



Formal Fatality (Cat Latimer Mystery #10)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: bestselling author, Lynn Cahoon has penned a new writers' retreat with your favorite fictional author in the snowy Victorian in Aspen Hills, Colorado.

Cat Latimer and her neighbor, Dante, are throwing a party the weekend before her monthly writers retreat starts. Dante had asked her to help find out who stole money from the Covington College endowment fund. The party's going strong until a dead body is found in Dante's conservatory after the desserts are served.

With a retreat to run, Cat doesn't have time to find a killer, but when it looks like the dead guy was setting Dante up for the fall, the list of suspects explodes and includes Dante who's now the primary suspect on Uncle Pete's list.

If Cat can't find out who the real killer is, Dante may have to move from the big house on the corner to the other Big House AKA Colorado State Prison.

Total Pages (Source): 19

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Chapter

One

The interior rooms of Dante Cornelio's Aspen Hill, Colorado home sparkled in the candlelight. Soft lighting filled the old ballroom where the party was in full force, highlighting the old, polished wood that had been darkened by the years. Even though Cat Latimer's Victorian down the street had been built at the same time, Dante's house screamed old money while hers gave more of the working professor vibe. The houses had both been built for the faculty and the deans of Covington College. Covington had been started for the wealthy but vulnerable children of families in Dante's organization. And when Cat thought about that family, she always translated it into a more generic term.

These children, now students, had grown up in mansions much larger than the college president's house. The college had continued to be an oasis or bunker for these families—a place where their family's standing didn't put a price on their heads. Over the years, they'd even accepted a few exchange students from the South American cartels. But generally, the families frowned on change.

Yes, Covington College, nestled in the Rocky Mountains of Aspen Hills, Colorado was a private college that catered to the mob. Cat didn't know how a family got a child into the college, but once here, the student was untouchable. It was a rule. For the most part, the unique aspect of the student body protected not only the students from violence but also the residents of the small mountain town that existed mostly to support the college.

Cat had grown up as a local. She hadn't even known the college's secret until after she'd graduated with her master's degree from Covington and then signed a teaching contract. All during her childhood, she'd planned on attending Covington, mostly for the full ride the college offered 'townies'. When she'd married Michael Latimer, her first husband and a Covington star teacher in Economics, she'd met his best friend, Dante, the host of this party.

Michael had come to Covington on scholarship, like her. But his friendship with Dante had gotten him in with the wrong sort. Not Dante, but his brother. She pushed the memory aside. Looking back never helped anyone.

Especially in Aspen Hills.

Tonight, the ballroom was filled with colleagues from the college. A black-tie event that included a string quartet for the music and waiters carrying trays of champagne and appetizers. Food to try to soak up some of the alcohol that was flowing freely between the champagne and the open bar at the other end of the room. Dante, Cat's handsome neighbor, strolled toward her, decked out in a tuxedo that probably cost more than Cat's last car. He was holding a glass of champagne for each of them.

She felt uncomfortable standing here in the dress he'd sent to her house early last week. A gift for agreeing to help host this party. According to Shauna Mary Clodagh, her best friend and partner in her writing retreat, the dress was designer and worth enough to restore the floors on the east wing's second floor. A project they'd been working on saving money for over a year.

All she had to do was not spill something and ruin the dress before Shauna had a chance to sell it on the secondary market—the things she did for the old Victorian she'd inherited from her then ex-husband, Michael.

"You look like you're facing a firing squad," Dante said as he handed her the glass.

“Get this one down and you can have mine as well. You need to relax. Have I told you how lovely you look?”

“Yes, and that’s not helping,” she responded as she took his advice on downing the wine. “Who should I go talk to? What questions do I ask if I’m trying to find a thief?”

Dante had asked her to host the party with him because he had just found a leak in the school’s extensive money pot. Someone was taking a hefty additional monthly salary from the donors’ fund and all the evidence pointed at Dante as the culprit. But it wasn’t true.

He thought the frame job had been set up by one of the other families trying to get him removed from the leadership position he held with his extensive family business. He wasn’t into many of the traditional money-making methods of the group, which made him a target.

Dante’s warm hand settled lightly on her bare back, causing a chill to run up her spine. The man was hot with a capital H, but they’d never been single at the same time. Not to mention that period where she’d hated him. “Just go mingle. You know a lot of these people from your time working at the college. Where are your writer friends?”

Cat pointed over to the bar where four of the five writers for this month’s retreat were sitting at a table, getting to know each other. The fifth, Debra Jennings, a historical mystery author, was currently on a self-tour of Dante’s house, taking pictures of the wainscoting and antique furniture. “They’re bonding. The other one is casing your house. Don’t worry, she won’t steal anything, but she could use one of your rooms for an upcoming murder in her next mystery.”

He chuckled as he nodded to a couple across the room. “I’m sure it’s not the first murder this house has been linked to. Come this way and let me introduce you to

President John Martin and his wife, Maggie. Allen Johnson is also with them. He's the chair of donor fundraising and is on my watch list. I don't think the president or his wife could have pulled this off."

"Why is that," Cat asked but instead of answering, Dante set her empty glass down and moved her quickly across the floor. Probably before she could change her mind, or the alcohol made her loopy. She wasn't much of a drinker.

Dante introduced them and Cat found Maggie to be a delight to chat with. They'd separated from the men to talk about the house, the party, and life in the small college town. The men, on the other hand, all had their heads huddled together like they were solving the aging process or maybe homelessness. The thing they weren't doing was socializing.

Maggie caught her glancing at Dante and the other two men. "Don't mind them. I've always said you can dress up an academic and drag them to a party, but you can't make them enjoy themselves. It leaves more of the delightful champagne for us. Are you the one who runs that writers group that the English department sponsors?"

Cat nodded. She'd love to tell Maggie all about the fight she had to have annually to keep getting funding, but as the woman had said, this was a party. She'd invite her out for coffee sometime the week after the retreat and they could chat about her funding woes. Having the college president's wife as an ally might not be a bad thing. She pointed to the table where the writers were still seated. "My next monthly retreat starts on Monday. Those four at that table all flew in today for the party. Tomorrow we'll get everyone settled at the house and they'll meet with Covington's librarian on Monday. The writer groups love using the library for research."

Maggie frowned, looking at them. "You only host four writers a month? How is that cost-effective?"

“This month we have five writers. Another woman is running around Dante’s house getting pictures for her research. We always have a spot for a Covington student to fill so we’ll have six total. Then, every quarter we add another five slots to the schedule for returning retreaters so those months we have a total of eleven guests. The returning participant slots are filled through next year. I may have to start offering that larger session every other month to keep up with demand.” Cat tried to explain how the retreat was making money. But Maggie was right, they needed to increase their available slots for more students. Cat just hated to give up her writing time. Her main job was writing books, not serving as a host for a retreat. It was either to host more events than once a month or increase the number of students. Cat thought both were bad options.

Running author events and attending galas like this one drained her introverted battery. On the other hand, her partner, Shauna, could entertain for months, probably years without a break. Cat needed downtime. Her personal tarot card would be The Hermit.

“I always wanted to write a book. I was an English major and had planned on going back to get my master's of fine arts degree once we got settled. Then I got pregnant and you probably know the rest of that story. Our youngest finally graduated and got a job in Denver last month. Now I’m an empty nester with nothing to do.” Maggie studied the group of writers. “I’d love to be sitting at that table rather than out here, making the small talk rounds.”

Cat wanted to high-five the woman with a loud, ‘Me too, sister’. But she thought it might scare the president’s wife away. Her next words surprised her, but they were out of her mouth before she could stop them. “Why don’t you come to a retreat? If you don’t want to stay at the house, we could give you a discount. Or you could take the Covington slot?”

“I’ll pay the full rate. I don’t want to take a slot from a deserving student,” Maggie

said, peering at the writers at the table. “I could come tomorrow and join in. I’ll pack up in the morning and be there by noon. If that works?”

Cat blinked. The alcohol must have gotten to her. Shauna was going to murder her. Cat had meant a future retreat, but she could see where she’d made her mistake. Instead of correcting her error, Cat took a breath and said, “Of course, we’d love to have you join in. This group is mostly mystery and thriller writers if that makes a difference. I could slot you into a different genre-specific group at a later time if you’d rather wait.”

“Terrific, mystery is what I love. I’ve started a cozy mystery, but I can’t seem to get past chapter four. Is that common with new writers?” Maggie asked, but instead of waiting for an answer, she nodded to the group. “Do you think they’d mind if I joined them? This is so exciting.”

“I’m sure it would be fine,” Cat started but quickly realized Maggie was already walking over to the group.

Dante moved behind her and touched her shoulder to get her attention. He’d seen Maggie walking away. “What’s going on?”

“This was not my fault,” Cat tried to explain. “You need to tell Shauna that when she asks. Anyway, Mrs. Martin, Maggie, is an aspiring writer and has decided to attend my writer retreat.”

“Don’t you have a waiting list?” Dante asked as the other two men joined them.

“Not if the president’s wife wants a slot, I don’t. Shauna’s going to kill me,” she whispered then turned toward the others. “What were you guys gabbing about? Global warming?”

Allen Johnson had joined their group and smiled at her as he answered her question. “Nothing to worry your pretty little head about. Just an issue with a whale donor. Those guys think they should be treated like royalty. I have to always explain that they’re contributing to the education of our young people.”

“Sometimes people would rather know their money is getting their name on a building,” Dante said as he grabbed another two glasses of the champagne being passed and handed one to Cat.

She wondered if he wanted her to be quiet. It wasn’t working. The alcohol was loosening her tongue, not helping her think before speaking. The good thing was she only had to walk a block to get home. No need for a taxi or a car. “As long as deserving kids get their degrees, I don’t care if we name the streets of Aspen Hills after the whale donors.”

President Martin had also joined the group and he reached out and clinked her glass. “I like this one, Dante. She’s a keeper.”

As she and Dante walked away to greet the next group, Dante apologized. “Sorry about Martin implying we were together.”

“You and I know what’s real, so it doesn’t matter,” she hoped what she was saying was true.

“I hope Seth doesn’t deck me after all this is over,” Dante chuckled as they stopped at the next group of partygoers. He introduced Cat to more department heads and their respective spouses. Most of the spouses worked or taught in other departments. Everyone who worked at Covington seemed to be a Nepo Baby or Nepo Spouse, to be more exact.

The night was beginning to wind down. Maggie and the other writers were still over

by the bar, talking and drinking. Cat noticed Debra Jennings hadn't come back from exploring the house yet. She might have to send out a search party soon.

Or maybe she should try to find her now. Cat set down her glass and studied the room. She didn't need to lose a writer this early in the retreat. Debra might have fallen asleep somewhere or had gone back to the house. She went over to the table, breaking in on a conversation about Hemmingway. "Has anyone seen Debra?"

One of the writers, she thought his name was Jon Booth, peered at her. Then he pointed at Maggie. "I thought you were the other one in our group?"

"Maggie is a late addition, but Debra came over with us from the house," Cat tried to explain.

"Don't mind him, he's on Eastern time and has had one too many," Nan Berry poked Jon in the side. Nan was in her fifties and a little older than the others. But she and Maggie seemed to have a lot in common. "Debra is tall and blond and too pretty to be an author, but there you go. I haven't seen her since we got here. I thought maybe she left early and went back to the house."

Cat was starting to get concerned but she didn't want the group to know. "Well, I'll make sure she's there. I'll be heading back to the house in about thirty minutes if anyone wants to walk with me. Otherwise, you have your keys to the front door."

"I'm about ready to go anyway," Nan glanced around the table and the group grudgingly nodded. "Maggie, will we see you tomorrow?"

"Bright and early. Well, maybe not too early," Maggie laughed as she finished her drink. She started saying goodbye to the writers, one by one.

Cat had just finished a text to Shauna asking about Debra when she found herself

wrapped in Maggie's arms.

"I'm so excited about this. Thank you for letting me attend." Maggie squeezed Cat and added a little jump to the hug.

"No problem." The woman was excited. Cat hoped she stayed that way. A high-level supporter at the college just might help during the contracting with the English Department.

Maggie let her go and then went to find her husband. Cat's phone buzzed with Shauna's response. Debra was not at the house. Cat went over and stood by Dante who was saying goodbye to a couple she'd met earlier.

The woman grabbed Cat's hands. "We really must get together soon. I'll call you for coffee."

"That would be lovely," Cat smiled wishing she remembered the woman's name.

"Then it's a date. And no, you two gorgeous men can't come along. Us girls need time alone to talk about you." The woman kissed Cat on the cheek, then squeezed Dante's forearm. "You're such a lucky woman to have caught this one."

As they left, Dante turned. "I'm so sorry..."

"Don't worry about it. At least our plan is working. But I have a problem. I've lost a writer." Cat frowned as she looked around the rapidly emptying room.

Dante glanced around the room and saw the four writers still gathered around the table. "The woman you promised wasn't stealing the silver?"

"Yeah, her. Tall, blonde, her name is Debra. She's pretty." Cat tried to remember

what she'd been wearing. "I think she was in a silver dress?"

"I'll ask the staff, they've been all over, trying to keep people from using the bedrooms. You would think this was still a frat house the way our guests have been acting," Dante headed over to a man who was standing in the hall.

Cat watched as after Dante explained the situation, the man touched his ear and spoke into his lapel. The search was on.

It only took a few minutes before Cat heard a woman screaming. She looked at Dante.

"It sounds like it came from the solarium," he took her arm and led her down the hall to the room. They stepped inside the glass-walled room filled with plants.

Cat saw Debra standing near a banana tree. She was staring at two legs that were below her on the cobblestone walkway. A man in a tuxedo pants and black shoes with new soles was lying on the ground.

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Chapter

Two

Stay here and call 911,” Dante said as he hurried toward where Debra stood. She’d turned when she heard us come into the room, now she was pointing at the man.

“He’s dead. I think he’s dead. This is unreal. I mean, I’ve written about it many times, but I’ve never seen anyone,” Debra’s eyes widened again as she looked at Cat and repeated. “I think he’s dead.”

Ignoring Dante’s instructions, Cat dialed 911 as she went over to get Debra away from whatever was happening. She hoped the woman wasn’t going into shock. As she took Debra’s arm, the operator picked up the call.

“911, what’s your emergency?” a calm female voice asked.

“There’s been an accident at Dante Cornelio’s house. A man is lying on the floor in the solarium.” Cat stepped closer and saw Allen Johnson staring up at the ceiling. A pool of blood seeped into the cobblestones around him. That was going to be hard to get out. Cat shook away the image and the comment. “It’s Allen Johnson and I think he’s dead. His eyes, well, you know.”

“An EMT unit and the police have been sent to that address,” the dispatcher said, her voice softening. “Did anyone see what happened?”

As Cat explained the situation, she led a shaking Debra from the room. Dante’s

security team ran inside. Soon, Dante met her in the hallway. She was still on the line with 911 as they'd asked her not to hang up.

He took her phone. "When will the EMTs arrive?"

Dante met Cat's gaze and pointed to a room off the side of the hallway. Cat led Debra inside. There was a couch and before she knew it, a woman with a tray with coffee and a plate full of desserts came inside the room.

"I brought coffee and some sugar, but, please, let me now if there is anything else you need," the woman asked. She was dressed in a black suit and had her hair pulled back. Cat had seen her before at the house. She ran the house for Dante. She'd been the one to plan the party and manage the staff.

Cat took a cup and focused on Debra. "Do you want sugar or cream?"

Debra blinked. "You're asking how I want my coffee? I just found a dead guy."

"And that's why I'm asking. You need to focus on something else. Like these macaroons," Cat pointed to the plate. Then she put both cream and sugar into the coffee. Debra needed something to eat up the adrenaline she was feeling, or she'd crash soon.

"Thanks," Debra took the cup and took a long sip. "I didn't eat at the airport and then I missed the food trays. I got a lot of beautiful pictures before I came into the greenhouse. I can't believe he's dead," She blanched at the memory and then turned to Cat. "He is dead, right?"

"Yes," Cat wondered if Debra was starting to go into shock. "Eat a cookie. I hear that your blood sugar tanks when you see something disturbing."

“Oh, I hadn’t heard that,” Debra grabbed a cookie and ate it, then another. “I should add that to my next story. After I verify it, of course.”

The woman was starving. Maybe Shauna had something at the house to feed her. Cat texted her uncle that she was taking Debra back to the house if he wanted to question her. Instead of a text, Uncle Pete walked into the room where they were sitting.

“Dante told me what happened and where to find you,” he squatted down and met Debra’s gaze. “I’m so sorry you had to see that. Was the body that way when you walked into the room?”

She nodded, staring into her cup. “I had my camera and was taking pictures of the way the conservatory was built. They don’t add these things to houses anymore. I stumbled on something and looked down. I had hit his foot.”

Cat watched as Debra shuddered and closed her eyes. Cat met Uncle Pete’s gaze and silently asked to leave with Debra. He nodded, but then he asked one more question. “Miss, did you hear anything when you first entered the conservatory?”

Debra opened her eyes, and it was clear she was trying to remember that moment. “I could hear the music from the party. It seeped into every room I visited, especially on the first floor. Then, wait, I heard voices to my left. Away from the party. Men, maybe? I just heard murmurings and thought I was going to be asked to return to the party. So I hurried inside to get my photos.”

“That’s good. So you could hear at least two different male voices?” Uncle Pete asked.

She nodded, and then responded, “I think so.”

“Did you hear what they were saying? Were they arguing or loud?”

Debra shook her head. “No. They were just talking. Like I said, I thought they were security and were going to ask me to return to the party. They’ve been watching me pretty closely as I walked through the house.”

“Thank you. I’ll come by the retreat tomorrow and get your formal statement, but this is good. You’ve helped me a lot.” He stood and nodded at Cat. “Are you walking back to the house?”

She stood and motioned him to follow her into the hallway. “If she can make it. She hasn’t eaten all day. I just texted Shauna and asked her to start some soup for her.”

“Shock should wear off soon. If she’s not feeling better tomorrow after she eats and gets some sleep, run her over to the clinic.” He glanced toward the solarium. “I can’t believe you get yourself into these messes.”

“You and I both know that Dante didn’t take that money. Allen Johnson was the most likely culprit. But now he’s dead. Do you know how?” Cat asked as she followed his gaze.

Uncle Pete nodded, then smiled as he tapped the badge on his chest. “I do and guess what? I’m the professional here. Go do your writer workshop and stay out of my murder investigation.”

As the women waited for someone to retrieve their coats, Cat poked her head into the ballroom where the party had been held. The writers were gone from their table. Hopefully, they’d headed back to the house, but they could have gone to one of the bars that catered to the college crowd instead. She’d find out when she got back to the house. They were adults and not her problem right now.

She knew one thing though, something Uncle Pete hadn’t meant to tell her. A suspect with an undisclosed weapon had murdered Allen Johnson in the solarium. Her game

of Clue had just started.

The internet reviews didn't call Cat's writers retreat Murder Central for nothing. She just wished the monthly session was known more for the quality of the retreat itself, not just for the likelihood a murder might happen in town while the retreat was running.

When they arrived home, Shauna took charge of Debra. She wrapped her in a blanket after taking off her coat and took her to her room. "I've got a bath run for you and a tray with hot soup and tea. And some fresh biscuits I'd just made for tomorrow's breakfast."

"I don't want to be a bother," Debra muttered as she let Shauna lead her away.

"Oh, it's not a bother," Shauna glanced back at Cat. "Are you going to be in the kitchen when I get back?"

"Yes. I'm going to run up and change out of this dress and into sweats. I'll be down for some hot cocoa in a few minutes." Cat slowly followed Shauna and Debra on the stairs, then hurried up to the third floor and her room. Slipping out of the dress, she hung it up in her closet, hoping it hadn't been damaged or worse, she'd gotten blood on it. She grabbed yoga pants, and an oversized Denver Bronco sweatshirt, and then pulled on fuzzy socks. She quickly cleaned the makeup off her face, putting her curly brown hair up into a clip. She looked at the woman in the mirror. She'd transformed herself back into everyday Cat. The author and retreat host. She often dressed up for events and looked amazing, but this was the real Cat Latimer. And it was good to be comfortable again.

Cat was in the kitchen making hot cocoa when Shauna came downstairs. "How is she?"

“A little better. She wanted to talk a bit and asked me to turn the television onto a station with those home improvement shows. She was going to eat, take a bath, then crawl into bed. She flew in from Boston this morning.” Shauna got two cups down, then bumped her hip on Cat’s. “Go sit down. I know you must be tired from all the hobnobbing with the fancy college crowd.”

“I always hated department parties. Even when I was one of them and married to Michael. They all think they know everything. Besides, they treated me more like a wife than a colleague,” she sank into a chair by the table, pulling her foot up on the chair. Groaning, she remembered Maggie. “Don’t hate me, but I need to tell you something. We’ll have one more student this week. Maggie Martin, the wife of Covington’s president wants to write a book.”

“That’s fine,” Shauna said as she poured the hot chocolate into the cups. She got out the dispenser and filled the rest of the cup with homemade whipped cream. “When is she checking in? Tomorrow or Monday.”

“Tomorrow. I figured you’d be mad since we had everything set for six writers,” Cat took the cup Shauna brought over and took a sip. “This is so good. And just what I needed, it’s cold out there.”

“Cat, we could have ten to fifteen writers every month. We’re set up for them now that Seth has finished the writer rooms in the east wing. We don’t have to limit our enrollment.” She sipped her cocoa. “How was Dante? Is he still worried about this embezzlement?”

“He thought the guy taking the money was Allen Johnson. The guy Debra found dead. Thank goodness she’s not local or Uncle Pete would be looking harder at her. You know they always suspect the one who finds the body.” Cat held the cup in both hands, trying to warm up.

“Which is why I have a strict policy not to find dead bodies anywhere,” Shauna smiled but then dropped her gaze. “Is Seth okay?”

“Is he over being mad that I agreed to help Dante find the guy who’s framing him? Not really. I think it’s going to be a chilly week around here between us. I hope it doesn’t affect the writers.” Seth Howard was or had been Cat’s high school sweetheart, friend, boyfriend, and, at one time, fiancé. She wasn’t sure what to call him right now, but he was part of the retreat team, picking up and dropping off the writers at the Denver airport along with a lot of other jobs. Including keeping the different parts of the old Victorian house working smoothly.

Just then, Sam, Seth’s mixed-breed dog ran into the room. Sam looked like he had Pom blood in his bloodline but he was almost fifteen pounds. He jumped on Cat’s legs, asking to be picked up. She obliged. It was always better to follow his orders before he started barking.

Seth followed him in, then stopped at the edge of the kitchen. “Sorry, I thought no one was here.”

“You mean you thought I wasn’t here,” Cat mumbled. Seth’s eyes met hers for a second. “We’re talking about the murder.”

Now he looked interested. “What are you talking about? A murder? Here? Don’t tell me something happened at Dante’s house during the party.”

“Okay, I won’t tell you,” Cat teased, then went on to tell him about Debra finding Allen Johnson while he fixed a sandwich and poured himself a cup of cocoa.

“Wow, Allen. He and his wife hired me last year to build an addition to their house. A new primary suite with all the bells and whistles. It even has a steam shower and jacuzzi tub. His wife is going to be heartbroken. She’s a tradwife with three kids she

homeschools. Before they moved here, she taught law at Columbia.” He saw both Cat and Shauna staring at him as he brought the food over to the table. “What? She was bored and wanted to talk. So she’d come in and watch me work during the day.”

Everyone loved to chat with Seth. He was just that kind of guy, friendly and approachable. Cat, on the other hand, stayed in her office writing most of the day. It suited her personality. Except for the retreat weeks. She should have told Maggie that she kept the retreat numbers down because it freaked her out to be around a lot of people. All the time. But she worried more about it before, then when the retreat was happening, she liked getting to know the other writers.

Cat had to face facts. She was a goofball.

“I take it Pete will be showing up tomorrow for breakfast,” Shauna glanced at her watch. “Or I should say brunch. We won’t be serving until ten tomorrow since it’s Sunday.”

“I’ll text him and let him know,” Cat grabbed her phone and sent her uncle a message. He was usually here for Sunday dinner. It had become a weekly tradition for the four of them. Five if Shirley, Uncle Pete’s girlfriend from Alaska, was in town. Except for the Sunday before retreat week.

Writers came in on either Saturday or Sunday, depending on if there was a pre-writing event like the party tonight or sometimes Seth liked to take the group hiking or skiing. Cat scrubbed at her face. Lately, all too often, the pre-retreat activity resulted in murder.

She looked at Shauna and Seth. “We’re just unlucky, right?”

“What on earth are you talking about? Luck is when opportunity and hard work meet. I think we’re doing amazing things with the retreat. It’s feeding the three of us and

I've been able to pop away more into my retirement travel fund for when I start roaming the world." Shauna took her cup to the sink and rinsed it. "I think you're tired."

"She's talking about the murders and how they seem to occur around the retreats," Seth set down his sandwich. "Cat, there's nothing you can do to keep people from killing each other. Besides, this one I blame on Dante. He was so sure that having all those bigwigs from the college over tonight would help you guys ferret out the embezzler. I think he's been watching too many television shows where the crime is solved in an hour."

Shauna giggled. "Maybe he thought that the bad guy would just raise his hand and announce, 'I feel so guilty about trying to frame you after this lovely party.'"

Cat tried to suppress her smile. Dante had been a little naïve about finding the guy. "Well, now his best suspect is dead, in his solarium. Whoever is doing this frame job, they're really good."

"So Dante killed Allen in the conservatory with the lead pipe?" Seth snapped his fingers at Sam who was now sleeping by the backdoor. "We're living a real-life game of Clue."

"That's what I said," Cat followed them out of the kitchen and into the hallway. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Seth looked at her, then nodded and headed into the door to the east wing and his apartment. It was supposed to be their apartment, but they were just getting back on track in their relationship after Seth had been hurt in an out-of-country contractor job. His military skills had been in high demand and the money was great. But Cat had worried constantly when he was gone. And they'd fought about his taking the job right before he left.

Now that he was back and healing from his physical and mental scars, there still was a wall between them.

She realized she was standing staring at the apartment door when Shauna put her hand on Cat's shoulder.

“He'll be back to normal soon. Just give him some time,” Shauna repeated the words she'd said often since Seth returned.

Cat turned and walked up the stairs with her friend. She only hoped Shauna was right.

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Chapter

Three

Maggie Martin arrived at exactly one the next afternoon with three suitcases. Cat was downstairs, helping Shauna clean the dining room after brunch. She watched as the woman pulled up in an upscale SUV and opened the back to pull out the luggage. Grabbing her phone, Cat texted Seth to come and help check in the late arrival.

He was there before Cat could get her coat on. He held the door open. “I thought most everyone was already here. This can’t be the Covington student, right?”

“No, Alicia Thomas is coming at five. I doubt she’ll have much luggage, but it is Covington so no promises. This is the school president’s wife. She wants to write a book,” She looked at Seth who was grinning at her. “What? We were talking about the retreat, and I mentioned her coming someday. I didn’t say today. She just assumed. Anyway, she’s here. It will be fun.”

“Of course, it will,” Seth paused. “For some of us. You’re going to be on tiptoes all week trying not to offend her.”

“I will not,” Cat said to Seth’s back. She could tell he had heard her because now he was laughing so hard that she could see his shoulders shaking.

“Good morning, Mrs. Martin. I’m Seth Howard and I’ll be around all week in case you need something or if there’s something wrong with your room,” he reached for two of her suitcases. “I’m sure Cat can grab the third.”

“Oh, thank you. Call me Maggie, everyone does,” she tucked a folded bill into Seth’s shirt pocket and handed him her keys. “Can you park this somewhere too?”

“Of course,” he met Cat’s gaze. “I’ll run these up to your room first.”

“Shauna has the key at the front desk,” she told him. This was going to be a huge mistake. Maggie was treating the retreat like a hotel when in fact, they were less about the hospitality part and more about making sure the writers had a comfortable place to be and create. Hopefully, she didn’t think they had a spa or room service. She grabbed Maggie’s last bag. “So good to see you this morning. We just finished brunch. We provide breakfast and usually Shauna has coffee, drinks, and treats around most of the day. The attendees get together and go to one of the local restaurants for lunch and dinner. Tonight, we’ll start writing activities with an orientation session and a couple of write-ins.”

“I probably brought too much stuff, but I have my laptop and several notebooks where I’ve started a chapter or scene. I need to gather it all together. I brought some writing books too, in case I need inspiration,” Maggie chatted as they headed inside. “I would have had John drop me off, but he wants me at a dinner Wednesday night, so I have to have the car. He’s not happy about me being gone. But he’ll survive.”

Her phone rang as they arrived at the front desk.

“And that’s him, probably wondering where his robe is, I swear, the man is hopeless. Maude, our housekeeper will make sure he eats.” She glanced at the display and her face turned red. “I’ll call him back.”

So, not your husband . Cat smiled and introduced Maggie to Shauna. “While you’re dealing with this, I’ll take this up to your room. I’ll see you at five for the orientation.”

She rolled the suitcase up to the east stairs and then picked it up. It had to be the one with her books or maybe shoes because it weighed a ton. She got it up halfway to the second floor when Seth came down and grabbed it from her. She gasped as she tried to catch her breath, “I was fine.”

“You need to lift weights more. Just running isn’t building enough muscle. Then you sit at your desk most days. Are you even using those hand weights I gave you?” He turned and jogged up the rest of the stairs.

Cat rolled her eyes and went back to the lobby. Shauna and Maggie were still talking when a young woman with a duffel bag came in the front door. Her hair was long and blond, and she wore jeans and a Save the Whales tee shirt. Cat hurried over to greet her. “You must be Alicia. I’m happy you accepted the invitation.”

“You’re kidding, right? A week out of the dorms and I get to stay in this house? I run on this street and between this house and the one where you held the party last night, I’m always slowing down to imagine what it must be like inside.” Alicia set down her duffel and shook Cat’s hand. “I write historical mysteries. Which is perfect for this part of Colorado right? All the ghost towns and bootleg alcohol. I’m working on a fictional account of the 1921 Tulsa massacre in Black Wall Street, Oklahoma.”

“That sounds interesting,” Mia always felt intimidated by historical authors. She made stuff up because she wrote paranormal. Writers like Alicia had to research. “I’m sure you’re already familiar with the library but Ms. Applebome will be giving the group a session tomorrow morning. You can stay here, come along, or attend the session. It’s up to you.”

“I love her. I’m always learning new ways to find and store information. She’s so knowledgeable. Oh, Maggie, I didn’t know you were coming,” Alicia hurried over and hugged Maggie Martin.

“I’m finally working on my book, can you believe it?” Maggie grinned and then grabbed Alicia by the shoulders, turning her to Shauna and Cat. “This is my goddaughter. Her mom and I were sorority sisters at Brown.”

“Oh, that’s special. Did you know she was coming?” Cat wondered if this was why Maggie had jumped on the idea of attending the retreat.

Maggie flushed. “Her mom had mentioned it, but I didn’t know it was this month.”

“Maggie, don’t lie. Did Mom send you to keep an eye on me?” Alicia put her hands on her hips and stared her godmother down.

“Maybe? She’s just concerned with all the chatter going around with the families. She worries.” Maggie glanced at Cat and Shauna who were just staring at them. “Oh, I know, I broke the seal of confidentiality, but Cat, you must have already known about Covington’s secret with your last marriage and now your relationship with Dante Cornelio. Right?”

Seth had just come back from parking Maggie’s car. His face turned to stone as he handed Maggie her key. “Luggage all delivered, your car is parked down by the barn. Now I need to take care of something.”

Cat watched him disappear. He knew she wasn’t dating Dante for real. But he didn’t like hearing about even her fake relationship with the mob boss.

“I hope I didn’t say anything wrong,” Maggie watched Seth walking away.

Before Cat could respond, Uncle Pete walked through the front door. He glanced at the almost clean dining room. “I hope you saved back some food. I’m starving.”

The house felt like Grand Central Station. Cat turned to Shauna. “I’ll handle getting

Uncle Pete fed and you finish up here. It was great to see you both. See you at five in the living room. Bring your laptop for the write-ins!”

Then she grabbed her uncle’s arm and dragged him to the kitchen. “I’m so glad you got me out of that.”

“You invited these people to come stay in your house for a week. But you don’t want to talk to them? You might have the wrong business model.” Uncle Pete sat down at the table and took off his cap. His face looked pale, and he had dark circles under his eyes. “You don’t have coffee, do you?”

“Of course we have coffee. The retreat starts at five. We’ll have fresh coffee available almost twenty-four-seven until they leave next Sunday.” Cat poured her uncle a cup, then got a basket of muffins and set them and a plate on the table. “You’ll have to deal with this until Shauna gets done. Unless you want me to warm up some hashbrown casserole in the microwave?”

“That sounds perfect. After I formally interview Ms. Jennings, I’m going home and sleeping for eight hours. Dispatch has strict orders not to wake me unless there’s been another murder,” he unwrapped a muffin. “You will keep that from happening, right? Even if you find a body in your backyard, just wait to call 911. Please?”

