



Seeds of Suspicion (Lack of Luxury Cozy Mystery #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: After a local interior designer is found murdered, city slicker turned farm girl, Liz Applegate-Rasmussen, becomes the prime suspect. It's a good thing her sister Gloria is a Garden Girl super sleuth...she's gonna need all the help she can get to clear her name!

Liz Applegate-Rasmussen has high hopes for the new chapter in her life. It includes her new husband (a wealthy one at that), who is determined to keep his high-maintenance, champagne-tastes wife happy. And Liz would like nothing more than to help Floyd reach that goal.

Unfortunately Floyd envisions a much different life for them. Meet the new Lisa Douglas aka Green Acres Socialite of 2022! Will Liz cave and move into the dilapidated farmhouse her husband surprises her with?

The death of a designer diva, a nosy new neighbor and a cute puppy are just the tip of the iceberg in Liz's chaotic new life.

It's a good thing her younger sister, Gloria Kennedy, and friends, the "Garden Girls" know a thing or two about solving crimes, tracking down killers and nabbing the bad guys. Liz is gonna need all the help she can get.

Can Liz make her high-end, happily ever after a reality, or will the seeds of suspicion bury her dreams six feet under?

Total Pages (Source): 27

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:33 am

“This can’t be the place.” Liz Applegate-Rasmussen shaded her eyes, a sick feeling settling in the pit of her stomach as she stared at the rusted gates and wrought iron fence being swallowed up by weeds.

“It sure is, sugar lips, and this is only the beginning.” Floyd shifted the truck into park and sprang from the vehicle. She watched as he hurried to the gate and dragged it across the crumbling concrete far enough for their truck to pass through.

He climbed back in, and they jostled along over the uneven driveway, past the towering oak trees lining both sides.

A small seed of hope sprang up inside Liz as she gazed at the lush rolling hills and bright blue skies. Perhaps she was overreacting and erroneously jumping to conclusions about her future home.

They cleared the trees and her bubble burst as a rambling three-story home appeared. Antebellum was the first word that popped into Liz’s head, but only because her pre-conceived visions were of a charming home perched atop a sprawling parcel of property where she planned to host lavish parties to impress West Michigan’s who’s who of local celebrities.

But it wasn’t the “Gone with the Wind” antebellum. No...it was something entirely different .

“What is this?”

“It’s designed after a French chateau, at least the front half. I can’t quite figure out

what they were trying to create in the back.” Floyd’s voice grew louder. “I figured with your love for travel and exotic locales, this would be right up your alley.”

“It would be, except someone busted out the window and the front steps are in even worse shape than the driveway. Is that a hole in the roof?” Liz’s skin crawled, and she instinctively started scratching.

“I thought you would be more excited.”

“Excited?” Liz struggled to maintain a level of optimism and quickly gave up. “This place is a dump.”

“A dump?” Floyd’s smile vanished. “It will be our labor of love. I’m giving you carte blanche to fix it up any way you wish. I have to admit, I thought it might be a tad overwhelming, so I have a surprise. ”

“Another one?” The snarky reply slipped past Liz’s lips before she could catch herself. She quickly apologized, noting the hurt expression on her husband’s face. “I’m sorry. I’ll try to go into this with an open mind.” She squared her shoulders and followed Floyd to the front entrance, past a semi-circular tower and up the double-sided staircase.

Floyd paused when they reached the landing. “Those are called pepper shakers because that’s what they kinda look like. The architecture and attention to detail in this place is stunning.”

“It appears this was a grand estate at one time.” Liz considered the possibility she might be the only owner of a French chateau in Montbay County. “Unfortunately, this place is going to need more than a deep cleaning for it to be ready to move into.”

Liz had been harping on her husband to loosen up the purse strings, move out of the

family compound and buy something for just the two of them. But she was thinking more along the lines of an oceanfront contemporary in Palm Beach, or a ski chalet in Aspen, or even a quaint seaside villa off the Amalfi Coast. Not a hundred-year-old ramshackle eyesore which hadn't been inhabited by a human in at least a decade. Probably longer.

The couple lingered while Floyd pointed out the various structures dotting the expansive landscape. He droned on about the land, the buildings and potential. All Liz could see were more projects in a similar state of disrepair surrounded by those rolling farm fields she'd admired on their way in. "I wanted something for the two of us, but this wasn't what I envisioned. Not even close."

Recognizing she'd regressed to her high-pitched whiny "I'm-not-getting-my-way" voice, something she was working hard to ditch to become a kinder, gentler and less self-centered Liz, she softened her tone. "I know you're trying to make me happy, but I was hoping when you agreed we could move forward with buying a new home that you would've consulted me first. "

"I had to snatch this place up quick. And..." Floyd began hem-hawing. "I had a feeling it might not have been your top pick."

"It wouldn't have been my bottom pick." Liz dusted her hands and turned back toward the truck. "We'll stay at the house until we find something more suitable."

Floyd reached out to stop her. "We can't."

"Can't what?"

"I'm sorry, Liz. I told Treece he could move into our place. He didn't renew the lease on his apartment and has nowhere to go."

“Treece is moving in with us?” Liz had nothing against Floyd’s grown son. In fact, although she didn’t know him that well, he seemed like a nice enough guy and had enthusiastically welcomed her into the family.

“No. He’s moving into our old place while we move here,” Floyd said. “I figured we could get it somewhat shipshape and be in here within a month.”

“Move in here within a month?” Liz squeaked. “This place needs a wrecking ball, a demolition crew, a blowtorch, quite possibly all of those things.”

“You’re not giving it a chance.”

Liz sucked in a breath and silently counted to ten. Floyd was trying to make her happy and had made a point of bending over backwards to make her feel comfortable at the family’s farm. And she appreciated it. Truly, she did. But Floyd had money... plenty of money from the recently acquired natural gas rights.

In fact, their bank account balances had so many zeroes behind them, Liz had trouble keeping track. The bottom line was they could afford a much more lavish lifestyle. Floyd’s biggest flaw, at least in Liz’s eyes, was that he didn’t have a materialistic bone in his body. He was content with his life. She was the one who was pushing for more .

Liz reached for his hand. “I love you, Floyd, and I don’t mean to come across as ungrateful. I’ll give it a chance.”

“That’s the spirit.” His eyes lit as he leaned over and gently kissed her lips. “I knew you would come around. It’s not as bad as it seems.” Before Liz could change her mind, he placed a light hand on her back and propelled her toward the front door. “As I said, we can fix this place any way you want. The value is in the land.”

Liz perked up. “Value? Do you think there’s potential for more gas exploration?”

“Of course, which is why I needed to jump on this place. You never know what could be right under our feet. I’ve already had some preliminary groundwork done.”

She half-listened as Floyd led her from room to room, her shrewd mind calculating how long it would take to figure out if they were sitting on a goldmine .

The couple toured the lower level and circled around. Liz paused, taking note of the faded clapboard siding and sagging rear porch. “What is this?”

“I believe it’s part of the original structure, a farmhouse. The front chateau was an addition.”

“This is a Jekyll and Hyde house. Jekyll in the front and Hyde in the back. What were they thinking?” Liz turned up her nose.

“Could be the owners were trying to add some French ambience,” Floyd said.

“And failed miserably. This place is a hot mess.”

“You need to see the original structure.” Floyd coaxed his wife into the kitchen. An overpowering stench of something rotting assaulted her nostrils, and she clamped a hand over her mouth. “What is that awful smell?”

“Probably a dead possum or raccoon. We’ll have the place fumigated. ”

“Or demolished. We need to leave that option on the table.”

Floyd ignored her comment as they made their way to the back staircase. He grasped the handrail and took a step up.

Crack.

Liz clutched her chest. “What was that?”

Floyd pried his foot from the hole he’d created. “It looks like we’re going to have to shore up these back stairs before we use them.”

“Shore up, sledgehammer out.” Liz felt lightheaded from holding her breath. “I’m feeling dizzy.”

Her husband placed an arm around her waist and led her to the back steps. He waved his hand in a grandiose gesture. “This is all ours, sugar lips, for as far as the eye can see. ”

“At least we’ll have privacy.” Liz’s eyes squinted as she studied a trailer near the edge of the field. “Is...the trailer ours too?”

“Mobile home,” he corrected. “We have milking barns, silos and a hog parlor all right over that hill.”

“Goody,” Liz muttered. “French chateau meets Green Acres.”

“I’m glad to see you’re coming around.” Floyd squeezed her arm.

“How long ago did you purchase this...place?”

“A few days before we eloped. I didn’t want to overwhelm you. I figured now was a good time to do something with it since we’re finally settling into married life and seeing how Treece is moving in.” Floyd followed his wife back inside, through a spacious breezeway and into the massive kitchen.

Liz lingered near the doorway, determined to focus on the chateau's positive aspects. There was more than enough room to hire a full-time cook, perhaps even two. With a total gut job, they could add stylish cabinets, cupboards with high-end quartz counters, possibly even a double prep counter for the cook. "This kitchen is enormous."

"You should see the rest of the place. The spiral grand staircase in the front foy-yay leads to several en suite bedrooms. You could host a hundred people in this place and not feel cramped in like sardines."

"I'm starting to see the potential." Liz began a mental to-do list while Floyd outlined his vision. "This kitchen is large enough for us to hire someone to cook full time," she hinted.

"If you want to hire a cook, I don't see why not. I was thinking we should seal off this stairwell leading down to the basement and add an access door on the other side of the breezeway." Floyd stopped in front of an arched wooden door. He slid the bolt, grasped the handle and pulled.

Nothing happened .

"Maybe it's locked on the other side," Liz suggested.

"No. This is the only lock." Floyd pulled again, this time harder.

Pop. He stumbled back.

Liz stared at the knob in his hand. "You can add this to the growing list of repairs," she joked.

"It's a minor fix." Floyd slid the knob back into the slot. Using a gentler approach he

wiggled back and forth until the door opened.

The putrid stench intensified, quickly filling the kitchen.

“What in the world?” Liz frantically waved her hand in front of her face, desperate to clear her nostrils of the foul odor.

“I think I found the source of the smell. Don’t look.” Floyd flung his arm out to stop his wife from getting too close .

It was too late. Liz gazed at the source of the stench. Her knees buckled, she let out a faint whimper and slumped to the floor.

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Floyd dropped to his knees. “Liz! Liz! Can you hear me?”

Ahhh. Liz let out a whisper of breath, her eyelids fluttering.

Floyd patted his wife’s cheeks, raising his voice as he called her name. Unable to muster more than a garbled response, he ran to the kitchen sink and turned the faucet on.

It made a hissing noise and sputtered. Drops of yellow water trickled out and splashed into the grimy sink basin.

Liz stirred.

“Hang on, Liz. Don’t move.” With renewed resolve, Floyd twisted the faucet knobs, turning both on full force until a steady stream of brownish-yellow water gushed out. He fished a cloth handkerchief from his pocket, ran it under the water and hurried to his wife’s side where he dabbed the wet kerchief on her forehead and cheeks.

“What...what?”

“You saw a dead raccoon on the basement steps and hit the floor,” Floyd said.

“Where am I?”

“In our new home.”

Liz let out a low moan. “I remember now. The crumbling chateau.”

“It’s not crumbling. This place is solid and has good bones. It just needs a little fixing up.” Floyd helped his wife to a sitting position, keeping the cool rag against her forehead. “I’ll take care of the critter. Will you be okay for a second?”

“I would be even better if we left and never came back. ”

Floyd grinned. “You must be feeling better. You haven’t lost your sense of humor.”

Liz gingerly scooted against the wall, watching as her husband ran out of the house. He promptly returned, dustpan and broom in hand, scooped up the raccoon’s remains and hustled back out.

Chirp. Liz’s cell phone chimed. She snatched it from her designer bag and glanced at the screen. “Great,” she groaned as she hit the “answer” button. “Hello, Gloria.”

“Hello, Liz,” her sister’s cheerful voice echoed back. “I thought you were stopping by to grab the cooler of fish Paul promised Floyd.”

“We got sidetracked.”

“You sound cranky,” Gloria said. “Let me guess...Floyd’s surprise wasn’t a good one.”

“That would be an understatement. Do you remember the old television show, Green Acres? ”

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. “Green Acres as in New York socialite moves to falling-down-farm starring Eva Gabor?”

“Bingo. Except you can replace falling-down-farm with crumbling chateau...er...slash farm. The house has an identity crisis.”

“I...”

Liz could hear her sister laughing. “It’s not funny. Floyd told Treece he could move into our house and we’re moving in here.”

“Where is here?”

“On the other side of Green Springs.” Liz lifted a shaky hand, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “I’m almost wishing he would’ve bought that dump over on Bass Lake.”

“That cottage had a lot of potential,” Gloria said.

“It was move-in ready compared to this place.” Liz removed the cloth Floyd had placed on her forehead and dropped it on the windowsill. “I can’t live here.”

“It can’t be that bad. Besides, you and Floyd have plenty of money to fix it up to your high standards. What’s the address?”

“One, two, three I’m not moving here lane.”

“You’re such a drama queen.”

“You haven’t seen it. Picture acres of land with rolling hills, a bunch of dilapidated buildings, throw in a mobile home and a crumbling chateau and it would be pretty close.” Liz could hear her voice raise an octave as pure panic set in. “There are dead creatures on the premises.”

Quick steps grew louder, and Floyd appeared in the doorway. “I thought I heard voices.”

“I’m talking to Gloria.”

“I need to run back to the house to grab some tools.”

“Wonderful. I’m ready to leave. ”

Gloria cut in. “I’m free and dying to see the place.”

“Floyd has to run home.”

“Perfect. I can stop by while he’s gone.”

Liz rattled off the address. “You wouldn’t happen to have a hazmat suit lying around, would you?”

Gloria chuckled. “I’ll be there in less than twenty minutes. I don’t have a hazmat suit, but I’ll bring the fish.”

The call ended, and Liz waved her phone in the air. “Gloria is on her way. She’s bringing the fish we were going to pick up.”

“That’s mighty kind of her.”

A sudden burning sensation radiated across Liz’s forehead. She ran a light hand across it, noting several small welts. “My forehead is burning and I’m developing some sort of rash.”

Floyd’s eyes widened as he stared at his wife. He reached for the handkerchief Liz had placed on the windowsill. “It must be from the water I got out of the sink.”

Liz fumbled inside her purse and pulled out a compact. She flipped it open and

peered at her reflection. “Look at my skin. I’m welting.”

“It’s better than melting.”

“What did you do to me?” she wailed.

“The water was only a little yellow.”

“A little yellow.” Liz scrambled to her feet and ran to the sink.

Floyd hurried after her. “Don’t...”

Liz turned the faucet on.

“...turn that on.”

Droplets of brown water trickled out. Horrified, she could feel her stomach churn.

“You put this water on my face?”

“I let it run clear...clearer. I’m sorry, Liz. ”

She gritted her teeth, teetering between storming out and slugging her husband. She did neither. Instead, she shot daggers at him.

“There’s bottled water in the truck. We’ll get it cleaned up right away.” Floyd guided Liz out of the house. He snatched a stack of fast-food napkins from the truck’s center console, doused them with water and dabbed at her forehead.

“It’s feeling better.”

Floyd’s shoulders slumped. “Buying this place was a big mistake. I let you down. I’ll

put it on the market and get rid of it.” He turned to go, and Liz stopped him. “I don’t want you to do that. I’m sorry I had a meltdown and for being such a party pooper.”

“I know the place needs some work. I should have told you about it sooner, but I was afraid you would hate it.”

“I don’t hate it. I mean, I probably won’t always hate it.” Liz placed a light hand on her husband’s cheek. “I know I’m not always easy to live with and have high standards. I’ll try to focus on the positives of this chateau farm.”

“That’s all I ask.” Floyd pulled Liz into his arms. “By the time we’re done, you’re going to love it.”

A pristine 1989 Mercury Grand Marquis crept down the driveway. Gloria sprang from the vehicle and was joined by her springer spaniel, Mally. “I hope you don’t mind. I brought Mally with me.”

“Not at all.” Floyd gave the pup a pat on the head. “I was thinking once Liz and I are settled, we could get a dog of our own.”

Gloria reached inside the car, grabbed a small Styrofoam cooler and handed it to Floyd. “These are the fish Paul promised.”

“Thanks. I can’t wait to fry up a batch.” Floyd set the cooler in the bed of his pickup. “I need to run home and grab some tools. The outdoor faucet won’t stop leaking. ”

“I’ll hang out here with Liz until you come back,” Gloria promised.

“I won’t be long.” Floyd gave his wife a quick kiss before climbing into his truck and driving off.

“Well?” Liz asked. “What do you think?”

Gloria spun in a slow circle. “How much land is there?”

“Too much. I’ll show you the crown jewel of this place.” Liz tiptoed around a mud puddle. “The driveway and sidewalk need work, along with everything else.”

“The place has potential.”

“Potentially demolished, razed, torched. Floyd promised to bring it up to my standards, but it’s going to take some time...time we don’t have since he’s offered our house to Treece.”

“I thought he already lived on the farm.”

“He moved away and now he’s coming back. ”

Gloria’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “So you’re moving in here soon?”

“In a few weeks.” Liz blew air through thinned lips. “We have all this money sitting in the bank collecting dust. Meanwhile, Floyd has it in his head that he wants us to live here. He thinks there might be more natural gas rights to sell.”

“Ka-ching,” Gloria said. “He’s a smart man.”

“With absolutely no sense of style and only a smidgen of good taste.”

“He married you, didn’t he?”

Liz wagged a meticulously manicured nail in her sister. “You know what I mean.”

Gloria frowned. “What happened to your forehead?”

“Floyd put putrid water on my face after I passed out.”

“Oh, dear. ”

“Oh, dear is right. I may be scarred for life,” Liz said dramatically.

Gloria pointed to an ATV parked nearby. “Why don’t you show me around?”

“There’s nothing to see. This falling down French disaster is going to be my home and there are dead creatures decaying inside.”

Gloria ignored Liz’s whining. “I see a key. I’ll drive.”

“I know how to.” Liz hurried to the driver’s side while Gloria hopped in beside her.

She fired it up and swung in a wide circle, making her way along the edge of the weed-infested yard. They jostled past a bladeless windmill and a trio of crumbling silos just steps away from a big, red barn.

The double doors hung haphazardly while tall weeds, matching the ones near the front gate, grew along the front. Beyond the barn was a hill and when they reached the top, it offered an expansive view of the fields for as far as the eye could see.

To the right was a single-wide mobile home sporting a spacious wooden deck. A flower garden, unkempt but in full bloom, gave the home a cozy feel.

“This looks nice,” Gloria said.

Liz wrinkled her nose.

“It’s in good condition. Let’s check it out.”

They crossed the deck, making their way to the front door. “It’s unlocked.” Liz eased the door open and peered inside. “Yep. It’s a trailer.”

She took a step back, nearly colliding with Gloria, who was standing directly behind her.

“Don’t you want to look around?”

“No.”

Gloria propelled her forward. “What if it’s in better shape than the house? You can live here during renovations. ”

“Don’t you dare even suggest that to Floyd,” Liz snapped. “He’ll have us sleeping here tonight.”

“It’s cozy.”

Liz reluctantly followed behind. “Meaning small.”

The women toured the back and then retraced their steps, passing through the living room, dining area, a second bathroom and main bedroom at the other end.

“It’s in excellent condition.”

“For someone else. Not me.” Liz’s cell phone chimed. She glanced at the screen and shoved it back in her purse. “Our furniture won’t fit in here.”

“You could store your furniture in the barn.”

“In the barn?” Liz’s eyes widened in horror. “And put my beautiful new full grain leather sofa and matching chairs in there for birds to poop on? I would rather stay put and live with Treece.”

“It’s an option. How do you two get along? ”

“He seems nice enough, but I wasn’t serious. We’re a newly married couple and need our space.”

“Maybe Treece can stay put until the chateau reaches your exacting high standards,” Gloria teased.

“Already tried. He’s moving in regardless of our housing arrangements.”

“What about an extended vacation while this place is being fixed up?”

Liz made a thumbs down. “I love the vacation part. What if we come back and the renovations aren’t what I want? I need to be nearby to supervise.”

“You could find one of those furnished rent-by-the-week places, move into this mobile home or move into the house.”

Liz clutched her stomach. “I don’t like any of those options. I’m wishing I’d never moved out of Margaret’s lakefront rental. ”

The women exited the home and finished the tour, during which Liz picked apart every single thing they saw. Gloria was more in line with Floyd’s vision and could easily see the potential of the place.

She thought about how they’d met the Rasmussens, not long after Floyd and his family had hired their friend Lucy to teach a gun safety class. A death in the family

led to a murder investigation involving Lucy. “With enough cash, this place could be an elegant home.”

Liz waited for Gloria to climb back in and then they returned to their starting point. “This concludes our tour of the ruins.”

“Future home.” Gloria noticed a small farmhouse across the street. A pole barn and pasture were directly behind it. “There’s another home over there. I didn’t notice it on the way in.”

“You’re right.” Liz craned her neck. “There’s a woman standing on the front porch watching us. ”

Gloria squinted her eyes and followed her sister’s gaze. “You have a neighbor.”

“A nosy one at that.”

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Liz watched as the woman standing on the porch of the house across the street lowered her binoculars and hustled down the steps.

“She’s coming our way,” Gloria said.

The woman, her flip-flops clip-clopping, scurried toward them. The binoculars she’d been using to spy on them were still dangling around her neck.

“Hello.” The petite blonde gave a friendly wave as she drew closer.

“Hello.” Liz offered the woman a hesitant smile.

“I live across the road and couldn’t help but notice someone over here. Are you Pierre’s family?”

“Pierre?” Liz frowned .

“Pierre Gagnon, my former neighbor. He’s the man who owned this property.”

“I don’t know Mr. Gagnon. My husband, Floyd Rasmussen, bought this place.”

“Bought it?” The woman’s brows knitted, and Liz could almost see her wheels spinning. “I didn’t know it was for sale.”

“Neither did I,” Liz mumbled.

The blonde waved dismissively. “I suppose it was merely a matter of time before

Pierre's children sold it."

"So this place has sat empty for a few years," Gloria said.

"Ever since Pierre's wife, Avril, died. He passed on not long after. When are you moving in? I noticed a pickup truck here a short time ago. Is the man who was driving it moving in, too? Are you from the area?" the woman asked. "Do..."

"Hang on." Liz lifted a hand, cutting her off mid-sentence. "I'm sorry. I don't believe I caught your name."

"Oh. Yes. Where are my manners? I'm Christi." The blonde extended a slender hand. "Christi Kravitz. My husband and I own the farm across the street. It's nice to see some activity, other than those men with the heavy machinery who were poking around a few days ago. I tried to talk Darren into running over here to see what they were doing, but he told me to mind my own business."

"Men with machinery," Liz repeated.

"They were digging up dirt." Christi enunciated her words, as if talking to a small child. "You know...excavating."

Gloria pointed to the woman's binoculars. "I suppose you don't miss much with those."

"These old things?" Christi shifted her feet. "I've taken up bird watching. They're fascinating, really. Each species has its own quirks. Some are inquisitive while others are standoffish." She began rambling on about birds and the various methods she was using to attract them.

Liz's cell phone chimed. "It was nice meeting you. Unfortunately, I need to take this

call. If you'll excuse us." She grabbed Gloria's hand and dragged her toward the house.

Gloria shot the woman an apologetic look as she struggled to keep up with her sister. "She wasn't done chatting with us."

"She might not have been, but I was. Besides, I need to take this important call." Liz tapped her cell phone. "Hello? Yes, this is Liz Rasmussen. Can you hold it for me until I can get over there to pick it up? Perfect?" She finished talking to the person on the other end, thanked them, and ended the call. "Finally, some good news. My new Dolce and Gabbana shipped."

"Dolce and Gabbana? Didn't you just drop some cash on new duds the other day?"

Liz pursed her lips. "It's nail lacquer, a fabulous new shade of red from D&G."

"You're gonna need some nail hardener before you start cleaning this place up," Gloria joked as she shot a glance over her shoulder.

"She's still watching us, isn't she?"

"Yeah. Judging by the look on her face, I give her a 50/50 of following us in hot pursuit."

"Not anymore." Liz hustled up the front steps. She nudged the front door open and waited for her sister to step inside before slamming it shut. The force of the slam loosened a corner trim piece. It torpedoed to the floor and wedged in a crack. "I guess I'll add securing trim pieces to Floyd's growing list of projects." She peeked through the side window. "Christi is still standing there. I'm having my doubts she's a bird watcher. More like a neighbor watcher."

Gloria grinned, and then she burst out laughing. “You should’ve seen the look on your face when she started her round of fifty questions.”

“How did I get so lucky?”

“Maybe you two will end up best friends, although she doesn’t strike me as your type.”

“She’s reaching for her binoculars, picking them up and...she’s spying on us again.”

“This place is getting more interesting by the minute.” Gloria fumbled inside her purse and pulled out her cell phone.

“What are you doing?”

“Researching the previous owners, Pierre and Avril Gagnon. I wonder how the last name is spelled. Never mind. I found it.” Gloria clicked on the link. She slipped her reading glasses on and read the story aloud:

“The body of Pierre Gagnon, a local business owner who was reported missing ten days ago, was found near the back of his property on Cash Creek Road in Green Springs. It’s a tragic conclusion to a heartbreaking story that began when Avril Gagnon, Pierre’s wife, died only hours before he went missing after succumbing to a rare heart disease.”

Liz shivered. “Great. I knew I was getting bad vibes. The house is probably haunted.”

“It’s a sad situation.” Gloria cleared the screen and slid the phone into her pocket.

“Are you going to show me around?”

“There’s not much to see. This is the foyer, or whatever the fancy French people call

it. There's a kitchen, a formal reception room, a living room and a dining room. After the incident with Floyd's foot busting through the rear stair tread and then finding the dead raccoon, I was ready to run."

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Show me around. "

Liz stubbornly shook her head.

"Fine. I'll take a self-guided tour." Gloria reached behind her and flipped the light switch. It flickered before going out. "Floyd might need to call an electrician to come out here to take a look at the electrical box and check the wiring. You don't want the place burning to the ground."

"Says who?"

"Liz," Gloria chided. "Poor Floyd. Hopefully, you haven't spent all morning complaining about the place."

"Of course not. More like ninety percent." Liz sucked in a breath and stared at the corroded copper lantern dangling from the ceiling. "I had no idea the French liked farmhouse chic."

"Perhaps the owners had eclectic tastes," Gloria said. "Where did you find the raccoon?"

"Follow me." Liz trudged down the hall, into the kitchen and to the stairs. "Do you smell something gross? "

Gloria sniffed. “Yeah, but it’s not overpowering. Stop pouting and give me a tour.”

“Fine, but I would start lowering your expectations. This place isn’t the Taj Mahal.” Liz showed her around the kitchen, followed by the butler’s pantry and, beyond that, the formal dining room. They circled past the living room and returned to the grand foyer.

“What a beautiful medallion in the center of the floor,” Gloria said. “I wonder what it represents.”

“Someone else’s style.” Liz grabbed the piece of trim that had fallen and tossed it into the corner. “I think it’s too pointy.”

“Too pointy?”

“It reminds me of a compass.”

“Then, tear it out.”

“And ruin the integrity of the original architecture? ”

“Do I detect a smidgen of sarcasm? I think it’s very nice.” Gloria wandered over to the grand staircase and tested the handrail. “This staircase looks sturdy. These stair treads are beautiful. I thought you said the steps were rickety.”

“I was talking about the other ones, the ones off the kitchen.” Liz eyed the tread, roughly estimating the value of the polished marble. She swiped at the grimy surface with the tip of her designer shoe. “We might need to keep these.”

“Up we go.” Gloria motioned toward the upper level.

“Who cares what’s up there? I’m going to gut the place.”

Gloria rolled her eyes. “You haven’t been upstairs?”

“No. Like I said, we never made it that far. The deceased raccoon put an end to our tour.”

Gloria began climbing the stairs .

“You’re really going up there?”

“I am.”

“Fine.” Liz grudgingly tromped along behind her. “You can’t hold me responsible for whatever we might find.”

“Duly noted.”

A spacious landing was at the top, with long hallways branching off in different directions. Starting on the right, they found bedroom after bedroom, some with adjoining baths, while others shared one.

“This place is huge,” Gloria said. “You could open a bed-and-breakfast.”

“Bite your tongue.” Liz crossed the bedroom, making her way to the ornate oval window overlooking the front yard. “I can see Christi’s house. She’s sitting on her porch facing our direction. What is that woman’s problem? ”

“Maybe she’s bored. You should give her a chance. I mean, maybe she’s not good at first impressions.”

