



Divine Double Trouble: A Divine Cozy Mystery Novel (Divine Mystery Series Book 10)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Spring is right around the corner in the tiny town of Divine. Big changes are on the horizon for Jo's residents—changes that fill Jo with a sense of pride but also an element of sadness when Leah McEllish, one of her residents, successfully completes her probation at Jo's group home for former inmates.

God's divine hand is in Leah's life when a job opens up at Dave Kilwin's farm, Jo's next door neighbor. As if perfectly planned, Leah moves right in and is eager to learn as much as she can with a future goal of starting her own farm.

Unfortunately, not everyone at the Kilwin Farm is thrilled at Leah's arrival. Within hours, she's written up and put on probation. When her supervisor is found murdered, investigators start taking a closer look at the former inmate.

With two open spots at Jo's facility, Pastor Murphy convinces her to consider twin sisters with a disturbing past. Despite her fears of double trouble, Jo decides to offer the open spots to the sisters, only to discover that one of them comes with a special challenge.

Determined to help clear Leah's name, Jo soon realizes the new resident's special challenge might actually be a "Divine" gift and the key to solving the mystery.

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A flash of baby blue flew down the road and careened into Jo's driveway. Toot. Toot. Tooooootttt!

"I wish Sherry would tone that horn of hers down a touch. It sounds like she's herding up cattle at King Ranch." Delta watched as a thick cloud of dust drifted toward the front porch.

The farm's former resident sprang from her 1980 Cadillac Coupe Deville, nicknamed Lady Luxe, and jogged across the driveway.

Delta grabbed her arm and dragged her inside before slamming the door shut. "You need to stop arriving in a cloud of dust."

"I can't help it if we need a good soaking rain," Sherry said breathlessly. "Divine is drier than a spoonful of cinnamon."

"Sherry," Jo chuckled. "Where do you come up with such crazy sayings?"

"From customers at the deli." Sherry craned her neck and looked around. "Where's Leah, the guest of honor?"

"Packing her bags and cleaning her unit. I'll be driving her over to Dave Kilwin's place first thing tomorrow morning to start her new job." Jo could feel her throat clog at the thought of Leah moving out. It was a mixed bag of emotions—pride at how the young woman had turned her life around and was taking her first step toward freedom and a fresh start.

There was also a sense of sadness. Another one of Jo's residents was leaving, although she wouldn't be going far. Dave Kilwin, Jo's neighbor, had recently expanded his operations and was hiring additional staff.

Leah was the perfect fit for the position. She was a born farmer.

There was one other person who would miss the resident as much as Jo. "Gary is still taking it hard. He's going to miss having Leah around."

"He'll be all right. Yes, he's gonna miss her, but there's no one prouder of Leah than Gary. He taught her everything she knows about farming. He'll be right there for her if she needs help." Delta glanced at her watch. "We're running out of time. We gotta finish frosting the cakes."

The trio headed to the kitchen and while Delta added frosting to the mocha double fudge cakes, Jo and Sherry began setting the table for Leah's celebratory dinner, a Mexican feast. There were enchiladas, burritos, a taco bar, homemade salsa, and guacamole.

One by one, the residents arrived...Raylene, Kelli, Michelle, Laverne and finally Leah. Gary and Nash weren't far behind, accompanied by Pastor Sawyer Murphy, who had been instrumental in bringing Leah to the farm.

Jo could feel her emotions well up again as she gazed at those gathered around the table. It was the last evening meal Leah would eat as a resident, and a sense of melancholy filled her as she thought about the others. Emily was the first to finish the program and leave. Sherry was second and now Leah.

Leah's departure would also mean Jo had two open spots. "We are so excited for you, Leah," she said. "Dave Kilwin will be lucky to have you."

“I can’t wait.” Leah’s eyes lit. “He’s implementing some new farming techniques and I’m hoping he’ll be open to my ideas about testing out more organic methods.”

“It’s a wonderful opportunity,” Jo said. “This is your last official night as a resident, and I would like to say a special prayer.”

The group joined hands and lowered their heads before Jo began. “Dear Heavenly Father, thank you for bringing us all together for this special dinner. Lord, we lift Leah up. She’s beginning the next phase of her life, will be enjoying her newfound independence and starting a job doing something she truly loves. We pray you lead her and guide her every step of the way and thank you that one more of our residents grows and flourishes in a new and exciting way. Amen.”

“Amen,” the others echoed.

“So.” Laverne grabbed the baked enchiladas, scooped a large spoonful onto her plate and passed the dish to Leah. “At the risk of not minding my own business, how much is Dave Kilwin paying you?”

“That’s none of your business,” Jo admonished.

“I already said it wasn’t,” Laverne said. “I’m just curious to find out how much he’s willing to pay a former convict.”

A collective groan echoed around the room, and Delta pinned Laverne with a pointed stare. “You can be the most rude and nosy woman.”

Laverne shrugged. “It’s a legit question. I’ll be in the same boat someday soon. You can’t blame me for trying to figure out what the pay grade is for someone in our situation.”

Leah lifted a hand. "I don't mind. I'll be making ten dollars an hour to start, plus all my meals and housing are included."

Laverne let out a low whistle. "He's getting a bargain for someone with experience. You probably could've negotiated a little more. Did you try?"

"Laverne Huntsman." Jo made a zipping motion across her lips. "It's one thing to ask the question, but quite another to give Leah advice. If you ask me, the per hour pay, when factoring in housing and meals, is generous considering how rural our area is."

"Eh." Laverne arched a brow. "I can tell you one thing...I don't plan on working for ten bucks an hour. Of course, I'll be moving to the city. I suppose the pay in these rinky-dink small towns would be less than more populated places."

Delta clapped her hands, noting the bright pink color creeping into Leah's cheeks at being the center of attention and the subject of Laverne's inquisition. "This is an exciting opportunity and one of many stepping-stones in Leah's future." She lifted her glass. "I propose a toast. To a bright and promising future for Leah."

They tapped glasses, and the conversation shifted to the upcoming planting season. Gary would need some help now that his right-hand gal was leaving. He did his best to maintain a poker face, but a few times Jo caught his lower lip trembling when he talked to the resident who had been by his side the past two years, almost from the very beginning.

Delta brought out the cakes while Jo and Nash grabbed the coffee. All too soon, the meal ended, and Leah excused herself, claiming she wanted to finish packing.

Sherry was the next to leave, and the other residents weren't far behind. Delta and Gary headed home, and Nash ran back to the shop to lock up, leaving Jo alone with Pastor Murphy.

“You have two empty spots here at the farm,” the pastor reminded her. “Have you given any more thought to who might be on your short list of potential new residents?”

Jo had given it some thought, but something held her back from deciding and she couldn't quite put her finger on the reason. Perhaps it was merely a case of feeling melancholy at losing Leah and being hesitant to bring in new women until she had mentally prepared herself for the process.

There was always a period of adjustment, not only for Jo, but also for the remaining women. She took the responsibility of making sure each new resident had a shot at making it and was willing to put in the time and effort to start over.

Not everyone was ready. Hence, the current concern. All the candidates Jo had spoken with had, for one reason or another, not been able to tick off all her boxes.

“I have.” Jo picked at a piece of lint on her pants. “I'm having a hard time deciding,” she confessed. “Each of the women on the short list has an issue which is giving me pause.”

Pastor Murphy nodded sympathetically. “Between you and me, I've felt the same.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a folded sheet of paper. “I'm going to throw a wildcard at you. Two sisters, twins, have come up for release. They have nowhere to go, and I was wondering if you might consider them.”

“Twins?” Jo eyed the piece of paper.

“I met with them before driving here for dinner. Their names are Courtney and Carli Ladeaux.”

“Courtney and Carli Ladeaux. Why do their names sound familiar?”

“Because they’re the Ladeaux robbers. A few years back, the two went on a robbing spree, holding up banks in all four corners of the state. The police eventually apprehended them, along with their father, who was killed in a shootout.”

“And you believe they’re potential candidates for rehabilitation here at the farm?”

“I do. According to Courtney, their father was the driving force behind the robberies. After his death, they ended up in the women’s penitentiary. They’ve been model prisoners without a single incident and are now up for parole with nowhere to go.”

“I...” Jo struggled to remember what she could about the news stories—about how the two young women had successfully robbed a chain of banks. She remembered hearing about the shootout and the father’s death and wondered at the time how a parent could lead their children so far astray. “I would need to meet with them first.”

“Of course,” the pastor said. “I have some free time tomorrow afternoon if you would like to go over to the prison with me. You can chat with both of them, or at least one of them. Carli doesn’t talk.”

“Doesn’t talk?” Jo echoed.

“She hasn’t spoken a word since being incarcerated. For all I know, it could be even longer. Courtney does all the talking.”

“How does she communicate?”

“Through her sister.”

“I see.” Jo mulled over the proposition. On the one hand, she wasn’t any closer to figuring out who might be a good fit for the farm. Leah’s departure meant she had two open spots. The twins could fill both vacancies, ensuring Jo’s status as a state-

sponsored facility would remain intact. “I would like to meet them.”

“Good.” Pastor Murphy patted the paper. “I have a summary of their incarceration. I’m sure you can go online and find out more details about their history. How does noon tomorrow sound? I can swing by and pick you up.”

“Noon it is.” Jo, along with Duke, her hound, accompanied the pastor to his van and watched as he drove off.

The Ladeaux twins. An inkling of trepidation crept up Jo’s back, and she silently scolded herself. It seemed the longer she was in the rehabilitation business, the more cautious she became.

She wondered about the twins and the fact Carli didn’t speak. Would they be a good fit? Perhaps what they needed was a positive role model, someone to steer them in the right direction and give them a second chance, away from the life of crime their father had gotten them involved in.

Jo thought about her own situation and her mother’s incarceration. Although it was a completely different set of circumstances, she could sympathize with how they must feel about having a black cloud of poor decisions made by their parents, or at least one of them, hanging over their heads.

“C’mon, Duke.” Jo absentmindedly patted the pup’s head. “Let’s go back inside.”

Later that evening, when Jo got ready for bed, her thoughts turned to Leah and her future and then the Ladeaux twins. Changes were coming to the Divine farm.

She prayed for guidance, that she would make the right decision and, after finishing

was filled with a sense of peace. Jo would have a better idea about what she might be getting herself into when she met with Carli and Courtney.

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Leah nervously unzipped her backpack, checking the contents for the umpteenth time during their short drive to Dave Kilwin's farm early the next morning.

"The other workers are going to love you," Jo said. "In a day or two, we'll be a distant memory."

"No way. I'll never forget you, Jo. I'll never forget how you helped me. I want to make you proud."

"You already do. Today is the first day of the rest of your life. Look at it as an opportunity to learn. Take full advantage of everything Gary taught you with your eye on the future."

"I will." Leah sucked in a breath and nodded. "It isn't easy making friends when you have a past. I hope the other workers haven't already decided they don't like me."

"I hope not either." Jo had always made a concerted effort to be accepting, to be mindful of the fact that more than anything, her residents needed to know she was on their side, no matter what.

Moving outside their small circle of residents and workers wasn't necessarily being thrown to the wolves, but re-entering society could be tricky. At least Dave knew Leah's history and was willing to give her a chance, and Jo reminded her of that.

"I know, and I'll do whatever it takes to make sure I don't let him down."

Jo turned into Dave's driveway and parked in front of the barn, alongside her

neighbor's pickup with a big, bold "Kilwin Farms" emblazoned on the driver's side door.

"Before we get out, I have something for you." Leah fumbled inside her backpack, pulled out a small, wrapped box and handed it to Jo.

"What is this?"

"A thank you gift for everything you've done for me. I don't know where I would be right now if it wasn't for you. You took me in when no one else wanted me. You showed me people really do care. You gave me hope I could have a good life, a great life. The day I stepped foot on the farm, I knew you had my back and, for once, I was finally going to get a fair shake in life. I wouldn't be sitting here, shaking in my shoes and almost ready to throw up because my whole life is ahead of me, without you. And I say this not only for myself but for every other resident at the farm. You're changing lives, one person at a time, and you chose me."

Jo's throat clogged, and sudden tears burned the back of her eyes. "I love you, Leah. I have loved every minute of watching you grow and change and become the person I knew you could be from the moment I met you. I have faith in you and even though I might not see you every day, I'll be on the sidelines, rooting you on."

"I know you will be, and it means more than words can ever say."

Jo carefully unwrapped the gift box and lifted the lid. Inside was a necklace, an angel with a serene smile on her face, her hands folded in front of her. A pair of gold slippers peeked out from beneath her flowing white gown. "She's beautiful."

"It's you," Leah said. "Kelli made her out of clay. There's a scripture on the back."

Jo turned her over. "Psalm 34, verse 7."

“The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them,” Leah quoted. “Divine has angels and you’re one of them.”

Jo removed the necklace from the holder, unclasped the delicate hook, and placed it around her neck. “I’ll treasure it forever. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, and I meant every word I said.”

“I have something for you.” Jo reached inside the center console and removed a wrapped package. She handed it to Leah. “This is your graduating-from-the-program gift.”

“You didn’t have...”

“I wanted to,” Jo interrupted. “Go ahead. Open it.”

Leah unwrapped the package and lifted the lid on the box, revealing a shiny new cell phone. “A phone?”

“It’s all yours. I’ve included a year’s worth of cell service with unlimited talk and text. You can call whoever you want whenever you want.”

Leah attempted to hand it back. “I can’t accept this.”

“You can and you will. I also gave one to Sherry when she moved out.”

“Seriously?” Leah turned it over in her hand. “I can call anyone?”

“Anyone. I’ve already programmed my number, Nash’s number, Gary and Delta’s number, Sherry’s number, the farm’s number in it. We’ll only be a phone call or text message away.”

“Thank you.” Leah impulsively hugged Jo, a warm hug filled with love, and Jo could feel her slender shoulders tremble. “I’ll take good care of it.”

“I know you will. Let’s do this.” Jo slid out of the SUV and met Leah near the front.

Dave strolled around the corner of the building and caught up with them. “Morning Jo. Morning Leah. You’re right on time.”

“I’m ready to get to work,” Leah said. “I brought...I have my things with me.”

A man, in his late fifties, if Jo had to guess, emerged from the door marked “office,” and Dave motioned him over. “Leah, this is Shane Barr, my manager. He’ll show you to your quarters and get you started by giving you a tour.”

Leah extended a hand. The man clasped it and placed his other hand over the top. “Good morning,” he said. “Dave didn’t mention we were hiring such a pretty young gal.”

“I-uh. Th-thank you,” Leah stammered as she attempted to pull her hand away.

Barr held tight. “What was your name again?”

“Leah McEllish.”

“Leah,” Barr repeated. “The housing units are this way.”

“Let me know if you need anything,” Dave said. “Welcome to Kilwin Farms, Leah.”

A sense of uneasiness filled Jo as the man stepped in close to Leah and led her toward a long, low set of buildings.

Jo hurried to catch up with them. They stopped in front of the end unit. Barr opened the door before removing the key and handing it to Leah. “You only get one key. If you lose it, it’ll cost you twenty-five bucks to have another one made. Your shift starts at seven. You have a morning and afternoon break with an hour off at noon for lunch. Quitting time is six. I’ll rotate shifts so you’ll train in each of the areas. The only day you have off is Monday, but if something comes up and you need another day off, let me know and we’ll see what we can work out.”

“I...don’t have a problem with the schedule,” Leah said. “I’m here to work and learn.”

“Good.” Barr ignored Jo. “You’re on probation and I’ll be keeping a close eye on you.”

“I understand.” Leah shrank back under the man’s intense gaze, and Jo could feel the tips of her ears burn. She started to say something, but held back. Leah would be on her own now, and it appeared Shane Barr had more than a passing interest in the new employee.

They toured the common areas, similar in some ways to Jo’s setup, which wasn’t a surprise. Dave Kilwin had visited her farm several times, asking questions and getting ideas before starting his expansion and recent remodeling project.

The tour ended where it started, in front of Leah’s unit. Barr stood near the door while Jo and Leah stepped inside.

“This is nice.” Jo let out a low whistle. “Dave did a good job of renovating the private rooms.”

“It is nice.” Leah pressed lightly on the bed. “What’s over in the corner? Another closet?”

The women crossed the room. Jo eased the door open and found it led to a private bathroom.

“I have my own bathroom,” Leah said excitedly.

“Lucky you.” Jo pulled the shower curtain aside. “And even a soaking tub. You’ll be living in luxury now,” she teased.

“I can’t wait to try it out.”

Barr leaned his hip against the door. “My office is right around the corner.”

“Great,” Leah said in a low voice. “Just what I need.”

“He seems a little too friendly,” Jo whispered back.

“I was thinking the same thing.” Leah frowned. “The less time he spends in my unit, the better.”

The women hurriedly exited Leah’s private quarters where an impatient Shane Barr pointedly tapped the top of his watch. “I’ll meet you in the barn in ten minutes. That should give you sufficient time to drop your things off and get ready to start your shift, unless you need help unloading.”

“No. Uh. We have it covered. Thank you for the offer.” Leah sucked in a breath as she watched him walk away. “We better hustle.”

The women ran to the SUV, grabbed Leah’s things and returned to her unit.

“I hate to say it, but Shane Barr is making me uncomfortable,” Leah confessed when they were alone.

“You need to calmly but firmly let him know you aren’t interested,” Jo said. “The sooner, the better.”

“I agree. Otherwise, I think I might have a problem.” Leah set her backpack on top of the dresser. “I want this to work so badly. Starting off on the wrong foot with him won’t help.”

“Allowing him to harass you won’t, either,” Jo pointed out. “If he doesn’t back off after you let him know you’re not interested, you might need to talk to Dave about it.”

Leah squared her shoulders. “Right. Maybe we’re reading too much into it. After all, we just met him. Either way, I’ve got this.”

“That’s the spirit.”

Leah gave Jo another hug. “I’ll make you proud. I promise.”

“I know you will.” Jo and Leah parted ways near the SUV with her former resident making her way inside the building to track down her new boss.

As Jo drove off, she prayed Shane Barr wouldn’t start hitting on Leah and she would soon settle into her new home and new job.

Near noon, Pastor Murphy texted Jo to remind her about their appointment and let her know he was on his way.

Jo ran to the kitchen. “Pastor Murphy is on his way.”

“Good luck.” Delta trailed behind as Jo strode toward the front porch. “The Ladeaux twins might not be a good fit. Don’t make the wrong decision because you think you need to decide soon.”

“I won’t. I’ll go into this with my eyes wide open and listen to my gut.” Earlier that morning, after dropping Leah off, Jo had done a little background research on the sisters and discovered their father had raised them. Their mother had been out of the picture from the time they were very young.

Larry Ladeaux had used his daughters for many years to distract his victims and help him with his dirty work, starting out with petty thefts and minor crimes before graduating to armed bank robbery.

It was the only life the two had ever known, taught by a parent who was the worst possible influence. And now he was gone, and they were alone.

Honk. Honk. Pastor Murphy circled around and waited for Jo to hop in. “I was half-expecting you to back out after you researched the Ladeaux twins.”

“I have to admit, I was having second thoughts, but I’m committed to meeting them and would like to hear their side of the story.” Jo snapped her seatbelt in place. “From what I read, it appears their mother abandoned them not long after they were born and their father, Larry, brought them up in a life of crime.”

“In a nutshell,” the pastor said. “It’s a shame because they’re still so young. I’m hoping if they have a strong, positive influence and an opportunity to see for themselves what their future could be like, they’ll turn their lives around. As I mentioned before, they’ve been model prisoners without a single incident recorded. They may just need the Jo Pepperdine second chance.”

During the drive, the pastor shared a few more tidbits, information he’d gleaned from

the prison officials, and by the time they arrived at the state penitentiary, Jo was feeling optimistic she may have finally found her new residents.

She turned her cell phone in at the check-in desk before following a guard and the pastor through the first of a series of heavy metal doors.

Jo braced herself for the loud clang each set made and couldn't help but think the inmates heard those series of doors open and close, day in and day out. Heavy metal doors that clanged, reminding them they were separated from society, kept locked away for their own safety and the safety of those around them.

She often wondered how her mother had dealt with the emotions of being incarcerated and the feeling of hopelessness knowing she would never make it out alive. It had eaten at Jo so many times, the burden of feeling responsible for her mother. If she had only done things differently all those years ago.

But out of the bad had come good...Jo's farm and her desire to help those who needed a hand up.

The guard motioned them inside an empty visiting room, one Jo had been in more times than she could count.

The guard left and returned a short time later, accompanied by two attractive young women clad in prison uniforms.

Their dark hair was cut short, almost in a bowl cut with a row of bangs that brushed the bottom of their eyebrows, just above their intense blue eyes.

Pastor Murphy greeted them first. "Hello, Courtney and Carli."

"Hello," the woman to his left replied. "You're back."

“I am. Remember the woman, Joanna, I was telling you about?” the pastor asked. “She’s here to chat with you.” He introduced them as he talked, and Jo shook both of their hands. “It’s nice to meet you. You’re identical twins.”

“We are. I’m Courtney. This is my sister, Carli.”

Jo asked about their plans after being released, if they had any specific interests and what they might like to do.

For every question Jo asked, Courtney replied, while Carli stared at her hands. Despite Jo’s best efforts, she wasn’t able to engage with the other woman, and it almost seemed to her that Courtney enjoyed controlling the situation and—quite possibly—her sister.

Their allotted time flew by and before she knew it, the guard returned to escort the women back to their cells.

Carli slipped out of her chair appearing anxious to escape while Courtney lingered. “We...uh. We’re getting out of here the day after tomorrow and we have nowhere to go. I hate to be pushy, but was wondering if we had a shot at being accepted into your place.”

Their eyes met, and Jo detected something in Courtney’s. Perhaps it was a sense of desperation.

What would they do if Jo didn’t take them in? Their father was dead. Their mother could also be dead, or at the very least, had zero interest in her daughters.

Perhaps, in his own weird way, Larry Ladeaux thought he was doing the best he could for Courtney and Carli. Perhaps he had also been raised in a life of crime and it was the only thing he knew to do to survive.

During her research, Jo had discovered they'd spent most of their years living in the Westall Neighborhood, a crime-ridden, drug-infested neighborhood in lower Kansas City. She'd once watched a documentary about Westall, and it had made Jo's stomach churn.

To say it was a rough area was an understatement. No wonder they had been caught up in a life of crime.

The twins had so many strikes against them. If she didn't take them in, would they return to their old neighborhood? How would they survive? By committing more crimes or maybe even selling the only thing they had—their bodies—to make money?

It was an awful thought, and one that had kept Jo up the previous night. If she didn't take them in, they would be on the streets with few prospects and a dismal outlook for their future.

Chances are they would end up in the same situation or one even worse. And if the thought of what would happen to them was keeping her up at night, she could only imagine what was going through their minds.

The bottom line was that Jo Pepperdine was their last hope, their only hope. She cast the pastor a quick glance and could see from the tense expression on his face he also understood exactly what these two women were up against.

Jo sucked in a breath. She'd reached a decision. "I would like to offer both of you a spot at my farm, if you're interested."

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Jo paused, carefully choosing her next words. “There are certain rules and stipulations you must agree to, abide by and sign off on.”

“What kinda rules?” Courtney’s eyes narrowed.

“No cell phones, no visitors without prior approval, no contraband items such as alcohol, drugs, or cigarettes. You will both work a regular schedule at the farm and will be paid once a week. What you earn will be deposited directly into your own account. The money accumulates while you live at the farm. The account is turned over to you when you leave.”

“Sweet,” Courtney whooped. Her enthusiasm was short-lived. “After you deduct for our rooms and meals?”

Jo shook her head. “No. My offer includes both. What you earn is yours to keep, although you can’t access the funds without my approval. In other words, I’ll track your purchases while you live under my roof.”

“Can I...can we see a copy of the rules?” Courtney asked.

Carli, who had been listening in, returned to the table.

“Of course.” Jo removed the sets of rules she’d brought with her and handed a copy to each of them.

“Thank you.” Courtney grew quiet as she studied the list.

Carli let out a quick breath, and Jo thought she was going to speak, but she remained silent.

Finally, Courtney slid the list of rules back across the table. “How many other women live on the farm?”

“Four. I had five. One recently completed the program and moved out of the farm this morning,” Jo said. “The most important component of your rehabilitation is you. You must want to change.”

“We haven’t had a good start in this world,” Courtney said.

“I understand that. In fact, I did a little research before coming here today. I know about your background and how you got to this point. All of my residents—those who live there and those who have finished the program and gone on to live successful and productive lives, have been at a disadvantage, hit rock bottom and needed a helping hand.” Jo paused, letting her statement sink in. “We will work as a team. I’ll be your greatest ally, but it’s up to you to put in the effort and to want a fresh start.”

“What kind of work will we have to do?”

“I own a bakeshop and a mercantile, a store which sells gently used clothing and household items. I also have gardens and a workshop where you’ll be able to learn new skills. The residents rotate each day, so you’re taught an even balance of unique skills.”

“Can my sister and I have a minute alone?” Courtney asked.

“Of course.”

The guard escorted Jo and the pastor into the hallway and closed the door behind them.

“Well?” Pastor Murphy nudged Jo. “Do you think they’ll accept your offer?”

An uneasiness settled over her, and she wasn’t sure where it was coming from. The twins appeared to be eager to start over. Courtney asked the right questions. She seemed agreeable to working, learning new skills and abiding by Jo’s rules. If Jo had been in her shoes, she would have jumped at the chance, would’ve signed on the dotted line, yet the woman hesitated.

Something told Jo the hesitation involved Carli. The woman hadn’t uttered a single word the entire time, content to let her sister do the talking. Perhaps Courtney wanted Carli’s input to get her thoughts on whether they should accept Jo’s generous offer.

Why wouldn’t the woman speak? Despite Jo’s digging around, she hadn’t found a single reference to Carli’s silence. Surely, she had talked in the past. There had to be a reason for it. “Do you have any idea why Carli won’t speak?”

The pastor shook his head. “I point-blank asked Courtney. She told me Carli had nothing to say.”

“And you know for certain she can talk?”

“I believe she can.”

Jo grew quiet as she mulled over the unusual situation. A non-speaking resident would create certain challenges. She couldn’t wait on customers if she refused to communicate, which meant she would either need to work alongside someone or Jo would have to assign her tasks that didn’t involve talking.

The guard returned. “They’re done.”

The pastor and Jo stepped back inside the room.

“We’re ready to sign,” Courtney said. “Carli and I want to start over.”

Jo handed Courtney a pen. She signed the first set of papers, printed her name, and dated it before passing the pen to her sister.

Carli did the same and then Jo gathered up the signed agreements. “We’ll have a few hurdles to overcome considering the fact Carli refuses to talk.” Jo pinned Carli with a stare. “You can talk, can’t you?”

Carli silently nodded.

“But you don’t want to?” Jo pressed.

The young woman shook her head.

“I can’t force you to talk, but it will pose some challenges in working with customers.”

“We work together as a team,” Courtney said.

