘Something like that.’ I have no idea what that meant.”

An uneasy feeling swept over Maisey. “No idea?”

“Nope.”

“And she went back?”

“I don’t know. That was the morning of the day she was killed. But I thought it was weird that she’d forgotten or lost something there. It had been a couple of weeks since she’d been there. I would’ve thought she would’ve realized it was missing before then.”

Maisey could feel her stomach clench, and she knew Aaron was probably thinking the same thing she was. “A couple of weeks, huh?” Aaron asked.

“Yeah. Something like that.”

Maisey forged on. “Have you talked to her sisters?”

“I talked to them at the funeral. Augusta said she’d gotten a call from Torie the night she died, but Augusta didn’t answer it. Said she was somewhere with a friend and didn’t have the ringer on.”

Aaron nodded. “Yeah. At the movies.”

“Right. That was the week ‘Freaky Fear’ was released. I think I was the only person on the planet who didn’t get to see it.”

“You can’t think of anyone who’d want to hurt her?” Maisey asked.

“No. Not a soul. She was sweet and kind. She never hurt anybody in her life and wouldn’t. Torie had trouble swatting a fly, so it wasn’t her. Hurting things or people just wasn’t in her skill set. She’s just like Victoria.”

Maisey nodded. “And how are you doing with all this?”

“How do you think?” Will’s face turned glum. “I was crazy mad in love with her. I’d already bought a ring and I was planning to take her to dinner on her birthday a couple of weeks later and ask her to marry me.”

It had to be hard, and Maisey felt horrible for him. “I’m sorry. I know you miss her.”

“You don’t understand. I was a fat, geeky, unpopular kid. I only had a couple of friends. I never thought she’d give me the time of day, but when we met, it was like something clicked. I couldn’t believe a woman that beautiful could possibly be interested in me, but she asked me out the first time. I would’ve done anything for her. I wish I could’ve protected her that night, but I can tell you that I gladly would’ve died in her place.” His voice broke as he whispered, “She was everything to me.”

Maisey hugged her cousin and he clung to her. His heart was broken and in many ways, it would never mend. She and Aaron hadn’t even been dating when he’d had a wreck in his cruiser, and she could still remember the feeling of panic in her chest when she found out he was injured and in the hospital. “I’m so sorry, Will. If there’s anything we can do...”

He straightened, dropped his arms from around Maisey, and glared at Aaron. “Find them. Find the asshole who killed her. I don’t care who it is?man, woman, choir boy, girl scout, I don’t care. Just please, please find them and make them pay for what they’ve done to her, to me, and to our families.”

“We’re trying, buddy. We really are. Hey, why don’t you come over for dinner some evening? I can grill, Maisey can come up with some sides, and we can sit around and shoot the shit. I’d love to hear some things about her when she was younger,” Aaron said with a grin.

Will seemed to come back to himself a little. “You’re on. I’ve got a few tales that’ll

turn her scarlet in a hot second.”

“You wouldn’t,” Maisey hissed through gritted teeth.

“So, there was this one time when we were all going down to the swimmin’ hole,” Will started.

“NO! Time to go!” Maisey shouted and grabbed Aaron’s arm.

“No, wait, I wanna hear this,” he said, laughing.

“No. We’ve gotta go. Bye, Will. We’ll let you know if we find out anything.”

“You know I’m gonna tell that story!” Will shouted after them.

“Better not!” Maisey yelled back.

Aaron was still laughing when they got into the car. “So what’s the story with the swimmin’ hole?”

“I’m not saying, and you’ll never find out.”

“Will’s gonna tell me.”

“He’d better not.” It was truly humiliating, and she had no intention of Aaron ever finding out about that.

“Oh, come on, Maise! You’ve gotta tell me now!”

“No. I’ll never tell you that story. You hush. But now we know she was going to go back to the high school for something.”

“Yep. I wish she’d told him why, or left her sister a message. So, about the swimmin’ hole...”

“No. Not now, not ever.” She meant it. And if she ever suspected Will had told Aaron the story, he was going to join his girlfriend in the grave. She’d see to it personally.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Even though she hadn't told Aaron yet, she had already decided what the weekend would bring. Bailey's parents wanted to spend time with Murielle, so she was going to make arrangements for the little girl to go there for the weekend so she and Aaron would be alone. He didn't have the duty for the weekend, so that meant she could put on the coat several times a day until she got the information she needed. That was if she could live through it.

They'd no more than waved goodbye to Murielle on Friday evening when Aaron turned to Maisey and grinned. "So did you do this to give us some time alone?"

"Of course." Resting her forearms on his shoulders, she leaned in and gave him a kiss. "And I did it so I could do more work on the case."

He rolled his eyes. "How did I know you were going to say that?"

"Because you know me so well!"

"Can we at least fool around a little before you go all 'Murder, She Wrote' on me?"

Maisey laughed. "Of course!"

Two hours later, Aaron rolled off Maisey and onto his back beside her, then threw a forearm up and over his eyes. "Whew, woman, you're a hellcat in the sack!"

"So now you're complaining?"

“I am not complaining! Not at all!” Rolling to his side to face her, he gave her a little peck on the cheek and threaded his fingers through hers as her hand lay on her belly. “I felt so bad when we talked to your cousin the other day, and I remembered how I felt when you and Murielle were taken. I was terrified. I can’t imagine how much worse I would’ve felt if that asshole had killed one or both of you. It would’ve been unbearable.”

“Yeah, I was thinking about when you had that wreck in your cruiser, even before we were dating, and how badly that scared me.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You were scared?”

“Yeah! I mean, I didn’t know you that well, but I already had feelings for you, and if you’d?”

“You already had feelings for me? You never told me that.” He lifted their clasped hands and kissed the back of hers. “I had feelings for you too. I just didn’t quite know what to do with them.”

“Remember the doped-up phone call you made to me?” Maisey asked with a chuckle.

“Yeah. I do. And I remember you teasing me about it. Was that anything like the story with the swimmin’ hole?”

“NO!” Maisey shuddered. “No, nothing like it. You called me. I was one person. When that happened, there were probably two dozen...” And she stopped. She just couldn’t go on. It had been the most humiliating thing that had ever happened to her, and she’d finally managed to forget it. “The only person you were embarrassed in front of was me.”

He pulled away and laid his arm out so she could curl into his embrace. Once her

cheek was on his chest, she sighed as his arm tightened around her, and he kissed her forehead before he whispered, “I won’t ask you about it again. I can see it really upsets you, and I don’t want that.”

Tears filled her eyes. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Don’t cry. I like a laugh like everybody else, but I’m not cruel.”

“No. You’re not. You’re a good man.”

“And I’ve got an idea for what we can do tomorrow.”

“Yeah? Something special?”

His voice was sarcastic when he said, “Oh, yeah.”

She waited as long as she could stand before she snapped, “What? What are we doing?”

“Patience, baby,” he said and patted her cheek. “I’m taking you to meet VinceSkidmore.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Every time Maisey heard Skidmore's name, she felt queasy. She didn't even know the man, and something told her she didn't want to.

After they'd gotten up, showered, and dressed, Aaron took her to one of the local pancake places for breakfast before they set out to find Vince Skidmore. It was hard to carry on a conversation, though, because of a group of boys sitting two booths away. They were loud and rowdy, and she was getting tired of listening to them when Aaron stood. Oh, shit. Here it comes, she told herself and silently prayed that he didn't knock the shit out of one of them.

"Hey, fellas, you're getting kinda loud."

"We paid for our food, and we can do whatever we want," one of them popped off. There was a beat of silence before she heard the same kid say, "Sorry, officer. Didn't realize we were bothering anybody." Yep. Just as I thought, she laughed to herself. He'd flashed that badge and they'd shut the hell right up.

"Mind if I have a seat?" she heard Aaron ask, and she crept around the table and slipped into the other side of the booth so she could see what was going on. Hell, he'd sat down in the booth with them! It was hard to keep from laughing aloud.

"Uh, no, sir. Go right ahead." After he already has, she told herself, shaking with pent-up laughter. Like he was going to wait for your permission!

"I just wanted to ask you something. Figured you might know. You go to Whitley

County, right?"

"Nope. We graduated last year," another boy said. "Me and Hank are going to vocational school for auto mechanics," he said and pointed to yet another gangly youth. "And Royce here is going into the army."

"Oh! Well, congratulations, Royce. Sounds like the three of you have your lives figured out. What about you, hoss?" he asked and pointed to a fourth one.

"My daddy owns an excavating company, and I'm going to work for him. Family business and all," the kid said.

"Gotta love our local businesses, right?" Aaron said, reached over, snatched a fry off Royce's plate, and popped it into his mouth. The boy didn't say a word. "So, I was just wondering... I've got a classic car for sale. Fifty-seven Chevy. Red and white, red carpet, red and white tuck and roll upholstery. All factory stuff. And there's a guy here who wants to buy it. Said he can pay cash, but I dunno. He was a teacher at the high school. I was wondering if you could tell me if he was for real. I really don't want to waste my time with a poser, know what I mean?" The boys nodded. "Name's Skidmore. VinceSkidmore."

Two of the kids started laughing, and one snorted. The one whose name hadn't come up, the first one to speak, said, "Oh, yeah. Mr.Skidmore. He's definitely good for it."

Aaron cocked his head slightly and let his eyebrows rise. "Oh, yeah? Why's that?"

"Motherfucker won?"

"Language. There are ladies present," Aaron said and pointed to Maisey, so she smiled and waved from her seat in the booth.

“Oh, sorry, sir. Didn’t mean no disrespect. Uh, Mr.Skidmore won the lottery. So unless that dickhead?” She saw Aaron shake his head again. “Um, stupid son of his spent it all, he’s loaded.”

“His stupid son?”

“Yeah. Colin. He’s a real...” The boy leaned in and whispered something. It was all Maisie could do to keep from laughing.

“You think he spent all his dad’s money?”

“I dunno. That’s a lotta money,” Hank said, and the other boys nodded.

“How much was it?”

“I heard it was a hunnert and fitty million,” Royce answered.

Aaron acted surprised. “Wow. That would buy a lot of porn magazines.” Maisie laughed to herself. Yep, Aaron knew teenaged boys. That would be the first thing they’d plunk money down for.

“Uh, it would buy you the women so you could make your own porn magazine!” the kid with the excavating company said. Well, I see who’s the entrepreneur of the group , Maisie thought, still laughing internally.

Aaron nodded. “True. But Mr.Skidmore... Pretty good guy? Good teacher, good person?”