“Great. She’s looking this way.” Liz leaned back. “I think she saw me.”

Gloria took Liz’s place and peered out the window. “You’re right.” She waved, and the woman waved back.

“I’m tinting the windows right after I replace every single one of them. Or better yet, maybe I can pay a little extra and replace them with built-in privacy shading.”

The sisters finished the tour and headed back downstairs. All the while, Gloria threw out suggestions on improving the place. “You have more than enough money to fix this up to your heart’s content.”

Liz struggled to see the potential, looking past the uneven flooring, the dated cabinets and ancient appliances. “I could get one of those stoves with lots of burners. I’ve always wanted a sub-zero refrigeration system and maybe even put in one of those single basin copper sinks that cost an arm and a leg.”

“I wouldn’t blow all of your budget renovating the kitchen,” Gloria cautioned.

“Why not?”

“You don’t like to cook.”

“So? I’ll hire a cook, a chef, someone to prepare our meals. They can live in the dreadful mobile home out back.”

“It’s not dreadful.” Gloria said. “It’s nice. Nicer than this place, at least right now.”

“It doesn’t scream luxury.” Liz tilted her head, eyeing the room critically. “I’m trying to see the vision. Truly, I am. This place just needs so much work.”

“I’ll admit it’s a major project and will take some serious cash to bring it up to your standard of luxury.”

“Instead of living in the lap of luxury, I’ll be living in a lack of luxury,” Liz said. “It’s not fair.”

“Life’s not fair. Besides, adversity builds character. Think of it as character building.”

The sound of tires crunching on gravel echoed through the open side door. The women watched as Floyd exited his truck. He grabbed a toolbox from the bed and tromped inside. “I noticed our new neighbor is sitting out on her front porch. She seems like a friendly gal. She waved as I drove past.”

“Are you sure she wasn’t flagging you down?” Liz joked.

“We should go over and introduce ourselves.”

“We’ve already met. Her name is Christi Kravitz. She knows a lot about the previous property owners. ”

“She knew Pierre Gagnon?”

“Yes. How did you know him?” Liz eyed her husband suspiciously.

“He was a regular at the farm auctions. Pierre was a good man, although he didn’t know much about farming. I ran into his son at an auction late last year. We got to talking, and that’s when he told me he and his siblings were thinking about selling the place. Looking back, it’s almost as if this place fell right into my lap.”

“Or more like dropped on your head,” Liz mumbled under her breath.

“What did you say, sugar lips?”

Gloria snorted, and Liz shot her a death look. “I said she seems rather nosy. The neighbor. Gloria is giving me ideas on renovating.”

“I’ve been thinking, this house is bigger than I remember and too big of a project for us to tackle by ourselves,” Floyd said .

“We need a designer and a crew of construction workers,” Liz said.

Floyd clasped his wife’s hand. “I’m glad we’re on the same page. In fact, I have a surprise for you. It should be here shortly.”

“Another surprise? What kind of surprise?”

“Now, I don’t want to spoil it.” He held a finger to his lips. “I think you’ll like this one more than the last. In fact, I’m certain you will.” He excused himself to work on the leaky faucet while the women stepped out onto the front porch.

A stiff breeze blew across the open field, whipping Liz’s bangs into her eyes. “There’s an awful lot of wind around here.”

“It’s an open field, not uncommon when you’re surrounded by farms,” Gloria said. “You grew up on a farm. Surely, some of this is coming back to you.”

“I was a young child. It was decades ago.” Liz chipped away at the porch’s peeling paint with her fingernail. “It looks as if my life has come full circle. ”

“In a surprising turn of events.” Gloria called her pup, who had trotted off to investigate a dilapidated gas pump. “C’mon, Mally. It’s time for us to head home.”

Liz followed her sister to her car. “I should give Andrea a call. She has a knack for décor and might have some ideas about fixing this place up.”

“I think that’s an excellent idea. Andrea turned the old Johnson place into a real showstopper. I’m sure she would be happy to give you some pointers.”

Liz waited for Gloria to coax her dog to join them. “Thanks for the fish and for the pep talk.”

“You’re welcome.” Gloria leaned a hip on the bumper of her car. “The rash on your forehead is going away.”

Liz tentatively touched her forehead. “I thought I was scarred for life.”

“Hey!” Floyd flew around the corner of the house waving his cell phone in the air. “Your surprise is here.”

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The cream-colored Designer Diva van pulled into the driveway and parked next to Gloria's car. A woman, her jet-black hair brushing the top of her shoulders and sporting a large pair of dark sunglasses, exited the driver's side and sashayed toward them.

Trailing behind was a trio of women who timidly hung back as the driver approached Floyd, a wide smile on her face. "Floyd Rasmussen." Floyd's name rolled off the woman's tongue in almost a purring sound. With bracelets clanging loudly, she extended a meticulously manicured hand in his direction. "I do declare you are a sight for sore eyes," she drawled.

Floyd offered the woman a sappy smile. "Hello, Deanna. Thank you for coming by on such short notice. "

"You know I'm at your beck and call," Deanna flirted as she leaned in, revealing more than ample cleavage, courtesy of her low-cut sequined silk blouse. "Don't tell me you bought this place after all."

Liz could feel heat burning her cheeks at the realization she knew this woman...not only knew her but despised her. "Deanna Andretti."

The woman's shoulders stiffened. She slowly turned, her eyes widening in surprise. "Elizabeth Applegate."

"Now Rasmussen."

"I..." Deanna blinked rapidly. "I didn't know you were married to Floyd."

“It was a whirlwind courtship,” Floyd said. “You two know each other?”

“You could say that.” Liz crossed her arms. “Are you still on Dreamwood Retirement Community’s board? ”

An evil smile spread across Deanna’s face. “At the helm, serving as membership chairperson. I believe we have a little unfinished business. If I recall correctly, you still owe Dreamwood past due fees and for the minor disaster you and your friend Frances Crabtree were involved in during your residency.”

“You lived at Dreamwood?” Floyd’s jaw dropped.

“For more years than I care to admit. Deanna is one of the reasons Frances and I moved out. She was harassing us with ridiculous rules and regulations that she and her band of bullies set in place.”

“Which you and Frances willfully and blatantly disobeyed.” Deanna removed an iPad from her purse and tapped the screen. “All this time, I thought you and Frances were somewhere in the Florida swampland, hiding out near the Everglades.”

“We lived in Windermere. Frances is still down there and has moved closer to the Gulf.” Liz motioned to the iPad. “I’m not sure what you’re doing, but I don’t plan on giving you a single red cent.”

Deanna smirked. “Since you went MIA in Florida, the judge ruled in our favor. I’ll be contacting Dreamwood’s attorney to dust off those papers.”

“I wouldn’t use your designer services if you were the last person on earth.” Liz’s eyes flitted toward the logoed van, noting the uncanny replica of Deanna’s curvaceous image, her eyelids lowered and striking a seductive pose with one hand on her hip...like she was now, giving any man, woman or child a partial view of her

ample “assets.” “Your van should come with a viewer-discretion warning.”

The flirty Deanna vanished, and the woman’s eyes flashed with anger. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I’m sure Liz was joking.” Floyd forced a laugh. “Well, this is uncomfortable. ”

“I might as well give you the preliminary quote since I spent all morning working on it.”

“Yes. Uh. Perhaps you two can put the past behind you, work through the issue involving Dreamwood, and move on,” Floyd said.

“You’re such a reasonable man,” Deanna complimented. “I’m sure you’re open to a discussion about settling your wife’s former debts. I would hate to have to drag her into court and your name through the mud.”

Liz could feel the tips of her ears burn. “I don’t have an old debt owed to Dreamwood, and neither does Frances.”

A woman who was with Deanna cleared her throat.

“Where are my manners?” Deanna twirled around, the sequins on her shirt catching the bright sunlight and nearly blinding Liz. “These are my associates and colleagues.” She motioned toward the trio, still hovering off to the side. “This is Becky, Tammi and Carol. While I focus on the big picture, these lovely ladies are the ones who handle more specialized design aspects.”

“They’re your employees?” Gloria asked.

“I like to refer to them as colleagues. We collaborate on a number of projects.”

Deanna ticked off her list of credentials while Liz attempted to catch her husband's eye, to which he purposely avoided. Finally, he excused himself and hurried off, leaving Liz, the diva, her colleagues and Gloria behind.

"Shall we get started?" Deanna jotted something inside a blue notebook, slammed it shut and placed the pen and book back inside her purse. "Time is money, and this place needs a lot of both."

"It does," Liz said. "At least we can agree on something."

Deanna smoothed her hair. "I like to learn more about my clients before we delve too deeply into the designing process. Obviously, this is a French chateau-style estate. I hate to be presumptuous, but you strike me as more of a Florida eighties, Golden Girl type person."

"I can assure you my tastes are high end." Liz pointedly gazed at her designer shoe. "Give me a Bernard Tusse any day. You know Floyd well?"

"We go back a long way. Floyd is such a generous and thoughtful man. He's very well-versed in history and travel, not to mention design. We've worked on several projects together."

"Remodeling his seventies-era rambling ranch?" Liz arched a brow.

"I..." Deanna, caught off guard, stammered, but quickly recovered. "Of course not. There have been other properties we've collaborated on."

One of Deanna's colleagues snickered.

The woman pivoted. "Was there something you wanted to say? "

“Uh. Nothing.” She tapped her chest. “I was just clearing my throat.”

“That’s what I thought.” The diva spun back around. “Where were we?”

“About to embark on a tour,” Liz said.

“Right.” Deanna held her bag in front of her, cautiously following Liz along the broken concrete as they made their way to the front door while the others followed at a distance. “The architecture is magnificent and rarely seen here in the States.”

“Magnificent?” Liz rolled her eyes. “It’s a wreck.”

“But it has fabulous bones.” Deanna ran a light hand along the railing. “It’s a diamond in the rough.”

“Very rough.”

The tension in the air lifted as Liz, along with Gloria, gave Deanna and the other women a tour of the property. Admittedly, the diva had vision...something Liz lacked. All she could see were dollar signs and timelines.

They wrapped up the tour and Deanna returned to her van to finish putting together what she referred to as a preliminary quote. Her colleagues gathered off to the side and began talking in low voices.

“What are they doing?” Gloria muttered under her breath.

“Plotting the diva’s demise,” Liz whispered back. “Deanna hasn’t changed one iota. She’s rude and obnoxious, not to mention grating on my last nerve.”

“Maybe that’s her personality.”

“She needs to cool her jets and she better stop threatening me about resurrecting that absurd lawsuit. It was ages ago.”

“She seems to have some great ideas. Are you sure you can’t tolerate her for a short amount of time? ”

“No.”

Deanna returned before Gloria could reply, waving a sheet of paper in the air. “As I mentioned, this is merely a rough estimate. I would need to get my technical team in here to assemble a line-item quote. Where’s Floyd?”

“Somewhere around here.” Liz glanced over her shoulder.

“I’ll need his approval to proceed.”

Liz’s lower lip twitched. “This is my home. My husband has given me carte blanche to fix this...place...up.” She held out her hand. “Let me see what you have.”

Deanna hesitated for a fraction of a second, a fraction of a second too long. Liz snatched the paper from her hand and made a choking sound. “One hundred thousand dollars for design and consultation? This is your quote minus material and labor? ”

“You get what you pay for. If you want cheap, I might be the wrong person for the job.” Deanna peered down her nose at Liz. “I figured this would happen, especially now that I know who this quote is for. Obviously, you’re looking for Florida Frumpy, not California Chic.”

“Florida Frumpy? Perhaps you should actually visit the state. There are some very high-end homes and neighborhoods...West Palm, Palm Beach, Naples, the Emerald Coast.”

“It’s nothing but flat swampland.” Deanna wrinkled her nose. “I’ll stick with Florida Frumpy.”

“You wouldn’t know the difference between Florida Frumpy and California Chic if it punched you in the face,” Liz gritted out.

Deanna’s eyes widened. “Are you threatening me?”

Liz balled up the sheet of paper and tossed it on the ground. “We’re not hiring you. You can leave.”

“I want to say goodbye to Floyd. ”

Liz planted both hands on her hips and glared at the woman.

“Trailer trash, money grubbing tramp,” Deanna sputtered under her breath as she spun on her heel and stormed off.

“And don’t you dare try to come after me with another bogus lawsuit!” Liz yelled.

Her colleagues stood wide-eyed, staring in disbelief.

“Get in the van,” Deanna growled at them. “We’re leaving. This isn’t the end. No one talks to Deanna Andretti like that.”

“Who is doing the name calling? You’re the one who called me trailer trash.”

“If the shoe fits.”

Liz made a move to go after the woman.

Deanna hurriedly hopped into the van and locked the driver's side door.

Meanwhile, the women stood frozen .

Gloria attempted to smooth things over. "I'm sorry this didn't work out. We wish you all the best."

"Here's my card," Becky whispered as she grasped Gloria's hand. She released her grip, and Gloria realized the woman had given her something. "Have Liz call me if she wants a reasonable quote."

The trio hurriedly climbed into the van. All the while, Liz stood glaring at Deanna.

Gloria joined her, watching as the woman's lips moved. Deanna shifted into drive. She stomped on the gas and peeled out of the driveway, flinging rocks and gravel at the sisters.

She reached the end of the driveway, rolled the window down and began making obscene gestures at them.

"What a class act," Liz said sarcastically. "She's giving us a fond farewell. "

"I was thinking more along the lines of something else." Gloria nodded toward the house across the street. "We're being watched."

"Christi Kravitz," Liz sighed. "Doesn't that woman have anything better to do?"

"At least she has something to watch this time." Gloria's eyes squinted. "I believe she's taking pictures."

"You're kidding. I wonder if we can build a privacy fence along the front of the

property.”

Floyd flew down the hill on the farm’s four-wheeler and stopped next to them.

“Where’s Deanna?”

“Gone. I don’t think she’s going to work out,” Liz said. “Let me rephrase that. She won’t work out. I don’t want her on our property. She’s rude, nasty, and expensive.”

“I’m sorry, Liz. She seemed a might uptight about the Dreamwood issue. I have one more surprise. ”

“Please...not another one.” Liz could feel tears burn the back of her eyes. “I can’t take any more surprises.”

“I’m sorry, my dear.” Floyd attempted to comfort his distraught wife. “This was meant to be a good day. I can’t bear the thought of you crying. I’m sorry about Deanna.”

“She was horrid. She called me a money-grubber and trailer trash.” Liz snatched the wadded-up piece of paper off the ground and handed it to Floyd. “This is a copy of her rough estimate.”

He smoothed it out and made a gagging sound. “A hundred thousand dollars?”

“And that only covered her fee. It doesn’t include materials or labor.”

“Her prices have gone up,” Floyd said. “I’m sure if we contact some other companies, we can shave a few dollars off the designer fees.”

Gloria held up the business card with Becky Kiefer’s name and Hometown Designs printed on the front. “One of the gals handed this to me before they left. It might not

hurt to give Becky a call and see what she comes up with.”

“I dunno,” Floyd said.

Liz snatched the card from her sister’s hand. “I’ll do it. It can’t be any higher than Deanna’s quote. Besides, we might get the same level of quality and expertise at a better price.”

Mally circled Gloria’s legs, reminding her they needed to get going. “Let me know if I can help.”

Floyd and Liz packed up and left not long after Gloria. It was a quiet ride back to Rasmussen Farms. All Liz could think about was Deanna’s threat, the bogus past due charges and lawsuit involving Dreamwood Retirement Community. If what the woman had said was true and she’d secured a judgment against Liz, what would happen next? She didn’t want to saddle her new husband with past problems .

Liz replayed the first part of the meeting when Deanna seemed to be a little too cozy with Floyd. She certainly wasn’t her husband’s type and struck Liz as being high maintenance, although, admittedly, she could be as well. There was nothing wrong with enjoying the finer things in life and Floyd didn’t seem to mind providing them for her.

The chateau could be a magnificent home—a real showstopper—but it would take time and money. Liz and Floyd had plenty of one, but were limited on the other.

After dinner, Floyd headed to the barn and Liz made an excuse that she needed to run some errands, telling her husband she wanted to pick up a few groceries. She left out the little tidbit about her plan to scope out Designer Diva, which was on the way.

The store was easy to find and on Green Springs’ main drag. It sported a hot pink

billboard that was impossible to miss. Liz eased into an empty parking spot out front and studied the building's exterior. Admittedly, it was attractive and stylish.

The lights were off and the sign on the door indicated they were closed for the day. Liz started to pull away and changed her mind. There wasn't any harm in taking a closer look. After all, there was virtually no chance of running into the troublesome woman.

Liz slipped out of her SUV and approached the front picture window. She placed her forehead against the glass and peered inside.

A small movement caught her eye. Certain it was Deanna, Liz braced herself, waiting for the woman to fly out the front door and demand to know what she was doing.

Liz made a mad dash for her SUV. She climbed inside and hunched down. "Where is the card Gloria gave me earlier?" She fumbled in her pocket and pulled out the business card Deanna's colleague had handed her sister .

As luck would have it, the other store was close by, tucked away on a side street. The small building wasn't nearly as flashy as Designer Diva's, but it was tidy and clean. Hometown Designs was emblazoned on the front. The lights were on, and Liz made a beeline for the door.

The overhead bell tinkled, announcing her arrival.

Becky emerged from the back. There was a look of surprise. A warm smile quickly replaced it. "Hello, Mrs. Rasmussen."

"Hello, Becky. My sister, Gloria, gave me your card. As you know, I don't believe Deanna Andretti is going to work out. I wouldn't mind getting a quote from you and your partners."

“It’s just me for now,” Becky said. “I’m just starting out and can’t afford to hire anyone.”

“I admire your entrepreneurship. You’ve seen the place. Would it be worth your while to give me a quote? ”

“Absolutely. I’ll have it to you by morning.” Becky explained the quote would be for her services only. “I have a team of suppliers and contractors in place. I’m certain my quote will be competitive with anyone else in the area.”

The women chatted for a few more minutes, with Liz growing more excited at the prospect of working with the woman. She was knowledgeable and much more pleasant than Deanna.

“Out of curiosity, how often do you work with Designer Diva and Deanna?” Liz asked.

“Not often. She views Hometown Designs as a joke and has dismissed me as no competition.”

“She’s not concerned you’ll steal her clients or contacts?”

Becky shrugged. “It’s hard to tell with Deanna.”

They chatted for a few more minutes. “I should get going. I look forward to getting the quote.” After she left, Liz swung by the grocery store to pick up a few things before heading home .

Floyd must’ve been watching for her. He met her at the door and helped his wife carry the bags of food inside. “I was wondering if you got lost.”

“The errands took longer than I thought.” Liz told him about stopping by Hometown Designs and speaking with Becky. “I think she might be a better fit for our project.”

“Whatever you want, sugar lips. Whatever makes you happy.”

Liz spent the rest of her evening scouring the internet, attempting to combine the French chateau characteristics with farmhouse chic. Finally, she gave up and turned her laptop off. “I’m ready to head to bed.”

“Me too.” Floyd let out a low groan as he slid out of the chair. “Hopefully, tomorrow will be a better day.”

After turning in, it took a long time for Liz to fall asleep. Visions of the dilapidated house filled her mind, and she fretted over how long renovations would take. It needed some heavy-duty attention...electrical, plumbing, wiring, new windows.

She woke early the next morning and fixed Floyd a cup of coffee before he left to tend to the cows and meet with the first shift staff.

Meanwhile Liz hunted down cleaning supplies to take to the new house. She was still working on it when a somber Floyd returned.

“What’s going on?”

“I have some bad news.”

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:33 am

Liz's eyes lit. "Treece has decided he isn't moving in after all, and we're staying here until we've finished renovating the chateau."

"No. Someone murdered Deanna last night. They found her body in the back of her store."

Liz blinked rapidly, staring at her husband in disbelief. "Murdered?"

"Rumor has it she was strangled with a pair of curtains, although I'm not sure if this is true."

Liz stumbled to the kitchen table. She slumped down in the chair and placed her head in her hands. "This is awful."

"It's a terrible tragedy. Deanna and I go way back, and I can't believe she's gone, but you hardly knew her. Besides, you weren't going to use Designer Diva anyway, sugar lips."

"No. Not that. I was there last night."

"Where?" Floyd shook his head, confused.

"At her storeroom. I swung by there to look around. I even walked up to the front window and peeked inside." Liz clutched her throat, reeling at the news. "If she had surveillance cameras, I'm on them."

"Oh no."

“I was in town and curious to find out what I might be missing. I could’ve sworn I saw someone moving around in the back, so I slipped off to the side. We didn’t exactly part on amicable terms when I told her to leave. Her colleagues witnessed it. Gloria witnessed it. Gloria.” Liz snatched her cell phone off the counter. She dialed her sister’s number, praying she would answer.

“Good morning, Liz. You’re up early. ”

“Deanna Andretti is dead,” Liz blurted out.

“Dead?”

“Floyd said someone strangled her in her showroom last night.”

“She wasn’t the pleasantest of people, but I chalked it up to her being upset about whatever trouble you caused at Dreamwood. Hang on.” There was a muffled sound on the other end of the line, and Liz could tell her sister was on the move. “I pulled up the local online news. The police have started an investigation.”

“And they’ll be on my doorstep any moment.” Liz felt a light hand on her shoulder and turned to find Floyd standing behind her. “I’m freaking out.”

“You need to take a deep breath,” Gloria replied in a calm, even voice. “Admittedly, you sent the woman packing, but you didn’t kill her.”

Liz briefly filled her sister in on her trip to town and her decision to swing by Designer Diva’s store. “ If it’s true and there are surveillance cameras, I’m on them.”

“This could be problematic.”

“Problematic?” Liz shrieked. “I can’t go to jail again. I won’t survive.”

“We were in jail for less than twenty-four hours,” Gloria chided. “So you had words, and you were probably one of the last people to see her alive, if that was even her in the back.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel better, you’re failing miserably.”

“After you stopped by Deanna’s store, did you go anywhere else?” Gloria asked.

“I stopped by Hometown Designs and met with the woman who handed you her card. We discussed her giving me a quote. I picked up a few groceries and then came home. What should I do?”

“If the police show up, tell them what happened. They’re going to talk to Deanna’s colleagues, go over where she’d been and what she’d done. They’ll find out soon enough you two got into it. Having said that, a little tit-for-tat doesn’t mean you killed the woman.”

“Other than we argued, she was flirting with my husband and called me some not so nice names, not to mention she planned to resurrect a bogus judgment.”

“Again, it wasn’t a reason to kill her.”

Gloria’s voice grew muffled. “Lucy’s here. Are you going over to your new place? We might stop by today or tomorrow.”

“I’ll be there every day trying to get it cleaned up, so if you’re inclined to lend a hand, I can use all the help I can get.”

Gloria promised she would see what she could do and then ended the call. Liz set the phone aside. She folded her hands and placed her cheek on the table’s cool granite. It was one of her favorite pieces of furniture and something she’d splurged on, unable

to resist.

“Are you all right?” Floyd’s voice was close, so close she could feel his warm breath on her neck and she burst into tears.

“I wish I had never met with Deanna,” Liz sobbed. “Why did I have to argue with her?”

Floyd patted her shoulder. “The truth will come out and the police will quickly clear your name.”

“Why did I have to be all nosy and drive over there last night?” Liz didn’t wait for an answer. “Because I was jealous. There. You have it. I thought the woman was chasing after my husband and it ticked me off. Although her frivolous lawsuit over some alleged damage to the clubhouse was also annoying.”

Despite Floyd’s assurances that Liz would quickly be cleared of suspicion, all she could envision was being locked up. “I can’t go back to jail. ”

“I heard you mention it to Gloria. When were you in jail?”

“Gloria, Margaret and I were up in the Smoky Mountains, tracking down a long-lost relative. Aunt Ethel died, and we ended up getting arrested. It was a huge misunderstanding.”

“I never heard such a thing.”

“Because I’ve kept it buried in the recesses of my mind until now.” Liz slowly stood. “I’m sorry Deanna is dead.”

“Deep down she was a good person,” Floyd said. “I hope the police catch her killer.”

“Me too.” Liz grabbed some old clothes and headed to the bathroom. While she showered, she wondered about the condition of the county’s jail cells and if they would force her to wear a drab orange jumpsuit. Granted, she could stand to lose a few pounds since she and Floyd had been indulging in gourmet meals out, but it was a horrible way to get back on track .

She finished getting ready and found Floyd waiting for her in the kitchen. He hovered over her, and it was clear to see he was concerned about his wife’s mental state. “I finished my morning chores. I figured we could ride over to the house together.”

During the drive, Floyd attempted to keep up a conversation, but Liz, still stressed out over Deanna’s death, had trouble focusing.

They reached the property, and Liz’s heart plummeted. The place was in even worse condition than she remembered.

He helped Liz carry the cleaning supplies inside and headed back out. Floyd returned a short time later carrying a plastic grocery bag. “What’s that?”

“Some small bones. I found them out behind the silo. I have someone who might be able to tell me where they came from.”

“An archaeologist?” Liz asked.

“No. It’s someone you haven’t met. She’s coming by later, after she’s done working.”

The morning flew by as Liz tackled the foyer’s steps. She was still working on them when Floyd tracked her down. “It’s time.”

“Time to go home?” Liz let out a low groan as she grabbed hold of a spindle and

pulled herself to her feet.

“No. Time for your surprise.”

“I don’t...”

Floyd ignored his wife’s protests as he whisked her out of the house.

Liz braced herself as she glimpsed a vehicle rounding the bend, wondering how many more surprises she could handle.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:33 am

A familiar hot pink seventies-era Volkswagen van with neon green peace symbols, bold blue flowers and bright red hearts painted on the sides pulled into the driveway.

“Paige Livingston.” Liz limped across the yard and hugged the woman who climbed out. “What are you doing here?”

“Floyd said you needed some help.”

“Did you just leave work? I thought I saw your van out by the farm’s office when we left this morning.”

“I did. I finished my shift and drove straight here.” Paige shaded her eyes and gazed at the chateau. “So what’s the scoop? This doesn’t look like your kind of house. ”

“It’s a dump,” Liz said bluntly.

A young woman, petite and with short dark hair, joined them.

“This is my friend, Echo Quigley. She’s been helping at the farm, is looking for another part-time gig and a place to live.”

Liz greeted her.

“I asked Paige and Echo to come by to see if they can help get this place shipshape and move-in ready,” Floyd said.

“Which reminds me. The lights are flickering in the front foyer,” Liz said.

Floyd pulled a notepad from his pocket and began scribbling. "I'm starting a list. So far, we'll need an electrician, a plumber, a handyman, a heating and air conditioning company." He finished writing and tucked his pen and notepad back into his pocket. "Now that you're here, Echo, I have something to show you." He ran inside and returned with the bag of bones. "I found these out back and was hoping you might know what they are."

Echo eagerly reached for the bag.

"You love looking at bones?" Liz asked.

"I used to be an evidence technician, collecting and processing evidence. It was an awesome job. Unfortunately, I had to quit when I moved back to West Michigan."

"Evidence technician?" Liz arched a brow.

"In Detroit, and believe me, I had plenty of work to keep me busy." Echo removed a bone and began studying it. "Based on the size and shape, I would say they came from a doe." She began removing the bones, giving them a lengthy analysis of each. "You're pretty far out here in the country."

"You can say that again," Liz said.

"This place is probably full of them." Echo finished examining the bones and handed the bag back to Floyd. "What's the cleanup entail? "

"The entire place. Anywhere and everywhere you look," Liz said. "It needs to be razed. Unfortunately, my husband has become attached to it and believes we can salvage it."

"Because it has good bones." Floyd playfully elbowed his wife. "Get it? Good

bones.”

“I’m sure it was a swanky place back in the day,” Paige said. “Mind if we take a look around inside?”

“Of course not,” Liz said. “You need to know what you’re getting yourself into. Don’t use the rear stairs leading to the upper level. They’re not safe.”

“We’ll be back in a few.”

Liz watched as Paige and Echo disappeared inside. “Echo is an interesting woman.”

“She’s had a hard-knock life. Her parents died when she was a teenager. From what little I’ve overheard, her aunt and uncle raised her. She moved out when she turned eighteen and has been on her own ever since. ”

“Poor thing,” Liz said. “Paige mentioned she was looking for a place to live.”

“She is.” Floyd shoved his hands in his pockets. “I was thinking since you don’t want to move into the mobile home that we might let her rent it from us. It already has water and power. She could move right in.”