“You will also be required to work alongside the other residents,” Jo warned.

The women exchanged a quick glance, and some unspoken message passed between them.

Jo was starting to suspect working with twins might be her biggest test yet.

“I...we understand,” Courtney said. “Do we get to leave the farm or are we stuck there twenty-four seven?”

“I wouldn’t call it stuck there. We plan outings. If you’re interested, you can also attend church on Sunday. We go out to eat, attend festivals and other events in and around Divine.”

“What about driving?”

“If you don’t know how to drive, we’ll teach you. You’re not allowed to leave the property unsupervised,” Jo said.

The twins exchanged another glance and Jo would’ve gladly paid a hundred bucks to know what the two were saying to each other. She was going to have to get up to speed on non-verbal forms of communication...and fast.

Laverne, the farm’s resident who loved to analyze others, popped into Jo’s head. The woman would have a field day trying to analyze these two.

“No shenanigans,” Jo warned. “If you cause any trouble at the farm, break the rules or refuse to abide by them, you’ll be forced to leave with no second chance. In other words, this is a one and done.”

“We’re ready,” Courtney said. “More than ready.”

Pastor Murphy consulted his watch. “I’ll confirm your exact release schedule before picking you up. From here, we’ll drive directly to Jo’s place.”

Courtney scrambled to her feet. “Thank you, Ms. Pepperdine. You won’t be sorry. Carli and I will be the best residents you’ve ever had.”

“I hope so. You have some stiff competition.” Jo could feel herself start to relax. “If you follow the rules and make the effort, I believe you’re starting the journey to a wonderful new life.”

A guard arrived to escort the twins back to their cells while a second guard accompanied Jo and the pastor to the front desk to retrieve their personal belongings.

Pastor Murphy waited until they were back inside his van. “Well?”

“There was something about them I can’t quite put my finger on,” Jo said.

“Courtney and Carli’s non-verbal communication. It was like they were having a conversation right there in front of us.”

“Yeah. Something was going on between the two of them, some unspoken rule was playing out.” Jo blew air through thinned lips. “I guess I’m going to have to brush up on reading body language.”

“Or figure out why Carli Ladeaux doesn’t want to talk.”

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Jo spent the rest of the day and a portion of the following day making sure her two vacant units were ready for new occupants. At first, she thought about rearranging the residents and putting the sisters next to each other but decided to leave them as is, with Courtney at one end and Carli at the other, suspecting a smidgen of distance would be good for both of them.

Her next task was to prepare the paperwork required by the state, along with a checklist of items and forms she assembled for each of the residents when they arrived.

She gathered up the paperwork, logged into the state's system and scoured the women's files, searching for clues about exactly why Carli had decided she no longer wanted to speak.

But there was nothing. Or very little, just a few jotted notes that hinted at the guards and staff's frustration over Carli's silence.

Courtney, on the other hand, appeared to be an exemplary inmate, volunteering in various areas and even being commended by some of the staff for her willingness to help.

Jo searched the internet again for stories about their incarceration and stumbled upon an old news article, an in-depth look at the life of the Ladeaux sisters. It was a sad summary of what Jo already knew—the twins were basically abandoned by their mother and raised by a father with a long criminal history.

He'd served time in a state penitentiary and Jo wondered what had happened to the

women, then children, during their father's incarceration and who had cared for them.

As she researched, it became increasingly clear it would take some time to unravel their past. It was a challenge Jo was confident she was up to—if the twins cooperated.

There was a buzz in the air at dinner that evening as Jo, Nash, Delta, Gary and the remaining four residents gathered at the table. Jo waited until they started eating to make her announcement.

"I may have mentioned it to some of you already, but we have two new residents arriving tomorrow."

Laverne's head snapped up. "Two?"

"Yes. Twin sisters." Jo briefly filled them in on the women's arrival. "Carli's room will be closest to the common area, while Courtney will get Leah's old room at the other end."

"You're not putting them side by side?" Raylene asked.

"No. I've decided against uprooting all of you in order to put them close together."

Laverne toyed with her fork, a gleam of interest lighting her face. "Twins. Did they commit the same crime?"

"They did."

"Which is..."

"Robbery."

“Did they shoot anyone?” Laverne asked. “I mean, I know your rule is you won’t take in murderers, but I was wondering if there was an attempted murder or the gun went off and they accidentally shot someone.”

Jo arched a brow. “I didn’t say they were armed with guns, although it appears to have been the case. The bottom line is Courtney and Carli Ladeaux committed the crimes, have done their time, and are looking forward to rehabilitation.”

“Did you say Ladeaux?”

“Yes.” Jo noted the fact the color had suddenly drained from Michelle’s face. “Are you okay?”

“I am. I just...” Michelle’s voice trailed off.

“You know something about the Ladeaux sisters.”

“They were from the Westall Neighborhood.”

Jo, sensing there was some new tidbit of information about the sisters, gave Michelle her full attention. “They were. You’re familiar with the area?”

“I grew up near Westall. I didn’t know Carli or Courtney, but knew their names and saw them around sometimes. Their father, Larry, ran with a rough bunch.”

“He’s dead.”

A flicker of something crossed Michelle’s face. “He wasn’t a good person, not even by the Westall standards.”

“What did he do?” Jo asked.

“Stole stuff. He put his daughters up to stealing stuff too and...”

“And what?” Jo prompted.

“I heard he used to beat the crap out of them to keep them in line.”

Jo felt as if someone had punched her in the gut. Not only had the scumbag father gotten his daughters involved in a life of crime, but he’d also abused them.

“Physically abused them.”

“Yeah. I would see them around, you know, we were close to the same age and one time I saw Carli with a black eye. It looked like someone punched her. Her sister Courtney was very protective of her.”

“How horrible.” Delta’s hand flew to her mouth. “Perhaps it’s a blessing with the father out of the picture. Is there anything else you can remember about them?”

Michelle shook her head. “I was on my way out right about then. I always felt sorry for them. It was a rough neighborhood. Years later, I heard about their crime spree and robberies. I wasn’t surprised seeing how their dad raised them to steal.”

“They’ll have a clean slate with their father no longer influencing their lives,” Raylene said. “If he’s gone, they might have a shot at a better life.”

“There’s one more thing. Carli doesn’t speak.”

Kelli blinked rapidly. “Doesn’t speak?”

“Courtney does the talking for both of them. In fact, I believe it has been several years now. She hasn’t talked while incarcerated and it appears she’s not inclined to start now.”

“That’ll be fun.” Laverne pursed her lips. “How is she going to handle customers in the bakeshop and mercantile if she refuses to talk?”

“I don’t know. What I do know is that she can hear. She understands what you say to her, so I believe she can at least help people. It’s something we’ll need to work on.” Jo segued into her pep talk, reminding the other residents how they had also once been in Carli and Courtney’s shoes and the importance of being supportive, helpful and understanding.

The meal ended, and the residents headed back to their units after helping clear the table.

Delta and Gary left, leaving Jo and Nash, along with Duke, free to meander out onto the porch for their evening chat on the swing.

Cluck. Cluck. Cluck. Jo could hear the chickens frantically clucking and caught a movement out of the corner of her eye.

Eggolina came barreling around the corner, her wings flapping and moving at a frantic pace.

Laverne wasn’t far behind. At first, Jo thought she was chasing Eggolina until she realized Henrietta, the other chicken, was in hot pursuit.

“The devil chickens are attacking me!” Laverne wrapped both arms around her head, shielding her scalp from Henrietta’s onslaught.

Laverne’s nemesis began closing in, and took off, feathers flapping as she dove forward. “She’s going for blood.”

Woof. Duke scrambled off the porch and joined the chase. He started chasing after

Egglina and then went after Henrietta, who was still doing her best to peck at Laverne.

Jo leapt off the porch. “Run to the barn!”

Laverne made a fast turn and bolted for the barn. She disappeared inside, and Henrietta ended her chase. She slowed her pace to a strut and began quietly clucking as she pecked the ground.

Egglina ran along the front of the bakeshop and then raced toward Henrietta.

“Is the coast clear?” Laverne stuck her head around the side of the barn door.

Henrietta’s head snapped up. Cluck.

“Nope.” Laverne slipped back inside.

Meanwhile, Jo and Nash coaxed the chickens back toward their coop. Working together, they placed them safely inside and closed the door, making sure it latched.

Laverne appeared. “That could’ve been bad.”

“Yes, it could have.” Jo watched as Laverne cautiously approached. “How did the chickens get out?”

“I...” Laverne’s eyes grew round as saucers. “I was passing by and noticed the door to the coop was open. Next thing I know, that demon Henrietta is chasing after me.”

Jo placed a hand on her hip. “Are you sure you didn’t open the door, hoping the chickens would run off now that Leah isn’t here to take care of them?”

Laverne shifted her feet, refusing to meet Jo's gaze. "I mean, Leah's gone. She was the only one who gave two hoots about those stupid birds."

"Laverne Huntsman," Jo scolded. "You cannot let them go. The other residents enjoy having them around."

"They're a safety and health hazard."

For some reason, the chickens, namely Henrietta, had it in for Laverne. As far as Jo could figure out, her resident had never intentionally antagonized them. All she knew was that from day one, the bird was out for blood as far as Laverne was concerned.

"Stay away from the chickens."

Laverne mumbled under her breath and stalked off.

Jo waited until she was gone. "Maybe I should've gifted the chickens to Leah. She was very attached to them and I have a feeling they're going to miss her."

The couple, with Duke leading the way, returned to the porch.

The pup wiggled his way in between them, promptly placing his head on Jo's lap and his hind legs on top of Nash. He stretched out, making himself comfortable, before dozing off.

"How do you think Leah is doing?" Nash reached for Jo's hand.

"Dave welcomed her and seems sincere. The farm's manager was a little too friendly."

"Too friendly?" Nash asked.

“Almost like he might be interested in Leah. We talked about it and Leah was going to nip it in the bud, but in a nice way. It’s been almost two full days. I’m sure she’s settling in.” Jo absentmindedly ran a light hand over the angel necklace Leah had given her and showed it to Nash.

“She gave this to me. It’s Psalm 34, verse 7. ‘The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.’ She said I was her guardian angel.”

Nash leaned in and studied the gift. “Leah has always been very thoughtful.”

“I miss her already,” Jo sighed. “And now I’m second guessing myself about the twins.”

“Because of the one who won’t speak?”

“Yeah. I’m wondering if I’ve signed myself up for double trouble.” Jo confessed her concern that because the two had a close relationship, being identical twins, there would be additional challenges in working with them one-on-one. “The fact Carli won’t talk is a concern and now, with Michelle giving us a small glimpse into what their lives were like, I’m even more worried.”

“You’re concerned you won’t be able to break down the wall they’ve constructed and give them the help they need,” Nash said.

“Exactly. It’s not that I don’t think I can help them. It’s whether they’ll let me, let us in, so we can.”

“I like the fact you’re keeping them separated,” Nash said. “From what you’ve told me, they depend on each other for support. They’re also two unique individuals and if Carli is allowing Courtney to run the show, to control things, either by design or because her sister wants her to, I think some separation will help them spread their

wings.”

“I was thinking the same thing. Working alongside you, Gary, Delta and the other residents might give Carli a boost of confidence and help her realize she doesn’t need to depend on her sister for everything.”

“Agreed.”

Ting.

Jo’s cell phone chimed. She slipped it from her pocket and glanced at the screen. “Leah is calling. She probably wants to fill me in on how it’s going.”

“Hello, Leah.”

“Jo!” Leah’s frantic voice cracked. “This is awful. Mr. Barr is dead. The police are here. It’s bad. What if they think I had something to do with what happened to him?”

Leah began rambling, her voice raising an octave as panic set in.

“Leah,” Jo cut her off. “Take a deep breath. What is going on?”

“Mr. Barr got upset with me yesterday when I told him he was making me uncomfortable. I guess it made him mad because next thing I know, he blamed me for dumping a bag of seeds in the water barrel, but it wasn’t me.”

“So, Shane Barr hit on you. You told him you weren’t interested. A bag of seeds got ruined and he blamed you.”

“Yes.”

“And then what happened?” Jo asked.

“He had me shovel cow manure. It was gross and disgusting but I didn’t complain. I spent all afternoon shoveling it.” Leah told her after she finished, she was supposed to start cleaning the milking parlor equipment. “No one was around. I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do so I hung out and waited for him to show up.”

“How long ago did this happen?”

“An hour or so,” Leah said. “Next thing I know, the cops and an ambulance are here. They found him with baling twine wrapped around his neck.”

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Jo chose her words carefully. “Leah, listen to me. Don’t talk to anyone. Nash is standing here. We’re on our way over.”

“Okay. Thanks, Jo. The police told me to hang around because they want to ask me some questions.”

“I’m sure they do.” Jo told Leah to sit tight. She ran inside to grab her keys and, by the time she ran back out, Nash had already pulled the farm’s truck around and was waiting for her to climb in. “I only heard your end of the conversation. What happened?”

“Shane Barr, Dave’s supervisor, was hitting on Leah. She told him she wasn’t interested. He blamed her for ruining a bag of seeds. To punish her, he made her shovel cow manure, and then she said something about being sent to work in the milking parlor. She finished the shoveling and waited for him, but he never showed up. Next thing she knows, the cops are there and Barr is dead.”

“Dead?” Nash tightened his grip on the steering wheel. “How did he die?”

“They found him with baling twine wrapped around his neck.”

“Maybe he committed suicide or maybe it was something else,” Nash said. “He wasn’t popular. In fact, I remember Dave commenting about how he was a bully, but Kilwin said he got the job done.”

“So Barr had enemies.”

“If I had to guess.” Nash cast Jo a side glance. “What are the odds he dies the day after Leah starts working there?”

“If someone was gunning to get rid of him and knew a former convict was moving in and taking up residence, then I would say pretty good.”

They arrived at Kilwin Farms within a few minutes and found the place swarming with cops. An ambulance sat idling. The lights were off and Jo could see the EMTs talking to a group of officers.

Dave Kilwin was with them, along with what appeared to be several of the farm’s employees. Leah stood alone near the side of the building. When she noticed Jo and Nash pulling in, she ran over. “This is awful. They carried him out on a stretcher. He’s in the back of the ambulance.”

“Tell me again what happened. Start from the beginning,” Jo said.

“After you left, Mr. Barr gave me a tour of the farm. He kept making comments about how much he liked my hair and the way my jeans fit. I finally told him he was making me uncomfortable and to please stop.” Leah snapped her fingers. “He changed just like that and started saying stuff.”

“Like what?” Jo asked. “Give me an example.”

“Threatening, about how he knew I was an ex-convict and would be watching me. Thankfully, he had me train with another worker all day yesterday and I thought everything was cool until this morning.” Leah told them she was sweeping out the hayloft and Barr came storming in. “He blamed me for a bag of seeds someone dumped in the rain barrel. He took me over to the cattle barn, started chewing me out in front of two other employees, and then told me to go clean out the stalls. I shoveled manure for a while, as punishment, I’m sure. After I finished, I was supposed to clean

the milking equipment but had no idea what to do, so I waited for someone to show up.”

“Then what happened?” Nash prompted.

“The sheriff, some other cops, and an ambulance showed up. I ran over to see what had happened, and that’s when I saw him, Mr. Barr.” Leah’s hands trembled as she rubbed the sides of her arms. “He wasn’t a nice person, but I can’t imagine anyone wanting him dead.”

“Do you recall if he argued with any of the other workers, maybe someone got in trouble and he got onto them?” Nash asked.

Leah thought about it. “I heard another worker talking about him during our lunch break. He called him a jerk, but I don’t specifically remember him arguing with anyone.”

“A worker called him a jerk,” Jo repeated. “Do you know who it was?”

“Yeah. Buzz. He was sitting with Jase, Mr. Kilwin’s nephew.” Leah bit her lower lip. “There was one more person, Sandi Ingram. She works in the office. When they saw me looking their way, they stopped talking about him.”

“Buzz, Jase and Sandi,” Jo said. “Have you talked to the police yet?”

“No. I guess I’m low on the totem pole seeing how I just started working here yesterday.” Leah lowered her voice. “I’m sorry, Jo. I shouldn’t have dragged you into this.”

“I’m glad you did. You had nothing to do with this man’s death. You barely knew him.”

“Except for the fact that he assigned me the crappiest job—literally — and didn’t seem to care for me after he found out I wasn’t interested in him,” Leah said. “I’m starting to wonder if taking this job was a big mistake.”

Jo placed a light hand on her shoulder. “It’s going to be all right. Yes, he may have been a jerk, a jerk to you and some of the other employees, but just because Barr made you shovel cow manure doesn’t mean you were angry enough to take him out. There is also the possibility he took his own life.”

“I don’t think so. I overheard the police talking. He has some other injuries. I think they called them defensive wounds, but I wasn’t supposed to hear that.”

While they were talking, an officer made his way over. “Ms. McEllish?”

Leah stepped forward. “I’m Leah McEllish.”

“I would like to ask you a few questions regarding Mr. Barr.”

“Of course.”

The officer cleared his throat and shot Jo and Nash a pointed stare.

“We would like to stay, if that’s not a problem,” Nash said.

“Joanna?”

Jo turned to find Sheriff Franklin standing directly behind her. “I’m surprised to see you and Nash here.”

“My former resident, Leah, is working here at the farm. Understandably, she’s upset about what has happened, so we thought we would come by to offer our support.”

“Let’s get on with this.” The officer turned to Leah. “How long have you known Mr. Barr?”

“I started working here yesterday morning, which is when I met him.”

“Was he your boss, your supervisor?”

“He was my supervisor,” Leah confirmed.

“How would you describe your relationship?” the officer asked. “Was it pleasant? Strained?”

“It was.” Leah struggled to find the right words. “He was my boss, and I didn’t know him very well.”

“In the short amount of time that you knew him, was there ever an instance where he may have said or done something to upset you?”

Jo could feel a heat creep up her neck. The officer was trying to lead Leah, to get her to admit to something incriminating. “I think you asked an unfair question. Leah hardly knew him, even if he gave her a crappy job or crappy jobs to do.”

The officer cleared his throat. “I’m not talking to you.”

“He made comments about my hair and my jeans. I told him he was making me uncomfortable. He seemed cool with it until today when he blamed me for ruining a bag of seeds and, I guess as punishment, he gave me an unpleasant job,” Leah said. “I did it. End of story.”

Jo silently applauded. Leah was holding her own.

“Were you reprimanded or written up, with the possibility of losing your job?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

The officer waved the sheet of paper he was holding. “You know nothing about this report Mr. Barr wrote about how you destroyed company property?”

Leah’s eyes widened. “He wrote me up?”

“For destroying Kilwin Farm’s seeds, valued at over two hundred and fifty dollars.”

“Two hundred and fifty dollars?” Leah gasped. “I had no idea a bag of seeds cost that much. I wasn’t responsible for it being ruined.”

“Where were you between the hours of four thirty and six p.m. this evening?”

“In the main barn. I finished shoveling and waited around for someone to show me how to clean the milking equipment.”

“You were alone? What about the office? Was anyone inside the office?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t go anywhere near there. I was in the milking parlor waiting for Mr. Barr to either show up or send someone to show me what to do.”

“And when he, meaning Mr. Barr, didn’t show up, did you go looking for him?”

“No. This is a pretty big place. I didn’t have his cell phone number. He told me to wait there, which is what I did.”

“Alone?” the officer asked.

“Yes. I would like to mention I heard one of the other workers calling him a jerk.” Leah motioned to the group standing nearby. “I think it was him.”

“We’ve already talked to the other workers.” The officer studied his notepad. “Where were you most recently employed, Ms. McEllich?”

“I...”

Jo jumped in. “She worked for me for the past few years.”

“And you are?”

“Joanna Pepperdine. I own Second Chance Mercantile and Divine Baked Goods Shop.”

A flicker of recognition sparked in the cop’s eyes. “You run a facility for former convicts.”

“I do.”

He placed a light hand on his holster, directing a whole new level of interest at Leah. “You’re a former convict?”

“I. Yes, but I didn’t destroy Mr. Kilwin’s seeds. I had nothing to do with Mr. Barr’s death.”

“Don’t go anywhere.” The cop stalked off.

Sheriff Franklin waited until he was gone. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, but I’ll echo his statement to stick around.”

The color drained from Leah's face as Sheriff Franklin walked away. "They think I got in trouble, was ticked at Mr. Barr and killed him. I could go back to prison. I'm still on probation."

"No, you're not." Jo grasped Leah's arms and gave her a gentle shake. "Your probation has ended. I signed off on it last month. Your record isn't coming back to bite you. The previous incarceration and this situation are unrelated. You didn't kill Mr. Barr. Yes, you might have been a little aggravated with him. Who wouldn't be?"

"But what if they think I found out he was going to write me up, have me fired, whatever, so I killed him?" Leah paced.

"You're innocent." A slow burn filled Jo. It was apparent someone at the farm had it in for Barr, took him out and was now trying to frame Leah. The setup was perfect. What better way to take someone out and then try to pin it on a former convict? "The truth will prevail."

The next hour dragged as Leah teetered between pure panic and a determination to clear her name. It was a terrible set of circumstances, yet Jo wasn't surprised. She thought about the worker Leah had overheard talking about Barr and asked her to point him out.

Jo found him and a few others standing off to the side, gazing in their direction, and a cold chill inched up her spine.

What if the three of them had it in for Barr, took him out and planned to use Leah as their scapegoat?

"Where exactly was Mr. Barr's body found?"

Leah led Jo and Nash around the side of the barn, past the corncribs and to a low set

of buildings. The doors were open, and Jo could see tractors and equipment lined up inside.

“I think it was right around here.” Leah pointed out a large ball of baling twine near the door.

The area was blocked off with yellow police tape, so they weren’t able to get close. Jo pulled her cell phone from her pocket and snapped a picture. After finishing, she gauged the distance from the spot the supervisor’s body was found and the location of where Leah said she was waiting for him.

The trio returned to their original spot. A familiar figure broke free from the group of officers and made his way over. It was Dave.

“Hello, Jo, Nash.” He turned a concerned gaze toward Leah. “How are you doing, Leah?”

“I’m okay. I’m sorry about Mr. Barr.”

“He wrote you up earlier today.”

“I just found that out. He blamed me for destroying a bag of seeds, but I didn’t.”

“And he made you shovel cow manure as punishment.”

“Yes,” she said in a small voice. “I won’t lie. I wasn’t thrilled about it, but I also didn’t kill him.”

Jo almost burst into tears when Dave placed a light hand on her shoulder. “I believe you, Leah. Unfortunately, several of the other employees saw you arguing with Barr earlier today.”

“He chewed me out in front of them but we weren’t arguing.”

“What happens now, Dave?” Nash quietly asked.

“Nothing. Leah is innocent. To be honest, Barr wasn’t well-liked, but he got the job done. Some of my employees have filed complaints against him. In fact, it would be easier for me to say who hadn’t lodged a complaint instead of who had.”

“So any number of employees could have been angry, possibly argued with him and then took him out,” Jo said.

“Maybe. Barr wasn’t easy to work for. He’s written up almost all the workers at one time or another. Leah just happened to be the most recent.”

The officer called Kilwin back over, and Jo waited until he was gone. “Great. An unpopular supervisor gets taken out and Leah is on the radar. What else could possibly go wrong?”

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Jo, along with Nash, hung around until the workers were allowed to leave. “Are you comfortable staying here?”

“Yeah,” Leah said.

“You’re sure?” Jo persisted.

“The cops are swarming the place. I doubt whoever attacked Mr. Barr would be dumb enough to try something else.”

“True.” Jo gave Leah a gentle hug. “Get some rest.”

“I’ll try.” Leah mumbled something about having a headache and Jo watched as she walked away, her shoulders slumped and her head down. “This is awful.”

“She’ll be all right,” Nash said. “The police will figure out what happened.”

“I hope so. I want to say goodbye to Dave.” Jo caught his eye and made her way over. “Thank you for standing up for Leah. I know you weren’t around when the officer was questioning her, but I get a bad feeling this investigation will center around her.”

“I knew I should’ve let Barr go. He was heavy-handed toward the workers but, like I said, he got the job done.”

“You can’t hold yourself responsible,” Jo said. “Is there any specific worker who comes to mind, an employee who couldn’t stand the guy?”

Kilwin shook his head. “Based on what my employees told the officers, I have a feeling they talked about him behind his back but not to me, other than their initial complaints. Leah hasn’t complained about him. I’m sure she didn’t want to rock the boat, being the new person and all.”

“We never had any trouble with Leah. Gary adores her.”

“She’s a hard worker and eager to please,” Nash chimed in. “Leah got along with everyone.”

“I figured as much. Gary has done nothing but sing her praises, which is one of the reasons I offered her the position in the first place.” Dave’s cell phone chimed. “I need to take this call. We’ll stay in touch. I’ll keep you posted if there are any new developments.”

Jo thanked him, and on their way back to the farm, she texted Leah, encouraging her to hang in there and reminding her she was only a phone call or text away.

Nash parked the truck alongside the workshop, and he and Jo meandered to the front porch.

“I know you’re worried.” Nash pulled her into his arms. “Leah will be all right. She has us in her corner, as well as Dave. It sounds as if someone either saw an opportunity to get rid of Barr or some sort of argument ensued. His killer snapped and took him out.”

“The fact Leah doesn’t have an alibi and has a criminal record is a serious red flag to investigators.” Jo placed her head on Nash’s chest and closed her eyes. “I was so certain Leah’s transition from here to her new job would go smoothly.”

“Remember how the locals were harassing Sherry when she first moved to her

apartment in downtown Divine? You ended up having to get involved to help sort that mess out.”

“How could I forget? Thank goodness we no longer have to worry about her being harassed.”

“You’re a good person, Joanna Pepperdine.” Nash tilted her chin and gently kissed her lips. “Leah is innocent, and it won’t take long for the investigators to reach the same conclusion.”

The kiss ended, and Jo placed a light hand on his cheek. “You sure know how to take my mind off my troubles.”

“That’s the goal.” He leaned in for one more quick kiss. “I wouldn’t be surprised to hear investigators figured out what happened to Barr as early as tomorrow.”

“I hope so.” Despite Nash’s optimism, Jo spent a restless night tossing and turning, wondering who had taken Barr out, certain whoever was behind it had patiently waited for the most opportune moment to do so, with all eyes focusing on Leah.

She crawled out of bed early the next morning and found Delta already hard at work in the kitchen.

“You’re up early.”

“It was a rough one.” Jo poured a cup of coffee and sank down in the kitchen chair. “Shane Barr is dead.”

Delta spun around. “What?”

“Someone killed Shane Barr, Kilwin’s supervisor. They strangled him with baling

twine late yesterday afternoon.”

“I knew he wasn’t popular.”

“And Barr wrote Leah up shortly before it happened.”

“They think our Leah had something to do with his death?”

“I can’t guarantee it but based on the way the officer in charge was questioning her, I would say so.” Jo briefly filled her in, starting with the frantic phone call she received from Leah and wrapping it up by telling her Dave Kilwin insisted he believed in his new employee’s innocence.