“Well, okay teacher,” the first kid answered. “Liked to do experiments that little kids would do. Said he was keeping it simple because he didn’t think we were ready for anything that took brain power.”

Ouch! Maisey thought. What a thing for a teacher to say to a bunch of high school kids!

“But he’s a good person, right?”

Excavator boy shrugged. “I guess. Some of the girls said he gave them the creeps, but that’s all. Said they could feel him staring at them from behind.”

Every hair on Maisey’s body rose. That would give me the creeps too , she heard her brain whisper.

“But you think he’d take good care of the car if I let him buy it?” Aaron asked.

“Oh, yeah. I mean, he was neat and tidy and all. Dressed nice enough. Had a nice house here in town, but I heard they bought a big one out in the county after he won the lottery,” Hank said.

“Good enough. Well, I thank you for the info, and hope you guys do well for yourselves. And your name? I didn’t catch it,” he said toward the boy who’d spoken first.

“Nate. And that there,” he said, pointing at his excavating company friend, “is Troy.”

“Nate, Troy, Royce, Hank, nice meeting you. If you ever need anything and I can help you, don’t hesitate to call me.” She watched as Aaron took business cards from his pocket and handed them to the kids.

“So if we have a DUI...” Troy started.

“You’re going to jail. Don’t even bother.” Aaron was grinning when he said it, but she knew he meant what he said. Zero tolerance. No question about it.

As he slipped back into the booth beside her, he leaned over to whisper to her. “Was I slick or was I slick?”

“Oh, yeah. Slick, baby. Slippin’ and slidin’ all through that little interrogation. Made me proud,” Maisey said, nibbling on her toast. “Especially that comment about the porn magazines. Perfect touch.”

Aaron’s grin was a mile wide. “Good. Now we know a little more about the Skidmores. I think it’s about time to go find out for ourselves. Eat up. We need to get going. I have a feeling it’s gonna be a long day.”

Everything Aaron had heard and told Maisey was true. The house was crazy huge. She remembered the land from when she was a kid, and that was not the house that originally sat on the acreage. It was brand new, and it was quite fabulous.

“Wow,” Aaron said as he stepped out of the car and gently pressed the door closed. Maisey watched and did the same. “This is really something.”

“I’ll say.”

“Come on. Let’s go see if?” He stopped and threw a finger up to his lips.

Arguing.

Two male voices were snapping back and forth at each other, and it only took her a minute to figure out who was who.

“But it’s an investment! These things only get more valuable with time!”

“It’s a car. The minute you drive it off the lot, it loses value.”

“Not one of these! They actually go up. And just think how much fun it’ll be to drive.”

“Just think how much fun it’ll be to wrap it around a tree and kill yourself!”

“Oh, I’d be careful in that baby.”

“Do you know how much that thing costs?”

“Yes. I know. And it’s worth it.”

“Almost a half million!”

“It’s not like we don’t have it!”

“ We don’t have anything! I have the money! It’s mine, and I have no intention of pissing it away on a stupid car.”

“Yeah, but if it was a private flight to Belize with a hooker, bet he’d lay out the money for that,” Maisey whispered to Aaron, who quirked a corner of his mouth up and nodded.

The arguing went on, and finally, Aaron whispered, “Let’s go.” He marched straight to the door and rang the bell.

The door popped open and before them stood a small Asian woman, dressed all in pale blue with a white apron. “May I help you?” she asked, her diction perfect.

“Yes. I’d like to talk to Mr.Skidmore, please. I’m DeputyAaron Friedman, Whitley County Sheriff’s Department.”

“Please, just step inside and I’ll tell him you’re here.”

As she walked away, Maisey and Aaron looked around. There were expensive paintings all around, sculptures, beautiful chandeliers, heavy, gorgeous carpets. A staircase swept upward on their right and ended at the balcony above that overlooked the foyer. Aaron whispered, “Wow.”

“Yeah. Wow is right.” It was total sensory overload, and Maisey could barely stand it. There was just too much going on with the decor.

A man, not a lot taller than Maisey and a little thick in the midsection, stepped into the foyer. “Yes, hello, I’m VinceSkidmore. Is there something I can help you with, officer?”

“That’s deputy, sir, and yes. I was wondering if you could answer a few questions for me. Now, let’s see,” Aaron said, looking at a little notebook he kept in his pocket and flipping the pages forward and back. “We’re in the process of investigating the death of VictoriaHunt. New evidence has come to light, and we’re asking questions of everyone we can think of.”

“Certainly, but I didn’t know her. I mean, I knew who she was, but I didn’t know her personally,” Mr.Skidmore said.

“Did you attend her talk at the school just a few weeks before she died?”

“Uh, no. I had a planning period, and I was in the middle of grading tests, so I stayed in my room. Besides, it was more for the female students. Now if you’ll?”

“Did you have any problems with anybody at the school?” Aaron asked.

“Uh, do you mean teachers, parents, or students?”

“Yes,” Aaron said decisively.

The older man sighed. “Well, there were the usual class clowns, and the typical non-conformists. Had a few parents who were at the school constantly, trying to get teachers to give their slacker kids good grades so they could pass. As for the staff, I never had a problem with anybody. We all got along, insofar as I know anyway.”

“I see. So when exactly did you win the lottery?”

When he answered the question, Maisey made the immediate connection. As the principal had told them, he’d won the lottery just a week before Victoria came to the school to speak. “And ten days later, I quit. Didn’t need to work anymore. Teaching is so underappreciated.”

“That it is, sir. Can you tell me anything you might remember about that time period, anything that struck you as odd, or anything you might have forgotten to tell the police?”

“I didn’t talk to the police. I was already gone from the school when she was killed, and the school was our only common denominator. Otherwise, there was no connection at all.” That was true, as far as Maisey could tell. They hadn’t known each other. So why did she get the feeling that he was involved in some way?

“You have a son, correct?” Aaron asked Mr. Skidmore.

“Yes, Colin.”

“And he was a student at the time, correct?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Could I speak with him, please?”

“Sure, but he’s not here. He’s on a trip with his grandparents. He won’t be back for a week.”

Would Aaron mention hearing them argue? Maisey knew he wouldn’t. He’d just caught VinceSkidmore lying, and he’d play it close to the vest and hang onto that information. “Could you have him give me a call when he comes home?” Aaron asked and handed Mr.Skidmore a business card.

“Sure, but I doubt he could tell you anything.”

“We’ll just ask him a few simple questions and I’m sure it’ll be fine. And thank you for your time, sir,” Aaron said with a nod and turned. “We’ll see ourselves out.”

“Thank you for stopping by. Wish I could’ve been more help,” Mr.Skidmore called after them.

Aaron helped Maisey into the car, and as soon as he was in and the door closed, she turned to him wide-eyed. “Colin is out of town.”

“Yeah. If he’d lie to my face like that, what else is he hiding?”

“Who knows, but I have a sick feeling about that guy,” Maisey grumbled.

“Me too,” Aaron said as he turned the car toward home.

Maybe the next coat episode would help her figure out more. For the time being, though, it felt like they were just spinning their wheels. But there was one thing Maisey knew for sure.

Somebody out there knew something. And she had every intention of finding them.

CHAPTER NINE

Nearby Cumberland Falls State Resort Park had a seafood buffet on Friday and Saturday nights, and Aaron told Maisey that was where he'd planned to take her for dinner. When they stepped into the dining room, she got a big surprise.

Carly was there with Ross, her firefighter husband. So was ShawHarrison, a local conservation officer and friend of Aaron's, and his wife, Cherilyn, was with him. The three couples had become great friends, which had been easy with the men's friendships already in place, and the fact that Aaron worked for Carly. Maisey couldn't believe it. "You all managed to get sitters too?"

"My parents are looking for excuses to keep Belle for us," Ross said with a smile.

"Where are yours?" Aaron asked Shaw.

"They're over at Mom and Dad's. When we left, Candace and Maya were trying to learn some dance they saw on Tockity and Lara was trying to do it too. Took everything I had not to laugh," Shaw answered, grinning.

"I know she's disabled, but it was still funny," Cherilyn said with a little laugh.

"Couldn't be any worse than me," Maisey said. "I can't dance to save my life."

They stayed for several hours, laughing, eating, and drinking, and when it was time to leave, all three men left a twenty-dollar bill on the table. Even though it was a buffet, the server had kept their glasses filled, plates picked up, and mess generally

contained, and repeatedly asked if they needed anything. They wanted her to like them so they'd be treated well when they came back.

Maisey and Aaron plopped down on the sofa as soon as they stepped through the door at home. "Oh, god, I ate too much," Aaron moaned.

"You? I think I ate five hundred boiled shrimp," Maisey groaned.

Aaron laughed. "I had enough of that steamboat round of venison that I've probably got deer DNA mixed with mine now." They both finally stopped laughing, and he turned his head to look at her. "Are we doing the coat thing tonight?"

Maisey let out a quick sigh. "I need to."

"She'll still be just as?"

"I know. Just as dead tomorrow. But the sooner I figure this out, the sooner we can solve it. And I'm hoping when we solve it and find her killer, she'll be at rest and I can wear the coat without getting stabbed every time I put it on."

Aaron chuckled low in his chest. "That sounds horrible."

"Yeah, but that's how it feels."

"Well, I hope she keeps haunting it," he announced.

"Why?"

"Because the damn thing is ugly as sin!" As soon as the words were out, Maisey picked up a magazine and slapped him in the head. "Oww! It's true! It's hideous!"

“No, it’s not! It’s cute. I like it.” She sat there for a second before she said, “Let’s just do it and get it over with.”

“Okay. Let me go to the bathroom and I’ll be right back.”

“I get a turn after you,” she called after him as he disappeared down the hallway.

Ten minutes later, they were on the deck just like before. Maisey stuck her arms into the coat. “Ready?”

Aaron gave her a look. “I should be asking you that.”

“I’m ready. Here we go.” She gripped the lapels, pulled the coat forward, and let it fall onto her shoulders.

Blackness. And little pinpricks of light far, far away. The same figure. But the voice was clearer. She heard him say something new, and it gave her pause, but soon enough, he was thrusting the knife into her midsection. Same hands, male and younger. Not VinceSkidmore’s hands. She’d made sure to look at them.

As soon as the visions faded and she could focus on the lights of the bulbs on the patio, she dropped the coat onto the deck. “Well? Anything?”

“Yeah. Those hands... They’re not VinceSkidmore’s. Too young. And even though I didn’t want to, I looked at Will’s hands while we were there. Not his either. His fingers are fat enough that the knuckles aren’t knobby. These are.”

