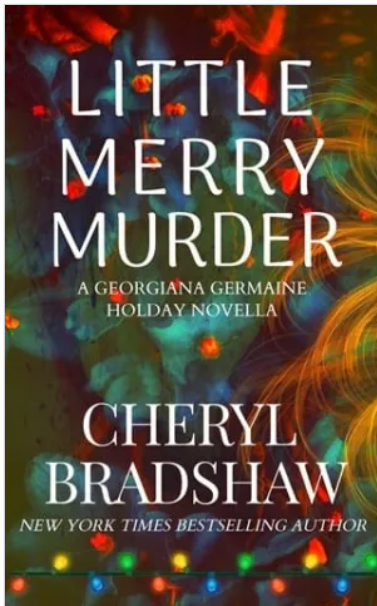




Little Merry Murder

(Georgiana Germaine)

Author: *Cheryl Bradshaw*

Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: As Claire Cooperson sits by the fire, wrapping presents and putting them beneath the Christmas tree, she hears what sounds like glass shattering. The unwelcome noise startles her, and she jumps up, tiptoeing toward the back door. A chill brushes across her face, and as the outside wind howls, she wraps her arms around herself, pulling her sweater tighter.

Struggling to see in the darkness, Claire switches on the dining room light and finds the cause of the sound she heard. A glass panel in the center of the back door has shattered, spitting jagged shards all over the tile floor.

But what caused the glass to break?

And why does Claire have a sinking feeling—a feeling telling her she's no longer alone?

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CHAPTER 1

It had been an eventful day of shopping for twenty-seven-year-old Claire Cooperson. Ever the introvert, she wasn't fond of mingling with the masses during the holiday season, but her best friend Leah always knew just what to say to convince her. And convince her, she had.

At present, Claire was sitting in the den by the fire, wrapping presents and placing them beneath the Christmas tree. Reaching for her mug of hot cocoa, she hummed along to a classic holiday tune playing on the record player and smiled, grateful for Leah and the wonderful day they'd had.

The past year had been difficult, to say the least. It all started with the death of Claire's mother eleven months earlier, the fatal car accident coming as an unwelcome shock. After her death, Claire had struggled to accept her mother was gone. Days often blurred together, each one harder than the one before, and she found herself becoming depressed and withdrawn.

Even getting out bed proved a difficult chore. All Claire wanted was to melt beneath the covers, avoiding the outside world and everyone in it. But as the secretary of the local elementary school, she knew she had to find a way to persevere, to fake her way through the pain.

And she did just that.

Brave face by day, emotional breakdown by night.

The schoolchildren with their bright, beaming faces offered the slightest sliver of hope that her happiness would return. Soon after word spread about her mother's death, several schoolchildren began making cards for Claire and drawing her pictures, all of which she pinned to a pegboard in her office.

As the months passed, her days became more bearable. Still, most nights were the opposite. She would sit on the couch, curled beneath a blanket, and try her best to escape into the pages of a book, something her husband didn't understand. Owen wanted her to talk about her feelings, to let him in, something she found hard to do with him. On her better days, when she did try, it often resulted in an eruption of tears.

She'd hoped Owen would understand her need for some alone time, and he seemed to at first. But as time rolled along, his patience began to fade, replaced by feelings of resentment. In his eyes, she was shutting him out, avoiding him, and in doing so, damaging their marriage. The more Owen pushed, the more Claire pulled back, escaping deeper inside herself.

She knew it wasn't right.

And she knew the toll it was taking on their marriage.

But the day her mother died, it was as if a part of her died too. A new woman was forming in its wake—a woman Claire was still trying to understand.

The holiday song on the record player came to an end, shifting Claire's focus back to the last present to be wrapped. As she began cutting the paper, she heard what she assumed was glass shattering. The sound startled her. But given it had been a windy day, and an even windier night, it wasn't too farfetched to believe something had struck a window, causing it to break. Perhaps a tree branch, or an object swept along by the turbulent breeze.

Moving the wrapping paper to the side, she pushed herself to a standing position and tiptoed toward the back door. A chill brushed across her face, and as the outside wind howled, she wrapped her arms around herself, pulling her sweater tighter. Struggling to see in the darkness, she reached out, her hand sliding against the wall until she felt the switch for the dining room light. She flicked it on and glanced around the room. It didn't take long to find the cause of the sound she'd heard. One of the glass panels in the center of the back door had shattered, spitting jagged shards all over the tile floor.

But what had caused the glass to break?

Upon closer inspection, she couldn't say. There was nothing on the floor to explain why. And where was Owen? She checked the time on the microwave, noting he was almost an hour late.

Unsure what to do about the broken windowpane, Claire stood a moment, trying to come up with a temporary solution. The easiest one that came to mind was a sheet of plastic and packing tape. She hoped it would keep the frigid air out long enough for Owen to arrive and come up with something better.

Claire removed a box of plastic wrap from the kitchen cabinet and walked to the den for the packing tape. She grabbed it and turned, gasping when she felt a warm, tingling sensation on her neck, like the heat of someone's breath.

Hands shaking as she gripped the items, she turned.

Her eyes came to rest on a familiar face, and she whispered the last words she'd ever utter in this life. "What are you doing here?"

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CHAPTER 2

ONE WEEK LATER

I was sitting in my office at the Case Closed Detective Agency, talking to Simone and Hunter, my two partners in crime, about our holiday plans. Christmas was less than a week away, and both women were headed out of town to visit family and friends in their hometowns. As we finished our conversation, the office door blew open and a woman walked in, clutching a crumpled tissue in her hand. She looked to be around sixty, and her hair was styled in a dark, blunt bob. She was dressed like she was expecting a blizzard, but it was the dead of winter, so I didn't blame her.

She blotted her eyes with the tissue and glanced in our direction.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

"I ... I hope so."

I waved her over. "Why don't you come into my office, and we can talk?"

She nodded and walked over.

Simone looked at me and said, "Do you want us to stay, or ...?"

"Why don't you give us a few minutes?"

"You bet," Simone said.

They stood, and Hunter followed Simone out, closing the door behind her.

The woman took a seat, and I said, “What can I do for you?”

“I need ...” She lifted a finger and began digging around in her purse. “Just a moment, okay? I’m sorry.”

Taking a guess, I grabbed a box of tissues and pushed it in her direction. “No need to apologize. Take all the time you need.”

For the next couple of minutes, she sniffled and snorted into a half a dozen tissues, and I waited. Every time she began to speak, she’d get a few words out, but she hadn’t managed an entire sentence yet. Whatever was on her mind, it carried a heavy weight.

The woman removed a few more tissues from the box and placed them in her lap. “Believe it or not, I don’t consider myself an emotional person. I don’t get like this often.”

“I’m the same way. It takes a lot for me to get worked up about something, but when I do, everything I’ve been suppressing spills right out.”

She nodded and pressed a hand to her chest, closing her eyes as she worked to steady her breath. When her eyes reopened, she seemed a lot calmer.

“My name is Delilah Cooperson,” she said. “I’m not sure if you’ve been paying attention to the news, but my daughter-in-law was Claire Cooperson.”

“I have some connections at the county police department. What happened to Claire was awful.”

“I’m guessing you may have heard my son has been arrested.”

“I have, and I’m sorry.”

“The thing is, he didn’t do it, you see. Not my Owen. He’s too gentle a soul to even consider such a thing. And now that they’ve arrested him, they won’t listen to a word he says, or a word I say, for that matter.”

“I take it you’ve spoken to the police?”

“More than once. I’ve talked to anyone willing to listen. I’m getting nowhere. I didn’t know who to go to or what to do, and then I met the kindest woman at the grocery store. She told me about you and your detective agency, and I thought ... well, it’s worth a shot. I’ll do anything to save my son from these false allegations.”

Any mother would.

It didn’t mean he was innocent.

The case intrigued me, but as far as Owen’s guilt or innocence, I didn’t know enough about why he’d been accused to weigh in.

“What has your son told you about the night of the murder?” I asked.

Delilah leaned back, crossing her arms. “He told me he didn’t do it, and that’s enough for me.”

It may have been enough for her, but not for me.

“Do you know any specifics about what happened the night of the murder?” I asked.

“Owen’s told me a few things.”

For a woman desperate to save her son, she was a little light on the details, offering me blanket statements that led nowhere.

I crossed my arms and tried again.

“Where was Owen during the time the murder took place?” I asked.

“He was running late from work. He said he tried to call Claire, but she didn’t answer. It was a windy night, from what I understand, and the cell service was shoddy, going in and out. Even so, the police confirmed a call was made about thirty minutes before he arrived home.”

“How far away is Owen’s work?”

Delilah gave the question some thought. “Mmm, less than ten minutes, I guess. I understand your need to ask these questions, but my son didn’t kill her.”

“He was arrested, which means the police believe he did.”

“It seems like it’s always the husband who gets blamed when the wife gets murdered, no matter what evidence the police have to the contrary.”

Not always.

And when they were, it was for good reason.

In domestic murder cases, 76 percent of female victims were killed by someone they knew, and 34 percent by their intimate partner.

Delilah was so fixated on her son's innocence, she was biased, which was understandable. But questioning her wasn't getting me anywhere. I needed a different approach.

"Has Owen hired a lawyer?" I asked.

"Yes, he's represented by Jasper Hamilton. Do you know him?"

I nodded. "He's good. He has an impressive track record for winning his cases."

"Good doesn't mean he'll prove Owen's innocence, no matter how many cases he's won. He's had losses too, which means I can't count on him alone to come through for us. If this does go to trial, there's a chance it won't go in Owen's favor. It's the reason why I came to see you."

