



Spy in the Sky (Lack of Luxury #3)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Liz's new mini-mansion has finally been renovated with no detail overlooked. She can't wait to throw a huge party to show off her elegant "farm chic" chateau. Unfortunately, there's a problem....noise pollution in the sky.

A small, private plane has started flying over and Floyd is convinced the pilot is spying on them because of the natural gas recently found on the property, guaranteed to make the couple even wealthier estate owners.

Tensions escalate when the annoying pilot begins tossing tomatoes at their property at all hours of the day and night. When the plane is shot down, authorities focus on Floyd, who swears he had nothing to do with it.

Gloria and the Garden Girls jump in to help clear his name but soon uncover disturbing clues that lead them to believe Liz's husband could be behind it after all.

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Liz aimed her binoculars skyward and made an unhappy sound. “He’s at it again.”

Her sister shaded her eyes, gazing up toward the bright sun. “Who is doing what again?”

“The stupid lawnmower in the sky.” Liz handed the binoculars to her. “Don’t tell me you can’t hear that annoying sound.”

Buzzzzzz. Buzzzzzz.

“See what I mean? Please tell me you can hear it.”

“Yes, I can hear the plane. It does seem a little loud,” Gloria agreed.

“A little loud? You should hear him. Every morning, like clockwork, he’s been buzzing around in circles, waking us up.” Liz and her husband had started noticing the small plane early one morning. The aircraft’s engine was so loud that the couple, who were both early risers, sprang out of bed, thinking it was going to crash into their house.

That morning was the beginning of what had become an everyday, from sunrise to sunset, occurrence. At first, they thought it was a local farmer surveying the fields, but after asking around, the couple quickly ruled it out.

Floyd had become convinced someone was spying on them, which may have seemed a little paranoid except for the fact the couple was sitting on a potential goldmine, courtesy of the natural gas found on their property.

“Maybe they’ll eventually get tired of flying around in circles and stop,” Gloria said.

“I don’t think so.” Liz turned her attention skyward again, watching as the small plane circled overhead once more. She thrust her fist in the air, hoping the pilot was watching, would take the hint and leave.

Instead, the plane looped around again.

Buzzzzzz. Buzzzzzz.

“It is a little annoying,” Gloria said.

“A little? More like a lot. Not to mention it’s a security concern.”

“If the pilot is after attention, it probably doesn’t help having us standing here watching.” Gloria nudged her sister toward the front door. “Maybe they’re getting their kicks, thinking they’re upsetting you, which makes them circle around even more. Let’s head inside.”

Liz lowered the binoculars and reluctantly trudged toward the house, falling in step with Gloria. “I wish they would go away, at least for today. I want everything to go perfectly and the annoying plane is making me a nervous wreck.”

“The girls should be here any time now. When’s your fancy pants designer and her television crew showing up?” Gloria’s sister had hired local designer, Evie Bloomwell, who also happened to be the host of *Elegant Estates by Evie*, a local television show, to help put the finishing touches on her newly renovated home .

Liz’s renovation project had gotten off to a rocky start, which was somewhat of an understatement. The original designer had been murdered, with Liz being the chief suspect.

Figuring out who was behind the death had been a team effort, with all the Garden Girls becoming involved. After clearing Liz's name, Margaret and Lucy had generously offered to help her and had even been the ones to suggest she contact the local celebrity to add designer touches.

Liz discovered not only was the show's star interested in helping the Rasmussens transform their five-thousand-plus square foot chateau into a showpiece, Evie was eager to feature the home in one of her shows.

Obsessed with the idea, Liz spared no expense in completing her elaborate, extravagant, and expensive home. In other words, she wanted the estate to be a genuine showstopper. And today was the big day.

To set the scene, Evie suggested Liz invite a few close friends over for the taping, to create a cozy and inviting environment.

Liz wasted no time enlisting the help of her sister, along with the Garden Girls—Lucy, Ruth, Margaret, and Dot.

“I see them pulling in now.”