“Have you heard from her this morning?”

“No. I kept my phone on the nightstand last night just in case she called. I thought about texting her, but I don’t want her to think I’m trying to butt into her business. She’s a grown woman and I need to give her space. If she needs me, she’ll let me know.”

“I can see your point. Leah can’t test out her wings if you’re hovering over the top of her.”

“Exactly, although maybe Gary could chat with her, kind of get a feel for how things are going,” Jo hinted.

“I like your way of thinking. Finding out what’s going on without sticking our noses in. I need to tell him what happened. He’s over in the gardens.” Delta dashed out the back door. She returned a few minutes later. “He’s all fired up and is on his way over to talk to Kilwin and check on Leah.”

“Gary and Leah are close. I figured he would want to see how she’s doing.”

“Like a daughter, that one. Maybe he’ll have some good news for us when he gets back,” Delta said.

Jo refilled her coffee cup and headed to her office to go over Carli and Courtney Ladeaux’s paperwork. Her niggling of concern over her new residents returned. Was she taking on more than she could handle with twin sisters? She had always embraced challenges and gone with her gut. Her gut told her the sisters desperately needed a break.

She went over their incarceration records and notes again. By all accounts, both were model prisoners. Their lives had been shaped, been controlled by a father who used them.

Jo pulled up the news stories of the last robbery and Larry Ladeaux’s death during a shootout with the police. Carli and Courtney had been with him when it happened. Had they seen their father die?

No matter how bad of a person he’d been, no one wanted to see a loved one suffer, which brought her thoughts back around to poor Leah. Hopefully, Gary would return soon with a positive update.

As soon as she wrapped up her research and made sure the paperwork was in order, Jo headed to the kitchen to help Delta and Kelli set the breakfast table.

Gary returned midway through the meal.

“Well?” Jo asked as soon as he took his place at the table. “How is Leah?”

“She’s stressed out. The police showed up while I was there. They had a bunch more

questions for her and the other workers. They were even questioning Dave.”

“Thinking he might be involved?” Jo asked.

“Hang on.” Laverne held up a hand. “I feel like I got dumped in the middle of a conversation I know nothing about. What happened to Leah, and why are the cops involved?”

“Dave Kilwin’s supervisor was murdered yesterday afternoon. He had written Leah up earlier in the day for some destroyed seeds she swears she knows nothing about. Shane Barr had her cleaning up cow manure. After she finished, she waited near the milking parlor for someone to train her on how to clean the equipment.”

Kelli blinked rapidly. “They think Leah killed him because he gave her a crappy job?”

“Possibly. The police seemed interested in Leah’s past and...”

“And what?” Michelle asked.

“No one can confirm where Leah was around the time Barr died. She was alone waiting for him, and never went looking for him when he didn’t show up.”

“They’re focusing their investigation on her because of her background,” Laverne said.

“Reading between the lines, that would be my guess.” Jo sighed heavily.

“I flat out told ‘em Leah didn’t have a mean bone in her body,” Gary said. “I vouched for her and let the detective know I trusted Leah with my life.”

Delta's eyes shined as she patted her husband's hand. "You're a good man, Gary Stein."

Gary's eyes clouded over. "Leah was a touch sad to see me go. I feel terrible. She likes her job, likes her co-workers, but now she's got this big black cloud hanging over her head."

"And Dave?" Jo asked. "Do you think he still believes she's innocent?"

"He does, but I'm not so sure about the other workers. When I was over there, I noticed a couple of them standing off to the side watching us."

Jo's heart plummeted. She had feared once the other workers found out about Leah's background, they might shun her, or even be afraid of her. Now with Barr's death and the investigators questioning Leah, they had to suspect she might be involved, especially if they found out only hours earlier the man had written her up.

"Poor Leah," Michelle said.

Laverne absentmindedly began tapping the tines of her fork on the edge of her plate, and Jo could almost see the woman's wheels spinning. "What is it?"

"Huh?" Laverne stopped tapping.

"You. I can see the wheels spinning. What are you thinking?"

"Leah seemed pretty keen on getting the job."

"Of course," Jo said. "This is her opportunity to start over. She loves farming, respects Dave Kilwin and wants to stay in the Divine area. It's the perfect place for her to start putting her life back together."

“Which means she wouldn’t want to screw things up.”

“I’m sure,” Jo said.

“And getting written up by the supervisor only a day into her job probably didn’t make her very happy,” Laverne said.

“Of course not,” Delta snapped. “What are you getting at?”

“Maybe Leah went ka-ping.” Laverne made a diving motion with her hands. “Something in her broke. She went berserk and killed the guy.”

“Laverne Huntsman.” Jo clenched her jaw. “That is the most horrible suggestion about someone I thought you considered a friend I’ve ever heard in my life.”

“We are friends. I’m not saying Leah is a bad person, but anyone can reach their breaking point. You, me, and especially Delta.”

“What?” Delta roared. “How did I end up getting dragged into this?”

“I’m merely making a point.” Laverne scooted her chair back and stood. “And on that note, I need to head over to the mercantile to start my day.”

Jo stopped her. “Before you go, Carli and Courtney Ladeaux are arriving around noon. Please try to muster up a warm welcome.”

“As difficult as it may be for you,” Delta muttered under her breath.

“I’ll be as warm and fuzzy as a five-star Welcome Wagon lady.” Laverne squared her shoulders and casually sauntered off.

Jo waited until the front door banged shut. “There are times that woman tests my last ounce of restraint.”

“Yours and mine both,” Delta said.

“Laverne is plotting a way to get rid of the chickens,” Kelli said.

“I’m almost certain she let them loose last night and Henrietta went after her,” Jo said. “Nash and I were able to get them back inside their coop. I warned her to leave them alone.”

“Henrietta knows a bad egg when she sees one,” Michelle joked. “I thought she liked Leah.”

“I believe she does, or at least as much as Laverne can like anyone,” Jo said. “I suppose her comments were her way of voicing her opinion.”

Raylene stayed behind to help Jo and Delta clean up while the other women, along with Gary and Nash, headed out to start their day.

“Leah sent me a text earlier,” Raylene said. “She’s worried the cops are going to come after her.”

“I know she is,” Jo said. “There’s not much anyone can do until they wrap up their investigation.”

“Which is what I told her. I also told her to let me know if she needed my help. My best advice was for her to keep her nose to the grindstone and try to ignore the noise.”

“Thank you for being such a good friend,” Jo said. “Leah’s strong. She has a level head on her shoulders and will make it through this.”

Pastor Murphy called Jo near noon to let her know he was running behind. He planned to pick the Ladeaux sisters up around one and they would reach the farm in the early afternoon.

Restless, Jo wandered from the mercantile to the bakeshop, stopping by Nash's workshop and then to the gardens to check on Gary. With each stop, she was asked if she'd heard from Leah, which she hadn't.

She'd been tempted to text her, but figured Leah knew Jo was there and willing to help. All she had to do was ask.

She also knew Leah needed to stand on her own two feet and would have to learn to deal with co-workers who were leery of her and fight back against potential discrimination because of her past.

A bright red minivan pulled into the driveway, and Carrie Ford emerged. At first, Jo didn't recognize her, with her almost jet-black hair piled high atop her head and framing a pair of sunglasses that nearly covered Carrie's face.

She tottered across the driveway, her heels clickety-clacking when she reached the sidewalk.

"What did you do to your hair?"

"Do you like it?" Carrie ran a light hand along her long strands. "I got tired of the blondes-have-more-fun-look. Besides, Charlie likes his women dark and sassy."

Jo wasn't sure how to respond to Carrie's comment about her boyfriend, Centerpoint Chapel's caretaker, and vaguely nodded.

Carrie barely took a breath. "I'm glad you're here. I heard about Shane Barr's

shocking murder and how the police suspect Leah might be involved.”

Jo said the first thing that popped into her head. “Already?”

“Of course, I defended Leah. There’s no way that sweet young woman murdered lecherous old Shane Barr. Whoops.” Carrie’s hand flew to her mouth. “I didn’t mean lecherous old Shane. Although it’s a fact he was the biggest womanizer this side of the Mississippi, cheating on his wife and taking up with Robyn Colburne.”

“Hold up.” Jo lifted a hand. “Barr was cheating on his wife?”

Carrie nodded her head, her dangling silver earrings clanging loudly. “Everyone in town knew about it. His wife left him months ago. As soon as I found out about his death, I got on the horn with Evelyn McBride, the sheriff department’s dispatcher, and made sure she knew about Robyn. She said she would put a bug in Detective Vine’s ear.”

“Detective Vine. Why does his name sound familiar?” Jo snapped her fingers. “I know why. He investigated Harrison Cantwell’s death outside the movie theater. I remember him now.”

“Evelyn said he’s a hard nose, by the book kinda guy.” Carrie leaned in and lowered her voice. “They’re looking at Leah, seriously. I thought you might like to know.”

“Leah is innocent. She barely knew the guy.” Jo shifted her feet. “You and Dave Kilwin are friends.”

“Oh, yes. I’ve done several taxidermy pieces for Dave. He has excellent taste in forever pieces. Why, just last month, he had me work on Molly the Moo Cow. Poor thing. Her heart gave out on her. At least she lived a good life. Dave had her head mounted and I believe he was going to put it in his office. I had to add a triple

mounting kit on the back. She was a heavy gal.”

“Back to the farm. Have you met any of Dave’s employees?”

“Yeah. Sandi works in Dave’s office. Buzz has been an employee for a while now and then there’s Jase, who has been working at Kilwin Farms for even longer. He’s also Dave’s nephew.”

“I think I remember hearing that,” Jo said. “You seem to be somewhat familiar with the situation. Who do you think hated Barr enough to kill him?”

Carrie made a clicking sound with her teeth. “I’m not sure. I do know that no one who worked under Barr liked him.”

“Dave basically told me the same thing.”

“I’m sure the police are taking a closer look at more than one of the farm’s employees.” Carrie crooked her finger. “The reason I’m here is I was hoping you could help me.”

“Help you?” Jo asked.

Carrie grasped Jo’s arm and nearly dragged her to the back of the minivan. She took a quick peek inside and then flung the door open. “I found this little fella almost dead on the side of the road and nursed him back to health. No one seems to want him and I was hoping I could send him back into the wild here at your farm.”

Jo stumbled back, clutching her chest as the animal inside the cage hissed at her.

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Jo scrambled out of the way as the skunk stomped his rear feet, aiming his backside directly at them.

She watched in horror as Carrie remained motionless, watching while the hissing skunk lifted his tail. “Get away! He’s gonna spray!”

“His stinker no longer works. He tries to spray. Nothing happens.”

If looks could spray, the skunk would have given them a good dose from a potent arsenal, but sure enough, no smell emanated, no matter how hard the skunk tried.

Finally, his tail lowered. He flopped down on his blanket, a look of defeat etched on his face.

“See? He’s harmless. I was hoping I could set him free here at the farm. No one else wants to take him.”

Jo wrinkled her nose. “You want to let him loose here? What about our chickens?”

“Skunks won’t go after full-grown chickens. Although eggs and baby chicks are another story. Besides, I have a feeling once we open the cage door, he’s going to take off like a bat out of you-know-what.”

“I dunno.”

“Please?” Carrie clasped her hands. “There’s so much farmland around here, around you. I found him three roads over. I’m sure he’ll find his way home and head back to

his den.”

Nash strolled over and greeted Carrie. “Hey, Carrie.”

“Hello, Nash.” Carrie smiled brightly. “Maybe you can help.”

“Help what?”

“Convince Jo it’s okay to release this little fella here on the farm.” Carrie grabbed the cage’s handle and slid it onto the ground.

Nash stumbled back. “What in the world?”

“His sprayer doesn’t work,” Jo said. “I did the same thing.”

Nash inched closer, warily eyeing the skunk who barely lifted his head, still clearly depressed about his non-working number one defense mechanism. “You’re sure? Maybe it’s just clogged.”

“Nope. It doesn’t work,” Carrie said. “He’s tried spraying me multiple times. I think something happened to it when he got hit.”

“You rescued this skunk...”

“From the side of the road. Isn’t he cute? Check out the brown patch of fur on top of his head. He has a mini mullet. Some skunks have a brown stripe, but I’ve never seen one with a brown patch of fur.”

Jo craned her neck. “I don’t think I have either.”

“He’s special. At first I thought he was dead, but when I found out he was still alive, I

took him home, nursed him back to health and now he's ready to be reunited with his kinfolk here in the countryside."

"What will happen to him if you don't drop him off here?" Jo asked.

"I can't keep him. My cat, Mr. Whipple, is having a hissy fit. I think he's afraid. Besides, skunks aren't allowed as pets inside the city limits, and I don't want to risk losing my taxidermy license."

Jo stared at the forlorn animal, now curled up in the bottom of the cage. He seemed like a plucky little guy, determined to live. Carrie had worked hard to help him get back on his feet. The very least Jo could do was give him a fighting chance. Besides, if his home was somewhere nearby, it was possible he would find his way back there.

"Why not just drop him off? Why bring him here?" Nash asked.

"Because if I let him loose near my house, I'm afraid he'll find his way back. He seems to like the creature comforts of a warm home, three squares a day and people," Carrie said. "I considered leaving him near the woods where I found him, but was afraid if you came across him, you might try to trap him and relocate him."

"So you wanted us to be aware you're dropping him off in our neck of the woods in case he comes sniffing around looking for his next meal," Nash said.

Carrie nodded. "Or better yet, you pick the spot and set him free. He's relatively harmless to humans with his stinker out of commission, although I still wouldn't get too close to him. His other defense mechanisms appear to be intact."

Jo weighed her options as she studied the critter. He looked sad, depressed. Maybe he was close to home. "Okay, but I want to drive him way out back, by the fence line, to let him go."

“It’s a deal.” Carrie let out a whoop and clapped her hands. “Like I said, I’m sure as soon as you let him loose, he’s going to scamper off to his happy place and you’ll never see or hear from him again.”

“I’ll load him up in the pickup and we can take him out back.” Nash ran to get the truck and as soon as he pulled around, Carrie opened the tailgate and slid the carrier into the bed.

Jo jogged inside to tell Delta where they were going, and then the trio piled into the cab.

Nash drove around back, down the long dirt track leading past the gardens and beehives. He turned right, keeping to the main path as he made his way along the fields, recently cultivated and ready for planting season.

While they rode, Carrie rattled on about her latest project and then the conversation shifted to Shane Barr. “I’m going to run by Dave’s farm after I leave to offer my condolences. If I was him, I would keep one eye open.”

“Keep one eye open?” Jo asked.

“Someone who worked at the farm killed Barr, which means a killer is on the loose.”

Jo shared her concern, and she’d even voiced those concerns to Leah the previous night. Her former resident was living within striking distance of the killer, as well.

“I warned Shane someday his risky lifestyle was going to come back to bite him,” Carrie said. “It was right after we broke up.”

Jo’s head whipped around. “You dated Shane?”

“Unfortunately.” Carrie waved dismissively. “It was eons ago, before he married. He started his womanizing not long after we broke up. I’m surprised he ever bothered getting married.”

“Maybe his wife took him out,” Jo theorized.

“No way. She’s a mousy little thing. I think it was a marriage of convenience. Shane used her. Besides, as I said, I heard it was splitsville for them. His wife has been out of the picture for some time now.”

“What about the girlfriend, Robyn, something?”

“Colburne. They were two peas in a pod. I seriously doubt it was her.”

Jo had to agree with Carrie. In fact, the more she thought about it, the more convinced she was someone who worked at the farm murdered the man. It was the only thing that made sense.

Nash stopped when they reached the “t” in the fence. Beyond the fence were hundreds of acres owned by the Kansas Creek Indian Reservation. Dave Kilwin’s property bordered on the other side, with Jo’s property being the third. “This is it.”

Carrie hopped out and surveyed the area. “I think it will work. I get a good vibe from this spot. Let’s set him free and see what happens.”

With Nash leading the way, they circled around to the truck’s bed. He cautiously removed the cage and set it on the ground. “Would you like to do the honors?”

“I want to say goodbye.” Carrie knelt on the ground. The skunk’s ears flattened, and his beady little eyes watched her like a hawk.

“This is it. You’re well now and will be home free. I think if you head off in that direction, you’ll find the rest of your family over there in the woods.”

While she talked, Carrie lifted the latch and opened the door. She took a step back.

The skunk remained rooted to the spot.

“Go.” She shooed him with her hands. “You’re free, free to leave.”

The skunk refused to budge.

“Now what?” Jo folded her arms.

“I thought this might happen.” Carrie reached inside her pocket, pulled out a bag of cat treats and strategically placed them on the ground in a curved line, starting near the door. “Here’s your going-away meal.”

The skunk perked up, his nose wiggling back and forth. He cautiously crept forward and gobbled up the nearest cat treat. He went for the second one and then the third until he was finally out of the cage.

He gobbled up the last treat and began sniffing around, searching for more.

“It’s time to go.” She shooed him forward. The skunk paused for a fraction of a second and then waddled off. He squeezed under the fence and ran up the hill before disappearing from sight.

“Wonderful.” Carrie gave a thumbs up. “Another successful rehabilitation notch in my belt.”

“You’re a good person, Carrie.” Jo patted her back. “I hope he’s reunited with his

family and lives a long and happy life.”

Nash placed the empty cage in the bed of the truck and climbed back in the cab where Jo and Carrie sat waiting.

They reached the front and Jo noticed a familiar vehicle parked off to the side. It was Pastor Murphy. Standing next to him were Carli and Courtney Ladeaux.

“It’s time to greet our new residents.”

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“You have new residents already?” Carrie tilted her head. “That was fast.”

“I’ve been working on it for a while,” Jo said.

“I’ll let you get to your business.” Carrie hopped out of the truck and gave Jo a quick hug. “Thanks for having a heart and giving the skunk a chance to find his way home.”

“You’re welcome, although you have a bigger heart than I do, rescuing him and nursing him back to health.” Jo turned to go, and Carrie stopped her. “I’m heading over to Dave’s place. I’ll let you know if I hear anything.”

“Thanks, Carrie. I’m trying to give Leah her space, but would be lying if I said I wasn’t worried about her.”

“I’ll only call if I find out something new.” Carrie took off, and Nash swung around to park the truck while Jo made her way over to the trio, who stood chatting with Delta and Gary.

“Hello, Jo.” The pastor greeted her. “Delta said you were on a mercy mission.”

“To free a stray skunk Carrie Ford rescued and rehabilitated.”

“Instead of stuffed and sold?” the pastor joked. “I thought she was a taxidermist.”

“She is, but she’s also a compassionate animal lover.” Jo turned her attention to the two young women. “You made it.”

“We did,” Courtney said. “Carli and I are excited to be here.”

Carli nodded as she shook Jo’s hand. Her small hand was cold and her complexion was pale. Jo immediately got the impression she was anxious or stressed. “Welcome to your new home. The other residents are looking forward to meeting you.”

“Would you like me to hang around?” Pastor Murphy asked.

“You can stay for the tour if you like.”

“I would like him to stay.” Courtney gave Jo a nervous smile. “If he, if you have time.”

“Of course.” Pastor Murphy opened the side door of his van and removed two small backpacks. The twins slipped them on and then fell into step as they made their way toward the housing units.

Duke caught up with them and nudged Jo’s hand. “This is Duke. He’s our official guard dog. Curtis, our cat, hangs out in the resident’s common area. You’ll meet her in a minute.”

“Curtis is a female?”

“It’s a long story. When she first showed up at the farm and adopted us, we thought she was a he. By the time we figured it out, her name had already stuck.” Jo led them around the side of the building. “One of you will be housed in the end unit while the other is at the opposite end, next door to the common area. I thought Carli could take the unit closest to the shared space.”

A troubled expression crossed Courtney’s face. “I was hoping we could be next to each other.”

“I put you in my two vacant units. I don’t want to disrupt the other residents by asking them to move around. These are their homes and I don’t think it’s fair to ask them to move.” Jo smiled brightly. “You’re free to decorate the walls and paint with my approval.”

“I suppose,” Courtney said in a quiet voice.

“You’re not far apart.” Jo pointed out that there were only four units between them. “It’s a short walk from one end to the other.”

They stopped at Courtney’s unit first. She unpacked her meager belongings and then they continued to the other end. Carli placed her backpack on the bed but made no move to unpack.

“Would you like to get settled in?” Jo asked.

Carli shook her head and lowered her gaze.

“We don’t have a lot of stuff, just what we had when we got to the prison and some old clothes the guards donated.”

“We sell women’s clothing in the mercantile,” Jo said. “Tomorrow, we’ll see what we have on hand that might work. Some of them are very nice, gently used items.”

“Thank you.”

Their next stop was the common area. They toured the living room, the kitchen area and then stepped into the bathrooms, where Jo assigned each of them a medicine cabinet and gave them the key. “We eat dinner together, every night at six on the dot. Breakfast is every morning at seven. If you miss a meal, there’s extra food in the common area’s kitchen. Breakfast is voluntary. Eating dinner together is mandatory.”

Curtis emerged from beneath the coffee table. Her tail shot up in the air as she curiously eyed the strangers.

“This is Curtis.” Jo scooped her up.

“She’s cute.” Courtney patted her head.

Carli leaned in and scratched her ears.

Curtis purred loudly, rubbing her head against Carli’s palm.

“And spoiled rotten.” Jo set her back down before making her way to the door. While they walked, she briefly went over the work schedule.

They circled around to the mercantile. It was busy and because they were short staffed, Kelli was hustling to keep up.

“I’ll introduce you to the residents and our staff at dinner this evening,” Jo said. “Gary, our gardener, has a shop over here.”

They strolled past the chickens, and Carli abruptly stopped. She backtracked and tentatively approached the coop.

The chickens strutted over to the wire mesh.

Cluck. Cluck.

“Carli,” Courtney said excitedly. “They have chickens.”

Carli placed a tentative finger inside the mesh, and Henrietta gently pecked the tip of it.

She stroked the chicken's head and began making a soft noise. It reminded Jo of a bird cooing. "Carli likes chickens?"

"Loves chickens," Courtney corrected. "What are their names?"

"Henrietta is the one greeting Carli. Egglina is the other one. They're both friendly. Leah, the resident who just left the farm, is also the one who cared for them."

Carli's head shot up and her eyes lit.

"Would you like to help care for our chickens?" Jo asked.

The woman's head bobbed up and down.

"Are those crazy birds still chasing Laverne around?" the pastor chuckled.

"Yes. In fact, she sneaked back here the other day, planning to set them free, and Henrietta started chasing after her."

Henrietta circled the cage, vocalizing her "cluck of approval."

"Let's head inside and go over your paperwork."

"And this is where I say goodbye," the pastor said.

"Thank you for everything," Courtney said. "Carli and I are determined to make this rehab thing work."

"That's all I ask." Pastor Murphy clasped Courtney's hand. "You're in good hands here with Jo and the others. I'll be around here or there and perhaps I'll even see you in church on Sunday."

He shook Carli's hand next. "Good luck, young lady. Maybe the next time I see you, you'll be chattering away and giving your sister a run for her money."

Carli smiled, and it was the first time Jo noticed she had a dimple. Maybe because she couldn't remember ever seeing her smile. She made a heart with her fingers and pressed it to her chest.

Jo waited until he was gone and then led the women up the front steps and into the house. "The living room is free for you to use when you're not working. During the winter months, we like to hang out here and play board games after dinner."

They crossed through the living room and dining room and made their way into the kitchen, where Delta bustled back and forth. "You already met Delta. She's my right-hand gal. She runs our kitchen. You'll be helping her during your regular rotations."

"Welcome to the most popular place on the farm. Not only do we make meals, but we also bake up a storm for the bakeshop. Do either of you like baking or cooking?"

Both women's hands shot up.

"Wonderful. I can't wait for you to roll up your sleeves and give me a hand."

They chatted briefly, and then Jo led them into her office. "Have a seat."

She made her way around the back of the desk. "You've seen the farm. I've explained how things run. Do you have any questions so far?"

Both shook their heads.

"It seems like a great place," Courtney said. "We're looking forward to settling in."

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to put you next to each other.”

“I think...I’m sure it will be all right,” she replied. “We were apart in prison. It’s just easier for Carli to communicate if I’m nearby.”

“I hope Carli’s lack of communication will only be temporary.” Jo settled into her chair and focused her attention on her non-verbal resident. “Can you speak?”

Carli nodded.

“You just don’t want to?”

She shook her head.

“I’m opposed to crutches,” Jo said as she reached inside the desk. “However, until we can get to the bottom of why you won’t talk, I’m giving you this.” She handed her a large flip pad and blue marker. “I’ll accept the fact you aren’t willing, for whatever reason, to speak. I am asking, however, instead of depending on Courtney to answer for you, that you communicate by using this.”

Carli stared at the flip pad and then she looked at her sister, as if seeking her approval.

“Carli?” Jo waved a hand in front of her face. “This isn’t a decision for Courtney to make. This is your decision. I want to hear what you have to say, even if you spell it out on this pad of paper.”

There was a long moment of tense silence and Jo could almost sense an internal battle waging inside the young woman. Slowly...ever so slowly...she reached for the pad of paper and marker.

Jo held her breath as she flipped it open, removed the marker's cap and began writing. She turned it around so Jo could see.

Okay.

“Wonderful. I’m happy to hear you plan to take part in living here.” Jo got down to the business of going over the state’s required paperwork. She filled in the blanks with the help of Courtney and Carli, who continued writing out her answers.

An hour later, Jo uploaded the files and submitted them to the state. “It’s official. Your records have been filed and you’re now residents here at the farm. I’ll follow up with your probation officer in the next day or so to make sure he received the information.”

A slow smile spread across Courtney’s face, and she gave her sister a high five. “Thank you, Ms. Pepperdine. You won’t be sorry,” she promised.

Ditto, Carli scribbled out.

“You can call me Jo. Welcome to the family.” Jo escorted them back to their units, reminded them about the dinner hour, and then headed back inside to the kitchen.

“Well?”

Jo gave a thumbs up. “Carli will communicate using a scratch pad. In other words, Courtney will no longer be answering for her sister.”

Delta let out a loud whoop. “That was fast.”

“I’m hoping with the help of the flip pad, Carli will become more comfortable in answering for herself. Courtney doesn’t have to be her sister’s keeper and Carli has a

voice again.”

“Joanna Pepperdine, the miracle worker.”

The dinner hour arrived, and everyone gathered around the table. To celebrate, Delta had whipped up a feast of fried chicken, mashed potatoes with gravy, corn on the cob, freshly baked yeast rolls with apple pie for dessert.

Courtney joined in the conversation, and even Carli answered questions using her flip pad. Jo beamed with pride as her “girls” took the two new ones under their wings and welcomed them.

Nash and Gary helped carry the conversation as Delta kept passing the dishes of food to the twins, deeming them too thin to be living under their roof.

“Watch out for the demon chickens,” Laverne said.

“They are not demon chickens,” Jo said. “In fact, Henrietta seems to have taken to Carli.”

“Really?” Laverne arched a brow.