I was interested in taking the case ... if her son was innocent.

"What do you say?" Delilah asked. "Will you do it?"

I sat a moment, wrestling with my feelings. Given the police had made an arrest, the case was a bit different from many of the others I'd taken.

"I'll take the case on a trial basis," I said.

"A trial basis? What do you mean?"

"I need to speak with your son, look over the evidence, and get more details about what happened to Claire. If I believe your son is telling the truth, I'll continue investigating, and I'll promise you this—if he's innocent, I'll prove it."

"And if you decide he's lying?"

“You said yourself that he’s innocent, so you have nothing to worry about.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

She offered me a slight smile, and I hoped I’d just lightened the weight she’d been carrying, even if for a moment. For me, the weight was just beginning, and I wasn’t looking forward to the tough conversation I was about to have with Chief Foley.

CHAPTER 3

Foley sat behind his desk, glaring at me but saying nothing. I'd explained my reason for being there, my involvement in the case, and the support I was hoping but not expecting to receive from him. At the moment, it seemed he was in shock—and no doubt trying to decide how to handle the situation.

We'd worked together on several homicide cases in the past and had always done a decent job of not stepping on one another's toes. This time, things were different. Foley was certain Owen was guilty.

And to throw an additional wrench into the mix, Foley was married to my sister. Not only did we interact on a professional level, we had a personal relationship as well. If we were on opposite sides about who murdered Claire, I guessed there'd be a fair amount of turbulence between us.

I'd never cared for long silences, and I had just hit my breaking point.

"Is there anything you'd like to say?" I asked.

"There's a reason I haven't spoken, you know. It's the only way I can control my temper."

"I'm not saying Owen's innocent. I won't know until I investigate more. If you're right, and he's guilty, I'll drop the case."

"I've told you he's guilty. There's nothing more to say, Georgiana."

“I’m not trying to disrespect you. I hope you know that.”

“You disrespected me the moment you accepted the case.”

“I don’t see it that way,” I said. “Besides, I’d accepted it on a trial basis.”

He sighed, shaking his head. “How many times do we need to go over the facts? Owen’s story has been inconsistent from the start. His prints were on the bloody knife found at the scene, which just so happens to be the same knife used to slice her throat. When we arrived, he had blood all over him. According to their neighbor, they were having marital problems. The same neighbor also overheard them have a heated argument.”

I crossed one leg over the other, considering my response. “You’re right. So far, some of those things could point to him being guilty. But he insists he’s innocent.”

Foley threw his arms in the air. “Most murderers profess their innocence at this stage, and you know it. The guy’s got no alibi for the time of her murder.”

It had only been a week since Claire’s murder.

Even if the police had spoken to her friends and neighbors, I assumed there was more I could get out of them.

“I’m aware Owen doesn’t have an alibi,” I said.

“Ask me, it’s an open-and-shut case. Or it was until you came barging in here, deciding to poke holes in my arrest.”

“I’m sorry we’re not seeing eye to eye on this one. I don’t want it to be this way.”

“Then it’s simple. Drop the case.”

“It’s just ... I told her I’d look into it, and I wouldn’t feel right if I didn’t.”

“You’re going against me, then?”

“Come on, Foley. I understand you’re upset. I don’t like being on opposite sides of this any more than you do, but given our line of work, it was bound to happen at some point.”

Staring at the ground, he shook his head and mumbled, “I’m disappointed in you.”

He may have been disappointed, but I suspected there was more to his reaction to me taking this case. Given I wasn’t backing down, I wondered if he was second-guessing himself. Perhaps they’d been a little hasty in making the arrest. Foley was a proud man, but he was also level-headed and logical. If he’d made the wrong move, it would be hard for him to take.

“I can see we’re not getting anywhere with our conversation,” I said. “And I don’t want to upset you any further, so I’ll go.”

“Fine by me. You can show yourself out. And hey, don’t expect any help with this one. You won’t get it.”

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CHAPTER 4

There was nothing like a little merry murder to dampen spirits during the holiday season, and dampen them, they had. As the chatter about Claire's death made its way around town over the last week, the festive feel faded. Even the air seemed gloomy, thick like lead.

I'd just exited the police department and was making my way to my car when I heard someone say, "Hey, Georgiana, wait up."

I turned to see Whitlock heading in my direction.

Decades before, he'd worked as a detective alongside my father. When he retired, life wasn't as exhilarating as he'd thought it would be, so when a position opened up at the San Luis Obispo Police Department a couple of years back, he jumped at the opportunity to get back into the action.

"Hey," I said. "I was going to stop by your office, but Foley's not too happy with me right now. I didn't want to hang around and make things worse."

"Yeah, I ... ahh, I just ran into him."

"Did he tell you about the case I've taken?"

"Yup. The first words out of his mouth, in fact."

"He's never spoken to me like he did just now. I feel like I've damaged our

friendship.”

Whitlock reached out, giving my shoulder a squeeze. “You’re being too hard on yourself. Give it some time. He’ll come around.”

“You think so? He told me he was disappointed in me.”

“People say all kinds of kooky things when they get their panties in a bunch. He’s no different. It’s going to be all right. You’ll see.”

“You seem to be fine with me taking the Cooperson case.”

Whitlock glanced over his shoulder, then back at me. “Yeah, speaking of the case, I was hoping we could talk about it.”

“I’m guessing you want to do it somewhere else, not here, right?”

“You know me all too well. I was thinking we grab some lunch and go somewhere we won’t run into any corn?”

“Corn?”

“You know, ears ... ears of corn. People listening in. Get it?”

He smacked a hand against his leg, laughing at his own joke.

I couldn’t help but join him.

“We can go to my place,” I said. “Giovanni will be there, but I feel like he’s an acceptable variety of corn.”

“The finest of varieties, yes, and it will be nice to catch up with your fiancé. What do you fancy for lunch? It’s my treat.”

“I’m feeling comfort food, something simple. How about grilled cheese sandwiches and soup?”

He tipped his head toward me and nodded. “I believe I can make that happen. I’ll meet you at your place in an hour.”

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CHAPTER 5

Whitlock arrived at the exact time he said he would, carrying enough food to feed an entire family.

“I wasn’t sure which type of soup to get, so I got a little of everything they had,” he said.

He followed me to the kitchen, setting the sacks of food on the counter.

Giovanni walked over and extended a hand. “Nice to see you, my friend. How have you been?”

“Oh, I can’t complain,” Whitlock said. “You?”

“I’m well. Georgiana tells me there’s trouble in paradise.”

“Yeah, this investigation ... it’s an interesting one.”

Over the next several minutes, the two of them caught up, and then Giovanni got a call, which he took in his office. Whitlock removed the food containers from the bags on the counter and turned toward me, spreading his hands. “What will it be? We’ve got chicken noodle, tomato, mushroom bisque, and broccoli cheddar.”

“They all sound great.”

“Have a bit of each if you like.”

I went with mushroom bisque, and Whitlock with chicken noodle, and we each grabbed a grilled cheese sandwich and settled in at the kitchen table.

“Before we get going, I should mention something,” I said. “Foley told me I shouldn’t expect any help because I won’t get it. You don’t need to talk to me about anything that might get you in trouble.”

He reached out, patting my hand. “I have the utmost respect for Foley, so I appreciate your concern. I have just as much respect for you and your family. The way your mother looks after me, inviting me to Sunday dinners with all of you, it means a lot to me.”

It meant a lot to me too.

“I’m glad you moved back to Cambria to be a detective again,” I said.

“I couldn’t be happier that I did.” He clapped his hands together. “Now, let’s get down to the reason I’m here. When Foley decided to arrest Owen for his wife’s murder, we had a talk beforehand. I’ll admit, I expressed my doubts.”

“You don’t think Owen killed his wife?”

“I can’t say one way or the other yet. A lot of the evidence points to him. Doesn’t mean he did it. In my opinion, we should have waited a bit longer.”

“What did Foley say when you expressed your doubts?”

“He doesn’t like Owen, for starters. The guy rubs him the wrong way. Rubs me the wrong way too.”

“Why?”

“He can be an entitled hothead at times. When you talk to him, you’ll see.”

I leaned forward, taking a bite of my grilled cheese and thinking about what he’d just said. “Even if the guy’s full of himself, it’s not like Foley to arrest someone this fast just because he doesn’t like the person.”

“In a way, I get why he did it. Like I said before, there’s so darn much evidence to suggest the husband is guilty. I’m guessing Foley thought the case will be easy to wrap up. Ask me, though ... he’s been acting strange since we made the arrest. I think he might be questioning his decision.”

“I don’t blame him.”

“I know he told you to drop the case. It’s the reason I wanted to talk to you. I support your decision to take a closer look at the murder. When I heard Owen’s mother had hired you, I was relieved. I feel I must stand by Foley’s decision, but if we’ve arrested the wrong man, I’m certain you’ll find the right one.”

“I appreciate your faith in me.”

“I suppose I do have faith in you, but your track record speaks for itself, my dear.”

“As far as the evidence you have against Owen, I know about the alleged marital problems, and an argument between Owen and Claire. Is there anything else I should know—anything you wouldn’t mind sharing with me?”

Whitlock took a sip of his soup and then set the spoon down, lowering his voice like there was corn in our midst, even though we were alone. “There is one thing, and you didn’t hear it from me. Owen met with a divorce lawyer a few weeks before Claire’s murder. He was planning to leave her.”

“Do you know why?”