“Okay. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Something new. That stupid high school comment?” Aaron nodded. “He said, ‘She’s just a stupid high school girl.’ Wonder what that means?”

“Hmmm. Maybe she was cheating on Will with somebody else who was cheating on her? And they told her it was just a stupid high school girl? But that doesn’t sound right.”

“No. It doesn’t. This person, they’re really, really mad. I mean, really mad. Furious. Talking about ruining things, somebody being a good man. I don’t get it.”

Aaron was still kneeling in front of her, and he took her hands in his. “We’ll figure this out. And babe, I was just kidding. I don’t like the coat, but if it makes you happy, that’s fine. I hope solving this brings her peace and she can leave you alone with the coat.”

“Thanks.”

“And now will you tell me about the swimmin?”

“That’s it. You’re sleeping in the guest room tonight,” she snapped.

“I’m just kidding! Just kidding. I love you, Maise.”

“I love you too.” Would she tell him the story if his life depended on it?

She’d have to think about that, but probably not.

CHAPTER TEN

“Get up and get moving. We’ve got somewhere to go,” Aaron informed her on Sunday morning.

Please, don’t let him be taking me to church, she groused internally. She was in no mood for that.

They stopped at a little bakery and had quiche and cheese-smothered chicken breasts, all of which was delicious. Then they headed toward the other side of town. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” Aaron drove and Maisey watched out the window. There were new little businesses cropping up everywhere, and she was so happy about that. They’d had little to nothing over the years in the way of amenities, and it was a pleasure to finally have a bit of variety.

But, to her surprise, they pulled up in front of the big sporting goods store. Not basketball, football, baseball, and soccer. Oh, no. It was mostly hunting and fishing supplies. And a lot of guns. All things Maisey really didn’t like. “What are we doing here?”

“You’ll see.” He swung around the front of the car, opened her door, and took her hand to help her out. They wandered toward the building, and Maisey looked around. It was a Sunday morning in the Bible belt, and yet the parking lot was full. People around there liked their hunting and fishing, that was for sure.

They had clothing too, and she wondered if he'd brought her there to buy a new coat. Maybe to replace the one he thought was so ugly? No. He kept walking, her hand in his, and she wondered where they were going. After weaving through a few displays and aisles, they stepped into a large open area filled with glass cases, and Maisey understood. "Oh, wow."

"Yeah. Start looking and let me know when you see a knife that looks like the one you've seen."

It was a bit overwhelming. There were so many! There were even some that were styled for women, and that was a surprise, although she wasn't sure why. Half the kids in town, boys and girls alike, wore camo most of the time. They'd had a wedding just a year or two before where the bride wore white with a hunter orange sash and the groom wore camo pants and an orange safety vest with a camo tie. For the life of her she couldn't figure out what the attraction was, but folks around there loved the stuff.

She remembered what Morgan said, so she started trying to figure out which ones were hunting knives. Most of what she was seeing was smaller, but as she walked, the knives got bigger and bigger until she was standing in front of a case with some good-sized blades in it. Maisey closed her eyes and tried to concentrate, attempting to remember what it had looked like. She knew the handle looked dark. As she let her eyes wander through the cases, she heard a voice. "Hey, little lady. Can I help you with anything?"

She wanted to punch him. Little lady? But she should've expected it. Those kinds of places attracted pseudo-alpha males who needed to diminish women to feel powerful. She'd seen it all her life. But hell?she could use his nonsense to her advantage. "Yes, please. I need a fairly large knife for hunting."

"Hunting? Whatcha gonna hunt with a knife?"

Maisey didn't know how to answer that. "I don't really know. My husband wants one for his birthday, but I don't know what to buy."

"What kind of hunting does he do?"

"Deer. Turkeys. Wild boar."

"Oh, well now, them suckers is mean," the man said, a funny look in his eyes.

"Yeah, well, he's not afraid of anything. He's a deputy," Maisey threw out. Where the hell is Aaron anyway? she wondered. She hadn't seen him since she walked up to the display cases.

"Ah. A deputy. I see. So I think you need to be lookin' over here in this case." He stepped down about five feet and Maisey followed. "Those right there are pretty nice," he said as he pointed down through the glass.

Sure enough, there were some good-sized knives down there, and Maisey stared at them. It would be best if she closed her eyes, but she didn't think she should do that with the eager beaver standing on the other side of the cases, so she tried to think. What had it looked like? And then she saw it.

A Bowie knife. "Can I see that one, please?"

"Aww, honey, you've got good taste. These are around three hundred and fifty dollars," he said as he lifted it from its spot on the shelf in the case and laid it gently on the display case's glass top.

Maisey touched it gingerly. "Is that a lot?"

"For a knife? Yeah. Not too many people can afford them. I mean, we got cheaper

ones, but these right here, these are the best.” Maisey stared at it. Yes. It could very easily have been the knife she saw in the... visions? What should she call them? She’d never tried to define them before, but it was becoming obvious she should. The blade was gleaming stainless, the handle was black, and it had brass rivets. “So it’s full tang, the bolster’s tapered, and...” Maisey had no idea what he was talking about, but the longer she stared at it, the surer she was that it was this knife. Then she picked it up.

It seemed to almost crackle with electricity in her palms, and the sensation was anything but pleasant. For some reason, she got the impression that Victoria was trying to tell her that she was getting it right. It took her a second to pull herself together enough to ask, “Do you keep a record of who buys these?”

“No, ma’am. We don’t. We ain’t sold a lot of them, but we sold enough that I wouldn’t be able to tell you who bought one.”

“Okay. Thank you. I’ll go find my husband. I want him to see it and tell me if that’s what he wants for his birthday.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be here ‘til five o’clock.”

Everything inside Maisey was telling her to run away from the case. Where had Aaron gone? She wandered aimlessly through the store, looking here and there. She finally spotted him and, no surprise, he was looking at grills. “Here you are.”

“Yeah. I really want one of these.” He pointed to a huge black box on legs.

“What is that thing?”

“It’s a smoker. Just think of all the barbecue and stuff I could make in this! Smoking sausage! Wouldn’t that be awesome?” She hadn’t seen him that excited in a long

time.

“I need you to come look at this knife.”

“What knife? Did you find one?”

“Yeah. It’s a Bowie knife. That’s what Morgan said he thought it probably was, and I think so too. And it’s really, really expensive. I mean, for a knife.”

“How expensive are we talking here? As much as a gun?”

“He said about three hundred and fifty dollars.”

Aaron nodded, his eyebrows peaked. “Yeah, not too many people around here can afford a knife like that.”

They made their way back to the case, and she pointed out the knife to Aaron. “That one right there.”

“Wow. That’s really nice.”

“Yeah. I don’t know anything about knives, but it’s really pretty.”

“I’ll say. For that price, it should be.”

Aaron let the man who worked there show him the knife, and Maisey knew he was making a mental note of what kind it was. Then he’d go home, look it up on the internet, and print out a picture of it. That would go in the file, and they’d have it for reference.

They stopped at a country cookin’ place on the way home and had a good lunch.

Bailey's parents would be bringing Murielle home in a few hours, and her little family would be complete once more. There was no happier time for her than when the three of them were together.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Ever since her coworker had been killed while making a home visit, Maisey had started hating home visits. That was her least favorite part of the job. This time, it was to a home full of kids, and it looked like the mother might be in trouble with the law. There was no father, so that meant there would be no one to care for the kids.

The house was a ramshackle mess at the edge of town. When she pulled up, it was behind another car, an SUV, and a fairly new one at that. And it was in very good shape. That made her wonder who else was there. Had some other social worker been assigned? Had she crossed the Whitley County line into another county? She glanced at the documents again. No, she was at the right place, and her name was on everything. Once she'd gathered everything up, she got out of the car and headed to the door.

Just as she reached up to knock, the door swung open and a woman stood there, her lips sunk inward from lack of teeth. "No need to knock. I seen ya pull up. Come on in." The furniture was threadbare, and so was the rug, which was placed directly over the particleboard subfloor. A skinny dog wandered around, sniffing here and there. It was hard to pretend she hadn't seen through the kitchen doorway, but the piles of dirty dishes and garbage were hard to miss. "Have a seat," the woman said and pointed to a beat-up recliner. When Maisey sat down, she got quite the surprise.

Directly in front of her on the wall was a huge TV. Enormous. Before she could stop herself, she muttered, "Wow. That's some TV."

"Like that? Yeah, it's just an eighty-five inch. Wanted one-a them ninety-eight inch

ones, but the store didn't have none of 'em, so I settled for this 'un. Might get a bigger 'un later on. Dunno."

"You watch a lot of TV?"

"Oh, yeah. Got about ten diffurnt streamin' channel thangs so there's allays sumpin' to watch."

Maisey was flabbergasted, and she realized she hadn't even introduced herself. "That's nice. So, um, my name is MaiseyFriedman and I work for the Kentucky Department of Health and Family Services, Child Protective Branch. And you are NoraWurth?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And you have five minor children? Rachel, who's two, Dennis, who's six, NevaLou, who's nine, Tucker, who's thirteen, and Deena, who's seventeen. Did I get that right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I have here that you're a stay-at-home mother?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Do you mind me asking whose car that is out front?"

"No, ma'am. Don't mind at all. It's mine."

Shithole house. Nice car. Huge TV. What the hell is going on here? There was no indication of any drug activity, not so much as a cigarette butt, and there were no

empty beer cans or bottles, or any other liquor that she could see. “So do you have a partner, significant other, someone other adult in the family?”

“No, ma’am. Just me and these kids.”

“Okay. So it says here in the documentation that you’re having trouble paying your utilities and affording food. Is that correct?”

“Well, ’twas, but it ain’t anymore. No reason for y’all to worry about us. We’re doing fine.”

“And your ability to afford these things... Is that right now, or ongoing?”

“Definitely ongoing,” Nora said and nodded.

“I see.” No, actually, I don’t. What’s missing here? “Well, okay, I’ll put that in my report. Is there anything I can do for you? Any kind of assistance you need?”

“Yeah, I need me a cleanin’ lady!” Nora said and laughed loudly. “This here place is a mess!”

“We can’t help you with that, but I’m sure you can find someone. Okay then. I’ll just be going, and if you think of anything you need help with, just let me know.” Maisey handed Nora a business card and stood. “Otherwise, I’ll see you in six months just to check on you.”

“Okie dokie then. You be careful going back, ya hear?” Nora said as she followed Maisey to the door.

“Will do. Take care, Ms.Wurth.” Maisey headed to the car, thankful to be outside. The place was rank with the smell of rotting garbage everywhere, but there were no

signs of feces or anything like that. Just garbage.