“I’m not going to find a body in my backyard,” Cat laughed, but she looked out the kitchen window to make sure her words were true. At least for the moment. “You need to hire another deputy.”

“Tell that to the mayor. He thinks I should be able to do it all with the help of my three officers. I think he’s pocketing the money the college sends us for town law enforcement instead of hiring someone new.” He rolled his shoulders. “You and Dante find out who’s been stealing from the cookie jar at the college yet?”

“He thought it was the guy who got himself killed last night. So no, we haven’t. And like I told him, now I’ve got a retreat to run. I’m not going to have time to play Sherlock Holmes on this case.” Cat cut a square of the casserole and popped it into the microwave as she talked.

“You just keep telling yourself that and maybe you won’t get sucked into my murder investigation this time. Sometimes you don’t realize you’re a civilian, not a book character.” He sipped his coffee. “I can feel life pouring back into my body with every sip and every bite. You and your friends are good to have around.”

“You need to eat something besides the chips and candy bars in your desk drawer,” Cat poured herself another cup and sat down with her uncle. She opened a muffin and took a bite.

“I’ve told you I can make homemade granola and buy you cheese curds for your snacks,” Shauna said as she came into the kitchen. “You need to be eating better when you’re not getting your meals here. Otherwise, I’m going to have to insist that you eat all your meals here. Then I can track your nutrition.”

He waved at her. “Stop nagging. I have Shirley for that. How are you, Shauna? Sorry, I’m late for brunch. I can just eat whatever’s easiest.”

“I’ll make you some eggs and fruit to go with your hashbrowns and muffins. Eating dessert first isn’t a bad way to start a Sunday. You probably needed the sugar to keep you going.” Shauna took the plate out of the microwave and gave it to him. Then she started cooking. “Did you know about Maggie and Alicia?”

“No, I didn’t,” Cat filled her uncle in on the fact that Maggie Martin was a surprise guest and her relationship with Alicia. “I wonder how it will affect the retreat. We’ve had friends come together before. And even that one writing group that Deek ran. But this seems more intimate of a connection.”

“And there’s a connection between the missing money and President Martin,” Uncle Pete waved his fork at them, keeping his head low over his plate as he ate. “Martin has all the access to the financial pots as well as the codes for everyone, including Dante. He could have framed your friend with one hand tied behind his back. And he was at the party when Johnson was killed.”

“Dante doesn’t think he’d do that.” Cat chased a stray muffin crumb off her plate.

“Sometimes your friend is too nice,” Uncle Pete looked up as Shauna took the empty plate away and put a new filled plate in front of him.

“I never thought I’d hear those words come out of your mouth describing Dante,” Cat stood and took her plate back to the sink. “I’m running upstairs to write unless you need me.”

“As long as Shauna can set me up to talk to Ms. Jennings, I’m good,” He grabbed her hand as she walked by. “Just make sure you stay on the edge of this Dante thing. I don’t want someone thinking you’re good leverage to get him in line.”

Cat blinked as she thought about what her uncle had just said. “I hadn’t thought about it that way.”

“Please have Seth join you and the group on any outings. I’ve already briefed him early this morning on what was going on and asked him to watch out for you two. I’m so glad you have an ex-Army Ranger in the house. I don’t worry half as much as I used to during these retreat weeks.”

“Now you have me worried,” Cat kissed her uncle’s forehead. “Make sure you do get some sleep later. Are you okay to drive home? Seth could...”

He shook his head. “Seth’s not leaving your side until we find out who was

embezzling and probably, who killed Johnson. I think Johnson was mixed up in this whole scheme. It's too coincidental for him just to be randomly killed last night at Dante's house. Usually, it's all about the money."

Cat left the kitchen after taking the water bottle that Shauna had just set out for her. Shauna was her best friend and had been since they'd met in a bar in California where Cat had moved after the divorce. She'd wanted to live someplace the opposite of Aspen Hills, so she accepted a teaching position just south of Los Angeles and lived in a condo by the shore. She walked on the beach every morning, taught her assigned classes, then wrote, and then she'd find herself in this little dive bar that served the best tacos. Shauna had been the bartender at the place and they'd become fast friends.

When Cat had learned that Michael had left her the Victorian they'd bought as a couple, she jokingly came up with the retreat idea. Shauna had jumped at the chance to be part of it. Now, they were living their best life, and Seth, Cat's ex-boyfriend, now current boyfriend, was part of the family. Life was weird and the world smaller than you expected.

She settled into her desk, opened her writing program, and read the last few pages. She'd written yesterday so it didn't take much for her to fall into the story. She was writing two series now – her original character Tori was in college that taught magic and more human-based degrees like finance and English. And her cousin was attending Tori's old high school and learning about her own magical talents. She loved being in both of her imaginary worlds.

Her office and her words were her happy place. She could retreat here and just enjoy the silence of the morning. Many authors she knew wrote in crowded coffee shops or turned on music to soundtrack their writing. Some even lit candles. For her, the messy desk with a weekly calendar, a planner, a whiteboard with her most important deadlines, word counts, pens, and lots of paper in all different sizes was nirvana. She even had a framed picture of Sam that Seth had given her, well, Sam had given her

for Christmas.

The chaos made her feel safe. As a professor, she'd been the same way. Her office at the college had class notes, student papers, and books all over. She'd had Michael install bookcases both at the college and here in her turret. She'd painted these white and they held all her college books as well as most of the fiction she'd collected as a child. Then she had her Tbr section of books she wanted to read, someday. She figured she'd be done by the time she was 536 or maybe 537. So many books, so little time.

As she fell into the writing, the worries of the last few days fell away. It wasn't that she didn't care that someone had died in the same house where she'd been making small talk with the upper crust of Covington College. She just needed to make sure Tori got her final paper done while she was fighting the rogue wizards who were trying to take over her sorority house as well as the world.

A girl has to have priorities, right?

A gentle knock on the door pulled her out of the wild magic that was flying around the dining room of the Beta Gamma Kappa house. Cat turned away from the computer, trying to bring herself back to reality. She called, "Come in."

Shauna opened the door with a tray. A bowl of soup that smelled remarkable and a sandwich sat on the tray as well as two chocolate chip cookies. And a large bottle of water with a glass of ice. "I made you an early dinner since your writer thing starts at five. They're all out to grab a meal now too so you can write until your meeting starts."

"You don't have to do this, I can come down and eat with you and Seth," Cat's stomach growled. Thank goodness someone thought about food or she would have eaten cookies during the write-in as dinner. "But thank you. It smells amazing."

“Seth has already eaten and I’m going to a class on fall soups this evening so this works better for me,” she set the tray on the coffee table and then sat on the arm of the overstuffed couch in the room. “Seth’s still not happy, is he?”

“Oh, I’d say not happy is a mild description. If Uncle Pete hadn’t ordered him to watch out for us this week, I think he would be on a plane to Tahiti right now.” Cat stood and walked over to the sitting area. She poured the water into the glass and took a long drink. Then she set it down. “He has to know that I’m just helping Dante find this money guy, right?”

“Dante reminds him of Michael and that whole marriage thing. You need to be sensitive to him right now. He’s fragile.”

Cat snorted. “The one thing Seth has never been is fragile. He played football in high school. He took the hardest route in the Army and became a Ranger. He was courted by the top echelon contracting teams in the world. Well, until he got hurt.”

Shauna stared at her, “Exactly.”

“So he thinks all I want him for is his strength? His body?” Cat scrubbed at her face. “He must really think I’m shallow.”

“Dante’s not hurt. And he’s rich. And handsome,” Shauna stood and walked to the door. “Since I dated him, I won’t describe all his charming characteristics. A lady never kisses and tells. Anyway, be thoughtful.”

Cat devoured her early dinner alone. Sometimes being around people was impossible to figure out. She had a retreat to run. She couldn’t think about Seth’s feelings now. She’d have a long talk with him after the guests left.

She just hoped it would be enough.

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Chapter

Four

Cat was the first one in the living room that night for the orientation and write-ins. She always told people this session was voluntary, but she'd yet to have no one show up. Maybe this week would be different. She nibbled on the brownie she'd snagged from the treats Shauna had set up in the dining room before she'd left for her meeting.

She should have been scanning her notes for the orientation, but instead, she was thinking about Dante and the missing money. If Allen Johnson had been the one taking the money, his being killed at Dante's house was problematic. It could look to her uncle that Dante had set Allen up to take the fall. Or Dante had found out Allen had set him up and killed him in a fit of rage. The problem with that scenario was Dante didn't have to kill someone directly. The family had people for that. Besides, no one in their right mind would kill someone in Dante's house.

Cat thought about the first rule of investigation, at least in her mind. Find out more about the victim. She started researching Allen Johnson but before she could search through his Facebook page or his college bio page, the writers arrived all at the same time—even Maggie and Alicia.

They'd been chatting when they entered the room, but when they saw Cat sitting and waiting, everyone quieted and found a seat. Earlier, she'd pulled the furniture into a large circle and added a whiteboard with flip chart paper and markers on a stand next to her.

“You guys have a little time before we get started to grab a cup of coffee or a drink and snacks from the dining room. Shauna went all out for tonight’s writing session.” Cat stood and stretched, sending a visual clue that she wasn’t ready to start. Writers for the most part were rule followers. Tell them to write ten reasons they wanted to attend the retreat; they’ll give you twelve or fifteen. And when class started, they were ready with their pen and paper or laptop to take notes. Or at least look like they were.

“Okay if I run up and get my laptop?” Nan Berry asked, standing up. “I thought we were a little early.”

“Go ahead. We’ll start in ten minutes. In general, feel free to take a break anytime you need. We’re informal this week,” Cat paused as she thought about what she’d just said. “Except for the library session and Tuesday and Friday’s session. I don’t teach or run those sessions so I can’t speak for those sessions. But anything I do here, we’re casual. I need a volunteer to run the write-ins at night. I find I get more work done that way. If no one wants to take that on, Shauna or Seth will step in.”

“You’ll be writing this week with us?” Patrick Bradley asked. He wrote thrillers and lived in the Washington DC area according to what Cat had read on his retreat application.

Cat nodded. “First and foremost, I’m an author. I have deadlines to meet. If I’m on deadline during a retreat, you’ll see me on my laptop more often than not. Besides, I get a lot of work done during the sprints. I’m not sure what the power of writing for twenty-five minutes at a time is, but it works. Does anyone do these sprints at home?”

A few people raised their hands. Cat could tell some were waiting to run out of the room for her to stop talking. They didn’t want to miss anything. She beat them to it. “I’ll be back in a few minutes, I need coffee.”

She headed to the kitchen and texted her uncle asking if there were any updates to Allen's death. She set the phone on the table and poured her a cup of coffee, mixing a packet of hot chocolate inside to make a cheap mocha. Then she added whipped cream.

Chocolate and sugar would get her through the week. At least they'd help.

When her uncle didn't respond, she dialed Dante's number. He picked up on the first ring.

"What's wrong?" He sounded concerned.

"Nothing's wrong. I was just wondering if you've heard anything about Allen's death. I'm on my way to a writers' session tonight so I don't have a lot of time to chat, but I haven't heard anything since my uncle came for brunch today."

"I didn't talk to him all day. Did you get an invite for coffee from Grace Evans? She said she was going to reach out. Her husband is, I mean, was friends with Allen. Maybe she has some information?"

"Hold on," Cat looked at her phone. She did have an invite for coffee tomorrow afternoon at one. She could do that. The writers would be done with the library session and in an independent working period. Or still at lunch. It depended on the group. She answered the text and then went back to the call with Dante. "I'm seeing her tomorrow at one. Anything you want me to ask?"

"If somehow you could find out if he made any recent large purchases? And how his widow is set up? Without asking?"

"I'll be discreet, but Seth said they hired him to do a remodel last year that was over the top expensive. I wonder if Uncle Pete talked to him?"

Dante chuckled, “That’s up to you to find out. Your uncle doesn’t disclose anything about Seth to me. And Seth doesn’t talk to me, not even when I run into him in town.”

Cat went back to the living room, putting her phone on silent mode. She held it up. “Just a reminder, please be thoughtful about phone calls. When we’re in sessions or write-ins, please silence your phone. Especially when you’re in the library. Ms. Applebome will confiscate it tomorrow morning if you don’t and it rings during her session.”

A chuckle went through the group.

“You guys think Cat’s kidding,” Alicia shook her head. “My roommate Freshman year had hers set to play a rock song in the library and when Applebome heard it, she took the phone for a week. She only had it on because she was waiting for a call to see if this guy she’d met was going to ask her out. She thought he’d ghosted her.”

“And going to administration to complain won’t help your cause,” Maggie Martin added. “My husband has at least twenty complaints a year on her tactics. But she’s an amazing librarian.”

“And with that cautionary tale, let’s talk about the structure of the retreat,” Cat pointed to a schedule on the whiteboard and walked everyone through the sessions that were already set. Then they brainstormed on what the writers wanted out of the retreat. Cat put these ideas on a sheet of flip chart paper.

Then she handed out the retreat contracts. “This is an agreement with your future self. Where do you want to be on Saturday morning when we get together for the last time? Well besides when I take the group to dinner that night to end the retreat. There’s a place for word count and page count for edits. But if you have another goal, like querying 100 agents by Friday, you can write that too. Just make sure your goal

is SMART. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound.”

“Can you give us an example,” Jon asked as he was furiously writing on a legal pad.

“Of course, but this is on your goal sheet too” Cat explained the five criteria of a SMART writing goal and then gave a few examples. “Please turn the contract in tomorrow before we go to the library. Then I’ll review and make sure we’re supporting you with what you need to make your goals this week a reality.”

Everyone was looking at the sheet.

“So, you’ve seen what we’ve planned for the retreat. What else do you want to know before you leave? We can use your list for topics for my session on Wednesday on Ask an Author Anything, or Quad-A for short.” She paused for a minute. “Or, if you want to spend time at the library researching, just let me know. We might be able to find a subject matter expert if you want a specific session. I can’t promise I can deliver everything, but several of the faculty have published several books.”

Alicia held up her hand. “Do you know anyone who knows about self-publishing? I’m writing genre fiction and my professors say no agent will pick me up.”

“Well, one, he’s wrong. And two, yes, we have several authors in town who successfully self-published and some who have traditional contracts. I can set up a panel for anyone interested. Maybe Thursday if I can pull it together?”

Maggie was frowning and nodding at the same time. Cat wasn’t sure what was going through her head. But then she raised a hand, “I’d be interested in attending that panel as well.”

Several others added support so Cat wrote it down on the flipchart. “This is more for me so I don’t forget to do something.”

They spent another thirty minutes doing that, then Cat called a break. “I’ll be glad to run tonight’s writing sessions – for an hour, but after that, you’re on your own. I need my beauty sleep.”

Maggie stopped on her way to the dining room. “If no one else wants to run these, I’ll do it. I’m used to bossing people around. Not really, but I’m reliable and can use a timer.”

“You’re hired unless someone desperately wants the job. Then we’ll set up a mud wrestling match to the death,” Cat laughed as Maggie stared at her. “This is why I can’t run nightly events. I’m already rummy and it’s only Sunday.”

“You were out late last night. I was so sorry to hear about Allen’s death. I hope Dante’s not blaming himself.” Maggie glanced at her watch. “I need to go call Martin before we start. He’s so needy.”

Cat followed Maggie out of the room and went to the kitchen. Shauna was still gone. They had implemented an in-and-out whiteboard in the kitchen so if someone was looking for someone else, they didn’t have to go searching through the three-story, two-wings of the Victorian to find out that the person was out shopping or at the library. There was a black dot that you moved on the board to show your goings from home to out and back. Both Shauna’s and Seth’s dots were in the out column. But only Shauna’s had a note saying where she was at.

Seth was still mad at her. It was going to be a long week.

The next morning, Cat was up before anyone. Except Shauna. Cat didn’t know how much sleep her friend got during retreat weeks, but she did know she’d never beat her downstairs. She’d changed into yoga pants and a large sweatshirt with a tank underneath. Not too much different than the pajamas she’d taken off, but these didn’t have red hearts all over them. She poured coffee, then went to sit by Shauna at the

table who was writing in her planner. “Good morning, I didn’t hear you come in last night.”

“A bunch of us went out for a drink after the meeting,” she sighed and looked up. “Having another murder has messed with my retreat mojo. I needed a bit of calm.”

“So you went to a college bar? That’s the opposite of calm, isn’t it?” Cat sipped her coffee. Shauna had lost someone close and was still dealing with his death.

“We went to the wine bar. It was filled with professors and their wives, talking about Allen Johnson’s death. I probably would have been better off going to one of the college bars,” Shauna admitted. “There’s a rumor going around that Dante found Allen’s hand in the cookie jar.”

“And killed him in his own house? That’s just stupid.” Cat sipped her coffee.

Shauna stood after the oven timer went off. She opened the door and took out two pans of what appeared to be banana nut muffins. She set the muffins on a rack to cool and put two waiting pans into the oven, setting another timer. “Most rumors are stupid. I’m just telling you what I heard.”

“Sorry, I’m killing the messenger,” Cat sank deeper into her chair. “I knew rumors were going to start flying about Dante’s involvement. That scenario is just not realistic.”

“So what do you think happened?” Shauna sat down at the table.

“Dante thought someone was misappropriating money for their personal use. And then pointing the finger at him. He’s been fielding calls from donors for months now wondering why the promises that were made to them haven’t been followed up on. So he talked to Allen Johnson, the head of fundraising. He assured Dante that he

would look into the issue. He only has two fundraiser positions under him. If anyone was draining money, he was the most likely candidate.” Cat filled Shauna in on what Dante had told her over coffee over a week ago now. “So he wanted me to go to that stupid party and see what I thought about Allen.”

“What did you think?”

“He mentioned trouble with whale donors,” Cat sighed as she sipped her coffee. “Other than that, he was a total jerk. He called me sweetheart and said the men were talking, or something like that. I wanted to punch him, but I was talking to Maggie then. She just blew it off. I can’t believe she has to deal with such patriarchal attitudes all the time.”

“Have you talked to Maggie since she’s been here? She might be able to give you some insight into the way the college world is. The way it works.” Shauna pulled out her planner and started making notes about the retreat. “I found that the biggest blowhards when I was a bartender tended to be the least likely to cause real problems. It was the silent guys in the corner you had to watch.”

Cat thought about Shauna’s advice as she made her way upstairs to her office, fortified with coffee and a couple of muffins for later. She had a busy day scheduled. Words first, then she’d go with the group and drop the writers off at the library. She could stop by the fundraising office and see how they were dealing with Allen’s death. It would be polite. Then she had a coffee date with Grace Evans. Hopefully, she’d drop some juicy gossip that Cat could give to Dante and her part of the investigation would be over. Maggie was the only one to volunteer to run the evening writing sprints so Cat could write. She knew something else might happen, but at least she had a framework for the day.

And with that done, she started writing.

Her phone buzzed at nine-thirty. It was time to get ready for the trip to the library. Cat wrote down her word count, and then saved her document. She sent it in an email to herself. The laptop she'd use tonight had access to the same cloud files, but Cat just felt easier when she also sent herself a copy after a good writing session. She deleted the old emails at the end of the week so she wouldn't use up all her storage, but she'd never have to recreate scenes again. Not like she had that time her computer had gone down in the middle of a manuscript.

The more she wrote, the more paranoid about losing documents she got.

When she finally made her way downstairs, most of the group was already waiting by the front door. They had a few minutes before they had to leave to be able to walk to the library. Cat could have asked Seth to drive them, but she liked adding a bit of exercise to the retreat where she could.

"Who has their phone on them?" She looked around the group.

Everyone pulled it out and she watched as they silenced the ringers. "Good job."

"Alicia scared us into complying," Jon Booth said as he poked the young woman's shoulder. "My wife would kill me if I didn't check in at night. She's dealing with our teenage daughter who thinks she should be treated like an adult at fourteen."

"Give her a bill for the rent, lights, and food," Nan Berry suggested. "She'll change her tune quickly."

"Knowing Penelope, she'd just say she was getting a job," Jon groaned as the others laughed.

"Find out what McDonald's pays and then take out taxes and all the other deductions. She'll find out she can't afford to live in your house with a minimum-wage job,"

Debra added. "I worked one summer making plastic milk bottles. That job sent me screaming back to college. I never missed a class after freshman year."

Cat studied Debra as she joked around with the group. She didn't seem affected by finding Allen's body. But some people dealt with death easier than others. She would have hated to have Debra's retreat ruined by the event. And now she sounded cold and unfeeling. She was so glad she hadn't said any of that aloud.

Cat glanced at her watch, "Okay if we're going to be on time, which means ten minutes early, we need to leave now. Everyone ready?"

"Maggie's not down yet," Alicia looked over at the stairs but they were empty. "I talked to her at breakfast and she was planning on coming with us. She just needed to call her husband first."

"Text her that we're leaving, and I'll let Shauna know that she may need to drive Maggie over to the library. I don't want the rest of you to be late," Cat smiled like she was kidding, but she didn't want to deal with the librarian's wrath if she brought the group to the library late. Even after giving the library a large portion of Michael's estate that Cat felt was a little too sketchy for her to accept, the librarian still hadn't forgotten the fact that Cat had snuck a non-circulating reference book out of the library. She'd even returned it, but that didn't wipe away the stain.

The writers were afraid of Ms. Applebome only taking their phones. Cat was afraid the woman would ban her, and her retreat guests, from the library entirely.

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Chapter

Five

Cat and the retreaters were halfway down the block when Maggie Martin caught up. She slowed down as she walked next to Cat. “Sorry, John was going on and on about the issues with the fundraising department and I lost track of time. You would think he’d talk these problems out with his vice president rather than me.”

“Shauna could have driven you to the library,” Cat heard the wheezing in the woman’s breath as she tried to talk and walk at the same time.

“I haven’t run that fast in years,” Maggie coughed. “You and your retreat are good for me. I got an entire chapter written last night. I haven’t ever done that. Who knows if it’s any good, but words are words, right?”

“Exactly. And if you’re looking to add a workout to your day, there’s a little gym in the basement with a treadmill and weights. I like running outside, but sometimes the weather stops me. Getting moving, even just walking, like this, helps keep the words moving in my opinion.” Cat watched for cars as the group crossed over Main Street and headed onto campus. “You’d be surprised how much.”

“We’ll see. I may be asleep before the writing sprints even happen tonight.” Maggie must have seen Cat’s face react because she laughed. “I’m just kidding. I’ll be there with bells on and a huge cup of coffee to keep me awake so I can run them. But if the younger guys want to stay up late, they’re on their own.”

“I appreciate you volunteering,” Cat said as they headed up the stairs to the library. Alicia was at the front of the group, leading them to the library. The good thing about having a Covington student in the group was that they took their unofficial role as tour guide seriously. Alicia was a natural. As they gathered in the hallway next to the first-floor conference room, Cat handed everyone their temporary library card. She didn’t have one for Alicia, who had a student card, or Maggie. “You have a library card, right?”

Maggie dug into her designer tote, Gucci, if Cat was right, and pulled out her wallet. “Right here, somewhere.”

Ms. Applebome greeted the group. “Good morning, please go inside and find a seat. We’ll be starting in a bit. Alicia, great to see you. How’s the Hemingway studies going?”

“Really well. I think my thesis is going to rock the committee, thanks to you,” Alicia followed the group inside.

Ms. Applebome stared at Maggie who was now flipping through credit cards looking for her library card. “Mrs. Martin, can I help you with something?”

Maggie looked up and smiled, “I’m part of Cat’s retreat this week. Isn’t that wonderful? Now if I could just find my library card.”

“You left it in a book you returned six months ago. I have it at the reference desk. We can go and retrieve it after my class,” she pointed toward the doorway to the conference room. “Please go inside and find a seat. I need a minute with Catherine.”

Cat’s stomach dropped. What was it this time? Had last month’s retreat guests been too rowdy in the library? Had she missed returning a book?

After Maggie went inside the room, Ms. Applebome closed the door behind her. “I wanted to make sure you were okay. I heard there was a body found at Dante Cornelio’s party this weekend.”

“I’m fine. I didn’t find Allen Johnson’s body, one of my guests did. Debra Jennings. She’s the tall blond.” Cat explained, nodding toward the door.

“I was talking about you and Dante. Rumors are going around that you two are an item. What about Seth?” Ms. Applebome drilled Cat with a stare that could freak anyone out.

“My love life is no one’s business but my own,” Cat responded. She wanted to tell everyone what was going on, but as Ms. Applebome said, rumors floated around the school like puffy clouds. She tried to “I’ve been hearing rumors about Allen stealing from the donor fund. Have you heard those?”

The librarian glanced around them before she answered. “The rumors say it wasn’t Allen who was stealing, it was Dante. Is that the kind of man you want to hitch your star to, young lady?”

“I’m not hitching,” Cat scrubbed at her face and then pointed to her watch. “You’re one minute late to your lecture.”

Ms. Applebome’s eyes widened as she looked at the clock and she hurried to the door. Before she went inside, she turned and looked at Cat. “You need to be careful. The college, well, it isn’t what people think.”

The fear in the librarian’s face made Cat’s heart soften a bit. She’d come back and tell her that she wasn’t really dating Dante as soon as she could.

Now that Cat had delivered the guests to their library orientation session, she headed

to the administration building and took the stairs to the top floor. The president's office was up here as well as the donor department. Dante had an office on this floor too as the family's representative. But he had a different title. Vice President of Family and Community Relations. He drew a salary, but the money came from the family's funding and not the schools. He was there to keep the peace. He was there in kind of an undercover cop role, although if you called him that, he'd laugh.

She decided to kill two birds with one stone. She'd visit Dante after seeing what she could find out about Allen Johnson from his grieving co-workers.

Except when she opened the door to the fundraising department, there was no one at the front desk and there was a party going on in the conference room. Not the somber atmosphere she'd expected. She half expected the small group in the conference room eating cake to start singing a round of, "Ding Dong the witch is dead," at any moment.

She walked over and knocked on the open door of conference room. The cake had a big Congratulations, Mike , written in icing on the top. "Excuse me, is this the fundraising department?"

A woman broke away from the happy group and closed the door behind her. "I'm sorry that no one was out at the desk to greet you. We're celebrating the promotion of one of our staff to department head this morning."

"Oh, is that because Allen Johnson was killed?" Cat asked and the smile fell off the woman's face.

"Yes, that was a terrible tragedy and Mr. Johnson will be missed, but the world goes on," she folded her arms, clearly tired of the banter. "What can I help you with?"

"I'm Cat Latimer. I was at the party the night Allen died," Cat glanced at the room

where Mike was now talking to his new crew. “I had some questions.”

“I’m Kim Stage. I’m the office manager for the department,” she looked around and nodded to the waiting area. “Let’s sit and I’ll see if I can answer your questions. You realize we already talked to your uncle this morning.”

So they knew who she was and who she was related to. Kim probably also thought Cat was dating Dante, which is why she was even open to chatting with her. If she hadn’t been linked to the mobster, the office manager would have sent Cat packing. Dante would hate Cat even using that word to describe him, but right now, it worked in her favor. People were afraid of Dante.

“I realize this might be a bit unorthodox, but thank you for talking with me,” Cat pulled a notebook and pen out of her tote. “I take it that Allen was head of fundraising? I talked to him at the party and he didn’t seem to like donors.”

“That described Allen to a tee. He hated talking to people about giving money. Mike was our biggest fundraiser for the last five years running. Allen liked pushing papers and going to parties. Then he’d send Mike and Roxie, that’s Mike Tosan and Roxie Scarsdale, the contact information of the people he met. They did all the work. Allen got all the credit.” Kim shook her head. “I shouldn’t talk ill of the dead. I’m sure his wife is heartbroken.”

Cat wrote down the names as she thought about her next question. “You’re the office manager. Did you deal with donor gifts and the accounting?”

She nodded. “You’re asking about the missing money. Somewhere from the gift letter that Mike and Roxie have all the donors sign with the check, to when it got recorded, money started going missing. It was about a year ago. We thought the leak was out of the office, somewhere in accounting. Those people get paid chump change for all the money they handle every day. Most work here to get their kids a free education. Then

once the kids are out on their own, the parents quit here and go and make real money.”

“We thought? You and Allen?”

Kim glanced back at the conference room. “Mike and I have been researching the problem for the last month. We told President Martin about it two weeks ago. He said he’d handle it and keep quiet. It wouldn’t look good to certain invested stakeholders.”

“You mean Dante and the family.” Cat decided not to play coy. She knew the college’s special circumstances. And apparently, so did Kim.

A long breath released as Kim nodded. “I never know exactly what to say about that. I came from a small Denver college when my husband got a job teaching in the mathematics department. He told me after we were here and I was applying for this job. He said I’d get it or another one because they wanted to make sure we both had jobs. He said not to worry about what I might hear. He was wrong. I worry all the time, especially now that we’re divorced.”

“The college is legit,” Cat told her. “My uncle wouldn’t be police chief here if he thought there were issues. Aspen Hills is a safe place. Safer probably than most places.”

“Except Allen’s dead,” Kim pointed out as the door to the conference room opened and people started piling out. “That’s my cue. I’ve got to transfer all of Allen’s files over to Mike and get him up to speed on Allen’s job. If I find anything odd, can I call you?”

“Please,” Cat handed her a business card she’d made for the retreat business. “I’d appreciate it.”

As they stood, Kim paused. “I’m not sure why you’re doing this. You might be putting yourself in danger.”

“I hope not,” Cat agreed, “but I don’t think anyone should get away with murder just to cover up stealing money. Where does it stop?”

She thanked Kim for her time, then left the office and headed to Dante’s suite across the hallway.

As she walked into the plush outer office, a conservatively dressed woman at a large dark oak desk smiled at her and said, “Good morning Ms. Latimer, Mr. Cornelio is in his office and available to see you. I’ve already let him know you’re here.”

As she walked past the woman’s desk, she saw one of the two screens was a security monitor that showed the front door, the elevator, the hallway outside Dante’s office, as well as the stairs. Suited men stood in the stairwell, waiting.

Dante had Secret Service level of security. At least here at the school. She opened the oversized door and stared at the large office. “I’ve never been in here before. This is bigger than the college president’s office. And you have better security.”

“No one wants to kill a small Colorado college president. Me, on the other hand, I somehow keep ticking people off.” He stood to greet her and squeezed her hands. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

I’m trying to keep up the rumors about us. So, I need to show my face,” she sat in one of his visitor chairs. It invited people to curl up and stay a while. Not like any other office she’d visited. “Is the woman out front office staff or security?”

“Who says she can’t do both? Jodi is an excellent analyst. I hired her out of the CIA. She’s a black belt and used to compete in world competitions. She stopped after she’d

won every title out there. I like having excellent people around me.” Dante reached for the intercom. “She also makes great coffee. Do you want some?”

Cat shook her head. “I’m good. I drank a pot before I brought the retreat guests over for their library orientation. The book’s going well but I’ll need to clean it up before I send it in next month.”

“Then, why are you here, just for appearance's sake?” He glanced at his watch. “You have a coffee date at one.”

“I happen to be aware of that, thank you, Dad.” Cat teased. “I wanted the fundraising department to see I came in here to chat with you. Did you know they already replaced Allen?”

He pointed to his computer. “I did. The college sends me an update if anyone is hired or promoted. Just in case.”

“What did you think?” Sometimes talking to Dante was like pounding nails. You never knew what question would get a real answer.

“Mike Tosan is a good guy. His wife is a history professor here. I was kind of expecting them to promote Roxie though. She’s been with the college longer and has excellent contacts out in the funding world.” He peered at her. “What did you think of either of them?”

“I didn’t meet them. I talked to Kim Stage, the office manager. She said they were all happy for his promotion because he brought in a lot of donor money.” She stood, taking another look around the professionally designed office. “I need to walk into town now and have coffee.”

“I could drive you, or have my car take you,” he offered, but he didn’t rise.

“I like walking, it’s almost warm out there today,” she paused at the door. “If Allen wasn’t on the take, maybe someone killed him to frame you.”

“I’ve thought about that. I hear my name is getting high odds in the betting pool. Or is it low odds when they think I’m guilty? I’ve never understood all the ins and outs of gambling.”

Caught off guard, Cat laughed. “I don’t think you want to admit that to anyone who works for you. You’ll lose your mobster reputation quickly.”

“Especially if they find out I’m more partial to tea than bourbon.” He shot her a quick salute. “Go forward and be careful. I don’t want you doing anything dangerous.”

“You sound like my uncle. Remember, walking across the street can be dangerous if you don’t look both ways,” she threw back at him. He wasn’t going to control her actions, even though he wasn’t the first man to try. She left his office and took the stairs down to the first floor, surprising the security guard who was stationed inside the stairwell.

People must not take the stairs often here.

As Cat walked, she texted Shauna to let her know she was stopping for coffee on the way home and to not expect her for lunch.

The text back was short and mouthwatering. Potato soup would be waiting when she finally arrived home.

It was nice to live with someone who loved cooking. Shauna had taken over all the comforting parts of the retreat. She fed the guests breakfast and supplied drinks and treats for the rest of the day. She cleaned their rooms in the middle of the week as well as after they left. And she did a light touch-up on the days in between. She was

like a really cool dorm mom from college.