“And she can keep an eye on the place,” Liz pointed out. “I can’t wait to introduce her to Gloria. She’ll be fascinated by Echo’s previous job as a crime scene evidence technician. Why don’t we see how Paige and she do today and go from there?”

“You read my mind.”

Paige and Echo were already hard at work, scrubbing the kitchen sink using the cleaning supplies Liz had brought with her when the couple caught up with them.

“We figured we might as well get started,” Paige said. “We hope you don’t mind. ”

“Mind? I’m thrilled. You give me hope this place could eventually be livable.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Echo said. “There’s nothing a little elbow grease can’t fix. This sink is in pristine condition.”

While Paige and Echo continued cleaning, Liz and Floyd wandered through the dining room and onto the front porch.

A flash of movement across the street caught Floyd’s eye. “I see the neighbor outside. Do you think I should run over there and introduce myself?”

“Are you ready for fifty questions, courtesy of Christi Kravitz?”

Floyd chuckled. “We’re not getting off to a good start, are we?”

“In the past twenty-four hours, we’ve found a dead raccoon, and your friend Deanna, is dead. How much worse can it get? I’m heading back inside to help. I can’t expect Paige and Echo to do all the work.” Liz crossed the front foyer, heading toward the kitchen, when she tripped on a loose floorboard. Arms flailing wildly, she started to go down.

A quick-thinking Floyd moved at lightning speed, catching her before she hit the floor. “I forgot to mention there are also some loose boards.”

Liz stared at her husband. “This place is a deathtrap.”

“It looks like one of the medallion’s patterned pieces came loose. I’ll fix it before someone gets hurt.” He hurriedly headed toward the door. “Let me go grab my toolbox.”

He returned moments later with Paige and Echo in tow. “I figured I better show them what to watch out for.” Floyd knelt next to the warped board. “It’s not even nailed down.”

Echo squeezed in next to him. She grabbed hold of the edge and lifted it.

Creak. The board popped out, revealing a hidden space beneath it. “There’s something down there.”

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Liz inched forward, a shiver running down her spine as she peered into the gaping hole. She said the first thing that popped into her head. “At least it doesn’t smell.”

“Let’s see what we have.” Floyd shined a flashlight along the bottom. “It looks like a storage area.” He grabbed a crowbar and removed several more loose floorboards.

“Well, I’ll be.” He set the crowbar aside and picked the flashlight back up. “It appears to be some sort of safe room.”

Liz squinted her eyes, studying the concrete block walls, dirt floor and single bare bulb dangling from the ceiling. A beam of light reflected off an object in the corner. “I see something. It looks like a small box. ”

“I’ll go grab my ladder.” Floyd ran back out of the house. He returned, ladder in hand, and slid it into the opening.

“Be careful.” Liz held her breath as her husband descended into the darkness. “You were right, Liz. It’s a mighty fancy box,” his muffled voice echoed. “I’ll need to bring it up to find out what’s inside.”

Echo dropped to her knees. “I can grab it.”

Floyd’s voice grew faint. The top of his head appeared as he balanced on the ladder’s lower rung. “This thing is heavier than it looks,” he grunted.

“I’m ready.” Echo reached for it.

“You got it?”

“Yep.” She kept a tight grip on the red velvet box, trimmed in gold. “This baby is in pristine condition except for a layer of dust.”

Floyd joined them moments later. “There’s nothing else down there. ”

“If we’re lucky, it’s full of hidden treasure we can cash in to help pay for the repairs to this dump,” Liz said.

“You mean diamond in the rough.” Floyd fumbled for his reading glasses. “Pray for the best and prepare for the worst.”

Liz clasped her hands as he twisted the gold handle and lifted the lid, revealing a padded velvet interior. Carefully tucked between the folds was a red medallion. “What is it?”

“It looks like a coat of arms.” Floyd gingerly removed the medallion from the velvet folds and held it up to the light. On closer inspection, a crown sat atop an intricately carved badge of sorts. A winged lion and eagle, each with sharp claws extended, gripped the sides.

“Let me see.” Liz took the medallion from Floyd, surprised by the weight as she held it in her hand. While the surface was smooth, as if made from some sort of precious gem, the edges were sharp. “I wonder how much we could get out of this thing. ”

“Liz,” Floyd chided. “Let’s not jump the gun. This has some sort of significance. I think we should hang onto it, at least until we can figure out what it is.”

“I suppose.” Liz passed it to Paige, who studied it before handing it to Echo.

“It looks ancient.” Echo juggled her cell phone in one hand and snapped a picture of the front and back. “I love a good mystery. I’m going to do some research on it, if you don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Liz said.

Echo handed it to Floyd, who promptly placed it back inside the box. “There’s something else.”

He removed a crinkled roll of parchment paper and what appeared to be some sort of map. “Check out this old map. It was printed in 1897,” he said excitedly. “What an incredible find.”

Liz wrinkled her nose. “It’s a bunch of names and lines. ”

“These are property boundaries. I see our place right here.” Floyd ran a light hand over the top. “I’m gonna frame this and hang it in my office.”

Liz craned her neck and peered into the black hole. “It’s creepy. This whole place is creeping me out. I need to have Rose fly up here and clear this place of any creepy spirits.”

“I saw a commercial for her Miracle Moisturizer the other day,” Paige said. “Rose is flying high.”

Rose Morris, former co-owner of Dot’s Restaurant, had hit the big time. Her years of tinkering with concoctions, miracle cures and special elixirs had finally paid off when she snagged a contract with VitaNew, a national health and wholesale vitamin chain.

“If she can’t make it, maybe she can mail me something.” Liz struggled to her feet. “It’s time to get to work. ”

Paige and Echo returned to the kitchen while Floyd replaced the floorboards. “It’s almost like a puzzle. Check it out.”

Liz watched her husband replace the medallion’s pieces, fitting each one together like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. “I think someone, the previous owner, added the secret room during construction. The pieces fit together perfectly.”

“I have to agree. It’s rather ingenious, really.” After finishing, Floyd packed up his tools and headed outside.

Liz carefully placed the gold and velvet box inside one of the built-in cabinets and then carried a clean bucket of water to the windows. The hair on the back of her neck prickled. She turned to find Christi standing in her front yard, binoculars in hand.

Determined to ignore her nosy neighbor, Liz moved from left to right, cleaning each of the windows until they sparkled in the bright sunlight. She finished the final one and stood back to admire her hard work. Although old, they were in excellent condition, and with a fresh layer of caulk, she was certain they would outlive her and Floyd.

Late afternoon, her stomach grumbled, reminding her it had been hours since her last meal. She trekked to the kitchen and found Echo and Paige scrubbing the insides of the cabinets. “I’m ordering pizza. Any special requests?”

“Nope. Pizza sounds good,” Paige said. “I think I saw Floyd out by his truck.”

“Thanks.” Liz placed an online order for delivery and tracked her husband down to let him know food was on the way. She let out a low groan as she slid onto the truck’s tailgate. “I’m sore.”

“Me too. The more time we spend here, the more I’m realizing this place needs a lot

of work.” Floyd settled in next to her. “Looking back, I should’ve consulted with you before buying it. We can put it up for sale, find you that penthouse you keep talking about, and call it a day. ”

Liz tilted her head, noting the look of resignation on Floyd’s face. “You’re serious.”

“We’re getting up there in years. This is a big project...bigger than I thought. I can’t expect you to take this on. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You saw potential. If your hunch is right, we could be sitting on a goldmine.”

“But I want you to be happy.” Floyd reached for Liz’s hand. “I want us to be happy. You know the saying...happy wife, happy life.”

“You would hate living in the city.”

Floyd grew silent. “I would, but I would move there if you wanted to.”

Liz inspected the grime under her fingernails, struggling to remember the last time she’d chipped one of her perfectly manicured nails. It had been a very long time.

She closed her eyes, embracing the sun’s warmth and breathing in the fresh country air. What would they do if they sold this place and moved to the city?

Spend their days at local museums, attending social events, shopping, traveling the world? It would be a dream life for Liz and a nightmare for Floyd. Yes, he was well-traveled and could seamlessly fit into the social scene, but he wouldn’t enjoy it. Not one bit. He would be miserable, and she would feel guilty every time she dragged him to another gathering, another get-together, another museum.

And, although she would never admit it to her sister, the quiet country life was

growing on her. More than once since she'd married Floyd, Liz had caught herself carrying her morning cup of coffee to the front porch to keep a watchful eye on the robin who had built a nest in the blossoming apple tree.

Floyd had assured her she could create her chic French chateau, renovating it to her exacting standards by using whatever resources she needed. And there were plenty. If his hunch was correct, there would be even more.

Liz Applegate-Rasmussen would never again have to worry about coasting into town on fumes, dead broke and relying on the generosity of friends to keep a roof over her head. Thank you, Margaret Hansen. She had come a long way and with each step she was becoming more cognizant of her selfish behavior and more aware of the feelings of those around her.

Perhaps God had placed her right there for a reason.

"I think we should stay," Liz announced. "As long as you're okay with me spending ridiculous amounts of money fixing this place up, I'm still on board."

"One hundred percent?" Floyd eyed her skeptically. "Because we'll both need to be fully committed. "

"One hundred percent." Liz placed a light hand on his cheek. "We're partners in crime, Floyd Rasmussen, and I don't mean that literally."

Floyd chuckled. "I love you, my beautiful wife. You won't be sorry."

As Liz leaned in for a kiss, she sent up a small prayer she hadn't made the wrong decision and missed her opportunity to get out while the getting was good.

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The pizza's arrival was a much-needed break from the tedious task of cleaning. While they ate, Paige, Echo, Floyd and Liz chatted about the home's potential and Liz reminded herself of all the pluses. At their age, major renovations would be a one and done, which reinforced her determination to get it right and exactly the way she wanted from the get-go.

"We can come back again tomorrow, as soon as our shift ends," Paige offered.

"We need all the help we can get. This is for today's work." Liz pulled some cash from her wallet and handed several bills to each of them. "We'll also need more cleaning supplies. Here's some extra to pick up what you think we'll need. If you run over, let me know. "

"Thanks. I will." Paige folded the bills and tucked them in her front pocket. "I know you're not in love with the house, but it speaks to me. This would be my dream...fixing this place up and living here."

"I wish I had your vision. You and Echo have been a tremendous help." Liz turned to Echo. "Floyd and I were talking earlier. There's a mobile home near the back of the property. It's in decent shape, although it could use a good cleaning. Would you be interested in taking a look at it?"

Echo's jaw dropped. "To live in?"

"To live in," Liz said. "Paige's mother is a real estate agent. I can ask her to draw up a rental agreement, something reasonable in exchange for you keeping an eye on the place. You might want to check it out first."

“Yes. I mean, I don’t even need to look at it. There aren’t many rentals in this area and those that are available are out of my price range. Thank you.” Echo impulsively hugged Liz. “You won’t be sorry. I’ll sign a lease. I can afford a few hundred a month. Floyd has offered me a permanent job, but I’m looking for something with benefits and a few more hours.”

An idea popped into Liz’s head. “You have crime scene experience. Have you thought about contacting the Montbay County Sheriff’s Department?”

“Yes, but I need a permanent address before they’ll accept an application.”

“Which means you’re in a catch-22.”

“Until I find a place to live,” Echo said.

While the women loaded Paige’s van, Liz sent Lucy a text, asking if she could help put together a rental agreement. Lucy promptly replied, and after Liz explained it was for Paige’s friend, Echo, her phone rang.

“Hello, Liz,” Lucy’s bubbly voice greeted her. “How on earth were you able to find a rental for Echo? I’ve been searching for days now, and nothing is even close to being in her price range. ”

“There’s a mobile home on our new—and I use that term loosely—property. It’s vacant, in decent condition, and I believe it will fit the bill. She can afford a few hundred a month. I was thinking if you could put something together for three hundred a month, with Floyd and me waiving the deposits, and make it a six-month lease, I would be forever in your debt.”

“Done. When do you need it?”

“Hang on.” Liz motioned to Echo. “Lucy has agreed to put a lease together, three hundred a month for the next six-months. I’m waiving the security deposits. If she can bring it by tomorrow, will that be too soon?”

“It’s perfect.” Echo clapped her hands. “Does this mean I can move in?”

“Lock, stock and barrel, as soon as you sign the lease and pay the first month’s rent.”

“It’s a deal. We’ll be back tomorrow. Thanks, Liz. ”

“You’re welcome.” Liz told them goodbye and waited until they hopped in Paige’s van and drove off. “Hey, Lucy, Echo and Paige will be back tomorrow to help in the afternoon. Is that too soon?”

“No. That’s so sweet of you. What goes around, comes around. Margaret helped you and now you’re helping Echo. I’ll run it by. Where is it?”

“Off Cash Creek Road in Green Springs.”

“Cash Creek,” Lucy repeated.

“An appropriate name considering cash, and lots of it, is what it will take to fix this place up.”

Lucy laughed. “I think I know where it is. Is it French chateau-esque?”

“Chateau in the front. Farmhouse in the back.”

“There’s a covered bridge at the end of the road. If my memory serves me correctly, a railroad went through Cash Creek and somewhere out there is an old ghost town from years back. ”

“I wonder if one of the ghosts is missing a map and a fancy box,” Liz said.

“What did you say?”

“Nothing. Thank you, Lucy. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Liz rattled off the exact address before ending the call.

Floyd traipsed across the driveway. “Paige and Echo left?”

“Yes. They’ll be back tomorrow after they finish their shift at the farm,” Liz said. “Echo enthusiastically accepted our offer to rent the mobile home for three hundred a month with a six-month lease. Lucy is writing up the rental agreement and will bring it over.”

“That was mighty nice of you to agree to let Echo move in.”

“I know how she feels. If not for Margaret offering to rent me her lakefront house at a discounted rate, I would’ve had to move in with Gloria and Paul and my sister and I would’ve killed each other.”

Floyd chuckled. “You two are complete opposites. I can see where the sparks might fly. Are you ready to head home?”

Liz’s eyes twinkled with mischief. “But dahling,” she replied in her best Eva Gabor voice. “We are home.”

“Soon, my wonderful wife.” Floyd kissed her lips. “Soon.”

Liz was out like a light and woke before six the next morning. Her eyes flew open,

and with a whisper of a groan, she remembered why every bone in her body ached. She slipped out of bed, only to discover Floyd was already gone, which wasn't unusual. He loved early mornings in the barn, milking the cows, working out his schedule for the day, leaving Liz free to do what she pleased .

The couple set aside late afternoons for just the two of them, which included dining out, taking in a movie or shopping, all the things she knew Floyd would never do if not for her.

Liz strolled into the kitchen and a small smile lit the corners of her mouth when she discovered her husband, who loved to cook, had made breakfast. Hers was waiting for her on the warming plate. She carried the food and a cup of coffee to the sunroom, where she could keep an eye out for the birds and enjoy her morning meal in peaceful solitude.

She switched the television on and began flipping through the channels when an image flashed across the screen, catching her eye. It was a picture of their Cash Creek property. Liz hurriedly turned the volume up.

“...previous property owner Pierre Gagnon's estate on Cash Creek Road outside of Green Springs, recently purchased by Floyd Rasmussen. An unnamed source, someone who works at the Montbay County Sheriff's Department, has told us Designer Diva owner, Deanna Andretti, visited the property only hours earlier. If the Rasmussen name sounds familiar, viewers may recall a member of the family was charged with murdering the matriarch last year.

A morning news anchor, seated behind a desk inside the studio, appeared. “This is an interesting turn of events for a family who has had their share of tragedy. Our field reporters are working on this breaking news story and will have more information during our noon report.”

Bam. The backdoor slammed. Liz quickly turned the television off. She gathered up her empty plate and coffee cup and caught up with Floyd in the kitchen. “Thank you for making breakfast. It was delicious.” She set the plate in the sink, bounced onto the tips of her toes, and gave him a quick kiss. “I’m ready to start on day two of our home renovations. ”

“There’s been a change in plans. The milking system went down and we’re still trying to get it fixed.”

“No problem. I’ll head over there alone. I want to get as much done as possible. What about the contractors?”

“I have an electrician and plumber coming out later today. I was thinking about rescheduling.”

“Don’t,” Liz said. “If you can’t make it, I’ll be there. I can talk to them.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

While Floyd left to track down their information, Liz hustled to the bathroom to get ready for the day. She’d finished and was loading more cleaning supplies in her SUV when he caught up with her. “You sure you want to do this? I can try to reschedule for tomorrow. ”

“Positive. The sooner we can get the repairs done, the better.”

“I’ll try to make it, but if not...”

Liz lifted a hand. “You take care of the farm and I’ll handle the other.”

Floyd promised to check in late morning. He gave her a quick hug and then hurried back to the barn.

With supplies loaded, she hit the road, reaching the property in no time. Instead of turning onto the driveway, Liz drove past, curious to check out the covered bridge Lucy had mentioned.

She found it less than a quarter mile away. Her tires made a clickety-clack sound as she drove over the long timber trusses running the length of the bridge. Liz did a U-turn at the crossroads on the other side and spotted a small creek running under the bridge.

She pulled off the side of the road and climbed out to admire the view. The soothing sound of the gurgling creek was like a magnet drawing her to the water's edge. Liz's eyes swept the banks, and she wondered if the creek was part of their property.

Ting. Her cell phone chimed. It was her sister. "Hey, Gloria."

"Hello, Liz. Did you catch the morning news?"

"About Deanna Andretti's death and how the reporters linked her to our place? I'm telling you, it's only a matter of time before they track me down."

"You have nothing to hide."

"Except for the fact she and I argued, and I was at her place that evening. The news crew reminded viewers about the death of Floyd's mother. I don't know why they found it necessary to point it out."

"Because it's news." Gloria changed the subject. "How's it going?"

Liz briefly filled her in about the secret room, the medallion, and the map .

Gloria let out a low whistle. “Your new place is full of surprises.”

“And not necessarily good ones,” Liz said. “Lucy is putting together a rental agreement for Echo, a farm employee who is also Paige’s friend. Floyd and I are letting her rent the mobile home.”

“I heard. I ran into Paige and Lucy at Dot’s Restaurant last night.”

BAM! BAM! A loud pounding echoed through the line.

“What was that?”

“Ruth is banging on my back door. The reason I’m calling is we were thinking about coming by.”

“The more, the merrier. Lucy said she’d be here around noon.”

“I’ll see if we can’t all come together,” Gloria said. “Would you like us to bring lunch? ”

“Sure. Lunch sounds good. So does a bottle of bleach, disinfectant, and maybe even a couple sticks of dynamite,” Liz joked.

“Paige told us your kitchen cleaned up nicely.”

“And would be perfect if I wanted to live a sixties lifestyle.”

“Don’t get grumpy. We’ll see you around noon.” Gloria hung up before Liz could remind her to bring dishes and silverware, so she sent a text, to which her sister

promptly replied they would bring everything needed.

Liz finished admiring the covered bridge and creek and climbed back into her SUV. She rolled the windows down, letting the fresh country air pour inside for the quick drive back to the chateau. Pulling close to the backdoor, she hit the hatch release and slid out.

A small movement caught her eye, and her heart skipped a beat. Someone was lurking near the side of the house .

Liz ducked down and crept to the back bumper, watching as a petite figure darted to the corner.

“No way.” She briefly closed her eyes when she realized who it was. She let out an exasperated breath and emerged from her hiding spot. “We’re going to nip this nonsense in the bud.”

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Liz marched across the front yard, catching up with their new neighbor seconds before she cleared the lot line. “Hey!”

Christi stopped mid-bolt, frozen in her tracks. “H-hello.”

“What are you doing?” Liz motioned to the taser the woman was holding.

“I...uh. I thought I saw someone trying to get inside your house.”

“You should’ve called the police instead of taking it upon yourself to start snooping.” The words slipped out of Liz’s mouth before she could stop them. The last thing she wanted was to start off on the wrong foot with the neighbor .

“I called them. The dispatcher told me she would send someone out, but I don’t think she was taking the matter as seriously as she should have. I’ve been hearing gunshots too, although it could be a local farmer. Country folks and farmers love their guns.”

Liz softened her tone. “I’m sorry for seeming ungrateful, but you shouldn’t be on our property if you think something suspicious is going on.”

“I noticed the Designer Diva van parked in the driveway the other day. The owner, Deanna something, is dead.”

“She is,” Liz replied in an even voice.

“You knew her,” Christi said.

“Not...really. She was giving us a quote.”

“At the risk of stating the obvious, the place is in rough shape. When are you moving in?”

“I’m not sure. Perhaps within the next month. ”

“The sooner, the better.” Christi turned to go, and Liz stopped her. “Did you see anything?”

“No, although you might want to consider installing cameras. My husband travels frequently, so extra security is a necessity for us.”

Liz thanked her and, as she walked away, she wondered why the woman hadn’t brought a gun over to investigate if she thought something suspicious was going on.

Shrugging it off, she returned to the SUV, grabbed her supplies, and headed inside. Keeping necessity in mind, she focused her attention on the bathroom’s toilet and sink. While both cleaned up fairly easily, the tub was a different story. No matter how hard Liz scrubbed, she didn’t make a dent in the tub’s black ring.

She finally gave up, grabbed a bottled water and took a break out on the back steps. Had Christi spotted someone messing around the house and by the time she got here, they were gone? She was still mulling over the possibility when she spotted Ruth Carpenter’s van, nicknamed the spymobile, cruise into the driveway. Dot Jenkins, former owner of Dot’s Restaurant, pulled in behind her.

Ruth, Margaret, Lucy, Gloria and Dot climbed out and began carrying bags of food, cans of soda, and cleaning supplies toward the house.

“What are you doing?”

“When I told Ruth and the others the house needed a good top-to-bottom cleaning, they offered to help. Think of it as our housewarming gift to you.”

“You don’t know how much this means to me.” Liz blinked back sudden tears as she gazed at the close-knit group of friends. “It’s a mess. I mean, the house. The dead designer diva, the secret room.”

With a sympathetic audience, Liz babbled on about being overwhelmed. “When I got here this morning, I caught my nosy neighbor snooping around.”

“Nosy neighbor?” Margaret interrupted .

“Secret room?” Ruth chimed in.

“We found a secret room beneath the front foyer.” Liz led the women inside and showed them the spot. “I tripped on a loose floorboard, and we discovered it was loose for a reason.”

“Cool.” Lucy’s eyes lit. “Mind if we check it out?”

“Be my guest.”

The women gathered around, watching as Lucy carefully stacked the floorboards off to one side. “What was down there?”

“A cool old box and map.” Liz showed them the built-in cabinet where she’d stashed the red velvet box. “This is what we found.”

The box and its contents made the rounds, with the women closely examining what each unanimously agreed was some sort of coat of arms.

Gloria was the last, and she ran her finger along the back. “This goes to something.”

“Goes to something,” Liz echoed .

“It’s more than a fancy decoration. I think it’s some sort of key.”

“Echo took a picture of it and is going to do some research. I figure it’s probably worth a few hundred bucks,” Liz said.

“A few hundred bucks?” Gloria’s brows drew together. “You can’t sell this.”

“Why not?”

“I’m with Gloria,” Margaret said. “I know a few things about antiques and this looks like the real deal. You’re making a mistake if you sell it before you figure out what it is.”

The others chimed in, attempting to convince Liz she should hang onto it.

Finally, she lifted a hand. “You win. I’ll keep it.”

“Good.” Gloria carefully placed it back inside the box. “Something tells me one day I’ll be telling you I told you so.”

“For once, I hope you’re right. ”

“I snapped a picture of the map.” Margaret patted her phone. “I’ll email it to my friend, a cartographer, when I get home.”

“Maybe the box and contents belonged to the Gagnon family,” Ruth said. “I remember when Pierre Gagnon’s body was found. He went missing a few years back,

right after his wife died. His children set up a search. They found him near the creek out back.”

“I’ve never heard of the man,” Liz said. “Now that I think about it, I was probably living in Florida.”

“I’m starving,” Lucy said. “Can we eat before we start cleaning?”

With a plan in place, the women arranged a makeshift serving area in the kitchen. They filled their plates with leftovers from Dot’s Hot Meals on Wheels’ food truck. The women feasted on roasted chicken, coleslaw, baked beans, macaroni salad and chocolate chunk cookies for dessert .

Floyd showed up mid-meal and grabbed a bite to eat. He finished with minutes to spare before his first appointment arrived.

With lunch out of the way, Margaret and Gloria tackled the dining room and living room while Lucy offered to clean the front and back porches.

A glimmer of hope bubbled up in Liz that they might actually make the place habitable—perhaps not modern and magazine cover worthy, but good enough to live in until they could complete the most pressing renovations.

Paige and Echo arrived and offered to clean out the smaller of the barns, the one closest to the house.

It was late afternoon when Liz, covered in grime, insisted they call it a day.

“The place is going to be fabulous,” Margaret said. “I’ll let you know if I find anything out about the map. ”

“Thanks, Margaret. Thank you everyone. I owe you all so much. In fact, I’m going to throw the biggest party this side of the Mississippi when the chateau is done.”

“We can’t wait.” Ruth gave her a quick hug.

Liz trailed behind, following her friends to their vehicles, exhausted from a hard day’s work. The only thing she wanted now were clean clothes and a long soak in a hot tub.

The sound of tires on gravel caught Liz’s attention. She watched a vehicle coast into the driveway and pull in behind her SUV. Her heart plummeted as the driver emerged from the car. “Here we go.”

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Officer Joe Nelson exited his patrol car and approached the group of friends standing in Liz's driveway. "Good afternoon, ladies."

"Hello, Joe." Gloria smiled. "How's your new job as sheriff working out?"

"Busy. Montbay County and you gals are always keeping me on my toes."

"We haven't had trouble since Dot's fundraiser," Margaret said.

"True, and I had hoped to make it through the rest of the year without having another murder investigation on my hands. I guess it was too much to ask. "

Liz swallowed hard and stepped forward. "I suppose this means you're here to discuss Deanna Andretti's death."

"I am." The sheriff reached into his pocket and pulled out a notepad. "According to eyewitnesses, Ms. Andretti met with you on Tuesday to discuss a job."

"She did."

"And did Ms. Andretti provide you with a quote?"

"Yes."

Nelson shifted his feet. "How would you describe your meeting?"

"It was fairly brief."

“Friendly? Professional? Cordial?”

“None of the above. Ms. Andretti brought up a past issue that happened years ago when I lived in Dreamwood Retirement Community, not to mention she gave me a ridiculously high quote for her services. I told her to leave. She called me some unsavory names.”

“And then what happened?”

“She left.”

“On good terms?” the sheriff probed.

“No. She was spinning her tires and slinging rocks. Looking back, she may have also given me an unfriendly finger wave as she drove off,” Liz said.

“Did she threaten you?”

“No.”

“Did you threaten her?”

“I told her to leave. End of story.”

“And you never saw her again?” the sheriff asked.

“Never.”

“Where were you Tuesday evening?”

Liz’s heart skipped a beat. Here it was...the real reason the sheriff was on her

doorstep. He knew. “I had dinner with my husband. Later that evening, I ran some errands.”

“Where did you go?”

“To Green Springs.”

“Did you see anyone?”

“I met with Becky Kiefer, the owner of Hometown Designs, who is also giving my husband and me a quote to renovate this place.”

“You never stopped by Designer Diva store on Tuesday evening?” The sheriff’s eyes met hers. “You know I already have the answer, Liz.”

“I...did. Look, I was driving past on my way through town. The lights were off, so I kind of peeked in the windows. I thought I saw someone moving around in the back and didn’t want Deanna to see me, considering our last words to each other weren’t exactly friendly. I left and drove to Hometown Designs, Becky Kiefer’s place, which was only a couple blocks away. In fact, she can vouch for me. ”

“Ms. Kiefer told us you stopped by her place. You met with her and went where?”

“To the grocery store. I have a receipt. You can verify the time. After shopping, I returned home.”

“Putting all of this into a timeline, how long would you estimate you were in Green Springs Tuesday evening?”

Liz grew quiet as she thought about it. “An hour and a half, maybe two hours. I was home by eight-thirty.”

“Two hours.” Nelson scribbled furiously. “What were you wearing that evening?”

“Clothes.”

The sheriff’s head snapped up. “This isn’t a joke.”

“I know it isn’t. I don’t know. Jeans, a button-down blouse and a pair of Dior espadrilles.”

“Espa what?” Nelson interrupted .

“Dior espadrilles. They’re designer slip-on shoes,” Liz said. “I had done some work around this place, so when I got home, I showered and changed. The dirty clothes are in my laundry basket. I can send you a picture if you want.”

“I’ll get back to you on that. Is Floyd around?”

“He’s over by the barns. Do you need me for anything else?”