Before she left, Maisey took a picture of the license plate on the car. She'd give that to Aaron, and he could run the plate to see who it belonged to. As she drove, she tried to piece the puzzle together, and she just couldn't. It was like somebody had taken two puzzles and swapped up their pieces. It just didn't work.

That was all she needed?another mystery.

The chicken casserole was in the oven and Maisey was making a pretty salad when Aaron walked through the door. "Hey, babe, smells fantastic," he said as he strolled past her and slipped a little kiss on her cheek. "Gonna go change and I'll be right back."

"You got news for me?"

"Sure do." He disappeared into the bedroom, and Maisey wondered what he'd found out.

When he returned, he leaned back against the countertop, his hands braced on its edge. "So I ran that plate."

"And?"

"The car is registered to a DeenaWurth."

"You mean Nora."

"No, Deena."

"But she's only seventeen."

“That’s what it says on the registration and the title.”

“What about insurance? Because she has to have insurance.”

“She does. And I tried to get the carrier to tell me who paid for the policy, but they wouldn’t. Said I’d have to have a warrant. That’ll take time and, frankly, right now, I don’t have cause to get one.”

“Aaron, they have an eighty-five inch TV.” His mouth fell open. “Yeah. I had the same reaction. It’s fucking huge. And the house is a wreck. Garbage everywhere, dirty dishes everywhere. But a brand-new jumbo TV and a very, very nice vehicle.”

“Yeah. A Lincoln Aviator, Maisey. That’s a really expensive vehicle. And it’s just a year old, so it’s practically brand new.”

“How in the world did they afford that?”

Aaron shrugged. “I have no idea. I did some digging and there’s no record of there ever being a Mr. Wurth, so god only knows who these kids’ dads are. But a high school girl with a car like that? Beats me.” He picked up a grape tomato and popped it into his mouth. “You doing the coat thing tonight?”

“I think I should.”

“Okay. I’ll be right there.”

And she knew he would be.

“Here we go.” Maisey pulled the coat up her arms, then grabbed the lapels and settled it on her shoulders.

Everything went black, and the lights off in the distance were more distinct than usual. That meant the visions were getting clearer, thank goodness. It was the same figure. “You need to keep your mouth shut.”

Victoria’s voice cut through her thoughts. “Please, I really don’t know what happened. I won’t say a word, I swear.”

“You’re right. You’re not going to. She’s just a stupid high school girl. It’s her fault because he’s a good man. If you do the right thing, you’ll ruin everything for me, so that can’t happen.”

“But I didn’t see?”

“You’re right. You didn’t see anything.”

And there it was?the flash of the blade, the searing of the cut, the pain deep inside. “Why? I don’t understand...” She could feel the life force ebbing from Victoria.

“Because I want ...”

The darkness started to lift, and Maisey couldn’t get her bearings. Who was that? The voice sounded familiar, but when she ran through the people she knew or had met, she couldn’t come up with a face. “Maise? Talk to me. You okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” She fought to sit upright. “I’m fine. I just need some rest.”

“What happened? Anything new?”

“Yeah. But can I tell you in the morning? I’m really, really tired.”

“Sure. Come on. Let’s go to bed.” Maisey let him help her to standing and wrap an

arm around her waist to support her as she walked along. Who was the stupid high school girl? Who was the man? And what did he want?

Other than wanting Victoria dead.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“And that’s what he said,” Maisey finished with, then took another sip of her coffee.

“He wanted her to keep her mouth shut.” Aaron rubbed his finger back and forth across his chin as he thought. “About what?”

“Yeah, and what does he want? He wants her to keep quiet, but I got the impression that’s not what he would’ve finished the sentence with. I mean, ‘because I want...’ That doesn’t sound right.”

“Nope.”

“And what about DeenaWurth?”

“I have no idea what’s going on there, but I can tell you one thing I’m going to do. That title has to have a bill of sale related to it somewhere, and I’m going to see if I can find out who sold her that car. If I can talk to them, maybe they’ll tell me who paid for it.”

“That’s not a bad idea. Shit. That’s all I need?two mysteries to solve. Why do I get the feeling that the answer to Deena’s is going to make me sick?”

“Because if there’s anything I learned at the academy, it’s that for someone to pay for a car like that for someone else, there has to be a compelling reason, and most of the time, it’s not good, especially when they’ve gone to such lengths to hide their identity. So whatever we find, it’ll probably turn my stomach too.”

“Daddy, I’m ready,” Murielle’s little voice said from somewhere near Maisey’s elbow.

“Okay. Time for school. Tell Maisey bye.”

Murielle reached for Maisey and the stepmom drew the child into her arms. “Bye, baby doll. You have a good day at school.”

“I will. Today’s pizza day! And I think today’s the day that Marty is gonna tell me that he wants me to be his girlfriend.” The little girl had been talking about Marty, last name unknown, for weeks. She apparently had a big crush on him and was hoping he’d ask her to “go” with him. Exactly where they thought they were “going,” Maisey didn’t know, but it sure wasn’t on anything that even vaguely resembled a date. Nope. No way. And Aaron would back her on that one.

Aaron stood, leaned over, and gave Maisey a big kiss. “Bye, babe. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Yep. Later. Love you.”

“Love you too. Come on, scooter butt. Let’s go,” Aaron said as he guided Murielle toward the door.

“Bye, Mama Maisey! Love you!” she said, turning to wave.

“Love you too, cutie pie.” The door closed behind the two most important people in her life, and they were gone.

Maisey picked up everything from breakfast, rinsed it all out, loaded it in the dishwasher, and got the pork chops out to thaw for dinner. She’d just bought a five-pound sack of potatoes the day before, and she’d stop at the store and get a bunch of

fresh green beans to cook. It occurred to her to bring them home at lunch and start them in the slow cooker, so she made a mental note to do that.

The morning was slow, and she spent most of it in the office, completing paperwork and setting up meetings with parents and teachers for the next week. A little after noon, she headed to the store, bought a pound and a half of fresh green beans and a sandwich from their deli for lunch. She had chips and pickles at home, so she'd have a good midday meal.

It was sunny out, and she looked around. She loved the quiet neighborhood full of mostly working families or elderly people. There were no fall colors yet?it was still pretty warm outside?but it wouldn't be long before the leaves started to turn. The door swung open by her key and she took a step inside. There was a crinkling sound, and she looked down to see a piece of paper under her shoe. As soon as she'd closed the door and deposited the shopping bags on the counter, she went back, picked it up, and turned it over. The three words there made shivers run down her spine.

Stop asking questions.

Aaron answered on the first ring. "Hey, babe. Having a good?"

"Aaron, somebody was here."

"Here? Where's here? At the office?"

"No! At home. I'm here eating lunch. I stopped by the grocery to pick up a few things and there was a note slipped under the door when I got here."

"What does it say?"

"It just says, 'Stop asking questions.'"

“Did you touch it?”

“Uh, yeah. I had to pick it up if I wanted to read it.”

“Don’t touch it again. One of our investigators might be able to pull a print from it. I’ll come and get it.”

“Okay.”

His voice was soft and warm. “Are you okay?”

“I’m a little scared.”

“Don’t be. I think it’s just somebody trying to get us to back off. Now I know I need to find out more.”

“I’ll try not to be scared, but it’s just creepy, you know? Somebody shoving a note under the door? That means they know where we live.”

“I’ll ask all the neighbors if they saw anybody. It’ll be fine, baby. I promise. I’ll be there in just a minute.”

She’d only managed to get half of her sandwich eaten when Aaron strode through the doorway. “Where is it?”

“Hello to you too,” she said with a grin.

He leaned down and kissed her. “Hi. Where is it?”

“Singular of focus, aren’t you?” she asked as she pointed at the piece of paper lying on the countertop. To her surprise, he put on a pair of latex gloves, pulled an evidence

bag from his pocket, and carefully placed the note inside the bag. “You really think you can get prints off that?”

“You’d be surprised. I mean, it may be harder now because yours are on it, but still...”

“I only touched it with my forefinger and thumb when I picked it up. Then I laid it on the counter and haven’t touched it again. I can’t. It gives me the willies.”

“Okay. I’ll get it to one of the forensics guys and see if they can figure it out. And I know a couple of state troopers, so they might be able to help too.” Aaron hesitated for a second. “Wait. Which one is the note about? Us asking about Deena? Or us asking about Victoria?”

“Exactly. And I have no idea. Would’ve been nice if they’d been a little more specific.”

Aaron grinned. “Not that it would stop us.” Then he kissed her again. “Gotta run. I’m going to the courthouse to see if I can find a bill of sale on that SUV and then go talk to the dealership.”

“Thanks. And thanks for believing me.” She knew what kind of reception she’d get if she told her parents about the things she saw and heard. They’d tell her to quit being so dramatic. She loved them, but that was their answer to everything when it came to her.

“I always do, babe. I’ve got your back.” He smiled as he closed the door, and she was alone again. At least the scary note was gone. She hoped she never saw that thing again. It wasn’t so much what it said.

It was more about the way it made her feel.

Something was tickling Maisey's brain, and she couldn't figure out what it was. It took all afternoon, but she finally figured it out about four o'clock, and she decided she'd stop by the school on her way home. After digging through her files, she found the document she needed.

There were very few cars in the parking lot when she pulled up, but she could see a secretary in the office when she stepped up to the front doors. It took her almost a full minute to get someone's attention, but when the lady came to the door, Maisey smiled. "Hey, Ophelia!" She and OpheliaStinson had gone to high school together.

"Maisey! Good to see you! What can I help you with?"

"Is Mrs. Albright here?"

"No. She's already gone. Can I help you?"

"I dunno. I need to check on attendance records for one of my clients."

"Oh. Well, that's okay. Mr.Snow is here, and he's the vice-principal. He's the one who keeps up with attendance, truancy, sick days, all of that. Let me get him." She left Maisey standing by the front counter, and in just a couple of seconds, she returned with a man behind her, a younger man. "Maisey, this is Mr.Snow. This is MaiseyKendall. She's a social worker with the cabinet." That was the short name most people used for the government agency.

"Hi. Nice to meet you, Ms.Kendall."

"It's Mrs.Friedman now. And it's great to meet you too. I just need to talk to you about one of my clients."

"I trust you have the appropriate paperwork to let me do that?"

“Yes, sir. I sure do.”

“Okay then. Let’s go back to my office. Would you like something to drink?”