Then when the retreat wasn't in session, Shauna still fed the three of them. Cat had hired a cleaning service that came in before every retreat session and did a deep dive clean. They all did their own laundry, but the kitchen was Shauna's domain.

Someday, Shauna would find the one and move out on her own. But for now, Cat loved the way the house felt more like a home than it had even when she'd been married to Michael. Shauna's touch was part of the reason why. And having Seth there.

Cat wondered why she had been so sentimental the last few days. Had Allen dying at the party thrown her more than she'd realized? She didn't have time for even a mental exercise on this. She had a retreat to run. And to help Dante clear his name. Everything else would have to wait until next week.

She should have told Grace Evans she would have coffee with her then. But she was out and about today and the writers were engaged with library things so she didn't have to feel guilty. And yet, she did. Besides, Dante thought she might have information about Allen.

She felt uncomfortable about going off on an investigation without telling Seth or her uncle. Shauna knew what was going on and where she was going. So she wasn't one of the basement girls that you knew were going to get slashed in the first five minutes of the horror film.

That was her story and she was sticking to it as she walked into the coffee shop to meet Grace Evans. She hoped she hadn't made a huge mistake and trusted the wrong person.

She'd done that before too.

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Chapter

Six

Grace waved Cat over to a booth as soon as she opened the coffee shop door. Grace must have been here early as every table and booth was filled. Cat went over and greeted the woman, taking her hat, scarf, mittens, and coat off before scooting into the other side of the booth. She saw a menu on the table. “Do we order up front,” Cat asked as she looked for a counter. She hadn’t been at this coffeehouse before.

“No, they’ll come by in a minute. I know the owner and she likes hiring college kids so if they do sit-down service, she can hire more people. Katie has such a big heart.” Grace pointed to the menu with her long fingers that had several diamond rings on each hand. As well as a nice manicure. Cat wasn’t sure the last time she’d even had a manicure. Probably when her last book was released, just before she’d gone on the book tour. She liked to look professional so she packed suits to wear and even had her hair done before the tours started.

Grace looked like she dressed like this all the time. She had a beautifully draped blue blouse with a leather jacket over the top. Her hair was light brown with sunny highlights. “I’m so glad we’re doing this. We didn’t live here when your ex-husband was on staff. I’m sure if we had, you and I would have been best friends.”

Cat kind of doubted that, but she smiled and nodded anyway. “So when did you move to Aspen Hills?”

“Five years ago? Time flies. Ronnie, that’s my husband, he teaches in the business

department. He wanted to be a lawyer but got tired of school, so he got an MA and started teaching. He just finished his PhD and now he's in school all the time." Grace wagged her finger. "The moral of that story is to be careful what you wish for, you never know how the universe will interpret your wish."

Cat sat the menu down. She knew what she was having. And maybe Grace was right, they could have been friends. "I know that feeling. I thought the only thing I ever wanted to do was teach, but then I got hired as a faculty member and the writing bug hit. Micheal was so embarrassed when I told him I was writing paranormal young adult. He wanted me to focus on literary studies. I love genre fiction and telling stories people what to read."

"It's too bad you don't write mysteries, you could have a field day with Allen's murder, am I right? He was such a sweet man. Hen-pecked, though. His wife always wanted more. That's why I work. I want to be able to pay for my wants all by myself without some man telling me no. Of course, Ronnie doesn't know the meaning of the word when it comes to me." She grinned as the waitress came up to their table. "I'm going to have another one of these large mochas with real milk and whipped cream and a plate of your chocolate chip cookies."

Cat gave the waitress her coffee order, black with two pumps of caramel, and then added a plate of snickerdoodles. They probably weren't as good as Shauna's, but she'd find out. And share with Grace. The woman seemed to have a sweet tooth.

After the waitress left, she turned back to Grace. "I've heard that Allen was involved in some money issues with the college."

"Oh, that's just rumors. They also say that Dante killed him and we both know that's not true. Allen had his own money tree. He didn't need to pick off anyone else's tree. I wasn't sure why he even worked. His wife had a trust from her father. He was a famous writer and set her up for life. Compounding interest is the true millionaire

maker, am I right?" She smiled as the waitress delivered their drinks and cookies. "Thanks, doll."

"I didn't know that," Cat wondered how Dante had missed that little bit of background. "Are you sure?"

Grace nodded. "Lucy and I were good friends. She even gave us a card from her money manager. I called once but Ronnie and I don't have enough saved for them to even bother to talk to us. You have to be really rich. We're just Aspen Hill's rich. I heard you donated a lot of your ex-husband's estate to the college. That was nice."

"Our relationship was challenging so I thought it would be best," Cat didn't want to talk about Micheal, especially to someone who didn't know the full story. "I'm so sorry for Allen's wife. I know losing someone is hard."

"The good thing is she's got the kids, and the money doesn't hurt either. I heard this morning that the college has already replaced him. They don't let a body get cold, do they?" Grace asked as she ate a cookie. "I mean, he hasn't even had a funeral yet. It's on Thursday, at three in the college chapel if you want to come. I got the invite right after the announcement that they'd replaced him. I work for the fundraising department, but I work from home. I don't think my personality fits into the small cubical they wanted to give me."

As they talked, Cat started to relax. It was nice having someone to talk to who knew what it was like as the wife of a Covington professor. She'd had the same insecurities and crazy schedule when she was married to Michael even though they were both professors, Michael was more established and on the cusp of doing something great in the field of Economics. Cat had written a fictional witch academy book. Both were great accomplishments, but only one got props from academia.

By the time they'd finished the cookies, Cat realized they'd been talking for over an

hour. “Sorry, I need to get back and check on the writers in this group. It’s their first official day and I like to be around as much as possible.”

The check had come by then and Grace threw two twenties on top, waving away Cat’s offer to pay. “I’ll get this. I hear that Maggie Martin is attending your retreat this month. She’s a force, that woman. She keeps her husband in line and had two Deans list kids the entire time they were in school. I don’t think she allows anyone she loves to be mediocre. I bet she was conflicted when they came to Covington. Not quite as prestigious as where she wanted to land, but it has way more perks.”

After promising to meet up again in a couple of weeks, Cat walked home. Her mind was filled with information she’d learned today. And the factors that didn’t feel right. Like Mike’s quick promotion after Allen’s death. And Roxie being passed over for the job.

As soon as she got back to the house, she made herself a cup of tea and sat down at the kitchen table. She updated the murder book she’d made for Allen’s death including the mystery of who was being light-fingered with the money which was Dante’s mystery that had started this. She could be wrong, but she felt like they all were connected. She just didn’t know how. Yet.

She had just finished with the updates when Seth came into the kitchen. He poured himself a cup of coffee and sat down at the table. She looked up and smiled at him, “Hey.”

“Hi, gorgeous. Sorry, I’ve been such a pill lately,” he reached out and stroked her face. “I’m just an insecure man with too much time on my hands. Are you doing okay?”

She’d take the olive branch. She leaned into his hand. It felt rough on her skin. A working man’s hand, her father had always called it. She sighed as he dropped his

hand and took a drink of his coffee. “I’m good. I was writing down what I found out today about Covington and Allen Johnson. And before you hear it on the grapevine, I visited Dante at his office. He has so much security it’s a little disconcerting.”

He raised his eyebrows and asked, “What’s going on with Dante?”

She told him about her visit to the fundraising department and how she wanted to keep up appearances for the gossip train. “I guess I’m going to a funeral on Thursday.”

“I’d come with you, but the whole fake dating Dante thing,” he grinned.

“Sure, now you’re fine with the arrangement if you don’t have to go to a funeral.” Cat threw a napkin at him.

“I do what I can for the team,” he nodded to her notebook. “Give me that and I’ll add what I know about Allen and Lucy.”

She handed over the notebook and the pen. “Did you know she had a trust fund?”

Seth looked up at her. “Seriously? She was so down to earth. You never would have guessed.”

“Guessed what,” Shauna asked as she came into the kitchen with a basket of towels to fold. The first floor had a small laundry room next to the kitchen which allowed her to get a lot of things done at the same time.

Cat filled her in, while Shauna folded clothes and Seth wrote. She loved afternoons like that when they were all together. As she did, she went to the stove and dished up a bowl of soup for her lunch. She was starving.

After they'd finished, Shauna glanced at the clock. "What's on the schedule for tonight? Do you need someone to run the writing sprint?"

"Maggie volunteered, but can you do it Wednesday night? She has a thing with her husband," Cat remembered the conversation. "And do you want to go to a funeral with me? Seth has tapped out because it interferes with my undercover work."

"I'd love to," Shauna punched Seth in the arm. "You're just afraid of funerals."

"I'll admit it, I don't like them." He pushed the book back to Cat as he stood. "I need to check in with Sam. He probably needs let out and fed. That dog eats more than his weight every day, I swear."

When it was just the two of them, Shauna took Cat's now empty bowl and put it in the sink. "That felt nice."

She nodded, agreeing with her friend. "Like old times. I think we might just be over a hump."

Cat hoped she hadn't jinxed it.

Professor Ernest Turner was back to being the face of Covington College's English department for the group. He provided Tuesday's learning session. He liked to give the group his Hemingway talk and for a group of mystery and thriller writers, it was probably the best one in his roster. His lectures could get dry and the man loved hearing his own voice, so Cat tried to either bring work like edits or working on a schedule to the meeting or avoid it completely. Today she had marketing plans to make for the next release that should keep her from falling asleep.

She couldn't protect the rest of the group, however.

He always came early and filled up on Shauna's treats. The man was a widower and didn't have the money to eat out all the time. A professor's salary wasn't a lot of money, unless you were in danger of being poached to a bigger school like Michael had been. Shauna had started making him a to-go box with not only homemade treats but also a loaf of bread and two quarts of whatever soup she'd recently made.

The woman had a heart of gold.

When they got started, Cat settled in the back. Maggie sat next to her; laptop perched on her lap. As she wrote, Cat glanced over. The woman was working on her book. It most definitely wasn't a transcript of Professor Turner's talk, even though, by the way he smiled at her, he clearly thought she was taking notes.

The good thing was he never asked questions until the end and that was just to see if anyone wanted something explained or expanded upon. Cat hadn't taken any of his classes when she went to school in Covington. Somehow, she'd avoided it. Now, she was so grateful, but she felt like she paid for that lack every month when she had to listen to him drone on about the genius that was Hemingway. At least in Professor Turner's eyes. He was still watching Maggie Martin. He must have recognized her from a faculty event.

Cat had gotten a high number of words during her morning writing session, so she was in a good mood. Her agent had emailed to tell her that she'd gotten an extension on the *Tori-goes-to-college* book series. With a fat advance that would help support the house and their lifestyle for a few years.

Someday, she dreamed she'd make a huge advance on a stand-alone book. Enough that she'd never have to write again. She could finish all the restoration the house needed. And maybe they could take a long vacation somewhere like Tuscany. But she knew that even if that happened, she would write again. Even if she never sold another book, she'd write. Well, maybe. Maybe she'd go back to teaching and ignore

the muse's siren call.

If you ignored her long enough, she gave your book idea to someone else.

Grace's words about being careful what you wished for echoed in her head. She went back to her work. Just before she was finished, she saw Maggie close her laptop and she realized Professor Turner was done and the group was waiting for her to end the session.

She jumped up and set her laptop down on her chair after closing it. She didn't want to hurt his feelings.

As the group moved out to walk into town for lunch, Professor Turner thanked her for inviting him again and took the basket of food that Shauna had brought into the room as soon as she'd heard Cat excuse the writers.

"Cat, can you check on my schedule in the kitchen? I think I have the meetings for today wrong," Shauna nodded toward the door, giving Cat an excuse to leave.

"Sure, just let me grab my laptop," Cat said goodbye to Professor Turner and tried not to run out of the room. If he caught you in a conversation, you never knew how long you'd be there. Shauna loved chatting with the older professor. Or if she didn't, she hid it well. Another skill learned behind the bar in her previous occupation.

"Oh, Catherine?" Professor Turner called after her.

Cat froze, made sure there was a smile on her face before she turned, and then said, "Yes, Professor?"

He looked between her and Shauna. He dropped his voice to almost a whisper. "I noticed Margaret Martin in your class today. Do you realize she's the wife of the

president of the college?”

“Yes, I know who she’s married to,” Cat wasn’t sure if the professor was just nervous about having one of the higher administrators spouses hearing his lecture or what. “Is there a problem?”

He used his index finger to silently ask her to move closer. Then he checked the doorway again, to make sure they were alone. “She had contacts with the same people your husband did before he died.”

Cat met Shauna’s gaze and thought about his words. Professor Turner knew the history of the college and he wasn’t comfortable with what that meant. “You’re telling me she has friends in one of the families?”

He shook his head and dropped the volume of his whisper even more. “No Catherine, I’m saying she is part of the family.”

Uncle Pete made an unscheduled stop that afternoon. He sat at the table where Cat, Shauna, and Seth were eating lunch. “I came right in the nick of time.”

“You’re always welcome to eat with us. You know that,” Shauna said as she stood, filled a bowl with chili, and pulled out a small plate for cornbread. She set that and the utensils in front of him. “Soda or water?”

“Water. Shirley’s on me to hydrate, whatever that means. Liquid is liquid in my mind. And there’s nothing wrong with a Pepsi now and then,” he picked up a spoon and took a bite. “Shauna, this is the best chili I’ve ever had.”

“Thank you, I think you’re exaggerating,” Shauna set a glass of water in front of him. “And Shirley’s right. From what I can see of your intake, your blood should be fifty percent coffee and the rest Pepsi.”

He chuckled, "That's exactly what she said. I guess I do have some bad habits."

"Are you heading back to the station after this? I can make up a basket for your dinner," Shauna asked.

"That's totally unnecessary but appreciated. I'll drop the food at home before I go back, just in case I'm called out. This investigation has been a little touchy with the college and the families. Everyone wants an update every time I turn around." He looked at Cat as he cut open a square of still-warm cornbread to put butter inside. "You ruffled some feathers yesterday."

"By visiting the fundraising department?" Cat wondered who had complained.

Uncle Pete looked at Seth before answering, "And stopping at Dante's office."

"No worries, I already knew about Cat's visit," Seth said as he stood to refill his bowl. "We're cool."

"Well, I'm not cool with you hanging out with that character," Uncle Pete turned back toward Cat. "Just because a tiger's been in a cage at the zoo for years doesn't mean he's tame."

"That's oddly specific," Cat said as she spread butter on her cornbread. "Anyway, who complained? I think it's important."

"President Martin for one. He asked if you were now on my payroll," Uncle Pete reached for another square of cornbread. "And the new head of fundraising, Mike Tosan called and asked if you were dating Dante. That he was concerned for your safety."

"He never even met me," Cat said as she thought about the calls. It was one thing to

follow up on the investigation, but this overprotection of her from people who barely knew her was new. “Oddly enough, Professor Turner just expressed a similar sentiment because of Maggie Martin being in the retreat class. He says she’s connected.”

“He said she was family,” Shauna corrected.

Uncle Pete choked on the bite of chili he’d just taken. “He said what?”

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Chapter

Seven

After filling Uncle Pete in on their discussion, he sat back and wiped his mouth. “I’ve never heard that before. I’m not doubting your source, but Maggie Martin? She was head of the PTA for over twenty years once her kids entered school.”

“Professor Turner rarely gossips, and I don’t think he would have told us this if he wasn’t genuinely concerned,” Shauna finished her lunch. “I have an apple pie if anyone wants dessert.”

“I’ll have a slice,” Seth ate the last bite of chili and took the bowl to the sink. “You’ve been busy this morning.”

Shauna cut four slices and brought the plates to the table with the whipped cream dispenser. “I bake when I’m anxious.”

Uncle Pete let her take his empty chili bowl and replace it with a dessert plate. “Are you sure this town is the best place for you? I think we’re going to bake you to a frenzy.”

“Not funny, Uncle Pete,” Cat picked up her phone and texted Dante. She didn’t have to wait long for an answer. “Okay, here’s the answer. According to Dante, Maggie is related, her brother runs a family in Detroit, but she’s never been active.”

Seth leaned back in his chair and met Cat’s gaze. “Huh.”

She watched as he went back to finishing his pie. “Is that all you wanted to say? Or did you have to raise your blood sugar before you could continue?”

He licked the last of the pie off his fork and smiled. “Good grub, Shauna. And no, I was just thinking. If Maggie’s never been active, how did Turner know she was family? Is there a connection between the two?”

Everyone around the table stopped and Uncle Pete whistled. He pulled out a notebook and wrote something down. Then he put it away and finished his pie. “Sometimes out of the mouths of babes.”

“I’m not sure what that means, but I’ve got to go. Things to do and people to see,” Seth put his plate in the sink. “Pete, always a pleasure. Let me know when you’re ready to redo that bathroom. Shirley’s been sending me paint colors.”

“Of course she has,” Uncle Pete stood and pulled on his coat. “I’ve got some calls to make. Always good seeing family.”

After her uncle had left, Cat went to rinse off her dessert plate. “He sounded like he almost meant it. Shirley is invested in getting his house updated. Do you think she’s planning on moving here or hoping he gets a good price when he sells and moves to Alaska with her?”

“Could be either, but it’s not your business. If Pete moves and you’re missing family we could sell the Victorian and move to Florida. I’m sure a writers' retreat by the beach would be lovely as well.” Shauna started putting the leftovers away.

“Bite your tongue. Then I’d be close to my parents. I like having a little family around, but the folks are just a little too much. Besides, I don’t think we’d get Seth to move. He’s always been a mountain man type.”

“Oh, who are we talking about,” Nan came into the kitchen with two carafes. “Sorry to bother you but we’re all of coffee and I need a few cups to get writing.”

Shauna took and put the carafes into the sink, then filled the two that were sitting by the coffee maker. “I meant to refill before you all got back from lunch, but we had a visitor that distracted me.”

“That handsome man who threw Saturday night’s party, I hope. He was eye candy.” Nan smiled as Cat and Shauna stared at her. “Don’t judge. I may be older, but I’m not dead.”

Cat nodded. “Good for you. And on that note, I’m heading upstairs to write. I hope your writing day is productive.”

“Oh, honey. I’ve already written more words in the short time I’ve been here than I did all last month. This place is a godsend.”

Cat nodded. “That’s why we do it. And why it’s structured with a lot of free writing time. I’m sure you can entertain yourself at home by learning craft and marketing skills. Here it’s just about the words.”

“And the King or Queen cup,” Shauna reminded her.

Cat hadn’t mentioned the cup yet. She’d bring it up tonight when she checked in. And she still needed Maggie’s goal sheet unless it was in the basket on the front desk now. As Cat left the kitchen, she heard Nan ask, “What’s the Queen cup?”

Maggie’s sheet was in the box. And as typically with an older adult learner, she’d over planned the week with what she could get done. Especially with her leaving the retreat tomorrow night to do an event with her husband. She’d pull her aside tonight before the word sprints started and see if they could decrease her word count goal.

Cat found when she had big word count goals that unless it was at the end of the book and she knew exactly what needed to be hit as she wrote, the first of the week was fine, but she'd find herself burned out in the middle and needing a break from writing.

Cat didn't believe in writer's block, but she knew that you sometimes needed time away from your project, especially as a new writer. to think about the plot and characters. That held doubly true if the writer was a pantsier or gardener like she was. Plotters knew exactly what they were going to write when they sat down because they had outlined the entire book in advance.

That seemed like torture to her.

Maybe Maggie was a plotter. Thinking about Maggie got her thinking about her connection to the families who ran Covington. Dante hadn't thought Maggie was involved at all, yet Professor Turner was concerned. Had she threatened him before with power that she might not have?

This is why she liked writing. When the questions piled up, Cat just made up a solution or pointed the main character at another character. As long as the result was logical, she could do that. In real life, her uncle needed solid evidence to charge someone with murder.

She hurried up the stairs, clutching Maggie's goal sheet in her hand. All she could do was what was in her circle of control. And right now, finding Allen's killer and who was setting up Dante wasn't part of that circle.

She just hoped her uncle found the culprit before he had to charge Dante with something he didn't do.

Attending magic classes at a specialized college and passing trigonometry with at

least a B was easier to think about. Even if Tori was making a pros and cons list between two suiters. Cat opened her office door and fell into the fictional world she was creating.

The real world would have to wait until she hit her minimum word count for the day.

When Cat came up for air, and a soda from her office fridge, she highlighted and had the program count her words. She'd hit her word count plus a little more, which would give her some leeway during the editing process. She saved her document and sent it to her email account. Then she scanned her email account for anything important. Why did every time she bought something online the system made her give out her email? Which meant she got a newsletter, and sales flyer, and updates on her shipping, once, twice, or even several times a day.

She needed to make a sign-up-only address that she could use and unsubscribe from all of these. But then she'd need to sort through the new email account when she needed to check on something. It might save her time, though. She wrote the idea down on a sheet of paper called, Things to think about after the book/retreat is done.

The page was already full and Cat hadn't scratched off anything yet. Maybe she would get some of these things done during the next free period she had available. Or she'd just have to start scanning it daily to see if she could do anything on the list quickly.

She looked at the first item. Check the webpage to see if she needed to update it. She glanced at her watch. If she ate dinner after the first-word sprint, she could get this done now. If she needed an update, she'd just do it now or put what she couldn't get done in her planner for tomorrow. And her 'system' would have one item crossed off.

She set an alarm for five, then opened her website and started making notes. She got them all done and sent an email to her web designer on anything she couldn't fix

herself. She was a to-do-list rock star. She needed to use this as an example for tomorrow's Ask-the-Author session.

Sometimes things don't take as long as you expect them to take. So just do it, to steal an old phrase from Nike.

Happy with her progress for the day, she shut off the computer and grabbed the folder where she'd put all of the goal sheets. As soon as she pulled Maggie aside, she knew one or more of the others would have questions about what she thought about their goals. It always happened.

She locked her office and headed downstairs. She gave the writers free range of the house, except the other bedrooms, her office, and Seth's apartment. The prize spot was always the den. It had been Michael's office and the decor screamed old money den. One of these days she was going to find and hang an old-fashioned smoking jacket on the back of the door. Just for the look.

As she stepped off the stairs, she saw several authors heading to the living room with a travel cup and a plate of treats. She went to the dining room first to grab water and a couple of cookies so her stomach wouldn't growl. She set her food down in the living room, then she looked for Maggie.

Maggie wasn't in the living room so Cat continued to search. Cat found her in the den. She started to push the door all the way open and come inside when she realized that Maggie was talking on her phone.

"I don't care what it looks like, Martin. I'm enjoying myself here and taking some well-deserved me time. I'll go to the stupid funeral, but after that, you need to forget I exist until Sunday when I come home. That shouldn't be so hard, right?"

Cat didn't hear anything else so she knocked and stepped into the room, like she'd

just got there. “Hi Maggie, I was wondering if we could chat for a minute about your goals?”

Maggie lifted her head from where she’d been resting it on the desk. Tears glistened on her face.

“Oh, dear. What’s going on?” Cat ran to the attached bath and grabbed some Kleenex. She held them out as she asked, “Are you okay?”

Maggie took the tissues and wiped her eyes, nodding. “Sorry, a spat with Martin, I’m afraid. He didn’t take my impulsiveness kindly when I decided to come here. But really, a woman should have the freedom to learn what she wants, right?”

Cat smiled, “I believe so, but then again, I’m divorced.”

Maggie choked out a laugh. “I don’t think anyone should have to choose between a relationship and what she wants. It’s not like I’m off shopping in Paris. I’m across town for goodness sake.”

“Maybe that’s the problem, you’re too close,” Cat sat down on one of the chairs. “He thinks you can just come over and fix whatever’s broken. You’re probably great at taking care of everything.”

“I am. He called this morning to ask what tie he should wear,” Maggie laughed again, wiping her eyes one last time. “I guess I made this man child, now I just need to let him know he needs to grow up.”

“I’d put a little of the blame on his mom too,” Cat smiled as she looked at her watch. “Should I tell them you’ll be a few minutes?”

“No, I’m fine. See, even here I jump up to volunteer to run everything as soon as an

opening happens. When did I become Wonder Woman?” Maggie gathered her things.

Cat wanted to ask about her family but decided it wasn't the time. Instead, she hit on what Maggie had said, “Speaking of being a superhero, I think your goals are a little high for a week.”

She pulled out the goal sheet and handed it to her. “Maybe you should decrease them at least a little.”

Maggie glanced at the sheet and then dismissed Cat's advice. “They're fine. I've already written three thousand today. And we have tonight's work. My dad always told me if I wanted something, I needed to aim for the moon. At least I'll hit the stars. I may not make the goal, but if I don't set the bar high, I'll never know what I'm capable of.”

“You're pretty goal-driven,” Cat said as she took back the sheet and put it in her folder. She had to assume Maggie knew what she could do and not do. “I'm surprised you haven't taken on finishing your book before.”

“Like I said, life got in the way. My mom passed on a year ago. I spent a lot of time flying from here to Detroit the year before. Before that, it was the kids, and of course, Martin and his career. Being here, this is the first time I've had to just breathe and think, in forever. So when you mentioned your retreat, I knew I was pulling that partial novel out and dusting it off.” Maggie chatted as they made their way to the living room. “I can't just sit, I'll rust.”

Cat smiled as she found her seat. She grabbed her notebook where she'd made announcement notes. “Okay, happy end of Tuesday. Tomorrow's lecture is with me. I'll be holding an Ask-the-Author-Anything session. I've got the questions that other groups have asked for reference and the ideas you all brought up on Sunday night. But if you have more, make sure to ask. We can always schedule another meeting.

Thursday is open after the Facts About Publishing panel. I'm offering individual one-hour sessions with me between now and Friday. The sign-up sheet will be on the front desk."

Alicia raised her hand, "Is there an additional charge?"

"No charge. I've found that some people want more direction on their pathway or the book they're writing. These types of discussions work better one-on-one," Cat glanced at the announcement list. "You have the library available for use until Saturday night and any books you check out, you can leave on the front desk on Sunday. We can take them back to the library after you leave. So don't worry about that. Any questions?"

"Did they find out what happened to that guy from the party?" Jon Booth asked, glancing sideways at Debra.

"It's an ongoing investigation," Cat shrugged, trying to distance them from the murder.

"The cop was here yesterday, so I was just wondering," Jon explained.

Cat laughed and nodded. "Sorry, I should have explained something before. We're a small town. The cop you saw yesterday, that's my uncle. He came to have lunch with us. You might see him here several times."

Jon's shoulders dropped. "Oh, good. I was concerned about, well, I mean, that's good."

Debra blushed a deep red but didn't say anything.

Cat looked around, "Any other questions?"

Nan looked up from her notebook. “I see Friday we’re taking a trip to the local bookstore. Is that just a visit to shop or will we be doing something? I’d hate to lose two hours of writing time.”

“Like all of our sessions, the bookstore visit is recommended but not required. This is your retreat. However, Tammy Jones, the owner will talk about how books get to the store and the consumer.” Cat read off the description of the session that Tammy had sent at the first of the year. “She also has an amazing selection of craft and marketing books for purchase. I know keeping your luggage weight down is important, so she can ship your impulse buys.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize,” Nan shook her head. “Never mind. I want to hear that discussion.”

“She’s really good about talking about all publishing opportunities. She runs a local writing group too and some of them have self-published their books. So she can talk about how she gets books like mine that are traditionally published and how she does consignment and what that means to a new author.” Cat wrote a note to reach out to Tammy and let her know about the group makeup. “I got suggestions of authors from her for the Thursday panel.”

“Can we talk about agents and how to get one?” Patrick asked. “I have a book done, but I have no idea now what to do.”

“Definitely. And starting tomorrow, we’ll add critique groups to the mix if you want them. I’ve put another sign-up at the front desk. We have a slot for everyone to read a chapter of your book. The first ten pages or somewhere in the middle. I suggest the first chapter to see if it hooks your readers. Then if someone else doesn’t want a slot, I’ll offer the unclaimed slots for a second time. The first one’s tomorrow so I’ll need you to email me the section and I’ll get it out first thing in the afternoon. Do you want paper or digital copies?”

Nan started, “I like reading print. That way I can focus and make notes.”

Everyone nodded in agreement. Cat made another note. “Perfect. Then the reader will get the annotated print copies to take home or work on here. And with that, I think it’s time to write. Unless anyone has something to say.”

“Like be nice to me when I read,” Nan grinned at the other guests. “I have a very tender disposition.”

“Whatever, but I do think it’s important to think about what you’re saying and how you’re saying it,” Debra added to Nan’s comment. “We don’t want to be mean. We want constructive criticism. Everyone needs to pinky swear.”

Patrick laughed at the image. “I won’t pinky swear, but I’ll be thoughtful.”

“And that’s all we can ask,” Cat nodded to Maggie. “Are you ready to start?”

“I love this and all of you. I just want to say it again,” Maggie wiped a tear off her cheek. “I needed this energy. And now that I know that Tammy hosts a writers’ group, I’ll be there every week. And you all should find one where you live.”

“Yes, Mom,” the group called back.

Cat laughed as Maggie’s cheeks pinked. Apparently, this was a running joke. Cat loved it when the group started coming together as friends.

“You’re all horrible children, so let’s get started,” Maggie set her phone alarm. “Ready, set, write.”

Cat opened her laptop and downloaded her manuscript. Then she read the last paragraph she’d written, trying to get back into Tori’s world.

Then she started writing and her fingers transported her into the book. When Maggie called time, twenty-five minutes later, it took Cat a moment to center herself. She checked her word count and smiled.

Standing, she went over to the whiteboard and unveiled a word count chart. “One more retreat business item. For those of us who work better in a competitive environment, may I present the Word King or Queen competition. Every morning, post your daily word count on this board. The winner will be the writer with the most words as of three pm on Saturday. And he or she will get a prize fit for royalty. Words written from Sunday night’s write-in until tonight can be put in Tuesday’s block. Or you can divide if you keep count that way.”

As the group gathered around the whiteboard, Cat gathered up her things and said goodnight. She wasn’t a night writer, but she liked opening the group if possible. Now she needed some decompression time. And to think about Maggie’s situation.

The woman seemed too nice to be related to the mob.

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Chapter

Eight

The next morning, Cat was up early and downstairs in the kitchen eating waffles when Seth came in with Sam. The dog greeted Shauna, then ran to Cat. She fed him a bite of bacon, then went back to demolishing her waffle.

“No wonder Sam loves you best,” Shauna put a waffle-covered plate on the table for Seth and then sat back down to eat. “You spoil him.”

“My mom always said it was rude to eat in front of other people without offering them some,” Cat responded. “Good morning, Seth. What’s on the agenda today?”

“I think you used the wrong word there, dogs, not people,” Shauna pointed out.

Cat reached down and covered Sam’s ears. “Don’t tell him that. He thinks he’s people too.”

“I’m pretty sure he doesn’t,” Seth laughed as he poured maple syrup over the still-hot waffle. “Unless he learned how to dig holes in the backyard from one of you .”

“Has Shauna working in her garden been giving you bad ideas?” Cat asked Sam who cocked his ears at her, trying to understand the words. She gave him a bit of waffle she’d broken off earlier, hoping Seth would bring the dog with him to breakfast.

“You’re a nut,” Seth said as he got up to get coffee. After he’d refilled Cat and

Shauna's cups, he sat back down. "Your friend wants an estimate on what it would cost to replace the flooring in his conservatory since the cleaning staff can't get the blood out of the grouting."

"That's gross," Shauna rolled her eyes. "We always talk about something disgusting at the table. Murders, mob families, and now home improvement projects due to blood seepage. Maybe we should have a no bad topics at meals rule."

"Maybe. Speaking of bad topics, I chatted with Maggie a lot yesterday. She just doesn't seem the type to be involved with the family business. She lost her mom last year and from what she said, I think she was helping with the hospice." Cat ran a finger in the left-over maple syrup since her waffle was gone. She licked it off. "Between raising kids, her ailing mother, and her demanding husband, I'm not sure she'd have time to be a boss lady."

"If you want something done, give it to someone busy," Shauna quoted. "I do agree with you though. She just doesn't seem the type."

"Not a cold-blooded killer?" Seth asked. When the two women stared at him, he shrugged. "What? Dante looks like he could be involved with the mob and can give you a look like you're already dead. Or is that piercing look he has saved only for me?"

"And on that note, I need to get upstairs and get writing before I have to run the session today," Cat stood and rinsed her plate. She'd wanted another waffle, but she didn't need it. She was full. "Seth, can you be on call to drive the group to the bookstore if it snows on Friday?"

"Of course. They've been a little self-sufficient this week. I've felt like I'm not needed much." He turned toward Shauna. "Any chance I can get another waffle?"

Cat grabbed the travel mug Shauna had already filled for her and headed upstairs. Seth hated Dante and the feeling was kind of mutual. And she was stuck in the middle.

She wondered if that would ever change.

The Ask-the-Author-Anything session went as she'd expected. A few members of the group were closer to being published than the others. So the question of traditional versus self-publishing came up. Since Cat hadn't self-published anything, her input was basic but she reminded the group about the Thursday panel. She'd developed a list of national writers' groups for the different genre areas and had added in a few that were specifically for people wanting to do it all. The idea made Cat want to weep. She had too much on her plate as it was to take on the responsibility for the entire book. She had heard one bit of advice that she thought covered the author's job well. So she ended the group with that focus.