“If you’re asking if I’m done questioning you, the answer is ‘no.’ I would like to speak to Floyd to find out what he remembers.”

“I’ll take you to him.” Gloria led the sheriff to the buildings out back.

Ruth waited until they were gone and let out a low whistle. “That went well.”

“You can see what’s happening,” Liz said. “I argued with Deanna. She was threatening me about some frivolous lawsuit and calling me names. There are eyewitnesses. She was ticked off enough to peel out of my driveway and make obscene gestures, and then I was dumb enough to stop by her place. What was I thinking?”

Gloria returned moments later. “Nelson seems to be doing a very thorough job of investigating Deanna’s death.”

“Unfortunately, it’s me he’s investigating,” Liz groaned.

In a short amount of time, Floyd and the sheriff appeared, making their way toward them.

“I have what I need for now,” the sheriff said. “You don’t plan on leaving town, do you?”

“No,” Liz said. “Surely, I’m not the only suspect.”

“We’re speaking with several persons of interest.”

“Including Ms. Andretti’s colleagues?” Gloria asked. “I was here at the same time as Ms. Andretti and able to observe the women she was with. Looking back, none of them struck me as particularly warm and fuzzy toward the deceased. ”

“Like I said, we’re chatting with others.” The sheriff tipped his hat, thanked them for their time, and returned to his patrol car. He sat there for several long moments before driving off.

“I wouldn’t get too freaked out yet, Liz.” Lucy finished her water and tossed the empty bottle in the recycle bin. “On a brighter note, I’ll go grab the rental agreement.”

Liz turned her attention to Echo. “Have you changed your mind about renting the mobile home?”

“Not at all. In fact, I was so excited, I barely slept last night.”

“Perhaps you should look at it first.” Liz placed a light hand on her aching back. “I don’t know if the locks work, but even if they do, they need to be replaced.”

“I have some extra locks in my van,” Ruth said. “It’s an easy breezy swap out. ”

“What are you doing riding around with sets of door locks?” Gloria waved dismissively. “Never mind. I probably don’t want to know.”

The women made the trek to the mobile home as Liz mulled over her conversation with their new neighbor, Christi Kravitz. What if someone was hanging around the property? Would Echo be safe living there alone until Floyd and Liz moved in? “Our neighbor, Christi, claims someone was over here, but she didn’t find anyone. I want you to feel safe.”

“I’ll be fine,” Echo said. “I appreciate your concern, but I own a gun and know how to use it.”

Knowing she wouldn’t be the one living there, Liz was able to view the home in a different light. On closer inspection, it wasn’t half bad. In fact, the interior was in better condition than the main house.

“I love it.” Echo clasped her hands and spun in a slow circle. “It’s perfect. ”

“Good. Lucy has the paperwork.”

Lucy turned to go, and Echo stopped her. “There is one other thing I should have mentioned earlier.”

“You have someone else moving in with you,” Liz guessed.

“Yes.” Echo and Paige exchanged a quick glance.

“We’ll need to add him or her to the lease,” Liz said. “All tenants must sign the lease.”

“That might be tricky.” Echo reached for the doorknob. “I’ll be right back.”

The others grew quiet as she darted out of the mobile home and jogged over to the barn where she had spent the last few hours working.

Liz pinned Paige with a stare. “Do you know what Echo’s talking about?”

“I do. I think it’s best that she shows you.”

Ruth gave a thumbs up. “I love surprises. ”

“Good ones,” Liz pointed out. “So far, none of them have been good, at least as far as this place is concerned.”

Gloria patted Paige’s arm. “Is it going to send Auntie Liz into a tizzy?”

“A Lizzie tizzy,” Margaret chuckled.

“Stop.” Liz held up a hand. “You aren’t helping.”

The door flew open. Echo reappeared. She wasn’t alone.

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Liz's heart melted as she gazed at the small puppy in Echo's arms. "You have a puppy."

"This is Teddy. Isn't he the handsomest fellow?"

"He certainly is." Liz began cooing as she reached for the small pup.

"I got him from one of the other employees at the farm," Echo said. "I hope it's all right."

"It is, although I don't remember seeing a section in the rental agreement referencing pets."

"There's a line to add a pet addendum." Lucy sifted through the agreement. She reached the last page and began writing. "It's only you and Teddy I take it?"

"Just the two of us," Echo confirmed. "Although there are more puppies still available. "

Liz perked up. "There are?"

Echo slid her cell phone from her pocket. She tapped the screen and handed the phone to Liz. "I'm not sure how many he has left."

Liz half listened as she gazed at the basket full of puppies, her eyes drawn to one with mischievous eyes and a playful tilt of her head. "This one is calling me."

“Do you want to run it by Floyd first?” Gloria asked. “He’s out by the shed.”

“Yes.” Balancing Echo’s phone in one hand and the squirming puppy in the other, she flagged her husband down. “We’re getting a puppy.”

“A puppy?”

“From one of the farmhands.” Liz held Teddy up, who promptly scrambled toward Floyd, batting at his chin. “He’s a friendly little fellow. ”

“What do you think about this one?” Liz showed him the photo of the puppies. “The one on the right is adorable.”

“If you want a puppy, I’m all for it. I knew Tate had some, but I didn’t think you’d be interested, at least not right now.”

“A Shih Tzu would be the perfect companion. We’ll need to make sure he still has them.”

“I’ll give Tate a call.” Floyd fished his cell phone from his pocket and tapped the screen. “Hey, Tate. Floyd here. Liz is interested in one of your pups. He’s a little fella. Got a white face and a set of floppy brown ears. I see. You still have her .” Floyd cast his wife a glance. “How much are you getting for them? That much? Okay. Forget it.”

Liz playfully punched Floyd in the arm and snatched the phone out of his hand. “Tate. It’s Liz. We’ll take the puppy. Tomorrow? Yes. We’ll be home in the morning. Thank you.” She jabbed the end button and handed the phone back to her husband. “He’ll be by with our sweet little girl tomorrow morning before his shift starts. I can’t wait.” She bounced on the tips of her toes and planted a kiss on her husband’s cheek. “Thank you, Floyd.”

“You’re welcome. It’s nice to see your gorgeous smile again.”

Liz returned to the mobile home to give the others the good news. “We’re getting a cute little girl tomorrow morning.” She handed Teddy to Echo. “We need to execute the rental agreement.”

Lucy, Echo, and Liz went over the paperwork, and Ruth began installing the new locksets while the rest of the friends returned to the house to pack up.

“We’re done.” Lucy handed a signed copy to Liz and the other to Echo.

“So am I.” Ruth tested out the door lock and handed the keys to Liz and Floyd’s new tenant. “You’ll be needing these.”

“Thank you, Ruth. I can’t wait to move in. ”

Paige and Echo began unloading Echo’s car while Ruth, Lucy and Liz caught up with the others.

“I haven’t been down this road in ages, but if my memory serves me correctly, the old Pere Marquette Railroad bed, or what’s left of it, is in your backyard,” Ruth said. “Do you know if Cash Creek runs through the property?”

“I’m almost positive it does,” Liz said. “The creek is down at the crossroads by a covered bridge.”

“I wouldn’t mind checking it out if you have time.”

“I need to get going.” Dot consulted her watch. “I’m covering the food truck’s afternoon deliveries. We’re heading over to Hank’s encampment today.”

“You’re a saint, Dot.” Liz hugged her. “Thank you for your help and for lunch. I know how busy you are feeding the homeless.”

“I’m happy for you, Liz.” Dot eyed the gaping hole in the soffit. “I’ll admit I was surprised when I found out you planned to move here. ”

“It’s growing on me, although it’s hard to imagine I’m willing to live in the lack of luxury instead of the lap of luxury.”

“You have the right attitude.” Dot smiled. “Sometimes we need to step out of our comfort zone to realize what’s most important in life...our faith in God, our friendships, our health. Money can’t buy happiness.”

“I love Floyd. This place makes him happy, so I’m going to do my best to make it our forever home, somewhere we can live out the rest of our years together.”

Margaret patted Liz’s arm. “I’m leaving with Dot. I offered to help her deliver meals.”

“Thank you, Margaret,” Liz said sincerely. “Thank you for everything. For offering me a place to live when I moved back to Michigan, and not letting the cat out of the bag when Floyd and I first started dating. For helping today when I know you—all of you — have other things you could be doing. ”

“Dot’s right. Nothing is more important than helping friends. Besides, I must admit I was more than a little curious to see this place. It was exactly what I envisioned. It looks as if the season of change for the Garden Girls has rubbed off on you.”

“I suppose it has,” Liz said. “Whether I’m up to the task is another story.”

“You might have to sacrifice a fancy fingernail or two along the way, but I know you

can do it.” Margaret winked before giving Liz a hug. “Call if you need anything.”

Ruth was itching to explore as soon as Dot and Margaret left. “How far away is the creek?”

“Not far,” Liz said. “We can walk it.”

Ruth, Lucy, Gloria and Liz fell into step, meandering along the two-track leading to the back of the property.

They reached the crossroads and stopped to admire the covered bridge first. Ruth seemed particularly intrigued by the patterned timber trusses. “I’m almost positive the old town and railroad bed are nearby.”

The women crossed the bridge and approached the fast-flowing creek. With Ruth leading the way, they covered several yards before she abruptly stopped.

“Check it out.” Ruth gingerly brushed at a mound of dirt, revealing a block of wood. “This is the railway sleeper. It’s the foundation for the rails.”

“That’s cool,” Lucy said. “You think there’s an old ghost town somewhere around here, too?”

“Yep.” Ruth dusted her hands. “We should’ve grabbed the map Liz and Floyd found. I bet it would’ve given us a better idea of the exact location.”

“I think we can figure it out. Let’s split up.” Gloria and the others began making a thorough sweep of the area .

“Hey,” Lucy called out. “I think I found a foundation.”

Ruth hurried along the side of the bank and joined her friend. “This is it.” She ran a light hand over the stone wall and shot Liz a look. “Would it be all right if I come back with my metal detector?”

“Absolutely. After finding the medallion and map, I have to admit I’m curious about the property’s history.”

“Someone’s been back here.” Lucy pointed to a set of fresh tire tracks.

Ruth eased in alongside her friend. “These tracks go all the way out to the road.”

“If I had to guess, I would say someone’s been back here within the last twenty-four hours,” Gloria said.

“Great.” Liz placed her hands on her hips. “Maybe my nosy neighbor Christi saw someone after all. It looks like they’re heading toward the house. ”

Liz’s cell phone chimed, and she pulled it from her pocket. “Dot’s calling. Hey, Dot. Did you forget something?”

“No. Are you still at the farm?”

“We are. Gloria, Ruth, Lucy and I are exploring out back by the creek. We found some fresh tire tracks and are trying to figure out if someone’s been messing around.”

“Can you put me on so the others can hear?” Dot asked.

“Sure.” Liz pressed the speaker button. “You’re on speaker. We’re all listening.”

“Hank is here with me. Do you remember him?”

“I do. He’s one of the homeless men who runs an encampment and helped rescue Paige.”

“That’s him. Hank is familiar with the Gagnon property and told me something very concerning. I’m not sure how safe you, Floyd or even Echo, will be living there.”

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Liz's heart skipped a beat. "Why doesn't Hank think we'll be safe living here?"

"He and his group set up a temporary camp near the creek before finding their current location. The reason they left was because someone was roaming around after dark, firing a gun. It happened more than once. After the second time, they decided to move."

Gloria's eyes widened. "How awful. Was anyone hurt?"

"Thankfully, no." Dot told them Hank figured it was someone trying to scare them off. "I thought I should warn you."

Liz thanked Dot and asked her to thank Hank before ending the call. "What if the shooter wasn't trying to scare the homeless people away? What if Christi is right and someone is messing around back here? I need to warn Echo."

They made a fast track back to the front and found Echo and Paige giving the mobile home a top-to-bottom cleaning.

"Dot called. According to one of the homeless men she knows, someone has been shooting guns after dark," Liz said. "The neighbor, Christi, is also convinced someone has been hanging around. I don't know if it's safe to stay here, at least not alone."

"My friend left for an out-of-town trip, so I can't go back there." Echo cast an anxious glance out the window. "I don't have anywhere to go."

“You can stay with me,” Paige offered.

“As soon as we figure out what’s going on, you can move in,” Liz promised. “We’ll adjust your rental agreement to the actual move-in date.”

Teddy pranced around their feet, and Echo scooped him up. “What will I do with Teddy? ”

“He can come with you,” Paige said.

“We’ll figure this out as soon as possible. I would feel terrible if something happened.” Liz led the way out of the mobile home and back to the main house. She helped her sister and friends finish loading Ruth’s spymobile and stood in the driveway waving goodbye as they headed out. Paige and Echo weren’t far behind, leaving Floyd and Liz alone.

“Dot called.” Liz briefly filled him in on what Hank, the homeless man, had said. “I asked Echo not to move in until we could figure out what’s going on.”

“Could be anything. Could be someone trying to scare the homeless people off or hunters out at dusk,” Floyd said. “Shoot, I hear gunfire out at our other house sometimes.”

The couple went from room to room, throwing out ideas for the changes they planned to make and discussing Deanna Andretti’s death. “Hopefully, Sheriff Nelson and the investigators will be able to figure out who murdered her. I wish I could turn back time. I never would’ve gone anywhere near her store.”

“But you did and now all we can do is wait to see what shakes out.”

Liz and Floyd meandered to the back porch to watch the sunset, and she posed the

question that had been lingering in the back of her mind since the day she met Deanna. “Were you ever attracted to Deanna?”

Floyd shot his wife a side glance. “No. She wasn’t my type. I met her through her ex-husband, Eric. He loved farming, but Deanna hated it. She nagged him until he finally sold the place. As soon as it sold, she bought the store downtown, opened her business and divorced him.”

“He sold to keep her happy and then she left him.” Liz grew quiet as she contemplated the new information. “Do you know anything about the women who were with her the other day? ”

Floyd shook his head. “Not much. Those three were among the last to see Deanna alive. I’m sure the authorities have already talked to them, or at least plan to.”

Liz leaned her elbows on the railing, staring out into the open field. “Motive and opportunity,” she whispered under her breath.

“What did you say?”

“Motive and opportunity. Deanna’s death wasn’t a random murder. Someone took her out for a reason. I’m trying to figure out who had a motive. Maybe it was Becky. If Deanna and Designer Diva were out of the way, she could swoop in and steal her customers.” Liz snapped her fingers. “Voila! Instant business.”

“True,” Floyd agreed. “I can’t be certain, but I think I heard at one time that Tammi O’Toole and Deanna were partners.”

“Hmm. Deanna didn’t introduce her as a partner, only as a colleague. ”

“I could be wrong,” Floyd cautioned. “I’m sure the investigators are chatting with

Eric as another person of interest.”

“Carol Wright, the third colleague, is flying under the radar,” Liz said. “I think it’s time to pull a Gloria and start doing some digging around.”

On the way home, the couple swung by a pet supply store where Liz promptly purchased bags of toys, food recommended by the store’s in-house vet, hair bows and anything else she thought the new family member might need.

Back at the farm, Floyd excused himself to check on the milking system’s repairs while Liz showered and then logged onto the computer. She searched for updates on Deanna’s death but found only vague information, how the police had determined she’d been murdered and were still investigating.

Eric Andretti was quoted as saying he was deeply saddened by his ex-wife’s death .

Liz finished filtering through the current news clips and then pulled up Designer Diva’s website. The woman had a flair for style, similar to Liz’s. There was a handful of glowing testimonials with photographs of her work.

She clicked on the “about us” section and read Becky Kiefer’s credentials, both impressive and extensive. Could it be she was desperate to get her business off the ground and took Deanna out after witnessing the confrontation between her and Liz?

Up next was Tammi O’Toole. Tammi’s portfolio was equally impressive. She’d worked for a high-end designer in New York City before moving to Grand Rapids, where she’d “collaborated” with Deanna. There was no mention of a partnership.

Leaving the Designer Diva page open, Liz started a new search, this one focusing on Tammi O’Toole. There were various photos of the woman, along with press releases. What Liz found most interesting was the woman in the photos looked nothing like the

one she'd met. The New York Tammi O'Toole was a fashionista, dressed in the latest styles and high-end couture.

Liz returned to Designer Diva's website and clicked on Carol Wright's information. Her bio was brief, only stating she had been working alongside Deanna for a few years.

She clicked away and returned to the main screen before opening her email account. Tucked in among the junk mail was a message from Becky:

“ Hello, Mrs. Rasmussen,

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to turn your chateau into a dream home. Working closely together and with a combined vision, along with my level of expertise, I'm confident we can make it happen. I use only pre-certified, licensed and vetted contractors and suppliers. Attached is a sample listing of both .”

The email gave a general timeline with the project broken down into segments. Although price was important, Liz's primary concern was how long it would take, and her heart plummeted when Becky cautioned it could take up to two years to renovate the five thousand plus square foot home.

Liz didn't have two years. She didn't even have two months. A small note at the bottom included a second timeline, this one for the completion of the main living area, which Becky promised could be ready in roughly eight to ten weeks.

She was still going over the quote when Floyd arrived home. “I got the quote back from Becky Kiefer. She thinks she can have us living in the lower level in about eight weeks.”

“Eight weeks doesn't sound too bad.” Floyd shrugged out of his jacket and hung it on

the hook near the door. “What do you think?”

“That maybe we should sign on the dotted line and get the ball rolling.”

“You have my blessing. How much is she charging?” Floyd leaned over Liz’s shoulder, briefly scanning the proposal and breakdown. “That sounds fairly reasonably priced.”

“And a great deal lower than the hundred thousand Deanna quoted us. I wonder how the authorities are doing on her murder investigation.” Liz told him what she’d found, how Tammi O’Toole had moved from New York to West Michigan and possessed an impressive background. “I checked Designer Diva’s website. There was no mention of a partnership.”

“I guess what I heard was wrong,” Floyd said.

“I’m torn about hiring Becky.” Liz swung around and faced her husband. “She should be at the top of the list of suspects. Think about it...she was in direct competition with Deanna. How convenient would it be for Designer Diva to be out of the picture and for Becky to swoop in and steal their clientele?”

“What about the third gal, Carol?” Floyd asked .

“Carol Wright. I wasn’t able to find out much about her. She’s a bit of a mystery woman.” Liz turned her attention back to the computer. “Let me fire off a reply to Becky to see if we can agree on a time to meet.”

“Don’t forget Tate’s bringing the mongrel by in the morning.”

“Mongrel?” Liz playfully wagged her finger. “Echo’s puppy is adorable, and so is the one we picked out. Besides, we could use a guard dog.”

“I’m teasing. I love dogs.” Floyd leaned in for a quick kiss. “I reckon we should figure out what’s for dinner.”

The evening passed uneventfully, with Liz jotting down some ideas she had for the chateau’s lower level. She and Floyd discussed installing surveillance cameras after hearing from the neighbor someone was lurking nearby, and then Hank’s story about how he and the others had been shot at. With a long day on tap, the couple turned in early .

Liz spent a restless night wondering what they would do if they couldn’t figure out who was hanging around and, even more concerning, if the authorities weren’t able to determine who had murdered Deanna.

Floyd slipped out of bed before Liz, and she found him in the kitchen making breakfast. They went over the day’s plans while he cooked and she loaded the dishwasher. After breakfast, she threw on some old clothes, eager for Tate and her new puppy’s arrival.

She couldn’t wait to fuss over her new little princess. In fact, if she were ever to come back as an animal, she wanted to come back as a Shih Tzu...spoiled, pampered and pretty.

Liz checked the bags of goodies she and Floyd had purchased the previous day and then headed to the barn to wait for Tate. He arrived a few minutes later carrying a small dog carrier.

Liz’s heart melted the moment she laid eyes on the puppy. Frightened at first, she cowered in the cage's corner, but Liz’s soft voice and gentle coaxing eventually lured her out.

Floyd hovered nearby, watching his wife and the small pup bond. “You two seem to

be hitting it off.”

“She’s definitely a keeper.” Liz watched as the pup delicately nibbled the treat she offered. “I’ve already picked out her name.”

“Killer?” Floyd teased.

“Very funny. I’m naming her Duchess.” Liz stroked one of her ears and cuddled her close. “Isn’t she perfect?”

“It looks like you and our last little princess are gonna be best friends,” Tate drawled.

“We are. Thank you for bringing her to me,” Liz said. “Duchess and I are heading over to the new house.”

She wrote out a check, thanked Tate again, and made her way out of the barn’s office. Her heart skipped a beat as headlights flashed across the driveway and a car pulled in alongside her SUV. “Great. Now what?”

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Floyd caught up with her as an officer, a man Liz didn't recognize, emerged, and for good reason. He was a Michigan State Police officer.

"Morning." Floyd was the first to greet him.

"Good morning. I'm looking for Floyd and Elizabeth Rasmussen."

"I'm Floyd and this is my wife, Elizabeth."

"I'm investigating the death of Deanna Andretti, a local business owner who was well-acquainted with you."

"Not that well-acquainted," Liz corrected. "I've already talked to Sheriff Nelson and told him everything I know."

"The state police are working alongside the Montbay County Sheriff's Department to investigate Ms. Andretti's death. I'm speaking with everyone who had contact with her leading up to that day." The officer flipped his iPad open and tapped the screen. "Elizabeth Rasmussen and the deceased met to go over a potential project."

"Correct," Liz confirmed. "Floyd was there, as well as three of her colleagues and my sister."

"Gloria Rutherford-Kennedy," the officer said.

"Yes."

“Mrs. Kennedy is also on my list to chat with. Although you spoke with Sheriff Nelson, I would like you to tell me about your meeting with Ms. Andretti on the day of her death.”

Liz briefly outlined the events, starting with Deanna’s arrival, pointing out how Andretti’s colleagues spent most of the time hovering off to the side. “They toured the property and then she gave me a written preliminary estimate. It went downhill from there.”

“Downhill?” the officer prompted .

“I’ll be blunt. Andretti was hinting at resurrecting an old matter.” Liz waved dismissively. “It was a frivolous lawsuit. I informed her we wouldn’t be using her services and asked her to leave.”

“How did she react?”

“She called me a few choice names.”

“Such as...”

“Money-grubber, trailer trash. I believe the word tramp was also thrown around. She was miffed when I rejected her ridiculously high prices.”

“Did you threaten Ms. Andretti?”

“No.”

“An eyewitness claims you threatened her.”

Liz tightened her grip on a wiggling Duchess. “By ordering her off my property?”

The officer tapped the screen again. “I believe your exact words were that she—Ms. Andretti—wouldn’t know the difference between Florida Frumpy and California Chic if it punched her in the face. Ms. Andretti appeared distressed and even questioned if you were threatening her.”

“I might have said something along those lines, but surely you can’t believe that was a threat to her life.”

“My Liz is as cool as a cucumber,” Floyd said. “It was a stressful day, and she was under duress. Punching someone in the face is not even close to strangling them with a curtain.”

“Let’s continue. You ordered her off the property, and then what happened?”

“She left. End of story.”

The officer pinned Liz with a stare. “You were caught on camera in front of Designer Diva’s store the same night.”

“But I never saw her again,” Liz argued. “I was in town. Curiosity got the better of me and I wondered if perhaps I hadn’t made a mistake. I got out of my SUV and walked to the front window. The place was closed. I thought I saw someone in the back and then I left.”

“You returned home?”

“No. I stopped by Hometown Designs, a business owned by Becky Kiefer, Ms. Andretti’s colleague, to discuss getting a quote from her. She left a card during the blowout...err...meeting between me and Deanna Andretti.”

“How did Ms. Kiefer appear?”

“She seemed fine, although I had only just met her,” Liz said. “I will say I was surprised to discover she worked alongside Andretti, yet owned her own design company.”

“What about the threat Deanna received?” Floyd asked. “I heard she got some sort of threatening note.”

The cop’s head shot up. “Who told you that?”

Floyd shrugged. “I heard it from one of my employees. Eric Andretti was an area farmer for a good many years. When someone dies, it’s not uncommon for rumors to fly.”

“This information is not publicly available. I’m not at liberty to comment.”

“Look.” Liz shifted her feet. “I’m sure Becky Kiefer can vouch for me. If I had strangled Deanna Andretti, I seriously doubt I would be in any frame of mind to stop by her place to discuss a project and then shop at the local grocery store.”

“If you don’t mind, I would like permission to look at your cell phone.”

Liz frowned. “What does my cell phone have to do with Deanna Andretti’s death?”

Floyd lifted a hand. “Do you have a search warrant?”

“Not yet.”

“Meaning you plan to get one,” Liz said.

“Possibly. We can do this the easy way or the hard way. ”

“I’ll go get it.” Liz hurried into the house and grabbed her cell phone. Back outside, she entered the access code and handed it to the cop. “I have nothing to hide.”

Liz and Floyd exchanged a nervous glance as the officer grew quiet. Finally, he handed the phone back to her. “Mr. Rasmussen, you knew the deceased.”

“I did. As I mentioned, Deanna’s ex-husband was a farmer. We were in the same line of work.”

“How long did you know her?”

Floyd thought about it. “Maybe ten years. Eric sold his farm a few years back, so I haven’t seen much of him lately.”

“And Ms. Andretti?” the officer probed. “How well did you know her?”

“About as well as I knew Eric. ”

“Yet you contacted her, out of the blue, to come to your recently purchased property to give you a quote for a major project?”

“Yes, because it needs a lot of work and I promised my wife we would fix the place up the way she wants it.”

“Did you ever date Ms. Andretti?”

“No.”

“You’re sure?” the officer probed.

“Positive. We were acquaintances, that’s all.”

“I have copies of Ms. Andretti’s cell phone records and texts. Your number has popped up several times over the course of the last few months.”

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The color drained from Floyd's face. "I might've talked to Deanna a few times when I first had my eye on the property over on Cash Creek Road. The house needs a lot of work, and I didn't think it was fair to lay the burden of fixing the place up on my wife, so I was trying to be pro-active and line someone up to help."

The state police officer rocked back on his heels, eyeing Floyd skeptically. "So it took several phone calls to line up a time to schedule an appointment for Deanna Andretti to see the place?"

"I can't rightly recall how many times we chatted. I do believe I called her once and then she kept calling me back, asking a lot of questions." Floyd pointed out that if the officer verified what he'd said, he would discover Deanna was the one who made the calls .

"Your relationship with Ms. Andretti was strictly business?"

"Absolutely. She may have had other ideas, but I can assure you it was one-sided."

The officer asked a few more questions, pointed questions about how long Floyd had known Deanna along with details about their conversations. Finally, he left.

An uncomfortable silence ensued as Liz stewed over the fact that, although Floyd hadn't been untruthful, he also hadn't been completely forthright in how much he and Deanna had chatted.

She wanted to believe there was nothing to it, but couldn't ignore the fact Andretti had maintained contact with Floyd, even if only to secure a big job—a hundred

thousand dollar deal at that. And her husband had money, more than enough to pay what Liz deemed an outrageous amount, considering it was only for the design fee .

“I’m sorry, sugar lips. Looking back, I suppose Deanna was making excuses to contact me, but I can assure you it was all on her end, not on mine.”

“Unfortunately, it appears we’re both on the investigator’s radar now. You because of your alleged relationship with her and mine because one of her lovely colleagues threw me under the bus.” Liz’s level of aggravation grew but she wisely let it go. Picking a fight would only make matters worse.

Floyd was either lying or telling Liz the truth. It was up to her to decide, or trust her husband was being forthright. The only problem was, she had a hunch there was more to come. More questioning by the police.

After all, the Rasmussen family had a history of less than stellar behavior...Floyd’s brother, Floyd’s niece. Perhaps the authorities thought there was at least one more bad apple in the bunch—her husband .

“Duchess and I are going to the house.” Liz placed the puppy in the carrier she’d lined with a soft cotton blanket. “What are your plans?”

“I want to head over to the hardware store to pick up some surveillance cameras. If someone is messing around the property, I want to catch them. If you run into the neighbor across the street, maybe you could ask her if she saw anything suspicious last night.”

“I will.” Liz impulsively hugged her husband as he held the door. “I love you, Floyd. I know there was nothing going on between you and Deanna.”

Floyd attempted a half-hearted smile. “I guess I’m a numbskull and she was reading

more into me calling her than I realized.”

“We women can be conniving and creative when we want something.” Liz chuckled. “Although I wouldn’t say our relationship started out that way.”

“You were trying to get away from me and this farm just as fast as you could,” Floyd said. “I was intrigued from the moment I laid eyes on you when you strolled into the office dressed for an afternoon of shopping on Park Avenue instead of a day in the milking parlor.”