“Oh, no thanks, sir. I’m fine. This shouldn’t take long.” They stepped into the office and the vice-principal closed the door. He motioned for Maisey to have a seat, so she chose the chair right in front of his desk, then pulled a paper from her messenger bag. “Here you go. I think this is what you need.”

She watched as his eyes swept back and forth across the page, then handed it back to her. “Looks good. So you need to know about Deena Wurth.”

“Yes, sir. I have this feeling that there’s something going on there, but I’m not sure what.”

“What do you mean?”

“Just some observations I made during a home visit. I can’t really be specific, you know,” she said, and he nodded. “Just some niggling notion that something may be wrong.”

“Have you met with Deena yet?”

“No. Just her mom. It wasn’t anything her mom said or did. It was environmental. And that’s all I can say.”

“Gotcha. I pay a lot of attention to my kids, and I haven’t seen any indication that she’s neglected or abused in any way.”

“Good. So what can you tell me?” She waited while he tinkered around on his computer.

“Okay, so I see no truancy issues. She’s only been out sick one day since the first of the year, and she brought a note from her mother for that. She’s been late a couple of times, but just by a minute or two.”

“Is she a good student?”

“Eh. Steady two point two GPA. She’s no Rhodes Scholar, but she’s not failing.”

Something flitted through Maisey’s mind. “Can you tell me if she had better grades and they fell, or worse and they rose?”

“Since ...”

“Oh, just this school year compared to last school year.”

“Sure. Let me just...” Mr.Snow clicked around for a second or two. “Okay, yeah. They dropped.”

“When?”

“Last spring. That would’ve been about nine months ago maybe?”

Maisey did everything she could to keep her expression neutral. “Oh. Well, I guess that’s good to know. Any idea what happened?”

“No. But it looks like... Hang on.” More clicking. “Okay, during that time, she got into a couple of fights. Nothing horrible. Just enough that she had to do detention. Hmmm. Wonder what that’s about?”

“And no fight since?”

“No. None.”

She let out a heavy sigh in pretense. “Okay, well, that really tells me little to nothing, but it’s good to know. Maybe I can have a talk with her sometime.”

Mr.Snow nodded. “Thank you for caring about your clients. I think you’re the only social worker who’s ever come by to talk to me about a kid.”

“That’s a shame. But you do realize, we’re spread pretty thin.”

“So I’ve heard.” Maisie stood, so Mr.Snow did too, and he held out his hand. Maisie shook it politely. “Please let me know if I can help you with anything else.”

“I will. Thank you so much for your time. I’ll see myself out.” Maisie made her way out of Mr.Snow’s office and to the main office.

“Mrs.Friedman, huh? I didn’t know you got married,” Ophelia singsonged.

“Yeah. Aaron Friedman. He’s a deputy. I met him when...” She couldn’t help but shudder a bit. “When my coworker was...” It was impossible to say the words.

Ophelia’s eyes flew open wide and she gasped. “Oh! Yes. I remember that. Oh, I’m so sorry. She was your coworker?”

“Yes. It was a senseless tragedy.”

“It sure was. Well, it was good to see you. Hope I see you around again.”

“If you’re still here in a few years, you will. My stepdaughter is only in first grade, but she’ll be a student here eventually.”

“Great! I’ll look forward to that.”

Maisey made her way to the car, deep in thought. Deena’s grades had dropped not long before Victoria had come to the school to speak. Then they’d leveled off. That was no coincidence.

When she pulled up to the house, Aaron’s truck was already there. She stepped inside to find him seasoning the pork chops. “Sorry. I stopped by the school and I found out some interesting things.”

“Well, I found out some interesting things at the courthouse,” he said, sprinkling herbs on top of the meat.

“Good. We’ll have plenty to talk about after dinner then. The beans are cooking. I’ll get the potatoes ready and I’ll let you know when they’re about done so you can put the meat on the grill.”

“Sounds great, baby. Murielle’s in her room working on her homework. I’ll work on it with her after dinner.”

After a minute to tell Murielle hello, Maisey went to work on the potatoes, scrubbing them. What could’ve happened at about that same time that would make Deena’s grades drop? They didn’t completely stall out, and she wasn’t absent a lot, so it couldn’t have been too horrible. Still, it was something.

Dinner was delicious, and after they’d watched a TV show they all liked, it was time for Murielle to go to bed. As soon as she was asleep, Aaron was back, and they took the coat and went out onto the deck. “Okay. You said you went by the school. What did you find out?”

Maisey nodded. “Yeah. I happened to think I should check on Deena’s attendance

and grades. She's not truant. Only missed one day for sickness this year and had a note. But last year, her grades took a nosedive and she got into a couple of fights at school."

"She's failing?"

"No. They just dropped. She's still passing, although barely."

"And what were the fights about?"

"The vice-principal had no idea. But there's something there. This all happened around the same time that Victoria came to the school." She took a sip of her tea. "So what did you find out?"

"I pulled the title information for the Lincoln. Her name is the only one on it. No one else. But get this: There's no lien against it. There would be if she'd financed it somehow, but she didn't. That tells me somebody paid for the whole thing."

"Who would do that?"

"I dunno. Is there any record of the family coming into money? Like someone died and left an insurance policy or property?"

"No. Nothing that I can tell. It's like the whole thing just... happened. Went to bed poor, woke up rich."

A funny look passed over Aaron's face. "Went to bed poor... woke up rich."

"What?"

"Who went to bed poor and woke up rich, Maise?"

“I dunno.”

“Think.”

“I don’t... Oh, shit.”

“Yeah. Went to bed poor, woke up rich. But why? Why would VinceSkidmore hand DeenaWurth enough money to buy a car? And the family has that big TV. Those aren’t free. They’re not even cheap.”

It hit Maisey like a freight train. “Victoria. She said she didn’t really know what had happened. She didn’t see anything. Do you think she saw something? Skidmore and Deena?”

“I guess it’s possible.”

“Wait. Will said she told him she had to go back to the school to talk to the principal. She did see something! And she was going back to the school to talk to the principal! Aaron, we’ve got to find out for sure what Deena was fighting with someone about.”

“And I know just who to ask.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It hadn't taken much to get the four boys to come to lunch with them. Kids around that area wouldn't miss a free meal if they could get one, plus telling their parents or bosses that they were having lunch with a deputy would get them a free pass to eat pizza. Aaron had started with Troy, the kid whose family owned the excavating company, then asked him to invite his other three friends.

They met at a local pizza place, and when the kids got there, Aaron already had five pizzas on the table, big ones, and loaded with all kinds of toppings. He also had gift bags for them from the department, filled with tee shirts, pencils, stickers with six-pointed stars like badges with "Whitley County Sheriff's Department" emblazoned across them. There were some sunglasses with the insignias on the temples, a tin of mints with the "D.A.R.E." logo printed across them, and a free pass for a movie at the local theater. They seemed excited about that.

When most of the pizza was gone and all the drinks were refilled, Aaron started. "I just wanted to thank you guys for your information. I sold the Chevy to somebody else who offered me more, but I appreciate you being straight with me about Mr.Skidmore."

"Hey, happy to help. Wouldn't want a law enforcement official to get stiffed," Hank said, wiping his mouth.

"Yeah," Royce added. "That would be bad."

"It would. So I'm thinking of taking the money and buying Maisey here a very, very

nice SUV. Know anybody who's got one that you think she'd like?"

"My mom's got a Toyota," Nate offered.

"I was thinking something a little higher end. You know, like a Cadillac or a Lincoln," Aaron said. Maisey's brain whispered, Please, please, let them take the bait.

"No Cadillac, but I know somebody who's got a Lincoln SUV. Big-ass thi... Oh, sorry, ma'am," Troy said and blushed as he glanced over at Maisey.

She gave him a soft smile. "That's okay."

"So you know somebody who's got a Lincoln?" Aaron asked.

"Yeah. Girl at school. Deena Wurth. Big Lincoln SUV."

"Wow. Her parents must be loaded," Maisey threw in.

The boys all laughed. "Oh, god, no," Troy said. "They're poor as old Job's turkey."

"Those things are expensive! How in the world did she do that?" Aaron asked, and Maisey crossed her fingers under the table.

"Wellllll..." Hank said slowly and glanced back and forth at his buddies, who were all doing the exact same thing. "We've heard rumors..."

"Yeah. Lots of rumors," Royce added.

Aaron stared back and forth at them. "Like?"

"Like all of a sudden, she started dressing real nice and all. Nice jewelry. Lots of

makeup. Nice shoes and boots. Some really sexy... Owwww!" Nate yelled as his friend Troy slapped his arm.

"That's not nice," Troy explained.

"But it's true! Short skirts showing her ass... butt cheeks. High-heeled boots up past her knees. Them fancy, sexy stockings that look like fishing nets. Really puttin' on the dog," Nate explained.

Aaron wouldn't let it drop. "So this has been in the last couple of weeks?"

"Oh, no. This was last year. Before school got out. And she got in fights with a couple of girls because they were teasing her..." And Royce stopped.

"Teasing her about what?" Aaron pushed.

"Well, it was just a rumor. Don't nobody know if it was true or not," Hank added.

"What was the rumor?"

All the boys did it again? glanced back and forth at each other. And then Nate said it. "We all heard she was fu... doing it with Mr.Skidmore."

Maisey frowned and played dumb. "Doing it?"

"Yeah, you know." Troy glanced at Aaron. "Can I say it? In front of her?" he asked, gesturing toward Maisey. Aaron nodded. "They said she was having sex with Mr.Skidmore."

BINGO! Maisey's brain shrieked. "And there were rumors that he was giving her money?" she asked.

“Yeah. We heard that at first, he offered her money, but then she started blackmailing him,” Troy explained.

“And this was after he won the lottery?” Aaron asked.

“Yes, sir. I think that’s why he up and quit.”

Maisey had a sudden thought. “How did his son feel about this?”

Nate shrugged and grimaced. “He was pissed. Really, really pissed. But he didn’t say nothing. He just quit hangin’ out with everybody, quit talkin’ to everybody. We ain’t seen him since he graduated. As soon as the school year was over, they moved out there to the county, and that was that. I heard he was really mad that his dad was givin’ that girl money.”

“I heard another rumor, but I don’t know if it’s true,” Hank said.

Aaron perked up. “What’s that?”

“I heard he took her for an abortion this summer. But I don’t know if that’s true. May just be what some of the girls was sayin’. They’re all so jealous. Not of her screwing old Mr.Skidmore. They’re jealous of her clothes and her car and all that stuff.” Hank stopped, then tipped his head to one side, lifted his eyebrows, and set his lips in a line before he spoke. “You know, I ain’t no detective or nothin’, and I ain’t the smartest cookie in the drawer, but I think if’n I was her and I got knocked up, I’d want that baby so I could get child support from him. Make him give her a big, nice house and plenty of money to raise it. So I kinda think that was made up. I don’t think she had no abortion.”