"As an author, it doesn't matter how you publish, you have one responsibility. You are the project manager for the book. You need to expect to have input on or design your covers, make sure the book is edited well, and lend a hand in, or do all of the marketing. However you choose to publish, you should always have a plan for the life of the book. You're also a branding expert. You can't just hire people to write social media posts and guest blogs. You have to be the one who touches everything."

"It sounds exhausting," Nan had stopped writing and was now staring at Cat.

"Being an author is the most exhausting and exciting job you can ever have. But that's the point. It is a job." Cat met everyone's gaze, one by one. "And you always have to remember that. It's fun, it's hard, it's time-consuming... but you get to make up worlds and inspire others. When you're at book events, every person is important. The last thing you need is someone to get the idea that you don't care. And you'll have homework every night of the week."

“So basically, you’re saying, be careful what you wish for, you might get it.” Alicia leaned back in her chair. “No one has ever said those things regarding being a writer. Mostly in class, they all expect that you’ll write to get a job teaching at a college. You have to publish so they can add it to your bio.”

“That’s one way to do it,” Cat shrugged. “I have a half-done literary novel in a drawer somewhere that has been workshopped to death. Everyone has an opinion on what you should be like as a writer. Or how you should write your book. But in the end, it’s your story. Tell it like the book needs to be told.”

The room was quiet after that. Cat had either got them thinking or they were in shock at what she’d said. She glanced at her watch. “And with that it’s time. Our first reader tonight will be Alicia. I figure she’s had the experience with workshopping before so she won’t be as overwhelmed. I’ll put her pages on the front desk as well as email them to you so you can read them before if you want. See you all tonight.”

As people were leaving, Cat pulled Nan aside. “You’re up first with a ten am appointment with me tomorrow morning. Anything specific you want to talk about so I can be prepared?”

“Writer journey, I guess. This helped, but I’m still struggling to understand what happens now that I’ve finished a book,” Nan glanced around the room. “Good and bad.”

“That sounds perfect. What genre are you aiming for?” Cat wrote down the information as she listened. After Nan explained her elevator pitch, Cat nodded. “We’ll be meeting in my office on the third floor to the left of the stairwell in the east wing.”

As Cat left the group as they gathered to go into town to lunch, she ran into Maggie. “So when are you leaving?”

“The event is at seven tonight and I have to get ready, so I’ll probably leave here about five and try to make a full day of the retreat. I wouldn’t go except it’s a donor and faculty reception to honor Allen. Mike and Roxie put it together,” Maggie held up a finger to Alicia who was by the front door with the group. “Well, Roxie probably did all the work. She’s a driven one, but Mike seems to get all the credit. I would have thought that they would have promoted Roxie over him.”

“Funny, I’m hearing that a lot,” Cat said.

“You should come. I’m sure Martin would be furious, but you and your ex-husband were a big part of Covington when he was alive. He brought a lot of money in with his writings and speaking events.” She grabbed Cat’s arm excitedly. “And if you need a dress, I have several little black dresses that would fit you perfectly.”

Cat patted Maggie’s arm. “Sorry, I don’t think I can step away from the retreat tonight. But I’ll be at the funeral tomorrow. And I have a dress.”

“Oh, of course you do,” Maggie released her arm. “Sorry, I got a little worked up. I do that at times. Anyway, they’re waiting for me. We’ll chat later.”

Seth joined her as soon as Maggie stepped away. Cat hadn’t seen him in the foyer. “That was intense.”

“You thought so too, right?” Cat asked as she watched the group, now bundled in heavy coats make their way out of the foyer and out into the porch. Maggie was walking with Alicia who had her arm around the older woman. When Alicia looked back, Cat smiled and waved. The girl did the same.

And yet, Cat couldn’t shake the feeling that something was wrong.

“Shauna asked me to come and get you for lunch,” Seth said. He too was watching

the group leave. “Is something not right there?”

“Now, that is the question, isn’t it?” Cat answered his question with another which is how these weeks tended to go. “Just once I’d like a quiet retreat with no murder or subterfuge going on.”

Seth chuckled as they walked to the kitchen. “Now what fun would that be?”

After lunch, Cat felt restless so instead of going back to her office to write, she decided to walk over to the college. Maybe she could accidentally run into this Roxie that everyone was praising and see what she had to say about Allen’s death and quick replacement. If anything.

At worst, it would get her out of the house for a couple of hours. She asked Shauna to make the copies for tonight’s reading and she forwarded Alicia’s emailed section to the rest of the group. Then she bundled up and started walking to the college. When she passed Dante’s house, she saw a figure in the window. She didn’t stop. Dante didn’t have the answers to this murder or even the missing money. He was as much in the dark as she was.

She had just turned the corner when she heard someone calling her name. She turned around and saw Dante in his long wool coat hurrying after her. Even out in the cold, the guy looked like he stepped out of that GQ magazine. He probably had an expensive sweater and cords underneath the coat.

“Catherine, what are you doing out here? Are your cars in the shop?” Dante wasn’t even out of breath catching up with her. The man was fit.

“I’m walking to the university. I wanted to see if I could talk to Roxie.” Cat shoved her gloved hands into the coat. Now that she’d stopped walking, she was starting to feel the chill. Okay, the cold.

“Why are you focusing on Roxie?” Dante took off his woolen scarf and tied it around her head and neck. “Let’s walk and talk, otherwise, you’ll freeze here on the sidewalk.”

“Thanks for the scarf, I never seem to think about one until I’m out and walking. Anyway, Roxie seems like the power behind the fundraising department. She’s the one who gets things done. That’s the person who knows everything including where the bodies are buried, so to speak.” Cat felt a little warmer now that they were walking. Living in Colorado meant you took winter seriously but didn’t stay locked in your house from fall to spring. You needed to take the so-called warmer days and get outside in the diffuse sunlight. “You even said she should have been the one promoted, why?”

“Like you said, she’s a hard worker. I think she does more for donor relations than anyone else. She keeps the donors giving to the school. Allen and Mike would promise you the moon for a check, she keeps the donors sending those checks year after year.” He stopped her from crossing the street as a truck barreled through the intersection. “She’s solid, I guess.”

“And it’s the flashy ones who get noticed,” Cat nodded. “I get that. Sometimes I wish that the underdog would get the cheese or the girl or in this case, the job.”

“You’re mixing your metaphors,” Dante laughed. “What are there too many stories in your head to keep all of them straight?”

Cat checked the street, then crossed toward the campus. She was buying a hot chocolate from the lobby vendor as soon as she got into the administration building. “Sometimes I think so. I’ll remember a scene from a book because it was powerful and emotional, but not the author’s name. Or I’ll remember loving a book I read years ago but now I can’t tell you why. I think some books are made for us at a specific period. There to get us through whatever we’re going through. And I went way off-

topic.”

“I like to hear how your brain works. I think you’re right. If something was going wrong in the fundraising department, or probably on the entire campus, Roxie would know.” He walked inside the building with her. “I’ll leave you here to do your sleuthing.”

“I’m not sleuthing, I’m just asking questions,” Cat sighed because Dante was right. Her uncle would call it sleuthing too. “You could come with me.”

He looked around the administration building’s lobby. Everyone who walked by looked at him, then dropped their gaze when they realized he was watching. Dante didn’t go anywhere incognito. “I don’t think my presence will open the doors you want it to. Let me know if you need a car to get you back home. I can send Roger.”

“It’s almost forty degrees out there, I’ll be fine. Besides, I’m not hanging out here long. The writers’ group is starting at five and we’re doing a critique session first thing.” She laughed at the confused look he was giving her. “And you don’t understand anything I’m saying.”

“Sorry, no. I’d come to one of your retreats, but I think Mr. Howard’s head would explode. Have a good day, Catherine, and please be safe.”

She watched him walk out the door and then she turned to find the elevator. It wasn’t until she was walking off on the fourth floor that she realized she was still wearing his scarf.

She unwrapped it and opened her coat. The building was warm and toasty, even though she hadn’t bought a hot cocoa like she’d planned. Dante threw her off at times. She didn’t love him, but she could see how he and Michael had been such close friends. The guy listened.

The door to the fundraising department had a sign on the front announcing the reception for Allen Johnson starting at six. Cat half expected the door to be locked as people headed home early to get ready but the door was unlocked. Kim wasn't at the front desk and no one was in the glass-walled conference room. Cat walked toward the hallway that led back to the offices. "Is anyone here?"

She heard a noise down the hall. As Cat walked toward it, she paused at an open door to an office that must be Mike Tosan's now. It still had Allen's name on the door, but it was clearly being used. She stepped inside and hurried over to his desk. There were a few files on top. One was labeled pending donations, another – Allen's contacts. And a third was just labeled Urgent.

Cat opened that one. A summary of the disappearing money issue was on top along with a spreadsheet listing donations, dates, and names. Kim had said that she and Mike were investigating the problem too. She didn't hear any footsteps, so she spread out the pages and took a picture of each one, hoping her hand wasn't shaking.

She scooted them back into the folder, then headed out the door. Anything that had been Allen's looked like it was packed in boxes at the edge of the office. Probably waiting for the widow to come and haul it out. Mike already had a picture of him and his wife or girlfriend on the polished desk.

Cat kept walking. Someone was running a shredder. She knew that sound since Shauna insisted on shredding all their junk mail to use for fire starter in the house. She followed the noise and found Roxie Scarsdale in what looked like a mail room. She waited for her to finish with a page before speaking, "Excuse me."

Roxie jumped and fell on her butt. She stared at Cat. "What are you doing here?"

"No one was out front, but I heard you back here. Do you have a moment to talk?" Cat added a smile to her request, especially since she'd scared the woman.

“I’m just cleaning up a few old files,” Roxie explained. “We try to keep our donor list up to date. It doesn’t do us any good if people have died or left the area or even stopped donating for some reason to send them a Christmas card.”

“I get it,” she nodded, but she wondered why no one from the college had taken Michael off the mailing list. He got an alumni funding request probably every three months since he died. And he used to work at the college. “I know you have an event tonight, anyway you have a few minutes to talk?”

Roxie glanced at her watch as she turned off the shredder. She grabbed the folder and pointed back toward the hall. “My office is on the left. Let’s go there so we can sit.”

“Thanks,” Cat held back and followed Roxie out of the mail room.

Roxie tucked the folder into a desk drawer as she sat behind a completely clear desk. She didn’t have a coffee cup or a folder in sight. “So what can I help you with? Are you looking to set up a scholarship in your late husband’s name?”

“No, this visit isn’t about Michael,” Cat didn’t bother to correct her. This was the same department that was still mailing him and expecting a donation from the great beyond. “I wanted to ask you about Allen Johnson. And what you thought of him.”

Roxie tapped her nails on the surface of the desk, studying her. “I know what you want to ask. You want to know if I think Allen could have stolen that missing money. And my answer is probably. He’s the only one besides Dante Cornelio who had that level of access. Well, besides the president of the college, that is.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:26 pm

Chapter

Nine

When Cat came out of the administration building she pulled her coat closer. The temperature had dropped by several degrees in the last hour as she talked with Roxie. And she'd learned nothing new. As she walked to the street, a parked limo flashed its lights at her, and she watched as Dante stepped out of the back seat and held the door open for her. She went over and slipped inside the warm car. "You must really love this scarf."

He laughed as she unwrapped the scarf and gave it to him. "It has sentimental value, what can I say? I'm a softy for these types of things. How was your conversation?"

"Interesting. Roxie states there are only three people who could have moved that money. You, her boss – Allen, now Mike, and the president of the college." Cat leaned against the exceptionally soft leather on the seats.

"Interesting that she brought Martin into the discussion. But if he or Allen are anything like me, three others had the security codes to get into the account. Our assistants. Mine has top-secret security clearance so I think she can go off the list." He watched as they left the campus. "And I pay a lot better than the college positions. She has no need for the money."

"Sometimes money isn't the motivating factor, but I think she can go down on the list," Cat thought about her conversation with Kim Stage. "Are we still thinking you were set up to take this fall? And if so, why would the framers kill Allen?"

“I’ve had some feelers out in my family business. No one is claiming responsibility, but, I have ruffled some feathers. They all think I’m soft since I’d rather stay within the law for the businesses I manage. I think some of our businesses are too busy sampling the product and have lost sight of what a business should do. Make money.” He turned to see her grinning at her. “What?”

“You sound positively normal. Michael always said if a business was going to succeed, they had to look at the big picture and play within the rules.” She took her beanie off and ran her fingers through her hair to try to control the madness at least a little now that she was warming up. “I didn’t know then all he knew about your family business.”

“If he would have lived, my section of the business would be completely clean by now. I’m close, but Michael was a lot smarter on how to expedite it than I’ve been. I’m afraid I’ve let this cleanup go on too long. People are getting nervous.”

“The question then is who benefits if you go down for this? Allen’s murder was probably a red flashing arrow to my uncle to point everything at you. The problem is Uncle Pete’s not an idiot and he knows if you were going to get rid of Allen for ratting you off, it wouldn’t be in your own house with a bunch of guests floating around.” Cat saw they had just turned on her street. “Are you going tonight to the memorial for Allen?”

He nodded. “Do you want to come along?”

“I would but I’m not sure if I continue to look like your date if anyone will talk to me again. I’ll be at the funeral tomorrow,” she reached for the door handle. “Let me know if anyone acts suspiciously tonight.”

“At this point, I’d appreciate it if someone just bragged and admitted their evil plan with a laugh. At least that way, I’d know who was throwing knives at me. I’m tired of

watching my back all the time.” Dante leaned against the headrest and closed his eyes. “Sometimes I think you’re the only one who believes me.”

“That’s not true,” Cat paused before getting out of the car. “Besides, you have a security team. Let them watch your back for a while. Go have a little fun.”

He opened her eyes and stared at her, “At a memorial.”

“Okay, bad example, but maybe tomorrow.” She climbed out of the car and before she shut the door, she leaned down. “Thanks for the ride. Totally unnecessary, but it was nice.”

“You just can’t say thank you and leave it be, can you?” He shook his head as he leaned back into the leather seat.

Cat watched the car leave and then hurried into the house. She hoped that Shauna had something cooking that was warm and filling. She felt like she’d been out skiing for hours.

Seth held the door open for her. She pulled off her coat and hung it up. “Thanks.”

“Where have you been? Your guests are asking about tonight’s reading. I guess you told them that there would be hard copies available?” Seth watched Dante’s limo drive away.

“I walked to the college to talk to the fundraising department. Dante saw me and drove me home,” Cat hurried to the front desk. “Where’s Shauna? I thought she would do the copying.”

“She’s been dealing with finding a plumber for the barn. The pipes to Snow’s water trough froze over. If you sent her something, she probably didn’t see it.”

Snow was Shauna's pride and joy. The horse lived in the barn behind the house with a tribe of cats. Keeping the barn warm enough for the animals and the plumbing was an ongoing challenge.

"Oh, well, that's what I get for leaving the house to investigate. You would think that I'd put off the mystery-solving until the monthly retreat is done. I'll go get the copies made right now." After one of her advances, she'd bought a large printer for the house. Shauna kept it in the closet in the den where Michael had kept his office supplies. The printer was on their network so all she had to do was push a button to get the copies made. "I'll be right back if anyone asks."

"Cat, you can't dog yourself for trying to help solve a murder. You didn't kill the guy and you can't schedule these things around the retreat. You like figuring this stuff out. Besides, you're good at it."

She turned back and smiled at him. "Thank you for saying that. Sometimes I don't think I'm doing anything right. Not the writing. Not the retreat. And not the sleuthing. Just ask Uncle Pete."

"He worries about you, that's all. Go get the copies and I'll go check on Shauna and the barn rats. Hopefully, this plumber has the problem fixed." Seth kissed the top of her head as he grabbed a coat to head outside.

By the time Cat got the copies made and back up to the front desk, several writers were hanging out in the dining room. Shauna must have just refilled the treat bar and coffee. Cat headed that way to check in with them. "Hey, Alicia's pages are at the front desk. I'm sorry about the delay. Tomorrow's pages will be there when you get back from lunch. But I'll be out tomorrow afternoon for a couple of hours and back for the reading and writing sprints."

Nan held up her hand, "Can I ask a question?"

“Of course, and you don’t need to raise your hand. We’re informal around here,” Cat grabbed a cookie and sat at the table with the writers.

“Sorry, I’m feeling like I’m back in school. Are you going to that guy’s funeral? The one who was killed at the house where the party was held?” She looked around the table. “We heard about it at the diner. Everyone’s saying the owner of the house killed him. Was it gang related? Are we safe here?”

Cat took a breath and wondered how much to tell the writers. “First of all, you’re very safe here. Aspen Hills is one of the safest towns in Colorado. If you’re concerned about walking anywhere, please let us know and we’ll transport you in the van. But it’s totally safe to walk around town. Second, Dante is a neighbor and a friend. Allen’s death at the party is a tragedy but Dante didn’t kill him. Small towns tend to gossip about people who aren’t in their own social circle and those they consider outsiders. I’m not sure what else to say, but I’m sorry if you’re feeling unsafe.”

“Oh, I’m not feeling unsafe,” Nan hurried to explain after the group stared at her. “We were just repeating the rumors. I guess that wasn’t very kind to your friend.”

“I understand that people gossip, I just don’t want this event to affect your retreat. If you don’t feel comfortable with me attending the funeral, I can send Shauna as our representative. Since I was a faculty member of Covington, I feel a responsibility to attend.”

Nan shook her head violently. “Now I feel horrible. No, you go ahead. I guess we were just wondering if you were investigating the murder. I’ve read reviews of the retreat where the writers had been involved in helping to solve a murder and...”

Jon broke in. “Don’t be mad at Nan, we were all talking about it at lunch today. It’s kind of cool to be at the murder retreat during an actual murder so if there’s anything

you need us to do to help solve this mystery, we're here for you."

Cat set her half-eaten cookie down on the napkin. "Look, I know some of the past guest reviews have talked about participating in a murder investigation, but I swear, it's not a formalized part of the retreat. And Allen Johnson isn't an actor, paid to be the dead guy. This is an actual murder that my uncle, who is Aspen Hill's police chief, is solving. We're writers. We should stay out of real investigations."

"We're sorry if this came off wrong. We love the retreat, I promise," Debra Jennings came to the rescue of the other guests. "I probably set this whole conversation in progress since I found Mr. Johnson that night. It seemed like a staged event."

Cat felt sorry for Debra. She'd found a man murdered. It would be simpler if that was just a fake murder for the benefit of the writers' group. Cat glanced at her watch, "I understand and I hope I didn't come off grumpy. If you're all going to grab dinner before our session tonight, you better get going. Unless you want Seth to drive you to the restaurant?"

"No way, I'm finally getting some steps in during the day. Typically, at home, I'm either stuck at my desk in the office or sitting on the couch with the laptop. The fresh air is making me so creative." Patrick Bradley stood and looked around the room. "But I could be the only one."

As the group assured him that he wasn't, Cat reminded them of the five pm start time for the reading and she left the dining room, fleeing to the kitchen.

Shauna and Seth were there with cups of hot tea in front of them. Seth grinned at her. "Water crisis averted. Snow and the dwarfs are fine."

"Good, I'm happy about that," Cat grabbed a cup and put a teabag inside, then came to the table to fill her cup with hot water. "The group feels slighted that I haven't

invited them to solve the staged murder we had on Saturday night.”

“Seriously? They thought Allen’s death was just play-acting?” Shauna sipped her tea. “Maybe we should put something in the fine print saying that if an event happens during retreat week, we are not just putting on a show for their amusement.”

“I’m not sure it would work. Nan asked if they were safe here in Aspen Hills. So they went from one extreme to the other. From thinking it’s made up, to worrying about their own lives. I’m concerned.” Cat played with dunking her tea bag. Maybe she should have been more clear and addressed the elephant in the room earlier so that when the guests heard rumors, they could put their own spin on them. “Anyway, I sent them off for dinner. I’ll probably have to reassure them again tonight during the session.”

“So let’s get our dinner ready and then you can tell us what you found at the college,” Shauna stood and went to the crockpot where she stirred something. “I’ve got salsa chicken ready and I just need to make some rice so dinner should be ready in about thirty minutes?”

“Sounds good,” Seth stood as he drained his tea. “I need to get Sam out and about then I’ll come back after I feed him.”

Cat paused as she watched Seth leave and Shauna busy herself at the stove. “Do you need help?”

“No, go write or something. I’ve got this,” Shauna said as she finished setting the rice to cook. “Besides, I need to plan out tomorrow. I spent so much time out in the barn, I’m behind on baking and cleaning.”

“Can you still go to the funeral with me?” Cat paused as Shauna grabbed her planner.

“It’s at three? Probably not. I’m going to have a full day as it is.” Shauna shrugged.
“Sorry. Maybe Seth would go with you?”

“I can ask,” Cat responded and headed up to her office to check her email quickly and look at her plans for the week. All of the writers had signed up for private sessions with her so she needed to put them in her calendar. As she played with her calendar, she thought about what Roxie had said. The gossip train was shining the light on Dante for the murder. Was there a reason for that? Who would take over Dante’s consulting spot from the family if he was in jail?

She texted him the question and he responded back quickly with a short – I’ll look into that – response. She was sure the idea had occurred to him. And it had to be someone who was at the house that night. Another guest? One of Dante’s own security team? Or just someone Allen was meeting who’d come in the guise of being invited?

She texted another request. The names of everyone who had been invited to the party. Dante’s security team had checked her invite, but not the five writers who had followed her inside.

This time the answer came a few minutes later. In your email .

Cat had a lot of work to do, including looking up all the names on the list he’d just sent her. She hoped someone would take on leading the writing sprints tonight since Maggie was at the memorial. If not, she’d check out the names on her laptop while the guests wrote. Hopefully, no one would realize what she was doing or everything she’d told them about not being part of the investigation would turn out to be a lie.

The next morning, Cat hurried down to get coffee so she could write a few words before her one-on-one meetings began. She ran into Shauna in the kitchen. “Hey, I just need coffee and maybe a muffin or something to tide me over. What was I

thinking - offering individual conference times and a new panel session? Everyone signed up so I've got meetings today and tomorrow. And the funeral."

"Did you talk to Seth?" Shauna got a carafe down from the cabinet and handed her a plate with two slices of zucchini bread. "Eat this while it's warm. There's butter on the table."

"Thanks. And no, I didn't talk to Seth. I forgot at dinner, then I ran the evening session since Maggie was gone," Cat sat and slathered butter on the warm bread. "I was trying to go through the list that Dante sent me with the party guests. So many departments at the school. I mean, I knew they offered a lot of degrees but there had to be fifty Deans there with their spouses."

"The last time I went to one of Dante's parties, he said that if one of the special students wanted a specific degree, they built the department around them. At least at first. He's been working with the president to combine some of the less popular degrees into others. Like Professor Turner, he had an entire degree program in Hemingway studies, but then program got sucked into Contemporary Literature a few years ago. That's why the English Dean sends him here for the lecture. Turner's paid more than him and there's nothing Forest can do about it, he has a tenure contract." Shauna set a full cup of coffee on the table, then sat down with Cat.

"You've been spending time with our favorite professor," Cat finished the first slice of bread and licked her fingers. "I didn't realize that about the school. And I worked there."

"Not long enough. If Michael had lived, they were going to let him open his own graduate degree program in Economics. It would have been quite the boon for the college. Which made the families a little nervous about the attention he was bringing." Shauna was checking her to do list while they talked.

“So a lot of department heads all focused on money and students. No wonder the fundraising guy was killed. I wonder what whale donor he was trying to reel in when he died. Allen said he was having problems with a donor at the party. That the guy wanted too much for his money.”

“There are only so many buildings on campus. And so many streets in town. What else could they offer?” A buzzer went off and Shauna stood to check something in the oven. When she opened the door, the smell of cinnamon and sugar filled the room.

“Rolls?” Cat finished her bread hoping to snag a cinnamon roll before she left to go write.

“French toast casserole for the guests,” Shauna corrected. “Kind of a bread pudding with a maple syrup cream on top. This group loves their sweets. The egg casserole was almost untouched yesterday, but the muffins disappeared within minutes.”

Cat took one last sip of coffee and dumped the rest into the travel mug sitting by the carafe. “Well, have a good day. See you at lunch?”

“I’ll bring up treats and coffee for your meetings. What times are they today?” Shauna wrote down the times and names for each of the four meetings today. Then she stood and grabbed something off her desk. “I almost forgot. I found this by the front door this morning when I went to check the dining room.”

Cat took the flash drive that Shauna handed her. “Probably someone’s backup. We’re all terrified of losing words. I have an auto-system that sends my work to a cloud storage. I’ll check it and see if I can identify the owner.”

She went to her office and got lost in her words until ten minutes to nine when Shauna’s sharp knock pulled her out of the story.

Shauna came in with a coffee service and arranged it on the table by the sofa. “Did you find out who the drive belongs to?”

Cat saved her work, then popped the drive into her desktop. “No, but I will right now. Alicia’s first up so I have a couple of minutes.”

When the drive came up on her screen, she frowned. “These aren’t Word documents. They’re Excel files.”

“Like what we use for the accountant?” Shauna stepped closer and peered over Cat’s shoulder. “The file names seem to be months and years. Open one.”

Cat did and when the spreadsheet finally loaded, she realized what she was looking at. “This is a listing of all the donations and expected donations with all the promises made for how the money would be spent. This line is supposed to go to student scholarships. And this one, athletic supplies.”

Cat turned and met Shauna’s gaze. “There’s only one person who had access to this level of information from the school and even Maggie shouldn’t have this. She’s the president’s wife, not the head of fundraising.”

A knock on the door stopped their conversation. Alicia popped her head in, a planner in her arms and a huge smile on her face. “Oh, sorry, am I early?”

Cat closed the file, then pulled the flash drive and tucked it in her desk. “We were just going over some retreat business. Come on in. Do you want some coffee?”

Shauna took Cat’s empty carafe and headed to the door. “I’ll come up just before ten with more treats, so please, eat.”

Alicia sat down on the couch and filled a plate with cookies. “You are a much better

dessert baker than the woman at the college. She's always trying to push low-sugar and low-fat stuff on us. I swear, I'm going to gain back all of the freshman fifteen I just lost. And then, at my work-study job, Kim's always bringing in home-baked brownies for the crew. She keeps us well fed."

Shauna paused at the door. "Oh, Cat, do you want me to invite your uncle to lunch? We haven't seen much of him this week?"

Cat shook her head. She knew that Shauna was trying to give her an out to just give the flash drive away but she wanted to study it more. Not that she'd know what she was looking for, but she needed to at least try. Especially if Maggie was involved in this scheme. "Let's wait. You know he loves spending Sundays with us. Maybe invite him for dinner then."

Shauna shook her head but closed the door as she left. She didn't have to tell Cat she thought she was making a mistake. Cat got the message without Shauna saying a word.

"So Alicia, what are your plans for your writing? Your career goals?" Cat grabbed Alicia's goal sheet and a notebook and sat in the chair next to the sofa. She just hoped she could keep her mind on the meetings and her guests and not on what information was hidden in the flash drive setting in her desk.

Chapter

Ten

Nan came up the stairs and arrived at Cat's office right at ten. She had brought a notebook with a list of questions. After Shauna had stepped in and refreshed the coffee service and added more cookies and a fruit plate, Nan set her pen down and met Cat's gaze.

"First of all, I want to apologize for even questioning that the town and retreat weren't safe or that you would set up this murder mystery without telling us. It was insensitive to think we were the focus of life here. I can't believe I came in with that kind of attitude. I'm usually very sensitive to the needs of others," Nan met Cat's gaze. "I'm truly sorry."

"It's fine. I can see how the party set up an expectation that fed on our whole murder retreat reputation. I'd tried to fix that, but it's an uphill battle. Anyway, we're here to talk about your writing and questions, not the branding issues of our retreat. What do you want to do with your writing? Career plans? What do you currently do?" Cat tried to assure Nan that things were okay.

Nan explained that she'd retired early from a lucrative financial planning position. "Now, I want to focus on my passion, writing murder mysteries. I know Debra loves the historical part of world-building, but for me, I like a more contemporary scene, and I was wondering about how you decided where to set your stories. Does it always have to be somewhere you know well?"

As they talked about the books Nan wanted to write, something about what she'd said was ringing a bell in Cat's head. She set up the publishing panel, then excused herself after telling the writers to go to lunch after the panel was over. Shauna would take care of dealing with the payment to the panelists. Cat went back upstairs and tried to write but her mind kept drifting.

It wasn't until she was downstairs, eating lunch with Seth and Shauna that the pieces came together.

"I bet Nan could help us see a pattern in the flash drive files," Cat said as she dug into the shepherd's pie Shauna had made them.

"Didn't she just apologize for assuming she'd be part of an investigation and decided to settle into her writing?" Shauna sipped her water as she watched Cat.

"Yeah, there's that," Cat focused on eating again.

"I'd ask you to explain, but I'm not sure I want to know. Did you all hear the argument last night when Maggie came back? I'm assuming it was her husband because he wasn't happy she didn't go home with him." Seth took a roll and broke off a piece, handing it under the table to Sam.

"I didn't hear anything. What time was this?" Cat watched Seth as he fed a second piece of bread to Sam.

"About one? Sam woke me up and wanted to go outside. We were around the side when the car pulled up. They were already fighting. I couldn't hear much of it, but she got out of the car, and he opened the door and leaned over the top. He called her some not-so-nice names and then drove off. She muttered as she walked to the door. Something about him never appreciating her and how much she's done for him. It's never enough. Typical breakup thoughts."

“Has anyone heard any rumors about the two of them divorcing? I know she’s at that point where she wants a life that’s not focused on him or the kids. She told me they had an empty nest when she decided to join the retreat.” Cat swirled mashed potatoes into the thick gravy on the bottom of the dish. Maggie had to be the owner of the flash drive. But what had she done to keep her husband in the president’s chair? Could she have killed Allen? Or maybe used her connections to do it. All she had to do was set up Dante as a repayment.

The pieces were falling in place. Now, all Cat needed was some proof that the drive belonged to Maggie or maybe Allen. Then she could take her theory to her uncle.

“Earth to Cat,” Seth snapped his fingers to get her attention. “Did you hear Shauna’s question? Do you need me to go to the funeral with you? I think I should drive you there anyway. It’s supposed to rain this afternoon. I’ve already set the guests up to go to the Diner at five and pick them up at six thirty unless they call.”

She shook the theory away. She had a lot of steps to lock in before she could point a finger at Maggie and declare her a killer. “Yes, thank you. I’d love it if you would go with me. Do you have a black suit?”

“Of course I do. I bought it last year,” he finished off his lunch. “And with that, I’ll meet you at two thirty in the lobby. Wear boots. You can change into shoes at the church if you want to look more dressed up.”

After Seth left the kitchen, Shauna finished her lunch not talking.

“What’s going on?” Cat knew when her friend was keeping something from her. “Is the barn plumbing still an issue?”

“No, but I don’t think you should hold on to that drive. I’m worried about you. Allen Johnson was killed at Dante’s house where he has all kinds of security. We don’t

even come close to that and you're holding onto a piece of evidence that could prove someone killed someone else? It's crazy." Shauna took her plate to the sink and started rinsing dishes to put in the dishwasher. The woman multitasked with the best of them.

"I'm sorry. I'll get it out of here as soon as possible, but I'm going to at least scan it. If Maggie stole money from the college and then killed Allen because he found out, we don't want her here at the retreat. I just told Nan the place was safe." Cat glanced at her watch. "And speaking of Maggie, I've got my one-on-one with her at one. I need to get up to my office."

Shauna took Cat's dish and then pointed to the tray on the side cupboard. "There's your coffee tray. I'll come up and get it when you and Seth are at the funeral. Just be careful, please. I'm beginning to love my job and would hate to have to find a new one because my partner was killed."

Cat thought about Shauna's words as she walked up to her office. Hopefully, she wasn't meeting with a killer, even though the facts were adding up to Maggie being at least involved in the stolen money. When she got there, Maggie was already waiting for her. She had a planner in her hand.

"Oh, no, am I early?" Maggie's eyes widened as she watched Cat come up the stairs. "Sorry, I've been so excited about having some time to talk that's all I could think about. I told Martin about it last night and he said I talked his ear off."

"You're right on time," Cat pulled the key out of her pocket and unlocked her office. "Come on in."

She sat the tray down and then went to get the file off her desk with the goal sheets and a notebook. "Help yourself to coffee if you want. And there are some sweets to keep us going. I swear, sugar and caffeine are essential to keeping the retreat on

schedule. I don't think we could manage without Shauna. Not to change the subject, but are you attending the funeral later?"

Maggie sat and put the leather-bound planner on the couch as she poured two cups of coffee. After that, she took one small cookie, broke it in half, then set it on a napkin near her cup. She opened her planner to the daily sheet and set her pen on the page. "Martin insisted I attend. I swear that man can't do anything without me by his side. It's charming but at times, well, I just wish I had a little more independence, you know? Anyway, I have to run to the house to change and lay out Martin's suit before the funeral or I'd offer you a ride with me. I'm assuming you're going?"