“I was under duress, all because of Gloria, who pressured me into taking the job.” Liz shuddered. “Those were the bad old days, before my handsome knight in shining armor rescued me.”

“So why did you give an old farmer a second glance?” Floyd asked.

“Because you were, you are different. You love all of this, yet you’re educated and well-traveled. You enjoy nice things, yet you’re down to earth. In other words, you’re the complete package, and I can’t imagine my life without you.” Liz tilted her head, her eyes meeting Floyd’s. “When did you decide I was the one?”

The smile on Floyd’s face widened. “The moment Betty whacked you in the face with her tail. You went back for a second round. I knew right then I had found a beautiful woman who also had spunk. ”

“I suppose I have some spunk.”

“More than you give yourself credit for,” Floyd said. “I see the look of determination in your eyes. Our new home is going to be a chateau fit for a queen by the time we’re done.”

“I hope you’re right.” Liz checked to make sure Duchess was safely inside the crate and slid behind the wheel. “If you don’t mind, I would like to give Gloria a call. She has a knack for solving mysteries and may have picked up on something.”

After Floyd left, Liz sat in her SUV and texted her sister. As luck would have it, Gloria promptly replied she was hosting the Garden Girl’s weekly breakfast and invited Liz to join them.

“I’m on my way. I have something exciting to show you.”

“Exciting as in good or bad?” Gloria texted back.

“Good. For once, I have a pleasant surprise. ”

It had been several months since Liz’s last visit to her sister’s farm, and if one thing could be said about Gloria’s place and the small town of Belhaven, it was that nothing ever changed.

She passed by the same fields, small ranch homes and sprawling farmhouses. Life in Belhaven moved at a slower pace. Anyone new to the area would be shocked to discover the place was a virtual hotbed of criminal activity, something Liz’s sister somehow found herself continually embroiled in the middle of.

Reaching Gloria and Paul’s place, Liz squeezed in between Lucy’s Jeep and Ruth’s spymobile. She cast a quick glance in the backseat where Duchess sat staring, itching to be released from her confines.

“I’m sure Mally will love meeting you.” Liz gathered up her purse, slinging it over her shoulder as she released the latch on Duchess’s crate. She scooped the small pup up and carefully made her way around the vehicles to the back porch steps .

Gloria met her at the door. “Who is this adorable beauty?”

“Duchess. Remember Echo’s new puppy? This is Teddy’s sibling. I got her this morning.”

“I forgot all about the puppy. She’s a sweetheart.” Gloria took the small dog from her sister and held her up for a closer inspection. “I love her color.”

Ruth, Dot, Lucy and Margaret gathered around, all oohing and aahing over the small puppy. Liz set her on the floor and she pranced in a circle, soaking up all the attention.

Mally made her way over and cautiously sniffed the small pup. Giving her the Mally “seal of approval,” she crouched down on all fours and yipped excitedly.

“Duchess and Mally are going to be great friends. Have a seat.” Gloria patted an empty chair .

“Something smells heavenly.” Liz sniffed appreciatively. “I already ate breakfast, but I’m sure I can eat a little more.”

Gloria, with help from Lucy, carried platters of food, donuts and Danish, a large bowl of seasoned home fries, scrambled eggs, crispy bacon, toast, orange juice, and mixed berries to the kitchen table.

Liz patted her stomach. “I’ve already gained five pounds just looking at all of this.”

“And now for the star of the show.” Gloria placed a covered dish in the center and lifted the lid. “Well?”

“There goes another five pounds,” Liz joked.

“It’s almost too pretty to eat,” Dot said.

“It’s a breakfast Bundt cake with cinnamon, pecans and something else.” Gloria expertly sliced several pieces and passed out small plates to her friends. “After we finish praying, you need to give me your honest feedback. ”

“Now this is a challenge I can sink my teeth into,” Lucy joked.

Gloria took her seat at the table. They bowed their heads, and she began praying, “Dear Lord, thank you for this beautiful morning, for bringing all of us together to fellowship and encourage one another. Lord, we pray for the family of Deanna Andretti and lift Liz up. Please help the authorities catch whoever is responsible for the woman’s death and give my sister patience as she tackles her new home project. Thank you for Your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ.”

“Amen,” the women echoed.

“Dig in.” Gloria clapped her hands. “Try the Bundt cake first and tell me the secret ingredient.”

Ruth was the first to guess. “It’s not chocolate.”

“Nope.”

“Or vanilla,” Lucy chimed in .

“Caramel something.” Margaret scooped up a second bite of the rich topping.

“Close,” Gloria said.

“I know. It’s butterscotch,” Dot said.

“Ding, ding. Dot’s the winner,” Gloria joked.

“She’s also the expert,” Lucy laughed.

While the breakfast dishes made their rounds, Liz filled them in on the recent developments, starting with the state police officer’s visit that morning. “They have Deanna’s cell phone records. Apparently, Floyd contacted her prior to buying the property over on Cash Creek Road. As I suspected, Deanna had more than a professional interest in my husband and viewed him contacting her as an invitation to keep calling.”

“So he called her one time and the rest of the calls were ones she made to Floyd,” Ruth verified.

“Calls and texts. ”

“Which means the authorities are taking a closer look at him, too,” Lucy said.

“Possibly. At least one of Deanna’s colleagues who was with her that day told the investigators I threatened her.”

Gloria made a choking sound. “Threatened her. How?”

“I said something along the lines of she wouldn’t know the difference between California chic and Florida frumpy if it punched her in the face. I remember saying it now, but it wasn’t like I planned on actually hitting the woman.”

“The colleagues seemed to think the argument escalated to the level of physical violence.” Margaret tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Exactly who are these people?”

“This is where it gets interesting. Becky Kiefer was one of them. She has her own

designer business.” Liz motioned to Gloria. “She’s the woman who handed you her business card right before they left.”

“Meaning she may have seized a golden opportunity to get rid of Deanna and steal all of her clients,” Ruth said.

“Tammi O’Toole is another. Floyd thought he heard she and Deanna were business partners, although Deanna didn’t introduce her as one.”

Gloria cut in. “If she was more than a colleague, don’t you think she would’ve corrected Deanna?”

“I know I would,” Lucy said.

“She was a designer who moved here from New York and began working with Deanna.”

“What about the third woman?” Gloria asked. “Her name was Carol.”

“Carol Wright. There’s not much information on her.”

Duchess, worn out from playtime with Mally, scampered over and pawed at Liz’s shoe. She picked her up and placed the pup on her lap. “I’m thinking one of those three women found an opportunity to get rid of Deanna after witnessing our small spat.”

“Maybe Deanna’s killer knew she was hot after Floyd and had been calling him. For all we know, she may have confided in one of them she was attracted to your husband,” Dot said.

Ruth picked up. “They arrived at the property, witnessed you arguing, and after you

kicked her off the property, put a plan in motion to take her out.”

“Two of the three have potential motive,” Lucy added. “Becky Kiefer, who was in direct competition with Deanna and possibly Tammi O’Toole, if she was a business partner.”

“Is that enough motive to kill the woman?” Liz polished off the rest of her butterscotch Bundt cake. “This was delicious.”

“Thanks,” Gloria beamed. “It’s a new Missy’s Meals in Minutes recipe.”

“You still watch her show?”

“Every week,” Gloria said. “Back to Deanna’s death. I’m with Liz. I believe taking a closer look at her colleagues is the next logical step.”

“We need a POA,” Margaret said.

“POA?” Liz asked.

“Plan of action. I’m up for some sleuthing,” Lucy said.

Dot tapped Liz’s arm. “Have you had any luck figuring out who’s snooping and shooting around your property?”

“No. I guess I have more than one crisis.” Liz sucked in a breath. “Figuring out who murdered Deanna and who might be targeting our property.”

“You’ve come to the right place for help,” Margaret said.

“The Garden Girls are officially on the case.” Gloria rubbed her hands together.

“Now, let’s start working on that plan.”

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Ruth pulled a small notepad and pen from her purse. “We need a list of suspects, anyone who may have had a motive for killing Deanna Andretti.”

“Her ex-husband,” Margaret said. “Nothing screams killer like the ex.”

“What’s his first name?”

“Eric,” Liz said. “Eric Andretti.”

“Eric makes it to the top of the list. Tammi is below him.” Ruth carefully jotted down the names. “Who’s next? Becky something.”

“Becky Kiefer, the colleague who was also a competitor. K-I-E-F-E-R. Last, but not least, is Carol Wright, which gives us four potential whodunnits.” Liz snapped her fingers. “There’s one more thing. Someone mentioned Deanna was being threatened before her death.”

“Being threatened, how?” Gloria asked.

“Floyd heard about it from someone out at the farm, something about a note. The cop who stopped by this morning seemed to know what he was talking about but wouldn’t elaborate.”

“Interesting,” Ruth murmured. “Floyd knew about an alleged threat.”

“Unless, as he pointed out, someone at the farm mentioned it to him.”

Gloria and Ruth exchanged a look, one Liz didn't miss. "Do you think my husband killed Deanna?"

"I..." Ruth shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "We don't know him that well, Liz. To be perfectly honest, his family doesn't have a very good track record."

"What would be Floyd's motive? My husband doesn't have a motive." Liz abruptly stood .

Gloria motioned for her to have a seat. "Don't get your feathers ruffled. We need to cover all the angles and look at every plausible scenario."

"We're not accusing him, but you must admit it raises a red flag," Ruth added.

"I'm sorry, Ruth." Liz sat back down. "I'm on edge. Floyd springing the house on me, the nosy neighbor poking around, Hank, the homeless man telling Dot someone was shooting guns, not to mention Deanna's death. I'm overwhelmed."

"For good reason." Lucy patted her hand. "We'll try to determine who's responsible, but to do that, we'll need to do some digging, as uncomfortable as it may be."

"You're the experts," Liz said. "If all of you working together can figure this out, I owe you a bunch."

"We'll start with Eric Andretti," Ruth said. "I'm gonna implement my Leonard techniques to do a little in-depth research. "

Leonard Navoy, the founder of NASCA, North American Surveillance and Communications Association, was a friend of Ruth's who had murky methods of obtaining confidential information.

“Meaning some questionable methods,” Liz guessed.

“I’ll go grab the computer.” Gloria hustled into the dining room. She returned with her laptop and set it in front of her friend.

“Thank you.” Ruth began humming under her breath. “You know the drill. None of you have ever seen me access certain sites for any reason.”

“Nope.” Lucy shook her head. “In fact, it’s honestly a mystery how information magically appears at your fingertips.”

“The less we know, the better,” Dot said.

“You have that right.” Ruth adjusted her reading glasses. “Hmm.”

“Hmm what?” Liz leaned in .

“I’m tracing the timeline of Deanna and Eric’s marriage.” Ruth began humming again, clicking through screens at lightning speed.

“You’re pretty proficient at...researching,” Liz said. “You must go in there a lot.”

“More than I should,” Ruth admitted. “It’s a hobby of mine.”

“Snooping,” Lucy said. “How often do you snoop on us?”

“More than I should,” Ruth repeated.

“Ruth Carpenter.”

“Kidding. I’m kidding. I already know everything there is to know about all of you.”

Gloria made a choking sound.

“Seriously, you guys need to lighten up. Let’s stay on task. I found where Eric and Deanna Andretti listed their farm and acres of land, as well as rental properties for sale roughly three years ago. It looks like the Andrettis made a pretty penny.” Ruth snatched the pen off the table and began jotting down numbers. “Wow. Two point two million. That’s a nice chunk of change.” She grew quiet.

“What else are you finding?” Liz asked.

“I’m still following the yellow brick road paved with gold. The couple legally separated nine months later. Their divorce was finalized another year after that, and the assets were equally split. Now...this is interesting.”

Gloria’s eyes squinted as she struggled to follow along on Ruth’s search. “You found a motive for murder?”

“Maybe. It appears Deanna Andretti purchased a commercial property in downtown Green Springs not long after the sale of the couple’s assets.”

“The Designer Diva store,” Liz said.

Ruth rattled off the address.

“That’s it. ”

“She paid cash. Deanna owned it outright. The property is in her name only, although she was still legally married to Eric.” Ruth did some rough calculations. “Take away a half million for the purchase. It still leaves the Mr. and Mrs. with over a million and a half, not accounting for capital gains.”

“So you can kiss another hefty chunk of change goodbye,” Margaret said. “They probably had less than a million left after taxes and her property purchase.”

“Yep. The cash cow has left the building,” Ruth joked. “The couple divorced. Let’s take a look at the nuts and bolts of the divorce decree, something I never would’ve been able to access without Leonard’s help.”

The others grew quiet while their friend concentrated.

“Oh, boy. I think we’re finally onto something,” Ruth said. “You’re not going to believe this.”

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“Deanna Andretti was paying her husband alimony,” Gloria guessed.

“Nope. The exact opposite. Eric Andretti was paying her to the tune of a couple thousand dollars a month.”

“Floyd mentioned something along those lines. Not about the alimony, but about the couple divorcing not long after they sold a bunch of assets.” Liz began pacing. “While still married, Deanna somehow persuaded Eric to give her the money to buy a building in downtown Green Springs and put it in her name only. They divorced, and she was collecting alimony.”

“In a nutshell. ”

“Which brings up another question,” Margaret said. “What did Eric Andretti do with his share of the proceeds?”

“Perhaps they knew their marriage was in trouble and the couple reached some sort of agreement. Deanna got a building. Eric took his share and invested it in something else.”

“An investment which made enough money that when they finally divorced, he was forced to pay her alimony,” Dot added.

Ruth motioned to Gloria’s printer. “I want to print off the legal findings.”

“Hang on.” Gloria checked the printer’s paper tray. “There’s plenty of paper.”

“Let me do a copy and paste.” Ruth made quick work of assembling what she wanted, pasted them in a notepad, and pressed the print button.

“You’re getting pretty high tech there,” Margaret teased .

“I’m getting smarter and streamlining my investigative skills.” The printer whirred, and Ruth snatched up the single sheet of paper. She skimmed the contents and handed it to Liz. “We need to find out more about Deanna’s colleagues, face-to-face.”

“I’m out,” Liz said. “They’ve met me.”

“Ditto for me,” Gloria said.

“Well, Lucy?” Ruth tapped Lucy’s arm. “You and Margaret are the reno experts. Do you think you can come up with an acceptable reason to show up on Designer Diva’s doorstep and do some snooping around?”

“Ditto for Becky Kiefer’s business,” Liz said. “For all we know, Designer Diva is closed now that Deanna is dead.”

“If Eric Andretti or even Tammi O’Toole have some sort of vested interest in the business, I’m going to take a wild guess they’ll want to keep the doors open,” Gloria said .

“There’s an easy way to find out.” Margaret grabbed her cell phone. “I found the number. The line is ringing.” She held up a finger. “Hello, my name is Margaret Hansen. My friend and I own a property investment company. We’re working on a potential project and would like to discuss it with you.”

Margaret paused, waiting for the person on the other end of the line to reply. “Let me check with my partner. Can you hold? Thank you.”

She covered the phone with her hand. “She has an opening this afternoon, around two.”

Lucy gave her a thumbs up.

Margaret returned to the call. “Yes. Two this afternoon will work. You’re in downtown Green Springs, on Main Street? My name is Margaret Hansen and what was your name? Tammi O’Toole. Great. We’ll see you then.” She ended the call and waved the phone in the air. “What about the other gal, Becky? We’ll be in town. Might as well kill two birds with one stone. ”

“She owns Hometown Designs. I have her number.” Liz scrolled through her cell phone’s recent list of contacts and pulled up Becky’s number. “Let me know when you’re ready.”

“I’m ready.” Margaret tapped in the number Liz rattled off and, once again, went through the spiel about being in the market for some design ideas. Unfortunately, Becky was booked for the rest of the day.

Margaret thanked her and promised to call back before hanging up. “We’ll start with Designer Diva. If we’re still on the hunt for clues, we’ll call her back to schedule an appointment.”

“I feel guilty about dragging you into my mess,” Liz said.

“Dragging us into it?” Ruth arched a brow. “We love this kind of stuff.”

“Ruth’s right,” Gloria said.

“Maybe I’m stressed, but I’m not getting a good vibe.” Liz pressed a light hand to her forehead. “ What if someone is trying to set Floyd or me up? Either way, I’m almost

certain one of those women who worked with Deanna knows more than they're letting on."

"We still have very little information about Carol Wright," Dot reminded them.

"Let me take a quick peek to see what I can find." Ruth began tapping the keys. "I have some good news and some bad news."

"Good news first," Liz said.

"I found Carol Wright."

"What's the bad news?" Lucy asked.

"I found Carol Wrights, as in multiple people in this area with the same name."

"Crud." Liz blew air through thinned lips. "Can you narrow them down by county?"

"I can't, but I'm sure Leonard has a few tricks up his sleeve. I'll call him later to see if he has any suggestions." Ruth logged off the super-secret websites, shoved her chair back and stood. "I hate to spy and run, but I need to head home to see if the part for my new yard surveillance project delivered. I paid for expedited delivery and it was supposed to arrive by noon."

Liz, along with Duchess, trailed behind Ruth and followed her to the spymobile. "You're still selling yard surveillance stuff?"

"Yep. It's a more lucrative business venture than I ever imagined. Business was booming right around Christmas. People were ordering my nutcracker, Cornelius, left and right, gearing up for when the porch pirates came out in full force." Ruth made a diving motion with her hand. "As soon as January rolled around, orders tanked,

although it gave me time to tinker with a new project. Summer is right around the corner and customers are thinking about protecting their property from rude neighbors who let their dogs poo in their yard and don't clean up, kids doing the ding-dong doorbell pranks, you name it. ”

“I might be interested in purchasing a piece or two,” Liz said. “Do you have any in stock?”

Ruth perked up. “You’re looking for a cash-and-carry transaction?”

“Yeah. Cash-and-carry. If you have something ready to go, I’m interested in purchasing it for the new property.”

The other women wandered out of the house, curious to find out what Ruth and Liz were discussing.

“I thought you were hot to get out of here,” Lucy said.

“I’m in the middle of a business transaction,” Ruth said. “Liz might be interested in purchasing some yard surveillance.”

Gloria laughed. “Are you going to spy on Christi Kravitz?”

“I’m going to keep an eye on our investment and find out what the nosy neighbor is up to when we’re not around,” Liz said. “The woman spends almost as much time on my property as she does on her own. If she can watch what we’re doing, I have no qualms about returning the favor.”

“My spring collection sold out. All I have left is the prototype of an Easter bunny.” Ruth flung the spymobile’s rear door open and pulled a rabbit out.

“Good grief.” Margaret curled her lip. “I thought you put Sunny the evil bunny to rest.”

“I haven’t been able to find a good home for him.” Ruth eased the rabbit onto the ground and shifted him so that he faced the others. “I only have one, but if you take him now, I can start tinkering with a replacement.”

“One that won’t give small children nightmares?” Dot teased.

Ruth rattled off a reasonable price. “The cost of supplies has gone up, although it’s still a bargain. This thing will monitor your front yard, the mailbox, all the way over to your neighbor’s house. ”

Liz inched forward, studying the rabbit’s glittery green eyes. His heart-shaped lips turned up at the corners, creating an evil smirk. She tapped the end of his pointed nose. “That might hurt.”

“Only if you ran into it.”

Duchess pawed at Liz’s blouse, eager to put some distance between them and the evil bunny.

“I’ll take it. In fact, if you have extra batteries, I’ll buy those from you too.” Liz ran inside to grab her purse. She filled out a blank check and handed it to Ruth. “Are there any special instructions?”

“You’ll need the app. Give me your phone.” Ruth uploaded the yard art surveillance app and showed her how to use it. “All you need to do is click on the rabbit icon to pull up the camera. It’s live 24/7 unless you turn it off.” She took a step back and waved her hand in front of Sunny’s eyes.

Ting...tingle. Liz's phone chimed.

"It's motion sensitive. If something or someone passes in front of it, the app will chime. "

"Sweet." Liz tapped the button. A live feed captioned "Sunny" popped up. "This is slick. Thank you. I love it."

"I have one small piece of advice. Try not to stare into his eyes. There's something about the beam. It makes me see double if I stare into them for too long."

"Duly noted." With Ruth's assistance, Liz loaded the rabbit into the back of her SUV. She thanked the women for their help and Margaret and Lucy promised to catch up with her after they met with Tammi O'Toole.

Liz gave them a cheery wave and steered onto the road, feeling much more optimistic about the investigation now that the Garden Girls were officially on the case.

And she was looking forward to finding out exactly what Christi Kravitz was up to when she and Floyd weren't around.

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“Are you ready to roll, Lucy?” Margaret studied the Designer Diva’s storefront. “We need to pay close attention to the recent projects, not to mention try to figure out the relationship between Tammi O’Toole and Deanna Andretti, and why O’Toole is keeping the business open if she’s not a partner. She came across as being a little uptight when we talked on the phone.”

“Not surprising. How can you be totally chill when your colleague was just murdered?”

“Totally chill? Where did that come from?”

“Paige,” Lucy said. “I’m talking my daughter’s lingo.”

“She seems to have settled into farm life and loves working for Floyd. ”

“I’ll be the first to admit when she moved here after fleeing the hippie compound in California, I didn’t think she’d hang around, but something changed after her ex kidnapped her. It was a wake-up call, and we both realized nothing is more important than family.”

“I’m happy for you, Lucy, and for Paige. She may have been a wild child in her younger years, but she’s finally come into her own.” Margaret unbuckled her seatbelt. “I wish Chad would move closer, maybe even settle down and marry, but he seems content living in Albuquerque. If not for you and the others, not to mention Stephen, I would be lonely.”

“We’ll always be here for you, Margaret, whether you and Stephen decide to take

your relationship to the next level or are living happily ever after as an unmarried couple. After the fiasco with my ex, Bill, I haven't found anyone I click with, you know?"

"Kind of like Ruth. She's perfectly content with her surveillance business, hanging out with us and enjoying her golden years. You have your guns. Ruth has her spy stuff. Dot and Ray have the Hot Meals on Wheels program. Gloria has a great life."

"Now, all we have to do is help Liz get on the right track." Lucy reached for the door handle. "Is that who I think it is?"

Margaret followed Lucy's gaze and watched as a spry, white-haired woman traipsed down the sidewalk, moving at a brisk pace. "Eleanor Whittaker." She flung the Jeep's passenger side door open. "Eleanor!"

Eleanor did an about-face.

"Over here." Margaret waved.

Eleanor waved back, waiting for them to catch up. "Hey, Lucy, Margaret. How's it going?"

"Good," Lucy said. "Margaret and I have an appointment at Designer Diva."

"Deanna Andretti's place. I heard she died. "

"Someone strangled her," Margaret said. "Lucy and I are doing a little intel."

"Oh?" Eleanor blinked rapidly. "Who's in the hot seat this time?"

"Liz," Margaret and Lucy said in unison.

“Liz argued with Deanna and kicked her off her property hours before her death,” Lucy said. “We’re trying to figure out if her colleagues know more about what happened than they’re letting on.”

“I met Deanna once, at a zoom class. She had a hard time keeping up. I mentioned Rose’s vitality pills to her, but she didn’t seem interested. I suppose you can’t help everyone.”

“I miss Rose,” Margaret said.

“She’s coming to town to host the grand opening of VitaNew’s new store in Rockville,” Eleanor said. “Don’t mention it to Dot. Rose wants to surprise her. ”

Lucy made a zipping motion across her lips. “My lips are sealed. When?”

“In a few weeks. Johnnie’s coming, too. I invited them to stay at my place. Seeing how I’m her number one field sales representative, I figured we could strategize while she’s in town.” Eleanor’s watch chimed. “Gotta run. I’m hosting a workshop for the gals at the Montbay County Supper Club. Ciao.”

Margaret watched as Eleanor hustled off. “I wish I had half her energy.”

“Vitality potion courtesy of Rose. It will be nice to see Rose again.” Lucy held the door and followed her friend into the designer showroom. A woman with light brown hair, tall, and sporting a thick layer of makeup, stood near the back. “Hello.”

Lucy greeted her. “I’m Lucy Carlson. This is my partner, Margaret Hansen. We have a two o’clock appointment with Tammi. ”

“I’m Tammi.” The woman stepped around the side of the counter. She extended a hand to Lucy first and then to Margaret. “Welcome to Designer Diva. How can I help

you?”

“I’m a real estate agent. Margaret and I flip area homes. We have our eye on a high-end property. It needs a total gut job and we’re looking to partner up with a designer.”

“You’ve come to the right place. We specialize in high-end design,” Tammi said.

“Are you the owner?” Margaret asked.

“Not technically, but I’m second in command. As far as your project—how would it work?”

“Our plan is to purchase the property using a hard money loan. Our partner, aka designer, would extend credit for renovations. After covering the costs of the repairs and renovations, we split the profit.”

“Where is this property located? ”

“It’s here in Montbay County,” Margaret said.

“In Green Springs?”

“We’re still negotiating the contract, so I would rather not say,” Lucy fibbed. “I’m sure you understand.”

“I...yes. You never can be too careful about someone going behind your back and stealing customers.” Tammi offered them a tight smile.

“Unfortunately, it’s been an issue in the past.” Lucy casually gazed around. “You mentioned that you’re not the owner.”

“The owner is currently...indisposed. I’m covering for her.”

Margaret shifted her purse. “We would love to see samples of your work and get some testimonials, if possible.”

“Of course.” Tammi led them to a nearby conference table where she showed them an array of renovations, including one of Lucy’s favorite styles, farmhouse chic. There was also a cool and contemporary condo and finally an elegant and expensive-looking Tudor-style home.

“These are all equally impressive,” Margaret said. “I’m sure you have glowing testimonials.”

Tammi reached behind her, grabbed a spiral-bound book and placed it on the table. “The most recent customer referrals are in the front.”

Margaret and Lucy grew quiet as they perused the recent projects, both focusing on figuring out if one of those customers may have had a reason to murder Designer Diva’s owner.

The front bell chimed, announcing an arrival. Lucy caught Tammi’s sharp intake of breath. Her eyes narrowed slightly, and she abruptly stood. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment.” She strode to the front and began talking to the woman in a low voice.

Judging by the tone of their voices, it wasn’t a pleasant conversation .

Lucy, with her back to the women, shifted slightly. She discreetly removed her cell phone from her pocket and turned it on. “Are they looking this way?” she whispered.

“No,” Margaret whispered back. “What are you doing?”

“Taking a picture of the recent projects.” Lucy steadied her hand and tapped the camera’s icon.

Tammi’s voice grew slightly louder, and she could’ve sworn she heard the other woman say “cops.”

“Hurry,” Margaret hissed under her breath. “They’re wrapping it up.”

Lucy dropped the phone in her purse and placed a light hand on the back of her neck.

The woman left, and Tammi returned to the table. “I apologize for the interruption. Where were we? ”

“Going over your recent projects,” Margaret said. “Is this all of them?”

“It is.” Tammi went into a long spiel about customer satisfaction and warranties. She threw out the names of a few brands Designer Diva used and slid a “welcome packet” toward them. “I would like to take a look at your agreement ahead of time, if we decide to proceed with a partnership.”

“Of course.” Lucy slipped out of her chair. “Your portfolio is impressive. We believe you would be a good fit for this venture. In the spirit of full disclosure, we’re discussing our potential project with a few other local designers.”

Margaret followed suit. “Without wasting more of your time, we’ll have a definitive answer about the tentative project, hopefully sometime next week.”

“Sounds perfect.” Tammi straightened the stack of papers and escorted the women to the front door. “We’ll be in touch? ”

“Yes. Absolutely.” Lucy handed Tammi her card. “Thank you for meeting with us.”

From the sidewalk, the friends could see O'Toole watching them as they crossed the street.

"Well?" Lucy waited until they were back inside the vehicle. "First impressions?"

"She knows her stuff. I love their work, but did you see their prices?" Margaret let out a low whistle. "Even if we had a million-dollar project waiting in the wings, Designer Diva might be too rich for our blood."

"I was thinking the same. Montbay County doesn't have a lot of million-dollar homes in need of renovating, so I'm guessing they bid outside the county," Lucy said.

"Did you get a clear picture of their recent projects?"

"I don't know. I was trying to hurry and my hand was shaking." Lucy retrieved her cell phone from her purse and pulled up the photos. "Not bad. They're clear enough to read the names."

"We're close to the other designer store, Hometown Designs," Margaret said. "While we're in the neighborhood, we should swing by there."

"I agree." Lucy checked her side mirror and steered onto the street, making the short drive to the second business in record time.