Smartest cookie in the drawer. Well, there’s a mangled euphemism if ever I heard one , Maisey thought. But she had to believe Hank was right about that. Girls got

pregnant by boys all the time to trap the guy and make him stay with her. It didn't usually work long-term, but it did short-term, and it netted them child support until the kid was eighteen. Around there, that was the poor girl's version of winning the lottery.

"Wow. Well, I hate to hear that about that girl. That's not good," Aaron said, shaking his head convincingly.

"No. It's not. I feel sorry for her," Maisey threw in.

"Yeah, well, if you seen old Mr.Skidmore, you'd really feel sorry for her! Having his old, wrinkled di... Um, you know, having sex with him," Troy said, finishing with a mumble.

"Well, at least he didn't get my Chevy. Wouldn't want any of their sexy funk on the seats," Aaron said with a forced laugh.

"In the car? Hell, I heard they did it all over the place! At his house, at her house with her brothers and sister there, at the school in the locker rooms and the bathrooms. All over the damn place," Royce said again.

"Makes you want to spray everything down with disinfectant before you sit down, huh?" Maisey asked with a laugh.

"You know it!" Nate crowed, and they all laughed.

But it was no laughing matter. And if Maisey was right, she knew exactly what had happened to Victoria Hunt.

"Where are we going?" Maisey asked once they were in the car and Aaron turned in the opposite direction from her office.

“We’re going to talk to DeenaWurth.”

“At the school?”

He shot a side-eye at her. “You got a better idea?”

Maisey shrugged. “Guess not.”

He pulled his cruiser into the parking lot. “Got your paperwork with you?”

“Yeah. How are we going to do this?”

“We’re going to tell them we need to talk to her in the course of a murder investigation. If they want her mother there, they can call and ask her to come, but I’ll only wait so long. You’re there, and you’re the mother’s proxy through the state, so you’re there in her best interest. Before we go in, I’ll call and get SheriffMcEvers’ blessing.”

All Carly said was, “How the hell did you manage to figure all this out?”

“I’ll let Maisey tell you sometime soon. Right now, I’m pretty sure we know what happened, but we’ve got to find out for sure.”

“This is a murder investigation. Listen to me. You stay out of it. If you go in there with guns blazing, they’ll lawyer up in a heartbeat. Let Maisey go in and talk to her under the guise of finding out she may have been abused. If she does that and the girl admits it, then we’ll move forward.”

Aaron glanced at Maisey before he said, “Yeah, okay. Will do.”

“And I’m going to want an explanation before long. Right now, just get her to admit

to the sex and we'll go from there."

"Roger, sheriff. Thanks." He turned and looked at Maisey. "Okay. The ball is in your court. Here's what you do. Get her to admit to the sex. And get her to say Victoria knew about it. That's all we need."

She took a deep breath and blew it out. "Okay. Here I go." The parking lot was full, being the middle of a school day, but there was no better time to do it.

The school resource officer met her just inside the door. "Good afternoon. Can I help you?"

Maisey pulled out her I.D. "I'm Maisey Friedman and I work for the Cabinet for Health and Family Services. Child Protective Services. I have reason to believe that there's a child here who's been sexually abused, and it's my job to investigate that and report it."

"Yes, ma'am. Let me?"

"Maisey!" Ophelia's voice rang out in the massive foyer. "Good to see you again! I've got this, Burt," she told the SRO. "Whatcha doin' back here?"

"I need to speak with Deena Wurth. I have reason to believe she's been sexually assaulted."

"Oh, my. I'll get Mrs. Albright and?"

"Because she's a minor, no one can sit in on my meeting with her. I'm sure you understand."

"Oh, yes. Okay. I'll just clear it with Mr. Snow."

Maisey nodded. "I'll be glad to talk to him."

After her previous conversation with the vice-principal, he told her he was sure she was probably right and cleared her to sit with Deena. He showed Maisey to the conference room, then went to pull Deena from class. As she sat there, Maisey got out a large legal pad and a few pencils, but she also turned on the recorder on her phone and placed it gently in her lap. In a couple of minutes, the door opened and a tall, lanky teenage girl stepped in, decked out like a street walker. Maisey stood. "Deena?"

"Uh, yeah. Who are you?"

"I'm your social worker, Maisey Friedman. Could we talk for a minute? Please?"

The teenager shrugged. "Yeah, sure. I guess."

Maisey pointed to a chair and waited until Deena sat. "I don't know if she told you or not, but I visited with your mom the other day."

Deena looked confused. "No. I didn't know that."

"I'm very concerned about something." She'd been observing Deena. "Is that an Apple watch you're wearing?"

"Yeah."

"Does it have a phone line connected to it?"

"Uh, yeah. Why else would I have it?"

"I was at your house. You have a very, very large TV there. But I looked around the

house, and you guys don't have that kind of money. How did you get that TV?"

"Why would you want to know? What difference does it make? We didn't steal it or nothin'."

"It makes a lot of difference if you got these things in a way that's not right." She didn't want to use the term "legal." She wasn't an attorney, and that would just scare the girl. "There are a lot of things I don't know much about, but I do know shoes. And those shoes weren't cheap. They look like Manolos."

"They are."

Maisey pretended to be looking through notes. "You have a car, right?"

"SUV."

"What kind is it?"

"I dunno. Something big."

"Is it a Toyota?"

"Hell no, it ain't no Toyota! It's a Lincoln!"

"Is it old?"

"No. It ain't brand new, but it's newer. Just like a year old."

"I could understand if you have a thirty-six inch TV and a fake Apple watch and a Chevy. But these are all really expensive items, Deena. How did you manage to get all of this stuff?"

The young woman shrugged. “What can I say? My boyfriend is really, really generous.”

“Who’s your boyfriend?”

Her brow furrowed and she stared at Maisey. “I don’t have to tell you nothin’.”

“We can talk about it here, or the sheriff’s department can come and take you to the station to ask you. Or they can go talk to your mom and?”

“No! Fuck it. My boyfriend’s name is Vince.”

“Vince what?” Come on. We’re so close , Maisey’s mind whispered.

“Vince Skidmore.”

AND THERE IT IS! Time to pick him up , Maisey’s brain screamed. She texted Aaron immediately.

She just admitted it’s VinceSkidmore.

The dots wiggled.

On my way now. Don’t let her use the phone or she might alert him.

Maisey sent back a thumbs up emoji just as Deena touched the screen of her phone.

“Deena, I’m going to have to ask you to end that call. Right now. Law enforcement is already at the Skidmore house, and I don’t want you implicated in his problems.”

“You’re arresting him? Why? He didn’t do nothin’!”

“Honey, he’s been having sex with you. Am I right?”

“It was conceptual!” Deena shrieked.

Our educational system fails yet another kid , Maisie told herself. “It can’t be consensual. You’re underage, and he was your teacher.”

“He weren’t my teacher. I weren’t in his class.”

“He was a teacher here at the school, so that means he was an authority figure. And that’s a crime, honey.” The girl looked like she was going to cry. “I need to know... Did anybody else know about this?”

“Me. Vince.”

“What about Colin?”

“I dunno.”

“Anybody else.”

She nodded and quietly said, “That pageant lady.”

“Victoria Hunt?”

Deena nodded again. “Yeah. She seen us coming out of the girls’ bathroom when she was here talkin’ ’bout pageants. But Vince told me not to worry about her, that she weren’t gonna talk. And then she died.”

“No, Deena. She was murdered.”

Deena's eyes went wide. "No. No, that can't be. Vince didn't do that. He wouldn't."

"Then who did?"

"I dunno! I want my mama! I don't wanna talk to you no more! You're ruinin' everythin'!" Those words rang in Maisey's ears, virtually word for word what the killer said to Victoria. But it hadn't been a girl. Who was it? She knew she couldn't let Deena out of her sight until Aaron let her know that Vince was in custody. "You hear me? I want my mama."

"Okay. I'll see what I can do." She had to proceed carefully, so she dialed the number for the sheriff's department and the desk sergeant answered. "Hey, Pete, this is Maisey. I need to talk to Carly."

"Uh, okay. Hang on."

In a few seconds, she heard someone pick up. "Maisey?"

"Yeah, hey, Carly, can you do me a favor? I'm at the school with a client, and she wants her mom to come down here. I know you're busy with the baby and all, but can you go get her and bring her here? I'd really appreciate it."

"Okay. Tell me her name and address like I don't know who you're talking about."

"Yeah. Her name is Nora Wurth. Her address is... Honey, can you tell me your address?"

"Yeah." Deena rattled off the address, and Maisey knew Carly could hear it.

"Okay. I'm on my way. Aaron is almost to the Skidmore's house. You doing okay?"

“Yeah. Fine.”

“You owe me an explanation for all of this.”

“And you’ll get it. I know you didn’t mean for me to keep it. I’ll give it back.”

A low chuckle rolled from the phone. “You’re a little too good at this. I’m a bit worried.”

“Thanks for doing this. See you in a bit.” She hit END on the phone’s screen and smiled. “That was my friend, Carly. Your mom will be here in a little bit.” Then she made a decision to ask the girl nothing specific about what had happened. She’d leave that for the detectives and a time when Deena had an attorney. Nora was going to need one too if she knew about it all.

They were just chatting about school when her text tone went off, and Maisey checked the screen. It was a smiley face emoji from Aaron. He had Skidmore in custody.

Another ten minutes went by, and then there was a huge ruckus and NoraWurth appeared in the hallway, Carly right behind her. “What the hell is going on here?” she screamed when she stepped into the room. Mr.Snow appeared in the doorway and stood there with Carly, their shoulders filling the door frame. “Why the hell am I here?”

“Your daughter has told me that she’s been sexually assaulted by one of the teachers here at the high school.”

“I did not say that!” Deena shrieked. “It was conceptual!”

“She ain’t done nothin’ wrong! Why you call me down here?”

Deena glared at Maisey. “I thought your friend was bringing her down here.”

“SheriffMcEvers is my friend.” Maisey turned to Nora. “Ms.Wurth, did you know that Deena was in a relationship with VinceSkidmore.”

“How’d you know his last name?” Deena barked.

“Well, yeah. What the fuck was I s’posed to do about it? She’s seventeen. She can do whatever she wants. I ain’t got no say.”