"Since he knew my ex and with my connection to the college, I think it's only polite," Cat nodded her head. "It's just so sad."

"I don't think I ever told you how sorry I was for your loss," Maggie checked off an item on the planner page. "You were in California teaching when he died if I remember correctly."

"I was in California. Michael and I had divorced a few years before his death. When he left me the house, I came back and opened the retreat." Cat hated that most of the college treated her as if she were a widow and not a divorced wife. But as she realized the truth behind Michael's life, the divorce was just a ruse anyway. At least on his part. Something no one besides those closest to her knew. "Anyway, I know our time is short. What can I help you with?"

Maggie blinked, twice. Then she ran a finger down the list of questions she'd prepared. Finally, she looked up and set her pen down. "I have all these questions, but the biggest one is can I have a career in writing at my age? I know. Everyone wants to recreate their lives when they hit the empty nest. To have a real career and a life. But am I fooling myself?"

“Let me tell you a story,” Cat went on to tell her about a woman she’d met in California. She’d always been the steady one, working in accounting while her husband went from one promotion to the next in banking. Then when her youngest child went to college, she went with her. She got her associate’s in nursing, but instead of stopping her education there, she went on to get her bachelor’s. And then finally, her masters. “When I met her, she was working at the neo-natal department of the local hospital as a nurse practitioner and so happy. So no, it’s not too late. For even a career that needs a lot of schooling.”

“Oh, well, there you go,” Maggie took in the story, nodding and grinning. “I’m going to register for the master’s in creative arts next semester. I’ll have to make sure the professors know I want to be treated like a normal student, but would you mind if I checked in with you from time to time? I appreciate your honesty.”

“Of course,” Cat said, automatically. Now she felt bad about assuming Maggie was the mastermind behind all the trouble. Her being nice didn’t mean she wasn’t at least involved in the crimes, but it made it harder for Cat to see her that way. “So tell me what you want to write?”

The hour flew by and after Maggie left, Shauna showed up at her office door.

“Hey, are you alone?”

Cat nodded, “Alone and alive. Come in and tell me the truth.”

Shauna closed the door and leaned up against it. “About what?”

“Do you think Maggie could have stolen money or killed someone?” Cat tucked the notes from Maggie’s session and her goal sheet into a folder with her name on it.

“Killed someone, no. She’s not that cold. Money, maybe. People do weird things for

money.” She glanced at her watch. “You have a half hour to get ready.”

Cat stood, thinking about Maggie still. “Wait, if she’s connected, doesn’t she have money?”

“Better ask Dante,” Shauna smiled as she opened the door. “You might have just got your favorite off Pete’s suspect list.”

At the funeral, Cat walked into the chapel on Seth’s arm. She leaned close and whispered, “I feel like everyone’s watching us.”

“I told you co-hosting that party with Dante would give people the wrong idea,” he said as they made their way into the chapel. “Now they think you were either cheating on me then or are now cheating on Dante and I’m a marked man.”

“Maybe I just like to keep my options open,” she scooted into the pew and Seth sat next to her. She opened the flyer that the usher had handed them when they walked inside. “The obituary is detailed in his career highlights and light on family. It says he is survived by his wife and three kids, but nothing else. He used to work in community relations with Boeing before he came to the college. Typically, colleges hire from other colleges, especially for senior positions.”

“Sometimes people don’t have a lot of family to list,” Seth nodded toward the widow who was sitting in the first pew, alone. Her face was covered with a black lace veil. “She doesn’t seem to have anyone here either.”

“That’s just sad,” Cat leaned back and looked around the chapel. It seemed like everyone from the party was here and as she watched, Dante came up the aisle and sat down in the pew next to her.

He shook Seth’s hand. “Thank you for coming. I know a funeral isn’t anyone’s idea

of a good time.”

“I’m having a little bit of fun,” he glanced around as people dropped their stares as he met their eyes. “Messing with people’s expectations can be a hoot.”

Dante chuckled as he followed Seth’s gaze. “Yes, I can see your point. We have made quite a statement.”

“Did you get my text about Maggie? Would she have money?” Cat was tired of the boys playing around.

Dante glanced around them to see if anyone could overhear. When he seemed satisfied, he leaned closer. “Maggie Martin does have a trust fund. And her husband makes a good salary at the college. But there have been a few questionable investments that might have drained her access to funds. Why are you asking?”

“Money, love, revenge, envy, the four major reasons someone would take a life. And envy is kind of a reflection of love and money.” She saw the minister walk out. “Keep your eyes open. The service is starting.”

Cat leaned back and focused on the service, hoping to find clues as to why Allen Johnson would have embezzled money from the college or why someone wanted to kill him. Neither question was answered, however.

When the service ended, Dante stood, shook Seth’s hand again, then disappeared out the back.

“Well, that was useless,” Cat complained as they made their way out of the chapel. The widow had decided not to hold an open house or even stay for the coffee hour after the service. She nodded toward the reception area. “Do you want coffee or something?”

“No, I’m good. Unless you want to stay,” he asked as he met her gaze. His blue eyes dug into her soul, asking all the questions he never asked aloud.

“We have guests. And no one stood up during the service to announce that they had killed Allen. I guess we should head home,” Cat watched as people floated out of the church.

In Seth’s truck, they waited for the heater to clear the light frost that had already covered the windshield. Winter was here and there was no reason to try to push around Jack Frost just for their own needs.

Seth squeezed her hand. “I’m glad we found each other again. I would have been lonely in this life if I’d never found you.”

“The widow looked so alone up there by herself. She didn’t even stop to talk to any of the Covington faculty or administration staff who had come to pay their respects.” Cat felt sorry for her. She pulled out the flyer. “Her name was Lucy.”

“Lucy didn’t stop to talk with anyone. She just bolted out the chapel doors. Don’t you find that strange?” Seth turned down the music as the cab began to warm.

“I understand being overwhelmed with the circumstances but I would have thought she would hang around and meet people. Lucy Johnson did no such thing. So either she has an amazing level of self-awareness and didn’t need to be comforted by her husband’s friends, or, she’s not too upset about his death.”

‘Give the girl a gold star. We need to learn more about the marriage and the relationship. I think Lucy Johnson might just have a clue or two to add to the file you’re working on by yourself.’

“I think that she might have been overwhelmed by the whole process,” Cat added a

possibility.

“Maybe, but she didn’t look overwhelmed. Instead, she looked mad. Like she was going to jump on the first person who talked to her and would have kept talking until she got everything off her chest, maybe this was a better idea.” Seth muttered as he drove toward home.

Cat couldn’t get Lucy Johnson off her mind and as they passed the subdivision where most of the Covington professors lived, she pointed to the road. “Turn there and give me a second.”

“What’s going on,” Seth asked as he turned, then pulled the truck over to the side of the road. “You have guests at the house.”

“It’s free writing time and I don’t have to be there until the evening writing sprint.” Cat found the email she’d been looking for and opened a file. “Here we go. 1010 N. Oak Street. I’ll key it into the GPS.”

“No need, I know where the Johnson house is, remember I told you I did some work for them this summer?” Seth checked for cars, then pulled back out on the road. “So why are we visiting the widow at home?”

“She acted like her hair was on fire, running out of the funeral. I’m just wondering if she had something to hide or if someone was waiting for her back home?” Cat pointed to the road and Seth made a turn.

As they came up on the house, Lucy Johnson’s car was in the driveway with all the doors and truck open. Seth and Cat got out and watched as Lucy dragged a suitcase out of the house. She stopped and blinked as they walked toward her. “Please don’t kill me. I wouldn’t have expected the two of you, but just tell your boss I don’t have his money.”

Cat shook her head, “Mrs. Johnson, I don’t know who you think we are...”

Lucy pointed at Cat, then at Seth. “You’re Cat Latimer and you are Seth Howard. I know who you are. I just didn’t realize you were family. I guess I should have guessed that you were Cat. With how close Dante and Michael were, but Seth, aren’t you a townie? You’ve been to our house, ate at our table. Please, just give me a couple of hours and I’ll be out of town for good. You don’t have to kill me.”

Chapter

Eleven

“ I don’t understand. Can we go inside and talk for a minute?” Cat nodded toward the house door that Lucy Johnson had left standing open. “I can make you some coffee.”

Lucy sighed and dropped the suitcases on the driveway. “Fine. But I’ve told you everything I know.”

Cat and Seth followed Lucy Johnson into her house. As she did, Cat wondered if the woman was just crazy or if she thought the family was heading to find her and kill her for her husband’s misdeeds.

Or maybe a little of both.

They walked to the back of the house where a bank of windows let the sun into an eat-in kitchen. Casseroles, bakery items, and other food items covered the island. Lucy sank into a chair at the table. “People have been bringing food since Allen died. I didn’t know what to do with it.”

Seth glanced at the counter and then started organizing the food. “Most of this is okay to be out, but you might want to freeze some of these muffins.”

Cat put three on a plate and handed it to him. She lowered her voice and said, “Maybe you could get her to eat something? If she hasn’t been eating, it might be affecting her memory or thought process. I’ll make coffee.”

Seth nodded and took the plate to the table. “Lucy, Mrs. Johnson, maybe you should eat something. When did you last eat a meal?”

Lucy eased out of the black suit jacket she’d worn to the funeral. “I’m not sure. Allen and I were at the party on Saturday. I ate some from the passed trays then. My mother had the kids, so she just kept them with her.”

“It’s Thursday. You haven’t eaten anything since Saturday?” Seth looked over at Cat in horror. Cat took in a big sigh of relief, at least the question of where the children were had been answered.

“I’ve been sleeping. Kim came one day and took me to the funeral home to make arrangements.” Lucy unwrapped the blueberry muffin. She took a bite, then another, and spoke around the food in her mouth. “We went to a Chinese restaurant after that and I ate then. Allen hated Chinese food. Kim and I always went there when we went shopping.”

“So, you and Kim are friends,” Seth asked as he pushed the plate of muffins closer to the woman.

“Kim’s the best. I work in the accounting department at the college. Accounts payable. So I pay the light bills, all the utilities, and things like that. Do you know how many books we order just for a semester? Professors can’t just have one text for a class, no, they need five. No wonder the scholarship kids need help with books as well as tuition.” Lucy was rambling, but at least she was eating the muffins.

Seth nodded in all the right places and when Cat brought over coffee, he nodded toward the fridge. “Maybe there’s something in there we can warm up for her. And maybe we should call this Kim to come sit with her. I don’t think she should be alone. Or driving.”

Lucy latched onto her coffee cup and took a long sip of the hot liquid. “This is so good. Why haven’t I had a cup lately? I can’t seem to remember.”

Cat left her in Seth’s capable hands as she went to the fridge. There was a quart of what looked like potato soup in the fridge and a date was written on top of it. “Use by the fifteenth. Hopefully, that meant this month,” she said as she took the soup to the stove and found a pan in a cupboard. “Lucy, how about some potato soup?”

“You don’t have to feed me,” Lucy Johnson said as she set down her coffee cup. “I’m feeling better, I promise.”

“I’m sure you are, but since we’re here, we might as well help out. Is anyone staying with you?” Seth asked as he brought over some croissants to the table that had been on the counter.

After Cat started the stove to heat the soup, she brought over coffee for both her and Seth.

“Kim’s been in and out, but I can’t tell you when the last time she popped in. She called this morning and told me to get to the chapel by three.” Lucy sipped her coffee and then looked around. “Oh, my. I was trying to leave town, wasn’t I? I vaguely remember packing.”

“When we got here, yes. And it might not be a bad idea to get away for a while, but you seemed a little off when we started talking to you,” Cat sipped her coffee as she watched the woman eat. She was pinking up and she didn’t have a crazed look in her eyes anymore.

“Oh, my goodness, I remember. I accused you two of trying to kill me, didn’t I?” The shock of her words sent the pink back out of her face.

“It’s okay, calm down. I’m sure you just needed some food in you,” Seth patted the woman’s shaking hand. “Can I bring your suitcases back inside?”

“That would be lovely, Seth, thank you.” She rubbed her forehead. “Please tell me I didn’t make a fool of myself at the funeral. I remember going to the chapel. Then it all seems a blur until you two came by.”

“You were fine. You didn’t talk to anyone, but people thought you were overwhelmed with grief,” Cat got up to stir the soup. “Lucy, can you tell me why you thought the family might be sending someone to kill you?”

Lucy closed her eyes. “Kim told me about the missing money. She thinks that’s why Allen was killed. That he was stealing from the college. But we don’t need the money. I got an inheritance trust a few years ago. We invested most of it, put some away for college for the kids, but some, we’ve been using to fix up the house. Just little things, like the bathroom we had Seth work on. We were going to go to Paris in the spring.”

Tears fell now and Seth moved the tissue box closer to her. “I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Lucy smiled a little and nodded, using another tissue to clean up the tears. “Thank you. He liked you. He was jealous of what you could do with a hammer and saw, but he liked you. I’m not sure what I’m going to do without him.”

“Lucy, what on earth is going on? Why is the car open and your suitcases outside,” a woman came into the kitchen with several bags of groceries. “Oh, you have company. Sorry, to just barge in. I brought you some food.”

“Hi Kim,” Lucy smiled at Seth. “We were just going to fix that problem. Seth, our, I mean, my bedroom is at the top of the stairs. It’s the room with blue walls. You can’t

miss it. Just put the suitcases in the closet.”

Seth nodded and headed out to the front door. Cat turned off the stove under the pot and dished up a bowl of soup for Lucy.

“Here you go,” Cat turned her attention to Kim and smiled. “Lucy was a little out of it when we got here. She needs to eat more frequently.”

Kim blinked several times. “I didn’t realize she wasn’t taking care of herself. Don’t you worry, I’ll be here or when I go to work, I’ll have someone come and sit with her. Thank you for all you’ve done.”

“Not a problem at all,” Cat grabbed her purse and looked around the kitchen. Kim was Lucy’s friend. Cat had only met the woman once, at the party where her husband had been killed. It was probably for the best that she and Seth left and let them be alone.

But something was making Cat question her decision. “Are you sure you’re going to be all right, Lucy?”

The woman smiled, “I’ll be fine. What’s that line from *Sleepless in Seattle* where Tom Hanks says I just keep reminding myself to breathe? That’s kind of where my heart is now.”

“Call me if you need anything,” Cat said as she walked into the hallway where Seth was waiting.

Kim walked them to the door. “I’m so sorry you had to see that. I was here at the first of the week, but Lucy convinced me she was fine. That I should go to work, I shouldn’t have left her alone.”

“It wasn’t a problem. I don’t think she’s been eating well,” Cat glanced back at the house. “We’ll stop in tomorrow and see how she’s doing.”

“Oh, okay,” Kim leaned on the doorway. “I guess I’ll see you then.”

They were almost out of the subdivision when Seth turned to look at her. “Why are we visiting tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure, but something seems off. Have you ever known anyone to freak out like that just because they hadn’t been eating?” Cat tried looking it up on her phone. “I don’t have internet here.”

“We can look it up when we get home,” he turned the truck onto their road. “I wonder what other issues that symptom could be attached to though. Or if there’s another cause.”

“I just don’t understand where her fear of the family is coming from. Even if Allen was the one stealing, and I’m beginning to think he was set up on this, they wouldn’t care about Lucy. If she were involved and didn’t give back the money, that would be one thing. But she’s telling us that Kim told her about the embezzlement. I wonder if Lucy even knew anything about the money before that.”

Seth pulled his truck into the driveway and turned off the engine. “Cat, let’s put this on hold and you try to focus on the rest of the retreat. We only have three more days with the guests. Then you can spend your free time when you’re not writing figuring this out. And your uncle’s worried about you getting involved. Especially if it’s a family matter. We talked when he called me last night.”

“I know what I’m doing, but you’re right.” Cat hated to admit defeat but if Uncle Pete was worried about family involvement, there was a reason. Typically, the crime families stayed out of Aspen Hills and the college per the agreement. But this might

be different. Seth was still watching her. “The retreat has to come first. I have a lot of individual sessions tomorrow. If I do any sleuthing, I’ll invite you to come along.”

“That’s all I’m asking,” he opened the door and waited for her to meet him at the kitchen door. “I’ve got to go let Sam out for a while. Thanks for humoring me. I always get worried when Dante’s part of the discussion.”

“Because you’re afraid I’ll run off with a handsome modern pirate?” Cat teased.

Seth laughed as he opened the door. “No, that hadn’t occurred to me. I get worried because even being around the guy is dangerous. You have to realize what his day job truly entails.”

“I do,” Cat admitted. When she’d been married to Michael, he’d been friends with Dante but Cat hadn’t realized who exactly Dante was in the family hierarchy. It was only after Michael’s death that she found out that he was in leadership. A status that gave Dante power and put a target on his back at the same time.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re back,” Shauna came in from the hallway. “The writers have been asking for you. I think they want to know how the funeral went.”

“The funeral was weird,” Cat went to the tea kettle and turned it on, setting herself up for a cup of tea. “Have you ever heard of anyone not thinking clearly when they don’t eat?”

“Of course, it’s brain fog. Your body is a machine and if you don’t feed it, nothing works well, including your mind. Why? Is your uncle having problems?” Shauna set some cookies on the table and then sat down at the table. “I knew I should have sent over more food this week. When he’s involved in a case he doesn’t eat. Shirley and I have talked about this before.”

“No, why would you think, never mind,” Cat finished setting up her tea. She noticed that after greeting Shauna, Seth had left the kitchen to take care of his dog. “Allen’s widow, Lucy, was acting strange at the funeral. Paranoid. She didn’t even stop to talk to anyone once it was over. So Seth and I went to her house and found her packing her car to leave town. She calmed down a little when I heated some soup for her, and she admitted she hadn’t been eating.”

“Paranoid about Allen’s death and, well, Aspen Hill’s special secret?” Shauna guessed as Cat sat down, taking a cookie from the plate.

“Yeah. She thought people were trying to kill her. I guess Kim Stage has been visiting since Allen died and put a bug in her ear about Allen stealing money from the college.” Cat stirred some sugar in her tea. “So why would a so-called friend try to freak out someone who just lost her husband?”

“If you’re talking about Kim Stage, she’s a viper, not a friend,” Maggie stood in the doorway, a cup of coffee in her hand. “I’ve been waiting for you to come back. Can I come in?”

“Of course,” Shauna pulled out a chair and glanced at her watch. She met Cat’s gaze. “I need to finish freshening up the guest rooms so I’ll let the two of you talk.”

“Thanks, Shauna,” Cat pushed the plate of cookies over to Maggie as she sat down. “Are you hungry?”

“After that fiasco of a funeral? I don’t know how I feel. I’ve met Lucy several times. She’s a warm and loving woman, but the person at that service? She was different.” Maggie took a cookie and broke it in half. “And if Kim was such a good friend, why wasn’t she even at the funeral?”

“She didn’t come?” Cat hadn’t noticed Kim’s absence. “Maybe it was too hard on

her.”

Maggie made a noise in answer.

Cat looked up from her cup. “What? What am I missing?”

“It’s only a rumor,” Maggie shook her head and broke the cookie in half a second time. Then she ate a quarter. When Cat didn’t drop her gaze she shrugged. “Martin had complaints from the staff in fundraising that Allen and Kim were too close. That there was an affair going on.”

“You’re kidding? And now she’s the one watching out for Lucy’s welfare?” There was something wrong with this picture.

“Maybe it was just a rumor and they were all just friends,” Maggie paused, “but Martin said that one of the staff members caught them in Allen’s office.”

“Do you know who?”

“Mike. Mike Tosan. He went directly to Martin to complain saying he didn’t think it sent the right message to the rest of the department.” Maggie ate another quarter of the cookie.

“The guy who replaced Allen also blew the whistle on his affair?” Cat wondered if that was the ‘something else’ going on that could explain Allen’s death. Was Lucy to blame?

“Yeah. Martin was planning to promote Roxie based on her numbers but Mike made the case that he wasn’t being taken seriously because he was the whistle-blower on the affair. The whole department’s a mess.” Maggie picked up the last quarter of the cookie. “I don’t know why I even try to convince myself that I’m not going to eat the

whole cookie. I'm a stress eater. If I'd lost Martin, I would be eating everything in sight rather than nothing at all. I guess we all react differently to grief."

Cat and Maggie talked about the evening's activities. Jon Booth was reading pages tonight before the writing sprints.

Maggie stood and held her coffee cup. "I'm not sure he's going to like my comments on the pages he gave us. His main character is unlikeable, but maybe that was what he was going for."

As she left the kitchen, Cat wondered if her uncle had any clearer idea on who killed Allen or at least, found the missing money. Maybe it was time for a family supper. She went to find Shauna to see what was planned for dinner.

Chapter

Twelve

When the guests left the house to go to dinner, Uncle Pete was just pulling into the driveway. Cat saw Maggie pause as she saw him park his Charger, but Alicia took her arm and they walked away from the house. The girl was a godsend since she was probably the only Maggie whisperer in the group. Maggie wanted to know everything and didn't have a problem with asking pointed questions. Even if they weren't any of her business.

Cat was sure she'd be grilled tonight at the writer's sprints about why her uncle had come to the house. The good thing was Cat could honestly say she invited him for dinner. She just wouldn't tell Maggie the rest.

It wasn't certain that Uncle Pete would answer any of her questions anyway. Information during an investigation was usually a one-way street. You told him things. He wrote them down. Sometimes he made faces. What he didn't do was reciprocate with his information. Unless he wanted to tell Cat to be careful.

Her phone rang before she got to the kitchen. Grace Evans was calling. Cat sat on one of the benches Shauna had recovered in the foyer area. "Hi Grace, what's going on?"

"Cat, I just wanted to check in. I saw you at the funeral but you didn't stay long."

Cat could hear the reproach in Grace's tone. She'd made a social error by not staying. "I wasn't feeling well, so Seth took me home. I'm sorry we didn't have time to

“speak.”

“Oh, that was Seth Howard who came in with you. I assumed you’d be with Dante.”
Grace paused a minute. “I saw Dante come in later.”

Now Cat had the opening to explain that she was never ‘with’ Dante, she’d just helped him host that mess of a party. Instead, she played stupid. “Dante was going to be late so Seth was kind enough to bring me. Dante had responsibilities.”

“Oh, you’re right, sorry for the misunderstanding,” Grace sounded relieved that Cat and Dante were still together.

Cat felt a twinge of guilt about leading her on. But she had been asked to play a part. She should have thought of that before Seth decided to take her to the funeral. Being a secret agent wasn’t ever going to be one of Cat’s super skills. “Anyway, can I chat with you later? My uncle just showed up and we’re having dinner.”

“I know you’re super busy with the retreat this week. Maybe we could have coffee on Friday? I’d love to get your thoughts on the funeral. I don’t think Lucy Johnson is handling Allen’s death very well.”

Cat knew the writers would be at the bookstore at ten tomorrow with Tammy Jones talking about the business of writing so she could sneak away then to meet with Grace. “The Coffee Bean a little after ten? I need to get the writers set up before I can leave.”

“Perfect. And I won’t keep you. I just think that Lucy could use some support.” Grace said her goodbyes then hung up.

Cat tucked her phone into her jeans after making sure the call had ended. Then she said to the empty foyer, “If you were truly worried about Lucy maybe you could stop

by her house rather than meeting me to gossip about her actions today.”

Seth walked out of his apartment just as Cat was finishing her monologue. “I’m glad you’re not talking to me. Are you?”

Cat met him at the kitchen door. “No, just doing that thing where you think of the perfect comeback after you hang up the phone. Wait, it wasn’t that. It was saying what I wanted to say but I was too polite to say it.”

“Okay, I’m leaving that statement alone. Do you need me to drive tomorrow to the bookstore?” He had his phone on calendar mode. “I have you booked at nine forty-five for a drop-off. I don’t think they’ll need to be driven back unless it snows, and they decide to forgo lunch.”

“I told them that Tammy would ship any books to their house already. So, I don’t think either of those situations will happen, so yes, your calendar is right. I’m going to have coffee with Grace Evans while they’re with Tammy.” She started to push the swinging door open. “And there’s one more thing.”

He sighed as he followed. “What is it now?”

“Uncle Pete’s joining us for dinner.”

It took a few minutes for everyone to be settled at the table and for Shauna to sit down after bringing bowl after bowl of yummy food.

Uncle Seth met Shauna’s gaze. “This all looks wonderful. I can’t decide to count it as an early Thanksgiving dinner or worry that you’re buttering me up for something.”

“We missed you and Shauna has been worried about you not eating,” Cat dished up mashed potatoes and put them on the plate next to the slice of meatloaf. Then she

poured brown gravy over everything. The green salad was already served in a separate bowl. “I wanted to hear about what was going on with Allen’s death. The funeral was just bizarre, and the widow is freaking out because her friend is telling her that the mob is coming for the money that she didn’t steal, and she doesn’t know where Allen hid it if he did.”

“Kim’s telling her that?” The crease over Uncle Pete’s forehead. Now he rubbed his hand over it absently. “I swear, people can’t just be supportive. If everyone would play nice with others, my job would be obsolete. Instead, I’ve got a woman winding up a widow with words that aren’t even true.”

“So the mob, the family,” she corrected her wording, “isn’t worried about the money?”

“The money, yes, but they are letting me investigate. Aspen Hills and Covington College are protected from their system of justice.” Uncle Pete shook his head. “I’ve been part of this community for years. If someone from the organization says they didn’t kill Allen, you can trust it unless someone went rogue. And that hasn’t happened in years. Not since the Michael incident.”

“What do you know about Kim?” Cat watched her uncle’s reaction, and she could tell that the question had surprised him.

“You can’t think that Kim Slate killed Allen or took the money. She’s worked for the college forever. She raised her son and then he graduated from college and went off to law school several years ago. I hear he’s working for a big firm in New York.” Uncle Pete took the basket of fresh rolls from Shauna and then passed the basket to Seth after taking a roll. He shook it at Cat for emphasis on his last words. “She’s a townie.”

“Townies don’t kill or steal? You’ve got an easy job here then,” Cat focused on

eating so that Uncle Pete could consider his prejudice.

Seth handed him the butter. “All I know is I agree with Cat that the funeral was super weird. It was like everyone was expecting the body to jump out of the coffin with a machine gun and plow down the entire church.”

“I think you watch too many movies,” Shauna said a small smile on her lips. “My friend, Tina, was there and she said it was quiet but normal. Except for the widow of course. But she knows Lucy. She’s always been a little distant.”

Cat concentrated on eating her salad as she listened to the conversation. There weren’t any hard facts to go on in either Allen’s death or the theft. Or at least, in the loss of the money, nothing that didn’t leave a trail toward Dante. Cat realized neither her uncle nor Seth was pushing the evils of Dante. They didn’t like the guy because he was in a dangerous line of work. But they didn’t think he’d steal or kill someone for money. This had to be a first.

Shauna elbowed her. “Okay, spill. I can see it all over your face. You know something.”

Cat shook her head, embarrassed that Shauna could read something on Cat that she hadn’t said aloud. “I’m just thinking. I’m worried about Lucy. I feel like I haven’t helped with the investigation at all.”

“Thank you,” Uncle Pete said as he grabbed another roll.

Frowning, Cat turned to him. “Thank you? What are you thanking me for?”

“This is the first time that I haven’t felt like you’re in the middle of things. I know you hate that idea, but I love the fact that you’re clueless.” He held up his hand. “At least in who killed Allen and who stole the money. Maybe no one will come after you

this time.”

He glanced at his watch. “Thanks for the grub, Shauna. I’ve got to get home. Shirley’s Facetiming me this evening and I need to get changed. We call it a date night.”

After he left, Cat and Seth helped Shauna clean up the kitchen including the dishes. Shauna started the dishwasher. “Do you need me to run the writing sprints tonight?”

Cat wiped the table. “No, Maggie’s doing it. I feel disconnected from this group for some reason. So, I’ll be there. I want to make sure they’re getting their money’s worth with the dancing author.”

“Dancing monkey,” Seth corrected. “Besides, you can’t dance.”

“That would be what you comment on. Not reassurance that I’ve been providing a lovely retreat, but that I can’t dance.” Cat rolled her eyes and Shauna laughed.

“I’m glad you don’t need me because I need to bake a few batches of cookies. Your writers are snackers.” Shauna turned on the tea kettle. “Now get out of my kitchen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Seth looked around the room and snapped his fingers for Sam to follow him. “I’ve got laundry to do anyway.”

“I should go up and clean out my emails,” Cat followed Seth out of the room and into the hallway.

“You don’t want to do my laundry for me?” He aimed a crooked smile her way.

“In your dreams, big guy.” Cat headed up the stairs, then paused. “Hey, thanks for coming with me today. I know this isn’t easy.”

“Cat when has anything with us been easy? I like spending time with you. I always have,” he said as he opened his apartment door and left her alone in the foyer.

She thought about his words as she headed upstairs. She didn’t have a lot of time before the writers returned from dinner, but she hadn’t checked her email since Monday and although she probably hadn’t missed anything, sometimes she had surprises. Besides, it kept her from doing Seth’s laundry.

There wasn’t much there, but she updated her social media accounts as she waited for the evening session. Then she spent time planning her day for Friday and Saturday. She was meeting with two authors before the field trip to the bookstore and the rest of her one-on-ones were in the afternoon. Then Friday night, they’d have their last session together, besides the dinner on Saturday night. She’d thought about adding events to Saturday’s schedule, but the writers seemed to enjoy the time to get more words done on the documents or spend a few last hours in the library researching. Besides, it was good practice for them to go back to the solo experience that being a writer entailed. Hours at the computer alone, forming a scene that advanced the story, or editing a timeline that had gone wonky.

Authors spent a lot of time alone. She was lucky that she had Seth and Shauna here at the house. Otherwise, she’d be here by herself, with her cat, Angelica, to talk to most of the time. Sharing her oversized house with the writers’ retreat also brought people into her world. People she might never meet in real life if not for the event. Even when she went to conferences, she had her assignments and her appointments. But she walked by so many people she recognized by their faces but had no idea what they wrote or who they were.

Cat was lucky. She had friends and family here in Aspen Hills. She worked with community members and people from the college. She had a life outside her office and her imaginary friends she worked with every day she opened her Word document.

It was a good life.

Her watch alarm went off and she realized it was time to head downstairs. She took the agenda she'd written up along with her laptop and a notebook. She would participate in word sprints tonight and hopefully, she could have a reasonable word count at the end of the week. Most retreat weeks she came out with more words than a normal week. This retreat had felt a little different. But words were words and she had a deadline next month.

Most of the group was in the dining room, getting sustenance for the evening's activities. Shauna had put out a plate of still-warm brownies that Cat could smell as she came down the stairs. Somehow, she ignored the siren call of chocolate and went into the living room to get organized. Jon Booth was there, standing at the podium reading his section aloud.

"Sorry, am I disturbing you?" Cat asked as Jon stopped reading and stared at her, his face turning beet red.

He shook his head and took in a shaky breath. "I don't think I can do this. I've never let anyone read my stuff before."

Cat nodded and sat down. "I know it's scary. But you can do it. And there's one thing I forgot to tell you all about publishing. Once you sell your book, it's not yours. Everyone seems to have an opinion about what should be said, who your main character should be, and what the cover you've been imagining for years, should look like. So getting input early from other writers gives you experience in sifting through what changes to your vision you can live with, and what you can't."

"I thought they just edited the book. Why would they buy it and then make changes?" Jon leaned on the lectern, watching her.

“Because they liked something. The plot. The promise of the book. Or maybe they believed you could make this book shine.” Cat leaned back in her chair. “I have to admit, it was a learning experience for me. This is a safe place. You can hear or read the questions that the group has and either take the suggestion or leave it. Nothing is riding on tonight. If you think you can’t read, I’ll read it for you. Sometimes that gives you a different experience, listening to what you wrote versus what you wanted to say.”

He looked at her, then down at the papers in front of him. Then back at her. “I’ll read. But can you be here just in case I freeze?”

“Of course,” she held up her notes. “I’ll start the session with the plan for tomorrow and Saturday. Then I’ll ask if anyone has questions. And after that, I’ll hand it over to you.”

“You make it seem so natural.” Jon glanced at the empty chairs. “What if they hate the book?”

“What’s the worst they can say? And did anyone trash a reader the last two nights?”

He shook his head. “The comments were mostly good, but I know I made some suggestions on the papers I gave back. I didn’t want to embarrass them. I guess the worst they can do is laugh and tell me to go back to my day job.”

“Would you do that to anyone in your group?”

“No way. Everyone’s trying hard. They spent money and time to come here to get better. And,” he paused, looking at her, “So did I and that’s why it’s a safe place. Sometimes I can be a little dense.”

“It’s easier for us to stand up for other people sometimes than it is to stand up for

ourselves.” Cat glanced at her watch. “You’ve got five minutes before I start talking to grab some coffee or water. Or maybe a cookie or brownie for after you read?”

“Thanks for calming me down. I’m not sure coffee is a good idea, but I might get some tea.” He left the room.