She eased into an empty spot and turned her attention to the small shop. It wasn't as upscale or large as Designer Diva's building, but it was tidy and clean.

Yellow sunflowers filled the planter boxes beneath the window and a blue and white striped awning greeted potential clients. The lights were on and Lucy could see someone standing near the front.

It was a woman. She was talking on her cell phone, a concerned expression on her face .

Margaret nudged her friend. “Are you seeing what I’m seeing?”

“Yes. A woman who’s having a serious conversation.”

“No. Not that. Isn’t she the woman who showed up at Designer Diva’s store a few minutes ago?”

“I don’t know. I was too busy trying to get a picture of the client list.”

“Well, I did and I’m almost certain this is the woman Tammi O’Toole was just arguing with.”

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Liz popped the SUV's rear hatch and carefully set Sunny the evil bunny on the ground.

Duchess, eager to escape her crate, scrambled out as soon as Liz opened the door. She gently placed her in the grass, staying close by while the small pup explored her new surroundings and future home. A light breeze cooled the morning air, ruffling the tufts of fur atop her head.

"Do you like farm life?" Liz grinned. "I figured you would be more of a city girl, Park Avenue, boutique shops, sidewalk cafés kinda pup."

Duchess dashed forward and toppled over in a tuft of weeds. Unscathed and unfazed, she continued exploring, with Liz trailing behind.

They reached the corner of the house and Liz's scalp tingled, a sure sign they were being watched. Her eyes were drawn to the small farm across the street and the minivan that was parked in the driveway. Christi was home.

The Shih Tzu circled around and stopped when she reached the bottom step.

"It's a long way up for such a pint-sized pup." Liz scooped her up, carried her to the top and set her back down.

While Duchess explored the landing, Liz hurried back to the SUV to grab Sunny. She slung her purse over her shoulder and wrapped both arms around the bunny's base. It was heavier than she remembered.

She reached the landing and placed the bunny next to the front door. Fiddling with her phone, she pulled up the surveillance app Ruth had installed. It took several minor adjustments before Liz was satisfied with the position, making sure her nosy neighbor's house was front and center .

She herded Duchess inside, where the fresh scent of Pine-Sol greeted them. Liz lingered in the doorway, reminding herself to focus on her blessings. Yes, the chateau needed a ton of work. Yes, it was a massive project, but it was her project. She could do whatever she wanted with it.

Toot. Toot.

Liz peered out the window and watched as Echo's four-door sedan pulled into the driveway. Not stopping at the main house, she turned right and drove toward the mobile home.

She had finished filling Duchess's food and water dishes when Echo and Teddy appeared on the back step. In fact, the pup was the first to notice them. She ran toward the door, pawing at Echo's shoe until she set Teddy, Duchess's sibling, on the kitchen floor.

"Isn't that so sweet?" Liz's throat clogged at their reunion, both barking and prancing excitedly .

"Just think," Echo said, "Duchess and Teddy will be neighbors."

Teddy caught sight of his sister's food dish and made a beeline for it.

Liz added another handful of food and set the bag on the counter. "Did you finish your shift at the farm?"

“Yeah. I’ve been shopping,” Echo said. “I’m grateful for Paige’s generosity in letting me stay with her, but I’m ready to get out of her hair and move into my own place.”

“I don’t blame you. Floyd is installing surveillance cameras. In the meantime, I have my own.” Liz led Echo through the house to the front landing. She stopped in front of Sunny the evil bunny. “This is it.”

Echo wrinkled her nose. “This is your surveillance camera? ”

“I bought it from Ruth Carpenter, the one who installed your new door locks. She specializes in surveillance yard art.”

Echo leaned forward to study the bunny’s face. “His eyes are glowing green.”

“Don’t stare at them too long. Ruth said they’ll make you see double.”

Echo promptly looked away. She ran a light hand over the rabbit’s ear. “I never would’ve guessed.” She glanced over her shoulder and grinned. “You’re monitoring the neighbor’s house across the street.”

“I am. Ms. I’m-into-bird-watching-as-well-as-neighbor-watching is getting a taste of her own medicine. I’m sure she’ll figure out soon enough she’s being watched.”

“How does it work?”

Liz gave her a brief rundown and showed her the app.

“I have to admit, this is slick. ”

“And worth every penny if it works.”

Paige's hippy van appeared. She honked her horn as she continued driving toward the mobile home. "Paige and I found some decent furniture at Thelma's Thrift Shop in downtown Belhaven. She offered to drop it off."

"That's wonderful Echo. I'm happy for you."

"I'm ready to move in today."

"But..."

Echo lifted a hand. "I appreciate your concern and understand that if someone was shooting at the homeless people, it's something I shouldn't take lightly. I've dealt with my share of indigents living in Detroit. Sometimes those situations are self-imposed."

"Meaning one or more of them may have been arguing, and the shooter was someone who was part of the group," Liz guessed .

"It's possible, and I'm willing to take my chances. The home has new door locks, thanks to Ruth. I have mace and a handgun, registered, permitted and all. I'm confident I can protect myself if I need to. Besides..." Echo motioned toward the neighbor's house. "If Kravitz is comfortable strolling around your property when no one is home, then I would say I'm fairly safe."

Echo had a point. The neighbor didn't seem to mind living in the middle of nowhere while her husband traveled. She was an adult and fully able to decide about her own safety. "All right. You argue a strong case."

"Hey, Liz." A beaming Paige bounded up the steps and gave her a warm hug. "Oh, no." She started giggling. "Please tell me you didn't inherit Ruth's evil surveillance bunny."

“I didn’t inherit it. I bought it.”

“That thing gives me the creep-olas. ”

“It is...disturbing. I think it’s the nose, or perhaps it’s the beady green eyes. Either way, Sunny is going to keep an eye on the place,” Liz said. “Echo was telling me you picked some things up at Thelma’s Thrift Shop.”

“We did. She got some great deals on furniture. You should see what we found.” Paige and Echo led Liz to the van, crammed top to bottom with furniture.

A small dresser, faux leather futon, and folding table and chairs were in the back. Tucked along the sides was a decorative mirror and several pieces of wall art. “Echo snagged all of this for less than a couple hundred bucks.”

“I have some stuff in the basement I’m no longer using and was considering donating,” Liz said.

“I’m in pretty good shape, although I could use a few lamps and small appliances like a toaster and coffeemaker,” Echo said .

“Both of which I can confirm I have.” Liz offered to keep Teddy at the house while the women unloaded the furniture. Back inside, she found the pups cuddled together on Duchess’s doggie bed, both sound asleep.

Liz tiptoed closer, quietly snapping a picture of them before placing her phone on the counter.

Up first on her to-do list was to tackle cleaning the downstairs half bath, just off the formal living room. The porcelain pedestal sink was filthy, but in excellent condition. The toilet, sporting a cracked lid, was another story.

While Liz worked, she thought about the state police officer's early morning surprise visit. Floyd never mentioned he'd been in contact with Deanna Andretti several times prior to her showing up at the house to discuss renovations.

Was there more to her husband and the dead woman's relationship than Floyd was letting on ?

Even though they were newlyweds, Liz believed she knew her husband well enough to know if he was sneaking around behind her back. If he had wanted Deanna Andretti, he could've had her. Why bother marrying Liz if he was in love with another woman?

Perhaps Floyd had been the one to pursue, and Deanna hadn't been interested. Liz quickly dismissed the idea. She had openly flirted with Floyd, right in front of Liz. No, the woman had been hot after her husband.

According to the officer, at least one of Deanna's colleagues claimed Liz had threatened her. Telling the woman she wouldn't know the difference between frumpy and chic if it punched her in the face was not a threat. Granted, it probably wasn't the wisest thing to say, but she'd said it in a moment of anger.

Why would the colleagues tell the investigators that, unless one or more of them was trying to deflect suspicion away from themselves ?

Gloria and her friends were experts at digging in and getting to the bottom of mysteries, which made her wonder if Lucy and Margaret were having any luck with Tammi.

A nagging concern flitted through Liz's mind. Was she making a mistake by entertaining the idea of hiring Becky Kiefer? What if she was the one who had strangled Deanna? She had motive and opportunity.

But then, so did Tammi if she was actually a partner, although as far as she knew, that wasn't the case. There was still the mysterious third "colleague," Carol Wright, who was flying under the radar. Whatever the case, Deanna had angered someone enough to kill her. The woman's death was a sobering reminder no one knew how much time they had left on earth.

Ting...tingle. Liz's cell phone alerted her to the surveillance camera's activity. She sprang to her feet and ran toward the side of the house, thinking it was probably Paige or Echo .

Agh! A woman's shrill scream filled the air.

Liz changed directions and made a mad dash down the long hall. She flew through the foyer and flung the front door open, her eyes darting back and forth, envisioning either Paige or Echo being attacked by a wild animal.

A sudden movement close to the drainage ditch that ran along the front of the property caught her eye. A woman with short blond hair was sprawled out on the ground. A pair of binoculars were wrapped around her neck.

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Liz raced down the front steps, taking them two at a time. She reached her neighbor at the same time as Paige and Echo.

Christi's eyelids fluttered, and she let out a low moan.

Liz leaned in. "Christi. It's me. Your neighbor, Liz. Can you hear me?"

The woman whimpered, her eyelids continuing to flutter.

"Christi." Liz repeated her name, this time louder. "Are you all right? What happened?"

"I-I heard a song sparrow in your front yard and brought my binoculars out to see if I could find him." Christi struggled to an upright position and placed a hand on her cheek, lightly pressing on the perfectly round indentation the eyepiece had made around her right eye. "I landed on my binoculars. Did they leave a mark?"

"They did." With Paige on one side and Liz on the other, the women helped Christi to her feet.

"I must've scared him off because I don't hear him any longer. He sings the most beautiful song." She sucked in a quick breath. "Trill...trill...trill," she sang. "Have you heard it?"

"No. I haven't." Liz plucked a clump of grass from the woman's hair. "I was in the back of the house when I heard you scream."

“Now that I’ve confirmed the sparrows are nearby, you’ll need to be careful. They sometimes nest in weeds and tall grass.”

“There are plenty of both around here,” Liz grimaced. She changed the subject. “While you’re here, I would like to introduce you to Echo Quigley. Echo is moving into the mobile home. ”

“Oh.” Christi’s brows knitted. “It’s very dark and kind of creepy around here at night.”

“If I recall correctly, you mentioned that your husband travels a great deal,” Liz said. “You should be thrilled to know there will be someone else around.”

“I am. I mean, of course,” Christi said. “We should exchange cell phone numbers.”

Echo cast the woman a hesitant look and then gave a small shrug of her shoulders before plucking her cell phone from her pocket. The women exchanged numbers and then Christi started in with fifty questions. Had Liz and Floyd found evidence of someone messing around the house? What were their plans for the acres of empty farm fields? Had they heard anything else about Deanna Andretti’s death?

Liz replied in as few words as possible, secretly wondering how the woman got anything done, considering the amount of time she spent sticking her nose in other people’s business .

Finally, Christi headed home, claiming her head hurt and that she wanted to put an ice pack on her eye.

“I don’t think she even noticed Sunny the bunny,” Paige said after she left.

“She was too fixated on the bird, or maybe the bird was an excuse and she was trying

to figure out what we were doing.” Liz shifted her feet. “I suppose she could be a bird enthusiast.”

Echo twirled a finger next to her forehead. “Or maybe she’s cuckoo...cuckoo.”

Paige gave her friend a playful nudge. “And now she has your cell phone number.”

“Hopefully, she won’t call me unless absolutely necessary. She strikes me as being lonely.”

“I was thinking the same.” Liz rubbed her palms together. “Time to get back to work.” She returned inside and finished cleaning the half bath. She began tackling the built-in bookshelves when the surveillance app alerted her to activity. “Not again.” Liz left the dust rag on the shelf and made a beeline for the front door.

Lucy, along with Margaret, pulled into the driveway. The women exited the vehicle and joined Liz on the front porch. “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you in work clothes more than once,” Lucy teased.

“You’re going to see it a lot more if you hang around. I’m barely putting a dent in the place.” Liz changed the subject. “How did your Designer Diva appointment go?”

Lucy and Margaret took turns filling her in on the meeting.

“A woman showed up while we were there,” Lucy said. “She and Tammi were having some sort of serious discussion near the door. While Tammi and the other woman chatted, I snapped a picture of Designer Diva’s most recent jobs. Check it out. ”

Liz studied the photos on Lucy’s cell phone. “None of these names sound familiar. I don’t know how this is going to help us.”

“Better to have too much information than not enough.” Lucy fiddled with the screen. “I forwarded a copy to you.”

“There’s more,” Margaret said. “We found out who the mystery woman was, the one who showed up at the place while we were there.”

“Becky Kiefer,” Lucy said.

“That might not be significant. Becky was Andretti’s colleague and they worked together on various projects.”

“True, but whatever they were discussing wasn’t a ‘hey, how are you?’ kinda conversation,” Lucy said. “If I had to guess, they were arguing about something.”

Liz tapped her lower lip. “It could be Tammi is trying to seize control of the business. She might not be a fan of Becky or Hometown Design, considering they’re competing against each other.”

“My thoughts exactly,” Margaret said. “I still don’t get why Deanna would work with a competitor.”

“To steal each other’s potential clients?” Liz theorized. “I wonder if Ruth’s been able to find anything out about Carol Wright.”

“Let’s give her a buzz.” Lucy placed the call and Ruth picked up right away.

“Hey, Ruth. Margaret and I are with Liz. We’re wondering if you tracked down the Carol Wright who worked with Designer Diva.”

“I did. I planned to give Liz a call a while ago but got sidetracked with my yard art project. You gotta see this. Hang on.” There was a muffled sound on the other end of

the line.

Lucy's cell phone pinged .

"I sent you a picture. "

"I have it. I'm putting you on speaker so the others can hear." Lucy opened the text message and tapped on the attachment. "Ruth Carpenter, this is pretty cool. I want one."

"It is cool," Ruth bragged.

"Let me see." Margaret grabbed Lucy's phone. "Brilliant, Ruth. Absolutely brilliant. I'll take one."

"What am I missing?" Liz leaned in, studying the picture of a red wooden wagon filled with bouquets of wildflowers.

"It's practical and decorative," Ruth said. "Plus, you can remove the flowers and fill the wagon with anything you want. Pumpkins in the fall, the Stars and Stripes for 4th of July, Santa Claus and a wagon full of toys at Christmas. It's an all-season's product."

"This is more for the yard, not the porch," Margaret said.

"Correct. It's also super-durable and can withstand the elements. "

"How are you going to protect the cameras?" Liz asked.

"I've already figured that one out." Lucy's phone pinged again. "It's an upgrade and I'll have to charge more. A clear plastic, nearly indestructible case protects the

camera.”

“I need one, too,” Liz said.

“You don’t want Sunny?”

“I’ll keep Sunny. The wagon can go in the yard.”

“Three orders.” Ruth whooped. “I’ll get started on them right away. You won’t be sorry. These will be the best bang for your surveillance buck. Gotta go.”

Lucy stopped her. “What about Carol Wright?”

Papers rustled on the other end of the line. “This one was tricky. Wright is flying under the radar. She’s twenty-eight years old and lives alone. Not married. No children. As far as I can tell, she doesn’t have much of a life other than work. ”

“How sad. She seemed awfully quiet. Maybe she’s a loner. Deanna was overbearing, and definitely the one in charge. I wonder how Carol ended up working with Designer Diva?”

“She lives above the store.”

Liz’s heart skipped a beat. “In Deanna Andretti’s building?”

“Correct.”

“Well, it certainly casts a little more suspicion her way,” Lucy said.

“Yep. Although we have nothing on her, she still might have a motive,” Ruth pointed out. “You know what Gloria always likes to say...”

“Suspect the least suspect,” Margaret said. “So now what?”

“I’m glad you asked. Remember when I mentioned Carol had little life other than work?”

“Yes. ”

“That’s because Carol has a second job. You’ll never guess where she works.”

“At a bank as a teller,” Lucy guessed.

“Nope. Green Springs Café, which is three doors down from her other job and her second-floor apartment,” Ruth said.

“Green Springs Café,” Liz repeated. “She has two jobs which is not unusual.”

“I agree. The café is owned by Horace Wright. I wasn’t able to tell if Carol and Horace are related, but if I had to guess, I would say they are.”

“Interesting,” Margaret said. “Carol worked alongside Deanna in some capacity as a colleague or employee. She also lives above Deanna’s store, yet she works for a restaurant owned by a Wright a few doors down.”

“Oh, I forgot one other thing, which might throw a wrench into your investigation. Becky Kiefer,” Ruth said. “She’s been in business for less than a year and is already filing for bankruptcy. ”

“Crud.” Liz blew air through thinned lips. “I don’t want to hire her if she’s not paying her contractors. They could place liens on our property.”

“They most definitely could.”

“I’m going to put off signing with Becky until I figure out what’s going on. Thanks, Ruth. You’re the best. Let me know when my red wagon is ready.”

“Will do.” Ruth wished them luck before ending the call.

“I guess it’s time to head over to Green Springs Café for a bite to eat,” Liz said.

“I would love to go, but I have a date with Stephen tonight,” Margaret said.

“Paige and I have plans.” Lucy clasped her hands. “Why don’t you invite Gloria? ”

Liz accompanied the women to Lucy’s Jeep, thanking them multiple times for the information. As soon as they left, she dialed her sister’s number.

“Hey, Liz. How’s Sunny the bunny working out?”

“He’s doing a great job of notifying me when someone is around. Christi was birdwatching, fell in the ditch out front and her binoculars attacked her.”

“Birdwatching?”

“Yeah. She claims she spotted a sparrow in the yard and ran over to take a closer look. She tripped and fell but is going to be all right.”

“Hopefully, she doesn’t sue you.”

“I hadn’t considered that. I wonder if she knows Floyd’s loaded.”

“I would be wary of a slip and fall injury with that woman.” Gloria changed the subject. “How’s your adorable pup, Duchess, settling into her new home? ”

Liz's eyes fell on the puppies, still sound asleep, and curled up on the bed. "She's going to be a farm dog and is already spoiled...spoiled rotten. Teddy, Echo's pup, is here. They're keeping each other company. Speaking of company, Lucy and Margaret just left." She filled Gloria in on what the women had found. "It appears there may be some sort of strained relationship between Tammi O'Toole and Becky Kiefer."

"Which is understandable considering the circumstances and the fact Becky is actively going after Designer Diva's clientele."

"I agree. We also talked to Ruth. She tracked down some information on Carol Wright. Carol lives above Designer Diva's store. She also works at Green Springs Café, which is within walking distance of her apartment. The owner is Horace Wright."

Gloria grew quiet, so quiet Liz thought the call had dropped. "Hello? "

"I'm still here. So Carol works...worked with Deanna. She also works at the café down the street and lives above Deanna's store."

"Correct."

"Which would give her ample opportunity to murder Deanna without raising suspicion if the store's surveillance cameras caught her in the vicinity."

"I was thinking the same."

"It sounds as if you need to head over to Green Springs Café to see what you can find out."

"That's why I'm calling. What are you doing this evening?"

“Paul and I invited the kids over for dinner. I can’t do it tonight. What about tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow won’t work.” Liz stared out the window, watching as Paige climbed into her van and drove off. Echo began making her way across the driveway. “Floyd’s tied up over at the farm and I don’t want to put it off. I think I may have found the perfect person to go with me.”

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Liz stood near the back door, watching as Echo bounded up the steps, her cheeks flushed and a bright smile on her face. “Thank you for keeping Teddy for me while we unloaded the van.”

“He’s been an absolute doll.” Liz led her to the bed where the two, who woke at the sound of Echo’s voice, slowly stood. Teddy scampered across the floor. “Are you still interested in some of the household stuff I’m not using?”

“You’ve already done so much, not charging me deposit fees and renting the new place at a monthly rate I can actually afford. You don’t have to.”

“I want to,” Liz insisted. “What are your plans for the rest of the day?”

“I don’t have any other than settling in. ”

“Let’s run over to your place to take an inventory of what you need. After we’re done, we’ll head to the farm to see what I have and then grab a bite to eat in Green Springs. Floyd’s busy and won’t be around.”

“Dinner?”

“At the Green Springs Café. Have you ever been there?”

“No. I don’t eat out too often. I’ve been trying to save money for a place of my own.”

“Dinner will be my treat.”

While the women meandered toward Echo's place, they chatted about the Rasmussen farm.

"I never was a city girl," Echo said. "The country has always called me. I couldn't wait to get out of there."

"Even though you loved your job working as..."

"An evidence technician, processing and sorting criminal evidence for the county. "

"I'm sure you're doing a great job for the Rasmussens, but if you truly enjoy that line of work, it wouldn't hurt to put out feelers around Montbay County to see if there are any job openings."

They reached the mobile home, and Echo led the way inside. She set Teddy on the floor and he promptly began investigating. Duchess squirmed until Liz set her down and she trotted along after her brother.

A faint musty aroma filled the interior. "It smells a little musty in here."

"Paige and I thought the same thing."

Liz and Echo made their way through the home, opening windows and letting the fresh country air in.

Starting in the back, they inspected the main bedroom, which was next door to the primary bathroom. Although dated, the mobile home was in excellent condition. Whoever had previously lived there had taken good care of it.

A long hall connected the bathroom and bedroom to the kitchen and eat-in dining area. The women spent most of their time in the kitchen, with Liz making a mental

note of what Echo needed. Her meager belongings left plenty of cupboard space for small appliances and kitchen utensils, something she had plenty of.

Passing through the sparsely furnished living room, Liz continued making a mental list.

Their last stop was the guest bedroom, a room Echo planned to turn into an office, with an adjoining half bath for visitors.

“I love it.” Echo’s eyes sparkled as she clasped her hands. “It’s perfect. Have I thanked you yet?”

“Multiple times and you’re very welcome,” Liz laughed. “Let’s go. We’ll stop by the farm first to see what we can find and then head out for dinner. When we’re done, I’ll drop you back off here. ”

Echo’s expression sobered as little Teddy trotted over. “What about the puppies?”

“We’ll take them with us.” Back in the driveway, Liz transferred the crate to the SUV’s back seat and discovered both puppies easily fit inside.

During the drive, Echo asked Liz how she and Floyd had met.

“I had moved back to Michigan from Florida. I was down on my luck. Gloria loaned me some money to buy a vehicle. Paige’s mother found herself in trouble with the Rasmussen family, so my sister and her sleuthing group of buddies decided they needed a little intel at the farm and I was the one going in.”

Echo’s eyes grew round as saucers. “You met Floyd while working at the farm?”

“I did. Do you know Betty and Betsy, the cows?”

“Yeah. I call them the gentle giants. ”

“Don’t let them fool you. Betty has a dark side.” Liz told Echo the story about falling into a pile of cow poo and had her laughing so hard, tears ran down her cheeks. “It was the most horrid and disgusting experience of my life. Floyd told me he knew right then that I was the woman for him. Little did he know it wasn’t spunk or determination, but my sister. I never would’ve set foot in that barn if not for Gloria.”

“So in a roundabout way, your sister set you up.”

Liz grinned. “Yes. I guess she and the other Garden Girls had a hand in it.” They reached the farm and Liz eased into her spot near the house. She grabbed the dog carrier and her purse, chatting with Echo as they made their way inside.

Making sure they settled the pups first, the women headed to the finished basement and the storage room filled with boxes of household items and furniture Liz planned to either sell online or donate to a local charity. It had been weeks since she’d been downstairs and forgotten how much there was.

The look of excitement on Echo’s face as she admired a plain, white toaster reminded Liz she had been blessed beyond measure, with a wonderful husband who loved her, and friends and family who would do anything to help her.

There was more...a coffeemaker, pots, pans, silverware, plates, cups and mixing bowls. Echo and Liz made several trips from the basement to the SUV until there wasn’t a single empty spot in the back seat or rear storage compartment.

“I can’t let you give all of this to me.” Echo slid the last box, this one filled with bath towels and washcloths, in the only available empty spot. “Let me pay you.”

“Nonsense. As I said, I planned to donate it to charity or sell it for pennies on the

dollar. You can use this stuff, and I'm glad I'm able to help." Liz closed the hatch and dusted her hands. "I don't know about you, but all of this packing and loading has made me hungry."

"Me too."

Treece's newer pickup pulled into the driveway. He parked next to Floyd's truck and climbed out, giving Liz and Echo a friendly wave as he made his way over. "Hey, Echo, Liz."

"Hello, Treece," Liz said. "Your father is around here somewhere."

"He's out back on the tractor." Treece motioned to Liz's loaded SUV. "Are you moving stuff over to the new place?"

"Not yet. Have you been by there?" Liz wrinkled her nose. "The chateau is uninhabitable in its current condition."

"Dad mentioned it needed a good cleaning and some updating."

"Which is an understatement. I thought it needed a wrecking ball, but now that I've spent some time over there, extensive renovations with tons of money dumped into it will probably do the trick." Liz patted the SUV's door. "Echo is moving into the empty mobile home that's on the property. I was giving her a few things to help her get started."

"I can run by there and give you a hand if you need it," Treece offered.

Echo's cheeks turned a tinge of pink. "I...it's a very generous offer, Treece. Paige and I already unloaded most of it. I'm sure Liz and I can handle this."

Liz, detecting an undercurrent of attraction between Floyd's son and their new tenant, jumped in. "I'm sure it wouldn't hurt to have some extra muscle to help us. Besides, you had your eye on the ottoman and side table we couldn't fit in my SUV. Perhaps Treece wouldn't mind loading them in the back of his pickup and following us over there."

"Not at all. I need to drop off these parts so the guys can start on the new lines. I'll be right back." Treece hurried off and disappeared inside the building.

Echo tugged at the neckline of her blouse. "That's awfully nice of him."

"Treece is a good-looking young man," Liz said. "You two are probably close to the same age."

"I think I'm a year or two older."

"But not too far apart in years."

"No."

"I don't believe Treece has a girlfriend. Perhaps you should hang out sometime."

The pink in Echo's cheeks deepened to a flaming red. "Are you trying to play matchmaker?"

"Me?" Liz feigned innocence. "Why on earth would I do that, other than I'm pretty good at it and I detect a level of interest on both sides?"

"Tr-treece isn't interested in me," Echo stammered .

Liz arched a brow.

“You think he is?”

“Most definitely.”

“Here he comes,” Echo whispered under her breath. Forcing a smile, she grew quiet as Treece crossed the driveway. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Positive. Where’s the furniture?”

The trio made quick work of loading the odds and ends Echo and Liz had set aside. There was still plenty of room to add more, but Echo was adamant Liz and Treece not give or do anything else for her.

They finished loading his pickup, and then Liz ran back inside to grab the pups. She returned to the SUV and realized there was no room for the crate plus Echo in the passenger seat. “I don’t have room for Echo and the pups.”

“They can ride with me,” Treece offered. “I have plenty of room in the front seat. ”

Echo shot Liz a look of desperation, and she gave her an encouraging smile. “Wonderful. Thank you, Treece.” She handed the carrier to him and propelled a reluctant Echo toward the passenger side. “It’s only about a twenty-minute drive. You can follow me.”

She hurriedly ran back to her SUV, watching in her side mirror as Echo climbed in. Her expression was pinched, but Treece didn’t seem to notice as he slid the crate in next to her.

Liz waited near the road for him to catch up and then they made the short drive back to the farm. She parked off to the side, leaving plenty of room for Treece and Echo to pull alongside the deck.

The couple emerged, both laughing and smiling. Liz caught the young woman's eye and winked, which made Echo smile even wider.

With three of them working together, they unloaded in record time. Treece insisted on helping move the heavier pieces of furniture around, and then they stood back to admire their handiwork. "This place is nice, Echo."

Liz's stomach grumbled loudly, to the point of embarrassment. "I'm sorry. My stomach is going crazy."

"Don't let my dad work you to death," Treece joked.

"He's not. Echo and I are heading into Green Springs to grab a bite to eat. Would you like to join us?"

"Thanks, but I need to get back to the farm. Maybe some other time." He motioned toward the house. "I saw this place right after Dad bought it. I can't wait to see what it looks like when you're done."

"Me either, and the sooner, the better," Liz quipped.

"When I get settled in, I'll have you over for dinner as a...as a way of saying thanks," Echo stammered.

"I would like that." The dimple in Treece's chin deepened and Liz didn't miss the spark between them. She discreetly stepped away as Echo escorted him out of her new home and to his vehicle.

When she returned, there was a spring in her step.

"Treece is a good guy," Liz said. "Inviting him over for dinner was very thoughtful."

“And dumb on my part. I’m regretting it big time.”