“My sister loves animals,” Courtney said.

Carli nodded enthusiastically and began scribbling. I’ll take care of them if no one else wants to.

The evening meal ended. Raylene and the other residents invited the twins back to the common area so they could show them how to log onto the computers and give them

the lay of the land.

Nash had some cleanup to do, which left Delta and Gary, who stayed behind to help Jo.

“The new residents seem like a good fit,” Gary said.

“I hope so. They’re willing to put in the effort which is more than half the battle. I have some concerns about why Carli won’t speak, but keep reminding myself I need to be patient,” Jo said. “We’ll take it one day at a time.”

After everyone left, Jo wandered from room to room. The big old house seemed empty now that Delta had married Gary and moved out.

Duke, sensing Jo’s melancholy, began following her. “Well? What do you think, Duke?”

He circled Jo and trotted to the door.

“I agree. Let’s wander around the yard for a few minutes.” Jo let the pup out first and followed him along the length of the flower gardens. Delta was itching to plant the spring flowers now that the last of the frost was gone.

From the driveway, she noticed a light in the window of the end unit, the one Courtney had moved into.

Changing direction, Jo strolled over to the units. She could hear the faint sound of voices and gave the door a light rap.

It grew quiet. The door abruptly opened, and Courtney appeared. “Hello.”

“Hello.” Jo offered her a small smile. “I thought I would check in to see if you needed anything.” She craned her neck, catching a glimpse of Carli perched on the edge of Courtney’s bed.

“We...we’re fine. The rooms are cozy. Carli and I would like to take you up on the offer to see if there are any clothes in the mercantile that might fit us.”

“Of course. We’ll run by there first thing in the morning and see what they have,” Jo promised.

“Thank you, for everything.”

“You’re welcome.” Jo told them goodnight and the door shut.

She started to walk away but something told her to stay put. She listened as the voices resumed. “Can but won’t talk,” she whispered under her breath.

She and Duke circled around and Jo ran back inside to grab her cell phone when she discovered she’d missed a call from Leah. There was no message.

Jo promptly called her back. “Hello, Leah. I noticed that I missed your call. How are you doing?”

“Hey, Jo. Not so good.”

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“What’s going on, Leah?” Jo asked.

“Mr. Kilwin put me on leave. He said it was temporary, hopefully only for a day or two.”

“He was on your side last night when we talked to him. Has he changed his mind and now he thinks you’re responsible?”

“No. One of the other employees told him they weren’t comfortable working with me considering my background and the fact Barr died not long after I started working there.”

Jo’s mind whirled. It was clear what was happening. Someone had taken Barr out and was using Leah as the scapegoat. It was the perfect setup. Leah arriving and Barr writing her up. Leah was alone when Barr was murdered.

It wasn’t fair, and Jo could feel an anger build. Leah had worked so hard to get to this point. She deserved, had earned her second chance. Whoever was behind the man’s death needed to be caught. “How can I help?”

“I...Dave...Mr. Kilwin said I could stay here, although I’m not feeling welcome at this point.”

“We need to regroup.” Jo briefly closed her eyes. “Where are you right now?”

“In my room. None of the others will talk to me. I can hear them whispering behind my back. They think I killed Mr. Barr.”

“Let’s do this.” Jo walked into the kitchen. “I’m going to swing by and pick you up. You can spend the night here. We’re going to go over everything you know about Barr and the other workers.”

“I don’t...want to drag you into my mess.”

“You’re not. I’m volunteering. This is wrong. So very wrong, and we’re going to figure out who is trying to set you up. Pack your bags. I’m on my way.”

“Thanks, Jo.” Leah’s voice cracked. “I want this so badly,” she whispered.

“I know you do and you deserve this second chance.” Jo ended the call, snatched her keys off the hook and ran out the door.

Within minutes, she was in Dave’s driveway and sent Leah a quick text that she was there.

Jo almost burst into tears when Leah trudged past her headlights, her shoulders slumped and a look of defeat on her face.

“Thanks for coming to get me.”

“You’re welcome. Don’t worry. We’re going to sort this out,” Jo vowed. “Did you let Dave know you were spending the night at my place?”

“I did. I can tell he feels bad about it, but I also see his point. He can’t afford to have his workers walk out on him because of me.”

Back at the farm, Leah and Jo headed to the kitchen. Nash arrived for his evening porch chat and Jo briefly filled him in on the recent developments.

“I’m with you. It’s clear someone got rid of Barr and is planning on having Leah take the fall for it,” Nash said. “We need to come up with a list of people who may have had an axe to grind and go from there.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking. The sooner the better, while the details are fresh in Leah’s mind.” Jo ran to her office, grabbed a yellow pad, and settled in at the table. “You mentioned before you overheard someone call Barr a jerk.”

“It was during lunch my first day. Buzz called him a jerk. Jase, Dave’s nephew, was there when he said it, along with Sandi, who works in the office.”

Jo began writing:

Jase. Dave’s nephew.

Buzz. Employee. Called Shane Barr a jerk.

Sandi. Works in office.

“What are the names of some of the other employees at the farm?” Nash asked. “I think I remember a guy named Art.”

“Art works the fields. He’s in charge of the tractors and big equipment,” Leah said.

“Is he also in charge of the seeds and planting?” Jo asked.

Leah thought about it. “Yeah. I guess he would be. There’s also a guy named Joel. He works in the milking parlor.”

“Did Barr give a reason why he thought you were the one who ruined the bag of seeds?” Nash asked.

“No.” Leah shook her head. “I guess because I was the only one working out in the fields and garden area when it happened.”

“What about Art? Was he working yesterday?”

“Yes. He seems like a nice guy.”

“Did he get along with Barr?” Jo asked.

“It’s hard to tell. I basically said ‘hello’ to him, just like Joel.”

“How many employees work at Dave’s farm?”

“Me, Sandi, Buzz, Jase, Art, Joel and I guess it would have been Shane Barr.”

“Seven, not including Dave,” Nash said.

“So, out of those seven people, we know at least three who didn’t care for Shane Barr,” Jo said.

“Yep.”

Jo tapped the top of the notepad with her pen. “Dave even admitted his staff had complained about Barr, but he didn’t want to get rid of him because he got the job done. I wonder what sort of issues they were having with the guy.”

“I’m sure the cops are questioning Dave and getting that information,” Nash said. “Which means Leah isn’t the only one they’re taking a closer look at.”

Leah leaned her head back and closed her eyes. “But none of them were recently written up and risked losing their job. I was.”

“True.” Jo grew quiet as she studied what they had so far. “I feel like I might be missing something, some important clue.”

“It’s been a long day.” Nash patted Leah’s arm. “Why don’t we get some rest and tackle this again in the morning?”

Leah shoved her chair back and stood. “I guess I’ll camp out in my old room.”

Jo stopped her. “The Ladeaux twins have moved in. Your old room is already occupied, which means you get to stay here with me.”

“You found two new residents?”

“So much has happened. I forgot to mention it to you. They got here this morning. You’ll meet them at breakfast. Their names are Carli and Courtney Ladeaux.” Jo led Leah upstairs to one of the empty bedrooms and helped her get settled.

She returned to the kitchen to find Nash holding Jo’s notes, a concerned look etched on his face. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“Leah is in trouble. Someone at Kilwin’s farm killed the guy and is making it look like she was the one behind it,” Nash said.

“She has a motive and no alibi. No one was with her around the time Barr died. Leah has the history. It would be so easy to pin his death on her. If she goes back to prison with a murder rap, she’ll never see the light of day again,” Jo said.

“If we stand back and wait to see what happens, something tells me the outcome for Leah is going to be grim,” Nash said. “I think...”

“Think what?” Jo prompted.

“Leah is going to have to go back over there. We need someone on the inside to do some digging around. Her leaving is playing right into the killer’s hands.”

“I hadn’t thought about it that way. With Leah not there to defend herself, it would be easy to lay the groundwork and point fingers at her,” Jo said. “Although there’s a killer on the loose, which makes me more than a little nervous. I’ll let her decide what she wants to do, but will at least throw out an offer for her to stay here until this is over.”

Nash placed a light kiss on Jo’s cheek. “We’ll put our heads together in the morning and come up with a plan.”

“Thanks. Leah’s going to need all the help she can get.”

Jo was up early the next morning, her first thoughts about Leah’s future and Barr’s death. Delta and Gary arrived a short time later.

Delta’s sharp eye noticed the jacket hanging on the hook near the door. “Is that Leah’s jacket?”

“Yeah. She spent the night.”

“Leah is here?”

“She called me after you left for the day. Dave put her on temporary leave.”

“I have to admit, I’m not surprised.”

“Not by choice,” Jo said. “It appears some of the others no longer felt safe with Leah

around, although Dave told her she could stay, just that she couldn't work."

Delta placed her hands on her hips, her brows drawing together. "What a bunch of hogwash. Someone over there is trying to set our poor Leah up."

"I agree. Unfortunately, I think Leah staying here won't help."

"Because whoever it is will keep working the angle that she's behind Barr's death and if she's not there to defend herself, it will be a slam dunk case."

"Precisely. On the one hand, I think our best move is to get her back over there to snoop around," Jo said. "On the other, I worry about her safety."

"I wonder if Dave has someone in mind. Maybe it's time to chitchat with him," Delta said.

"If anyone can help us, my guess is it will be Dave. But how are we going to get him to talk?"

"Food."

"Food?"

"I need something fast and fabulous." Delta tapped her lip. "Dave loves my cinnamon caramel coffee cake. I'm gonna whip up a batch, run it over there, and do a little intel while I'm at it."

"I'll go with you," Jo said. "We can take Leah back over there and hit Dave up while we're at it."

With a plan in place, Delta began working on breakfast and the coffee cake while Jo

ran upstairs to check on her houseguest.

She found Leah standing at the window, staring out. Her bed was neatly made. In fact, it looked as if she hadn't even slept in it.

Jo gave the door a light rap, her heart nearly breaking when Leah whirled around and she noticed the dark circles under her eyes. "How are you this morning?"

"Okay. I did a lot of thinking last night."

"And?"

"I want to go back."

"To Dave's farm."

"Yeah. Someone who works there or went over there killed Shane Barr. The writing is on the wall. Someone is trying to make it look like I did it."

"I believe you could be right, but I'm worried about your safety."

"I've been around the block a time or two and around criminals for more years than I can count. This wasn't a random killing. Mr. Barr was targeted for a reason, and I don't think I'm in any danger," Leah said. "If I stay here and hide out, it's going to make me look even more guilty."

"It might."

"If I go back there, I can do some snooping around and maybe figure out who took him out. The only problem is, I have no idea where to start."

“Raylene.”

“Raylene.” Leah’s eyes lit. “You’re right. She knows a lot about this kind of stuff. Maybe she can give me some pointers.”

“Delta is whipping up a caramel coffee cake for Dave. While she does that, let’s run next door and pick Raylene’s brain.” Jo flung an arm across Leah’s shoulders and gave her a quick hug. “We can do this. We’ll get to the bottom of what happened to Shane Barr.”

It took a few minutes to track Raylene down. They found her in the common area, feeding Curtis and chatting with the new residents. Or at least one of them.

“Hey, Jo.” Raylene’s jaw dropped as she watched Leah follow Jo into the living room. “Leah.”

“Hey, Raylene.”

Raylene waited until Jo finished introducing Leah to the new residents. “Did Dave Kilwin fire you?”

“No. I’m on temporary leave.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” Raylene finished filling Curtis’s food dish and rinsed her hands in the sink. “What are you going to do?”

“Fight,” Leah said. “I’m innocent. I need to go back there and start doing some digging around.”

“Which is where you come in,” Jo explained. “Leah is looking for some pointers on how to go about it.”

“You came to the right place,” Raylene said.

“Carli and I can see you need privacy.” Courtney sprang from the chair. “We’ll head back to our rooms and start getting ready for breakfast.”

Carli tucked the notepad Jo had given her under her arm.

The women excused themselves, and Jo waited until the door closed behind them. “How is it going with our new residents?”

Raylene tipped her hand back and forth. “So-so. I don’t get the whole thing about why Carli won’t talk. She can hear what you say and understands what’s being said. It’s weird.”

“Has she been using the flip pad I gave her to answer and ask questions?”

“Yeah. She seemed interested in my bounty hunting background. I mean really interested,” Raylene said. “She wanted to know how I got started, what kind of people I tracked down, how much it paid.”

“Interesting,” Jo murmured. “What about Courtney?”

“She had very little to say. While Carli did all the writing and asking questions, Courtney was quiet.”

“I found the opposite to be true. Courtney talks while Carli is quiet.”

“They seem excited about being here and mentioned what they hoped to do once they finished their rehabilitation.”

Jo clasped her hands. “They’re already making plans for their future?”

Raylene nodded. "I got the impression they've spent a lot of time talking about it."

"What do they want to do?"

"Sell real estate."

"Sell real estate?" Jo rubbed her chin. "Become real estate agents?"

"Yeah. I never would've guessed."

"Me either. I'm not sure how their incarceration will affect the chances of them getting real estate licenses."

"At least they have goals," Leah said. "Knowing what you want to do is half the battle."

"Like you, who always knew you wanted to work on a farm," Jo said.

"I love it. I love getting my hands dirty, watching things grow and knowing I helped. Until I got here, I didn't know it was my passion."

"And we're going to make sure you continue working toward your goal," Jo vowed.

"One day, you're going to have your very own farm, Leah. I feel it in my bones."

"But first, I have to figure out what happened to Mr. Barr."

Raylene darted to the computer station, grabbed a blank sheet of paper from the printer tray, along with a pen, and joined Jo and Leah at the table.

"Back in the day, I called this my 'Blindside Game Plan.'" Raylene wrote the name at the top. "It's a three-prong, targeted plan to efficiently and expeditiously figure out

where our missing jump-bail-and-disappear suspects were hiding.”

As Raylene outlined how she thought Leah might best figure out who murdered Shane, a small seed of hope sprang up in Jo.

If Leah could pull it off, they might be able to figure out who hated Barr enough to kill him.

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“Do you think you’ll be able to remember my tips?” Raylene slid the piece of paper across the table.

“Yeah. My biggest concern is the other employees want nothing to do with me, so getting them to talk might be next to impossible,” Leah said. “Who can blame them? If you thought your new co-worker killed someone, you wouldn’t want to hang around them either.”

“Win them over,” Jo said. “Show them you’re not the horrible monster they might think you are.”

“I’ll try. What choice do I have?”

Leah was right. She had little choice. If the investigators railroaded over the top of her and had already concluded she was guilty of murder, then she was only a few short steps away from having her fate sealed. It would be up to her to fight—to prove her innocence.

“You can do it,” Jo said. “If you stick to Raylene’s game plan and figure out a way to speak with your co-workers one-on-one, play on their sympathy, my guess is some of them might open up to you.”

“Be personable. Be pathetic. Be whatever you need to be to get them to talk,” Raylene said. “It’s your best shot.”

Curtis leapt onto Leah’s lap and rubbed her head against her arm. She snuggled the cat. “I miss you too, Curtis. Life was so much simpler when I still lived here, before

Barr died and my life fell apart.”

“Your life hasn’t fallen apart,” Jo said. “True, you’ve hit a bump in the road, but we’ll get through it.”

Leah placed a light kiss on top of her head and gently set her on the floor. “I guess we should see how Delta’s doing on the coffee cake.”

The trio headed to the kitchen, the tantalizing aroma of cinnamon wafting in the air.

“...local businessman, Dave Kilwin and the horrific murder of his...”

Delta hurriedly shut the television off and tossed the remote on the counter. “You’re done. I didn’t hear you come in.”

Jo shot Leah a quick glance to see if she’d noticed the news report. “We didn’t mean to sneak up on you. It smells heavenly in here.”

“Dave loves my cinnamon caramel coffee cake. I figured while I was at it, I might as well make a few more. I have enough for us and a couple for him and his workers.” Delta plated several servings and passed them out. “This is one of my best and simplest recipes.”

Jo picked up the bite size morsel and studied the gooey coating. “I like the idea of simple. What’s in it?”

“Refrigerated buttermilk biscuits cut up into pieces. I stick them in the bottom of a Bundt pan, mix up some brown sugar, heavy cream and cinnamon, pour it over the top and then bake it in the oven.”

Raylene closed her eyes, savoring the tasty morsel. “I could eat a whole pan of these

by myself.”

“I better limit my intake.” Jo patted her slim hips. “Past the lips and to the hips.”

“You could eat dozens of these and never gain an ounce,” Leah laughed. “I’m gonna run upstairs and grab my backpack. I’m ready to get this intel mission underway.”

“We’ll head out as soon as we finish eating breakfast.” Delta waited until Leah’s footsteps echoed on the stairs. “How is she doing?”

“It’s like a seesaw. One minute she’s gung-ho to figure out what happened. The next, she seems defeated and depressed.” Jo motioned toward the television. “What were they saying on the news about Barr’s death?”

“It isn’t looking good.” Delta said in a low voice. “Investigators are focusing on the farm’s employees. Shane Barr recently reprimanded several of them, threatening to fire them. Reading between the lines, the cops are going with the angle that his death and those reprimands are somehow linked.”

“Which includes Leah,” Jo whispered as she pressed a hand to her forehead. “The clock is ticking. It’s only a matter of time before the authorities make an arrest.”

“Leah might come across as a little easygoing, but I’ve seen her when she gets all fired up,” Raylene said. “She’ll find the strength to fight back, to prove her innocence.”

“I hope so,” Jo said. “It would be a terrible tragedy for her to be convicted of a crime she didn’t commit.”

“We’re not gonna sit back and let that happen, not if I can help it.” Delta glanced at the clock. “Breakfast is ready and daylight is burning.”

“You go round up the residents and Raylene and I will take the food to the table.”

“Deal.” Delta ran outside to ring the breakfast bell while Raylene and Jo carried heaping bowls of biscuits and gravy, scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, stacks of buttered toast and a plate filled with coffee cake to the table.

“What’s the occasion?” Nash teased as he stepped into the dining room. “You whipped up a feast.”

“You know how I like to cook when I get nervous,” Delta said. “Besides, I figured Carli and Courtney might enjoy a good old-fashioned Divine farm-style breakfast.”

“You won’t hear me complain,” Nash said.

The residents and Gary gathered at the table with everyone talking at once, wondering why Leah was there.

At first, she was reluctant to share her story, but as it spilled out and she found a sympathetic audience among friends and those who believed in her innocence, she told them everything.

Not only did she have a sympathetic audience, but also a group of people who understood exactly what she was going through. It was a fear they would all have to face one day—judgment over poor past decisions, suspicion they were still criminals, unwilling or unable to leave a life of crime behind.

Jo could also understand Dave Kilwin’s dilemma. He needed to protect his workers, to protect his business. He was in a difficult position as a local business owner and employer. As it was, Jo suspected he might be worried he could be slapped with a lawsuit for unsafe working conditions and sued by Shane Barr’s family. The list was endless.

The meal ended, and after being encouraged by her friends and former housemates, Leah's smile returned as she helped clear the table.

Courtney and Carli carried a pile of dishes to the kitchen and then waited off to the side.

Jo could feel their eyes on her, and she finally made her way over. "I'll get you started on your first job as soon as we finish cleaning the kitchen."

Delta appeared, juggling a stack of plates. "I was thinkin'...Gary wants to help Leah and since you have a lot going on this morning, he and I could be the ones to drop Leah off at Kilwin's farm."

"I hate to drag him into this," Jo said.

"You know how much he loves her."

Delta was right. Gary and Leah were close, like grandfather and granddaughter. He would want to help, would want to do whatever he could. "Are you sure?"

"Sure as sugar."

"Maybe you two can glean some clues from Dave while you're at it."

"And meet Leah's co-workers." Delta winked. "Who doesn't like homemade baked goods?"

Jo grinned. "I like your way of thinking."

"We have a little cleanup left to do. It might be a half an hour before we can get out of here."

Courtney spoke. “I...we hate to bother you, but were wondering about picking out some things over at the mercantile.”

“Oh, my gosh.” Jo placed a light hand on her arm. “I am so sorry. I completely forgot we were going to go over there to see what we could find.”

“It’s okay. You’re busy and have a lot going on,” Courtney said.

“You run on over there,” Delta said. “Leah, Gary and I will swing by before we head out.”

With a plan in place, Jo accompanied her new residents to the mercantile, which hadn’t yet opened for business. She unlocked the door and pointed out where to find the women’s clothing and accessories.

Carli eyed a nearby rack of shoes. She grabbed her flip pad, began scribbling, and then turned it so Jo could see. “Can we pick out shoes?”

Jo glanced at Carli’s torn and worn sneakers with her big toe poking out. “Yes. You can pick out shoes, shirts, pants, jeans, shorts, whatever you want.”

“And then we’ll show you what we found and you can take it out of whatever we get paid?” Courtney asked.

“No.” Jo slowly shook her head. “You can take whatever you want free of charge. Each of the farm’s residents is allowed to pick out things they need—clothes, shoes, toiletries, toothpaste, shampoo, everything at no cost, when they first arrive.”

The twins exchanged a glance.

“We don’t have to pay for whatever we pick out?” Courtney asked.

“Correct. Once you have everything you need and you decide you would like more or find something you want to buy, then you purchase it with what you earn so you can re-acclimate to what the real world will be like,” Jo explained. “To learn to budget and manage your finances.”

A tear trickled down Carli’s cheek, and Jo thought she was going to burst into tears.

Jo’s throat clogged as she patted her shoulder. “I’m here to help you, to give you a second chance, to prove to both of you that someone cares. I’m on your side. This isn’t a free ride. It will be work. It will be challenging. It will be so very different from a life of crime and to do that, I’m giving you a hand up.”

“We’ve never had anyone help us before,” Courtney said. “Why would you do this?”

“Because I know all too well what you’re going through. I lost someone I loved so very much while she was behind bars.” Jo paused, struggling to maintain her composure. “The farm, offering housing to those in need, is my way of working through my guilt and grief.”

“Thank you.” Courtney clasped her hands, her eyes shining with unshed tears. “I don’t know why you picked us, but thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now start shopping before the customers show up.”

Jo stood near the coatrack, her heart bursting as she watched the twins excitedly sift through the clothes, the shoes, the undergarments like kids in a candy store.

Raylene arrived to open for business and Jo caught up with her near the cash register. “Those two are having a ball,” she said.

“They came here with very little,” Jo said. “They’re being conservative about how

much they pick out.”

“Because they don’t want to take advantage of your generosity,” Raylene said. “I remember when I got here with not much more than the clothes on my back. It was a humbling experience.”

“I remember that day. You tried to kill yourself,” Jo said.

“I had no hope until you took me in.” Raylene watched as the sisters began gathering up the items. “I think they’re starting to understand how lucky they are to be here.”

“And I’m blessed to have each of you in my life,” Jo said. “You have all taught me a thing or two about compassion, about not passing judgment, and the importance of having a strong support system.”

Raylene pivoted so her back was to the women. “I noticed something interesting.”

“About?”

“Carli,” Raylene said in a low voice. “I think she can read lips.”

Jo’s eyes widened. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah. I was talking to Kelli this morning before breakfast. We’re having trouble with one of the bathroom sinks. It keeps clogging. I told her Nash was going to check it out.”

“I’m sure he’ll get it fixed.” Jo said. “What makes you think Carli is reading lips?”

“Because she ran right over and scribbled out a note that she’d noticed the sink drain was slow too.”

“Maybe she overheard you talking.”

“Not a chance. She was in the living room with her sister and Kelli and I were standing in the kitchen.”

“So Carli can read lips but hasn’t bothered to share that tidbit of information with us.”

“She can pick up on what we’re saying without us knowing it,” Raylene said. “I thought you might want to know.”

“Absolutely. Thank you for giving me a heads up,” Jo said.

Courtney, with Carli close behind, hurried over. “We have some stuff picked out.”

They excitedly showed Jo the shirts, sweaters, jeans, shorts, shoes and even the bras and underwear they’d found. “Are you sure you don’t want to take this out of our wages? It seems like it would be an awful lot of money.”

“No, but thank you for the offer. The mercantile can absorb the cost of what I call donating to a good cause.” Jo attempted to lighten the mood. “I can’t have you running around in your birthday suits now, can I?”

Courtney grinned. “I guess not.”

“The clothes are all cleaned and ready to wear so there’s no need to launder them. Why don’t you swing by your rooms and put the things away? When you come back, I’ll have Raylene start training you here in the store.”

“Thanks, Jo. We won’t be long.”

The sisters ran out of the store, passing by Delta, Gary and Leah, who were on their

way in.

“Did you see the way those gals’ faces were all lit up?” Delta asked when she got close. “They looked like two kids on Christmas morning.”

“It was fun watching them, how excited they got at what they found.” Jo motioned to the stacks of baked goods boxes Gary and Delta were carrying. “I see you’re ready to roll.”

“More than ready to roll,” Delta said. “Gary and I made a pact. We’re not coming back until we have a lead on who murdered Shane Barr.”

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Delta tapped Leah's shoulder. "Do you have your marching orders from Raylene about what to do?"

"Yeah." Leah patted her pocket, checking to make sure she still had a copy of her friend's suggestions. "My biggest problem is none of my co-workers know or trust me. How can I get them to talk when half or most of them think I was the one who killed Barr?"

"You're a delightful young lady," Gary said. "You come across as sincere and genuine. Just be yourself. Maybe most of them aren't gonna talk to you, but all you need is one or two."

"Jase, Dave's nephew, was nice to me." Leah nervously chewed on her lower lip as they pulled into the farm's driveway.

"If he's anything like his uncle, then he's a fair man and would be a good person to start with." Gary swung around and stopped alongside the private quarters. "Delta and I are gonna run over to the house to see if Dave's around and then stop by the breakroom with the coffee cakes."

"Thanks you guys. I barely slept at all last night, worrying about what I'll do when the cops show up to arrest me. It's been a nightmare."

"The police aren't taking you anywhere," Delta said. "We're going to figure out who killed the guy. Instead of being a suspect, you'll be a hero."

"I hope so." Leah squared her shoulders, grabbed her backpack, and sprang from the

vehicle. She hurried around the front of the truck.

Gary waited until she was inside her unit before shifting into drive and heading back toward Dave's house. "You said you called ahead, and he's expecting us?"

"Yeah. I told him I was bringing his favorite caramel coffee cake and a few of my pumpkin cream cheesecake balls." After parking, Delta grabbed the top box and followed Gary to the back door.

Dave must've been watching for them because the door swung open, and Kilwin appeared. "Morning, Delta." There was a flicker of surprise when he saw Gary. "How are you, Gary?"

"I'm doing fine. I thought I would ride along with Delta to drop off the goodies. We brought Leah with us. She's a little nervous about being back here."

"Can't say as I blame her," Dave said. "The detective called early this morning. I think he's coming by sometime today to chat with the workers again and have another look around."

"I brought some of your favorite pumpkin cream cheesecake balls and my cinnamon caramel coffee cake as a way of thanking you for helping Leah." Delta held up the box.