Ruth's spymobile cruised into the driveway, parking next to Liz's brand-spanking new Range Rover, a birthday present from Floyd after his wife complained she didn't have enough room for shopping bags in the expensive convertible she'd upgraded to several months ago.

The doors flew open. The friends emerged carrying boxes of baked goods and bouquets of fresh flowers.

Liz darted down the steps and caught up with them. “What's all this?”

“Your housewarming gifts.” Lucy beamed, holding an enormous bouquet of pink, purple, and yellow flowers.

“They’re beautiful.” Liz accepted the flowers, her eyes shining brightly.

Dot juggled the boxes of baked goods. “I whipped up a few goodies for the big event.” She lifted the corner of the box, revealing blueberry muffins with crumble topping, thick slices of lemon pound cake drizzled in cream cheese frosting, enormous chocolate chunk cookies, along with raspberry twists coated in a decadent glaze.

“These are so pretty,” Liz gushed. “They’re almost too pretty to eat.”

Ruth balanced two gallon jugs. “And I have the tea and lemonade.”

Margaret slipped past Dot. “The only thing I brought was me.”

“Which is the most important thing of all.” Liz hugged her. “Thank you for being here. All of you. I can’t wait to show you the finishing touches Evie added yesterday. I made sure Floyd didn’t touch a thing, so it’s all perfectly placed for the camera crew.”

Buzzzzzz. Buzzzzzz.

The small plane reappeared, flying directly over the women who were standing in the driveway. All eyes turned skyward, watching as it circled a second time before slowly drifting away.

“That was loud,” Ruth said.

“Please go away.” Liz begged, clasping her hands. “At least for today.”

“I’ve never noticed small planes flying around here before,” Margaret said. “Who is it?”

“I wish I knew.” Liz briefly filled them in, telling them how the flights had only recently started—from early in the morning until late at night. “I’m sick and tired of it. Whoever it is wakes us up every morning. I think they’re spying on us.”

“Contact the township,” Lucy suggested. “Maybe they have some suggestions about how you can get this person to stop.”

“What a great idea.” Liz motioned them inside. “But for now, it’s time to get set up.”

Working together, the women strategically placed the flowers in areas already staged for the camera crew. Gloria, who contributed to the setup by bringing lavender scented candles, placed one near the front entrance and a second in the cozy and inviting family room.

With minutes to spare, Liz gave them a tour of every square inch, pointing out the touches Evie had added. “Margaret and Lucy did such a great job with the renovations. Floyd and I couldn’t be more thrilled with how everything turned out. Thank you for taking this monstrosity on.”

“It was fun.” Lucy beamed. “I have to admit, the renovations went smoother than I thought they would.”

“We had a lot to tackle,” Margaret added.

Liz would never forget the day Floyd brought her to the property, surprising her with what would be their future home. Or more like shocking her after discovering her husband had purchased a dilapidated farmhouse with French influences, “mishmashed” together, and completely uninhabitable except for the creatures who

had taken up residence.

In her opinion, the ramshackle residence needed to be torn down and for them to start over from scratch. But slowly, with input from Margaret and Lucy, she'd embraced their vision.

Looking back, she was glad she'd been open to it. The estate's end result was reflected in the warmth and charm, enhanced by touches of elegant opulence, giving the home a new look spotlighting Liz's personality. Floyd, happy to give his wife free rein, had been hands-off in the decision-making, only insisting he wanted her to be happy.

Happy couldn't even begin to sum up how Liz felt about her home. It was everything she could have dreamed of and more, thanks to her friends and wheelbarrows full of money. Lots and lots of money.

Right on time, Evie and her crew arrived. Working quickly, the crew and star of the show taped several segments, starting with Liz's opulent entrance, the keeping room—a casual space for friends and family to gather—followed by showcasing the living room, their grand and gorgeous library, the spacious yet cozy family room, ending with a taping of the Rasmussen's state-of-the-art, high-end kitchen.

“That's a wrap.” Evie pulled a small compact from her jacket pocket and dabbed at her lipstick. “We've finished the room recordings. Now it's time for you to show us around. We'll start at the front entrance.”