“Regretting it? I saw the way you two looked at each other.”

“I don’t know how to cook. Microwave dinners are about all I can do.”

“Well.” Liz straightened her shoulders. “I’ll be completely honest. I’m not the best cook, either, but if you invite Treece over for dinner, I’ll give you a hand. Between the two of us, I’m sure we can whip up an acceptable meal. ”

“Thanks, Liz. This has been the best day I’ve had in a very long time.”

Liz impulsively hugged Echo, feeling her shoulder blades through the thin t-shirt she was wearing. Something told her the young woman needed this break...needed a helping hand. It was a situation she knew all too well and it brought tears to her eyes to think God had placed Echo in her path.

Liz couldn’t wait to find out what God had in store for Echo and what he still had in store for her. “I’m starving. Let’s go eat.”

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Green Springs Café was exactly what Liz envisioned...a small café smack dab in the center of Main Street, symmetrically designed with a set of double doors between two large picture windows. Potted plants served as a focal point near the hostess stand and beyond that was a cozy dining area offering an even mixture of booths and tables. The layout reminded Liz of Dot's Restaurant in Belhaven.

Belhaven and Green Springs were close in age, meaning the downtown structures had been built around the same time, so it wasn't surprising.

They began making their way inside, and Liz remembered one of the reasons they were there. She backed up and studied the front of the building.

"What are you doing?" Echo asked .

"Wondering if there's a second floor."

"This is a two-story building. I see a smaller window at the tippy-top, which means there's probably an attic, although it doesn't look like it's being used." Echo lowered her gaze. "We're here for a reason."

"We are."

"It has something to do with the death of Deanna Andretti."

"Right again."

"I'm pretty good at picking up on things. What are we looking for?"

“To be honest, this is my sister, Gloria’s field of expertise. We’re looking for clues.”

“Clues,” Echo echoed. “If you give me the basics, maybe I can help. You know, the nuts and bolts of how this visit ties into her death.”

“Carol Wright was one of Deanna Andretti’s colleagues or some sort of assistant. She’s been flying under the radar. As far as I can tell, Carol didn’t have a motive. However, what she currently lacks in motive she more than makes up for in opportunity, most notably the fact she lives above Designer Diva’s store, which is where the woman’s body was found.”

“So what’s the connection between her and this place?”

“Horace Wright, who shares the same last name as Carol, owns this café. I’m thinking she and the owner are related.”

“Ah.” Echo tilted her head. “Which is why you’re wondering about this building. If Carol Wright and the café’s owner are related, why doesn’t she live here instead of above Designer Diva’s store?”

“Precisely. Carol not only works at Designer Diva in some sort of capacity, either as a colleague or an employee, but she also works here.”

“What does she look like? ”

Liz blinked rapidly, struggling to remember. “Your average Jane.”

“Kind of like me.”

“You’re anything but average,” Liz said. “You’re a lovely young woman with an intriguing background in criminal investigation.”

“I always thought it would be fun to be a PI. I’m a big fan of Charlie’s Angels.”

“That show was on before you were born.”

“Gotta love late night reruns.” Echo struck a defensive pose, lifting her hands and pointing an imaginary gun in the air. “I’ve seen the knockoff movies, which aren’t as good as the original. They were a force to be reckoned with.”

A restaurant patron passed by them, casting Echo a strange look.

“Anyhoo, that’s my strategy, in a nutshell. Who is Carol Wright and what motive could she have had to murder Deanna Andretti? ”

“Let’s go see what we can find out.” Although the café was busy, Liz and Echo managed to snag a table off to the side.

“Hello.” A server greeted them with menus and glasses of water as soon as they were seated. “Our special today is meatloaf with mashed potatoes, a vegetable medley, and a dinner roll.”

“Meatloaf sounds good,” Echo said. “I’ll have that and stick with the water.”

“Ditto.” Liz handed the menus back, studying the woman’s nametag, Lisa . “Lisa. You guys are busy.”

“We are. Customers love the meatloaf special. We usually sell out by now, but the cook made an extra batch. I’ll be right back with your silverware and napkins.”

After she left, Liz surveyed their surroundings, noting another server on the other side of the small café. She looked vaguely familiar and when she turned around, Liz realized she was the same woman who had shown up at the farm with Deanna and the

other colleagues the day of her death. “There she is,” she whispered.

Echo casually gazed over her shoulder. “Five foot six. A hundred and twenty pounds all day long. Has a slight overbite and an addiction to red Twizzlers. Her last date was someone she met on the internet.”

Liz wrinkled her nose. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope. Dead serious.” Echo turned away. “Everything except for meeting someone on the internet. The Twizzlers are sticking out of her apron pocket, and I’ve always made a game out of guessing people’s height and weight.”

Liz used her straw to twirl her ice. “What am I?”

Echo eyed her critically. “Five foot ten, a hundred and thirty-six pounds, but you may have been a little lighter recently.”

Liz’s jaw dropped. “I’m five foot ten and a hundred thirty-eight pounds. I was in the twenties but gained a few pounds since Floyd and I got married.”

“I guessed on the height and weight but saw a picture of you and Floyd on his desk when you were a little lighter,” Echo confessed. “I’m sorry if my hobby freaks you out.”

“It freaks me out, but it’s also very intriguing.” Liz lowered her voice. “I’m not sure how much this will help us. I mean, it’s not like we can march over there and accuse her of nefarious activity.”

“Have you checked the social sites to see if you could find her online profiles?” Echo asked.

“No. I suppose I should have.”

“I’ll see what I can find.” Echo was still fiddling with her cell phone when the food arrived. The server was spot on. The meatloaf and side dishes were delicious, and both women cleaned their plates. In between bites, Echo continued her search. “I found a few things. I’m sending them to you. ”

Liz grabbed her phone and clicked on the links. “I feel like the generation half my age where they sit at the table, staring at their phones and not enjoying each other’s company.”

“It’s a bad habit and one I need to work on.” Echo set her phone down. “What do you think about what I found?”

“Ruth was right. This poor woman spends a lot of time at work. All these photos are of her working.”

“At Designer Diva,” Echo added. “If a picture is worth a thousand words, those thousand words are telling us Deanna Andretti was probably running the poor woman ragged.”

Liz drummed her fingers on the table. “We need to figure out if the restaurant’s owner and Carol are related.”

“I’ll get the information for you. Here comes our server. ”

“I see you enjoyed our special,” the server said as she began clearing the table. “Can I get you anything else? Maybe a piece of chocolate pie for dessert?”

“No. We’re full and you were right. The meatloaf was delicious,” Liz said. “I was wondering if I could get a to-go order for my husband.”

“Of course. I’ll bring that and the check back.”

“Horace Wright owns this café,” Echo blurted out.

“He does.”

“Is he related to Carol Wright, one of the other servers?”

Lisa never missed a beat as she continued stacking the empty plates. “Carol is his niece. Has she waited on you before?”

“No. I noticed her nametag. I knew Horace Wright owned this place and figured there was a connection, considering they both have the same last name.”

“That’s very observant of you.”

“Thanks. I like to think I am.” Echo leaned her elbows on the table. “We heard about the death of the store owner a few doors down. The police haven’t caught her killer yet.”

Lisa shuddered. “I knew Deanna. She came in here often for dinner. As a matter of fact, Carol worked with her. She’s really shaken up.”

“I’m sure it hit very close to home,” Liz said sympathetically.

“It has, especially for Carol. Deanna treated her like a daughter. She even lived above Deanna’s store.”

Liz’s eyes widened. “How frightening. I wonder if she was home when it happened.”

“I don’t think so. There were some strange things going on down at that place,” Lisa

said. “No way would you catch me living there, but like I already mentioned, Deanna and Carol were close.”

Liz waited until she walked away. “I admire your direct approach. No beating around the bush.”

“Sometimes the best way to get the information you need is to be direct. It’s not like we were asking for her social security number or bank account information.”

“What a novel idea. So Carol is related to the owner of this place and Deanna and she were close.”

“According to Lisa,” Echo added. “This is a small town. I’m sure most of the business owners know each other. Have you considered the possibility that you’re way off track? I mean, it seems the focus is on Deanna’s colleagues. Maybe it was someone else.”

The suggestion reminded Liz that Margaret and Lucy had sent her a copy of the list of recent projects. She mentioned it to Echo. “The investigators seemed very interested in Deanna’s visit to the farm, which leads me, leads Gloria and her friends, who are much better at figuring stuff out, to suspect they’re focusing on those she came in contact with the day of her death.”

“Including you, Floyd and the other women.”

“Correct.”

“Don’t look now.”

“What’s wrong?”

“I...”

Carol Wright marched across the room and placed the to-go container and bill on top of the table. “Lisa, your server, went on break. She mentioned you were asking questions about me.”

Liz knew the exact second the woman recognized her. “Mrs. Rasmussen.”

“Hello, Carol.”

“What are you doing here? ”

“Having dinner with my friend.”

Carol placed a hand on her hip, her eyes narrowing. “Why were you asking about me?”

“Because the authorities seem to think someone who was in contact with Deanna before her death may be responsible. Both my husband and I have been questioned, and the investigators mentioned one of Deanna’s colleagues claimed I threatened her the day she was at our farm.”

“And you think it was me?”

“It was you or one of the other women.”

“It wasn’t me. For the record, I loved Deanna. She was like a mother. The investigators are obviously questioning you for a reason.” The woman turned on her heel and stormed off.

“That went well,” Echo said. “It appears my direct approach backfired.”

“It’s all right.” Liz took some money from her wallet and carried that, along with the bill, to the cash register. After paying for their meals, she caught up with Echo, who stood waiting by the entrance. “If you ask me, Ms. Wright came across as overly defensive.”

“No kidding. I don’t know about you, but the warning flags went up as soon as she all but accused you of killing the woman.” Echo held the door and waited for Liz to follow her out onto the sidewalk. “She’s watching us.”

The women waited for traffic to clear before crossing the street and climbing in Liz’s SUV. She did a sly side glance. Wright stood in the café’s doorway, glaring at them. “I don’t think she appreciated us coming around.”

“Not at all,” Echo agreed.

Liz checked for traffic before pulling onto the street. “Something tells me Carol Wright needs to be moved to the top of the list of suspects.”

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It was late morning of the following day, long after Floyd headed to the barn and Liz was on her way to the fixer-upper before she got around to calling Gloria.

She filled her sister in on what had happened the previous evening at the café, how Carol confronted Liz and Echo and then watched them leave.

“She wasn’t happy about me being there or asking questions about her, which leads me to believe she may be hiding something. Why would Carol live above the design store when she could easily have lived above her uncle’s café?” Liz asked.

“Maybe it needs to be renovated or isn’t up to code. Maybe she doesn’t want to live under her uncle’s roof,” Gloria theorized .

“True, but if that was the case, why is she working for him?”

“You have to admit, if you had two jobs, it would be pretty convenient if they were only a few doors down from each other.” Gloria’s voice grew muffled. “Paul left for the day. Do you need any help?”

Liz grimaced. “We’re going to need help for the next few years until this place is habitable. If you’re offering a hand, I’ll gladly take it.”

“I’m on my way over.” Gloria promised to be there within the hour, and Liz got to work tackling the exterior of the wood-burning fireplace. The brick, although blackened from years of use, was in excellent condition. She mentally added a chimney sweep to the growing list of contractors they would need.

Gloria arrived as promised and hit the ground running. Noontime rolled around, and Liz ordered sandwiches for delivery. They took their lunch break and ate out on the front porch .

Liz let out a low groan as she eased onto the folding chair and winced at the sharp pain running down her back. “I’m getting too old for this.”

“It’s good to feel a few aches and pains.” Gloria reached for her soda and accidentally bumped into Sunny the bunny. “How’s it going with your surveillance? Have you caught your neighbor in action?”

“You know what? I completely forgot about it.” Liz juggled her sandwich in one hand and cell phone in the other. There were several camera alerts, most of them vehicles passing by. It also caught Christi on camera, leaving the farm and then returning an hour later. Thankfully, the app was able to jump ahead. View after view played out, to the point Liz’s mind wandered. They were wasting precious time, time she could spend getting the house ready. “I could do this all day.”

“Wait.” Gloria stopped her. “Did you catch that?”

“Catch what? ”

“The little red car creeping past.”

“No.” Liz paused the app and then slid the bar to move back a few frames. She pressed the play button again, and both women watched as a compact red car drove slowly past.

It moved out of the frame and then reappeared less than a minute later, heading in the opposite direction. As it drove slowly by, Gloria glimpsed the driver.

“Can you freeze the frame?”

“Sure.” Liz tapped the button and then gently slid the bar back again. She popped the last bite of food in her mouth, freeing up both hands to enlarge the picture. “No way.”

“I recognize her,” Gloria said. “She was with Deanna Andretti that day.”

“It’s Carol Wright, the woman who lives above Designer Diva. She’s the one Echo and I ran into last night at her uncle’s café. ”

“What is she doing way out here?”

Liz noted the timestamp. “She was here around seven last night, not long after we left the restaurant.”

The sisters finished watching the rest of the recordings, but there was no third sighting of the woman or her car.

“There’s something fishy about her,” Liz said.

“I agree.” Gloria polished off her potato chips. “Maybe it’s time for a stakeout.”

“I was thinking the same thing, and since Carol lives above Designer Diva, we can stakeout both places, to see what those other two lovely colleagues of Deanna’s might be up to. Taking my SUV is out. Carol watched us drive off in it last night.”

“Annabelle would work in a pinch, but I have a much better idea,” Gloria said. “If I invite the other Garden Girls, there will be too many of us to cram into my car. ”

“We could ask Ruth to drive the spymobile,” Liz said.

“That’s what I was thinking. Ruth has all the latest spy equipment, not to mention field surveillance is her forte. I’ll give her a call.”

Ruth was easily on board with arranging a stakeout and after some discussion, they agreed to get things rolling shortly before Designer Diva closed for the day.

With Ruth’s blessing, Gloria sent a group text to the rest of the friends, filling them in on the plan and inviting whoever wanted to tag along to meet at Liz and Floyd’s new place at four.

Ruth was the last to arrive and, with all the women assembled, they began going over their game plan.

Floyd, who had been working out in the barn, made his way over. “I figured you gals were here to help, but with Ruth rummaging around in the back of her van, I’m thinking something else is going on.”

“We caught Carol Wright scoping this place out last night and are going to return the favor by setting up surveillance on her apartment and the Designer Diva building,” Liz said.

Floyd shook his head. “The cops are already breathing down our necks. If they find out you’re spying on her place, they won’t be thrilled.”

Ruth waved dismissively. “They’re used to having us hang around. In fact, Officer Nelson would probably be shocked if we weren’t.”

“I’m not one to tell you what to do, but fair warning, the state police stopped by the farm again this morning asking a bunch more questions about Deanna.”

“They still aren’t any closer to figuring out what happened to her?” Dot asked.

“I guess not. I’m heading over to Treece’s place to help him move some furniture and won’t be home until later this evening.” Floyd tapped his wife’s arm. “I got a little surprise for you, sugar lips. I know you’re overwhelmed and I’m determined to do everything I can to make your life as easy as possible.”

“We’re moving into a rental until this place is ready.” Liz clasped a hand to her chest.

“Not...quite. I don’t want to ruin the surprise. I still have a few more details to iron out. Once I do, we’ll be snug as a bug in a rug until our dream home is ready.”

Gloria waited until Floyd returned to the barn. “I wonder what he has up his sleeve.”

“I don’t know, but I’m scared,” Liz sighed. “Floyd would be just as happy setting up a couple of cots in the barn’s hayloft and living there.”

“Maybe it is the barn,” Lucy joked.

“Very funny. I just want a normal, happy life, free from dead people, cows, pigs, and manure, not to mention nosy neighbors. ”

“At the risk of stating the obvious, you should not have married a farmer,” Ruth said.

“Love can make you do some crazy things,” Margaret said.

“It can,” Liz agreed. “I’m ready to get this stakeout under way.”

Ruth’s hand shot up. “Garden Girls activate.”

The friends all high-fived before climbing into the spymobile.

Liz could hear the excitement in their voices as each of them threw out theories on

what they might find and an inkling of concern filled her as she wondered what she'd gotten herself into.

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“We need a better plan.” Ruth cruised down Main Street past Designer Diva’s store. “Give me a rundown of the interior.”

“It’s your basic Green Springs building. A showroom is in the front. A small desk and counter are near the back.” Lucy tapped her chin. “Beyond that is a hallway. I’m guessing there might be a storage area and a restroom, possibly even a breakroom.”

“What about stairs leading to the upper-level apartment?” Gloria asked.

“I didn’t notice any stairs, although I wasn’t paying attention,” Margaret said. “I’m sure they’re also in the back.”

“Which means there’s potentially off-street parking. Let’s circle around the block.” Ruth turned at the light and then again, making a quick right onto a narrow alley running along the rear of the businesses.

Liz was the first to spot Carol’s small red car. “That’s the car we caught on camera driving by the farm last night.”

“Which means we were right,” Gloria said. “It was Carol Wright.”

“If she thinks I’m responsible for Deanna’s death, she’s got some guts to start semi-stalking me,” Liz said.

“You could say the same about what we’re doing,” Dot pointed out. “The stalking part, I mean.”

“We’re operating a stakeout,” Margaret said.

“Stakeout, stalk-out,” Lucy said. “It’s the same thing if you ask me.”

“We need to monitor both entrances, which means we’ll have to split up.” Ruth slowed to a crawl. “I see upstairs lights on. Carol must be home. What are the store hours again?”

“We have about an hour before closing time.” Liz watched as Ruth shifted into park and flung the driver’s side door open. “Where are you going?”

“Inside to play customer and take a quick look around.” She made a beeline for the side of the building.

“I hope she knows what she’s doing,” Liz said.

“Me too,” Gloria said. “We’re running out of people for these covert operations.”

Ruth casually strolled around the side of the building. She glanced at the “Designer Diva” sign on the front door and sucked in a breath as she stepped inside.

“Good afternoon.” A woman Ruth recognized from the photos as Tammi O’Toole stepped out from behind the desk .

“Hello. I’m thinking about doing some home renovations, noticed your sign out front and decided to drop in.”

“You came to the right place.” Tammi motioned to the counter. “If I can get some preliminary information from you, we can get the ball rolling and work up a quote.”

The woman jotted down Ruth's address and cell phone number. "How large of a project are we talking about?"

"I recently retired from the Belhaven Post Office, so I'm spending a lot more time in my house and realized I haven't updated the place in decades."

Tammi offered her a small smile. "Retirement certainly has its pluses and minuses."

"I'm in the minus mindset currently," Ruth said. "Do you have any photos of completed jobs I can take a look at? "

"Of course." Tammi handed a photo album to Ruth. "I'm tight on time right now and am in the middle of working on another client's project."

"I understand. I'll just take a quick look." Ruth opened the album and studied the pictures on the first page.

Meanwhile, a woman emerged from the back. Tammi propelled her off to the side while Ruth eavesdropped.

"You can take the rest of the day off. I'm sure you need to get down to your uncle's place and start your shift."

"I don't..."

Tammi cut her off, and Ruth's radar shifted into high gear. Suspecting there was more to it than an appointment, she slowed her pace, perusing each photo and wondering how long it would take before the woman forcibly removed her from the building .

The woman left and Tammi hovered over Ruth's shoulder. "I hate to rush you, but

I'll need to see you out."

"I thought. I mean, your store doesn't close for another." Ruth consulted her watch.

"Half an hour."

Tammi snaked an arm past Ruth and slammed the photo album shut. "We can set your appointment time today. I have several openings tomorrow."

"Are you the store owner?"

"I'm a co-owner."

Ruth almost asked who the other owner was. Sensing this might throw up all sorts of red flags, she kept quiet, watching as Tammi pointedly walked over to the front door and held it for her. "I'll need to rearrange some of my appointments and will call you when I get home."

"Or leave a message," Tammi said. "Better yet, let's chat first thing tomorrow morning. "

On her way out, something interesting caught Ruth's eyes. She did a double-take to verify and reluctantly exited the store. The door shut behind her and she heard the lock click.

The hair on the back of Ruth's neck prickled, and she knew the woman was watching her. She paced herself, casually strolling to the end of the block, and then doubled-backed. She slipped between two of the buildings and returned to the van, still parked in the alley.

"What happened?" Liz asked as soon as Ruth climbed inside. "We were getting ready to set up a search party."

“I chatted with Tammi O’Toole, who told me she was part owner.”

“Not true.” Gloria did a thumbs down. “She’s not a partner. She’s a partner wannabe.”

“She was in a big yank to get rid of me and Carol Wright, who was also there.” Ruth briefly recapped the store visit. “The place was a mess. There were papers everywhere.”

“Even more of a reason to keep an eye on it,” Liz said.

“Whoever she’s meeting with, if that’s even the truth, she didn’t want me or Carol to see them.”

A car flew up behind the spymobile, forcing Ruth to pull into a narrow parking spot. “We need volunteers for both sides, front and back.”

Liz unbuckled her seatbelt. “I wouldn’t mind stretching my legs.”

Ruth shook her head. “Carol and Tammi would recognize you. We need someone else.”

“Lucy and I are out, too,” Margaret said. “We’ve already met with Tammi.”

“Which leaves me,” Dot said.

Ruth shifted into park. “Gloria, you drive the spymobile around front while Dot and I hang around out back. Keep your phone close by so we can remain in contact.”

“Where exactly are you and I hanging out?” Dot tapped the bridge of her glasses.

“I was thinking over there.” Ruth pointed to a wooden fence running the length of the alley. Beyond the fence was an overflow lot with a “public parking” sign hanging from it. “Ready to take over?”

“Yep.” Gloria slid from the passenger’s seat to the driver’s side. Meanwhile, Ruth opened the rear cargo doors and began rummaging around inside a plastic storage bin.

Dot joined her. “What are you doing?”

“Making our stakeout as comfortable as possible.” Ruth grabbed a canvas bag and slammed the doors shut. “I have two folding chairs, one for each of us.” She rapped on the side of the spymobile .

Gloria stuck her head out the window. “Are you ready to roll?”

“Yeah. You know the drill.” Ruth kept an eagle eye on her van, watching as Gloria came to a full stop at the stop sign. After checking for traffic, she turned right and headed back toward Main Street.

“The spymobile will be fine.” Dot nudged Ruth toward the overflow lot. “They’re only going around the block.”

“I know. I trust Gloria’s driving. Lead foot Eleanor and Margaret are another story.” Ruth fell into step with Dot as they made their way to the end of the sidewalk. They circled around until they reached a sizeable gap in the fence. With a few minor adjustments, the friends were comfortably seated, giving them an unobstructed view of the store’s back door.

Ruth’s cell phone chirped, and she pulled it from her pocket. She laughed.

“What is it?” Dot leaned in .

Ruth handed her the phone and Dot read the text aloud. “Spymobile is in place. Found a great spot. Plenty of bumper room, so no one else is close.” A picture of the van was attached.

“That’s my girl, Gloria. Protecting my baby.”

“Or suffer Ruth’s wrath,” Dot joked.

“You know me too well. How’s the food truck biz going?” Ruth asked.

“Better than I ever dreamed possible. Ray and I found our calling.” Dot shared some heart-wrenching stories about the homeless people she’d met since starting Dot’s Hot Meals on Wheels.

“Do you miss running the restaurant?”

“I do and I don’t, if that makes sense. I miss keeping up on all the happenings around Belhaven and seeing friends, but I don’t miss the daily grind. Looking back, it was taking its toll. I guess I just couldn’t see it. ”

“But we could. Gloria, Lucy, Margaret. Even Eleanor. We were beginning to wonder if you would ever retire and enjoy what years you and Ray have left. I mean, I know I’m stating the obvious, but we’re not spring chickens anymore.”

Dot lowered her gaze, and Ruth could see something was troubling her friend. “Is everything okay?”

Dot shook her head.

“Everything is not okay.”

“Are you...has the cancer returned?” Ruth pressed a hand to her chest.

“No. I’m fine. It’s Ray.”

“What’s wrong with Ray?”

A lone tear trickled down Dot’s cheek. “He got lost going to the Quik-Stop last week. Yesterday he didn’t remember me.”

Ruth swallowed hard as sudden tears burned the back of her eyes. “I’m sorry, Dot. ”

“I scheduled a doctor’s appointment as soon as I could get him in.” Her voice was barely a whisper as she struggled to continue. “I’m scared.”

“We’ll take it one day at a time.” Ruth squeezed her friend’s hand, waiting until their eyes met. “You won’t be dealing with this alone, I promise.”

Dot sucked in a ragged breath as another hot tear trailed down her cheek. “We had so many plans—to travel, to help others and enjoy our golden years.”

“You can and you will. You don’t know for certain it’s dementia. It might be stress. Shoot, the only time I don’t forget why I went into a room is the bathroom.”

Dot smiled through her tears. “I haven’t told the others yet. The homeless people need us. They depend on us for food and to have someone to listen to them, someone who cares.”

“God didn’t call you to help the homeless just to have this happen. There’s a reason for everything. Like I said, it could be something else, something controllable. In the meantime.” Ruth made a zipping motion across her lips. “I won’t breathe a word. If, and when, you’re ready and you have a diagnosis, it will be up to you to break the

news.”

“We’ll know more next week.”

Ruth’s cell phone chimed. It was a text from Gloria. Some activity. Keep an eye out.

10-4, Ruth texted back.

The women resumed their surveillance operation, with Ruth being careful to avoid mentioning Ray again.

“Hey!”

The women turned to find a man standing in an empty parking spot a few feet away.

“You guys need help with something?”

“Who’s asking?” Ruth asked .

“A concerned citizen, curious about why two women are sitting in a public parking lot staring at a fence.”

“We’re not staring at a fence,” Ruth said.

The man, in his mid-thirties if she had to guess, strolled toward them. He leaned forward, placed his hands on his knees, and peered through the opening in the fence.

“You doing some sort of stakeout?”

“We are,” Dot said.

“What are you...cops or something?” The guy eyed them skeptically.

Ruth's eyes twinkled mischievously as she pressed a finger to her lips. "If we are, it's something you shouldn't know."

"I. Yeah. Carry on." The man walked away, looking back at them once before climbing into his vehicle and driving off .

Dot burst out laughing. "He thinks we're undercover cops."

"Or fruitcakes," Ruth chuckled. "Either way, he has a story to tell. Two old chicks staring at the side of a fence."

Ruth's cell phone chimed again. Tammi O'Toole is tearing the place apart.

Minutes ticked by, and then there was another text from Gloria. Tammi left. We need to go in, to figure out why she's tearing the place apart.

Time to regroup, Ruth texted back.

On our way.

The spymobile crept past. Gloria circled around and eased the van into a parking spot next to Ruth and Dot.

Gloria scooted into the back. Dot took the empty spot next to her while Ruth climbed behind the wheel .

"You said Tammi was in a big hurry to get rid of you because she had an appointment," Gloria said.

"Correct," Ruth confirmed.

“So it stands to reason she’ll be gone for at least a little while.”

“Yeah, depending on what kind of appointment it was. I’m not opposed to breaking and entering, but there are surveillance cameras watching the place.” While Ruth talked, she studied the back of the building. “Hold up. I don’t see any cameras on the roof.”

“The roof?” Lucy asked.

“Give me a sec.” Ruth gauged the distance between buildings. They were close...close enough so that if someone was standing on the roof, they could cross over to the adjacent building. “I think I found a way in.”

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“Liz and I are going in,” Gloria said. “If anyone is going to get caught, it should be us.”

“You’re sure?”

“Positive.” Gloria’s eyes squinted as she studied the back of the buildings. “The store just closed. Becky hasn’t been around, so I doubt we’ll have to worry about her. Our only goal is to get in, figure out what Tammi was searching for and then get back out.”

“Maybe she was rearranging now that Deanna is gone,” Liz theorized.

“There’s rearranging and then there’s tearing a place apart. I’m leaning toward the latter. Follow my lead.” Gloria tapped Liz’s arm. “We’re looking for whatever Tammi O’Toole was searching for and didn’t find.”

“You’ll need these.” Ruth opened the center console and handed Liz a flashlight and a set of small tools. “Because we don’t know what kind of entry point that you’ll be dealing with, you need to take the variety pack.”

“Variety pack?” Gloria eyed the tools and waved dismissively. “We’ll figure it out once we get up there.” She exited the van and led the way through the parking lot to the building next to the Designer Diva building. With a quick check of their surroundings, she grabbed the fire escape’s lower rung and quickly climbed to the top.

Liz, casting a furtive glance down the alley to make sure they weren’t being watched,

followed behind, not stopping until she reached the rooftop. “Now what?” Her armpits grew damp as she followed her sister to the corner of the building.