Seth came into the room. “You are good at this.”

She smiled as she waved him closer. “He just needed to take a breath.”

“No, you were able to get him to put himself in someone else’s shoes. He didn’t remember that we’re all here to help each other.”

She stood and set her notes on the lectern. “Do you need me for something?”

He came over and pulled her into his arms. Then he kissed her, long and slow. Whistles and catcalls came from the doorway. He let her go and smiled at their audience. “Just that. I forgot to kiss you goodnight after dinner. Enjoy your writer thing.”

As he left, the group came inside the room and found their seats. They were all grinning. Except for Maggie Martin. She looked shocked. Her and Dante’s fake relationship had seemed real enough.

“Okay, so no comments from the peanut gallery about what just happened. And it’s six so we’ll get started. I’ve got a few announcements about our next few days and then I’ll turn the mic over to Jon who will be reading from his manuscript. Please remember to leave constructive comments and to give examples of what might work better in the scene.” She smiled at Jon who was gripping his mug tightly. “This is Jon’s first reading, so let’s be as supportive as possible.”

Nods from the group reassured her that he'd be in good hands. She'd read and made her comments earlier, making sure she had something positive to say as well as a general correction idea.

Now they just had to get through Jon's reading without him having a heart attack from fear.

Running a writers' retreat either with or without a murder to solve was always interesting. And, she smiled as she thought about Seth's comment and his kiss. She was good at this. Maybe she should write a book or an article called *Hosting a Writers' Retreat at Home for One or Ten*. She made a note on her agenda. That wasn't a bad idea. Not at all.

"Okay, so we'll have official writing sprints tonight and tomorrow night. If you want to pull together sprints on Friday or Saturday, that will be on you guys to organize. The living room is always available. Then Friday morning we're heading to the bookstore. I'll have one on one's that morning and again Friday afternoon. Finally, on Saturday, everyone has free time until six pm when we'll be getting into Seth's van and heading out for dinner to celebrate the end of a hopefully successful retreat." She smiled at the group. "Don't forget to update your word count before three pm on Saturday on the official board. And bring any suggestions for future retreats or questions you need answers to at Friday's evening session. We'll go over your goal sheets tomorrow night too."

"Sounds like a busy session. Maybe I shouldn't plan on reading tomorrow night," Debra Jennings offered.

Jon shook his head. "Sorry. If I have to go through this pain, you do as well. Besides, you signed up for this torture, I mean, learning experience."

The group laughed and Cat looked at her notes. "That's all I've got unless someone

has a question. Jon, you're in the hot seat."

The group clapped and cheered as he walked to the lectern. He took a deep breath, then smiled. "Don't be offended, but I'm imagining you all in your underwear right now."

Then he started reading.

Chapter

Thirteen

Friday morning, Cat arose early and after grabbing coffee, went to her office to work. Instead, she found herself looking up the social media accounts of Kim Slate. Her uncle had framed her correctly. Her Facebook feed was filled with pictures of her house in Aspen Hills and her son. According to the site, she and Kim had been friends for a while. She'd probably friended her when she'd worked at the college. Back when Cat was the creative wife of the more distinguished economics professor. She'd been accepted at the college's parties more as a novelty. Especially after she'd confessed that she'd sold her first paranormal academy story. If she'd wanted to be respected, Michael had warned her, she needed to write a literary novel. Not genre fiction.

As she scrolled through the posts, she saw several shots with the fundraising departments. Mostly at events that they'd sponsored to raise money for the college. And in most of the posts, there was a picture that included her and Allen. Were they standing a bit too close? Were they watching each other in candid shots? How had they kept their affair a secret when they clearly were attracted to each other? Had Kim not seen the evidence when she posted these?

She continued to flip through the posts, seeing the same type of pictures from every event, until she found an event, two years ago where the signs weren't there. She found three different events before that where the two weren't soulfully gazing into each other's eyes. So she went back to the closest event that she could see the attraction. Eighteen months ago.

Cat wrote the date and event on a piece of paper. Then she went forward to now. The last event she'd posted didn't have a picture of Allen. And the one before, he was standing in the group shot with Lucy, his wife.

Allen and Kim had broken up sometime between that first picture together when the sexual tension snapped between them, even on film and now. But when? Cat slowly scrolled Kim's feed until she found the last picture of them together. Six months ago.

She texted Dante a question but before he could respond, a knock sounded on her door. Her first one-on-one was here. Time to stop snooping and to start working. "Come in," Cat called as she closed out the Facebook tab and grabbed another notebook and the file on top of her pile. Patrick Bradley was here to talk all things writing and deserved Cat's full attention.

By the time she'd finished the morning's meetings, she only had ten minutes to get downstairs for Seth's ride into town with the group. She'd walk home after her coffee with Grace. She was sure that as soon as Grace realized that Cat wasn't dating Dante, this would be the last offer of coffee. But she could be wrong.

Either way, she put on makeup and hurried downstairs to meet up with the group.

After she got into the van, riding shotgun, Seth turned to her and smiled. "You look nice."

"I'm meeting Grace Evans for coffee while the writers are at the bookstore." She glanced back but they all seemed involved in a discussion about first versus third point of view.

"Do you need a ride back?"

She shook her head. "I'll walk. Maybe stop by and see Uncle Pete."

“Do you have a theory?” Seth backed the van out of the driveway and headed to town.

Cat thought about his question and waved at Mrs. Rice as they passed by her house. Her neighbor didn’t like her, but she loved Seth and Shauna. Especially Shauna because they tested recipes together. Seth cleared her sidewalks and cleared downed trees from her property. Cat had divorced Michael. And Mrs. Rice had loved Michael too.

“Cat? Do you have a theory?” Seth repeated, quieter this time.

She shook her head and as she turned toward him in her seat, she saw Maggie watching her. “Not a theory,” she admitted. “Just more questions.”

When she got the writers settled, she said she’d see them at the house and headed for the door. A hand caught her coat and she turned to find Maggie watching her. “What do you need?”

Maggie glanced back at the other writers. Then she whispered, “Are you going to see Dante?”

Cat frowned and tried to process the question. “No, I’m having coffee with Grace Evans. Why? Do you need to talk to Dante?”

“No, I mean, I was just wondering,” Maggie stammered, then she met Cat’s gaze. “Are you cheating on Dante with Seth? Or Seth with Dante? It’s hard to figure out.”

“And none of your business, frankly. But I’ll tell you the truth,” Cat paused and saw that the group was watching them talk. Tammy was finishing with a customer. “I’m in a relationship with Seth. We’re probably getting married soon. Or at least I hope we will. Dante’s my friend. That’s all. No relationship besides friendship.”

Cat watched as Maggie processed the information. Cat was going back on her promise to Dante to pretend they were going together, but so far, that lie hadn't helped them figure out who had killed Allen or even who stole the money. "I've got to go. Grace's waiting."

"I'm glad. Martin said to stay out of it, but Seth's a nice guy. He did some work for us on the house. I just didn't want you to hurt him. Not like Allen and Kim."

Cat froze, then focused on Maggie. "What do you know about Allen and Kim?"

"They were having an affair, but he broke it off and told her he still loved Lucy. That he'd made a mistake. Kim was blindsided."

Just then Tammy called out, "We're ready to get started. Cat, did you need something?"

"No, sorry, I'm leaving," As Cat opened the door, she turned back, "Thanks for telling me."

As she walked to the coffee shop, The Coffee Bean, she thought about Kim and Allen. Was it that easy? Kim set Allen up because he didn't love her? And when that didn't work because someone else had seen the frame job and turned it to focus on Dante, had she killed Allen for his treatment of her?

And if all of this was true, how on earth was she going to prove it? Her uncle loved her but he wasn't going to be able to take some damaging Facebook posts and turn it into a murder motive. There had to be something more than he could use.

But maybe this would at least get him looking for evidence. Maybe Grace knew more and would be willing to talk to him. She should just tell her what she thought she knew and see if Grace had any more evidence.

She pulled open the door to the coffee shop and quickly stepped out of the cold. She stomped her feet to get the snow and ice off her boots. Then she glanced around the almost empty shop while she unwound her scarf. No Grace.

Cat checked her watch. She wasn't early she was late. It was fifteen after. She texted Grace but no response came back.

"Can I help you?" a girl asked from the hostess stand.

"I'm supposed to be meeting someone. Grace Evans? Have you seen her?" Cat peppered questions at the hostess.

The girl shook her hair. "Not this morning, although she's a regular. I'll seat you. Maybe she's just running late."

Cat nodded and followed the hostess. Then she ordered a large peppermint mocha. She leaned back and watched her phone.

Dante answered her while she waited. Do you want the exact dates or just an idea?

She texted back. Just an idea.

She held her breath as she watched the three dots dance. Finally, she had a longer-than-usual text from Dante. But the most important part was the first line. About six months ago now. Why?

Cat waited another thirty minutes, finishing her drink and getting more and more concerned about Grace's well-being. Before she left, she texted her one more time but still no answer. Either Grace had forgotten about their coffee date or she'd gotten busy. She headed to her uncle's house and as she walked, she called Lucy Johnson's cell.

The phone rang five times before Lucy picked up.

“Hello?”

“Hi, Lucy, it’s Cat Latimer. I was just checking to see if you were okay. I stopped by yesterday with my boyfriend, Seth, after the funeral?”

“I remember. Do you think I’m an idiot?”

The tone of Lucy’s voice surprised Cat but she pushed on. “Well, I just wanted to know if there was anything I could do for you today. I don’t have a lot of time but next week I’ll have more time available.”

“No, I’m fine. Everything is fine here. Except, of course, my husband is dead. You had that problem a few years ago, right?”

Cat paused at the street crossing, waiting for the light to change. “Yes, my ex-husband Michael died a few years ago. Did you know him?”

“No, I was just making small talk. Anyway, I need to go. Thank you for calling.”

Cat started to say something else but she realized that Lucy had ended the call. She tucked her phone into her coat pocket and crossed the street to the police station.

He was at the front counter, leaning over and talking with the dispatcher/receptionist. This was the third one this year and from the frustrated look on her face, Cat wondered if there would be a fourth soon. “You look busy.”

“I’m not. I’m just helping out,” he stood and waved her back to his office. The look of relief on the girl’s face was priceless. Cat might have to explain delegation to her uncle. “So what brought you out on a cold Friday?”

“I was supposed to have coffee with Grace Evans but she stood me up,” Cat sank into one of his visitor chairs. “Why don’t you hire Shirley to move down here and do dispatching? I’m sure she’d be excellent.”

He blinked at her several times. “She’s retired.”

“From being an officer. Maybe she’d like an office job to keep her busy.” Cat shrugged. “Whatever, I just don’t think your most recent hire is going to stay if you don’t give her some room to breathe.”

“I give her room. She just keeps messing up. She hung up on the mayor this morning, so I told her I’d watch her for an hour to see if I could help.”

“She’s probably freaking out that you’re watching her. I know I would be.” Cat leaned toward the desk, trying to see his paperwork. “Anything new on Allen’s murder?”

“No, and stop trying to snoop.” He grabbed the files from his desk and stuffed them into his side drawer. “Why were you meeting with Grace Evans? She doesn’t seem your type.”

“What? Too uptown?” Cat felt the same way, but she wondered what her uncle thought.

“She flies to New York to shop three times a year. Her husband is always complaining at the college board meeting about how much she spends on shoes.” He rubbed his earlobe. “Then he complains that the protective boots the security guards wear shouldn’t be paid for by the college.”

“Like he’s paying the bill,” Cat didn’t want to walk home yet, but she’d run out of questions. “Dante says the money started disappearing about six months ago. The

same time that Kim and Allen's affair ended. Don't you think that's interesting?"

"What's your point? Are you thinking Allen started stealing because Kim broke up with him?"

"Or maybe Kim started stealing because Allen broke up with her." Cat didn't have proof of either scenario, but it was interesting.

"I hadn't considered that angle, but then why would someone frame Dante?" Uncle Pete chewed on a pen as he talked.

"Maybe someone from the family caught wind of the money disappearing and thought it would be a good way to get him out?"

"There's a lot of maybe's in your scenarios. Usually, you come with a better theory besides a broken affair."

"Chief? There's a man on the line saying his wife is missing. I told him I'd sent out a car, but he wants to talk to you." The dispatcher stood at the doorway. "I didn't want to transfer him in case you didn't pick up and I lost the call."

"That's fine, Ariel. What's his name?" Uncle Pete looked down at the flashing light on his phone. "Sorry Cat, I need to take this."

"Ronnie Evans. He says his wife's name is Grace?" She backed out of the door and then called back. "He's on line five."

Cat met her uncle's gaze. "Grace?"

"What time were you supposed to meet?" Uncle Pete asked, "And where?"

She gave him the information and he pointed to the door. "I'll let you know what I find."

Cat bundled up her coat and nodded at Ariel. She wondered how long the girl would stay. She seemed frightened to do anything with the phone system. She said a prayer for Grace's safety and headed out into the cold so she'd be on time for her afternoon one-on-one with the writers.

That evening after dinner, she called her uncle. "Any word?"

"Don't you have a retreat to deal with?" He grumbled as she heard paper moving on his desk.

"Yes, and I'm going into a meeting right after I hang up, but I'm worried about Grace. Has she turned up?" Cat had tucked herself into the den so no one would overhear her conversation. There had already been a murder in Aspen Hills, if the writers found out someone had disappeared, her retreat would start living up to the murder retreat hype she sometimes found online from past guests.

"No. When did you make this appointment for coffee? You're in her day planner for today."

"She called yesterday after seeing me at the funeral. She wanted to talk about Lucy. And probably see if I was still dating Dante."

The pause on the other side of the line made her chuckle. "You know, the fake dating idea where I hosted the party? That turned out to be a horrible idea and instead of me figuring out who was stealing from the school, someone got killed."

"Allen's death wasn't your fault, Cat." He sighed and Cat could imagine him running his hand through his thinning hair. He was tired, she could hear it in his voice. "This

is getting out of hand. I'm talking to the council tomorrow including Dante and making sure the family is truly staying out of Aspen Hills. Oh, one more thing."

"What's that," Cat glanced at her watch. She had a few minutes before the final evening session started.

"You said something about talking about Lucy. Is that why her name's in the planner with a note to order food?"

"That makes sense," Cat nodded as she returned a book from the desk to the bookshelf. It was one of her craft books she'd moved down here after starting the retreat. The guests were welcome to use the den and its library as they needed. "I told her she wasn't eating well and it was messing with her thoughts and actions."

"Okay, so another dead end. I swear, this investigation keeps stalling out. But at least I have cleared your fake boyfriend. He's been alibied out for all the transfer times. Unless he's able to do it in front of other people or pre-schedule, which the school's accountant says is impossible. So it wasn't Dante stealing money. Someone just wanted us to think that it was him."

"Which is why you're talking to the council. Do you think someone will just admit they were framing him?"

"No, but they may grumble about his always getting away with something. Or be too overly happy that Dante was cleared. Sometimes, it's the little things that make me curious in an interview." He chuckled. "Like when I caught you and Seth heading out of town that night for the Denver concert with beer in the cooler."

"I didn't buy it," Cat smiled at the memory.

"Neither did Seth, but the look on his face when I stopped you just inside town told

me the whole story. Something was happening that night. The cooler just proved it. I need to thank him for the beer one day. I put it in my fridge and had one when I got off shift. It was high-end stuff. His contact knew what he was buying.”

“I think it was his cousin. Seth felt horrible about it as we drove to Denver. He kept apologizing to me for making me look bad in front of you.”

“He’s a good man, you need to remember that.”

“And with that trip down memory lane, I need to get to my writers’ session. Call me if you hear from Grace. I’m worried.”

Cat tucked the phone into her pocket and headed toward the living room. As she passed by Seth’s apartment door, she wondered if the trip down memory lane was her uncle’s way of pointing out that she and Seth had history and she needed to take the next step with him. She knew he hadn’t liked the idea of her helping Dante.

What was it with the men in her life that made them think she didn’t have a brain? Like helping Dante with one party would just sweep her off her feet and she’d run off and marry the mob prince without thinking about Seth.

Micheal . Uncle Pete thinks that is what happened between her and Michael. The difference was that she and Seth had ended things before she even went out with Michael. Seth had moved to Washington to live his life, she was still here, in grad school. Besides, they were good right now.

At least she thought so.

Seth came out of the door and almost ran into her. “Hey, I thought I’d come to your writing sprint tonight. I’ve been thinking about making a second walking trail course for the guests. Maybe one they can do on their own.”

“That’s a great idea. We’re doing a summary session, then I think Debra’s doing a reading of her pages. I think there’s an extra copy if you want to stay for the whole thing. Then sprints will start about seven.”

He grinned at her, the crook in his lips making her smile. “In for a penny, I guess. I’m getting some cookies first.”

She watched him head to the dining room and not for the first time, wondered how her life had turned out this wonderful.

Now all she had to do was figure out who took the school’s money, who killed Allen, and, find Grace Evans. Life was never perfect.

Chapter

Fourteen

Cat took a selfie with the group on her phone before she started talking. “So where are you all today? I have your goal sheets here if you want to take them back and adjust them or just see what you need to do tomorrow. I’ll leave them on the coffee table and pick them back up at the end of the session. No pressure, but most groups find they’ve overachieved on what they thought they could have done this week.”

“I know I wrote more words than what’s on my goal page,” Alicia, the Covington student said as she reached for the file Cat held out. “I’ve been in school for five years now and have been working on this book since then. My professors always told me that my pace was normal. I think I just wasn’t focused on the writing enough. This week, that’s all I did, besides your sessions and eating.”

“It makes a difference. When you’re in the manuscript, day after day, you start to hear your characters. I know that some writers do a lot of headwork before writing. For me, the magic comes when I sit down. There’s something about that empty page that calls me to fill it. Sometimes I think what I’m writing will all be cut later, but I always keep writing. I can make that decision later. But when I go to cut later, I find my subconscious was building another character or a new class for my main character to learn something she needs later in the story. Which I hadn’t even planned.”

“So you’re a pantsier,” Debra inquired.

Cat paused a moment before she answered. “Yes and no. The more I write and work

with a publisher, the more structure my story or outline gets before I start writing. But that's for them and to give me a direction to start. It's like driving along distance. You know what freeway you're going to take but the exits or off-ramps you take because you need to get out of the car and stretch your legs or get a cold drink, those you don't plan. I like to say that I'm a gardener. I plant the seeds and see what grows."

They talked a little more about goal setting and then Cat brought the group back to the agenda. "So make sure you have a system at home on how, when, and where you're going to write. Set up or join local writing sprints. We have a Facebook page where writers post what they've been doing lately. I noticed several online writing sprint groups have been announced and formed there. You can drop in anytime."

"Yeah, but Shauna's cookies won't be available," Jon Booth grumbled.

"True. We have several reunion sessions each year where you can come for cookies or a shot in the arm for your writing." Cat looked at her notes. "Anyway, besides brunch and treats, tomorrow will be a free day until dinner. I hope you spend some time tonight planning your last day here. I'll be available all day. I might be writing, but I don't have anything else planned."

"What about the guy who died? Have they found out who killed him yet?" Alicia asked, glancing over at Debra. She had turned white, probably remembering finding the body. "Sorry, Debra, I shouldn't have brought it up."

"No, that's okay. It's just weird. I'm forty years old and I've never seen a dead body before. I write historical, but fiction, not mysteries, so I never even considered what someone would look like that way." She shivered but then smiled. "I got a ton of pictures before that room though. I haven't looked at the ones I took in the solarium though because that's where I found him."

A twinge of hope circled in Cat's brain. Maybe Debra had caught something on film that Uncle Pete's guys had missed. "Debra, send those pictures to me and I'll send back the ones that are clear. That way, you don't have to lose all your pictures in that room."

"That's nice of you. But are you sure? I don't want you to get upset at what you see. One of us in a tizzy is enough." Debra asked, but she was already opening her phone and the pictures app to send them to Cat.

"Not a problem," Cat glanced at her watch. "Okay, well, like I said, I'll be around most of the day tomorrow. I have one errand to run, but I should be back. Don't eat too many brownies because I'm buying dinner. And the Mexican restaurant we're going to is amazing."

Jon stood and stretched. "Who's running sprints tonight? I need coffee and a brownie now that Cat brought it up."

Maggie stood and raised her hand. "I'll run the sprints tonight, but I can't tomorrow. My husband planned a luncheon for me to speak at so I'll be out for a couple of hours."

Jon laughed. "I called him and told him to keep you busy so I can write more and be the writer king. You were getting too close to my word count."

"I wouldn't put it passed you, but no, I think my husband is torpedoing my writing just fine on his own without your encouragement." Maggie grinned at Cat. "But what he doesn't know is I'm going to join the local writing group next week. It's time for me to work on my career, not just his."

As they started to walk out, Debra paused by Cat's chair. "I sent you all those pictures. I tried not to look, but I'm not sure you can save any of them. It's too bad.

That room was beautiful. And so tastefully restored. Dante has a very detailed decorator.”

“He only hires the best,” Cat squeezed her arm. “Don’t worry. If I have to crop some of the pictures, I’ll get you something back before the end of the retreat.”

“I appreciate it,” Debra looked at the group leaving the living room. “I better go if I plan to snag a brownie. I swear Jon’s been hiding them in his room at night.”

“Shauna loves baking, so there are always more,” Cat closed her note file and tucked it in her tote. She wasn’t going to write tonight. She was going to clean up Debra’s pictures and send anything she found to her uncle. Maybe there would be something to get Dante off the hot seat. Besides him being by her side all night. Her uncle trusted her, but Dante had the means to hire someone so he was probably still on Uncle Pete’s list.

“Cat? I asked everyone else, but I found this flash drive by the table at the party Saturday night. I didn’t want to open it, in case it was a professor’s test answers or something that might be confidential. But no one has claimed it. Can I leave it with you? Maybe it was Dante’s or one of the guests from the party. I thought someone would claim it before we left, but now time’s ticking.” Alicia handed her the flash drive.

Cat glanced at the writing on the case. This was the second flash drive to appear during the retreat. Not unusual, but since Cat had given the first one to Uncle Pete and hadn’t heard anything back, she wondered if she was being given information she didn’t understand.

The drive looked like it was one of the promotional ones the campus gave out to prospective students with all the college information on it. A way they could study what Covington had to offer before applying for admission. She had found them in

her first-year English classes all the time. The drive had a lot of room on it and the marketing material could be deleted and replaced with papers or assignments.

Most students used a marker to write their names on the back. This one only had the college name and crest.

“Thanks. I’ll take a peek and see if we can get it back to the owners. Thanks for being so thoughtful about the contents.” Cat tucked it in her pocket as she stood and grabbed her folder. “I’ll be up in my office if anyone needs me.”

“A bright idea you need to work out?” Alicia walked out to the foyer with her.

“Something like that,” Cat headed upstairs, smiling at the sound of happy writers in the dining room. Next week the house would be empty again and quiet. Which she liked too. Maybe she was becoming more of an extrovert as the retreats continued.

Having people around was starting to feel more normal. Even when they were all strangers at the beginning of the week. They had one thing in common, the need to write stories and share them with others.

Writers were the best kind of people.

As she settled into her office chair, she brought up her email from Debra. The first picture was from the hallway outside the conservatory. She glanced at it, then dragged it back to a new email to Debra. “Nothing scary there.”

She went to the next one and copied it to her uncle. Even if she didn’t see something, maybe his trained investigator eye might. The picture was focused on the windows that were backlit so the stained glass would show, even at night. It was beautiful. But not evidence. She put the picture back into Debra’s email.

The next one showed the rows of plants. She immediately copied it for her uncle, then blew it up. There was something red at the end of the photo. And it wasn't on the floor so it wasn't Allen's blood. It might have been a bloom, but it was at an odd angle and too large. She put this photo back into Debra's email after saving it to a file on her desktop. Then went to the next.

This one showed Allen's body. She studied the snap and copied it for her folder and another for her uncle. It occurred to her that Uncle Pete might already have these pictures since he'd talked to Debra the night of the murder. But it was better to be safe than sorry, he always said.

Cat cropped the picture to remove Allen and put the new copy back in Debra's email. At least she'd have a picture showing the ornate woodworking in the walls behind the plants.

When she went to the next picture, she froze. The angle was the same as the one with the red spot, but now, she could see a door clearly behind where the red spot had been. She opened the earlier picture to compare them.

It was the same angle. Someone had been leaving the scene just as Debra came inside the room and found the body. Someone in a red dress.

The killer was female. And wore a red dress.

After going through the pictures, she sent the email to her uncle. And called him. He answered. "What?"

"No, hello dear niece, I've missed you?" Cat teased, then she got to the point. "Anyway, I just sent you an email with a bunch of pictures Debra took."

"I've already looked at the pictures. She sent them to me."

She could hear him opening his laptop. He must be home as the television was on in the background. "So you know the killer was female."

"What are you talking about?" Now the television went on mute and she waited as he went through the pictures. He came back on the line, "I don't see one of this potential killer you see. What am I missing?"

She opened the email. "Look at the picture labeled five, then the one labeled six."

"Okay, I see a lot of plants and a wall."

She smiled. "I think that's a door. And look at the same spot in six."

"It's red. How does that mean the killer is female?"

She leaned back, "Because the party was a black-tie event. All the guys were in black tuxedos and the women were in colored dresses. The staff wore all black. The only red would have been a female guest."

"Text your friend and see if there was a professional photographer there to take pictures for the society page. I need to know the name of any woman in red."

"You want me involved?" She was already texting Dante. It was a rhetorical question. Or maybe just to rub it in.

"You already are involved from what I see. And you found a clue. You can follow up with him." He paused and she knew he was going through the pictures again. "Good job on this. I missed it."

She got an answer back from Dante. She relayed the information to Uncle Pete. "Aspen Hills Photography. Amber Hillcrest was the photographer. Do you want me

to visit her?”

“I can do that, thank you. Now I’m going back to watching my game. I’ll chat with you in the morning.”

She put her phone away, happy she’d been able to do something. This didn’t clear Dante but at least it was a lead. And those had been short and far between lately.

She glanced at her watch. The writers would probably be on their second set of sprints but she didn’t have the energy to join the group and write tonight. Instead, she closed her computer and standing, left the room, locking the office door. She needed to go see Lucy Johnson tomorrow and see how she was doing. And get ready for the guests' dinner.

Sunday she’d have time to put this case all together and see what she was missing. Maybe she’d go visit Dante and take another look at the murder scene. Maybe there was a clue that Uncle Pete’s guys had missed. And maybe Grace Evans would show up.

She was getting good at this investigating thing. It was all about seeing what shouldn’t be there. Just like some of the computer games she played when she didn’t want to write. She decided to head downstairs and see what Seth was up to. They hadn’t talked much this last week and she knew he was still a little touchy about her helping Dante host the party last weekend.

She went down the stairs and then crossed over to the other wing on the second floor. It had a small laundry room so Shauna didn’t have to go downstairs and back over to the other wing to clean up the guest rooms. And only the three of them knew that the room connected the two wings. You just went through the back door of the laundry room. Seth had designed it that way.

Then she went down the back stairs and knocked at Seth's back door.

There was no answer. If he was in the living room, he couldn't hear her knocking. She heard a bark and opened the door to find Sam on the other side, watching her. "Hey buddy, where's your guy?"

Sam barked again and ran through the hallway toward the kitchen area. Cat followed and no one was in the kitchen, but Sam stood at the door, waiting to go outside. She turned on the outdoor light and let the dog out. Then she went through the apartment, looking for Seth. She found him in the living room, asleep on his recliner. A basketball game was playing on the television. Probably the same game her uncle had been watching when she called. Cat turned the television off, using the remote.

Seth sat up. "I was watching that."

"Through your eyelids?" Her mom used to ask her dad that all the time when she found him sleeping in the living room, the television blaring.

He stretched and then stood up. She could see his knee was still bothering him, but she didn't ask how bad it was. He didn't like to talk about it. "Where's Sam?"

"Outside. I came down the back stairs and he met me at the door. I'll go let him inside."

She started that way when he asked, "Did you eat?"

"I had a little something with Shauna earlier. Have you?"

He shook his head. "She sent me a casserole, but I put it in the oven and forgot it. It might be burned to a crisp by now."

“I didn’t smell it,” she hurried into the kitchen and stopped at the oven. The timer still had a few minutes. She opened the oven door and checked the casserole. From the smell, it was close to being done.

“Yum. Do you want to stay? Or are the guests expecting you back?” He stood behind her, looking over her shoulder at the bubbling cheese casserole in the oven.

“I’m off for the night. Remember you have to be the designated driver tomorrow night.” She closed the oven and then went over to the door and let Sam inside. “And I’m still hungry.”

“Great. I’ve been missing you,” he went over and got two plates out of the cupboard setting the table as they talked. “I made a salad if you want to grab it. And a couple of sodas?”

She helped him get the table ready while Sam sat in the corner watching them. Then Seth opened a can of dog food and put it in his dish. “Sam eats the same time I do when I’m on my own. That way I have someone to talk to during dinner.”

The buzzer went off and she took the casserole out, setting it on a large hot pad in the middle of the table. She put a spoon in it and sat down, putting a napkin on her lap. “Well, tonight, you have someone here who can talk back and hold up her end of the conversation. We should do this more often. Eat together.”

“Shauna would get lonely.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her close for a kiss. “Besides, Sam talks back. Sometimes.”

She leaned back after the kiss and grinned at him. “If it means we always start dinner like that, Shauna can find her own boyfriend to eat dinner with.”

Chapter

Fifteen

Saturday morning, Cat woke to light snow falling outside her window. She loved the first few snowfalls, but by March, she'd be tired of the snow, white or not. Today it felt magical.

She'd stayed with Seth after dinner, and they'd talked about everything and nothing. She loved that. And they'd snuggled while they watched a movie. He'd even turned off the game.

She enjoyed her time with the retreat guests and the income from their monthly invasion paid for the house renovations as well as the utilities, which could be high, especially in the winter as they tried to keep the house warm. She employed Shauna and Seth with the retreat money. Her writing income was sporadic, but when it arrived, it was substantial. She had to put some of it back into marketing and her education as an author.

Thank goodness Michael had left her the house in his will. If he hadn't, she wouldn't have come home to Aspen Hills and brought Shauna along. They'd still be working in California and Seth would still be here, missing her.

But her life happened in between the retreats. Where it was just the three of them, or, sometimes, just her and Seth. And Sam, of course. Seth never went anywhere without that dog.

Cat wondered if her uncle felt that way about his job and the time spent with Shirley, his new girlfriend. She lived in Alaska so they only saw each other every other month. When they'd first gotten together, Cat thought Shirley would move here since she was retired. Instead, she had stuck to her guns and her hometown.

These random thoughts had led her to the relationships around her. Her friendship with Dante. Maggie's relationship with her husband, which didn't seem as flawless as when they were out together, they both put up a united front. Maggie's husband seemed to need her more than she wanted. Maggie was a gifted writer. Cat had read a few of her pages this week. She asked everyone to send three chapters of what they were writing to her before the retreat. Maggie's pages came later because she signed up on Sunday. But the pages were good. Maggie had a strong voice for her genre. Would writing become something that strengthened or stretched their marriage?

Cat had heard of spouses who had given their writer mate an ultimatum, early on while they were still learning. Give up writing or me. Michael had wanted her to write but wanted the result to be literary, not genre fiction. Hopefully, that wouldn't happen in this case.

As she dressed, thinking of her day, she remembered she wanted to visit Lucy Johnson today. Cat hoped she would be more aware of the real world today. Losing a spouse in a violent murder must have affected her deeply.

What would Cat do if she lost Seth?

She pushed the idea away. She'd gone down that rabbit hole when he'd joined a mercenary group for the money. Cat checked her image in the mirror. She would go write for an hour, check on the guests, then run out to see Lucy. Then she had to be back in time to change for dinner and put a giant cherry on the top of this writers' retreat.

She wished it was already Sunday night.

Cat headed downstairs to grab a pot of coffee and a clean cup. Shauna was in the kitchen, talking to someone. Probably Seth. Cat opened the door and saw Dante sitting at the table. He was dressed in a suit with a tie and drinking coffee. Cat wore what she called her writing clothes. Comfy sweatpants and an old tee from when she attended Covington. Over that, she wore a zip-up sweat jacket telling everyone that Denver was the place to be. She'd bought it on their last getaway to the closest city. "Good morning, I see you're dressed in weekend attire."

He snorted. "I've got a meeting with the college administration to finalize the promotions they've made recently. I wanted to see if you'd gotten any insight into who killed Allen Johnson or why."

"Shouldn't you be asking my uncle that?" Cat asked as she filled a coffee carafe and then a cup for right now. She took the cup to the table and sat down.

"He doesn't like to share information as much as you do. I swear, he must have never gone to kindergarten. Isn't that where we all learn to help each other." He took a plate holding a large cinnamon roll from Shauna. "Thank you. This looks amazing."

"I like to do something special for the guests' last full day. Tomorrow I'll have a full Sunday brunch on the table including mimosas if you want to come over." Shauna handed Cat a plate and fork as well, then sat down at the table with just her coffee. "Pete hasn't been sharing much with any of us this time. He thinks Cat's too close to the investigation."