“I have a couple of theories. Owen owns a construction company. He made far more than Claire, and as they resided in California, I expect she would have been entitled to half in a divorce.”

The motive made sense.

Perhaps in the meeting with the divorce lawyer, he’d learned just how much he stood to lose and decided killing her was his only option.

“I can see now why Foley thinks he did it,” I said.

“That’s not even the worst of it.”

“I’m listening.”

“Owen was stepping out on Claire. He’s been seeing another woman.”

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CHAPTER 6

There was another woman, which made Owen's motive even stronger. According to Whitlock, the affair had been going on for several months. The woman, Nadia DeMarco, was a personal trainer. They'd met at the gym. When the police learned about her, Owen claimed their tryst was nothing more than a temporary fling.

But was it?

I was about to find out.

Sitting at a table at the county jail, I waited for Owen to be brought in. When he was ushered into the room, he took one look at me and smiled, the smug look on his face making a fast first impression.

In the looks department, he was upper to mid-range decent, though I imagined he viewed himself as a perfect ten. He was tall with short, blond hair, bright blue eyes, and teeth so perfect and bright, they didn't seem real.

He took a seat across from me and said, "What's up?"

"What's up is that you have been arrested for murder."

"Yeah ... well, it's the reason my mom hired you, right? So you can find out who did it, and I can put this whole mess behind me."

"When's your bail hearing?"

“Tomorrow. Can’t wait to get out of here.”

“You’re assuming bail will be granted.”

“Oh, it will be. My lawyer knows what’s up.”

His unsophisticated, childish vocabulary was grating on me.

“Have you ever been in front of a judge before?” I asked.

“Not for murder. Why?”

Not for murder.

But perhaps for something else.

Interesting.

“Here’s a little advice for tomorrow,” I said. “Check your attitude at the door.”

“And if I don’t?”

“You risk your bail being denied.”

He laughed. “I’m not worried.”

“You should be.”

“I have two things in my favor—wit and charm.”

“And yet you were still arrested,” I said, my snark on full display.

He blinked at me, his expression so obnoxious I wanted to slap it right off.

Take a breath.

Calm yourself.

He is your client.

I was used to having a certain level of sympathy for people when I took on a homicide investigation. And I did, for Claire. As far as Owen was concerned, he struck me as the kind of guy who could get pushed off a cliff, and most would think he deserved it.

“Chief Foley has it out for me,” Owen said. “No sense of humor with that guy.”

“He has a sense of humor. It’s just different than yours.”

“If you say so. You’re supposed to be representing my interests. So how about we get to it?”

If I wasn’t so motivated to get to the truth about Claire’s murder, I would have ended the conversation right there.

It wasn’t her fault she’d married a jerk.

Or was it?

“You claim you’re innocent, but right now, all roads lead back to you,” I said.

“Then let’s flip the script, catch the real killer. How do we go about it?”

“We start by you walking me through the night of your wife’s murder.”

He shrugged. “Where do you want me to begin?”

“Before you left work.”

“Let’s see ... I was planning to leave on time, and then there was a problem on the jobsite.”

“What kind of problem?”

“The electrician ran into some issues, and I needed to stick around and weigh in, which I did. After he left, I did one last walkthrough of the kitchen.”

“Why?”

“When the cabinets were installed, they had several dings and scratches. I was marking them with tape so the installer could fix or replace what he needed to when he came in the next day. I tried calling Claire to let her know I was going to be late. She didn’t answer, not that I was surprised.”

“Why not?”

“She didn’t always take my calls after her mother died. It wasn’t like she was ignoring me or anything. She’d get home from work most nights, skip dinner, get in her pajamas, and open a bottle of wine. Half the time, she was asleep on the couch when I walked in.”

“When did her mother die?”

He tipped his head to the side, thinking. “About a year ago. After the accident, Claire

changed. She was depressed, crying all the time. She stopped going to the gym. Must have put on twenty-five pounds or more.”

“Did the weight gain bother you?”

“I’d be lying if I said it didn’t. When you’re in a relationship with someone, and they have a great figure from the start, I don’t think it’s okay not to keep up with it. Marriage doesn’t give you a free pass to let yourself go. It’s false advertising.”

Wow.

I didn’t know what to say—almost.

“Claire was dealing with the loss of her mother,” I said. “You could have been more understanding, and it’s clear you weren’t. You were selfish, thinking of your wants and needs when you should have been thinking of hers.”

He raised a brow like he was shocked I’d spoken to him in such a way.

I found it amusing.

He was lucky I’d kept my comments PG-13.

There was a lot more I wanted to say, and I was pleased I’d managed to resist.

“Whose side are you on?” he asked. “It sure doesn’t sound like you’re on mine.”

“Again, this is about Claire, not you. I’m on her side. I was hired to find her killer, and I will.”

“You should be here for me, on my side.”

My boiling point had been reached.

I took a breath.

It didn't help.

I took another.

Still no good.

"I came here today to figure out what happened to your wife, so I can investigate and exonerate you if you're innocent. I find your abrasive, tough-guy attitude repugnant. I'm sure I can solve the case without your input, so ... with that said, I'm leaving."

I stood with every intention of walking out.

"Hey, now hold on a minute," he said. "Just ... hold on."

"Why should I?"

"I'm not sure what repugnant even means, but I'm guessing it's not good."

"You're correct."

"I've been through a lot over the past several days, and I'm freaking out here, okay? I would appreciate your help. I mean it. I'll tell you everything you want to know. I promise. And I'll ... I'll try my best not to offend you. Just please ... sit back down."

I remained standing for several seconds, to ensure the moment delivered the impact I wanted. Then I took a seat, looking him right in the eye as I said, "Tell me about your affair with Nadia DeMarco."

CHAPTER 7

“What do you want to know about it?” Owen asked.

“For starters, was Claire aware you were sleeping with another woman?”

“I’m not sure. If she knew, she never said anything to me. I was careful not to communicate with Nadia when I was at home because Nadia’s also married. We did our best to keep things quiet.”

“The police found out, so you didn’t keep it that quiet.”

“They looked over my cell phone records. Figured they’d talk to Nadia, which they did, so I didn’t see any point in denying it.”

“You spoke to a divorce lawyer not too long ago,” I said. “Did Claire know?”

“I don’t think so, no.”

“When did you plan on telling her?”

“I had a second meeting scheduled with the lawyer, and he was going to help me plan everything out.”

“When you say plan , was it a plan to keep her from getting your money?”

He blinked at me, going quiet for a moment. “All right, yeah. She didn’t need any of

it. When her mother died, Claire inherited a bunch of money.”

“Define a bunch.”

“I don’t know the exact amount. Had to be seven figures. Her mother was loaded.”

On one hand, it would have been foolish for him to murder Claire when her mother’s money could have been up for grabs as part of the divorce settlement. On the other, with Claire dead, he may have inherited the money himself.

I crossed one leg over the other, thinking about other questions I hadn’t asked yet.

“What time did you leave work the night Claire was murdered?”

“Oh, I’d say it was about seven. I know because it takes eight minutes to get home if there isn’t any traffic, and there wasn’t any that night.”

“Did you drive straight home?”

“Straight home, no stops,” he confirmed.

“Did you speak with anyone between the time you left to go home and the time you discovered your wife’s body?”

“Nope, not a soul.”

“What happened when you got home?”

“I did the same thing I do every night. I parked in the garage out back—it’s detached from the house—then headed for our back porch, like always. That’s when I noticed one of the panels of glass on the back door was broken, and it was unlocked. It’s never unlocked. Claire was strict about making sure all the doors were locked. All the

time. To the point of annoyance, if I'm being honest. So, yeah ... this was odd."

"Do you have security cameras?"

"Sorry to say I don't. Never had a break-in anywhere I've ever lived. I thought we were safe, thought the neighborhood was safe. Guess I was wrong."

"You noticed the shattered glass, then the unlocked door. What happened when you entered the house?"

"There was a knife on the kitchen counter. Had blood all over it. I picked it up, looked it over. I thought Claire had cut herself. Then I saw more blood, on the carpet, the wall. I panicked. I started running through the house, calling Claire's name."

"Then what happened?"

He looked away, his focus shifting to the floor. "I ... I found her in the den. Blood all over her clothes. I bent down, grabbed her, started shaking her. She was like a ragdoll in my arms. So cold and quiet. It didn't seem real. I held her in my arms for ... awhile. I'm not sure how long. Time just kinda stopped. I was in shock. It didn't seem real, but it was real. Once I came to terms with the fact she was dead, I called my mother. Then I called the police."

"Why did you call your mother first?"

"I don't know. Needed to hear a familiar voice, I guess. I was a mess."

I checked my watch.

Visitors were given one hour to meet.

I was running out of time.

“One of your neighbors told the police she’d overheard an argument between you and Claire,” I said.

“Yeah, I’m guessing it was Marianne Bowman. Seemed like a nice lady until Claire’s mother died.”

“What changed?”

“For starters, she’s a single retiree without a thing to do. She started visiting Claire, offering her a shoulder to cry on. Ever since, the woman’s been awful to me. Dunno why. Claire wasn’t the type of person to say anything negative about anyone, much less her husband, so it didn’t make sense.”

“Did you ask Marianne about it?”

“A few weeks back, I was taking the trash to the curb. Marianne walked right up to me, pointed a finger in my face, and said Claire deserved a real man. She didn’t understand what Claire saw in me.”

“What was your response?”

“I’ll admit I had a few choice words for the old broad. I put her in her place. She hasn’t said a word to me since.”

Another glance at my watch.

Less than five minutes to go.