“Up and over.”

“Up and over.” Liz could feel the blood drain from her face as she realized what Gloria planned. “You want us to jump over to the other building? ”

“Don’t be so dramatic.” Gloria rolled her eyes. “It’s a minor hop.”

Liz peered down, straight down, to the cement walkway below. “That’s gonna hurt.”

“Only if you fall, which I don’t plan on doing,” Gloria said.

“You’re crazy.”

“I can be, but this is your adventure. Do you want the cops off your back?”

“Of course.”

“Then it’s up and over.”

“I’m feeling kinda sick.” Liz clutched her stomach.

“It’ll pass, and your adrenaline will kick in.” Gloria stepped onto the ledge. Without hesitation, she crossed from one building to the other. “You have zero risk of falling.”

“I could get stuck in the gap. ”

“Not gonna happen.”

“If I die, you’re never going to hear the end of it,” Liz gasped.

“You won’t die. We need to keep moving. The clock is ticking.”

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.” Liz refused to look down as she made the small step from building to building.

“See how easy that was?” Gloria grabbed hold of her sister’s arm and propelled her toward the rooftop door. “Hand me the tools.”

Liz handed the “variety pack” to her. “If we get caught, we could go to jail...again.”

“The jail in the Smoky Mountains is a distant memory.”

“Maybe for you, but I can still hear the cell door close, can still feel the lumpy mattress and taste that soggy ham and cheese sandwich. ”

Gloria chuckled. “You remember what they fed us?”

“Of course. It’s etched in my mind. Poor Aunt Ethel. I wish I still had some of those coins.”

“Why? You have a rich husband now.” Gloria twisted the pick. “I can’t get it. Unfortunately, Lucy is much better at this than I am.”

Liz jiggled the knob. “The knob is loose. We can pop the door open.”

Gloria stepped aside. “You sound like you’ve done this before.”

“I have a bad habit of accidentally locking myself out of the house.” Liz grasped the knob and gave it a hard twist.

Pop. The door opened.

Gloria braced herself for the sound of an alarm, ready to bolt, but nothing happened. “I guess they don’t have a rooftop alarm. Let’s keep moving. ”

With flashlight in hand, the sisters crept to the end of a narrow hallway where they discovered a door marked Private . The door was locked. “I think we found Carol’s apartment. I say we start downstairs. If we have time, we’ll search her place on our way out. Whatever Tammi was looking for, she was looking for it down there.”

Retracing their steps, they passed the exit to the rooftop and found a set of stairs leading down to the main floor.

Tap...tap...tap.

Gloria stopped. “You’re making too much noise.”

“I can’t help it. It’s the shoes.” Liz turned on her heel, displaying a mini stiletto. “They’re my favorite pair of Bernard Tusse shoes, and the rubber is wearing off the bottom.”

“Wearing stilettos on a covert mission is never a good idea.”

“I didn’t know I would be involved in a breaking and entering,” Liz hissed .

“It’s too late now. You could take them off and carry them.”

“No way. This floor is filthy.” Liz turned up her nose. “And it smells like a dead person.”

“There’s no decaying body,” Gloria said. “At least, I don’t think there is. We’re

wasting time.”

With each step they took, the stairs creaked and Gloria winced, waiting for someone to spring from the shadows, demanding to know what they were doing.

She forced herself to focus on the task at hand. Whatever Tammi O’Toole had been searching for, she had done it when Carol Wright wasn’t around and she was desperate to find it.

They reached the bottom and found themselves in the back of the store.

“Hang on.” Liz tapped her sister’s shoulder. “Do you think there are cameras in here?”

“Maybe. It’s too late now. You search the desk and I’ll start over there.” Gloria found another door tucked away in the corner. Discovering this one was unlocked, she eased it open and peered inside. At first glance, she thought she had found Carol’s apartment, but on closer inspection she realized the pictures on the wall were of Deanna Andretti.

“What are you doing?”

Gloria clutched her chest. She spun around and found Liz standing directly behind her. “You scared me half to death.”

“Sorry.” Liz stepped closer. “You found Carol’s apartment?”

“I don’t think so.” Gloria pointed to the pictures on the wall. “This is...was Deanna’s office.”

Liz placed a hand on her hip. “It’s a mess. Deanna must have had something good for

Tammi to tear this place apart.”

The women split up, each quickly searching both sides of the small office .

“She has it nicely decorated,” Liz said. “The woman had a flair for style, I’ll give her that.”

“I can’t for the life of me figure out what Tammi O’Toole was looking for.” Gloria continued tapping and searching.

Liz picked up a vase and turned it over. “A Baccarat. I adore this vase.”

“Forget the vase,” Gloria said.

“You’re so bossy.” Liz began perusing the bookshelves. “ How to Influence Friends and Connect with Powerful People , by Ophelia Tarnamount. I’ve always wanted to read this book. It has oodles of positive reviews.”

“Who do you want to connect with?” Gloria grinned.

“Good point. Not enough people to make reading it worth my while.” Liz placed the book back on the shelf and reached for the next .

A door slammed, echoing loudly, and a bolt of pure adrenaline coursed through Liz. They were no longer alone inside the Designer Diva store.

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Gloria grabbed Liz's hand and dragged her to the nearby closet. They barely made it inside when the office lights flipped on.

"It's useless, Tammi," a male voice said. "Maybe Deanna was lying about the background check and finding out my name was on your apartment lease. It was an excuse because she never planned to follow through on making you a business partner."

"But she knew you were on my lease, Eric, and don't forget, there's also the forged copy of the partnership agreement she found when she was digging up dirt on me."

Liz watched as her sister quietly removed her cell phone from her pocket, tapped the video button, and aimed it at the narrow crack in the door .

"I warned you it was a mistake to secure a line of credit against this place," Eric said. "Green Springs is a small town. Deanna had connections. She could very well have heard about me being on the lease from someone who works at the apartment complex. She sat on Dreamwood Retirement Community's board. I'm sure the people working in the rental community all know each other."

"Either way, I knew you should have never been on my lease." There was a rustling sound. Through the crack, Liz could see Tammi rifling through one of the desk drawers. "If Deanna had proof of the line of credit, she made sure no one would ever find it."

"I say let it go," Eric said. "The cops are hot after the Rasmussens. You're essentially off the hook."

“I can’t. I already told you. Carol is growing suspicious. She’s determined to make sure Deanna’s killer is caught. She’s asking for a key to the office since I changed the locks. I can’t keep putting her off. If Deanna hid those reports and partnership agreement somewhere around here and Carol finds them, she’ll turn them in.”

“The investigators searched this place. You’ve been tearing it apart, and no one has found them,” Eric said. “I admit, it could be problematic if the investigators find out I’m on your lease, but they still can’t prove you’re the one who strangled her.”

“And if they find the forged partnership agreement that’s MIA? I never should’ve let Deanna push me over the edge, but she kept going on and on about how she was going to make sure I never worked in this town again.”

Liz leaned in, her heart skipping a beat as she watched as the man she suspected was Eric Andretti pulled Tammi O’Toole into his arms.

“Maybe you should’ve waited until you had the papers in your hands before you wrapped that curtain around her neck,” Eric said. “Besides, if there was an agreement and you were a partner, it would have given you a motive to kill her. ”

“Yeah, well, you’re still on the hook,” Tammi said.

Eric laughed. “No way. They’ll go after Floyd now that they have Deanna’s cell phone records. Either him or his wife. What was her name?”

“Liz,” Tammi said. “You should’ve heard Deanna that day after we left their place. She was fit to be tied. Floyd wanted nothing to do with her.”

“Deanna could be relentless when she wanted to,” Eric said. “Back to Carol. If she was as loyal to Deanna as you claim, we might want to avoid meeting here, at least for now.”

There was a hint of desperation in Tammi's voice. "I can't keep putting her off about the office key."

"Then give her a key. Problem solved."

Tammi's voice became muffled.

"What did you say?" Eric asked.

"Nothing. I need to find those papers. "

"Deanna was big into secret hiding spots," he said. "Are you sure you checked every single book in her bookcase?"

It grew quiet, and Liz craned her neck, attempting to maintain a visual on the couple. She lost her balance and teetered back, creating the faintest of thuds .

Gloria grasped her hand and squeezed hard while Liz braced for the closet door to fly open. Her heart pounded loudly in her chest and visions of a gun-toting killer discovering their hiding spot made the small space spin.

"Did you hear something?" Tammi O'Toole's voice drew near.

"No. You're being paranoid. The doors are all locked and we're the only ones with a key. This place is secure." Eric laughed. "Maybe it's Deanna's ghost coming back to haunt you. "

"Very funny." Tammi's voice faded. "Let's head over to Deanna's again. We'll try searching the basement this time."

The door shut and Liz went limp. She reached for the doorknob and Gloria shook her

head. “Not yet,” she whispered softly. “Give it a few minutes.”

Liz began silently counting as the seconds dragged by. She shifted slightly, attempting to ease the numbness in her foot.

Gloria gave her a gentle nudge and a warning look.

“I can’t help it,” Liz whined. “I’m getting a Charlie horse.”

“I think the coast is clear.” Her sister slowly slid the closet door open and stuck her head around the corner. “They’re gone. We need to finish searching and get out of here.”

“Search where? You heard them. Tammi’s already torn this place apart. Apparently, Deanna liked secret hiding spots. We’re basically back to square one and we almost got caught. We could’ve died.”

“You’re so dramatic.”

Liz winced at the sharp pain in her foot. She took a tentative step and the heel of her shoe caught on the rug, causing her to stumble, her arms flailing wildly.

Gloria sprang forward and caught her sister before she hit the floor.

Snap.

“My shoe. The heel got caught,” Liz sniffled. “My favorite pair of shoes are ruined.”

“I’m sure you can glue it back on.” Gloria squeezed past her. “Where’s the flashlight?”

Liz held it out. “What are you doing?”

“There’s something under here.”

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Gloria passed the Bernard Tusse heel and flashlight to Liz. “Hold these.” She peeled back the brown indoor-outdoor carpet and found a padded envelope tucked away beneath it. Inside was a thick stack of papers. “This is it.”

Flipping through the pages, Gloria quickly realized she was holding Tammi O’Toole’s background report. “This is the background check Tammi was talking about.”

Sure enough, included in the information was a recent rental agreement with Tammi and Eric Andretti’s names on it. “This explains why Eric Andretti’s name is on the apartment lease.”

“Why?” Liz leaned in.

“Tammi has terrible credit and several judgments against her. Gucci at Dover Street, Bergdorf Goodman and a few other French names I can’t even pronounce,” Gloria said.

“At least she has good taste, even if she is a killer,” Liz said. “We now know she took Deanna out, but this is not a smoking gun.”

Gloria continued sifting through the papers and paused. “Jackpot! I found the forged copy of the partnership agreement Tammi used to secure a line of credit against this place. She must’ve been trying to get money to pay her creditors. Deanna was tipped off about it, maybe by her bank or an investor. My guess is she ran a background check to find out what was going on and inadvertently discovered her ex and Tammi were a couple.”

Liz blew air through thinned lips. “What a can of worms. Tammi used Designer Diva to secure some cash to get her creditors off her back.”

Gloria picked up. “Deanna caught wind, did some digging around, and found all of this. I bet there were some fireworks flying the night of her death. ”

“And Deanna was smart enough to hide these, just in case,” Liz said. “Now, all we have to do is turn this over to the authorities, along with what you recorded and they have a slam dunk case.”

“Not so fast. We have several issues...breaking and entering, illegally recording their conversation.” Gloria held up the packet of papers. “And theft.”

“So now what? We wasted our time.”

“Not necessarily. Although we can’t turn this in as evidence without getting into some potentially serious trouble , Sheriff Nelson might be on board to help coordinate a sting where Tammi O’Toole admits to killing Deanna.”

“What kind of sting?” Liz’s eyes narrowed.

“You were here the night Deanna died,” Gloria said.

“I was, and it was the biggest mistake of my life. Well, one of them,” Liz said .

“You were caught on camera, which means you could have seen something.”

“I could have, but I didn’t.”

“Tammi doesn’t know that. All she knows is you were on camera lurking nearby around the time of Deanna’s death.” Gloria waved the papers in the air. “If you have

something she wants and you make it seem like you're in the market to wheel and deal, I bet she'll show her hand, or at the very least incriminate herself."

"I'm, I'm not good at this stuff."

"Do you want to clear your name?"

"Of course."

"Then you're going to have to step up to the plate." Gloria shoved the papers back inside the envelope. "Let's get out of here."

The women exited the Designer Diva building the same way they entered—up the back stairs, down the hall and to the rooftop .

"Hang on." Liz removed her shoes. "I still can't believe my heel came off. It's a shame. I paid good money for quality footwear and now this. I may have to switch over and start buying another brand."

"Those shoes are over-priced and over-hyped." Gloria listened to her sister's nonstop whining as they made their way to the fire escape and down the ladder.

They reached the alley at the bottom. Gloria, fed up with her sister's complaints, made a timeout with her hands. "I'm sorry about your favorite shoes, but to be honest, high heels and undercover operations are never a good mix."

"I had..."

Gloria interrupted. "I know. You weren't planning on snooping around, but you must realize that because of what we found, there's a good chance we can clear your name."

“If I can pull it off. ”

“I have faith in you, Liz.” Gloria patted her sister’s arm. “Let’s head back to the spymobile to fill the others in and come up with a plan to coerce a confession from Tammi.”

“Less than half an hour.” Ruth consulted her watch. “What if Tammi O’Toole doesn’t show?”

“She will,” Gloria said confidently. “Liz convinced her she had something she was certain Tammi wanted. Sheriff Nelson should be here any moment. He told me when I left the station that he wouldn’t be far behind. I think I see an unmarked police cruiser pulling up to the stop sign.”

The four-door sedan coasted by and then eased into an empty spot next to Ruth’s spymobile. “That’s him. I’ll be right back.” Gloria flung the door open and hurried to the driver’s side.

Liz watched as the sedan’s window lowered halfway and her sister leaned in. She stood there for several long moments, with Gloria motioning toward the back of the building and then Ruth’s van. “I wonder what she’s telling him.”

“Them,” Ruth corrected. “There’s more than one cop in that car. Knowing Gloria, she’s making sure she knows exactly how this is going to play out.”

“I’ve let Gloria handle this sting, but maybe I should talk to them, too.” Liz reached for the handle, and Lucy stopped her. “If too many of us go over there and Tammi shows up, she’ll wonder what we’re doing.”

“True.” Liz checked her watch. Five minutes passed, and then several more. Finally, Gloria returned.

“What took so long?”

“Nelson and the other officers had a few more questions, and they lectured me on how much trouble we could’ve gotten into,” Gloria said. “I told them it was all Liz’s fault.”

“You did not.” Liz punched her sister in the arm .

“I’m kidding. I took as much blame as you.”

“Still, I knew I should’ve gone over there with you. Now I’m the one who’s in trouble.”

“Maybe a pinch, but I’m sure it will all be ironed out as soon as the sting is over.”

“Which means it’s still a go?” Lucy asked.

“It is.” Gloria pulled a small device from her pocket and handed it to her sister. “Put this recording device in your front pocket and don’t lose it. Nelson had to pull a bunch of strings and get special permission to use this.”

“A wire? You want me to wear a wire?” Liz asked.

“The more proof, the better. The transaction is an important part of the operation. Try to talk slowly. Remain here in the alley and turn so that you face this direction,” Gloria said.

“All of this is making me a nervous wreck. Do this. Don’t do that,” Liz said. “What

am I getting myself into? ”

“You’re clearing your name, clearing Floyd’s name,” Ruth reminded her. “Let’s go over the sting one more time, so it’s fresh in your mind.”

“When I talked to Tammi on the phone, I told her I had something she wanted and was willing to make a deal,” Liz said.

“You told her to bring cash,” Lucy said.

“Three thousand in small bills. She’s not going to want to part with it until she finds out what I have.”

“She won’t, which is why you’ll have to hand over the goods.” Gloria passed the envelope of papers to Liz.

Liz placed the wiretap in her front pocket. Her cell phone chimed, and she snatched it from her designer bag. “It’s Tammi. She’s heading into town now.”

“Remember, don’t let her lure you inside the building,” Ruth warned. “We need to maintain a visual to keep you safe. ”

“Right. The plan is for me to complete the transaction, get the cash in hand while it’s being recorded. I hope this works.” Liz slid out of the van and crossed the alley. She paced, waiting for Tammi to arrive. Two minutes, three and then five passed. Sweat formed on her brow and she wondered if the woman had changed her mind or, worse yet, suspected she was being set up.

At the eight-minute mark, Liz turned to go when the sound of tires crunching on loose gravel caught her attention. She watched as a luxury sports car coasted down the alley.

Tammi O'Toole exited the vehicle, slid her sunglasses on top of her head and casually made her way around the front where Liz stood waiting. "Hello."

"Hello," Liz evenly replied. "I was beginning to wonder if you would show."

"I was busy and had to rush around just to get here. You said you had something important, and it had to do with Deanna. What is it? "

"Evidence which backs up what I saw the other night when you attacked Deanna and murdered her in cold blood. I want you to tell the investigators that Deanna and I never argued, and I want money not to turn you in."

"Enough with the dangling carrot," Tammi snapped. "What do you have?"

Liz held up the envelope containing a copy of the papers she and Gloria had found under the rug.

Tammi reached for it. Liz, anticipating the move, took a quick step back. "Not yet. Did you bring the money?"

"Yes, but I'm not giving you a single red cent until I know what you have."

"A forged partnership agreement and a background check that shows you owe creditors a lot of money," Liz said. "Not to mention Deanna's ex, Eric Andretti, and you are on a lease agreement and listed as co-tenants. "

"Why don't you turn me over to the cops?" Tammi eyed Liz suspiciously.

"Deanna threatened to resurrect a bogus lawsuit against me and she was after my husband. Why should I care what happened to her? What matters to me is being able to pay off my credit cards so that Floyd doesn't take them away. If anyone can

sympathize with my situation, I figured it would be you.”

Tammi arched a brow. “You’re going to let me pay you off to keep quiet?”

“Why not?” Liz shrugged. “No skin off my back. Like I said, I wasn’t a fan of hers.”

“How do I know you won’t take the money and then ask for more?”

“You don’t. Other than you have my word that this is the end of it. You get the envelope and contents in exchange for the cash. You tell the police you never saw me argue with Deanna and that our meeting ended amicably. ”

“And you screw me over?”

“Fine.” Liz turned to go. “I guess I’ll turn this over to the police.”

Tammi reached out to stop her. “You’re leaving me no choice.”

“No, I’m not. For what it’s worth, you have my word.”

A sinister smile played across Tammi’s lips. “I don’t think you’ll say anything, because if you do, I’ll tell your husband and the police you blackmailed me.”

Liz’s breath caught in her throat. “You wouldn’t.”

“If you breathe a word of this to anyone, I’ll go right to your husband and spill the beans.”

Liz clenched her jaw. “I told you I was willing to make a deal.”

“And I’m taking care of my interests,” Tammi said. “Show me the envelope. ”

Liz handed it over. She watched as the woman removed the contents and scrutinized each page.

“How did you get this?”

Liz had expected the question, had been coached by Gloria and the others, that Tammi would want to know how she’d procured the paperwork. “Let’s just say I have several sources who are proficient at securing information and documents.”

Tammi finished flipping through the pages. She reached into her pocket and pulled out an envelope. “The deal is this is the end. You take the money, forget you ever met with me and we both walk away.”

“Isn’t that what I said?” Liz took the money, wondering precisely when Sheriff Nelson and his men would make their move.

“The money is all there,” Tammi said.

“I would like to trust you, but I don’t.” Liz removed the stacks of cash from the envelope and began counting. She placed the money back inside and dropped it into her handbag. “This concludes our business transaction.” She held out her hand. “No hard feelings?”

“I hope I never lay eyes on you again,” Tammi spat out.

“At least I’m not a killer.” Liz turned to go and her knees almost buckled as Sheriff Nelson and a trio of uniformed officers rushed toward them. A cop car sped down the alley and pulled in behind Tammi’s car, blocking her escape. “I received an anonymous tip about Deanna Andretti’s murder,” Nelson said.

“She did it!” Tammi O’Toole shouted. “Liz Rasmussen was trying to blackmail me.

She forged a bunch of documents, making it look like I was to blame for Deanna's death. She's going to lie and tell you she saw me murder her."

"Is this true?" Sheriff Nelson placed a light hand on his holster, his attention on Liz .

"Ms. O'Toole murdered her colleague and associate Deanna Andretti. She forged documents claiming to be co-owner of Designer Diva to obtain a business loan to pay off all the debts she'd accrued."

Nelson shifted his feet. "Where is this alleged document?"

"It doesn't exist," Tammi said.

"It's in her purse, inside an envelope I gave her a few minutes ago. She was willing to pay me hush money not to say anything." Liz removed the cash from her purse and handed it to Nelson. "There's three thousand dollars in here."

"She's lying. I never gave her a single cent." Tammi's eyes grew dark as she lunged at Liz, attempting to wrap her hands around her neck.

Officer Nelson stepped between the women while a second officer pulled Tammi away. Another patrol car arrived, and things moved fast as cops swarmed the place .

"Cuff them both," Nelson said.

"What are you doing?" Liz's face turned ghostly white. "This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. This was a sting. My sister, Gloria, can vouch for me. We planned this."

"We're gonna have to take you and Ms. O'Toole down to the station to sort this out," Nelson said.

“I can’t go to jail,” Liz gasped. “I look horrid in orange.”

“The outfits are gray. Besides, if what you’re saying is true, then you’ll be released within a couple of hours and we won’t even have to take a mugshot.”

Gloria and the other Garden Girls ran across the alley. “What’s going on?”

“The suspects are being taken down to the precinct until we can get both sides,” Nelson said.

“Gloria.” Liz’s voice grew panicked. “You got me into this. ”

“Let’s go.” Sheriff Nelson escorted Liz to a waiting patrol car.

“I’ll meet you at the station!” Gloria hollered.

Nelson placed Liz in the back. He climbed behind the wheel while two other officers placed Tammi O’Toole in the back of their patrol car.

As they drove off, Gloria could see Liz’s lips moving, her eyes focused on her sister.

“She’s one unhappy camper.” Ruth placed a light hand on Gloria’s arm.

“That would be an understatement.”

“Did you know they were going to take her down to the station?” Margaret shaded her eyes, watching as the patrol car turned the corner.

“Yes, although I had no idea Nelson was going to handcuff her.”

“Something tells me Liz won’t let us forget this anytime soon,” Lucy said.

Gloria sucked in a breath and briefly closed her eyes. “Nope. Not for a very long time.”

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“Don’t be too hard on yourself.” Lucy patted Liz’s shoulder. “You made a few rookie mistakes. Next time, you’ll know better.”

“I don’t plan on there ever being a next time.”

“If you stick around the Garden Girls long enough, there will be.”

Liz wagged her finger at her sister. “This entire experience has traumatized me.”

“C’mon,” Gloria chided. “It wasn’t that bad. The police didn’t even fingerprint you or snap a mugshot. The good news is, you and Floyd are off the hook, you don’t have an arrest record and Tammi O’Toole and Eric Andretti are behind bars, her for murdering Deanna and him for being a potential accessory.”

“For a while there, I was certain it was Carol Wright,” Liz said. “She didn’t have a clear motive but had more than enough opportunity.”

“Not to mention she was acting suspicious,” Echo said. “As soon as she found out Liz was snooping around, she began shadowing her and driving by the house.”

“And freaking me out,” Liz added. “Deanna treated Carol like a daughter, and her death devastated her. Tammi convinced the others I was furious about Deanna threatening to nail me with that absurd lawsuit over a minor incident when I lived at Dreamwood. For the record, it was when Frances went gaga over Milton Tilton and chained herself to the building.”

“I remember now,” Gloria said. “Reporters showed up, and it was all over the local

news. By the way, how is Frances?"

"I haven't heard from her in a while." Liz adjusted her Cartier watch. "I should call her. "

"Back to what happened," Gloria said. "Tammi finally confessed that Deanna kept promising to make her a partner. She didn't know Deanna had done a background check on her and not only discovered she and Eric Andretti were on a lease together, but found the fraudulent papers making them partners."

"Tammi's plan was to get a business loan using Designer Diva as collateral, pay off the judgments against her and avoid jail time. Deanna was dragging her feet, so Tammi decided to take matters into her own hands," Liz said.

Ruth picked up. "Deanna confronted her the night of her death. The women argued and from what we now know, Tammi strangled her in a fit of rage."

"I hate to say it, but sneaking into the store saved my neck, that and my Bernard Tusse shoe," Liz said. "There was more than enough evidence stacking up against me. Me being near the store earlier that evening not to mention Deanna had apparently caught me on camera and told the others about it."

"While all the attention was on you and Floyd, Tammi was working behind the scenes trying to cover her tracks and planting those seeds of suspicion." Gloria shook her head. "The only problem was, we found the papers Deanna hid before her death about the forgery and Tammi's judgments."

"The police already knew about the judgments but had no idea about the forgery," Lucy said. "I thought it was Becky Kiefer, who was having financial difficulties keeping her new business afloat and in desperate need of customers."

"Not only was Tammi planting those seeds of suspicion, she was tearing the place

apart looking for the papers,” Ruth said.

“Unfortunately, because of Becky’s financial problems, I won’t be using Hometown Designs. I’m back to square one, trying to come up with a plan to get this place move-in ready. ”

“Margaret and I have been talking,” Lucy said. “We don’t have any projects in the works and are up to the challenge.”

“Plus, we have plenty of contacts,” Margaret chimed in.

Liz’s eyes lit. “Are you sure you want to tackle this monstrosity?”

“We’ve never shied away from a challenge,” Lucy said. “Helping renovate this place would be a feather in our cap.”

“Floyd and I will pay you.” Liz hugged Lucy and then Margaret. “I’m so excited. When can we start? Can we start today?”

“As a matter of fact.” Margaret removed her iPad from her purse. “Lucy and I put together some preliminary designs. I’m sure you have your own ideas, but this might be a start.”

The friends gathered at the counter to go over what Lucy and Margaret had come up with. One was a contemporary farmhouse concept. A second was art deco. The third was the one that caught Liz’s attention. “This is it. This is what I want.”

“A French farmhouse,” Lucy said.

“I can see it now.” Liz clasped her hands, a dreamy expression on her face. “It’s going to be beautiful.”

“It will suit you perfectly,” Gloria said. “I’m sure there will be a few bumps along the way and you’ll have to put up with some inconveniences, since this is a major undertaking but I think you’re up to the challenge.”

In no time, they filled out the online agreement, and Liz signed electronically.

“We’ll start tomorrow,” Margaret promised. “Are you still planning on moving in during the renovations?”

“Floyd keeps insisting he has a plan. In fact, he called a short time ago and said he’s on his way here.” The roar of a loud engine echoed. “That must be him now. I believe his plan has arrived. ”

Ruth caught Dot’s eye and pulled her aside. “How’s Ray?” she whispered. “I’ve been thinking about him.”

“It turns out he has an underactive thyroid. Two of the symptoms are forgetfulness and memory fog. He’s trying some new medication. It seems to be working.”

“That’s wonderful news,” Ruth beamed.

“Yes, it is. Thank you for your prayers.”

“Hey.” Gloria snapped her fingers. “Dot and Ruth. You’re missing it.”

“We’re coming.” The women joined the others, watching as Floyd’s truck jostled along the driveway.

Ruth, Dot, Margaret, Lucy, and Echo crowded in behind Gloria and her sister.

“Good gravy,” Dot said.

“Is that what I think it is?” Ruth shaded her eyes .

Gloria grinned. “You have to hand it to him. He’s able to think outside of the box.”

Liz stared at the travel trailer, watching as Floyd shifted his truck into park and climbed out. “What is this?”

“This here is an RV, only gently used a time or two. I know you’re sensitive to smells, so I paid extra for a deep cleaning.”

Liz groaned. “I can’t...”

“Too late. I rented it for the next six months.”

Gloria rubbed her hands together. “Just think...it will be like being on vacation all the time.”

“You’ll be living the dream,” Lucy joked.

“I’m not surprised. Truly, I’m not.” Liz pinned her husband with a stare. “This is only temporary?”

“Only temporary,” Floyd promised.

Gloria elbowed her sister. “Maybe you should’ve moved into the mobile home, after all. ”

“No kidding.” Liz’s eyes traveled the length of her temporary home. “Somehow, this seems fitting for my new lack of luxury lifestyle.”

The end.