“Right.” Liz hurried over to the hall mirror. She critiqued her appearance, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear.

“You look chic and classic, just like your home.” Gloria gave her sister a hug. “It's time to shine. Knock their socks off with your wit, charm, and personality.”

“I’ll try. Hopefully, I don’t freeze from stage fright.” Liz sucked in a breath, squared her shoulders, and strolled out the front door.

Gloria and their friends gathered near the window, watching the interview yet attempting to stay out of sight so they wouldn’t make Liz even more nervous.

Dot quietly unlatched the window and lifted the sash.

“...and Hip Chick House Flips was instrumental in helping turn our vision into an exquisite forever home,” Liz said. “Elegant Estates by Evie arrived after the renovations wrapped up and added the finishing touches. As we step inside, you’ll notice no detail has been overlooked, from the French baroque chintz daybed to the Possini Euro blue table lamps right down to the luxurious Persian rugs.”

Liz continued, “Our piece of paradise will bring years of enjoyment to us and our family.”

“I can’t wait to tour the inside of this magnificent estate,” Evie said. “Our viewers are in for a special treat today.”

Buzzzzzz. Buzzzzzz.

The plane flew low. The engine was so loud it was hard to hear. Exasperated, Evie stepped off the porch, her eyes toward the sky.

Much to Liz’s horror, it appeared their spy in the sky had tossed something out of the plane. It was too far away to see what it was. The pilot performed a tight loop and tossed another object out, this one landing near the edge of the driveway.

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Furious, Liz stormed down the steps to see what the pilot threw out the window.

Gloria darted out the door and caught up with her at the end of the driveway. “What are you doing?”

Liz hunched down and stared at the ground. “I’m almost certain the pilot tossed something out of his window.”

“I don’t see anything.” Gloria circled the area, searching for some sign of what had been tossed out. “It could be your eyes were playing tricks on you and you just thought you saw something.”

“At least he’s gone now.”

“If I were you, I would try to wrap up the outdoor filming and head inside in case he or she comes back.”

“Good idea.” Liz did an about-face. With her sister by her side, she returned to where the camera crew stood patiently waiting. “Sorry for the disruption.”

“What happened?” Evie asked. “I saw the plane and then you took off down the steps.”

“The pilot tossed something out the window.”

“He did? I didn’t see anything.”

“He’s gone now.” Liz rubbed her palms together. “Where were we?”

“Wrapping this segment up. We have enough footage of the exterior.”

Gloria, Dot, Margaret, Lucy and Ruth joined Liz in the kitchen. It took several recordings before the camera crew was satisfied with the filming of their “casual gathering.” After finishing, the friends slipped out the back door and waited on the porch.

“Despite outward appearances, I can tell Liz is ticked,” Dot said. “What was she doing when she ran down the driveway?”

“She said the plane’s pilot tossed something out the window,” Gloria said. “We searched the area but couldn’t find anything.”

Lucy craned her neck. “It looks like Evie and her camera crew still need a few more minutes. Maybe we can take a look around while we’re waiting for them to wrap things up.”

The women spread out, systematically searching the driveway, the ditch, the road and even along the edge of neighbor Christi Kravitz’s yard.

Gloria continued walking until she found herself next to the mobile home where her sister’s tenant, Echo Quigley, lived. Backtracking, she returned to where the others had gathered, all eyes on whatever Lucy was holding.

“You found something?”

“This.” Lucy held up a chunk of blue rubber.

“What is it?”

“It looks like what’s left of a water balloon,” Margaret said. “Maybe the pilot tossed a water balloon.”

Dot ran a light hand over the grass. “The ground isn’t wet, but it could have already dried.”

While the women discussed the possibilities, Ruth slipped away and approached Liz’s mailbox.

Gloria hurried over. “What are you doing?”

“Checking out the mailbox.”

Lucy and the others gathered around. “Did you find something else?”