I shifted the direction of the conversation.

“Is there anyone you can think of who would have wanted to kill Claire?” I asked.

He gave the question some thought. “We may not have had the best relationship before she died, but she was the sweetest person. Even though we were headed for divorce, I would have never wanted any harm to come to her. Maybe though, just maybe, she’s happy now, in her spirit life or whatever there is after we die.”

It was an odd comment.

“Why would you say that?” I asked.

“Heaven knows I tried to get through to her this past year, after her mother passed. Nothing I tried worked. In the end, I was just ... worn out, tired of trying. And hey, I know it wasn’t right. I gave up on her, and she didn’t deserve it. She deserved better. So much better.”

We’d come a long way since the start of our meeting.

Once he’d pushed his ego to the side, I saw a different side of him, one he’d do well to show off more.

“It sounds like you’re carrying some guilt,” I said.

He gave a small shrug. “I guess I am.”

“Is some of it because of your affair with Nadia?”

“I suppose. Nadia was a fling. I never expected it to last.”

“Why not?”

“Relationships are hard and complicated, no matter how easy they seem at the start. I’m a simple guy with simple needs. Doubt I’ll ever get married again.”

And with that, my time was up.

“I have to go,” I said. “The two of us ... we had a rocky start. But we got there in the end.”

“We sure did. Thanks for giving me another chance. Hey ... ahh, before you go. What I said before about Claire being a good person. She was and all ...”

“I sense a but coming.”

“But there’s one thing you should know. I’m hoping it will help you find out what happened to her and why.”

“What’s that?”

He cleared his throat. “I wasn’t the only one cheating. I think she was too.”

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CHAPTER 8

I couldn't get my conversation with Owen out of my head. I'd been thinking about it all last night and this morning. I'd asked him if he knew the man with whom he suspected Claire was having an affair. He did not. I followed that question up with another, asking how he knew she'd cheated. He admitted he didn't know, not for certain. He had suspicions, but he was sure his suspicions were right.

My first stop of the day was the local elementary school where Claire had worked. I arrived during their lunch break, hoping to chat with a few of the teachers. As I walked down the hall, I peered into classrooms, noting the posters and decorations on the walls. It brought me back to my childhood and memories of my youth.

I rounded the corner and found the break room. As I walked in, several people glanced in my direction, no doubt wondering who I was and why I was there.

A twentysomething woman, wearing a red turtleneck and black slacks, pulled her eyeglasses down past the bridge of her nose and smiled at me. "Are you new here? Or are you lost?"

"Not new, and I'm not lost, no. My name is Georgiana Germaine, and I am a private detective. I've been hired to investigate Claire Cooperson's murder."

There were gasps all around.

"I thought her husband did it," Red Turtleneck said. "That's what we all heard. He's been arrested for her murder, hasn't he?"

“The fact he was arrested doesn’t mean he killed her. It means he’s been suspected of killing her. That’s where I come in. Were any of you friends with Claire?”

Red Turtleneck looked around, giving others the chance to speak. When no one did, she said, “I never saw Claire outside of work, but yeah, I considered her a friend. I’m Holly, by the way.”

“And I’m Colin,” one of the men said.

I focused on the others, those who hadn’t said anything yet. “And the rest of you?”

Using his pointer finger, Colin made the introductions. “This is Ann, Bruce, and Teresa.”

Bruce and Teresa smiled and made eye contact.

Ann did not, making her my primary focus.

“Ann, did you know Claire well?” I asked.

“I ... we ... Claire was ... The thing is we ...”

She burst into tears, speedwalking out of the break room, the door slamming shut behind her.

I looked at the others. “Is she all right?”

Holly swished a hand through the air. “She’ll be fine. She’s just a bit tender about the whole thing. We all are.”

“Holly’s right,” Colin said. “Ever since Claire died, we’ve been thinking of a way to

honor her. Claire always had a soft spot for animals, so we held a potluck dinner a few nights ago here at the school. We donated the money we made to the local animal shelter.”

“Did Claire have any pets of her own?”

“She didn’t,” Colin said. “Something about her husband being allergic.”

“Did Claire talk much about her personal life to any of you?”

“Like what?”

“I guess what I’m wondering is if any of you knew Claire and Owen were having marital problems.”

There were surprised looks all around, and in unison, they all shook their heads.

“If they were having marital issues, Claire was tightlipped about it,” Holly said. “She never said much about her personal life.”

“What kind of problems were they having, if you don’t mind me asking?” Colin said.

I didn’t.

“Owen was planning to file for divorce,” I said.

“Oh, wow. I don’t think any of us knew about that.”

“I’m not even sure Claire knew,” I said. “Owen never mentioned it to her before she died.”

Holly tapped her shoe on the floor, thinking. "You should talk to Claire's best friend. I bet she'd know."

"Do you know her name?"

"I believe it's Leah. Not sure about the last name."

"Do you know anything else about Leah?"

Holly paused, then said, "Claire mentioned something once about Leah having her own business. I believe she owns a flower shop in San Luis Obispo."

"Good to know."

"Who hired you to investigate Claire's murder?" Colin asked.

"Owen's mother hired me," I said.

"What are you going to do if he ends up being the murderer?"

"There won't be anything to do. If he's guilty, it won't be the outcome his mother is hoping for, but I will have done my job."

"Do you have any other suspects?" Colin asked.

"I've just been hired to investigate, which is why I'm here. Can any of you think of anyone who may have had a motive to kill Claire?"

They all said no.

"Claire was such a nice person," Holly said. "If she had any enemies, I'd be

surprised. When we heard she was murdered, we thought it was a robbery gone wrong, because any other reason just doesn't make sense."

The break room door opened, and Ann walked back in. She took a seat, then looked in my direction. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to rush out the way I did."

"Don't worry about it," I said. "Are you all right?"

She paused for a time. "Before Claire died, we had a ... well, it wasn't an argument, more of a heated verbal exchange. We weren't yelling or anything. Still, I didn't feel good about it, and I planned on apologizing. I ... I never got the chance."

"What was the argument about?"

"One of my students. He was in Claire's office, and she said something to him about her mother dying. He went home and told his parents, and his mother called me, giving me an earful about how angry she was about their conversation."

"Why was she upset?"

"She didn't think it was an appropriate topic of conversation to have with her son. I thought the mother was overreacting, but I told his parents I'd speak to Claire. When I did, she didn't take it well. She put it back on me, acting like I should have stood up for her with the parents. She thought they were overreacting and being insensitive about it all."

"How did the conversation between the two of you end?"

"She got emotional and took off. I thought about it all weekend. I decided I'd clear everything up when I arrived at school on Monday, but then I found out she died."

Her head dropped, and she stared at her lap.

“I appreciate you telling me about what happened between the two of you.” I turned toward the quiet ones, Bruce and Teresa. “Do either of you have anything to add?”

“I just started here a couple of months ago,” Bruce said. “I didn’t know her as well as the others.”

“We talked from time to time,” Teresa said. “I guess I’d say I considered her a friend. But like the others, I have no idea who murdered her or why.”

CHAPTER 9

A quick search of the local floral shops, and I found the one with a woman named Leah as the owner—Floral and Fern Botanicals. The bells hanging from the door's handle made a jingling sound as I stepped inside the flower shop, and a woman turned, offering me a small wave and a smile. Her ash-blond hair was in braids, and she was wearing an oversized green sweater, brown slacks, and matching, knee-length boots.

“Hi, welcome in,” she said. “Can I help you?”

“Are you Leah?” I asked.

“I am.”

“Were you friends with Claire Cooperson?”

She frowned then nodded. “Why do you ask?”

“My name is Georgiana Germaine, and I’ve been hired to investigate Claire’s murder.”

Leah set the flower bouquet she’d been working on to the side and cleared her throat, reaching for a cell phone sitting on the counter. She grabbed it and walked over to me.

“I was wondering when you’d stop by,” she said. “Owen’s mother came in this

morning. She's convinced her son is innocent. Don't blame her, I suppose. Any mother would think the same."

"Do you think Owen's innocent?"

I realized then that her eyes were brimming with tears. One escaped and ran down her face.

She flicked it away.

"I'm not sure," she said. "I've always had a decent relationship with Owen. I would never have thought him capable of committing murder, but I don't believe the police would have arrested him otherwise. Do you?"

"You're right. They have good reason to consider him their primary suspect. I've been toying with other ideas, though ... like the possibility that her murder had been staged in such a way to make it look like Owen is to blame when he isn't."

"Are you saying you think someone else murdered her and set him up to take the fall?"

"It's possible. It's happened on cases I've investigated in the past."

"Huh. I hadn't considered that."

I crossed my arms and said, "I was hoping you could tell me more about Claire."

Leah fiddled with one of her braids. "In many ways, we were opposites. She was an introvert. I'm an extrovert. She cried at the drop of a hat. And then there's me—unemotional ... well, most of the time. It's been a rough year. First Claire's mother, and now Claire."

“I heard Claire struggled with her mother’s death.”

“Oh yeah, she was devastated. It was hard to connect with her at times. If she wasn’t at work, she was at home, distancing herself from the world and everyone in it.”

“When was the last time you saw or talked to her?”

“We were together the day she died, earlier in the day, I mean. I talked her into going Christmas shopping, and it was the happiest I’d seen her in a long time. I thought she was finally coming around, returning to the Claire I recognized. We shopped for most of the day, and then I dropped her off at home. She was whistling a holiday tune when she got out of the car. She planned to sit by the fire and wrap the presents she’d bought before Owen came home. I had no idea it would be the last ...” Her voice cracked. “I didn’t know it would be the last time I ever saw her.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I know how hard this must be to talk about.”