"Her prior work colleagues?" Dante took a bite of the roll. "Shauna, you should sell these. You'd make a fortune."

"I don't want to make a fortune. I'm looking for a sugar daddy to support me,"

Shauna teased but she blushed as Dante continued to praise her food. “And no, it’s you that has Pete worried. He thinks that someone isn’t being honest about their role in the murder.”

Dante’s eyes flashed, but he kept his anger in check. “I didn’t kill Allen. I didn’t order someone to kill him. I do believe that he was stealing from the college and someone used that information to try to frame me for both the theft and the murder. Someone, apparently in a red dress.”

Cat shook her head, “Maybe. I’m wondering though if it’s two different things. If someone had found out that Allen was skimming and used it to frame you, I’m not sure they would have wanted Allen dead.”

“With him dead, you can build the story that he found me out and I killed him,” Dante explained.

“I get that, but Allen wouldn’t have talked if you got blamed for the theft. What’s he going to say? I did it, don’t blame Dante?” Cat focused on the roll. This was what had been bothering her for days now. “Both the guy who framed you and Allen would have wanted Allen alive. Not dead.”

“So we’re looking for two people, not one.” Shauna sipped her coffee. “Both were taking advantage of Allen’s misdeeds.”

“And one wore a red dress,” Cat added.

“I asked the photographer to send over the guest pictures she took that night. I think she’s getting them together for your uncle first, then she’ll send them along. I’ll forward them as soon as I get them.” Dante finished his roll and stood. “My meeting is in a few minutes. I’m sorry, I need to leave.”

Cat looked between him and Shauna. It was clear, he hadn't come to talk to Cat about the murder. Shauna blushed again, then stood and picked up his plate. "Thanks for coming by for coffee. I don't seem to leave the kitchen much during retreat weeks."

He paused by the doorway, looking back at them. "The way you cook, I'm surprised someone hasn't set you up in your own restaurant before now. Maybe we need to talk soon."

Cat pointed to the door. "You can leave anytime. No one poaches my retreat partner right under my nose."

Shauna smiled as she met Dante's gaze. "Besides, I don't want to manage a restaurant. One week a month of this is more than what I need or want."

After he left, Cat stayed around to finish her coffee. "So why was Dante here for breakfast?"

"He saw my light in the kitchen and texted to see if I wanted some company. He's an early riser, like me." Shauna opened the fridge and started taking things out to make something else.

"Oh, just a casual morning meeting?" Cat knew Dante still had feelings for Shauna. But she'd ended it a while ago, citing concerns about his job and family attachments. Cat thought it was more about her loss of Kevin and not wanting to go through that again. "Shauna, if you asked him, he'd leave the family for you. I'm sure of it."

"I wouldn't ask that of him or anyone. You shouldn't have to change who you are when you become a couple. It should be easy. Like you and Seth." She turned and looked at me.

"Whatever Seth and I are, easy is not one of them. We had a late dinner last night

together. It was comfortable. We haven't had anything close to comfortable like that since he left on his last deployment." Cat finished her coffee and put a paper towel in the empty cup. "I'm going to go write. Do you want to go to Lucy Johnson's with me later this morning?"

Shauna shook her head. "I've got too much to get done, but I'll make a care package for her. Soups, bread, and a lot of sweets. You never know what you want when you're grieving."

Shauna knew more than most about grieving. She'd helped Cat deal with Michael's death, which was more emotional than Cat had expected since they'd been divorced at the time. And then Shauna had lost her fiancé, Kevin, who had promised her the moon, including giving her Snow, her coal black horse. Shauna needed an uncomplicated relationship. Any relationship with Dante wouldn't be uncomplicated.

"Thanks, I'm sure she'll appreciate it." Cat didn't say any of the things she was thinking, but she decided she was going to watch Shauna and Dante closely. Maybe there was a way to get them together, somehow.

Cat didn't run into any of the writers on her way up to her writing office. She had planned on moving her office over to the other wing when Seth completed the remodel, but she loved how close it was to her room. Her work commute, not counting going downstairs for coffee was steps, not over an hour like it had been in California when she'd taught English.

She was lucky and she knew it. Now it was time to write the books that allowed her to continue to be lucky and support the retreat.

A knock on her door took her out of the world-building she was doing at the magic academy she'd now been writing for several books. Maybe she should teach a session on writing a series. She loved writing connected books because the town and

characters became friends as she continued to write books set in the same area. And when readers became invested in the series, they continued to read.

Which was a win/win for all involved. Including her publisher.

Shauna poked her head into the room. “Hey, I wanted to let you know I made chicken tortellini soup for lunch. It’s on the stove, staying warm. I need to run out for a few things at the store. I’d go shopping tonight, but I’m planning on having a margarita or two at dinner.”

Cat glanced at her computer clock. “I didn’t realize it was so late already. I need to get going if I’m going to see Lucy today.”

“The basket is already packed and in the SUV. I’ll take my car shopping. It hasn’t been out in days.” Shauna started to leave, then paused. “Anything I can get you?”

Cat assured her she was fine, and Shauna closed the door after her. Cat closed up her document and turned off the computer. Then she checked her to-do list for the day that she’d written out yesterday.

She had planned on visiting her uncle too, but she’d have to put that off until tomorrow since she’d gotten lost in the manuscript. She needed to find out if Grace had shown up yet. Uncle Pete would be here for Sunday night dinner. At least she assumed he would. He rarely missed Sunday dinner and Cat loved how they were keeping the tradition alive, even after her parents had left the state to retire somewhere warmer.

Cat left everything in her office except her wallet and keys and headed downstairs. She needed to get this visit over and done with before it was time to get ready for dinner. She grabbed her coat and headed out the front door to the SUV. Not only had Shauna packed the food basket in the front seat, she must have warmed up the

vehicle's engine and cleaned the windows. Or Seth had.

Somehow, everything got done. The writing retreats, her deadlines, and the house stuff were all handled between the three of them. Cat felt gratitude for the hands that took care of her, even when she thought she was doing it all herself.

As she drove past Dante's house, she saw several cars there. Was he having his staff get him ready for another week here in Aspen Hills? Or was he getting ready to head back to Boston? Running a crime syndicate must be hard enough. Changing one to be mostly legit? That must be overwhelming. The good news was that when there was money, sometimes it just fed itself and made more money without doing much.

Banks paid interest on money that just sat there. Stocks rose and fell in value. Someone had known a lot about financial tools to be able to pull off a scam on the college. And they either didn't know about the mob connection or didn't care. Was that same person the one who had framed Dante for the theft?

Maybe this was one mystery that would stay unsolved. The mob tended to take care of their own policing. People paid for any indiscretion against the connected families. It might not have been immediate like it had been in the past. But it happened.

A car was in the driveway at the Johnson's so Cat pulled up behind it and parked. It wasn't Lucy's car since Cat had seen that on Thursday when Lucy had decided to run away. But it seemed familiar. Was this Kim's car? She grabbed the food basket, which was surprisingly heavy, and headed to the front door where she rang the bell.

No answer.

She rang again. This basket was getting heavy. What had Shauna sent Lucy, a side of beef?

Cat reached out to knock and the door opened under the pressure. She could hear voices back in the area where the kitchen was if she remembered the house from her last visit. “Hello? Lucy? It’s Cat Latimer.”

She followed the voices and found Lucy and Roxie Scarsdale arguing.

“I don’t care if you did all the work,” Lucy screamed at her. “Allen was in charge of the department and he deserved the credit. He handled all those donors with kid gloves.”

“All I said,” Roxie looked at me, pleading in her eyes. “Oh, look, Lucy, you have another visitor. You’re Cat Latimer, right?”

Cat smiled and set the basket of food on the counter. “Hi, Lucy. Roxie. My business partner who’s an amazing cook made you up a basket of food. It can be frozen or just put in the fridge. Where do you want it?”

Lucy shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t really care. I need to do laundry. No one’s done laundry since Allen died. I need to make sure the maid is coming tomorrow. Just put it in the freezer so it doesn’t go bad.”

Cat watched as Lucy ran up the stairs. Then she started unpacking the food. Shellshocked, Roxie helped put it away.

“I just came by to see how she was doing and she laid into me about how unappreciated Allen was at the department. I’m not the one getting all the glory. She should be yelling at Mike Tosan, not me.” Roxie put the last quart of soup in the freezer. “I only came over because Kim said Lucy needed company. I’m leaving now. You can deal with the psycho.”

“She’s probably just overcome with emotions,” Cat said as she set the last of the

cookies out on the counter where Lucy might find them. “I parked behind you. Let me tell Lucy I need to leave, and then I’ll move my car so you can get out.”

“I’m not staying inside the house. I was genuinely afraid she would pull a knife on me just now. I’ll wait in my car.” Roxie headed out to the foyer where she’d left her coat and Cat went into the hallway to find the master bedroom or the laundry room since that was where Lucy had said she was heading.

“Lucy? Hey, I need to head out,” Cat called as she walked through the hallway and opened the doors. Finally, she found the bedroom. Clothes were all over the place. But something sparkly was on the bed and caught Cat’s eye. She stepped into the room and found a red sequined dress with a large black stain on it.

Was this the dress that Cat had seen in the picture? She needed to see the pictures that Dante had sent her to see if Lucy had been at the event, in that dress. She looked around and pulled out her phone, quickly snapping a picture of the dress.

“What are you doing in here?” Lucy asked behind her.

Cat turned, tucking the phone in her coat pocket. “I was looking for you. You said you needed to do laundry. That dress though, I think you need to take it to the dry cleaners. Sequins are so hard to wash.”

Lucy’s gaze went over to the dress. Then she walked over and picked it up, holding it up against her body as she looked in the mirror. “I loved this dress. I lend it out for one night and it comes back with this stain. I’m never lending out anything ever again.”

“I get it. I don’t loan out my books anymore, just for that same reason,” Cat moved toward the door. “Anyway, I left a bunch of cookies out on the counter for you if people stop by. And there’s soup in the freezer if you get hungry. I think Roxie’s

leaving too.”

“She’s a horrible person. I think Allen was sleeping with her. Then she comes here to tell me she’s sorry?” Lucy was still staring at herself or the dress, Cat couldn’t tell.

“I’m sorry for your loss, Lucy,” Cat said, then she hurried down the hall and out of the house. She didn’t stop until she was in the car with the doors locked. Lucy might not have killed Allen, but she wasn’t dealing with grief well and Cat didn’t think it was just not eating. Something had broken in Lucy’s head.

She dialed her uncle as she pulled out of the driveway and told him all about her two visits. “I don’t think she’s safe alone in the house. Or with people. Can you call someone?”

He assured her he would handle it. Then he asked about the dress. “Do you think she was making up the story about loaning it out?”

Cat wanted to say yes. That Lucy was the killer and the situation would be over and done with. But she didn’t think that was true.

Chapter

Sixteen

Back at the house, Cat walked through the empty rooms and finally found Shauna in the kitchen finishing up a batch of brownies for tonight's after-dinner treat. Cat sank into a chair and put her head on the table. "Why is life so hard?"

"Life has always been hard. That's why you write fiction and not true crime. You like the softer side of human nature." Shauna set a cup of coffee in front of her. "Typically I'd avoid giving you caffeine this late in the day, but we have dinner and probably margaritas tonight so I think we'll be fine. What happened to make you this puddle of a person?"

Cat sat up and sipped her coffee. "Lucy Johnson is pretty much off her rocker. I didn't know her before Allen's death, but she's not doing well. I asked Uncle Pete to send someone over to evaluate her. I'm not sure she's safe alone."

"I thought that Kim person was staying with her?" Shauna got her cup and sat too. "The one you and Seth met after the funeral?"

"I didn't see her. Roxie Scarsdale was there but her presence was agitating Lucy. She accused her of having an affair with Allen after telling her she knew Roxie was doing all the work but Allen was supposed to get all the accolades. It was weird." Cat closed her eyes, trying to get the image of Lucy staring at that dress out of her mind. "Roxie left as soon as I got there. Well, as soon as I moved my car. She sat outside waiting for me to leave. Maybe I should have waited for Uncle Pete to get there."

“You did what you could. You brought her food and called a professional,” Shauna looked at her watch. “And if you don’t hurry, you’re going to be late for the Seth bus to dinner. That’s why all the authors are upstairs getting ready. He told them that he wasn’t waiting for any of them and if they weren’t down here at six, they could find their own rides. I’ve never seen people move so fast.”

“Seth can be intimidating, but we shouldn’t be threatening our guests.” Cat felt a smile curving her lips.

“I think he was worried that the hostess at Three Tequilas would cancel our reservation. She can be a little snippy when people are late. Like last month.”

Cat groaned. “I remember. The horror authors thought it would be fun to dress in character. Dracula almost got us kicked out of the restaurant.”

“To his defense, the waitress started flirting with him first and she dropped the tray. He saved it from falling on the floor.” Shauna reminded her. “And the bar cheered at his save.”

“Good times,” Cat finished her coffee and stood. “What are you wearing? Tell me pants. I don’t want to get dressed up for this.”

“Wear your black jeans with the purple cashmere I bought you last month. It’s professional and classy. With your leather jacket, you’ll look like an author.” Shauna walked over and checked the lock on the kitchen door. “I’ll be right up. Everyone’s in their rooms so I’ll lock up before I go get dressed.”

Cat hurried up the stairs, pausing at the top to wonder why Shauna was so security-conscious today. Was it what Cat had said about Lucy? Or had the murder at Dante’s house down the street bothered her more than she was letting on? Shauna still saw a grief counselor after the murder of her fiancé. Maybe working at the murder retreat

wasn't the best place for her.

If they could just get through a few months of retreats without having someone killed in town, maybe they could lose the moniker. But, as she walked to her bedroom, more likely it would take years to lose the nickname.

She quickly got dressed and pushed some mousse into her hair to pump up the curl. Then she grabbed her coat and purse and headed to her office. She needed to check the word count sheets that Shauna had pulled at three from the living room to determine the Word King or Queen. Once that was done, she needed a cup for display. The winner would have the option of having one shipped. Packing light for a book event was hard, even before they started gathering souvenirs.

Cat's phone went off. "Hi, Uncle Pete. I was just getting ready for dinner. Can I call you when we get back?"

"Two things, Grace Evans is back. She got stuck in Denver after drinking too much to drive home. And now, Lucy Johnson is gone. I arrived about ten minutes after your call and she'd already rabbited. You're sure she didn't kill her husband?" Uncle Pete asked.

"Sure, no, but it doesn't feel right. I'm sorry, I should have stayed with her." Cat pulled on her jacket after checking the word count. She grabbed a mug off her bookcase and put it in her purse along with a piece of paper that listed off the winner. It wasn't a big thing, but she didn't want to look like an idiot and not remember who the winner was at the restaurant.

"If I'd thought she'd bolt, I would have asked you to stay and I wouldn't have taken that one last phone call. There are plenty of should haves going around." He said something to someone at the Johnson house. "Go have a nice dinner with your writers. At least on Monday, they'll be gone and I won't have to worry about them

getting involved in this investigation. Sometimes your guests are a little nosy for their own good.”

Cat locked the office door and hurried downstairs where most of the group was standing by the door. Maggie Martin was still missing as well as Debra Jennings. She smiled at the group. “At least Maggie has her car if Seth leaves without her.”

“Man, your boyfriend is brutal in his schedule announcements,” Jon adjusted his jacket. “I wouldn’t want to be on his bad side.”

“Oh, I’m a sweetheart, right Cat?” Seth was coming up the hall with Shauna. “Everyone here?”

“I’m coming, I’m coming,” Debra called from the stairs. “I got a call from my daughter when I was upstairs. I’m going to be a grandmother, again.”

“Congratulations, but still, no reason to be tardy,” Seth teased and started counting heads. Cat slapped him on the arm. “Fine, it’s a pretty good reason. We’re still missing one.”

“Maggie,” I took his arm. “Shauna? Can you call up to her room?”

Alicia held up her hand. “Maggie had to go talk to her husband. She said she’d meet us at the restaurant.”

“Okay, let’s go. I’m starving. I always eat more as a designated driver. The alcohol isn’t there to suck up the room in my stomach.” Seth grinned as he held the door open.

“Nice visual. No wonder the writers love you so much, you’re their example of a color character in their books.” Cat followed the last guest out and waited while

Shauna got everyone in the van. Seth was a few steps behind since he stopped to lock the front door and set the alarm.

With everyone finally inside, they made their way to the restaurant. The chatter was all about the progress people had made during the week. With some groups, Cat just connected but with others, like this one, it seemed like the group bonded together without her. She listened to their chatter and wondered what the difference was between the two experiences.

And, did it matter as long as the guests had a positive experience? Shauna did guest evaluations, she would ask her about the question sometime next week. It seemed rude to ask why people didn't like you while they were still in the house.

Seth reached over and squeezed her hand. "You're quiet today."

"Too much to think about, I guess." She looked back and saw that Shauna was watching her too. Maybe she was the determining factor. Had she been more distant this week? "Maybe I need a week somewhere warm and sunny. With a beach."

Shauna leaned forward. "Now that I can get into. When do we leave?"

"Hey, no fair. You guys are planning a retreat without us. Have you ever thought of having one somewhere warm, just for a change?" Debra leaned forward. "I'd love to have a writers' group week in Charleston. Going alone seems a little dull, especially after this week where I got to tourist a bit and get writing and research done."

"There's a library in Wales that lets you sleep in the actual library," Jon added to the discussion. "I bet there are ghosts too. We could all go together. Write in the morning, tourist in the afternoon, and hang out around a fire at night."

"A vacationing retreat?" Cat looked at Shauna and she could already see the wheels

spinning.

“Kind of like a semester abroad but more intense,” Alicia added. “I bet the college might even let you set it up as an actual class.”

Cat laughed and shook her head. “Now you might be overcomplicating the process, but this is a really good idea.”

Maybe that was her problem, she was getting bored with the day-in and day-out of life here in Colorado.

As they pulled up to the restaurant, Shauna said, “One of the benefits of attending the retreat is you get a quarter newsletter from us about what’s going on here at the Victorian, usually a recipe, and upcoming events. Watch your newsletter to see what comes out of this discussion. Maybe we should name the retreat for you guys?”

“Winter 2024 group?” Debra suggested.

“No, the Freewriters. You know, like freeloaders?” Patrick suggested. Patrick had been a quiet guest, but he’d put out a lot of words during the week. “Or the Brownie Mafia?”

The group continued to throw out ideas as they waited for the table. Shauna stood next to Cat. Seth was still outside as he’d dropped them off in the front before he parked. “This is a good idea, don’t you think? I don’t want to overstep my role here.”

“Are you kidding? It’s a great idea. I can’t believe we didn’t think of it before. We’ll have to adjust the schedule, kind of what Jon laid out, and I’ll talk to the college administration to see if we could be considered an elective, but I don’t want the guests to have to pay for credit along with the cost of the travel and housing. I don’t know, but maybe Charleston or somewhere in the States would be a good trial run.”

Cat stopped as the hostess came to seat them. “There will be two more, one’s parking the car and the other is driving herself.”

“We’ve got you set up in the banquet room this evening. Your groups are always so lively.” The hostess smiled as she led them into the restaurant.

Shauna whispered, “That’s hospitality code for we’re too loud for the main dining room.”

Cat waved her away and then sat down at the table. Shauna picked a chair a few spots away and pointed out a place for Seth. As everyone got seated, Cat outlined the schedule for the dinner. “Order whatever you want. Drinks, appetizers, main courses, even dessert. This meal is on us. It’s mainly Mexican cuisine, but there are a few more basic entrees for your enjoyment for the less adventurous. We’ll get our drinks and our order in, then we’ll have a short chat about the retreat. What you liked, what you didn’t. Don’t worry about being honest, I’ll ask after the first round of drinks.”

The group chuckled.

“Then with dessert, we’ll crown the King or Queen of Words for the week. We’ll get your picture to go up on the wall of fame and head home to get ready for tomorrow’s departure.”

“Do we have to go home?” Jon asked.

Seth joined the group, “You don’t have to go home, but you can’t stay here. Isn’t that the two am call out?”

Jon laughed and then studied the menu. Cat met Seth’s gaze and smiled. He had made a place for himself in the retreat. The three of them worked well together. Cat’s earlier melancholy disappeared as they enjoyed their time together.

Cat glanced at her watch as the waitress took their order. She texted Maggie and asked if she knew what she wanted for dinner. No response. Alicia was sitting next to Cat. “Have you heard from Maggie?”

Alicia checked her phone too. “No, but she said she might miss the meal. Her husband is needy. After talking to her, I know I don’t want to marry someone with a high-powered job. I want someone who will come home from work and cuddle on the couch with me. If he made good money too, that would be a bonus.”

“Well, if she answers, I’ll get her meal to go,” Cat set her phone out on the table so she wouldn’t miss the text. “Move that chip basket closer. They make their chips in-house.”

By the time they were on coffee and finishing desserts, Maggie still hadn’t responded. Cat figured that she must have been swept back into the role of the wife of a college president. Tomorrow, Cat would pull her aside and talk about setting boundaries around her writing time so Maggie could finish her project. Everyone needed time to create without worrying about someone stealing it from them.

Cat stood and pulled out the bag with the word count cup inside. “The winner of the word cup is...”

The group made a drumroll with their fingers on the table.

“You guys are good,” Cat laughed, “Okay, the winner is Alicia Smith. Our Covington student. And for the record, this is the only time a Covington student has won the cup. Usually, they’re bouncing back and forth from the retreat to campus and can’t find time to get words in. Congratulations, Alicia!”

Cheers went around the table and Alicia blushed as Cat handed her the cup. Seth came up to Cat’s side and said, “We’ve got to go.”

Cat turned and they stepped away from the table with Seth. “What’s going on?”

“The alarms are going off at the house. Someone’s trying to break in.” He glanced at the group. “Your uncle is already there and has someone in custody.”

“You’ve talked to Uncle Pete?”

Seth nodded. “We got lucky. A patrol car was in the neighborhood when the alarm system sent the first alert to their dispatch. They caught the intruder. Your uncle wants you to see if anything is missing. They broke the window on the back door to the mud room in the kitchen. Shauna’s going to be ticked off until we get that window replaced. The kitchen will be freezing, even with the inside door closed.”

Cat let the initial fear subside. Break in’s happened. Especially in the old college row since thieves thought having a big house meant having expensive things. For Cat, it just meant more bills. They would have gotten more at Dante’s house but he had a security team on site. And, she realized, that was why the patrol car was so close. They were watching Dante.

“Hey guys, we need to get this party over and get back to the house. I’ll warn you, there are a few emergency vehicles there. We had an incident at the house while we were gone, but officers have cleared the house and it’s safe.”

The writers stood and got their coats on, gathering their things. Seth had already left to get the car. Debra stopped next to Cat as the others followed Shauna out of the room. She’d already paid for the dinner.

Cat looked up at Debra, “I’m sure it’s fine.”

“I just wanted to say, the retreat started with a crime and ended with another. Maybe you should consider relocating or making this vacation retreat a monthly thing. Aspen

Hills seems a little dangerous.”

Cat wanted to disagree, to tell Debra all about what a great place to grow up the town had been when Cat was a kid. But this wasn't the time. “Let's just get back to the house and figure out what happened. I'm sure it was just some kids looking for something to grab and go.”

As they all climbed into the van, Cat thought about Debra's words. Maybe the idea of having a safe spot for mafia family kids was an old-fashioned one. Especially since someone had felt comfortable enough to steal from the college and try to frame one of the families' leaders. Maybe some people weren't following the rules set up so long ago.

She texted Grace Evans and asked if she had time for coffee tomorrow. If she asked Grace, would she get a straight answer? She had been excited that Dante was dating someone stable. Even though Cat had explained they weren't dating, Maggie had to know that Cat understood the secret code around the college.

Cat knew she was an outsider in the very town she'd grown up in. Maybe that's why it was feeling dangerous to Debra. And, if these things kept happening, would Cat even be able to hold the writers' retreats anymore here in Aspen Hills?

Her dark thoughts kept running through her mind all the way home. She felt both Seth's and Shauna's gazes on her at times, but she ignored them. The writers were talkative, but more subdued than on the way here.

As Seth turned the van onto their street, the flashing red and blue lights lit up the houses. Mrs. Rice, their next-door neighbor was standing in her front window, watching. Her elderly cat was in her arms. Cat wasn't sure if the feline was comforting his owner or the other way around. She could hear Sam barking out in his little fenced yard.

Uncle Pete walked up to her and nodded to the front. “Shauna, can you let your guests in through the front door and ask them to go to their rooms? If anything is missing, please have them come back down. Otherwise, can they stay in their rooms until we finish our investigation here?”

Shauna rounded up the guests and led them inside, giving them Uncle Pete’s instructions as they walked.

“I need you to see this,” Uncle Pete led her to the ambulance that was sitting in her driveway. The lights were off.

Not a good sign. Cat took a breath and looked in when her uncle opened the door. Lucy Johnson sat there with a leather-bound book in her arms. There was blood on her hands and arms. “Lucy? Are you hurt?”

“I found his book. She was sleeping with my husband. It’s not right. We took vows. She took vows.” She looked up into Cat’s face and Cat felt like this was the first time Lucy had really seen her. “You understand. Your husband broke his vows and paid with blood atonement.”

“Lucy, who was sleeping with Allen?” Cat looked at her uncle when she didn’t answer. “Maggie Martin didn’t show up for dinner. Did you check the west wing guest rooms?”

Uncle Pete swore. “I thought you only use those for reunion guests?”

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Chapter

Seventeen

One of Uncle Pete's officers found Maggie bleeding on the back stairs of the west hall. From the blood trail, it appeared that Lucy had attacked her in her room but Maggie had been trying to find someone to help. She was alive but in bad shape.

Uncle Pete moved Lucy from the ambulance to the back of a patrol car. Cat walked with him. "Is she alright?"

"The medics checked her out before you got here. I was trying to get her to tell me where she got the blood on her since they told me it wasn't hers. I should have had them check the whole house," Uncle Pete watched as they rushed Maggie out of the house and into a second ambulance.

"Uncle Pete? How did Lucy know Maggie was going to be here? When she came and found the house empty, why did she keep looking?" Cat watched Lucy in the back seat. Something didn't add up.

"Maybe she followed her here and took advantage of the house being empty." Uncle Pete was heading to the crime lab van that had just pulled up. Cat looked up at the windows and saw several faces watching them. She knew the writers would be documenting everything they saw for a future scene.

She waited for him to send the crime lab techs up to Maggie's room with another officer. He turned and stared at her. "What are you thinking? I can hear your gears

moving all the way over here.”

“Lucy didn’t have it together to act on this. Someone led her to Maggie. She said she saw it in the book, but where did she find it? Allen said the night he died that he left his planner at work. He even laughed that it was a rookie mistake. Has Lucy been at his office?”

He took his hat off and rubbed his forehead. Cat knew he was starting to get a headache. “You think someone handed Lucy the planner so she’d come and stab Maggie?”

“Yes. And I think whoever did that knew about the affair and the money.” Cat thought about her visit to Lucy earlier. “And Maggie wasn’t the one he was having an affair with, it was Kim. You need to talk to Roxie.”

Uncle Pete helped Seth tape off the broken window before he left. He’d been quiet since Cat had told him her suspicions, but even now, hours later, Cat wasn’t sure Roxie could have set Lucy up like this. Lucy had hated Roxie. Thought she was stealing Allen’s donors. So why would she listen to her if she came back with the planner?

Cat tried to sleep that night, but she kept turning the murder and Maggie’s attack over in her mind. She didn’t think Maggie could have killed Allen. Maybe they could have had an affair, but Allen didn’t seem her type. And would he have an affair with Maggie and Kim? She guessed it was possible, but Cat didn’t think Maggie would trade one power-hungry college administrator for another one. Especially one who made less money. Maggie would have wanted money to spend and not in some country where they didn’t mind Americans with lots of money and a past.

Maggie was one of those writers who wanted to publish for the glory. Money was something that she could already access. But becoming a household name was

something her money couldn't buy her.

As soon as Cat woke up on Sunday, she called the hospital. Maggie was alert and out of danger. She had a guard on her room and Cat's uncle had requested no visitation.

When Cat asked about her husband, the nurse snorted. "He came for about five minutes last night, signed papers, and left. He didn't even ask to see her."

Cat got up and got dressed. The clock said it was four thirty, but she couldn't go back to sleep. She went downstairs where Shauna was baking. The room was bright and warm, a stark difference from last night's gloom. "Did you clean?"

Shauna handed her a cup of coffee. "I couldn't sleep. I came down here. Then, I couldn't cook in a filthy room so I cleaned and started baking once I was done. I believe once the guests have left with Seth, I'm going to sleep for a week. You might have to clean up the dining room yourself."

"I can do that. Just let me know what you need. Last night was crazy." Cat sipped her coffee. Her eyes felt like grit but like Shauna, she knew she wouldn't sleep if she went back to bed. She updated Shauna on Maggie's condition and the comment the nurse had made.

"President Martin is a jerk." Cat slipped lower in her chair. "But I never thought he'd treat her like that. She was always at his side."

"Sometimes you don't know what's going on in a marriage unless you're inside of it." Shauna glanced at her planner. "Seth needs to be out of here by ten to get everyone to their planes on time. I'll have breakfast available starting at eight."

Cat's phone buzzed. She had a message from Grace Evans. She held it up. "It looks like I'm meeting the college gossip source at six this morning. She has church service

this morning but wants to check in with me about poor Maggie.”

Shauna yawned. “Are you going to have Seth drive you? Or drive yourself?”

“I’ll walk. I’ve already decided that writing this morning would be a waste of time. I don’t think I can form a complete sentence. At least the walk should wake me up so I can hang with the writers one more time without falling asleep while they’re chatting.” Cat tried to figure out when she needed to leave. “I’m going to go check my emails. If I’m not down by five-fifteen, come wake me up. I’ll be the one with her head on her desk, snoring and possibly drooling.”

“Pretty image. You and Seth are good at those.” Shauna teased as she stood and started gathering ingredients for another brunch dish. “I need to get the next pan ready for the oven.”

The one thing she’d learned as she hosted these retreats, no matter what was going on in town or her personal life, the retreat just kept going. Today, the writers would be heading home. Uncle Pete might be here for dinner. Lucy was either in jail or a locked ward right now, charges pending on her attack on Maggie and maybe killing Allen.

But what if she didn’t do either?

Cat could see her being upset with Maggie for having an affair, but would she kill Allen? And why did she say someone had borrowed her dress? If something had broken in her mind, would she still be fixated on that one little clue? She had no problem admitting to attacking Maggie. So why wouldn’t she say she killed Allen for cheating?

When Cat overheard Roxie talking with Lucy, she’d been defending her husband. Would she do that if she’d killed him?

She pulled out the notebook she'd been writing ideas about the killing. She wrote out all her questions. Then went downstairs to refill her coffee.

Alicia was there in the foyer, coffee at her side and her laptop open. She smiled as she saw Cat coming down the stairs. "Another early bird. I wanted to get some work done before I headed back to the dorms this morning. Seth's dropping me off on his way to the airport."

"It's always good to pre-plan your writing time before the world takes over your day." Cat sat down next to her. "Did you have a good retreat?"

"It wasn't what I expected. Everyone was so nice and chatty, but as soon as the sprints started, they worked. I've been in study groups that met three or four times before ever opening a book. The retreat is self-directed and it's up to you to get your work done. No one is waiting for a proposal or a chapter. Well, I guess you have more firm deadlines."

"Once the contract is signed and the book is done, yes. Then I have people waiting on something I produced. But it's up to me to write consistently and plan my day or week to get the words down and the book done. In that way, it's a job. But so many writers I know let life take over and nothing gets done besides talking about the book."

Alicia closed her laptop. "That's what Maggie said. She told me she'd let her husband's ambitions take over her life. But she was done playing the perfect wife. She said you had shown her the way."

"Me?" Cat pointed to her chest and laughed. "I got my first book done because I was bored with the thesis I was supposed to be writing. My ex-husband wanted me to publish the thesis. The effect of genre literature on the decreasing the amount of reading in high schools. I didn't find a correlation. Genre literature actually increased

reading levels. I started reading a few of the books the students were telling me about and I got hooked. Then I started writing my academy series. Tori and her world just appeared as I wrote. My success was a total accident.”

“It was what you were meant to write,” Alicia squirmed in her seat. “Have you heard anything about Maggie? Is she going to live?”

“I checked in with the hospital and she’s doing good. There’s a guard outside her room, just in case.” Cat paused, then asked, “Was she worried about anyone?”

“Maggie is fearless. I would never be able to speak my mind like she does. She wants to be a full-time author like you. She said she was done with academics and her husband. Do you think she meant she was going to divorce him?”

Cat thought about what Maggie had told her. Had she told her husband she wanted a divorce? Was that why she was in the hospital? “Honestly, I don’t know. Let’s just think good thoughts about Maggie and her getting better right now. You know you can write here anytime you need a different environment. Just let Shauna know you’re coming so we make sure someone’s here. We ask that you don’t use the house during retreat weeks though.”