“No. I’m trying to figure out if my mailbox monitor would work for Liz’s mailbox.”

“Mailbox monitor?” Lucy wrinkled her nose. “Let me guess...it’s some sort of surveillance tool you’ve been working on.”

“Bingo. I have a prototype at home and have been dying to try it out,” Ruth said. “There’s only one problem. Actually, there are two.”

“The first is your mail is delivered to a PO box at the post office,” Margaret guessed.

“Yep. I was planning to ask Gloria if I could test it out on her mailbox, but I’m thinking now Liz might be an even better candidate.”

“What’s the second problem?” Dot asked.

“As soon as the mailbox post is pounded into the ground, it becomes federal

property.”

“Seriously?” Gloria arched a brow. “The government owns my mailbox?”

“One hundred percent, which means installing some sort of surveillance camera on federal property becomes a gray area,” Ruth said.

“You mean like the time you installed a camera inside the Belhaven Post Office and got caught? C’mon, Ruth,” Lucy chided. “It’s not a gray area. It’s a you-could-get-in-deep-doo-doo area.”

“You don’t need to remind me. I remember the incident very vividly.” Ruth grimaced. “I have several customers interested in the product, but I’m having trouble sorting out the legal implications.”

Gloria rolled her eyes. “I say it’s a no go. If you want to test a camera or other surveillance device, mount it on a tree or nearby post.”

“I’ll add my two cents.” Margaret made a thumbs down. “Putting it on the mailbox is asking for trouble.”

“I agree,” Dot chimed in. “You need to operate within the parameters of the law.”

“I still haven’t given up on it,” Ruth said.

“Because of the gray area,” Gloria guessed. “Which is?”

“The post. Is the mailbox post considered federal property?” Ruth shrugged. “Like I said, I’m still looking into it.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Gloria caught a movement near the house and watched

as one of the cameramen carried a bag of equipment to the van. “I think they’re wrapping it up.”

The women began heading back when Gloria heard someone calling her name.

“Yoo-hoo!” Liz’s neighbor, Christi Kravitz, darted down the driveway.

“Here comes the nosy neighbor,” Margaret muttered under her breath.

“She’s nice,” Gloria whispered back. “Liz said she’s lonely.”

“Gloria!” Christi, her cheeks red and slightly out of breath, stopped at the end of the driveway. “I thought that was you.”

“Hello, Christi. How are you?”

“Fine. Fall is in the air, which means I’m working on wrapping up my yard projects.” Christi motioned toward Liz’s house. “I see the Elegant Estates by Evie star and camera crew showed up. How is it going?”

“Good, except for the annoying plane,” Gloria said.

“Annoying is putting it mildly. I don’t know who it is, but they’re driving us nuts.” Christi went into a long spiel, similar to what Liz had said, how the plane was flying over from early in the morning until late at night. “It got so bad, I called the police the other day. They said there’s nothing they can do.”

“What about contacting the township?” Lucy asked. “I told Liz maybe you should see if there’s some sort of noise ordinance.”

“Good idea. We’ll have to check it out.”

The women made small talk until Christi's cell phone rang. "My husband, Darren, is coming back from out of town. Maybe I'll see if we can go to the township together."

"I think Liz might beat you to it," Gloria said. "She's fed up."

"She's not alone." Christi returned home while the friends made a beeline in the opposite direction. They slowed when they noticed the cameras were once again rolling, filming Liz and Evie, who stood casually chatting near a basket of fall flowers.

Liz was in her element, and Gloria hovered off to the side, proudly watching her sister, who was a natural in front of the camera.

Off in the distance, she could hear the faint buzz of a plane. It grew louder and Gloria didn't need to look to know the pesky pilot had returned.

A flicker of annoyance flitted across Liz's face. It was quickly replaced by her warm smile as she tried to wrap up the final few comments, thanking the show's host.

Buzzzzzz.

The faint buzzing grew louder, to the point it was apparent whoever was operating the plane was doing it on purpose. It dipped down and circled around before slowly flying off.