“You do. You’re her mother, her legal guardian. You’re supposed to protect her from sexual predators. Did you know where that TV of yours came from?”

“Course I did! And the car too! If we need somethin’, she calls Vince and he gives it to us. What’s wrong with that?”

Maisey looked to Carly. “Where are the other kids?”

“I left DeputyCarlisle with them. Called your boss. It’s being handled.”

“Good enough.”

Carly stepped up to the Wurth woman. “Turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

“I ain’t done nothin’! She’s the fuckin’ whore!”

Carly grabbed the woman’s arm, spun her facing away, and whipped out her cuffs. “NoraWurth, you’re under arrest for neglect of a minor, promoting human trafficking, unlawful transaction with a minor, endangering the welfare of a minor, failure to report child abuse, with more charges pending. You have the right to...” Carly was

still reading Nora her Miranda rights as they made their way out of the building.

Deena was sitting there, her jaw hanging. “What the... What did you just do? That’s my mom! Where am I supposed to go now?”

“We’re making arrangements for you and your siblings right now. Deena, letting you have a sexual relationship with someone that much older than you and saying nothing, and profiting from it, is illegal. I have to ask you something. Did Vince kill MissHunt?”

“The pageant lady? No. He did not.”

I’m getting kinda tired of this , Maisey’s brain muttered. “So who did, Deena?”

“I don’t know! But it weren’t Vince! He didn’t kill nobody!”

“Did he say anything about MissHunt?”

Deena sat there for a bit, a conflicted look on her face, before she finally said, “He said we didn’t have to worry ’bout her no more.”

Maybe Vince didn’t kill Victoria, but he sure as hell knew who did. And she had a sneaking suspicion she knew who it was. But first, she had to put on that coat one more time.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“We’re having company,” Aaron said as soon as he walked in the door.

Maisey had been lying on the sofa for an hour. She was totally wiped, knowing what had happened. “Who?”

“Shaw, Cherilyn, Carly, and Ross. I’m having Chinese delivered.”

“But I wanted to put on the coat one more time because I’m pretty sure I know who did it.”

“I am too. I asked his dad where he was, but he was gone. Vince said he doesn’t know where Colin is, but I’m pretty sure he does.” She reached her hand upward toward him and he took it and squeezed it in his. “And yes. You’re putting the coat back on. And I hope it’s for the last time.”

“Me too.” She felt his grip soften, and she dropped her hand onto her belly. She was so, so tired.

“I just wanted to check on you. I’ve got to go pick up Murielle from school, but I’ll be right back.” As he passed back by, he leaned down and kissed her. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” She listened as the door closed behind him and heard his truck start.

Two hours later, Shaw and Cherilyn had come in with Maya, Lara, and Candace, and Carly and Ross walked in with Belle just a few minutes later. Within minutes, the

delivery guy had brought dozens of containers in, and everyone filled plates. Aaron had also ordered burgers and fries for the kids, so they were happy with those. Maisy was so tired that she struggled to eat, but the longer they spent eating, the more she could avoid the inevitable.

Too soon for her liking, dinner was over. "Aaron tells me you've got something you want us all to see," Carly said, but it was more of a question.

Maisy glanced over at Aaron, but he was smiling, and he nodded to her. "Yeah. I have something that... I can do. But this is so far beyond anything I knew... I don't know how..."

RossMcEvers' face was soft and his smile was warm. "Maisy, we're not here to prove you're a phony. We're not here to make fun, or scrutinize, or try to rule out what happens to you. We're here as your friends. We're here to understand, to support you, and to encourage you to embrace whatever this is. It's a rare gift. You can't ignore this anymore."

Maisy nodded. It was inevitable. She'd known that, but she hadn't expected it to be so soon. She glanced at Aaron again and saw him nod. "Okay. It's time, I guess. But I need a minute, okay?"

"Sure. We'll get the kids settled and then we can all go out to the deck." Carly stood and stretched, then called out, "Candace! Maya! We need to talk to you out here!" Behind her, she could hear Carly telling the girls to go to Murielle's bedroom and not to come out until they were told they could, with Aaron, Shaw, and Cheryl repeating what Carly was saying.

While they talked, Maisy went to the closet, pulled out the coat, and slipped past everyone to go into the master bathroom. She closed the door behind her, sat down on the toilet seat lid, and clutched the coat to her chest. With one sigh, her head bowed,

and her eyes closed, Maisey quieted her mind and concentrated.

Victoria, it's Maisey. You've been speaking through the coat to me for a while now. I want you to know that we're pretty sure we know who killed you, but we need to know positively. Please, please, reveal it all to me tonight when I put on the coat. We want to bring him to justice once and for all. Please? Trust me.

She opened her eyes, straightened her spine, and stood. There was work to be done, and she had to get on it.

As she stepped into the living room, there was silence. No one was in there, and she realized they were on the deck waiting for her. At the back door, she stopped for a second, her hand on the knob, and thought of Victoria again before she stepped outside.

"Ready?" Maisey nodded. "Okay. I've gotcha. Do whatcha gotta do, babe."

Maisey drew the sleeves of the coat up her arms until it reached her shoulders, then grabbed the lapels and pull the coat up until it slipped over her shoulders and settled. And just like always, everything went black.

Fear. It was thick in Victoria's mind. "Who are you and why are you here? What do you want with me?"

"I'm going to shut you up for good."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You need to keep your mouth shut."

Victoria's voice rang out. "Please, I really don't know what happened. I won't say a

word, I swear.”

“You’re right. You’re not going to. She’s just a stupid high school girl. It’s her fault because he’s a good man. If you do the right thing, you’ll ruin everything for me, so that can’t happen.”

“But I didn’t see?”

“You’re right. You didn’t see anything.”

Suddenly, everything was crystal clear, almost like the darkness was lit up, and she saw the knife plainly, the exact one she saw in the hunting goods store, and the flash on the blade as it found its home in her stomach. Victoria’s heart was pounding so hard that Maisey could hear it in her ears. “Why? I don’t understand...”

“Because I want a fucking Maserati, and if you open your fucking mouth, that’ll all go away. The lottery corporation won’t pay out to a felon, so you have to go.”

“Please. Please help me. Don’t let me die here. Who are you? I don’t understand!” Her voice was weaker, and Maisey could tell she was fading.

“Who am I?” The figure flipped back the hood on his hoodie and for the first time, Maisey could see his face. “I’m the guy who’s not going to let you ruin everything.”

It got darker and darker, and Maisey understood that Victoria was almost gone. In her mind, she whispered, Victoria! We’ve got him! He’ll pay! We’ll get justice for you. And know that Will still loves you. He always will.

From somewhere in the ether, she heard a voice. Thank you, Maisey. Tell Will I love him too.

The silence of the field where Victoria died was replaced with the sound of crickets in her backyard, but there were no voices. She lay there for a minute, stunned, until she finally opened her eyes, and a voice she loved said, “Maisey? Baby? You okay?”

Maisey struggled to sit up. Once she was upright, she felt something on her face. Tears. She was crying. “I saw him, Aaron. I saw him. He flipped his hood back and I saw his face.”

Carly’s voice cut through her fog. “Who was it?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never seen him before. But his voice was familiar.”

Aaron pulled out his phone. “I think it’s because you’ve heard it before, arguing with his father.” He held up his phone and there, on the screen was the face of the man who’d killed Victoria.

“That’s him! Oh, god! It’s him! Is that who I think it is?”

“That,” Aaron said, “is ColinSkidmore.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

“H e’s in the wind,” Aaron told Maisey the next morning about ten o’clock. The entire sheriff’s department had been looking for the boy, but so far, they hadn’t found a trace of him.

When work was over, Maisey went out to head home, but her car wouldn’t start. She tried and tried to get it to turn over, but it just wouldn’t. After fifteen minutes, she finally called Aaron and told him what was going on. “I’ll come get you.”

“No. You’ve got a game. You need to go on and I’ll call the auto club. It’ll be fine.”

“But I can?”

“No. I don’t want you to miss the game. That’s what I pay these people for. Go on. I’ll grab a burger on my way and I’ll be there before the end of the first inning.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m positive. Love you.”

“Love you too.”

Maisey went back into the office and called the auto club, then sat down and waited. She had plenty of paperwork to do, and it would take them forever to get there. The forms that had to be filled out with the Wurth kids were a nightmare?dozens of different kinds of forms.

So she waited. And waited. And waited. It was getting dark outside, so she called the club and asked if someone was coming. Yes, they said, it was a busy night and it would just take a while, so she settled back down to wait.

Daylight was gone before she heard a loud truck outside and wandered to the front door to see a burly guy with a wrecker standing across the street. “I think you’re looking for me,” she said as she stepped out.

“You Friedman?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Have you going in a jiffy.” True to his word, he jumped her battery and smiled. “There ya go. Need a new battery, or you left something on in the car.”

“Thanks. I appreciate it.”

“Have a nice evening, ma’am,” the guy said with a little tip of his hat. She watched as the truck disappeared down the street, then headed back to the office to gather her stuff, not daring to shut off her car.

It only took her a couple of minutes to get everything she needed, and she locked the office door behind her, then climbed into the running car. After checking her mirror, she pulled out from the curb and headed for the ballpark.

As she drove along, she turned on the radio and sang along. It would all be over as soon as they found Colin, and Maisie knew that wouldn’t take long. He was a teenager, and they weren’t usually as resourceful as adults. There were a lot of things they didn’t know how to do, and fleeing a country was one of those things. She doubted Colin even had a passport.

For a second she thought about stopping at the convenience store on the way, but there was a place she liked better. Once she'd picked up some dinner from the famous chicken restaurant, she turned toward the county park where the ball fields were located. The highway wasn't busy, and she only met one car.

The park's entrance had a lit sign, and as Maisey spun the steering wheel to the left, she thought she saw a flash of something behind her, but she couldn't see anything in the mirror. The road forked, going off to the right toward the ball fields, and to the left toward the tennis courts.

Her car knew the way, but just as she pulled the wheel to the right, there was a loud sound like metal crunching, and her car lurched toward the embankment on the left-hand side of the fork, rolled down, and came to rest faced into a huge tree. It took her a few seconds to figure out what had happened, and when she did, she heard a voice.

"And now I've got to deal with you."

Fear blinded Maisey, and she lunged for her bag, threw her door open, and ran. A couple of times he reached out for her and almost touched her, but she was running for her life, and she hadn't known she could run that fast. In her panic, she'd just bolted, and she realized as she ran that she wasn't headed toward the ball fields.

She was headed straight for the tennis courts.