"Thank you, Delta. I feel terrible about what happened. Shane wasn't the easiest man to get along with. Several of the workers have complained about him in the past, but he got the job done." Dave held the door. "Would you like to come in?"

Delta hesitated. "We don't want to impose."

"You're not imposing. I figured you probably wanted to ask me a few questions

about what happened so you could try to help Leah.”

“We do,” Gary said. “I’m sure the last thing you want is a killer on the loose while an innocent woman could end up taking the rap.”

“You took the words right out of my mouth.” Dave led them into his kitchen. He poured coffee and motioned for them to have a seat at the table. “Coffee cake sounds good,” he hinted.

“Help yourself.” Delta slid the box toward him. “I made a few batches. Gary and I have already sampled our share.”

Dave filled a plate with the sweet treats and dunked one of the caramel pieces in his coffee. “These sure are delicious.”

“Thanks,” Delta beamed. “I brought some extras for the workers. The boxes are still in the truck.”

“That’s mighty thoughtful of you. They’re nervous about what’s going on, so I’ve been trying to spend more time with them.”

“You must be concerned about how this death will affect you personally and as a local business owner,” Gary said.

“I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t. Shane was a hard man. He didn’t hesitate to put employees on probation. Looking back, he was a little overly strict.”

“Give us some examples about how he treated the workers,” Delta said. “I mean, what were their complaints?”

“What I just said. He was strict. I believe almost everyone who worked under him got

written up at one time.”

“If you had to pinpoint one person you think might have disliked him enough to kill him, who would it be?” Gary asked.

“Buzz couldn’t stand him.”

“Buzz. I’ve met him. He seems like a decent guy.”

“He is. He’s a hard worker, but for some reason, Shane seemed to have it in for him.” Dave started to say something and abruptly stopped.

“What were you going to say?” Delta prompted.

“My nephew, Jase, didn’t like him either. I think Shane picked on him because he viewed him as a threat.”

“Because he was your nephew.”

“Yep. You would think Barr would have cut Jase some slack since we were related, but it wasn’t the case.”

“So Buzz and Jase didn’t like him,” Delta said.

“There were others, but those two come to mind first.” Dave reached for another piece of coffee cake. “My nephew is as much a killer as Leah, but who knows what can happen when someone gets pushed too far and snaps?”

“True.”

“I’ve been thinking. What if it wasn’t one of my employees? What if someone who

had a beef with Shane tracked him down here and killed him? He wasn't popular around town."

It was a thought, and one Delta hadn't considered. The matter needed a little more investigating, but first...

"You could be right," Delta said. "Gary and I need to get going soon. We were hoping to drop the baked goods off for your employees."

"I'll go with you." Dave downed the rest of his coffee before accompanying them out of the house and to the main farm building.

Several workers stood near the coffee bar. Leah was with them, chatting with a man Delta thought looked familiar.

She gave a quick wave, and after Delta placed the boxes of baked goods on the table, she and Gary made their way over.

"We're heading back to the farm soon," Gary said. "You gonna be all right?"

Leah nodded. "I'm sure you've probably already met, but this is Jase Kilwin, Dave's nephew. He's been training me."

Delta extended a hand. "It's nice to meet you. I'm sure you're finding Leah is a hard worker and eager to learn."

"Yes, ma'am." Jase appeared to be close to Leah's age, with dark curly hair and an easy smile. "My uncle is going to let her start working again tomorrow."

"That's wonderful news." Delta clapped her hands. "We sure do miss her over at our farm."

“I’ve never met someone with a greener thumb than our Leah,” Gary boasted.

“A girl with a green thumb and someone after my own heart,” Jase teased.

Leah’s cheeks turned a tinge of pink. “I love farming, love getting my hands dirty, watching food grow, food I know I’m going to eat. It’s important to know what goes into it and I actually prefer organic farming and gardening methods.”

“I feel the same. I’m learning the ropes from my uncle and recently bought several acres of vacant land on the other side of Divine.” Jase told them he was saving his money, living on his uncle’s farm with his eye on the future—a home and farm of his own.

“That’s exactly what I want.” Leah’s eyes shined brightly. “I don’t even care what kind of house I have. I could live in a tent and be perfectly content.”

“Until winter comes,” Jase chuckled. “I’ve been pricing modular homes and have my eye on a three-bedroom, two-bath with a fireplace. I have a year or two yet before I’ll be ready. By then, I’ll have enough to add a garage with a workshop and a lean-to, to store supplies and farming equipment. I’m thinking one of these days I would like to settle down.”

“It sounds as if you have a level head on your shoulders and a plan in place,” Gary said. “Farming gets in the blood and it’s hard to get out.”

Delta, remembering the reason for their visit, excused herself and started making her rounds, chatting with the workers who thanked her for the coffee cake and cheesecake balls.

She kept moving until she tracked down Buzz, who was alone and near the door. “Good morning. You must be Buzz.”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you for the baked goods.”

“You’re welcome.” Delta casually glanced around. “Have you worked here at Kilwin Farms for long?”

“It depends on what you consider long,” he said.

“A year?” Delta asked.

“Close.”

He answered her in single syllables and didn’t elaborate, no matter how hard she tried to draw him into a conversation.

Finally, he excused himself and walked off.

“He didn’t want to chat.” Delta turned to find Gary standing behind her.

“No. Mr. Buzz struck me as guarded. I think he knows we’re Leah’s friends. She’s a suspect, and he isn’t willing to talk.”

Gary reluctantly consulted his watch. “Jo’s gonna start wondering what happened to us.”

“I was thinking the same thing. This intel mission was a bust.”

The couple tracked down Leah to let her know they were leaving and chatted with Dave briefly before they headed out.

Gary waited until they were in the truck to talk. “What was your take on the employees? Did anyone hit your radar as a potential suspect?”

“Maybe Buzz, and only because he didn’t give me a warm and fuzzy feeling.”

“Sandi, the office gal, was friendly.”

“I saw her talking your ear off,” Delta said. “Did she mention Leah or Shane?”

“Yeah. She said Leah seemed like a good worker and she hoped she would stick around. When I offered my condolences about Shane Barr, I thought she was going to burst into tears. She seemed real broken up about it.”

“Finally, someone who liked the guy.” Delta mulled over Gary’s information. Perhaps not everyone disliked the man as much as Dave thought, but then maybe it was all an act. Maybe Sandi detested Shane Barr but didn’t want to reveal her true feelings. Which meant if she was faking it, she was trying to stay off the radar.

Gary slowed at the crossroads to check for traffic. “Maybe we should do a little asking around town.”

“You read my mind. Marlee at the deli would be the first place to check. Sherry might even know something about Mr. Barr seeing how she works almost every day at the deli.”

Gary shot his wife a sly side glance. “Did you see how Jase Kilwin looked at Leah?”

“I certainly did, and did you see how she blushed when he complimented her?”

“I wouldn’t be surprised to see a romance blossom, if she’s able to stick around there,” Gary said.

“She’s going to stick around,” Delta insisted. “We’re not going to let this little bump in the road derail our sweet Leah.”

“So I guess your plan is to head into Divine to see what you can find out about Barr.”

“You betcha. The sooner, the better.”

“I’ve got a full schedule today,” Gary said. “There’s no way I’m going to have time to take off.”

“You’ve already helped a bunch. I’ll track down Jo, fill her in on what we found and go from there.”

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Delta gave Gary a smooch on the cheek and slipped out of the truck. “I’ll let you know what we find out.”

Back inside the house, it took a minute for her to track her boss down. She found Jo in her office, chatting on the phone.

When Jo saw Delta, she held up a finger. “Yes. I’m here now. How long?” She glanced at the clock. “Five minutes. I’ll be waiting. Goodbye.”

“Who was that?”

“Detective Vine has officially taken over investigating Shane Barr’s death. He wants to stop by to ask a few questions about Leah.”

“Because she’s on the radar.”

“Without a doubt,” Jo said. “Were you and Gary able to find anything out while you were at Dave’s farm?”

“We asked Dave point-blank if he thought any of his employees were capable of killing Barr. He mentioned Buzz, said the guy couldn’t stand him, but when pressed, he said he didn’t think he did it.”

“Which brings us back to square one.”

“Gary and I made small talk with some of the workers. No one hit the radar, not even Jase, Dave’s nephew. Gary talked to the office gal, Sandi. He said she seemed pretty

broken up about it and thought she was going to cry.”

Jo wandered to the window. “Yet Leah said she overheard Jase, Buzz, and Sandi talking, and one of them called Barr a jerk.”

“Could be she’s pretending she liked him. Or maybe she genuinely feels bad about his death,” Delta said. “Dave mentioned Barr wasn’t well-liked around town. I was thinking we might swing by Marlee’s deli to see what she knows about him.”

“I like that idea. We can head out as soon as Detective Vine leaves. Since Sherry works at the deli, I’m sure she knows most of the locals by now. Maybe she’s heard something about Barr.” Jo told her what Carrie had said, how Barr was a womanizer and having an affair. “In fact, right after Leah met Barr, she told me he was making comments about her, making her uncomfortable.”

Delta made a choking sound. “So maybe the woman he was messing around with was married. The husband found out and killed him.”

“It’s worth looking into. Vine is here.” Jo made it to the front door and waited for the detective to climb the porch steps.

“Thank you for agreeing to talk to me on such short notice. I won’t take up too much of your time.” The detective stared at her. “Have we met before? You look familiar.”

“I believe we have. You investigated a death outside the movie theater some time ago.”

“I remember now. You have an excellent memory.”

“You questioned me when Mr. Cantwell accused me of health department violations at my bakeshop and then he died. You also questioned my brother, Miles Parker.”

“It seems so long ago.”

“It does, and at the risk of sounding rude, I would have been fine with us never having crossed paths again.”

The detective cracked a smile. “No offense taken. Most people don’t want me around.”

Jo ushered him into her office, where Delta stood waiting. “This is Delta Stein. She runs my bakeshop and kitchen. You might remember her from before.”

“It’s possible. I meet a lot of people.” The man shook Delta’s hand. “Detective Vine. You know Leah McEllish, the farm’s former resident?”

“Yes, sir. Leah is like a daughter. I would trust her with my life.”

“You don’t beat around the bush, do you?”

“Not when I have something important to say. Leah didn’t kill Barr,” Delta said bluntly. “I would bet my life on it.”

“You’ve never witnessed her exhibiting signs of anger or uncontrolled rage?” the detective asked.

“Everyone gets angry,” Jo said. “Have I ever seen her angry to the point of losing it? No. Absolutely not. In fact, out of all my residents, she was the most even-tempered of the bunch.”

“And you would take her back here, if you could?” the detective probed.

“Without hesitation,” Jo said. “She was a model resident, a hard worker, trustworthy,

and a friend to everyone she met.”

“Except for Shane Barr.”

“I’m sure Dave Kilwin already told you Mr. Barr was not well-liked by anyone who worked under him.” Jo almost mentioned what Leah had confided to her, how Barr had made her uncomfortable with his comments about her appearance, but kept quiet, figuring Leah had probably already told the investigators what happened.

“He did.” The detective removed a notepad from his pocket and flipped it open. “Mr. Barr wrote Ms. McEllich up the day of his death.”

“That’s what I was told,” Jo said.

“Did you ever write Ms. McEllich up for misconduct?”

“No.”

“You’re sure.”

Jo crossed her arms and leveled her gaze at the detective. “One hundred percent.”

He leaned back in his chair. “You run a state-sponsored home, which means you’re required to keep records on each of your residents.”

“Correct.”

“And you have complete faith your former resident wasn’t involved in Mr. Barr’s untimely demise.”

“That’s what I said.”

“So, you wouldn’t mind me taking a look at Ms. McEllish’s records.”

“Each resident’s file contains private and confidential information. I don’t share that with any other employee at the farm. The only person who has access to those records, besides me, is the resident’s probation officer.”

“I could petition to see a copy, or you can save me some time and allow me access.”

Jo’s eyes flashed with anger. “Your request compromises my relationship with my residents.”

“Leah is no longer a resident. It seems to me if you want to help her, to help clear her name, you wouldn’t mind letting me see her files.”

“You’re asking for a lot,” Delta snapped. “You’re asking Jo to compromise her integrity because you don’t want to do the legwork to figure out what happened to Shane Barr. It seems kinda lazy if you ask me.”

“Quite the contrary.” Vine appeared almost amused by Delta’s jabs. “I, ma’am, am doing my job and my job is to figure out who killed Shane Barr.” He turned his attention back to Jo. “It’s up to you. Are we going to do this the easy way or the hard way?”

Jo sank into her office chair and grew quiet as she accessed the files. She clicked on Leah’s file and abruptly stood. “I’ve pulled her file up.”

“Thank you.” Vine settled in at the desk and Jo clenched her fists, resisting the sudden urge to wipe the smug smirk off the man’s face.

She stood behind him, watching as he perused the reports and each of her file updates. He spent some extra time on the files she’d recently uploaded, releasing

Leah from the program, and then jotted some notes in his notepad.

Finally, he slid the chair back and slowly stood. “Ms. McEllish appears to have been an exemplary resident, well-liked by the staff and other residents.”

“Which is exactly what I told you,” Jo said.

“Thank you for your time.”

“I only agreed to meet with you to help Leah. She’s innocent.” Jo escorted the detective out of the house with Delta close behind. “I’m assuming given this information you no longer consider Leah a suspect.”

The detective shook his head. “No. She’s one of several suspects.”

“I’m sure you could see Leah’s been here for several years without a single problem, a single instance of being disciplined.”

“True.” Vine rocked back on his heels. “Call me jaded, but I’m of the belief a tiger cannot change his stripes. The bottom line is Ms. McEllish is a former convict.”

“Who did her time and paid her dues,” Jo pointed out. “Don’t you believe if she paid her dues she deserves a break, a second chance?”

“Of course. Again, my job is to figure out who killed Shane Barr.” He tipped his hat. “Good day, Ms. Pepperdine.” He began whistling under his breath as he sauntered to his car. He climbed in, and after letting it idle for several long moments he slowly drove off.

“What a jerk,” Delta fumed. “And a lazy detective to boot.”

“Reading between the lines, I think he’s already decided Leah killed Barr.” Jo rubbed the sides of her arms. “We aren’t going to stand by and let this happen. As soon as you’re ready, I want to head into town.”

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“This place is packed.” Jo tightened her grip on the steering wheel as she drove past Divine Delicatessen. “They must be giving food away.”

“Divine is growing. We have the newer development on the other side of town, which brought in a whole slew of residents. It looks as if we need more restaurants, although it’s good for Marlee and I’m sure Sherry is killing it with the tips.”

They circled around the block and lucked out, snagging a spot between the deli and Claire’s Coin Laundromat.

Sherry did a double take and hurried over when she saw them step inside. “Hey, Jo, Delta. I didn’t know you were coming into town.”

“It was an unplanned trip.” Jo’s eyes scanned the dining room. “You guys are busy.”

“It’s like this every day. You should see it on the weekends. The line is out the door and down the sidewalk.” Sherry motioned for them to follow her. “There’s a table over there, if you don’t mind being close to the kitchen.”

“Not at all.”

The trio zig zagged past the diners to an empty spot in the corner. “Today’s special is a hot ham with Swiss cheese on a kaiser roll with a side of either potato salad or coleslaw and a dill pickle.”

“That sounds tasty,” Jo said. “I’ll take the special with coleslaw and have an iced tea.”

“Make it two,” Delta said.

“You got it.” Sherry gathered up the menus. “So why the special trip?”

“We’re here to see what you and Marlee know about Shane Barr, the supervisor over at Dave Kilwin’s farm, who was murdered the other day.”

“I know who he is. Was Leah working when it happened?”

“Working, doesn’t have an alibi and is now a suspect,” Jo said.

Sherry’s jaw dropped. “Seriously? Why would Leah kill the guy?”

“Because he wrote her up for allegedly destroying a bag of seeds.”

“That’s crazy. Leah would never do something like that.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Unfortunately, you know better than anyone how the past can come back to bite you, no matter how innocent you are,” Delta said.

“Do I ever. I wish I could help. I knew who the guy was. He came in here a few times for lunch. He wasn’t my best customer.”

“Wasn’t your best customer,” Jo repeated.

“He was never happy with his order. The coffee was too hot. The food was cold. Yada, yada. There’s always one.” Sherry glanced across the dining room. “I need to check on my other tables. I’ll see if Marlee has a minute to chat.”

Sherry rushed off, and Jo waited until she was gone. “It sounds as if Shane Barr made his rounds.”

“Sure does. If anyone has more info on the guy, it will be Marlee,” Delta said.

Their drinks and food arrived fast, and they were halfway through the meal when Marlee appeared.

“Hey, ladies. Sherry said you were looking for information on Shane Barr.”

“Unfortunately, Leah started working at the farm just before he was murdered. He wrote her up, and she doesn’t have an alibi.”

“That’s terrible.” Marlee eased into an empty chair. “The investigators can’t seriously suspect Leah of being responsible.”

“They do. In fact, the lead detective was at the farm this morning and asked to take a look at Leah’s file.”

“I would have told him to go fly a kite.”

“I thought about it, but have nothing to hide. Leah was a model resident,” Jo said. “Besides, he was going to get her information one way or the other, so I figured I would let him see it. We’re here because we thought if anyone had the scoop on him, it would be you.”

“Shane has lived in Divine for several years.” Marlee told them he worked at another farm when he first moved to the area. “Dave hired him and I heard he was a hard man.”

“That’s what we’re finding out.” Jo thought about what Carrie had told her. “Carrie Ford said he was a womanizer and cheated on his wife.”

“With Robyn Colburne. She took a job down the street at Claire’s laundromat.”

“Who is she?” Jo asked.

“Her husband is our rural route mail carrier.”

Jo snapped her fingers. “I knew her last name sounded familiar. Robyn is married to Glen Colburne?”

“Who took over the route when McDougall retired,” Marlee said. “He’s a nice guy.”

Jo’s heart skipped a beat. “Glen delivers our mail, which means he also delivers Dave Kilwin’s mail.”

Delta picked up. “His wife is having an affair with the farm’s supervisor. Maybe he found out, went to the farm, confronted Shane Barr, and then strangled him.”

“It seems like maybe the investigators should take a closer look at Glen.” Marlee glanced over Jo’s shoulder. “Evelyn McBride is here. She knows everything that goes on at the sheriff’s department. Maybe you should chat with her.”

Evelyn hustled across the dining room and greeted them. “There’s not an empty seat in the place.”

“You can sit with us.” Jo patted the seat next to her. “We were just talking about Shane Barr’s death.”

“Such a tragic turn of events,” Evelyn tsK-tsked. “I noticed the police were over at the post office.”

“To question Glen about what he might have seen since he runs the route and delivers mail to the Kilwin farm?” Jo asked.

“That would be my guess.” Evelyn lowered her voice and leaned in. “I’m sure they know about Shane’s affair with Glen’s wife. I mean, everyone in town knew about it.”

“I didn’t know about it,” Jo said.

“Ditto,” Delta added.

“Most people. Anyhoo, it was only a matter of time before Shane messed with the wrong woman,” Evelyn said.

“I heard Barr was married. What about his wife?” Jo asked.

“They were separated, maybe even divorced by now. I guess she put up with enough of his shenanigans and got out.”

Sherry finished delivering lunch to one of her other tables and hustled over. “Good afternoon, Evelyn.”

“Hello, Sherry. I’ll take today’s special with a cup of hot tea.”

“Coming right up.” Sherry hurried off and Marlee reluctantly stood. “I need to get back to the kitchen.”

Evelyn waited until Marlee walked away. “I didn’t want to say anything in front of Marlee, but I heard Leah, your resident, is also a suspect.”

“Unfortunately,” Jo sighed. “Leah didn’t take Shane Barr out. I would bet my life on it.”

“Detective Vine is very thorough. I’m sure he’ll figure things out.” Evelyn changed

the subject. “Will you be finding new residents now that Leah has moved on?”

“Already have,” Jo said. “Twin sisters, as a matter of fact. Carli and Courtney Ladeaux.”

“The Ladeaux sisters?” Evelyn pressed a hand to her chest. “Aren’t they career criminals who committed more than one armed robbery?”

“Because of their father,” Jo said. “They’ve done their time and are eager to start over. I have faith they’ll be successful if they stick with my program.”

Evelyn reached across the table and patted Jo’s hand. “You are an absolute saint, Joanna Pepperdine. I would have to sleep with one eye open if I were you, always wondering if one of my residents was going to snap.”

“They have their own units and I have a gun,” Jo said. “I fully vet all my residents, and I won’t take anyone who was convicted of murder.”

“Still, it would be too much for me personally. God gave you a special heart, that’s for sure.”

The conversation shifted to the weather, how the town of Divine was growing and after they finished their meal, Jo insisted on paying for Evelyn’s.

“Thank you for lunch. If I hear anything else about the Barr case, I’ll give you a call.” Evelyn left, and Jo and Delta weren’t far behind.

They stopped by the kitchen to tell Sherry and Marlee goodbye and then backtracked, stepping onto the sidewalk.

“Well?” Delta asked. “It seems to me the cops should focus on who Barr was hanging

out with.”

“Or the jealous husband. We need to chat with Claire. If Robyn worked at the laundromat, I’m sure Claire knows something about what was going on.”

They passed by Jo’s SUV and made a beeline for the laundromat. Unfortunately, Claire wasn’t there. The counter was closed with a note stating they wouldn’t be open for dry cleaning services for another hour.

“Crud.” Jo pursed her lips.

“Claire’s probably next door at her antique shop,” Delta said. “Let’s try over there.”

The women exited the laundromat and trekked down the sidewalk to the antique store, which was open.

The overhead bell jingled, announcing their arrival.

Claire appeared, and a wide smile spread across her face as she strode down the center aisle. “Hey Jo, Delta. I thought I saw your SUV parked out front. How have you been?”

“Busy. Always busy,” Jo said. “How are you?”

“Wonderful. The whole main street is in the midst of a revitalization, thanks to the new neighborhood bringing in families and young couples. Some of Divine’s old-timers aren’t thrilled, but I say it’s exactly what we needed.”

“I agree, as long as it doesn’t get out of control and they start taking out all of our forests and fields,” Jo said. “I’ve also noticed an uptick in visitors at the bakeshop and mercantile.”

“Miles’ movie theater has brought the locals into town. His place is busy every weekend. He’s helped give us a jumpstart as well.”

“I haven’t seen my brother in a while now. I should stop by there one of these days to check in on him,” Jo said.

Claire leaned an elbow on the counter. “I’m sure you heard about Shane Barr’s death.”

“Heard about it and had the lead detective show up on my doorstep this morning,” Jo said.

“Because Dave Kilwin is your neighbor, and they thought you might know something?”

“No. Because Leah started working for Dave and she’s a suspect.”

“Leah?” Claire pressed a hand to her chest. “I don’t know what she was like while she was in prison, but she’s a different person now. I doubt she would hurt a fly.”

“Unfortunately, Barr wrote her up. Hours later he’s...” Jo made a thumbs down.

Claire wrinkled her nose. “Barr was a big guy. There’s no way petite little Leah could’ve wrapped twine around his neck and choked him.”

“I agree and I know she didn’t do it, which is why I’m here. I heard he was having an affair with Robyn Colburne who works at your laundromat.”

“She was and is. I never could understand what she saw in him. He would stop by the laundromat here and there and I found him to be rude. He treated her like dirt. She ate it up.” Claire motioned toward the laundromat. “She’s taken a personal leave. Her life

is in shambles, between the affair and now I heard Glen served her with divorce papers.”

“Has Detective Vine been by to talk to her, or you about what happened?” Delta asked.

“Yeah, and I told him everything I know. Robyn was already on leave. I believe he planned to stop by her place.”

“At the risk of putting you on the spot, do you think it’s possible she was responsible for Barr’s death?”

Claire placed a light hand on the back of her neck. “You know, now that you mention it, Barr stopped by a couple weeks ago while Robyn was working. They had an interesting conversation.”

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“What sort of interesting conversation?” Jo asked.

“Robyn was practically begging Shane to stop hanging around his work after hours,” Claire said. “I could tell from the tone of her voice she wasn’t happy.”

“Wasn’t happy,” Jo echoed.

“Reading between the lines, she thought he was fraternizing with the other employees.”

“Was...is Robyn a jealous person?” Delta asked.

“I would have to say yes. She’s always on her phone texting. I think she was texting Barr, like she was keeping tabs on him.”

“So maybe she took him out in a jealous fit of rage,” Jo theorized.

“I hope not.” Claire blinked rapidly. “I don’t like the thought of having a killer as an employee.”

“What about her husband?”

“Glen was moving on. At least that’s the impression I got from Robyn,” Claire said.

“Is there anything else about her or them that sticks out in your mind?”

“No, Jo. Robyn is a good worker. She always shows up on time. Yes, her personal

life seems rough and now, with Barr dead, she's in even rougher shape, but I would hire her again."

They began making small talk and chatted until a customer arrived. Jo and Delta excused themselves.

Back outside, Jo's eyes drifted toward her brother's theater across the street. The double entrance doors were open. "Someone is over at the theater. I wouldn't mind popping in and saying 'hi' to Miles if he's there."

"Lead the way."

The women crossed the street, passing by Tool Time Hardware store and another business before reaching Divine Dinner Theater.

"Hello? Miles?" Jo caught a flash of movement near the ticket booth and her brother appeared. "Hey, Jo."

"Delta and I were in town running an errand and noticed the doors were open, so we thought we would swing by. We stopped by Claire's antique shop. She mentioned how busy the downtown area is."

"It's great," Miles grinned. "Business is booming. We've been packing them in every Friday, Saturday and Sunday."

"I'm glad to hear it. I'll have to bring the residents by one of these days for a dinner matinee."

"We would love to have you." Miles leaned an elbow on the counter. "How are your businesses doing?"

Jo gave a thumbs up. “We have two new residents who are settling in.”

“Sherry mentioned Leah’s working over at Dave Kilwin’s farm. I heard the supervisor died. Someone took him out.”

Jo briefly filled him in. “Unfortunately, Leah is on the investigator’s radar.”

“Leah?” Miles’ brows drew together.

“Because the guy wrote her up.”

“And she has a previous criminal record,” he guessed.

“Her record definitely isn’t helping the situation, so Delta and I decided to come into town and do a little digging around. It seems Mr. Barr may have had his share of enemies.”

“And girlfriends. He had a reputation,” Miles said. “He hit on Sherry once.”

“Seriously?” Jo’s brows shot up. “She didn’t mention it when we were over there for lunch.”

“She doesn’t like to worry you. Besides, Sherry can handle herself.”

“So, Barr was married. His wife ended up leaving him. He was running around with Robyn Colburne and was even hitting on Sherry,” Jo said. “He hit on Leah too.”

“What’s the saying? ‘Chasing anything in a skirt.’”

Ping. Miles’ cell phone chimed. “I’ve been waiting for this call.”

“We won’t keep you.” Jo gave her brother a quick hug. “You and Sherry need to come over for dinner one night. We would love to have you.”