“That’s so sweet of you. I’m going to start writing at the library. There are so many cubbies there and best for my diet, you can’t take food or drink inside. So I’ll have to walk a bit to get a treat. Not just to the dining room.” She reopened her laptop. “I’ve done a lot of thinking about who I am and what I want during this last week. Thank you for giving me the time and space to do that.”

Cat squeezed Alicia’s shoulder as she stood. “Just do you. That’s the best anyone can hope for. And if you do sell your book, let us know so we can shout you out to the other retreat guests.”

Cat headed into the kitchen, thinking about Maggie and her husband. The college president and his wife were a power couple. Cat knew two presidents before the Martins and the college seemed to look for that dynamic. Or at least, that's the person they'd chosen for the position. Someone with a strong spouse. Someone to talk to potential professors' wives or husbands, explaining the advantages of small-town Aspen Hills. How the town was close to Denver for the cultural experience yet a place with low crime and small-town values. A great place to raise a family.

But had Maggie gotten tired of choosing the right tie for her husband? Her kids were grown and she had told Cat that she wanted more of a career, more of a life. Had that been the reason behind her attack? Her inability to be happy with the status quo? Or was it something about Allen's murder? Or even the embezzlement?

The problem was there were too many good reasons she could have been attacked. Cat was certain if she found out why Maggie was attacked, she'd also find the answers to the other questions. Maggie was a lynchpin, so to speak.

"You look more awake. Did you take a nap?" Shauna said as Cat came into the kitchen. "I didn't expect you downstairs for another ten minutes or so."

"No, I went down the what-if rabbit hole. I told you about Maggie, right? She's still in the hospital and Uncle Pete put a guard on her door. Even family is barred from seeing her." The charge nurse on the floor was the wife of a professor that Cat had worked with at the college. She loved the gossip.

"Yes, we talked earlier. You are tired." Shauna rolled her shoulders as she wiped down the counter.

Cat nodded and poured herself a cup of coffee and then looked at her clothes. "I didn't realize how late it was. I better go change into something warmer."

“Okay, but if you want, I can ask Seth to drive you,” Shauna wiped her hands on a rag. “I’m worried.”

“I’m fine,” Cat started to walk out, but she paused. “Alicia’s up and writing. I told her she could come by anytime she wanted to write here. I think she’s worried that she’ll be bothering us.”

“As long as she knows the treats end this morning,” Shauna grinned, “she’s welcome anytime. Except for retreat weeks.”

“That’s what I said,” Cat sipped her coffee. “I’ll check in before I leave. Remember to call the insurance company Monday morning and see if we can get reimbursed if we have the glass replaced tomorrow.”

“Seth said he’s got a guy who can fix it. I’ve already filed an online report. I’ll call and make sure before I let him set up the appointment.” Shauna went over to her kitchen desk to add a note to her planner. “Maybe we should send flowers to Maggie?”

“Yeah, that will be nice.” Cat hurried upstairs, not stopping to bother Alicia who was focused on her laptop. Writers were of two groups. If they were emotional, sometimes, bad things happening around them either slowed their writing or gave them a place to escape. Cat had a feeling that Alicia was one of those who escaped. It wasn’t a bad trait.

It only took her a few minutes to change up into jeans and a sweatshirt. She put on her hiking boots to give her a little traction. It had snowed a bit last night. Not enough to stop the world from turning here, but it would make some places slick until it melted when the sun came up. She went into the kitchen and grabbed her parka, beanie, and scarf. She tucked her wallet into her inside jacket pocket and told Shauna she’d be back in an hour or so. She hoped it would be sooner, but if Grace had some

information, she wanted to give her the time to tell her.

Cat could focus on the whys behind what was happening now. The retreat was all but over. As soon as brunch finished, the writers would go home. Shauna would do a deep cleaning of the house. And she would be back working on her upcoming deadline. Seth's life didn't change much during retreat weeks, except he didn't take any outside work those weeks. Uncle Pete liked having someone on sight with strangers in the house. Cat had tried to explain that writers were different, but then one turned into a stalker killer and ruined her credibility.

Maggie had gone to talk to her husband before the attack. Had he known what was coming and sent a deranged Lucy off to take the blame? How had Lucy gotten into the house? Had someone shared the entrance code? Seth insisted on changing it after every retreat, so it couldn't be anyone from a prior retreat. And, well, writers. Cat smiled at the thought as she walked into the Coffee Bean. When looking for a suspect, you could usually cross off anyone who was currently writing a book. They had no mental bandwidth to plan a murder. And if they did, they weren't spending enough time writing.

She waved at Grace and went up to order and pay for her mocha. It was Sunday so a hot chocolate with a coffee punch would be perfect. She could watch her calories tomorrow.

Grace Evans had her phone out and was texting when Cat arrived at the table. She unwrapped her scarf and tucked it with her mittens into her coat pockets before taking the coat off and sitting down. The barista would bring her mocha. "How are you this cold morning?"

"Good but freaking out a little. I suppose you're the same. Was Maggie attacked in your house? That must have been scary." Grace pushed her phone aside and leaned closer, waiting for Cat's response. "Oh, sorry for bailing on yesterday's coffee. I

forgot and got stuck in Denver.”

“We were all gone when the attack happened. I take the writers out for dinner on the last night of the retreat. Maggie was supposed to join us, but well, you know the rest.” Cat leaned back, letting the barista drop off her cup. She took a long sip. “Coming home and having your house lit up with emergency lights, that was a little bizarre. Finding out Maggie was attacked, it, well, I guess I’m still dealing with how I feel.”

“Is it true that Lucy Johnson did it? Did she kill her husband too? I remember seeing her at the party that night. She looked a little out of it.” Grace was ignoring her coffee.

Cat had forgotten that she’d talked to Grace that night. “Do you remember what Lucy was wearing?”

Grace rolled her eyes. “Don’t you remember? She had on that hideous silver sequin dress. Someone should have told her she looked like a disco ball.”

Cat hadn’t focused on what anyone was wearing. She’d been too busy trying to listen in on conversations. Dante had thought that someone might slip up and say something to implicate them in the embezzlement, but Cat thought it had been a long shot. But now, she remembered seeing Lucy at the party. Most of the dresses had been long and straight. Most faculty wives prided themselves on their slim figures. And the rumor was that anytime someone didn’t meet the stereotype, they were replaced with a trophy wife. Young, like Cat had been when she married Michael. Lucy had a few extra pounds, but in that dress with all the poofy layers, she had looked heavy.

Lucy hadn’t been wearing the red dress. So who had?

Cat was about to ask Grace the question when she stood up. “Sorry, I’ve got to get home and get the kids ready for church. Call me and we’ll do lunch next week. I’m so

glad you're okay. I was worried."

Cat thought Grace was more worried that Cat might have gossip that she didn't have. And now that she figured out she didn't, she had other people to talk to. Grace knew everything. And Cat bet she would know who was wearing red dresses at the party.

Alone, Cat finished her drink, then pulled out her phone and texted her question to Grace. She might not get an answer until after the woman had milked the church group for all their gossip, but she might be curious enough to wonder why Cat was asking.

At least that's what she was hoping for. She stood and pulled her coat back on. Right now, she needed to get home to say goodbye to the writers. And see what Shauna had made for brunch. She was starving.

Chapter

Eighteen

The dining room was filled with people and subdued chatter when Cat came in the front door. Alicia hurried over to her. “Is Maggie okay?”

“I haven’t heard anything else besides what they told me this morning.” Cat looked at the writers in the dining room. They’d all stopped talking and were watching her. “Why? Did something else happen?”

Alicia sighed. “No, I mean, when Shauna said you’d stepped out, I guess I thought you’d been called to the hospital. I’m sorry, I got everyone worried.”

Cat took off her coat and hung it up. Then she went into the dining room, poured herself a coffee, and grabbed a cinnamon roll. Sitting down, she sipped her coffee before talking. It had been a cold walk back. “Look, I know you’re all worried about Maggie and we’ll keep you informed of her condition as best we can. But the last I heard, she was doing well and should be on the mend. Let me text my Uncle and see if he has any updates.”

“Thanks, Cat. I mean, I know she’s just another guest, but we got close as a group.” Debra smiled at Alicia as she sat next to her. “We’re all going home and leaving her here in the hospital. It seems wrong.”

Cat nodded her head, trying to swallow the bite of the cinnamon roll. “I know it can feel strange to go on with real life after the retreat. And worse, now we’ve had a

tragic event happen to one of our group, just before we all go back to our normal lives. But all we can do for Maggie now is support her as she recovers. I'm sure she'd love cards, letters, phone calls, or flowers as she gets better.

"Is she going home after the hospital? I heard her and her husband fighting yesterday." Jon fidgeted in his chair. "I was outside, walking around, trying to figure out a plot point and I heard her talking to him on the phone when she got into her car. She wasn't happy that he was dragging her away on the last day. I guess he didn't think it was that big of a deal."

"You listened in on her conversation?" Patrick asked, shaking his head. "That's cold, man."

"We all do it, Patrick. We even talked about it at dinner the other night. Getting dialogue right is so hard, so I eavesdrop at times. Sue me." He pointed a finger at Alicia. "You told me your professors talked about writers doing it all the time."

"Not to other writers, dude," Patrick responded. Then he looked at Cat. "Maybe her husband was part of this attack?"

"Are we plotting a mystery here, or talking about a friend we're worried about," Cat shook her head as she finished her cinnamon roll. "Believe me, as a writer, we're always looking for the reason behind the bad thing happening. Maybe this time it was just a disturbed woman and Maggie was at the wrong place at the wrong time?"

Jon shook his head. "I could see that if Maggie had gone to this woman's house to pay her respects and found her in a full-blown mental breakdown. But she came here after we'd all left and broke in. And if she followed Maggie inside after she'd used the code, Maggie would have seen her."

"She could have watched Maggie key in the code," Debra countered Jon's theory.

Alicia interjected, “I don’t think so. I teased Maggie about her covering the code pad as she entered the code the other day. She said it was habit. Her husband had talked about people breaking into the college labs after watching students key in codes. She always covered the keypad with her other hand. She said she did the same thing when she punched in her pin at the bank. She wouldn’t have just slipped the one time a crazed murderer was watching her.”

“Lucy isn’t...” Cat stopped. What was she going to say? Lucy wasn’t crazy or she wasn’t a murderer.

A text from her uncle beeped on her phone. She read it, then read it again.

“What’s wrong? Is Maggie dead?” Alicia looked like she wanted to pull the phone away from Cat to read the text herself. Debra rubbed her back to calm her.

“It’s not about Maggie. The evidence shows that Lucy was attacked as well. She had several defensive wounds. They got DNA from her fingernails and they’re running it. The blood on Lucy was her own. Not Maggie’s.” Cat set her phone down. “Lucy didn’t do this.”

“But someone made it look like she did. Someone who didn’t know much about modern police work.” Jon raised his hands in victory. “I told you it looked weird. And it’s always the husband.”

Cat decided to change the subject and told everyone to keep both Lucy and Maggie in their thoughts. Then she did the closing speech she always gave at brunch. The most important part of the retreat, in her mind, were these last words.

“Don’t forget why you wrote so much or made so much progress this week on your career of being an author. It’s because you showed up. You could have slept in, stayed at the bar too late, or even got involved in trying to solve a murder. Instead,

you did the work. When you get home, you need to approach every day with the same force.” She smiled at the group. “It doesn’t matter if you have four hours or fifteen minutes to write. The important part is you take that time and make progress. Write it on your calendar. Make an unbreakable commitment to yourself. Be the writer you want to be.”

She left the group with instructions on when Seth would be loading up their suitcases and taking them to the airport. Alicia hurried after her as she left the dining room. “Do you want me to help pack up Maggie’s room?”

Cat put her hand on Alicia’s shoulder. “That’s kind of you but it’s a mess and you don’t need to see that. Shauna and I will pack up her suitcase, maybe do some laundry for her, and then have the stuff ready for when she leaves the hospital. I’m sure she’d love a visit though. Just call the hospital first and see if she can have visitors.”

Alicia nodded. “Okay. I’ll go get my suitcase and bring it down. I’m just waiting for Seth to drop me off. I’ll be writing in the living room. Once I get back to classes Monday, I’m sure I’ll be slammed with work.”

“Someone listened to my rambling.” Cat liked having a graduate student in the retreats. If someone had been available for her to talk to about what types of things she wanted to write, she might not have felt so alone when she started writing the paranormal. She felt like she was reading comic books in class. “I’m serious about you being able to use the house to write if you need privacy.”

“I’ll think about it,” Alicia took the stairs, two at a time, and hurried up to the second floor, slowing down when she met up with Debra.

Cat went into the kitchen where Shauna and Seth were sitting at the table.

Shauna waited until she sat down to ask, “How was your coffee date?”

“Weird. I think Grace just wanted to know what I knew. Then when I didn’t give her any new information, she pulled out the church card and left. She could be Aspen Hill’s local gossip columnist if we had a paper.” Cat refilled her coffee cup. This needed to be her last one or she’d be bouncing up against the walls once the guests left.

Seth and Shauna looked at each other.

“What? What do you know about Grace Evans that I don’t?” Cat took a muffin off the pile on a plate in the middle of the table.

“Just that she’s pulled this kind of stunt before,” Shauna said. “I didn’t mention it when you said you were meeting with her, but she became obsessed with me about Kevin right after he died as well. She was always coming over to see if I was alright and if I’d heard anything about the investigation.”

“So she was concerned about you,” Cat didn’t understand what Shauna was saying.

Shauna met Seth’s gaze, “I’d never talked to her before that. She made something up about us meeting at a party, but Kevin had gone alone to that party because we had a retreat that week. She lied about meeting me. Then she latched on like we were best friends. At least until Pete found the actual killer. I think she liked hanging out with a suspect.”

“That’s a little creepy.” Cat thought about when Grace had asked her to lunch. It was because she thought Cat and Dante were dating. Was she looking for information on the mob boss rather than wanting to start a new friendship?

“She’s a true crime junkie. Everyone knows it.” Seth grinned as he ate his soup.

“Well, I guess, everyone but you. I’m surprised she didn’t try to find out more about how Micheal died.”

Cat paled a little and Seth noticed.

“She did. I knew it. Cat all that woman wants is details about murders and attacks. She’s not looking for a friendship.” Seth finished his soup. “Let the writers know I’ll be ready to leave in about thirty minutes. I want to let Sam out for a while and spend some time with him before I go. Can someone peek in on him while I’m gone?”

“I’ll bring him into the kitchen with me. He can follow me around while I clean rooms.” Shauna offered.

“Speaking of cleaning, I’m going up to pack Maggie’s stuff. If there’s a lot of dirty laundry, do you mind if I wash it before we let her know her suitcase is here? I’m going to go over and see her later this afternoon.”

Shauna nodded. “Sure, I’ll hold off on washing the sheets until tomorrow. Just let me know when you’re done. You know how to run the washer and dryer, right?”

“Funny girl,” Cat smiled as she grabbed a trash bag and a laundry basket from the cleaning closet. She also grabbed some cleaning supplies and rags. “I might not get it all clean, but it will be better.”

“I’ll finish cleaning it tomorrow when they’re here fixing the door,” Shauna called out. “You don’t have to do this. I can handle it.”

“I’ll be fine,” Cat said as she headed up to the second floor in the west wing. Maggie had been alone on this wing since she’d kind of invited herself to the retreat there wasn’t room with the rest of the writers. But she hadn’t spent much time in her room. She’d been downstairs, writing or talking to the others about writing most of the

retreat. Unless Professor Martin had asked her to meet him at the house, like yesterday. Cat wondered what had been so important that he couldn't have waited a day.

As she came into the room, she realized Shauna had been trying to tell her that she'd already done some of the cleanup. There was a towel over the blood-stained wood floor. Seth would probably have to sand and reseal the floor. They'd just opened this wing less than a year ago. The bed had been stripped and most of the flat areas were already cleaned. Cat wondered if this was where Shauna had been last night when she couldn't sleep.

Cat opened the closet and found that Maggie's closet was almost empty. She must have packed everything before leaving to meet her husband on Saturday. She was down to only one suitcase of the three, so she must have taken most of her clothes back home. Cat put the woolen dress and black boots into the empty suitcase she'd sat on the bed. That must have been what she'd been planning on wearing for dinner.

She went to the drawers and found underwear, a nightgown, heavy socks, and a pair of Ugh Boots along with jeans and a long-sleeve shirt. Maggie was on top of everything. Cat packed everything away, then went to Maggie's desk. A couple of fiction books were on the desk as well as her writing stuff. Her laptop sat on the top of the desk along with a notebook, pens, a highlighter, and stickies. She opened the laptop and saw it was password protected. She wondered why Uncle Pete hadn't taken this into evidence, but maybe it was because they assumed Lucy had attacked her in a fit of jealousy.

She wondered if she could just take the books and laptop over to Maggie. Being stuck in the hospital would drive her crazy.

She found Maggie's messenger bag and packed the computer with its plug-ins and mouse in there. Then she opened the desk drawer to be thorough. Maybe she had put

some things away to decrease the clutter.

Cat was more of a out of sight out of mind filer, so she kept everything on her desk if it needed to be addressed.

A folder and a flash drive sat in the drawer, along with more pens. Cat grabbed those and set them on the desk. Weird, this was the third flash drive she'd found this session.

A noise sounded at the door. Shauna poked her head inside. "Hey, John Martin is here to pick up Maggie's stuff. Are you done packing it?"

Cat fingered the flash drive in her hand. "What have you told him?"

"I said I didn't know if the police had released the room. I said I was going to call Pete first, then he could go up and get anything she left." She stepped inside. "You found something."

"I think so. Where is Martin now?"

Seth's watching him downstairs in the dining room. I came up the back stairs so he wouldn't see me." Shauna pulled out her phone. "Do you want me to call Pete?"

"Please. And tell him to hurry. Seth needs to get the rest of the writers to Denver and I don't want to be left here in the house with Martin. And take these up to my office before you go downstairs." Cat stuffed all the stuff from the desk into the messenger bag. "Put it in my closet."

Shauna already had her phone out and headed toward the laundry room to go up to the third floor.

When Cat heard her open the laundry room, she went back to the suitcase and adjusted everything there. Footsteps sounded on the main stairs and she stepped outside the room. She dropped the laundry basket and cleaning supplies. She wasn't surprised to see John Martin coming toward her, but she kept her face soft. "Professor Martin. I'm so sorry for what happened to Maggie. You didn't have to come for her luggage, we would have dropped it off at your house."

"Oh, I was in the neighborhood. I drive when I'm worried. They won't let me sit with Maggie so I thought I'd at least try to be useful. Is that her room?"

The fact that he had known she was in this wing wasn't lost on Cat but she smiled and nodded. "We only use these rooms for returning retreat guests, but since Maggie joined us unexpectedly this retreat, she got the upgraded experience. These rooms all have their own bathrooms. I was just about to check the bathroom for anything she left." She kicked the laundry basket out of the way of the door. "But I think she must have already taken a bunch of stuff home. Or maybe it's in her car. I think she only left Saturday's dinner outfit and Sunday's clothes here. Her desk was even cleaned off."

"Her desk?" He turned to me. "Her laptop's gone?"

Cat shrugged. "All I can think is that she figured she wouldn't have time to write before she left. Your wife is a creative storyteller. She did a reading of her book for us and it's really good. You should be proud of her. Maybe she can finish it while she recovers."

"Yeah, maybe." He checked the bathroom, then came out, but went back in and grabbed her toiletry kit and threw it into the open suitcase. The closet and dresser drawers were open. Shauna liked to spray everything down with disinfectant after a guest visit. He glanced at those, then opened all the desk drawers. "There's nothing here."

“Like I said, all I can think of is she took everything home with her when she went to meet with you on Saturday afternoon.” She nodded to the suitcase. “Can I take that down for you?”

“I can carry it, thanks. Her car is on the street, I’ll put this in there, and then come back for the car when I have a second driver.” He zipped up the suitcase, then stepped over the still bloody towel on the floor.

“I can have Seth drive it over this evening,” Cat offered as she followed him down the stairs. When they got there, Shauna, Seth, and the other writers were all in the lobby. Uncle Pete came in the door with two uniformed officers.

“Can the writers all meet me in the living room,” Seth called out. “You too Cat, you need to give your final talk before I take everyone to the airport.”

The writers moved into the living room, eyeing the officers warily. Jon stood near the living room door and glanced at his watch. “I thought you already did that. I need to be at the airport two hours before my flight leaves so it can’t be long.”

Cat smiled as she moved him toward the safety of the living room. “Oh, this will be fast. It’s the sales pitch for your next visit as an alumni.”

“I’m heading up to do laundry,” Shauna called out before Uncle Pete went over to stand near John Martin.

“Sir, I need you to come down to the station with me. I’ve got a few additional questions.” He reached for the suitcase and handed it to one of the men behind him.

“I answered all your questions last night. When are you going to let me see my wife? She’s all alone in that hospital room. Anything could happen.”

“There’s an armed police officer there to protect her,” Uncle Pete looked up as Shauna came down the stairs with the messenger bag. Cat was standing in the doorway watching.

“Hey, that’s Maggie’s bag. You told me she didn’t leave it here,” Martin stepped toward Shauna but the officers grabbed him and cuffed his hands behind him. “What are you doing? I’m the college president.”

“I’m a good storyteller,” Cat smiled at him.

“We know who you are,” Uncle Pete nodded toward Cat who stepped out of the living room. She could feel the writers watching the circus unfolding through the open doors. “Your neighbor, Mrs. Rice called yesterday to complain about a black Range Rover who sped out of here, just before the cops arrived. And a few minutes ago, she called again to say the car was back.”

“There are several black Range Rovers in town.” John Martin argued.

“Not that have PREZ as the license plate.” Uncle Pete held out the messenger bag toward Cat. “What did you want me to look at?”

“The journal and the flash drive are in the front pocket. I think you might find the Caymen Island account numbers with the missing money.”

“So Maggie stole the money? She always wanted more,” Martin was sweating.

“Would you take him outside? I’d like to chat with my niece for a bit.” Uncle Pete nodded to the door and the suitcase. “You might as well take that too. I think Mrs. Martin is going to need some clothes when she gets out later today.”

“Whatever she says, she’s lying,” Martin called as they dragged him out of the house.

Cat took the journal from Uncle Pete's hand. "From what I could see, this is a listing of all the deposits he took from different accounts. And he was tracking Dante's review schedule. He made notes of the last time Dante examined the accounts for usage. That way, he could frame Dante for taking the money. If I remember right, from what Michael told me, each department has a review from Dante's office, then one from the president, annually. Just in case someone is using the money inappropriately. Of course, Dante didn't hold that job when Michael was alive, but you get my drift."

"I knew about the annual reviews. It was the reason Dante's name came up in the embezzlement discussion, except for the fact that Dante had already alerted me to the missing money. He double-checked the account after the audit was done. Just in case the account holder changed something after the approval was given."

Cat smiled, "I don't think he trusts a lot of people."

"And with good reason. I think this will solve our missing money case, and with the fingerprints, I've already found in Mrs. Martin's room, her attack. But Allen's murder is still out there. Do you think Martin would have killed him?"

Cat shook her head. "I don't see the point. He was a perfect fall guy if Dante didn't go down. A layer of protection for Martin. Well, until his wife found out and was going to tell everyone about him."

"I've got to get these people on the road," Seth said from behind her. "Any problem with that, Pete?"

"Go ahead. I've got contact information for these guys. I think you should charge a surcharge if there's a crime that happened during the retreat." Uncle Pete nodded toward the living room. The writers were all taking notes about what just happened. "At least their books will have researched, authentic police work included."

“I’ll see what we can do in the marketing,” Cat waved the authors out of the living room. “Time to go home and finish writing your books.”

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Cat got a returned text from Grace just after lunch. She laughed and held the phone up for Shauna to see. "Someone must have alerted Grace that there was an arrest here this morning. She wants to know if we're okay."

"Before you answer, ask her about the dresses again. Let's see if she'll play tit for tat," Shauna stood and took her plate to the sink.

"Good idea," Cat re-asked Grace the question. Then waited. When she didn't answer after a few minutes, Cat set the phone down. "I guess only Grace can ask questions."

Shauna had returned to the table. "I should start cleaning but I'm going to wait until tomorrow. Somehow, I'm worn out. I guess it was a lot of excitement this morning."

"Well, I'm glad we got that messenger bag out of her room and into my office before he showed up this morning." Cat picked up her sandwich and then sat it down again. "Sorry, I'm not very hungry."

"I didn't take it to your office. I thought he might look there if he caught on to you having moved stuff. That was a good red herring, telling him she'd already packed most everything up and it must have been in her car." Shauna grabbed a cookie and broke it in half. "When you're upset you usually eat more."

Cat took the cookie, then looked up, "Wait, where did you take it then?"

"I put it in the dryer. You have to walk through the laundry room when you go to the back stairs so I hoped he didn't know about those stairs and tucked the bag there. It worked."

“You’re amazing,” Cat ate the half of cookie. “I’m going to call the hospital and see if Maggie’s ready to go home. Now that her husband is locked up, I guess it’s safe.”

“Yeah, but she’s going to have to move soon. Isn’t that house a perk for the college president?”

Cat reached for her phone and realized she had text messages. “I must still have this thing on do not disturb.”

“What did she say?”

Cat opened the first text and read it aloud. “See the picture of all the women. Maggie always gets one at every event. She calls it the power behind the throne. Huh, she didn’t ask me to pose with the group.”

“Maybe you were in the bathroom. Open the picture,” Shauna handed me my iPod. “You can see it better on this device.”

Cat opened the text message and then clicked on the picture to make it full screen. “Okay, here’s the wives, and there are three red dresses in the sea of blue and black.”

“That’s Clara, her husband is vice-chair of the English department, there’s Agnes whose husband is the head of the math department. Both of those women have to be in their seventies. And there’s one more. Isn’t that Kim Stage from the development office?”

Cat nodded. “And she’s wearing Lucy’s dress—the one with a stain on it. I think we found our killer. Sorry, Grace, I can’t play informant right now, I need to send this to my uncle.”

“You didn’t just type that, did you?” Shauna was smirking.

“No, but I wanted to. Anyway, she’ll find out what happened way before anyone else in town. She’s got her finger on the pulse of Aspen Hills.” Cat forwarded the photo to her uncle and then called him to tell him her theory.

After a few minutes of back and forth, Cat hung up and looked at Shauna. “He said he’d be over for Sunday dinner and wondered what you’re making.”

“He already knew about the dress?”

Cat nodded, “A crime tech had found it when they searched Lucy’s house. They also found a few legal and illegal drugs in her bedroom. I think Kim has been keeping Lucy drugged up so it would look like she was crazy.”

“I don’t understand why though. Why would Kim kill Allen? Why would she send Lucy after Maggie with a knife?”

Shauna stood and took a roast out of the fridge. “Maybe she was helping Martin cover up his misdeeds. Maybe she wanted to be the power behind the throne.”

“Well, the way Martin started to backtrack as he was taken out of here, I wonder if he’ll blame Kim for all of this.” Cat heard the knock on the door and opened it. Dante stood there. He looked at the plywood covering the glass. “Come on in.”

“You’ve had a busy couple of weeks. I wanted to visit to make sure you all were okay.” He stepped inside and took off his fedora. “I saw Seth leaving to deliver your guests to the airport. I didn’t want to step on any toes.”

“Seth’s fine with you coming by,” Cat shut the door behind him. “Well, it looks like your name is going to be cleared soon. Do you know why John Martin focused on you?”

“He was hired by my brother, which says a lot right there.” He smiled at Shauna as

she offered him a cup of coffee. "Thank you."

"Take off your coat," she sat the cup down on the table and reached for his long woolen coat. "Did you walk here?"

He unwrapped the red scarf and slipped off his gloves, tucking both into his coat pockets. "I did, but there's a car outside waiting for me. I'm on my way to the airport as well. I have some people I need to update on all the goings on and start the search for the next president. Please let Mrs. Martin know she's welcome to use the house until we finalize hiring the next president. That will probably take six months to a year. I stopped by the hospital to tell her, but I could tell she wasn't feeling well."

"I have a feeling that Maggie will do what's best for Maggie," Cat sipped her coffee. "But I'm sure she appreciates the time you're giving her."

"I'm still not sure why they killed Allen," Shauna sat down with us, the roast for dinner left waiting on the counter.

"He had asked Kim to set up a meeting with me three times, but she never did. That night, he'd pulled me aside and we'd set a time to talk on that next Monday. I think he must have discovered the missing money." Dante smiled sadly. "No one wants to be falsely accused of theft. Especially here at Covington. Allen might not have been a great fundraiser or a good man, but he was a good soldier. He did what he was told and ignored the rest. I think he believed I was taking the money and wanted to know if he should tell anyone."

"You don't need the money," Shauna refilled the coffee cups on the table. The kitchen was chilly, even with the plywood up.

"Need is sometimes a vague concept," he smiled at her. Cat wondered if the spark was still there. They'd started dating way too soon after Kevin's death and Shauna had ended the relationship before it could develop into anything. Dante was

complicated. His world was not only complicated but dangerous. Things that Shauna had left behind when she'd moved here from California and her bartending jobs at the biker bars.

But maybe someday.

Cat always held out hope for love. For her, for her friends, and the world. Which was why Kim and John Martin's lies had hit her so hard. Kim had ruined two marriages. Lucy and Allen's, and John and Maggie's. But in that one, there was plenty of blame to go around, especially for John.

Dante glanced at his watch. "Anyway, I have a thank you present for your help in clearing my name and helping me host that party last week."

Cat held up her hand. "I don't need a thank you present. Besides, you let the writers come and they were all excited to see your house. Especially Debra. I'm sure your house is going to be a setting for a whole new historical romance series."

"Well, you kind of need this," Dante stood as a knock sounded on the back door. He went over and let a man inside. "Cat, Shauna, this is Henry Sales. He's going to replace your door and set up an entry code lock for this door and security cameras for all of the doors and entry spots. He'll work with Seth to set up your security system. Right now, you just need to pick a door."

Henry came inside and spread out five different door types with pictures and descriptions. "I've already measured the entryway and all five of these will fit. I brought them with me based on the pictures that Mr. Cordova sent with the order. Your house was built at the same time as his, so it was an easy match. The camera system should be up later this afternoon. Seth will be back by then? Correct?"

"He should be, depending on the roads," Shauna hugged Dante. "You didn't have to do this. The doors are beautiful."

“And the security system is way too expensive,” Cat couldn’t help herself, she was staring at one specific door with stained glass on the top. Shauna saw where she was looking and grabbed the paper.

“This one, right Cat?”

Cat nodded and gave in. Dante did what he wanted and she never looked a gift horse in the mouth. Especially this one.

When Seth got home, he and Henry went around and checked out all the camera placings and set up the computer part of the system. At dinner, Seth was explaining it all to Uncle Pete and how the security company had guys who watched for alerts. “So you’ll be hearing from them before the alarm even wakes one of us up if the house is broken into. It’s a good system.” He rolled his eyes at Cat. “Especially due to who paid for it.”

“Well, since he kind of brought the fight to Cat’s house, I think Dante should be paying for the new door. The security system is a little over the top, but I’ve never known that man to be cheap on anything.” Uncle Pete took a bite of the seasoned beef. “Shauna, I don’t know how you get this pot roast so tender, but it’s magic.”

Shauna blushed at the compliment. “I just add the right seasoning, a lot of time, and care. Cooking is love.”

“Well, I’m blessed to be at this table tonight, with all of you,” Uncle Pete squeezed my hand. “I know you all were out of the house when Maggie was attacked, but my heart sank when we were called out here. Now that Lucy is coming down off the drugs, she was able to tell us what happened. She followed Martin into the house, he’d left the door open for her, which was their plan, but when she got upstairs, instead of freaking out on Maggie, she was trying to stop Martin from hurting his wife. She got cut from putting herself between him and Maggie.”

“Then John had to attack Maggie himself. Why didn’t he kill her?” Cat dished up more mashed potatoes.

“Lucy went running, saying she was going to get Maggie help. He went to find her, but she hid. Then the police arrived so he had to get out of the house.” He took the bowl of mashed potatoes from Cat and refilled his plate. “Mrs. Rice’s nosy neighbor trait saved Maggie’s life. Seeing his car here both days and to get a license number was smart.”

“Mrs. Rice saves the day,” Shauna grinned. “I’ve got apple pie for dessert, so save some room.”

Cat didn’t feel bad about having some help in putting together all the pieces. Even the Scooby Doo gang worked together. But Mrs. Rice should be on the villain side of the story, not the hero side.

“I need pie after this week,” Cat focused on finishing her dinner, knowing there was a treat waiting at the end. Kim Stage and John Martin were in jail. Dante was off the hook and his reputation was solid again. Or at least as solid as it was possible. And their family was together at the table life for Sunday dinner.

Then Shauna tried to ruin her mood. “It’s Mrs. Rice’s recipe.”

Cat blew out a breath. Gratitude in all things. Even when Mrs. Rice was involved. Cat changed the subject, “When is Shirley coming to visit?”