Evie's brows knitted, and she turned her gaze skyward. "The plane is making way too much noise. Do you have any idea who it might be? Maybe you can ask them to stop, at least until we finish taping our segment."

Liz, fed up and furious, said the first thing that popped into her head. "I have no idea who the pilot is, but if I had a gun, I would be tempted to shoot them down."

A moment of uncomfortable silence ensued as Evie and her camera crew stared at Liz.

“Liz isn’t serious,” Gloria blurted out. “She would never shoot at a plane.”

“No. I...” Liz’s eyes flitted toward the cameraman. “Of course, you didn’t record me saying that.”

“I recorded it, but we’ll edit it out.” The man lowered the camera, watching as the plane circled once again. “I don’t know what the pilot’s problem is, but it doesn’t appear we’ll be able to record additional outdoor scenes.”

“I think we have enough.” Evie unbuttoned her crisp black tailored jacket and carefully laid it across the passenger seat’s backrest. “Thank you for your hospitality, for trusting me to help you create your vision. You have a beautiful home, Liz.”

“Thank you for helping me.” Liz clasped her hands, watching as Evie and her crew finished packing up and drove off. “I am so sick of that plane,” she gritted out. “This has to stop.”

“Shooting them out of the air isn’t the answer,” Margaret said. “Although it would solve your problem, at least one of them.”

“Liz isn’t shooting anything.” Gloria tapped her sister’s arm. “Let’s call the township to see what can be done.”

“I have their number in my contact list. I use it often, especially when I need to apply for permits.” Lucy swiped her cell phone’s screen before handing it to Liz. “It’s ready for you to call.”

“Thanks.” Liz cleared her throat and pressed the call button. “Hello. My name is Liz Rasmussen. I live on Cash Creek Road and have a quick question.” Using her calmest voice, she explained to the person on the other end of the line why she was calling.

Although Gloria could only hear half the conversation, she could tell by the tone in her sister’s voice she was getting somewhere.

“I appreciate the information. Thank you for your help.” She ended the call and handed Lucy her phone. “The township clerk told me I can start a petition to limit the hours and number of times pilots are allowed to fly over. She said she’s not sure if anything can or would be done, but based on previous issues from other property owners, she thought it should be the first step.”

“Similar to issues of dogs barking at all hours, right-of-way concerns, stuff like that?” Margaret asked.

“Correct. She said she’s never personally had someone complain about annoying planes or air traffic, but it doesn’t mean it can’t be addressed,” Liz said.

“Cool. So, start a petition and take it to the township,” Gloria said.

“Before we go.” Lucy removed the thin piece of blue rubber from her pocket. “While you were filming, we took a quick look around. I found this at the end of your driveway.”

Liz took the piece of rubber, a slow anger building inside of her. “Echo.”

“What about Echo?” Dot asked.

“She’s been finding similar pieces of rubber around her property for the past few days.”

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Liz's eyes flashed with anger. "I found one of those nasty pieces of rubber in Duchess's mouth the other day. It has to be from the pilot throwing water balloons out the window. I have had it with this jerk. I'm driving right over to the township office and get the ball rolling."

Gloria and Lucy exchanged a quick glance. "Maybe Lucy and I can tag along. She knows the township clerk."

"I have some extra time," Lucy said. "Gloria can give me a ride home when we're done."

Dot glanced at her watch. "I'm sorry to celebrate and run, but Ray is home waiting for me to start our Dot's Hot Meals on Wheels afternoon run, which means Ruth needs to leave since she gave me a ride here."

"I'm going to skedaddle too," Margaret said. "Your home is fabulous, Liz. Congratulations. I hope you and Floyd have many happy years here together."

Liz's tone softened. "Me too. Thank you for helping me, for the delicious treats, for all you do and have done."

"You're welcome." Dot gave her a gentle hug. "Don't worry about the pesky pilot. I'm sure you'll figure out a way to get him to stop."

"One way or another."

Ruth wagged her finger. "But not by shooting the plane down."

“I was joking. Of course, I would never shoot at a plane.”