“And I would love to partake of some of Delta’s delicious dishes.” Miles smacked his lips and winked at Delta. “Just let me know.”

“There’s always room for you at our table.” Delta followed Jo out of the theater. “Well?”

“I was hoping we could narrow down the number of suspects, but now we have even more.”

Back at the farm, Jo added Robyn Colburne to her growing list. She knew Glen in passing, had casually chatted with him when he delivered the mail or when she had to sign for something.

He struck her as a nice guy. Maybe he snapped. Maybe his marriage was falling apart and he found out about Robyn’s affair. He confronted Shane Barr and killed him in a fit of rage.

Or maybe it was Robyn Colburne. Claire mentioned the woman seemed to keep tabs on Shane Barr. Maybe she became jealous, confronted him at the farm and killed him.

Or it could have been one of the farm’s employees. Dave Kilwin had even said he should’ve gotten rid of him because the employees didn’t like the man.

Jo meandered out of the house and into the mercantile. Raylene stood behind the cash register ringing up purchases.

Carli and Courtney were near the dressing rooms helping customers. Jo continued

walking, making her way to the bakeshop where Laverne was boxing up a customer's order. Kelli stood on the other side stocking the display cases.

"How is business?"

"The baked goods are flying off the shelves. Delta's cookies and cream raspberry dream bars have already sold out," Kelli said. "Customers are still coming in asking if we have more."

"Wonderful. That's music to my ears."

Laverne nodded toward the mercantile at the other end of the building. "Raylene's been training the new residents all morning. I still don't know how Carli can work without talking."

Jo followed Laverne's gaze and studied the woman's body language. Although her lips weren't moving, it appeared she was communicating with a customer as they passed clothes back and forth. "She seems to be managing."

"I guess we all have our crutch."

"Yes, we certainly do," Jo pointedly agreed. "Including you."

Laverne ignored the comment. "I've been watching her. Those psychology classes I took sure come in handy, especially when I run across an interesting individual."

Jo pressed her palms together, curious to get Laverne's take. "What are you seeing when you look at Carli and her sister?"

"Courtney is running the show. Of course, you don't have to have knowledge of psychology to see that. She's happy running the show and Carli is content to let her,"

Laverne said. “There’s something else I’m noticing.”

“What?”

Laverne started to say something and stopped.

“What do you see?”

“It only happened once. A customer came up behind Carli and spooked her. I thought she was going to hit the ground.”

“She’s easily startled,” Jo said.

“I saw it too,” Kelli said. “She seems kinda jumpy.”

“You both made an interesting observation.” A customer arrived, and Jo slipped out of the bakeshop. She circled around the barns, checking on Egglina and Henrietta.

While she walked, Jo mulled over what Laverne and Kelli had observed. Maybe something had happened in Carli’s past that instilled a deep set of fear in her, a fear of others. The fact she startled easily was a clue.

Jo found Gary near the edge of the field alone and fiddling with the rototiller. “Hey, Gary.”

“Afternoon, Jo.”

“You were able to get the rototiller running again?”

“Yep. I had to drain the old gas and put some new in.”

Jo glanced around. “No one is working with you today?”

“Michelle was on the schedule, but I didn’t really need her. Sometimes I work better by myself, especially when I have a lot on my mind.”

“About Leah.”

“Yeah. I miss having her around. I guess I’m kinda feeling sorry for myself. Don’t get me wrong, I want her to get on with her life and working for Dave Kilwin will give her the experience she needs from being employed by a larger establishment,” Gary said. “Jase seems to have taken a liking to her.”

“Jase and Leah are close to the same age. Wouldn’t that be something?” Jo asked. “Leah takes a job and finds a boyfriend.”

Gary tapped the side of his forehead. “They’re both on the same page, with similar interests and plans. I’m no matchmaker, but I wouldn’t be surprised to hear about a blossoming romance.”

“But first, we have to figure out who murdered Shane Barr,” Jo said.

“Yep. Dave borrowed one of our plows. I figured I could swing by there to pick it up and see how Leah’s doing.”

She touched his arm. “You’re a great guy, Gary. Leah loves you, adores you. If nothing else, this tragic death is a reminder she has someone on her side. Justice will prevail.”

Jo left, her own words echoing in her ears. Would justice prevail or would Detective Vine settle his sights on Leah, thinking he had a solid case?

Motive? Check. Barr had written her up only hours earlier.

Opportunity? Check. She was there at the time of his attack, with no one around to corroborate her story.

An uneasiness settled over her. Jo had been involved in more than her share of situations, when Sherry was a suspect and even Gary. But this one was different. She wasn't directly involved, and it was frustrating to realize her hands were tied.

The dinner hour rolled around and the residents and staff gathered at the table. Jo waited until they prayed over their food to ask how everyone's day had gone.

"Nash taught me how to change the lawn mower's spark plugs," Michelle said.

"You have one up on me. I have no idea how to change spark plugs," Jo said. "I noticed business was brisk in the mercantile and bakeshop. How were sales?"

"Great," Raylene said. "We were selling springtime merchandise like gangbusters. Everyone is looking forward to the warmer weather."

"I am too," Jo said. "Gary is getting ready to start planting, which means it's right around the corner."

"Those chickens have been making a racket all day long," Laverne grumbled. "Every time I walk by the coop, they cluck at me."

"The solution is simple," Delta said. "You don't like them. They don't like you. Stay away from their coop."

Laverne muttered something unintelligible under her breath.

“What did you say?” Delta asked.

“Carli loves the chickens,” Courtney said.

Carli reached for her flip pad. I can care for them, she scribbled before turning it so everyone could see.

“Problem solved.” Laverne dusted her hands. “Let Carli handle the chickens.”

“Are you sure?” Jo asked. “They need regular care.”

Carli nodded.

“I’ll show her around the shed, where the feed is and everything she’ll need after dinner,” Gary said. “Tomorrow morning, we’ll go over their feeding.”

Courtney grimaced. “I was hoping to work in the kitchen.”

“You can work with me,” Delta said. “I’ll have plenty to keep you busy.”

“But Carli...”

Jo cut in. “Carli can train with Gary. You can train with Delta. As I explained before, you’ll be rotating and working in different areas each day.”

“But Carli might need me.”

“Carli will be fine.” Jo turned to the woman. “Do you want to be trained in how to care for the chickens?”

Carli used the end of her marker to point to the “yes” on her notepad.

“Then it’s settled. You work separately starting tomorrow.”

Courtney picked at the food on her plate, refusing to take part in the rest of the dinner conversation.

Interestingly enough, Carli was the opposite. She “chatted” using her pad of paper. It was as if someone flipped the switch and Carli became engaged.

Dinner ended, and Gary invited Carli to join him to go over the evening care routine for the chickens.

Courtney reluctantly trudged along after them, and Nash pulled Jo off to the side. “That was an interesting turn of events.”

“Courtney isn’t happy with her sister going off on her own,” Jo whispered. “Did you see the way Carli lit up? She was over there scribbling like crazy. We might break through to her sooner than I thought.”

“If you can keep Courtney in check,” Nash said. “Seems to me there’s some sort of power struggle going on. She controls her sister by making sure she’s nonverbal.”

“Let’s just say it was an enlightening meal.”

Jo, along with Nash, Delta and the remaining residents, worked quickly to get the kitchen shipshape, the dishwasher loaded, and the leftovers stored in the fridge.

The sun had set and the outdoor temperature dropped. There was only a slight breeze, creating a light chill.

Jo followed the residents out onto the porch, where they lingered to chat about the following day's schedule.

"I ran into Miles today. Who would be interested in an afternoon dinner matinee at the theater?"

All hands shot up.

"Perfect. I'll plan a trip soon, probably for a Sunday. We can close early and enjoy an afternoon off together." Jo watched out of the corner of her eye as Laverne quietly slipped away.

She waltzed across the driveway and headed toward the chicken coop.

Jo wasn't the only one who noticed.

"Now what is that woman up to?" Delta placed a hand on her hip and shook her head. "As much as she whines and cries about those darned chickens, she sure can't stay away from them."

"If Gary let them out, Henrietta will chase after her," Jo said. "She should know better. I think she wants them to attack her so she can try to convince me to get rid of them." With a look of determination in her eye, Jo strode across the driveway, following after her troublesome resident.

She was halfway there when Laverne, Carli, and Courtney, with Gary hot on their heels and a look of terror in his eyes, came barreling toward her. "Run!"

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:16 am

“Skunk!” Laverne shoved Gary and Courtney aside, a look of pure panic on her face as she desperately tried to distance herself from the black and white critter who calmly waddled around the side of the barn.

Poor Carli gasped in terror, clutching Henrietta as she ran after Laverne.

Gary regained his balance and grabbed hold of Courtney, who stood frozen solid, her eyes wide as the skunk closed in on her.

Raylene, Kelli and Michelle scrambled to get out of the way while Nash grabbed a broom that was propped up against the barn and cautiously began advancing toward the skunk.

Jo stumbled back and then realized the animal looked vaguely familiar. She confirmed her suspicions when she noted the brown patch on top of his head. “Shoo.” She waved her arms and inched closer. “Go on. Go home. You don’t belong here.”

“Jo!” Raylene shrieked as she huddled behind the pickup truck. “You’re going to get sprayed!”

Even Duke knew better and let out a low growl before hightailing it back to the house. He didn’t stop until he safely landed on the porch swing.

Jo kept her eyes trained on the skunk. “You’re supposed to be home, not wandering around our farm. Go on,” she scolded in the loudest voice she could muster.

Nash adjusted his grip on the broom, swinging it back and forth in an attempt to

persuade the pesky critter to leave. “I have no idea how to get skunk du jour off you if you get sprayed.”

“He isn’t going to spray me,” Jo said. “Let me rephrase that. He can try to spray me, but won’t. This is the skunk Carrie dropped off yesterday. It appears he never left the area.”

“Are you sure?” Nash shot her a quick side glance.

“He has a brown patch on his head. I remember her mentioning it and how unusual it was for a skunk to have a brown patch.”

“You’re right. I see it now.” Nash relaxed his stance. “Talk about getting the old ticker pumping.”

“What are we going to do?” Despite her belief the skunk was harmless, Jo kept her distance. “I don’t want him around the chicken coop because he’ll try to get our eggs.”

“Maybe he doesn’t like loud noises.” Delta ran back inside and returned with a copper kettle in one hand and a metal spoon in the other. She began clanging them loudly. “Get out of here. Go home and don’t come back.”

The skunk’s tail shot up. He spun around and aimed it at Delta.

Nothing happened.

“It is him. Great,” Jo groaned. “Now what? We can’t have him hanging around scaring our customers away.”

“The honeybees aren’t safe either,” Gary said. “Skunks will eat wasps and honeybees

and have been known to go after beehives. Maybe you didn't take him far enough away."

"Gary is right. It's possible he hasn't found his family, became disoriented and wandered back here," Nash said. "I'll grab Curtis's carrier, lure him in with some cat treats, and then drop him off a few miles down the road."

With a plan in place, Nash headed toward the resident's common area to grab the carrier and cat treats.

He returned in short order and strategically arranged a trail of treats to lure him inside.

"He's kinda cute," Kelli said. "I've never seen a skunk up close and have never seen one with brown patches."

"According to Carrie, it's a unique marking," Jo said. "He's friendly and almost tame enough to be an outdoor pet, just not our outdoor pet."

"I think we should name him," Michelle said. "Brownie is fitting for his brown spot."

"Brownie," Raylene repeated. "I like it. Go home, Brownie."

"You people are nuts," Laverne huffed. "If you feed him, he's never going to leave."

Nash shot Laverne an annoyed look. "I suppose you have a better idea about how to get him into the carrier."

Laverne rolled her eyes but didn't reply.

"That's what I thought." Finally, Nash persuaded the skunk, now named Brownie, to

enter the cage. He flipped the door shut and reached for the handle.

Brownie, discovering he'd inadvertently stepped right into a trap, flopped down and curled up in a ball.

"He's a smart one. He knows he has a one-way ticket out of here."

"Let's get him back to his family." Gary dropped the truck's tailgate. Nash slid Brownie into the bed. The men climbed into the cab and drove off.

Egglina flew past them, heading toward the barn.

"I forgot all about the chickens," Jo said. "We need to get them back in the coop."

Kelli, who was closest to her, swooped down to grab her.

The chicken, anticipating the move, scurried away, clucking in protest.

"She's fast." Michelle came at her from the other direction. She hesitated for a fraction of a second before lunging toward her.

Egglina was quick on the uptake. She squawked loudly and scampered off.

"Crazy chicken," Michelle gasped.

Carli, who was still holding Henrietta, crept forward, making a cooing sound.

Egglina stopped, cocked her head, and listened.

"Coo." Carli moved ever so closer.

Raylene sneaked up behind the chicken, and while Carli cooed, she scooped her up.

With wings flapping, Egglina struggled to free herself, but Raylene held tight. “Let’s get these two back in the coop before someone gets hurt.”

“Namely me,” Laverne said.

Carli and Raylene circled the barn and placed the chickens back inside the coop before slamming the door shut. “I have to say, these two will keep us on our toes.”

Carli slid her finger between the bars and began humming, which seemed to calm the chickens.

“Good job, Carli.” Raylene patted her arm. “We’re going to have to nickname you the chicken whisperer.”

“Well?” Jo asked when they returned.

“They’re back in the coop,” Raylene said. “Any sign of Nash and Gary?”

“Not yet.”

It seemed to take forever. Finally, Jo texted Nash, who told her they were on their way back.

Moments later, the truck crested the hill and pulled into the driveway.

“Did you find a good place to set Brownie free?” Jo grabbed the empty carrier from the bed of the truck.

“Yeah,” Gary nodded. “I noticed a surfeit of them last fall over by Kansas Creek

Reservation, so we let Brownie out over there.”

“A surfeit?” Kelli repeated.

“A surfeit is a group of skunks.”

“You’re never too old to learn something new.” Delta dusted her hands. “Hopefully, Brownie is gone for good.”

“I dunno.” Nash slammed the tailgate shut. “Gary and I had to chase him off. Let’s keep our fingers crossed that we’ve seen the last of him.”

Laverne pressed a hand to her forehead. “All of this chasing and running has given me a headache. I need an Advil.”

Delta led her inside to give her the pain reliever and the other residents headed back toward their units.

Carli and Courtney lingered, waiting until Jo was alone.

“Today went way better than we expected,” Courtney said.

Jo smiled softly. “I’m pleased to see you’re eager to learn the ropes and seem to get along with the other residents.”

“They have all been so nice to us. The clothes, the food, a roof over our head.” Courtney’s eyes filled with tears, and she quickly looked away.

“I know it’s been a lot to process and take in. Even though prison wasn’t an ideal place, it was what you were used to. Coming here is a big adjustment. I know that. The other residents know that. They have all been exactly where you are today.”

Courtney swiped at her eyes. “They must really love you. Not one of them, even Laverne, had a bad word to say about you, Delta, Gary or Nash. I think I’m finally getting it, and Carli and I realize how lucky we are to be here.”

“And we’ll do everything in our power to help you start over, but you must also put in the work and want to change,” Jo reminded them.

“We’re more than ready. We won’t let you down,” Courtney promised. “Anyway, we wanted to thank you.”

Carli impulsively hugged Jo. Not an afterthought or half-hearted hug, but a genuine one.

Jo closed her eyes and hugged her back. “You’re welcome. I’m excited for you.”

“So are we.”

The sisters walked away, and Jo placed her hand over her heart, offering a silent prayer. She was pretty sure she’d just witnessed a small miracle.

Jo woke early to the muffled sound of pots and pans clanking together, echoing through the old farmhouse’s heat ducts. She groaned and rolled over to check the time. Six-fifteen.

It had been a rough night with Jo tossing and turning, worrying about Leah and replaying Detective Vine’s visit.

Barr had not been a saint, and something told Jo that although the employees didn’t care for the man, his murder had more to do with his lifestyle choices, namely

running around with married women.

Claire had told her that Robyn kept tabs on Barr, texting him constantly and didn't like him hanging around work after hours. Maybe he wasn't hanging around work. Maybe the man had another woman he was running around with and used staying at the farm after hours as an excuse when he was off doing something completely different.

Miles mentioned he'd been flirting with Sherry, which meant there was a chance even more women were involved besides Robyn Colburne.

She flung the covers back and wandered into the bathroom to splash water on her face. Feeling awake now, Jo threw on some work clothes, intent on tackling the barn which had accumulated a winter's worth of odds and ends.

But first, Duke needed a potty break, and Jo needed a cup of coffee.

A light frost covered the ground and Jo bundled up before letting the pup out. He scrambled down the steps and promptly began a perimeter patrol.

The hound sniffed the empty flower beds and made a straight line for the barns.

"Don't go too far!" Jo hollered as he disappeared around the corner. Duke reappeared on the other side and trotted along the covered porch past the mercantile and bakeshop.

His last stop was his favorite bush where he watered it and then scampered up the steps where she stood waiting.

"Did you run into Brownie, the skunk?" Jo scratched his head.

Duke sneezed and rubbed up against her leg as he waited for her to open the door.

He trotted toward the kitchen with Jo trailing behind.

“You’re up early again.” Delta greeted her as soon as she stepped inside.

“I have a lot on my mind.” Jo washed her hands in the kitchen sink and poured a cup of coffee. “I wonder how Leah’s doing.”

“Why don’t you send her a text?”

“Good idea.” Jo ran upstairs to unplug her cell phone from the charger and tapped out a brief text.

Good morning. Thinking about you and hoping you have a great day.

Leah promptly replied. Thanks, Jo. I’m back on the work schedule and raring to go.

Jo sent a smiley face in reply and carried her phone down to the kitchen. “Leah is back on the work schedule today and seems to be in good spirits.”

“Good for her. There’s nothing worse than sitting around worrying.”

“Exactly.” Jo eyed the counter, filled with cartons of eggs, milk, flour, sugar and spices. “What’s heading to the bakeshop today?”

Delta rattled off the list. “Peanut butter pie, chocolate chip cookies, banana nut bread and some more of the raspberry dream bars. I can’t seem to keep those bars in stock.”

“For good reason. They’re delicious. Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Sure. I have a couple of cold quiches stashed in the fridge for breakfast. We can start warming those up.” Delta set a stack of plates on the counter. “I’m looking forward to getting to know Courtney today when she helps me out.”

“Meaning you’re ready to delve into her relationship with her sister and try to figure out why Carli won’t speak,” Jo said.

“You betcha.” Delta reached for the television remote. “I was gonna check to see if we have any rain coming.” She turned the television on and began flipping through the channels when a familiar face caught Jo’s eye.

“Hang on. Go back.”

Delta reversed her channel search.

“There.” Jo nearly dropped the quiche when the cameras zoomed in and she realized what the news reporters were talking about.

Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 2:16 am

“A photo of Leah just flashed across the screen.” Delta turned the television’s volume up.

“...of the suspects is former Central State Women’s Penitentiary inmate, Leah McEllish. Considering the brutality of the crime, the state’s prosecutors plan to pursue the maximum sentence.”

“We’ll keep you updated with any new developments.” The news anchor shuffled her papers. “In other news, we’re monitoring a potentially deadly storm system developing to our west. Our updated forecast is right after the break.”

Delta switched the television off. “Why did they have to mention Leah’s name?”

“Because it sells. She has a record. It makes for more interesting headlines when they can sensationalize it and drag an innocent person through the mud,” Jo said. “Poor Leah. I hope she doesn’t hear about this.”

“Me too.” Delta glanced at the calendar taped to the fridge. “How long has this been dragging out now?”

“It’s only been a few days, although it seems like forever.” Jo’s phone rang. She snatched it off the counter, thinking it was Leah. It was Claire Harcourt. “Good morning, Claire.”

“Hey, Jo. You’re not going to believe this. The police picked Robyn Colburne up and took her down to the station for questioning late last night. She’s still there.”

“When?”

“Right around closing time. She stopped by to pick up her check. They blew in here guns and badges blazing, surrounded the place and escorted her out. I would’ve called sooner, but I wanted to find out what had happened first.”

“That’s good news for Leah,” Jo said. “Maybe they have evidence she killed Barr.”

“They wouldn’t blow in here with a small army of cops if they didn’t have some sort of concrete evidence,” Claire said. “Can you believe it?”

“You said she texted Barr a lot.” Jo switched the phone to her other ear. “Maybe the police pulled her cell phone records and found something.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Claire let out a low whistle. “I need to start questioning my judgment. This hits a little too close to home.”

“Delta and I caught the early morning local news. They didn’t mention an arrest,” Jo said. “When the story breaks, I’m sure reporters will be beating down your door.”

“That’s what I’m thinking.” Claire’s voice grew muffled. “Marlee is here. I bet she saw the cops show up out back when it happened and is wondering what’s going on.”

“I’ll let you go.” Jo started to hang up. “Hey! If you hear anything else, please let me know.”

“You got it.”

Jo ended the call and waved the phone in the air. “The police picked up Barr’s girlfriend, Robyn Colburne, late last night.”

“They arrested her?”

“Claire didn’t say she was arrested, but a whole slew of them showed up and took her to the station.”

“Thank the good Lord,” Delta whooped. “Our Leah is off the hook.”

“Maybe.” Jo briefly closed her eyes, thanking God for a break in the case. “I hate to get my hopes up, at least not yet. I’m going to run over to the Kilwin farm and give Leah the good news in person.”

“Wait until Gary finds out,” Delta said. “This is going to make his day.”

“It’s making mine.” Jo began humming as she set the breakfast table. It was sad to think the man was dead, but she was relieved to find the police were focusing on someone other than Leah.

“Good morning,” Jo cheerily greeted the residents as they began arriving. “Are we ready for another busy day?”

“Busy is better,” Raylene quipped. “I noticed Nash was in the back yard cleaning out the firepit.”

“I was.” Nash strolled in and gave Jo a quick kiss on the cheek. “It’s perfect campfire weather.”

“A campfire sounds like fun,” Jo said. “I’m pretty sure we have a few pie irons around here, along with some roasting sticks.”

Kelli clapped her hands. “Can we have a campfire meal? Maybe roast some hotdogs and cook pizza pies?”

Jo warmed to the idea. An evening fireside under a bright starry night, feasting on simple food and enjoying each other's company. "I think it sounds like a great idea. We'll need to pick up a few things and maybe even make some s'mores for dessert."

The group grew excited as they threw out ideas about what kinds of campfire pies they could create, while Delta jotted down a list of groceries they would need. She finished and motioned to Gary. "Jo has some exciting news."

"Claire Harcourt called a little while ago. The police picked Robyn Colburne up last night."

"For Shane Barr's murder?" Gary asked.

"It would seem so. They must have some sort of evidence."

He slammed his palm on the table, shaking the silverware. "That is good news. I wonder if Leah knows."

"I don't think the police have released an update. At least it wasn't on the early morning news show Delta and I watched." Jo motioned to him. "I was thinking about making a quick trip over to Dave's farm to tell her in person. Would you like to tag along?"

"I can't. Carli and I have a full day today but if you could tell Leah me 'n Delta knew everything would turn out all right and I'll get on over there in the next day or so to check on her, I would appreciate it."

"Will do."

The conversation shifted to the day's schedule and even Courtney seemed excited to be helping Delta in the kitchen, which made Jo think perhaps she had misread her all

along.

Perhaps she was secretly relieved to know Carli would be all right working with Gary, freeing her up to not have to worry about her sister.

In Jo's mind, it was a win-win for both of them.

Breakfast ended, and everyone headed out to begin their day. Jo popped into her office to add notes to Carli's and Courtney's files and the progress they were already making.

She sent a text to Leah, to figure out her schedule. After some back and forth, they decided Jo would head over during her lunch break, which would give them time to chat.

"I'm heading over to the Kilwin farm around noon to have lunch with Leah," Jo told Delta when she stopped by the kitchen.

"I'll make one of her favorite sandwiches to celebrate." Delta buzzed back and forth. "I knew everything would turn out all right for our Leah. How could it not?"

"It's a relief to know she's no longer at the top of the investigator's list."

Jo spent the morning making her rounds. She stopped to chat with Nash, who was working with Laverne, and then headed out back to track down Carli and Gary.

She found them by the beehives, and as she drew closer, she could see Carli waving her arms and pointing at the fence.

"What's going on?" Jo came up beside them.

“I don’t know.” Gary scratched his head. “Carli is trying to tell me something.”

The woman was clearly frustrated that whatever she was trying to relay wasn’t coming across.

Jo slipped her cell phone from her pocket, pulled up the messaging app, and handed it to her. “Type it out on my cell phone, Carli.”

Carli snatched the phone from Jo’s hand and rapidly tapped. She handed it back and Jo read what she wrote.

“Angels.” Jo’s scalp tingled. “You saw angels?”

Carli’s head bobbed up and down. She pointed toward the fence line separating her property from the Indian reservation.

“Did you see them too?” Jo asked Gary.

“No. I was fiddling with the beehives to make sure they were level. Next thing I know, Carli is grabbing my arm and pointing at the fence.”

Carli pressed her palms together and lifted them skyward.

“The angels disappeared into the clouds?” Jo guessed. “You saw them by the fence and then they floated up into the sky?”

Carli nodded again.

“Sounds like she saw the Divine angels,” Gary said.

Jo shaded her eyes and scanned the horizon. “I’ve seen them before, in almost the

exact same location. They usually show up to warn us something is about to happen or to protect us.”

“I had my portable radio on back in the garden shed. All the local channels are forecasting some powerful storms coming through later this afternoon.”

Divine was smack dab in the center of Tornado Alley, and more than once, the area had been hit by strong storms. In fact, the official tornado season was right around the corner. “We had better keep an eye on the weather.” Jo cast a wary glance skyward, and an uneasiness settled in the pit of her stomach.

Angelic appearances and storms went hand in hand. At least they did for Jo and the residents of the farm.

“I will, especially now that the angels came here to warn us.”

Thinking it might not be a bad idea to give the residents a heads up, Jo stopped by the bakeshop, the mercantile, and then Nash’s workshop to share Carli’s angel sighting and Gary’s concerns over the weather.

It was near noon when a stiff westerly wind began blowing. Dark clouds gathered, and Jo ran inside to check the weather.

Delta had the kitchen television on and there were several warnings of storms coming their way later in the day. “We’re getting a cold front from the north and a warm front from the southwest.”

“Carli saw the Divine angels out back,” Jo said.

“Angels?” Courtney set her dishrag on the counter.

“Divine is a hotspot for angelic beings. They visit people and places around here,” Delta explained. “They typically show up to warn us or help us.”

“That’s cool.”

“Cool, except when it means they’re trying to warn us.” Jo cast a concerned look out the window. “Maybe I should put off heading over to Dave’s farm.”

“The storms won’t start ramping up until later. I think it’s safe to go.” Delta handed Jo a collapsible cooler. “Your lunch is in there.”

“Thanks. I’ll be back within the hour.”

Duke followed Jo out the back door and to the driver’s side of the SUV. “Do you want to go for a ride?”