“It is hard, but if it turns out Owen didn’t kill Claire, then someone else did, and if I can do anything to help you catch that person, I will.”

I was glad to hear it.

“Can you think of anyone who had a problem with Claire?” I asked.

“I can’t.”

“What about her coworkers?”

“At the school? I can’t imagine any of them having an issue big enough to make them want to murder her over it.”

“Did she ever talk about them?”

“Here and there. She never had a bad thing to say about any of them, but then, that was Claire. She always tried to see the best in people, even when they didn’t deserve it.”

“How long had the two of you been friends?”

“We were roommates in college. When we first met, she was so shy and reserved, I never thought we’d become such good friends. Given she didn’t let many people into her inner circle, it was a long time before we became close. But once we got there, we were inseparable.”

“What’s your opinion on Claire and Owen’s marriage?”

Leah tipped her head to the side. “Hmm, that’s a tough one.”

“How so?”

“I get along with Owen just fine. It’s just, he’s different as a friend than he is as a husband. I could never be married to a guy like him.”

“Why not?”

“He kinda runs hot and cold. One minute, he was showering her with compliments and affection, and then next, he’d make a comment that wasn’t so nice. If you ask me if I thought he loved her ... yes, I know he did. He just didn’t always have the best way of showing it.”

It looked like she was gearing up to elaborate on what she’d just said when the bells on the front door jangled, and a customer walked in, eager to pick up her order. Leah

dealt with the woman and then made her way back over to me, sweeping her hands up and down her arms. “I’ve had a chill running through me all day today. I need a hot drink. I have a little kitchen area in the back. I’m going to make some tea. I also have coffee, hot chocolate, and orange juice, I think . You want anything?”

“I’ll take Earl Grey tea if you have it.”

“I don’t have Earl, but I have Lady Grey.”

“Even better.”

Leah turned, heading to the back of the store. She dipped behind a blue velvet curtain and then returned a few minutes later, carrying a tray. On the tray was a fancy pink-and-black-striped teapot and matching cups and saucers. She set everything down on a bistro table and took a seat. I joined her.

“Claire saw me eyeing this tea set when we were on vacation in London a couple of years ago,” she said. “Before we flew home, she returned to the store and bought it for me.”

“It’s adorable.”

Leah nodded and poured two cups of tea, handing me one.

“Is there anything else I can do to help you with your investigation?” she asked. “Ask me anything.”

I’d been waiting to segue into harder questions, and she was making it all too easy.

“Did Claire know Owen was having an affair?” I asked.

Leah raised a brow, but the question didn't seem to surprise her. "Yes, Claire knew Owen had been stepping out on her."

"He told me he wasn't sure if she knew. Why didn't she confront him about it, you think?"

Leah took a deep breath in. "She kept telling me she was going to, but she always talked herself out of it."

"Why?"

"Claire disliked any kind of confrontation. But that's just part of it. She'd even convinced herself she was partially to blame for the affair. After her mother died, she became distant. Not just with him—with everyone. But her relationship with Owen suffered the most."

No matter how distant she may have been, it didn't give him the green light to sleep with another woman. It was something I'd never understood about cheaters. Why not just leave the person rather than putting them through such a nasty betrayal? And yet, in aspects of today's society, it seemed far easier to blur lines than it had been in previous generations, to accept the unacceptable when it served an individual's purpose.

"You don't strike me as the kind of person who'd stand by and do nothing when you know your friend is being cheated on," I said.

"I'm not. Believe me, I wanted to slap him upside the head."

"Why didn't you?"

"Claire made me promise not to interfere, to let her deal with it in her way and time. I

kept my promise. Well, that is to say I didn't confront him, but I found ways to make life a bit harder on him and her —Nadia."

"You knew about the personal trainer?"

"Sure did. When Claire told me she thought he was cheating, I threw on a wig and a hat, I rented a car for the day, and I followed him. He came walking out of the gym, and that tramp was prancing around him, running her fingers up and down his arms, giggling like a high school girl with a crush. It was ridiculous."

It sounded ridiculous—like a woman desperate for attention. Maybe that's what drew them to each other—not getting what they needed at home.

"When you say you found ways to make life hard on them, what do you mean?" I asked.

"Let's just say they both started having car trouble, among other things, and leave it at that."

I didn't want to leave it there, but I had an even more pressing question. "Do you think Owen or Nadia ever suspected you?"

"Nah, I have the best poker face on the planet, and I'm a convincing liar when I need to be."

I wasn't sure how to take her admission.

Nothing in our conversation so far had led me to believe she'd been dishonest with me. Maybe she had, and I hadn't picked up on it. Then again, there was no reason for her to lie—not one I could think of, anyway.

“Did you know Owen was planning on divorcing Claire?” I asked.

Leah jerked back, smacking a hand against her lips. “Are you serious?”

“I am.”

“No, I didn’t.”

I reached for my teacup and took a sip. “I wonder if Claire knew. Owen said he hadn’t told her yet. He’d met with an attorney once, and he was planning on meeting with him a second time before breaking the news to her.”

“I don’t know what to say. I’m shocked. The cheating wasn’t a surprise to me, but this news ... wow, it’s a lot to take in.”

“Why weren’t you surprised about him cheating?”

“He likes attention, and Claire wasn’t in a place to give it to him. But that’s not the only reason. For all his faults, Owen is a good listener, something other women seem to pick up on. I worried someone would come along and put her claws into him when Claire wasn’t looking, and that’s what happened.”

“Sounds like it.”

“I have to admit, she went on, Owen tried everything he could to help Claire process her grief. He stopped by my shop several times, asking for my advice on what more he could do. Didn’t justify the cheating, but it helped me understand why he did it.”

“How would you describe his demeanor over the past several months?”

“He was in so much pain. If I had to sum up the conversations we had, I’d say he felt

helpless, like him not being able to help Claire with her emotions made him a failure.”

“Do you think it’s the reason he started the affair with Nadia?”

“I think it’s a big part of it. I figured it wouldn’t last though—that they’d find a way to get past it. All my little tricks to aggravate him and Nadia were supposed to make the decision easier for him. But if he was ready to file for divorce, it means I was wrong. Makes me wonder what else I’ve been wrong about.”

I took another sip of tea and geared up for my last burning question.

“I went to see Owen in lockup, and he said something interesting,” I said. “He believed Claire was cheating on him. Do you know if there’s any truth to it?”

“If she was seeing someone on the side, she wouldn’t have told me.”

“Why not?”

“I think she would have had too much shame to admit it.”

“But is it possible she was having an affair?”

Another pause, a lot longer this time, and then, “I wish I could say no, but the day we went shopping, she made a purchase that surprised me. She bought men’s cologne. She told me it was for Owen. It couldn’t have been, though.”

“Why not?”

“Owen didn’t wear cologne, ever. He was a stickler about that.”

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CHAPTER 10

I phoned Whitlock, asking him about the presents Claire wrapped the night she was murdered. They'd been bagged, tagged, and opened. Most of the gifts had Owen's name written on them, and the boxes contained things like boxer shorts, shirts, and a set of tools. But there was one gift without a name—a bottle of cologne.

Was there a mystery man in Claire's life?

From what I'd learned, if Claire wasn't at work, she was at home, which limited the opportunity for another man to enter the picture.

I thought about the guys I'd met in the break room at the elementary school—Colin and Bruce. But they were just two men out of many who worked at the school, I presumed. And since school was out for the day, I'd need to wait to explore the idea any further.

I parked curbside in front of a white, modern-style house, and made my way to the door. I knocked twice. The door opened. A fit, attractive man who was tall enough to be a professional basketball player offered me a curious look and said, "Can I help you?"

"Is Nadia here?" I asked.

"She's not."

He blinked at me, and I blinked at him, and we stood there, at a standstill.

I moved a hand to my hip, introduced myself, and told him why I was there.

“I see,” was his response.

I expected him to follow it up with a question about what my investigation had to do with Nadia, but I was wrong.

“I suppose you want to speak with my wife about Owen and the affair they’ve been having,” he said.

Right to the point.

I liked this guy.

“I ... yes. How did you?—”

“Know? When Nadia found out Claire died, she confessed she’d been having an affair. She thought it was news to me. It wasn’t.”

“How long have you known?”

“Since it started. It was little things, like her coming and going at odd hours, at times when I knew she didn’t take clients. She told me some of her work hours had changed, but I didn’t believe it. Went to the gym one day when she was supposed to be working, and she wasn’t there.”

“If you knew about the affair, why keep quiet?”

“This might be hard for anyone to believe, but we’ve known each other since we were kids. Lived next door to each other. I’ve loved her all my life. I’d do anything for her. I’m sure she wouldn’t like me sharing this, but it isn’t the first time she’s

cheated. I'm away a lot. Sometimes for long stretches. She gets lonely, and sometimes that loneliness leads to a lapse in judgment. Thing is, she always comes back to me, and if you can believe it, our marriage has become stronger because of it."

I didn't believe it at all.

But he was convincing.

I might not have believed it, but it seemed like he did.

"Have you ever spoken to Owen?" I asked.

"Once. Went to his construction site, and we took a walk. Thought about roughing him up, but I decided it wasn't worth it. Not to mention, he seemed like the kind of guy who would run straight to the police, and I don't need that kind of heat."

"Has the affair ended?"

"She told me it was over."

As I wondered whether what they'd told him was true, a car turned into the driveway and a woman got out. He looked at the woman and then at me, saying, "I suppose I should leave the two of you two talk."