The trio of friends climbed into Ruth’s van and drove off while Lucy, Gloria, and Liz ran inside to straighten up the kitchen. Duchess, the couple’s Shih Tzu who had been napping in Liz and Floyd’s bedroom, promptly made a beeline for the door as soon as she opened it. “I need to take her out.”

After finishing, the friends hopped into the Range Rover for the short drive to the township clerk’s office.

As luck would have it, the person Liz had chatted with earlier was still there. She briefly explained she’d been the one to call earlier about the pesky pilot.

The woman appeared sympathetic to Liz’s plight and patiently listened until she finished. “As I mentioned on the phone, I’m not aware of anyone complaining about private planes, but there’s always a first.”

“You suggested possibly starting a petition,” Liz prompted.

“I did.”

While the woman talked, Liz jotted down a few notes. “Thank you for your help. I’ll start working on this immediately.”

Gloria waited until they were back inside her sister’s vehicle. “Well? What’s your next step?”

“To get signatures.” Liz opened her center console and removed a yellow pad of paper. “If you have a few extra minutes, I wouldn’t mind starting right now.”

“You drive, we’ll fly,” Lucy quipped.

Liz was a woman on a mission, strategically mapping out their route block by block, mile by mile, gathering as many signatures as she could along the way.

“We’re onto something,” she said after returning to the car and speaking with the homeowner. “I’m not the only one who is sick and tired of the plane. I only wish I would have done this sooner.”

“The more people who complain, the better your chance of getting results,” Gloria said. “It’s a shame we can’t figure out who the pilot is and go right to the source to handle it more directly.”

“So they can toss water bombs in our face?” Liz asked. “Yeah, we could try it but something tells me this person...pilot is intentionally antagonizing area residents.”

“How many more stops do you need to make?” Lucy asked.

“One more. I want to stop by my neighbor, Christi’s house.”

Back home, Liz trekked down the driveway and across the road.

The faint strains of classical music echoed from the open windows. Liz gave the door a light rap and waited.

Nothing happened, so she tried again. This time knocking louder.

Finally, her neighbor appeared, a mud mask covering every inch of her face except for her eyes, lips, and nose. “Hey Liz.”

“Hello, Christi. I’m sorry to bother you.”

“No bother.” The woman eased the screen door open. “I saw the camera crew over

there earlier. How did it go?"

"Great, except for the annoying lawnmower in the sky that kept interrupting us." Liz shifted her feet. "Before I forget, have you found small chunks of rubber in your yard?"

Christi thought about it. She shook her head. "No. Why?"

"Because I think the pilot is tossing water balloons at us."

Her neighbor's jaw dropped, creating a large crease in her mud mask. "Seriously? How awful."

Liz held up the yellow pad. "I stopped by the township and talked to the clerk, who suggested I start a petition."

"I'm so sick of it. Darren can't stand those planes. If the guy keeps it up, I wouldn't be surprised if he tracked him down."

"Maybe we can nip this in the bud." Liz handed a pen and the petition to her.

Christi promptly signed it. "There's an app you can download to track planes in the area."

"An app?" Liz echoed.

"Flight Radar 24 will give you everything you need to know. The pilot's tail number, the airport they flew out of, the exact path they took."

Liz grabbed the pad of paper and began writing. "What was the name of the app again?"

“Flight Radar 24. I just found out about it myself.”

“I’m on it.” Liz thanked her and hurriedly left. She returned home, where Gloria and Lucy stood waiting.

“Well? I’m sure Christi was ready to sign on the dotted line,” Gloria joked.

“More than ready and now I have this.” Liz triumphantly waved the pad of paper in the air.

“The signatures.”

“The signatures plus information about an app I can use to track the plane. I’ll be able to figure out who the pilot is, where he’s flying out of, and his flight path. This is gold.” Liz led the way inside the house, making a beeline for her kitchen desk and already open laptop.

Using the information Christi had given her, Liz created an account and logged in. She entered her address and clicked on the flight map. A small set of wings popped up. She zoomed in, noting a solid yellow line circling around several times.