She swung the door open, and Duke promptly leapt inside. He scrambled into the back while Jo set the cooler on the passenger seat.

During the drive, she turned the radio on and searched for the local forecast. Her concern grew when she discovered Divine was in the middle of the potential storm’s path.

Jo arrived at Kilwin Farms and found several vehicles parked in front of the office. She tapped out a quick text to Leah to let her know she was there.

The young woman appeared in the office’s doorway and gave Jo a quick wave as she made her way to the driver’s side. “Hey Jo. Did you hear storms are coming?”

“I did. We’ll need to keep a close eye on the weather.”

Duke dashed out of the SUV. Leah dropped to her knees and hugged the pup. “You came to visit.”

“He misses you. We all miss you. About the storms, I think they might be bad ones.” Jo told her about Carli’s angelic sighting.

“She saw them?” Leah’s eyes grew round as saucers. “They were there to warn you.”

“That would be my guess, so please be careful.” Jo shifted her gaze. “Is Dave around today?”

“He’s out back, checking to make sure everything is secure before the storms roll in.” Leah lowered her voice. “Someone broke into Shane’s office and made a mess.”

Jo’s jaw dropped. “When?”

“I’m not sure. I think it was early this morning.”

“I wonder what they were looking for.”

“Dave was mad. I’ve never seen him so angry. My guess is whoever murdered Mr. Barr broke into his office looking for something.” Leah told her he called the police and someone from the sheriff’s department showed up to have a look around. “I was surprised when I heard the cop kind of blew it off.”

“Because the police have picked someone up.”

Leah stared at Jo. “They did?”

“Robyn Colburne, Barr’s girlfriend. They picked her up at Claire’s laundromat late last night.”

“Maybe she knew the cops were closing in on her and she was the one who broke in,” Leah said.

“It’s a thought. I wonder if Dave knows they made an arrest.”

“If he knows, he hasn’t told anyone.” Leah pointed to the cooler Jo was holding. “What’s in the cooler?”

“Delta whipped up one of your favorite meals. I figured we could celebrate the fact you’re no longer a suspect.”

“I like the sound of that.” Leah excused herself to go wash her hands. She returned a few minutes later and led Jo to a cluster of picnic tables dotting a large area beneath a shade tree.

A group of workers, including Jase, were seated at a nearby table.

He gave Jo a friendly wave, and she waved back. “Jase seems like a nice guy.”

“He is. He’s been training me. Jase knows his stuff. Maybe his uncle will promote him now that Shane Barr is gone.”

“It’s a thought.” Jo handed Leah the club sandwich stacked on lightly toasted wheat bread, a container of coleslaw and another one of macaroni salad.

“I can’t eat all of this,” Leah groaned.

“You know Delta. She shows her love by feeding us. Eat what you can and save the rest for later,” Jo suggested. “So, how is everything else?”

“Great. I’m learning a lot. Gary taught me a ton, but this farm is bigger and they do

things a little differently.” Leah rambled on about the farming techniques and her interest in how things were done. She told Jo that although her room was cozy and clean, she still missed her old place and her friends.

“They miss you too.” Jo tore off small chunks of meat and fed them to Duke, who had plopped down on her feet.

“How are the new residents working out?”

“They’re fitting right in. Carli is working with Gary today and Courtney is working with Delta.”

“And Laverne? How is she?”

Jo chuckled. “Laverne is Laverne. She tried to set the chickens free. Thank goodness I stopped her before it was too late.”

“I miss Egglina and Henrietta.”

“You can come by and visit them anytime you want. Carli appears to bond easily with animals and they seem to like her.”

“I’m glad. As long as you keep Laverne away from them, I think they’ll be fine.” Leah shivered involuntarily. “It’s happening again.”

“What’s happening?” Jo asked.

“I think we’re being watched,” Leah whispered. “Without being obvious, check to see if someone behind us is looking our way.”

Jo reached for her bottled water and took a sip, her eyes sliding over Leah’s left

shoulder. Sure enough, Buzz and Sandi were seated next to each other, their heads close together and looking in Jo and Leah's direction. "You're right."

"Let me guess. It's Sandi and Buzz," Leah whispered.

"Yes."

"They're friendly to my face, but I'm almost certain they're talking about me behind my back. It happened yesterday too."

"Maybe Sandi is jealous of you. You're cute, funny, smart." Jo changed the subject, and the women chatted easily about Leah's training and what was happening at their place. As they talked, Jo could feel herself relax. Everything was going to turn out just fine.

Leah was happy, was fitting in, making friends, at least as far as Jase was concerned. The Ladeaux sisters were acclimating.

All too soon, Leah's lunch hour ended. Jo packed up the empty containers and gave her a quick hug. "I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks." Leah grinned. "I'm pretty proud of myself. I'm doing it, Jo. I'm making money and already figuring out how much I can save to put toward a farm of my own. This couldn't be any more perfect."

"When God does something, he does it right," Jo said. "He knew exactly what you needed."

"And the best part is you're close by. I never want to leave Divine," Leah said. "When I buy a farm, it's going to be somewhere right around here."

“If you love living here, I hope you stay forever.”

“That’s the plan. I better get back to work.”

Jo watched as Leah caught up with the other workers and they began making their way back inside the barn. She turned to go when a familiar figure strolled past the grain elevator. It was Dave.

Jo waited for him to catch up. “Hey, Jo. Leah said you were coming by to have lunch with her.”

“We had a nice visit. She’s thrilled to be here and already has her eye on the future,” Jo said.

“She’s a good hard worker,” Dave said. “My nephew Jase and Leah seem to hit it off.”

“You noticed too?”

“Yeah. Jase has always been quiet and reserved, but when Leah’s around he seems to light right up.”

Jo changed the subject. “The investigators picked up Robyn Colburne.”

Dave frowned. “When?”

“Late last night. Claire Harcourt called to tell me about it first thing this morning.”

“Do you know about what time?”

Jo thought about it. “She said it was around closing time.”

“If Robyn has been in police custody since last night, and they think she was the one who killed Shane, who broke into his office and tore the place apart?”

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“Leah mentioned someone had been in Shane’s office. Do you have any idea what they may have been looking for?” Jo asked.

“Not a clue,” Dave said. “They jimmied the lock and broke in. I didn’t notice it until I stopped by there this morning.”

“I’m sure the authorities already went through the place with a fine-tooth comb.”

“They did. If Robyn killed Shane and was picked up last night, who was in his office?” Dave motioned for her to follow him, past several livestock pens and a three-sided structure filled with bales of hay, to another outbuilding, this one only slightly smaller than the main barn.

“His office was apart from the main office,” Jo said.

“He worked mostly in this area, so he liked to be close to the workers, easily accessible to whoever might need him,” Dave explained.

A service door on the back side led to a small office. A rectangular desk took up most of the space with a metal filing cabinet and a faux leather executive chair squished in behind it.

Dave wasn’t exaggerating. The place was a mess. The filing cabinet drawers were open and there were papers strewn everywhere...cluttering the floor, covering the desk, hanging haphazardly from the drawers. “What did the police say when you showed them?”

“They acted like it was no big deal,” Dave said. “It was almost as if they didn’t want to bother with it.”

“Because they think they have Shane’s killer in custody,” Jo theorized. “Was it Detective Vine?”

“No. It was Deputy Brian Franklin. I don’t believe he’s involved in Shane’s investigation.”

“But he knows about it, I’m sure.” Jo slowly circled the room. “What kind of information did Shane keep in here?”

“Personnel files, farming reports, receipts.” Dave shoved his hands in his pockets. “This isn’t the first time someone broke into Shane’s office.”

Jo spun around. “Someone broke in here before?”

“Yeah. About two weeks ago. Shane was fit to be tied.”

“Did he mention who he thought it was and what they might be after?”

“No. Looking back, it was an odd situation.” Dave told her at first Shane was furious, demanding all the workers be fingerprinted to try to figure out who it was. “Next thing I know, he’s acting like it was no big deal and wants to drop it.”

“So maybe Shane figured out who it was. After he found out, he let it go because whoever this person was had some sort of dirt on him,” Jo said.

“Kinda makes sense, doesn’t it?” Dave grabbed a stack of papers and glanced at the top sheet before setting them back down. “It wasn’t Robyn, at least not this time, not if the cops picked her up last night and she spent the night at the police station.”

Jo tilted her head. "You didn't know the police had picked her up until I told you?"

"Nope. Like I said, Deputy Franklin was the one who showed up when I called," Dave said. "I don't think he's involved in the case."

"You would think someone familiar with Barr's death would have been the one to take the call." Jo tapped her chin. "There's a good chance whoever broke into this office probably hasn't heard about Robyn being taken in for questioning."

"I think I know where you're going with this," Dave said. "What if the cops have the wrong person? What if whoever killed Shane is here at the farm? They broke in, trying to track down what they think might be incriminating evidence."

"Somehow there's a link between this break-in and Barr's death. I can feel it in my bones. I hate to think an innocent woman is going to be charged with his murder and there's a chance the killer will walk free."

"It's going to be all over the news in a matter of hours." Dave's phone rang. "Detective Vine is calling."

He pressed the answer button. "Dave Kilwin speaking."

"Yes, Detective Vine. I placed a call this morning. Someone broke into Shane's office overnight and tore it apart. Sheriff Brian Franklin came by, looked around and wrote up a report." Dave grew quiet. "No. No one seems to know who it was. I have no idea what they were looking for."

"I see. You've detained Robyn Colburne for questioning. No. I don't know her very well. She's been by the farm a few times to see Shane. What makes you think it was her?"

Dave grew quiet again. “I see. I understand. It’s an active investigation and you can’t divulge that information because she hasn’t officially been charged. I’ll let you know if any other odd occurrences take place.” Jo’s neighbor thanked the detective for the call and said goodbye. “He’s not talking.”

“Because he can’t,” Jo said. “He seemed interested in finding out about the office break-in.”

“I got the feeling it was because he had to. Shane spent a lot of time on his cell phone. Vine and his team confiscated it on the first day,” Dave said. “I’m going to guess some sort of communication between Robyn and Shane incriminated her.”

“Robyn worked at Claire Harcourt’s laundromat. She said Robyn spent a lot of time texting Shane and seemed upset when he hung around here after hours.”

“There you go,” Dave said. “She probably texted or left some sort of message for Shane implicating herself.”

“Did Robyn come by to see Shane during working hours?”

“Occasionally. The workers have a break in the morning, an hour lunch and then another break mid-afternoon. Robyn didn’t start coming around until she and her husband, Glen, separated.”

“Glen is Divine’s rural route mail carrier,” Jo said.

“Yeah.”

“It must have been uncomfortable or maybe even infuriating for Glen to have to deliver the mail here, knowing he and his wife split up because of her relationship with Shane.”

“I consider Glen a friend,” Dave said. “We chatted a few times about their split. I told him he was better off without her and he agreed.”

“Did they have children?”

“No. No kids. It was a second marriage for both of them. I don’t believe they’ve been married for very long.”

“It’s none of my business,” Jo said. “But why would you bother getting married if you wanted to play the field?”

“You got me. From what I understood, they began seeing each other when they were both still married to someone else.”

“You mentioned Robyn didn’t start coming around until she and Glen separated,” Jo said. “Did she swing by in the morning? After work?”

“During lunch. She came by some days during lunch. They would eat in his office.”

“While the other workers ate somewhere else.”

“Yeah. When it’s nice weather, they like to eat outdoors at the picnic tables. During the winter months, they head inside to the break area.”

“The breaks and lunch hour are at the same time every day?”

“Yep. Ten for the morning break. Noon to one for lunch and three for the afternoon break.”

An uneasiness settled over Jo. It was too neat and tidy, wrapped up with a bow. Robyn would be dumb to threaten Shane and then kill him, even if it was in a fit of

rage. There had to be something else, someone else. “How long has Sandi worked for you?”

“About a year. Why?”

“I’m not sure she’s a huge fan of Leah’s. While we were eating lunch, Leah and I both noticed her and Buzz sitting close together, looking in our direction.”

“She can be a little cantankerous and opinionated. Sandi runs a tight ship around the office. Could be there’s a little jealousy on her part.”

Jo almost mentioned how Leah commented that she and Buzz sat close together and chatted privately every day during their lunch break, but decided not to. “We know one thing for certain. Robyn Colburne did not break into Shane’s office, at least not this time.” She passed by the window and noticed a small swirl of dirt spinning around in the soon-to-be planted farm field. “The wind is picking up again.”

“I heard some big storms are coming. Good thing I cleaned the cellar out last week. I’ve already put the workers on notice to keep an eye on the sky in case things get bad.”

“We’re heading into storm season. It’s never a bad idea to be prepared.” Jo squeezed past the desk, studying the few pieces of office furniture.

“What are you doing?”

“Do you have surveillance cameras?”

“No, but I wish I did,” Dave said. “There isn’t much to steal from a farm. It’s not like a thief is going to load a cow in the bed of their truck and drive off.”

“True.” Despite the seriousness of the situation, Jo grinned, envisioning a thief trying to lure a cow into their vehicle.

“I take that back. I have a box of old cameras somewhere around here, but they’re not worth installing.”

“What about hunting equipment?”

“Chief Tallgrass lets me hunt their property near the back of the reservation.”

“Do you have trail cams?”

“I do.”

“Trail cams work nearly as well as surveillance cameras. You could set some up and see what happens.”

“As soon as the public finds out Robyn Colburne has been picked up, all other suspects will be off the hook.”

“I would think once an arrest has been made, it would trigger even more searching, even more digging around. You could put the bug in everyone’s ear that they need to stick close by because the investigation is heating up and the authorities are focusing their search on this place.”

Dave rubbed the stubble on his chin. “I would like to know who is behind all of this, even if the police have Shane’s killer.”

Jo reached for a stack of papers. “All you need to do is plant a little seed of suspicion to get whoever it is to make a move and start snooping again.”

Before Jo left, she told Dave she would try to come up with an idea, and he promised he would do the same.

She was halfway home when Claire called.

“Robyn is on her way to work.”

“They let her go?”

“She was able to prove she was at her daughter’s house the day Shane was murdered.”

“Which means investigators are back to square one as far as figuring out who murdered him.”

“Yep. I thought you might like to know.”

Jo thanked her and returned home, where she found Delta and Carli laughing and standing at the stove with smudges of flour on their cheeks. A trail of white footprints trekked across the kitchen floor and an excited Duke ran around in circles.

“What’s going on?”

“I accidentally tripped on Duke, who was right under my feet,” Delta said. “I dropped a bowl of flour. It spilled all over him. He thought he was in trouble and tried to hightail it out of here and ended up tracking it across the floor. Carli tried to help and then we both ended up covered in flour.”

“C’mon, Duke,” Jo coaxed the pup out of the house.

Duke left a fresh set of powdery prints behind as he obediently followed her down the

steps and out the back door.

The pup shook from head to toe, sending a dusting of powder into the air. Some of it stuck to his chin, coating his brown fur and creating a beard. Jo grabbed her cell phone and snapped a picture. “You look like an old man, now,” she laughed.

Duke flopped over and rolled on the grass, rubbing the remnants of the flour from his fur.

Jo grabbed a clean rag from the pail near the door and began wiping him down. She wiped his chin and then his paws before giving him the all-clear to head back inside the house.

They passed by Carli, who was on her way out.

Delta stood in the center of the kitchen, broom in hand. “Carli left to go get cleaned up. Duke and I sure made a mess.”

“I thought you were working with Courtney today.”

“We flip-flopped during lunch. Courtney wanted to run into town with Gary. He and Carli finished putting everything away ahead of the storm, so she started helping me here in the kitchen.”

“How is it going with Carli’s flip pad?”

“She writes a little here and there, but she’s also good at non-verbal communication. It helps that she can hear and understand what I’m saying.” Delta emptied the dustpan’s contents into the trash. “Maybe one day we’ll figure out why she won’t talk.”

“Raylene told me she thinks Carli can read lips.”

Delta’s head whipped around. “Read lips?”

“Yeah. Carli was in the common area’s living room while Raylene and Kelli were talking about a clogged bathroom drain in the kitchen. Carli came over and commented that she’d noticed it too.”

“I knew it.” Delta propped the broom in the corner. “After Gary left, I had to call him to add something to my grocery list. Carli and I were bringing clothes in from the clothesline, and she was way over on the other end of the yard. She ran over and reminded me to tell Gary not to forget the campfire supplies.”

“Are you sure she couldn’t hear you?” Jo asked.

“No. There’s no way. I thought maybe she wanted to make sure I didn’t forget, but looking back, she was reading my lips and knew I hadn’t mentioned it,” Delta said. “Isn’t that something? What are we going to do?”

“If I call her out, she could easily deny it.”

“Yep.”

Jo stared out the back screen door, watching as Carli slowly began making her way toward the kitchen. “We need to catch her doing it. I need to call Carli and Courtney’s probation officer to let him know the women have settled in and confirm he received their paperwork. I’m going to let her know I’m placing the call, and then step outside in full view of the kitchen where she can watch.”

“And I’ll be right here watching her while she’s watching you.” Delta lifted her hand in a high five. “Let’s do it.”

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Jo casually leaned a hip against the counter and waited for Carli to join them. “Delta said you’re enjoying your time working here in the kitchen.”

Carli nodded enthusiastically.

“And you learned the ropes this morning with Gary, including caring for the chickens?”

Her new resident nodded again.

“Wonderful.” Jo consulted her watch. “I’m calling your probation officer in a few minutes to follow up and make sure he received your file. Is there anything you would like me to mention to him?”

Carli lifted both brows and shook her head.

“No questions, issues or concerns you can think of?” Jo pressed.

Carli grabbed her flip pad and began writing. She turned it so Jo could see the word no.

“Gary and Courtney are back,” Delta said. “You should check with Courtney to see if she has any issues.”

Both appeared moments later, their arms laden with groceries. Jo waited for them to set the bags on the table.

“The stores were packed,” Gary said. “Folks must be stocking up because of the storms moving in. I’ll make sure the cellar is ready for us to hunker down.”

“Thanks for the supplies.” Delta gave her husband a peck on the cheek.

“For you, I would drive all over the countryside, my lovely bride.”

“You two are too cute,” Jo teased.

“I’ll be right back,” Gary told Courtney. “We can do a quick run through and make sure everything is secure as soon as I check the cellar.”

Gary left, and Jo motioned to Courtney. “How is it going with Gary?”

“He’s a great guy and very patient. He explains everything. I’ve enjoyed every job I’ve had so far,” Courtney said.

“Wonderful.” Jo offered her a smile. “I’m glad to hear it. I need to check in with your probation officer. Is there anything you would like for me to discuss, any issues or concerns?”

“Can we...are we allowed to talk to them?”

“Absolutely. Of course,” Jo said. “You can chat privately as well.”

“I...” Courtney shot her sister a quick glance. “Don’t have anything. How about you Carli?”

“I’ve already checked with Carli and she indicated she has nothing. He may want to talk to you, so hang around for a minute and let me see if I can get him on the phone.” Jo placed the call and was transferred several times before being connected with the

Ladeaux sister's probation officer, who confirmed he'd received their files.

"How are they settling in?"

"As I mentioned in her file, Carli is nonverbal. She's indicated everything is going well. Courtney is standing here. Would you like to have a word with her?"

"Yes. That would be great."

Jo handed Courtney the phone. "Ed Shevock would like a word with you. Delta and I will be in the dining room."

"I'll let you know when we're finished." Courtney took the cell phone, and Jo and Delta hustled out of the room.

They could hear her talking, but not what was being said. She appeared in the doorway minutes later. "I'm done. He has a few questions for you."

"Thank you." Jo took the phone. "Ed? Can you hang on for a minute?"

"Sure. No problem."

Gary appeared. "The cellar is in shipshape condition and ready for us. I want to double-check the gardens to make sure we picked everything up."

Jo followed Gary and Courtney out, making a point to head to the side yard where the kitchen window faced out.

She caught movement and could see Carli and Delta inside, both standing near the sink. "Thanks for waiting. I'm somewhere I can talk freely now."

“How is it going, Jo?”

Ed Shevock had been the probation officer for almost all of Jo’s past residents. He also handled the cases for her current ones, including the Ladeaux sisters. In fact, Jo made a point of requesting him, primarily because they had a good working relationship. He was familiar with the farm, how it was run and was easy to work with.

“Not bad, considering Carli won’t speak.” Jo made sure she turned so that if Carli was reading her lips, she would understand what she was saying. “They’ve already worked in several areas and seem eager to acclimate.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

“Do you have any questions about the files and information I uploaded?”

Jo could hear papers rustling on the other end of the line. “No. As always, your paperwork is in order. I have a note. The state is asking me to schedule a visit.”

“Here?”

“To inspect the farm,” Shevock said. “I haven’t been by there in a while so they want updated information.”

Jo and the officer discussed dates and finally settled on the following week.

“You have a full house again.”

“I do. Leah McEllish recently moved out, and I filled my two openings with the Ladeaux sisters,” Jo said. “It’s always bittersweet when one of my residents moves on.”

“I have to say, they do nothing but sing your praises, even Laverne Huntsman.”

Jo chuckled. “She can be a challenge, but we’re managing.”

“I can only imagine.” Shevock’s voice faded. “I have another call coming in I need to take. I’ll see you next week.”

“See you then.” Jo ended the call and then meandered back inside.

She could tell immediately by the look on Delta’s face she had her answer. Carli was in the exact same spot she’d been standing in when Jo went outside to talk to the officer...at the window, looking out.

“Well?” Delta asked.

“Ed Shevock will be by next week to inspect the farm. I’m sure he’ll want to chat with the residents while he’s here.” Jo caught Carli’s eyes. “You’ll have a chance to speak privately with him as well. Both you and Courtney.”

Carli gave a small nod of her head and then looked away with what Jo suspected was a tinge of guilt. “I have a question for you. I want you to be honest and tell me the truth.”

Jo waited until the woman lifted her gaze, and their eyes met again. “You can speak.”

Carli nodded.

“You can speak, but for some reason, you don’t want to. I’m hoping one day soon we’ll overcome that hurdle. Life would be so much easier—mostly for you — if you talked to us. Having said that, I want it to be when you’re ready. There will be no pressure, no pushing, no negotiating or even bribing you with some of Delta’s

delicious dishes.”

A small smile crept across the young woman’s face and there was a look of relief mingled in. Jo could see Carli’s shoulders relax.

She nodded toward the door. “You were watching from the window while I was talking to Ed Shevock.” She paused, carefully choosing her words, hoping not to put Carli on the defensive.

Unfortunately, there was no easy way to say it without the direct approach. Instead, she posed it as a question. “Were you reading my lips?”

Carli sucked in a breath, giving Jo a deer in the headlights look.

“You can,” Jo said. “You can read lips.”

Delta placed a light hand on her shoulder. “It’s not a crime to read lips, but I think in all fairness to the others, they should know you can and could eavesdrop in on their conversations.”

Her new resident’s hand trembled, and Jo grabbed it. “It’s all right. No one is in trouble. In fact, I think it may come in handy to help me with something. Regardless, I’ll be letting the others know about your special skill.”

Carli grabbed the flip pad and began scribbling. You’re not mad?

“No. I’m not mad, but the others will be told,” Jo said.

Okay.

Jo let it drop and headed to her office, mulling over the new tidbit of information and

wondering how many conversations Carli and her sister had “listened” in on since arriving.

Something told Jo if she hadn’t called Carli out, she may have continued using her special skill on not only Jo, but the others. She thought about her lunch with Leah and how Leah suspected she was the topic of conversation around the picnic table.

The dinner hour arrived and dark clouds filled the skies, turning it almost a shade of purple-black. Thunder rumbled, one rumble right after another.

“The storms are moving in.” Raylene cast a concerned look out the window.

“We should eat quickly and keep one ear out for weather warnings.” Jo motioned toward Carli. “While we’re all here, I would like to share a special skill Carli has.”

“You don’t...” Courtney started to interrupt, and Jo pinned her with a pointed stare. “Yes, I do.”

She continued. “Carli can read lips.”

There was a moment of dead silence.

Raylene was the first to speak. “I knew it. She commented about the bathroom sinks not draining and wasn’t even close by when Kelli and I were talking about it.”

Laverne cleared her throat, and Jo pointed toward her. “You have something to say?”

“I do. With my background in psychology, I have a theory about Carli’s disorder.”

“Carli doesn’t have a disorder,” Courtney snapped. “She just doesn’t want to talk.”

Laverne mumbled under her breath.

Courtney leaned in. "What did you say?"

"That you have some issues of your own."

"I don't have issues."

Jo did a timeout. "Ladies. Laverne, please don't antagonize Courtney or Carli. It's not helpful."

"I'm sorry," Laverne apologized.

"Perhaps we should drop the subject," Jo said.

"No. I want to hear what Laverne thinks." Courtney tapped her sister's hand. "Do you want to have Laverne try to diagnose you?"

Carli shrugged.

"Carli's okay with it. What do you think is wrong with her?" Courtney demanded.

"I believe she could be suffering from DPD. Dependent personality disorder. Something happened to Carli, creating a feeling of vulnerability and fear that she's unable to take care of herself. She's using you as a crutch. I believe with help she could learn to become independent / self-reliant and not look to you to take care of her."

"This-this is ridiculous," Courtney sputtered. "You're a quack."

"I've been called worse," Laverne said. "One of the key traits to DPD is being unable

to make even the simplest of decisions.”

Before Courtney could reply, another loud rumble echoed.

Duke scrambled out from under the dining room table, his fur standing straight up as he pressed his nose against the window. He let out a low growl, his ears flattening against his head.

Kelli reached for Curtis and her carrier, which were next to her chair. The cat shrank back and let out a timid meow. “Curtis senses something.”

Jo shoved her chair back. “I think we should...”

The eerie wail of a weather alert filled the air, and a bolt of lightning lit the sky.

“This is the emergency broadcast system. A funnel cloud has been spotted two miles west of Divine, Kansas. If you can hear my voice, seek shelter immediately. Go to the basement or the lowest level of your dwelling.”

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“I’m out of here.” Laverne bolted.

Jo quickly ushered the remaining residents and Duke through the kitchen, down the back steps, and into the basement. Delta was right behind her with Gary and finally Nash, bringing up the rear.

Gary clutched his emergency radio as it continued warning listeners to take cover immediately.

Nash pulled the cellar door shut behind them and Gary turned his emergency radio light on so they could track down the flashlights he’d placed on the shelves in the event they needed to take cover.

Jo lifted her gaze to the double cellar doors which led directly out into the yard as the wind whistled loudly through the crack.

Duke huddled close, and Jo wrapped her arms around the trembling pup.

Kelli coaxed Curtis from the carrier and placed her on her lap.

“It’s a good thing we put off starting our planting for another week or so,” Gary said.

“I knew once Carli saw the angels, we were going to get a whopper of a storm today.”

“Carli saw the Divine angels?” Michelle asked.

“This morning,” Jo said. “Out by the fence line.”

Laverne winced. “I knew a storm was coming when I started getting a lower pain in my back again. Any change in the weather and the old joints protest.”