I supposed he was right.

CHAPTER 11

I met Nadia just as she was closing her car door. When I explained who I was and why I was there, she scrunched her face, displeased. I assumed she was also displeased to drive up and see me speaking to her husband. For a moment, she said nothing, and I thought she was going to refuse to talk to me. Then she opened the back door of the car, grabbed her coat, and threw it on, suggesting we go for a walk.

After we'd rounded the corner, she looked at me and said, "I heard Owen's mother hired you."

News spread fast around this place.

"Are you two still seeing each other?" I asked.

"We're talking, not sleeping together, if that's what you're implying."

"I wasn't implying anything. Does your husband know the two of you are still in communication?"

"If he does, he hasn't asked me about it."

He may not have wanted to ask about it, but I did.

"Why are you still in contact with Owen?"

She gave me a snarky look, as if the reason should be obvious to me, which it wasn't.

“The guy just lost his wife,” she said.

“A wife he was planning on divorcing.”

“Getting a divorce doesn’t mean he no longer cared for her. He just got tired of trying, I guess. I don’t blame him.”

“When I talked to Owen about the affair, he acted like it was just a fling, no big deal. He never thought it would last.”

She raised a brow. “He said it was a fling, did he? Well, that’s news to me.”

“How so?”

“The last conversation we had right before his wife died, he made a comment about being able to pursue me once he was divorced. He wanted me to leave my husband.”

“What did you say?”

“I said no. The affair was a temporary distraction, nothing more.”

Funny.

They’d both said similar things about their dangerous liaison.

Was one of them was lying?

Or were they lying to each other?

Or maybe a little of both?

“What did Owen say when you told him you had no intention of leaving your husband?” I asked.

“He threw a fit at first, and then he got ... weird.”

“How so?”

“The next time we saw each other, he spent the entire time backpedaling, saying the same thing to me that I’d said to him—the affair wasn’t a big deal, it was never going to amount to anything, it was just a bit of fun, that kind of thing. He acted like the decision to call it off was his idea, and it wasn’t.”

“Did he talk about Claire when you were together?”

She shook her head. “We decided at the start not to discuss our spouses. Seemed like a disrespectful thing to do to our partners.”

Disrespectful.

Like an affair wasn’t.

I supposed we had different ideas about the definition of the word disrespectful .

In my view, they’d disrespected their spouses the moment they hooked up.

“How long ago did the affair end?” I asked.

“What did Owen say?”

“Why does it matter?”

“I suppose it doesn’t. We stopped seeing each other, you know, in an intimate way, oh, about a month ago, give or take.”

“And how many times have you seen him since?”

“Not at all ... until I found out about his wife. Then I couldn’t stop thinking about him, so we met up and talked.”

“How did he seem about Claire’s death?”

“Torn up.”

“The police think he killed her.”

She stopped, bent down, and tied her shoe.

Then she faced me.

“I know what they think, and I’ll tell you right now, they have it all wrong,” she said. “Owen’s the kindest, gentlest soul I’ve ever known. You better find out who did it, because it wasn’t him.”

Nadia pivoted and then took off toward her house, leaving me standing there, thinking about what she’d just said about Owen being a kind, gentle soul.

She may have wanted me to believe she saw the affair as a temporary one, but she sure didn’t sound like someone who wanted the affair to be over.

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CHAPTER 12

I woke at a little after two in the morning, finding myself in a house I didn't recognize. I sat up and looked around, my eyes coming to rest on a silver lamp on the nightstand. It was switched on. I was still wearing my 1930s vintage, floor-length, black negligee I'd put on right after the bath I'd taken, but I was in someone else's house, which meant ... I was in a dream.

Where was I, and whose house was I in?

A framed wedding photo hanging on the wall gave me my answer.

I was in Owen and Claire's house.

I pushed the blanket to the side, stood, and entered the hallway, following the sound of music to the den. When I walked in, I noticed the source of the sound was coming from a record player. The tune playing was "Christmas Time Again My Friend," by Mac Powell.

As I glanced around the room, I saw a bare Christmas tree, real pine. There were open boxes resting beside it, filled with various ornaments, tinsel, and ribbons, all waiting to adorn the tree. But no one had found the time to do it yet.

Sitting next to the tree was a woman surrounded by bottles of cologne. She picked up one of the bottles, held it to her nose, and breathed it in, humming along to the song.

I approached her, and she looked up.

“Hello, Claire,” I said.

“Hello.”

“I’m Georgiana, a private investigator.”

The song ended, and the record player went quiet. I offered to put another record on, and she said, “No thanks, I think I’ve heard enough Christmas music for one day.”

“Mind if I sit down?”

“You can if you like.”

I took a seat next to her and pointed at one of the bottles of cologne. “You bought a lot of these.”

“Yeah, I guess I did. Funny, I only remember buying one.”

“Is it for your husband?”

She stared at me for a time and then said, “Of course, who else?”

Now for a harder question. “Do you remember what happened the night you wrapped these presents?”

“Not all of it. This moment, here and now, has been playing over and over in a loop, except this is the first time you’ve been here. I’m dead. I know that much. I’m not surprised, you know. I thought it might happen.”

“Why?”

“I just did.”

We were going in circles.

“Did Owen murder you?” I asked.

She tipped her head back and laughed. “Heavens, no. He’s never laid a hand on me.”

The laughing continued, escalating like she couldn’t bring herself to stop.

“Oh, man,” she said. “It’s good to laugh. Seems like I haven’t laughed in ages.”

“If Owen didn’t murder you, do you know who did?”

She turned, staring at the tree. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“They all tried so hard to help me, you know, but I ... I just couldn’t be helped. I’m broken. Have been since my mom died. It’s hard, sharing a burden, letting someone in. It’s like your pain becomes their pain, and you feel bad for involving someone else in your mess.”

“I’m sorry about what happened to your mother, and to you.”

“Yeah, well, nothing can change the past. What’s done is done. I thought I would see her, though. I thought since we’re both dead, we’d be reunited. I figured that’s how it worked in the afterlife. I’ve been trying to find her, to leave this place, but when I call out to her, she doesn’t come.”

“Maybe you can’t leave yet, not until ... you know ...”

“My murder is solved. Is that why you’re here—to solve it?”

“I believe so, yes.”

She lifted a finger. “It cannot be done too soon.”

“What do you mean?”

“What is right. People find ways to justify their actions sometimes. They’re not to be trusted.”

“Are you saying you believe the person who murdered you felt justified in doing it?”

“It’s hard to make people understand why we do the things we do.”

“Tell me , make me understand.”

She reached out, looking me in the eye as she grabbed my hands. “Promise me you’ll do what you need to do so I can get away from this tortuous place. Please. I don’t want to be here anymore.”

“I promise.”

She released my hands and began to fade, her solid form dissipating until I could see right through her.

“Don’t go yet,” I said. “Stay, tell me who did this to?—”

Before I could finish, she was gone.

CHAPTER 13

I was standing in front of a Spanish-style home, thinking about the dream I'd had the night before, when a woman opened the door. She was hunched over, like she wasn't capable of standing up straight, and her gray hair was filled with pink foam rollers.

"You caught me right before I was about to hop in the shower," she said. "Who are ya, and why are you here?"

"I'm Georgiana Germaine, and I'm investigating your neighbor's murder."

She went quiet a moment, processing what I'd just said. Then she swished a hand through the air, gesturing for me to come in. I followed her to the front room, which had a single theme—purple. Purple floral wallpaper, purple couch, purple throw pillows, purple rug.

We sat on the sofa, and she said, "I'm Marianne. One of the neighbors told me about you taking on Owen Cooperson's case, though I can't imagine why you did."

"The police haven't proven he's guilty ... not yet."

"Doesn't mean he's innocent."

Indeed.

"I was told you overheard an argument or two while they lived next to you," I said.

“One argument is all.”

“ One argument in the entire time they lived here?”

“Yessiree.”

“One argument seems ... odd,” I said.

She raised a brow. “How so?”

“Your house is close to theirs. I would think if you’d heard one, you would have heard others.”

“My hearing is darn good for my age, though not as good as it used to be.”

“How do you know they were arguing?”

She rolled her eyes. “Their voices, they were raised. Duh.”

“Could you hear what they were saying?”

“Well, no, I don’t suppose I could.”

I ignored the sarcasm.

“Did you witness the argument, through a window or something?” I asked.

“No, I tried. Their curtains were drawn.”

“If you didn’t see them, and you didn’t hear what they were saying, how do you know the argument was between Claire and Owen? I mean, can you be 100 percent

sure it was them?”

“I ... well, I ... hold on a minute now.”

The question seemed to throw her off, perhaps making her reconsider her statement.

“You’re right,” she said. “I didn’t see them, and I’m not sure what all the fuss was about or why they were so upset with each other. I just know it was them arguing. Gut instinct tells me I’m right.”

Gut instinct?

Not good enough.

“You don’t like Owen much, do you?” I asked.

“Nope, can’t say I do.”

“Is it possible you told the police Owen and Claire were arguing because you want him to be convicted of her murder?”

She stabbed a finger in my direction. “I heard what I heard, missy. I’ve never lied a day in my life. Not about to start now, no matter what my personal feelings are for the man.”

“Why don’t you care for him?”

“He made Claire cry. These past months, she was crying just about every time I saw her. And as I don’t know of any other logical explanation, I figured the husband was to blame. They always are, you know. My husband used to make me cry too, until the day I booted his butt right out the door.”