At least I've got my bag, she told herself, but as she ran, she gripped whatever was in her hand, and it wasn't her bag. She didn't have her phone. Instead, she had the coat. For reasons she couldn't fathom that morning, she'd tossed it into the front seat. She'd had no plans to put it on at work, and she wasn't sure why she'd done it. It would be of no use to her—none at all. The distinction of being the second person to die in that coat didn't mean much to her. The tennis courts came into view, and she was almost to the clearing when something hit her from behind and she rolled.

She righted herself to find him dragging her by her shirt, and she flailed wildly, flapping the coat around. He dragged her, kicking and screaming, until he threw her against something, and she winced as her face struck it. That was when he turned loose of her, and she reached out for the object.

It was the tree trunk.

Something took over Maisie's body, and she slipped the coat on. "What the fuck? Why are you wearing that?" Colin spat.

"You know who I am. You know why I'm here," Maisie growled. "Remember? She said, 'Who are you and why are you here? What do you want with me?' And you said, 'I'm going to shut you up for good.'"

"How do you know that?" Colin bellowed. "You can't know that!"

"Because she told me, you idiot! She said, 'I don't know what you're talking about.' You said, 'You need to keep your mouth shut.' Then she said, 'Please, I really don't know what happened. I won't say a word, I swear.'"

"What are you, some kind of damn witch or something?" Colin snarled.

"No. Victoria told me. She told me what you said. She told me what you did. They all know, Colin. You're doomed. They'll find you, and they'll put you away for good, and if you kill me, they'll have you on two murder charges. Is that really what you want?"

"Shut up! Just SHUT UP!"

"You said, 'You're right. You're not going to. She's just a stupid high school girl. It's her fault because he's a good man. If you do the right thing, you'll ruin everything for

me, so that can't happen.' She said, 'But I didn't see?' Then you said, 'You're right. You didn't see anything.' Then she said, 'Why? I don't understand...' Remember what you said, you greedy little bastard?"

Colin laughed. "Yeah. I do. I told her I was going to kill her because I wanted a Maserati. It's worth a lot more than she was, and it's worth a lot more than you are too."

"She begged you for her life. And you killed her anyway. You may kill me, but you'll rot in hell, and I'll go to my grave knowing I put you away. Nobody's going to ruin it for you. You're going to do it to yourself. It'll be all your fault!"

"Fuck you! And fuck that pageant woman! And fuck my dad and that stupid skank he's been fucking! I'll be gone before anybody even finds your body!" He stalked up to her and grinned.

"ColinSkidmore! This is your only warning. Put down your weapon and surrender."

He glared at Maisey and for a split second, she thought he was going to lunge at her and kill her anyway. Then he stopped, grinned, and dropped the knife. "This isn't over," he whispered to her.

"Actually, it is." Aaron stepped up behind him and kicked the knife away. To Maisey's surprise, another deputy, Norris, stepped up with his weapon drawn so Aaron could cuff Colin. "ColinSkidmore, you're under arrest for the murder of VictoriaHunt and the attempted murder of MaiseyFriedman. You have the right to remain silent. If you do not remain silent, anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. You have..." Maisey couldn't hear anymore. She just turned inward and took a deep breath, listening to her heartbeat slow and feeling her pulse drawing down. "Mrs.Friedman? Mrs.Friedman, it's Norris. You okay?"

“Yeah. I’m okay. I think I twisted my ankle, but yes. I’m fine. Where’s Aaron?”

“He’s standing over there with Skidmore, waiting for a cruiser to come pick him up. Is there anything I can do for you? Get for you?”

“Got any water?”

“Uh, not with me. We ran all the way from the ball field.”

“That’s okay. I’ll be fine.” The field suddenly lit up as bright as day, and Maisey looked up to see an ambulance pulling into the grassy area. “An ambulance?”

“Yeah. Aaron insisted they check you out. I’m sure they’ll have some water. Come on. Let me help you stand up and I’ll walk you over to them.” He held out a hand, and Maisey took it.

She sat on the back steps of the ambulance and waited, sipping on a bottle of water, while one of the EMTs checked her head to toe. In just a few minutes, a cruiser pulled in, and she was surprised to see Carly step out of it. Instead of heading to Aaron and Skidmore, she made a beeline toward Maisey. “Honey, are you okay?”

“Yeah. I’m fine. I thought I was gonna die, but I didn’t.”

Carly stood there and stared at her. “You’re wearing the coat.”

A glance down told Maisey that Carly was right, and she hadn’t even realized what had happened. She didn’t remember pulling the jacket on. To her surprise, she also didn’t remember anything that had been said while he was standing over her, but she did remember how scared she’d been. Another face appeared beside Carly, and she looked up to find her husband standing in front of her, tears pouring down his cheeks. “Aaron? Are you okay?”

“No. No, I’m not. I damn near lost you, Maise. If I’d been a split second later... If I hadn’t seen your headlights wink off when he hit you... God, baby, I was so fucking scared!” Maisey was barely on her feet when he grabbed her and wrapped her in a tight hug. “I love you, Maisey. I can’t live without you.”

“Now you won’t have to.”

“Aaron, look at her,” Carly’s voice said. “She’s got the coat on.”

Aaron released her and stepped back. “Yeah. Colin said it was the weirdest thing ever. Babe, you repeated word for word what he and Victoria had said on the night he killed her. It totally freaked him out, and I’m guessing that’s the only thing that kept him from killing you.”

“She was here with me, Aaron. Victoria was here with me. And she’s at peace. But I have a message I have to give to somebody.” She had to wait until the next day to talk to Will, but she wanted Aaron and Carly with her. Otherwise, he probably wouldn’t believe her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Maisey was exhausted. Aaron took Murielle to Bailey's parents' house while Maisey showered, then came back to help her get into bed. She was so tired that she felt like she was just dragging around. He gave her some acetaminophen, helped her eat a tub of yogurt, and then told her she had to go to bed. Even though she thought she'd probably lie awake all night, thinking about everything that had happened, it only took her a few minutes and she was gone to la-la land.

The sun was shining, and she smiled when she woke up and found Aaron still in bed beside her. Carly must've given him the day off, and she'd have to remember to thank her friend. After a trip to the bathroom and washing her hands, she headed to the kitchen and started a pot of coffee. Damn, I hope somebody called the office for me, she thought as she leaned against the counter, listening to the coffeemaker gurgling. The sun was bright, so she headed to the living room to open the shades and let light fill the space. And she couldn't believe her eyes. "Aaron? Aaron!"

He appeared in the doorway, one eye still closed and scratching his balls. "What, baby? What's wrong?"

"Look out here."

Wobbling along, he stepped up beside her, and his eyes popped open wide. "What the fuck?"

Outside the front window were dozens of news vans, cars, and people, most of whom were wearing press badges. At least three of the vans had satellite dishes on top of

them. Neighbors were standing out on their porches, gawking, and someone knocked on the front door. “Don’t answer that,” he whispered.

“What the hell? Why are they here?”

Aaron gave her a scowl. “I mean, how would they even know? Carly... Carly told everyone involved that she didn’t want anybody to know what was going on. Besides, nobody but she and I, Cherilyn, Shaw, Ross, and you knew what your role was. There was nobody else who...” And he stopped.

“What?” He tipped his head downward and looked up at her from under his brows, and her heart sank into her slippers. “Who... Oh, no. You don’t really think...”

“Betcha a hundred dollars. Where were they?”

“They were supposed to be in Murielle’s bedroom. Carly told them to stay there. I heard her.”

Aaron frowned. “And when has Candace ever done what she was told?”

“Do you really think she’d call somebody and tell them?”

“Babe, I’d be willing to bet she had a list of media outlets that she couldn’t wait to call and tell. God, we’re fucked.”

“What do we do?”

“Well, I don’t know what you’re going to do, but I’m going to call Shaw and tell him what his daughter has done.”

Thirty minutes later, Maisey heard a loud voice say, “I may be a conservation officer, but I’m still a law enforcement agent, and you need to get the hell off their property.

Stay behind that sidewalk or I swear to god, I'll call the city and county and have all of you arrested. Get back and stay back!" Aaron jettied to the door and yanked it open to a startled Shaw. "Holy hell. Can I come in?"

"Of course."

He stepped in and Aaron closed the door behind him. "First off, before you say anything else, Cherilyn and I pinned her to the wall and she admitted to it. I'm so, so sorry. I don't know what I can do now, but she won't do something like this again."

Maisey sighed. "We hated to call you, but we figured it out pretty quickly. She was the only one it could've been. Maya is a rule-follower, and the other two wouldn't know what was going on."

Shaw shook his head. "Just when I think she's learned her lesson, she pulls another stunt. I'm one step away from sending her to boarding school before she gets somebody hurt or worse."

"She needs you, Shaw, you and Cherilyn. Her mother didn't pay any attention to her, and you're reaping the mess she sowed." Maisey turned to Aaron. "You do realize I'm going to have to talk to one of the outlets so they'll leave us alone."

"Yeah. I know. I was hoping for one peaceful day..." Aaron shook his head. "I guess if you talk to anybody, it should be a local outlet."

After a moment's thought, Maisey nodded. "Call Evan and let him figure out who to call and how to set it up." Their family attorney was also a friend of Aaron's, and she knew he'd be able to sort it all out.

Aaron wrapped his arm around her shoulders. "Will do. Shaw, we don't hold any ill will. You didn't do it? Candace did. But you need to let her know that she's done us a grave disservice as friends who love her and trusted her."

“Oh, trust me, I will. If I can do anything to help, let me know. I owe you that.”

Maisey gave him what she hoped was a reassuring smile. “You don’t owe us anything, but thank you for being a good friend.” She stepped up in front of Shaw and wrapped her arms around his neck.

She almost giggled when he wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tightly. “We love you guys too. I’m so, so glad you’re okay.”

“Thanks. See you later. Tell Cherilyn we said hi and everything’s okay between us.”

“Will do. Later.” Shaw opened the door, then closed it. She could hear him yelling, “I told you to get back! Stay off their property. That’s trespassing, and you’ll get yourselves arrested. I’m not kidding around.”

Maisey turned to Aaron, and he opened his arms. The next few days would be hard, but they’d make it. He had her back, and she had his. Nothing could break that bond.

Nothing.

It’s over. Or is it? Let’s face it, Maisey likes fashion, but she won’t ever go back to that consignment store! Or will she? Sometimes, no matter what you do, fate finds you and deals you a hand you never expected. Get ready. Maisey’s notoriety is spreading, and it’s just a matter of time before another voice from the grave calls out to her for help.