“You aren’t that old.” Delta waved dismissively. “Are you sure it isn’t gas?”

“Gas?” Laverne looked offended and then embarrassed. “Well, we had beans for breakfast. They typically don’t sit well with me.”

“There you go.” Delta dusted her hands. “Lay off the beans.”

Laverne and Delta went into an in-depth back and forth about the benefits of eating beans, each weighing in on why you should or shouldn’t eat them.

Jo didn’t stop their banter. It was a welcome distraction from the storm raging outside.

The minutes slowly ticked by...fifteen minutes, almost half an hour. It seemed to take forever for the winds to subside, and as soon as they did, Nash was the first to make his way up the cellar steps.

He cautiously unlocked the double doors and eased them open. “The coast is clear.”

“Finally.” Jo sprang to her feet and followed the others up the steps, where they found downed limbs and branches scattered around the yard. “It doesn’t look like a tornado went through, or if it was, we didn’t take a direct hit.”

“I put the chickens in the barn before the storm and want to go check on them.” Gary made a beeline for the barn while the others began gathering the limbs and branches.

Nash started a pile with plans to use them as kindling for the upcoming campfire.

“I can think of better ways to gather firewood,” Laverne grumbled. “Some of these are gonna need to be chopped up.”

“You gather the wood and let Nash worry about chopping it up.” Delta pointed a stick at her. “You won’t be fussing and whining when you’re dining on crispy pizza pies and ooey, gooey delicious s’mores.”

Jo caught Laverne rolling her eyes as she turned away, but let it go. It wasn’t worth the fight, at least not with Laverne.

Gary emerged from the barn with a squawking chicken firmly tucked under each arm. Carli dropped what she was doing and ran over. The chickens instantly calmed, and she fell into step while Gary carried them back to their coop.

“Carli reminds me of Leah,” Raylene said. “A true animal whisperer.”

“I think they would be delish in a large pot of chicken noodle soup,” Laverne said.

“The chickens are not...”

Laverne finished Jo’s sentence. “I know, I know. My responsibility.”

“Correct.”

With everyone working together, they cleaned the yard and gathered up the brush in record time.

After finishing, they went back inside to clear the dinner table. It was getting late. The residents headed back across the parking lot to check on their units and hang out

for the rest of the evening.

Delta waited until she and Jo were alone. “What do you think about Carli’s lip-reading ability?”

“I think it might come in handy, which reminds me. I want to check on Leah now that Robyn Colburne hasn’t been charged with Barr’s murder.” Jo grabbed her cell phone and tapped out a quick text to the young woman. She was relieved when she sent back a quick reply: she was fine, everyone was safe and they were cleaning up.

Moments later, Jo’s phone rang. It was Leah.

“I’m glad to hear you’re okay.”

“It was scary there for a few minutes,” Leah said. “The wind was really whipping. When the warning sirens went off, we all made a mad dash for the cellar. Before the storm hit, I got a call from the corrections department. They said they sent my final release papers to my last known address, which is your place. I was wondering if you could check to see if they came in.”

“I haven’t picked up the mail yet.” Jo shifted the cell phone to her other ear and strolled toward the mailbox.

She quickly sifted through the contents and found a thick envelope addressed to Leah. “I have them. I’ll drop them off.”

“Thanks, Jo. There’s no hurry, although I promised Dave I would give him a copy for his files when they came in.”

Jo circled around back and noticed Carli’s lights were on. “What does your schedule look like tomorrow?”

“The same as today...working all day, eating and sleeping.”

“And maybe lunch again out by the picnic table?” Jo asked.

“Yeah. It’s nice to get some fresh air and not sit inside the employee breakroom. It gets kinda smelly from the barns, especially when it’s warm. I mean, it’s not that I mind cows or farm smells because it goes with the territory.”

“I know we had lunch today, but I was thinking maybe I could come by for lunch again tomorrow and drop off your papers.”

“Sure, Jo. Again, there’s no hurry. You don’t have to make a special trip.”

Carli emerged from her room and began making her way along the corridor. She must’ve felt Jo’s eyes on her because she turned in her direction and gave a small wave.

Jo waved back. “The woman who was being questioned by the cops has been released. She was out of town, staying at her daughter’s place at the time of Barr’s death so it appears they’ve cleared her as a suspect.”

“Which means they’ll be back here trying to figure out who killed him,” Leah said.

“That would be my guess,” Jo said. “Are Buzz and Sandi still hanging out during breaks and lunch?”

“Yeah. The two are almost inseparable. I’ve caught them watching me again. I still think they’re talking about me. It’s kinda creepy. Why?”

“Because I might have an idea about how we can figure out what’s going on, which means I’ll be bringing someone with me when I come by for lunch tomorrow,” Jo

said.

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Jo spent the night trying to figure out the best way to have Carli “listen in” on what Sandi Ingram and Buzz were talking about, specifically what they were discussing during their lunch break while watching Leah.

Perhaps they had some sort of unfounded fear about her and her past. Maybe it was their way of keeping an eye on Leah, making sure she knew she was being watched.

Or maybe they didn’t like the fact that Jase, Kilwin’s nephew, had made a point of taking Leah under his wing.

Either way, a visit with Carli “listening in” would put to rest Jo’s concerns over what might be transpiring “behind the scenes” at the Kilwin farm.

She waited until breakfast was over, and Carli was working with Nash in his workshop to approach her. “How’s it going?”

Carli gave a thumbs up.

“Carli is a fast learner,” Nash said. “We’re sanding some boards to expand the chicken coop and give them more room to roam. When we’re done, you’ll have enough space to add more chickens.”

“Laverne would have a cow,” Jo laughed. “It is a thought.”

“What’s on your agenda today?” Nash asked.

“I’m running back over to Dave’s at lunchtime. The state sent Leah’s release papers,

and she needs them. I also thought Carli might tag along with me.”

“Oh?” Nash set the sander on the table, giving Jo his full attention. “What happened?”

“The police released Robyn Colburne. She can prove she was somewhere else when Shane Barr died.”

Nash’s expression grew grim. “Which means they’ll be back over at the farm questioning Leah again.”

“Correct and when I was there yesterday eating lunch with her, we noticed Sandi and Buzz huddled close together. They kept looking our way. Leah said they’ve been doing it a lot during their lunch break. Something tells me Leah is the topic of conversation and I would like to know what they’re saying.”

“You’re going to have Carli try to read their lips,” Nash guessed.

“I am.” Jo lifted her hands. “And before you say anything, I know I’m contradicting myself seeing how I made a point of sharing Carli’s unique ability with the residents, and now I’m asking her to use it to help me. But I feel I have little choice. Someone broke into Shane’s office. They’re looking for something.”

“Potential evidence?” Nash asked.

“Possibly. Dave planned to set up a trail camera, but who knows if they’ll try breaking in again. We’re running out of time. The more information we have on Kilwin Farms’ employees, the better.” Jo tapped Carli’s shoulder. “Leah’s break is at noon. I figured we could run by and have lunch with her. You could work your magic and listen in.”

Carli grabbed her flip pad and began scribbling. "I'll help in whatever way I can."

"Thank you, Carli."

The rest of the morning dragged by, and Jo kept checking her watch. Finally, it was time to head out.

Carli stood waiting by the workshop door and climbed into the passenger seat as soon as Jo pulled up. She handed her new resident one of the farm's extra cell phones and the woman shot her a questioning look.

"We can't have you flipping your pad, writing what you're hearing, so I figured you could text directly to my phone." During the drive, Jo showed Carli how to use the phone to send messages.

By the time they arrived, the workers had already gathered at the picnic tables. Leah was seated alone and off to the side, her hands folded in her lap.

"Hey." Jo gave her a quick hug and handed her the release papers. "Why the long face?"

"Someone tried jimmying my door open while I was working this morning."

Jo's heart skipped a beat. "Someone tried to break into your room?"

"Yeah." Leah shifted her gaze to Sandi and Buzz. They were looking their way. "They keep watching me. I think it was them."

Jo motioned to Carli to have a seat facing the other employees. She gave a slight nod, slid onto the bench, and placed the cell phone on the table in front of her.

“I’m sure you remember Carli Ladeaux, one of the farm’s new residents. You two met the other day at breakfast.”

“Hey.” Leah attempted a smile. “It’s nice to see you again.”

Carli nodded.

“Carli is nonverbal,” Jo said. “She won’t talk.”

“Oh. I think I remember hearing this when I was over at the farm the other day.” Leah leaned back. “Can she understand what I’m saying?”

“Perfectly.” Jo lowered her voice to barely above a whisper. “She can also read lips.”

Leah’s jaw dropped. “Sweet. That’s why she’s here.”

“Which means we’re going to eat quietly so Carli can get to work.”

“Thank you so much. Okay.” Leah made a zipping motion across her lips. “I won’t say a word.”

The trio grew silent as Jo unpacked the lunch bag, filled with BLT wraps, a thermos of tomato basil soup, single serving bowls of mixed fruit, and bottles of water.

Carli juggled her food in one hand and the cell phone in her other, furiously tapping the screen.

Jo was tempted to find out what the workers were saying, but because they were being watched, she didn’t want to throw any suspicion in their direction. Finally, she couldn’t resist. “Are you catching anything?”

Carli nodded and shot Jo a quick glance, her eyes wide. The tapping and watching continued throughout the hour-long break until the employees started gathering up their things and heading out.

Jo, Leah, and Carli hung back until they were alone. Jo snatched her cell phone from her purse, the blood draining from her face as she read text after text with snippets of Sandi and Buzz's conversation.

"What is it?" Leah leaned in, attempting to see what Carli had sent Jo.

"They're the ones who were trying to get into your unit. They said something about setting you up and it will happen sometime this afternoon," Jo said.

Jo finished reading Carli's texts and excused herself to track down Dave Kilwin. She found him over by the grain bins and filled him in on what Carli had gleaned. "You have texts of what they said?"

"On my cell phone."

They returned to the picnic table, and Jo handed him her phone.

She could tell from the look on his face the exact moment he reached the part where Buzz and Sandi planned to sneak into Leah's unit. "This is disgusting not to mention disturbing," Dave said as he handed the phone back.

"Was anyone caught on the trail cam?"

"Nope. I checked the recordings. No one came around."

Jo turned to Carli. “Did they say anything about Shane Barr’s death, about what may have happened to him?”

Carli grabbed the phone and started tapping the screen. “The only conversation was about sneaking into Leah’s unit to plant something. I never noticed them saying anything about Mr. Barr.”

Jo read the text aloud. “Even if Carli had caught mention of it, she would have to prove she successfully read their lips and prove it in court.”

“In other words, there’s no smoking gun,” Dave said. “What’s the plan?”

“I’m glad you asked. I’m going to drop Carli off and track Nash down. We have some old surveillance equipment just collecting dust. My idea is to find a hiding spot inside Leah’s unit, set up the surveillance equipment and see what happens.”

“There’s a storage closet around the corner from Leah’s unit. After hiding the devices, you and Nash can hang out in the closet,” Dave said. “I’ll arrange for both Buzz and Sandi to attend an important meeting in the office. How long will you need me to keep them busy?”

Jo looked at her watch. “It’s after one now. We can be back here within half an hour. If you keep them busy from now until two, Nash and I will have time to cut through the fields, sneak back over here and hide the equipment in Leah’s room.”

“There’s an air duct return near the floor facing the door. You could easily hide the surveillance equipment in there and no one would notice it,” Dave said. “I hope this works.”

“All we can do is try. I’ll need the keys to Leah’s unit.”

Leah fished them from her front pocket and dropped them in Jo's hand. "Be careful, Jo. If they killed Barr, what's going to stop them from killing again?"

"Nothing. I'll make sure Nash and I come prepared for whatever might happen."

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“I’m out of shape,” Jo gasped as she crested the hilly terrain, struggling to keep up with Nash’s long legs.

“You’re in perfect shape.” Nash slowed long enough to give Jo his most seductive gaze. “Every inch of you.”

“I wasn’t fishing for a compliment, merely stating the obvious.”

“And I was merely stating a fact.”

The couple reached the fence line separating her property from Dave Kilwin’s.

Nash easily cleared the split rails and then waited on the other side while Jo swung her leg over. She teetered on the top rail, lost her balance and toppled over. “Oof.”

Nash swooped down and scooped her up. “It’s a good thing we don’t engage in covert operations on a regular basis. We would definitely need more practice.”

“The good news is Dave has Sandi and Buzz sequestered in the main office. We have at least fifteen more minutes to slip in around the back, let ourselves into Leah’s unit, set up the surveillance equipment, and hide in the closet. He sent a text letting me know the closet door was unlocked. Do you have your handgun?”

Nash patted his pocket. “It hasn’t gone anywhere since the last time you asked me ten minutes ago.”

“Sorry. I’m just nervous. What if nothing happens? What if Carli misread what they

were saying?”

“Then we sit in a dark hiding spot together for several hours and make out.” Nash made googly eyes at her.

“Nash Greyson,” Jo laughed.

“What? I see nothing wrong with taking advantage of the perfect opportunity to be alone and in the dark with my love.”

“We need to be on our toes.”

“I know, and I plan to. Maybe this will score some brownie points for me.”

“Yes. Let’s bank those brownie points.”

The Kilwin farm and outbuildings appeared, and the couple veered right, careful to steer clear of the main building and attached office.

“The units are this way.” Jo slipped in alongside the back of the housing units. They turned left and came up on them from the far side. Thankfully, Leah’s unit was near the end.

“Do you have the key?” Nash asked.

“Right here.” Jo’s hand trembled as she slid the key in the lock and turned the knob. With a quick look around, she slipped into the room. Nash followed right behind her.

She paused long enough to collect her bearings and give her eyes time to adjust to the lack of light. “The air duct vent is over here.” Jo led him to the vent and watched as he released the tabs and set the cover aside.

Nash reached inside his backpack, removed the surveillance camera and audio recording device and carefully placed them on the narrow ledge. “I put new batteries in both so we don’t have to worry about them dying on us.”

“I hadn’t even thought about the batteries. Good idea.”

He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and checked to make sure the devices were sending a strong signal. “We’re good to go.”

“I hope this works,” Jo said.

“All we can do is try.” Nash carefully replaced the air duct cover, checked the app and devices one more time and gave her a thumbs up. “It’s not 100% unobstructed, but clear enough to see who shows up. Let’s go.”

The couple exited Leah’s unit and turned left, heading toward a door marked storage at the end of the long corridor.

“This must be it.” Nash turned the handle and eased the door open. He ran his hand along the wall and flipped the lights on.

Jo’s heart plummeted when she saw the cramped space. “It’s tiny.”

“Nah. More like cozy.” Nash nudged her inside. “Perfect for smooching and cuddling.”

“I…”

“I know.” Nash’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “Today is all business. The snuggling and smooching will have to wait.” He let Jo find a comfortable spot and followed her in, closing the door behind them. “See? This isn’t so bad.”

He fiddled with his phone and clicked on the surveillance app. Leah's unit, with a view of the entrance door, appeared. "This is working like a charm. Remind me again why we stopped using this equipment."

"Because the sales guy talked me into upgrading to a much more expensive set of surveillance equipment." Jo checked her watch. "Hopefully, we'll be able to put it to good use."

The minutes ticked by...ten, fifteen, half an hour and then an hour. Jo shifted slightly to ease the throbbing in her lower back. Next it was her knee and then her shoulder twinged.

Nash watched as she massaged the back of her neck. "You don't sit still very well," he teased.

"This floor is hard," Jo said. "I can't help it if you can sit for hours and not have to move. What's your secret?"

"Years of military training."

Jo tilted her head. "Do you miss it?"

"The military?" Nash shrugged. "Sometimes. It wasn't all bad—traveling, seeing the world, making friends and friendships that would last a lifetime. I was a little wild in my teen years. Looking back, the military was something I needed."

"Knowing what you know now, would you do it again?"

"I would. I think most people need discipline, to learn how to keep their mouths shut and do what they're told, to have a schedule and work with others as a team."

“You argue an excellent case,” Jo said. “You should have been a recruiter.”

“I thought about it. Instead, I moved back to Divine.”

“I’m glad you did.”

Their eyes met, and Nash smiled. “So am I.”

Jo peered at her watch. “The afternoon employee break is over. If Sandi and Buzz are going to make a move, it will have to be soon.”

A dull thump echoed, and Nash pressed a finger to his lips. Without making a sound, he slowly stood and slid his hand into his pocket.

Jo froze, fearing if she moved she would make noise and give them away.

The couple waited. Nothing happened, and it grew quiet again.

“False alarm,” Nash said. “I thought someone was going to bust us.”

Jo grinned. “Me too. I’m not sure how we would explain why we’re hiding inside Dave’s storage closet.”

Nash resumed his position, and Jo readjusted hers.

Another hour passed. It was closing in on five o’clock. Jo was starting to suspect they were wasting their time. Carli was wrong and nothing would happen. “Do you think...”

Tink. A small sound resonated from Nash’s phone. It was followed by the muffled voices of a man and a woman.

“...in the back. If Dave hadn’t pulled us away for his stupid meeting, we wouldn’t have had to put this off until now,” the woman said. “Let’s get in and get out before anyone sees us.”

“Where do you want to put them?” the man asked.

“When the investigator searched my room, he tore my dresser apart and turned the drawers over. I say we stick them under the drawers, kind of loose, so they’ll fall out.”

While the couple talked, Jo sent a text to Dave, who promised he was on standby.

“You know how I feel about this. We could easily get caught.” Buzz hovered near the door.

“We have to do something before the cops start taking a hard look at us.”

“You mean taking a hard look at you and finding out about you and Shane?”

“Shut up,” Sandi snapped. “You have a big mouth.”

Buzz ignored the comment. “What about the cash?”

“I have it. It’s in my car. I’ll give it to you as soon as we’re out of here.” Sandi appeared and hurried over to the dresser.

Jo leaned in, watching as the woman removed the second drawer from the top, tucked something red in the bottom and slid it back in place. “Done. This should do the trick. The cops are going to search the place again and Leah will be on the hook.”

“Let’s get out of here.” Buzz reached for the door handle.

Jo could see him cautiously ease it open and then motioned for Sandi to follow him out.

Nash clicked out of the app and tapped the screen. He shoved his phone in his pocket. “I sent Dave a text, letting him know Buzz and Sandi were in Leah’s room. Let’s go.”

“No.” Jo stopped him. “We need to wait for a few minutes. Buzz said something about Sandi giving him cash. I say we follow them to her car and wait for the transaction to take place.”

“Good idea.” With Nash leading the way, the couple slipped out of the storage closet where they glimpsed Sandi and Buzz making a beeline for the main building and parking lot.

The couple rounded the corner and could see Buzz and Sandi standing near the passenger side of a four-door sedan, their heads close together.

Dave emerged from the main office and stepped over to where they stood talking.

Moments later, a police car flew into the driveway, followed by a second.

Things moved fast as the officers surrounded Buzz and Sandi.

“Let’s roll.” Nash grabbed Jo’s hand, and they jogged toward them.

“...have no idea what you’re talking about,” Sandi said. “Buzz and I have been working all afternoon and meeting with Dave.”

“You broke into Leah McEllich’s room,” Dave said. “We hid a surveillance camera and recording device inside and caught both of you in there.”

“We overheard them talking about Sandi paying Buzz cash after they left Leah’s unit,” Jo said.

The color drained from Sandi’s face. “I...don’t...”

“It’s all been recorded,” Nash said.

“And inadmissible,” Buzz smirked.

Nash pointed to the bulge in Buzz’s jacket pocket. “What’s in there?”

“Nothing.” Buzz placed a hand over the front of his jacket.

Detective Vine stepped closer. “Mind if we take a look?”

“I...”

“If you have nothing to hide, show us what’s in your pocket.”

Buzz reluctantly unzipped the pocket. He pulled out a large wad of hundred-dollar bills. “I just...it’s...”

The detective held out his hand. “How much do you have?”

Buzz made a choking sound and handed the money to him.

Jo held her breath as he began counting.

“Five grand. That’s a nice chunk of change to be carrying around.” The detective waved the bills in the air. “Where did you get this?”

“I...uh. Picked up some extra cash working side jobs.”

“Where?”

Jo could tell Buzz was panicking, and shot Sandi a terrified look. “Here and there.”

“Local places?” the detective probed.

“Uh-yeah.”

“I would like the names of those places.”

Buzz’s face turned bright red. “Sandi gave it to me after I helped her.”

“Helped her with what?” the detective asked, turning his attention to the woman on his right.

“I have no idea what he’s talking about. He’s lying,” Sandi said.

“It was all Sandi’s idea,” Buzz blurted out.

Detective Vine motioned to the other officers. “Don’t let them leave. I want to see the surveillance recordings and take a look inside Leah’s unit.”

“I’m going to sue you,” Sandi threatened. “This is unlawful detainment without cause.”

Dave, along with the detective, Nash and Jo, strode across the parking lot and made their way to Leah’s unit.

Using the key Leah had given her, Jo opened the door and stepped aside.

Nash showed the detective where they'd hidden the recording devices and then played back what they had captured.

"Let's see what we have." Detective Vine flipped the drawer over.

Two envelopes fell out. "These envelopes are addressed to Leah."

He flipped the flaps on the top one and removed a card. "If you can still make it, let's meet around six thirty over behind the barn." The detective held the card up. "Is this Shane Barr's handwriting?"

Dave studied the card. "The outer envelope doesn't look like his writing but what's inside the card does."

He held up the second envelope with Leah's name scribbled across the front. "Is this also his handwriting?"

"I don't know," Dave said.

"We'll have a handwriting expert analyze the envelopes and cards," Vine said.

"They could have swapped out the envelopes," Jo pointed out.

"I'll need a copy of the recordings to take with me to the station when I question Buzz and Sandi. Something tells me neither one of them will be able to explain what the cash was for and why they were in here planting cards."

Jo began to feel lightheaded as Detective Vine placed the cards inside an evidence bag and made his way to the door. The police had their killer or, in this case, killers. And Leah was no longer a suspect.

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“Where are the roasting sticks?” Jo circled the firepit and grabbed the bag of marshmallows from the table.

“Right here.” Delta snaked her hand behind Jo and held out a stack of metal grilling forks. “Gary found more at Wayne Malton’s hardware store so now we have enough for everyone and...” She triumphantly hoisted a cast iron cooker into the air. “We can cook pizza pies, fruit pies, hot ham and cheese sandwiches. The list is endless.”

“Dinner by a campfire with an easy, breezy cleanup,” Jo quipped.

“Are Sherry, Miles and Leah still coming?” Delta asked.

“They’re on the way. They should be here any time now.”

Kelli, Michelle, Raylene, Laverne, Carli, and Courtney traipsed across the driveway, carrying folding chairs. They arranged them in an orderly fashion, surrounding the firepit while Delta and Jo ran back and forth, setting the table with condiments, hotdog buns, loaves of bread, pizza sauce, packages of pepperoni, shredded mozzarella cheese, and bags of chips.

“I don’t think I’ve ever had a campfire,” Courtney said.

“Me either,” Michelle said.

“Same here,” Kelli chimed in.

“I have, but it was a long time ago,” Raylene said.

Nash arrived with bundles of firewood. He built a teepee of chopped wood before tucking crumpled newspaper beneath it.

While Nash tended the fire, Gary helped organize the drink station and ran whatever errands Delta asked him to.

Sherry's baby blue Cadillac Coupe Deville flew into the driveway, stirring up a small dust storm. She sprang from the driver's seat while Miles climbed out of the passenger side and Leah exited from the back.

Jo hustled across the driveway and met them halfway. "You need to slow down. It's only a matter of time before you get a ticket."

"I'm trying to drive slower, but Lady Luxe needs to speed." Sherry hugged her. "Thanks for inviting us."

"And thank you for giving Leah a lift." Jo hugged her former resident and now neighbor. "I'm glad you could make it."

"Thank you for inviting me. I've been looking forward to this all day."

"How is it going over at Dave's farm?" Jo asked.

"So much better now." Leah swiped a hand across her brow. "It's like night and day now that Sandi and Buzz are in jail."

"I still can't believe they confessed they were behind Shane Barr's death," Nash said. "I had serious doubts Sandi was involved."

"Because no one, not even Dave, knew Barr was messing around with her," Jo said.

"Sandi found out she was being used after getting her hands on Barr's cell phone and

reading his texts. He had no intention of ending his relationship with Robyn. She was so distraught, she confessed to Buzz she would do anything to pay him back. Buzz saw an opportunity to make some extra cash. They came up with a plan. Buzz jumped him from behind and held Shane down while Sandi was the one who actually killed him,” Leah said. “The cops were back at the farm this morning, boxing stuff up and taking it from the office.”

“I suppose now that they have the real story about what happened to Shane Barr, they can start filling in the blanks and building their case,” Nash said. “I’m sure the five grand Sandi gave Buzz will help.”

Jo shook her head. “To think Robyn or Leah almost took the rap for his murder while Sandi and Buzz slipped under the radar.”

“If not for Carli reading their lips the other day, we never would have found out.” Leah held up a small box. “I have a gift for her. It’s a silver cross. I bought it at the Kansas Creek Indian Reservation’s store this morning when Dave took us over there to pick up some supplies. I wanted to thank her for helping when she didn’t have to.”

“You’re so sweet, Leah.” Jo tilted her head. “I think Carli got something out of this, too. She helped not only you, but Robyn Colburne.”

“She sure helped me.” Leah shifted the gift box to her other hand. “It isn’t much, just a small token of my appreciation.”

“It’s the thought that counts, and I’m sure she isn’t expecting anything.”

Leah, Sherry and Miles caught up with the others. They began hugging and all talking at once, while Carli and Courtney stood on the sidelines watching.

Laverne must’ve noticed, because she stepped away and then coaxed them into joining the circle of friends.

“Look at Laverne, making a point to include Carli and Courtney,” Jo said.

“She has a soft side even though she pretends she doesn’t.”

“I think you’re right,” Jo agreed.

Raylene began waving at them. “Hey. The party is over here!”

Jo turned to go, and Nash stopped her. “The campfire was a great idea. We might have to make this a regular springtime / summer activity.”

“I was thinking the same thing. What’s better than being outdoors in the fresh air, cooking meals over an open fire, disconnecting from the outside world and simply spending time together?”

“It’s like an impromptu family reunion.”

“It is.” Jo pressed a hand to her chest, her heart swelling with pride as she watched her “family” gather. “God has truly blessed me with the best residents, best friends, all in one wonderful bundle.”

“None of us would be here without you, Joanna Pepperdine, without your determination, tenacity, and grit to make things happen. It’s good to stand back once in a while and celebrate all you’ve accomplished.”

“I was so sad when Leah left, but I’m excited to see what the future holds for Carli and Courtney. There were a few times I wondered if I had signed myself up for a double dose of trouble, but I’m thrilled to discover I was wrong. I can already see small changes in the sisters.”

“I think you’re right, especially when we found out about Carli’s special talent.” Nash reached for her hand. “Joanna Pepperdine is still working her magic, changing

the world one person at a time.”

The end.