She was projecting, putting her personal feelings from her own past and obvious dislike of men onto Owen.

“Claire’s mother died in a car accident,” I said. “Claire struggled a lot afterward.”

“I’m aware. She died a year ago, didn’t she? Surely Claire wouldn’t have still been crying a whole year later, not all the time.”

“People grieve in different ways. It takes longer for some people to get past a loss than others.”

“Huh, I suppose you’re right. Still, the husband’s bad news. Get to know him. You’ll see.”

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:25 am

CHAPTER 14

I was sitting at a table in my favorite coffee shop with Owen, my frigid hands cupped around a hot mug of mocha to keep them warm.

He smiled at me and said, “Told you I’d get released on bail.”

“Yes, you did.”

He leaned closer to me, lowering his voice. “I’ll be honest, when it came right down to it, I thought bail was going to be denied.”

“Why?”

“A minute into the hearing, and I realized my approach was the wrong one. You were right about checking my attitude. Thanks ... for, uh, the advice.”

“I’m glad you took it.”

“Any updates on the case?”

“I still don’t know who murdered her or why,” I said. “I’ve been to the school, and I’ve talked to Claire’s coworkers. I’ve also met with Leah and your neighbor, Marianne.”

“Do I even want to know what Marianne had to say?”

“She saw Claire crying from time to time, and she assumed you were to blame. I explained Claire was still processing her mother’s death, but Marianne ... she’s a stubborn one.”

He rolled his eyes. “Tell me about it.”

“I talked to her about the argument she told the police she’d overheard. Turns out, she didn’t even hear what was said. Your curtains were drawn, so she didn’t see anyone either. She heard two people talking with raised voices. Presumed it was you two.”

“There’s no way. I never raised a voice to Claire a day in my life.”

“Is it possible you had an argument with someone else? Or vice versa?”

He took a few sips of his coffee and went quiet.

“If there’s something I should know, tell me,” I said.

He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. “I’m guessing the argument she heard was between Nadia and me. Right before we called it quits, she stopped by the house, which shocked me.”

“Why?”

“Well, it was a rule we’d agreed on—to never show up at each other’s house. Not to mention it’s common sense, for obvious reasons.”

“She must have had a good reason for breaking the rule,” I said.

“Yeah ...”

“I talked to Nadia,” I said. “She told me you were interested in pursuing her after the divorce. She also said you wanted her to leave her husband, which is different than what you told me. Nadia saw the affair as a temporary one. Seems one of you is lying to me. Or maybe you both are.”

“I wouldn’t say we’re lying. It’s complicated.”

“No, it isn’t. Even if it’s a bit of a gray area, a lie is still a lie, and I don’t work for people who lie to me.”

He raised his hands, saying, “Whoa, hang on. It’s not what you think. Look, we’ve said things to each other that we shouldn’t have said, or maybe we should have. Hell, I don’t know. Nadia told me she loved me, and I’m not saying she does or doesn’t. I’m just telling you what she said.”

“How did you respond to her?”

“I may have told her I loved her too.”

“There’s no may . You either told her or you didn’t.”

“You’re right, I did. Next thing I know, she shows up at my house saying we can’t ever see each other again, and yeah, we argued. I didn’t see her again, not until after Claire died.”

“How do you feel about Nadia now? Do you still love her?”

He tapped a thumb on the edge of the table. “I don’t know. Some days when she’s on my mind, it feels like love. Other days, it doesn’t. Ever since Claire died, it’s hard to know how I feel about anything. I guess numb would be a good word to describe it. Felt that way ever since I walked through the door and found her ... I saw her on the

floor, all helpless and bloody, and I ... I ...”

Tears welled in his eyes.

He wiped them with a hand and jumped up. “Excuse me a minute.”

He walked to the bathroom, returning to his seat a few minutes later.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

“Don’t be.”

“Sometimes I wonder if I could have prevented what happened somehow. Wish I had.” He glanced down at his watch. “I should be heading out soon. Anything else you want to know before I go?”

“Did you tell Nadia you wanted her to leave her husband?”

“Not in those exact words. I asked if she would ever consider leaving him.”

“What did she say?”

“Here’s where the complicated part I mentioned before comes in. She may love me, and I’m inclined to believe she does. She also loves her husband, and I get it, I do. I had mixed feelings about Claire and Nadia myself. Some days, I was set on getting a divorce. Other days, I thought about Claire living alone, without me, and I didn’t think I could bring myself to go through with it.”

I enjoyed seeing him like this, vulnerable and without the ego he’d had the first time we met.

“When the police gathered things from the crime scene, they noticed Claire had wrapped up a bottle of cologne,” I said. “According to Leah, you don’t use cologne.”

“Sure don’t. I think a man should smell like a man. Always have.”

“Any idea who the cologne was for, then?”

“The other man she was seeing, I guess.”

The other man.

Who was he?

“I haven’t been able to prove there was another man in her life,” I said. “Leah was with Claire when she bought the cologne. Claire told her it was for you.”

“Well, it wasn’t.”

Claire had been reclusive and withdrawn after her mother’s death. If there was another man, only one place came to mind where they could have met.

CHAPTER 15

On my way to the elementary school, I received a call from Whitlock. After the conversation I'd had with Foley, he decided to do another sweep of Claire's house. This time, they found a partial print, and it wasn't a match for Claire or Owen. And while I imagined Foley was still upset with me, he was a logical, reasonable man—reasonable enough to know I wouldn't take a case unless it had merit.

I arrived at the elementary school around the same time as my first visit, but today, the break room was a much quieter place. I found Ann sitting alone at a table, looking at a school yearbook while she picked at a chicken salad.

I joined her at the table and said, "Where is everyone?"

"Oh, they're around. It's the last day of the book fair. The teachers collect donations during the week and use them to buy books for their classrooms. I expect you'll find most of them in the library."

Pointing at the yearbook, I said, "They didn't do yearbooks in elementary school when I was a kid."

"We've been doing it for several years now. Teresa put it together last year, and this year, I am. It's the reason I'm looking through it. I'm trying to get some ideas about what to do."

"I was on the yearbook staff in high school—one of the photographers. I loved it, but I've never had much of an eye for taking good pictures."

She stabbed a forkful of salad and looked over at me. “How’s your investigation going?”

“There’s something I didn’t mention when I was here yesterday. Owen thought Claire was seeing another man.”

Ann raised a brow. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you have any reason to believe it’s true?”

“The day she died, Claire purchased a bottle of men’s cologne, but Owen doesn’t wear cologne.”

“Maybe she thought she could convince him to start.”

“Owen doesn’t strike me as a guy who could be persuaded to do something he doesn’t want to do,” I said.

“Given what she was going through, I don’t see how she would have had an interest in starting something up with someone.”

Unless she’d found someone to lean on for support.

“If Claire was seeing another man, I believe it was someone she worked with, here at the school.”

Eyes wide, Ann said, “At the school? I can’t imagine it.”

“Why not?”

“For starters, Claire was the best of us. She didn’t seem like the kind of person who would ever cheat on her husband, even if they were having problems.”

“Maybe she wasn’t cheating, or maybe she wasn’t cheating yet .”

“What are you suggesting?”

“She could have been talking to another man, maybe for support, someone she leaned on. It may have been romantic, or it may not have been.”

Ann took another stab at her salad, chewing for a time, thinking. “I guess I could get my head around Claire talking to someone, but not cheating. I have to say though, I love working here. Everyone is nice and supportive. When Claire’s mother died, everyone checked in on Claire, and I think it helped. Right before she died, she seemed happier, like she was coming out of the fog she’d been in.”

“Was there anyone you saw her talking to more than others?”

“Any men, you mean?”

“Yes.”

She took a moment to consider the question and then said, “I can’t think of one single person who stands out from the rest, to be honest. Most of the staff who work here checked in on her here and there. I never thought she was talking to someone too much, or that anything shady was going on.”

I rephrased the question. “Did you ever see Claire talking to one man more than the other men, even if it wasn’t a lot of talking?” I asked.

This time she paused, leaning back to give the question more thought.

“Hmm, now that I’m thinking about it, I guess that would be Bruce ... mmm, she was also good friends with Colin. You might want to talk to Colin first. He’d be able to answer your questions a lot better than I can.”

“I suppose I’ll need to speak to everyone.”

“Yeah, sorry. I don’t always notice things other people do. I tend to have my head in the clouds.”

“I’m the opposite. I notice everything. Every little detail.”

“I wish I was like that. I have the attention span of a squirrel.”

She shook her head, and we both laughed.

“If I’m being honest, I like noticing details, and it’s a huge benefit in my job,” I said. “Sometimes I drive myself crazy, though. When I enter a room, I start dissecting it all, taking it all in at once. It can be overwhelming, but it’s also amazing, noticing fine details most people miss.”

“I can’t imagine.” She took one more stab at her salad and then pushed the plate to the side. “I still feel bad about the disagreement I had with Claire.”

“You said before that the two of you had a heated exchange, but you weren’t yelling. I guess the reason I’m mentioning it is because one of Claire’s neighbors thought she heard Claire and Owen arguing. I talked to Owen, and he said he’d never raised his voice to Claire.”

“I’ve met Owen, and I saw him with Claire a handful of times. I believe him. He doted on her, and his tone and demeanor was always, I don’t know ... different when they were together.”

“How so?”

“Softer, I guess? He treated her like a fragile bird he just wanted to protect. I may not notice everything, but I did notice that much. I remember thinking how nice it would be to have a man treat me the way he treated her.”

“I take it you’re single?”

She nodded. “Not by choice. I just haven’t found the right one yet.” She bent toward me, her voice lowering to a whisper. “I’ve been talking to Bruce a lot. He’s single, and I’ve been hoping he’ll ask me?—”

Before she had the chance to finish her sentence, Bruce and Teresa walked in. They were looking at each other, laughing. Teresa gave Bruce a soft nudge to the shoulder, and he smiled. It seemed Ann wasn’t the only one vying for his attention.

Ann glanced at the two of them and then at me.

“I need to go,” she said.

“Oh, come on, stay,” Bruce said. “We just got here.”

“I ... I have some things to do,” Ann said.

She stood, reaching for her empty salad plate, the yearbook tumbling off the table and onto the floor in the process. I picked it up, and as I went to hand it back to her, my eyes were drawn to a page of staff photos. As I scanned the page, I picked up on a piece of information I didn’t know.

And there was something else.

In one of the photos, the person who'd caught my eye was standing in front of a poster, one I'd seen in a classroom on my last visit. I thought about the words on the poster and of the dream I'd had.

And all at once, it all made sense.

What is right to be done cannot be done too soon .

I believed I knew who killed Claire.

Now I needed to prove it.

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Source Creation Date: August 7, 2025, 3:25 am

CHAPTER 16

I leaned against my car, watching Holly and Colin walk together through the parking lot. Colin said something to Holly and then glanced up, noticing me standing there.

“I’ve seen your car around town,” he said. “Always wondered who owned it. Jaguar, right?”

“It’s a ’37 Jaguar SS 100, yes.”

“It’s a beauty.”

“I agree.”

“I ran into Ann a while ago. She said you were here at lunchtime. Surprised you’re still around.”

“I’ve been waiting for school to get out.”

“Why?”

The why was a simple reason.

Given I believed I knew who killed Claire, and not knowing how this person would react to my accusation, I didn’t want to confront them while school was still in session, and children were around. But now ...

“I feel like you’ve both been holding back on me,” I said.

“How so?”

“You two are married,” I said.

“We weren’t holding back,” Holly said, jerking back. “It just never came up in our previous conversation.”

“We’re separated, I might add,” Colin said. “Have been for several months now.”

“Are you planning on getting back together?” I asked.

“Yes,” Holly said.

“No,” Colin said.

“Which is it?” I asked. “Yes or no?”

Colin looked at Holly and sighed. “We’ve talked about this, Holly. I thought we were on the same page now.”

Holly moved a hand to her hip. “If by the same page you mean I’ve agreed to a divorce, not only are we not on the same page, but we’re also not reading from the same book.”

“We shouldn’t talk about this now,” Colin said.

“Oh, I think you should,” I said. “Today I saw your yearbook picture from last year, Holly. There’s a poster in the background with a Jane Austen quote on it.”

“Again, what about it?”

“I walked by your classroom this afternoon, peeked through the window, and noticed the poster is hanging in your classroom.”

“What about it?”

“It’s an interesting quote, don’t you think? It can be taken different ways.”

“I suppose it can.”

“The way I take it, given what I do, is that people justify their actions sometimes, even when it’s against the law.”

“What are you getting at?”

I shifted my attention to Colin. “The night Claire was murdered, the police found a bottle of men’s cologne. She’d wrapped it up as a gift for someone. It wasn’t for her husband, though. He doesn’t wear cologne.”

“It could have been for a friend or a relative.”

“Or a lover.”

“A lover ?”

“I think Claire was sweet on someone other than her husband,” I said. “She could have been having an affair, or maybe she was hoping to be more than just friends with someone, though an affair hadn’t started up yet.”

“What are you getting at?”

“I heard you were friends with Claire. What I want to know is, was she just a friend, or was she something more?”

“This is ridiculous,” Holly said. “Are you accusing my husband of something, because it sure sounds like it. Seems to me you’re grasping at anything you can to shift the blame from Claire’s husband to someone else.”

“Oh, I’m not grasping, and I have plenty to say about my suspicions to the police. Speaking of the police, I suppose I should go. I’m expected at the department.”

I turned, opened my car door, and waited.

“Wait,” Colin said.

I grinned and then faced him. “What is it?”

“After Claire’s mother died, we talked more than usual—it’s true. I was worried about her, trying to be a good friend. For a while, that’s all it was, a friendship between two people who cared for each other.”

“When did things change?”

“About a month ago. You know what they say about emotional cheating? I never believed in it. Never thought it could happen to me ... until it did.”

I turned toward Holly. “Did you know?”

“He told me, yes,” she said. “We talk about everything.”

I doubted that.

“How did you feel when he admitted it?” I asked.

“It hurt a fair bit, but we were already separated at the time, and Colin assured me the cheating had been emotional in nature, nothing more.”

“Did you believe him?”

“She just said she believed me, even though I was sure she she hadn’t,” Colin said. “I thought I could pull back from Claire, shift things to the way they were before. And then, I started developing deeper feelings for her.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I never wanted it to come out like this, but here we are. I was gutted when I heard about what happened to Claire. It made me realize I loved her.”

Holly’s eyes went wide. “You, what ?!”

“I should have told the police from the beginning,” he said. “I’ve been feeling awful about it, just awful.”

“Why didn’t you say anything to them?” I asked.

“I didn’t think it would make a difference, and I suppose even in death, I wanted to protect her integrity.”

“Her integrity ?” Holly scoffed. “There’s no integrity when a woman goes after another woman’s man.”

“She didn’t go after me,” he said. “She never did anything wrong. Let me be clear—nothing happened.”

The look in Holly's eyes told me she'd started to unravel.

"Nothing happened?" she asked.

"No," he replied. "Not on Claire's part."

"If nothing happened, why did I see you with your tongue down her throat!" Holly spat.

Colin stepped back, pressing a hand to his chest.

"Her tongue wasn't down my anything. I kissed her, one time. She was not expecting it. It was my fault, not hers." He looked at Holly, then at me. "I'll make a statement, an honest one this time. I'm sorry for not doing it before."

"You'll do nothing of the kind. And you ..." Holly said, finger wagging in my direction. "I won't stand here another second while you accuse an innocent man."

"I haven't accused an innocent man," I said. "I've accused a guilty woman. Colin didn't murder Claire. You did, Holly."

I shoved my hand into my coat pocket, palming my gun in case I was given a reason to use it. Then I looked at Colin, who had started putting the pieces together, his expression one of shock and devastation.

"Tell me you didn't, Holly," he said. "Look me in the eye and tell me."

"How could you believe I'd do such a thing?" Holly said. "Don't listen to the detective. She's just trying to rile you up, to rile us both up. Come on, Colin. Let's go."

“I suppose now would be a good time to mention the police searched the house a second time,” I said. “They found a partial print, and it’s not a match to Claire or Owen.”

“You’re bluffing,” Holly said. “Sad to see you’re so desperate to solve a murder you’ve resorted to making things up.”

“It’s true, and given what Colin just told me, I’m sure the police have a lot of questions for you, Holly. Wouldn’t it be easier if you just admitted it?”

Holly turned, looking like she was prepared to bolt out of there. Before she got the chance, Colin reached out, grabbing her arm.

“Let me go!” she screamed.

“No,” he said. “I will not.”

“None of this would have happened if you would have kept it in your pants!” she wailed. “I know you’re lying. The day after you’d kissed her, I saw the way she looked at you, the lust in her eyes. No tramp is getting their mitts on my man. Not now. Not ever.”

I cupped a hand to the side of my mouth, yelling, “Did you get all that?”

The three of us turned.

Foley and Whitlock stepped out of the back of a van, heading in our direction.

“I heard it all right,” Foley said. “Every single word.”

CHAPTER 17

A patrol car skidded to a stop beside Colin and Holly, and they were put into the back seat. The car pulled away, with Whitlock following close behind, and Foley walked over to me.

“I gotta say, this one stings a bit,” Foley said.

“It shouldn’t,” I said. “We found Claire’s killer. Nothing else matters. Thanks for hearing me out when I called, and for letting me be the one to confront Holly.”

“It’s the least I could do after what I said to you the other day. What caused you to suspect her in the first place?”

“I could say it was the cologne and the fact I thought Claire had started having feelings for someone at the school, even though I wasn’t sure who that might be. Today I was thinking about the expression on Colin’s face the first time we met. Everyone in the break room that day seemed genuinely sorry about what happened to Claire, even Holly. But Colin seemed a lot more pained than everyone else.”

“Is that all?”

“Yesterday, when I was walking through the halls of the school, I passed by one of the classrooms, and when I looked inside, I saw a quote by Jane Austen.”

“What was the quote?”

“‘What is right to be done cannot be done too soon.’ At the time, I didn’t think much of it. I didn’t know whose classroom it was either.”

“How does the quote relate to you suspecting Holly?”

I stared at him a moment, trying to decide if I wanted to say something more.

He gave me a playful elbow to the side. “Come on, out with it. It’s freezing out here.”

“I had one of those dreams I have. In it, I saw Claire, and she mentioned the quote. And look, the most logical explanation is that the quote had been dancing around in my mind ever since I saw the poster, and I just hadn’t connected the dots yet.”

“Logical, yes. But it doesn’t make for as good of a story. Your sister has told me a little about those dreams. Been having them since you were a kid, right?”

“Right.”

“I have to believe there’s some higher power in play sometimes, whatever that may be. Gives life a lot more spice. And with that, I better get on my way. Oh, and ... I’m sorry about the other day. I could have handled it better. We okay?”

I shot him a wink. “I believe I can let it slide this once.”

THE END