“This is it,” she whooped. “This is the plane.”

Gloria slid her reading glasses on. “The only plane, I might add. It’s going to be easy breezy figuring out who has been flying over your house.”

Liz clicked on the plane. A new screen popped up, this one with information about the plane’s owner, their address, and the type of aircraft. “The plane is registered to Tristan Keller.”

“Pretty nifty.” Lucy let out a low whistle. “This is up there with Ruth level

surveillance.”

“Does his name ring a bell?” Gloria asked.

“Nope.”

“Either way, you might not need to file a petition after all.”

“Maybe not. I can’t wait for Floyd to get home. Something tells me we’re going to get our peace and quiet back.”

Tink...tink. Gloria’s cell phone chirped. She slid it from her jacket pocket. “Paul is home and wondering how much longer I’ll be.”

“We should get going,” Lucy said. “Paige needs a ride to the repair shop. Her van’s muffler fell off.”

Liz followed her sister and friend out of the house. Duchess, who had trotted along behind, waited for Liz to scoop her up. “Thanks again for everything.”

“Good luck with your spy in the sky,” Gloria called out as she climbed into her car.

“Thanks.” Liz lifted Duchess’s paw and waved. As soon as they were gone, she returned inside to the computer with the flight radar app still open. Right next to it was the list of signatures. “You’re going to stop harassing us, Tristan Keller, one way or another.”

The rest of the late afternoon passed uneventfully. Much to Liz’s relief, the skies were quiet, with nary a single sighting of the pesky pilot. She briefly wondered if he had somehow found out she was gathering signatures to stop his harassment.

Near the dinner hour, she and Duchess meandered out onto the back porch to wait for Floyd who arrived right on time. Following close behind in her car was their tenant, Echo Quigley.

Liz gave her a friendly wave as she turned and continued driving toward her mobile home. She slid off the rocker and followed her pup across the front lawn, catching up with Floyd near the driver's side door.

"I love to see a smile on my sugar lip's face," Floyd teased. "I take it the Elegant Estates by Evie taping and interview went well?"

"For the most part, except when the annoying plane showed up and kept buzzing around while we were filming the outdoor segment."

Floyd's expression sobered. "Still at it, huh? I guess we're going to have to do something. We shouldn't have to put up with someone harassing us and watching us at all hours of the day or night."

"I couldn't agree more." Liz clasped her hands. "I have some good news."

"You made dinner," he teased.

Liz laughed. "Not this time, but maybe I'll try whipping something up soon."

"So, what's the good news?"

Liz filled him in on her conversation with the town clerk.

"It's a start. Now you can start collecting signatures."

"Already done. The list is sitting on my desk," she said proudly.

“You have been a busy bee.”

“While I was at Christi’s getting her signature, she mentioned a flight radar app used to track planes, so I signed up and tracked down the name of the pilot.”

Floyd reached back inside his truck for his jacket. “Who is it?”

“You know how terrible I am at names. I’ll have to look again.” Liz, with Floyd by her side, returned inside to her open laptop. “It’s a nifty tool.”

She showed him some of the app’s features, along with how the plane had looped around their house several times during the day. “I also think he’s been tossing water balloons out the window.”

“Water balloons. Why?”

“I have no idea.” Liz adjusted her reading glasses. She clicked on the plane and the pilot’s information popped up.

Floyd leaned in to take a closer look. “Tristan Keller.”

“Pretty cool, huh? I wonder if we should try to track him down and ask him to stop.”

“There’s no need,” he said. “In fact, his harassment is starting to make perfect sense.”

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“You know Tristan Keller?” Liz asked.

“He’s a real estate investor who was interested in purchasing this farm. I beat him to it.”

She stared at her husband, the pieces of why the pilot was harassing them beginning to fall into place. “A man, a local investor who was interested in our home and farm, is the same one who owns the plane that’s been flying over our house the past few weeks?”

“Correct.” Floyd rubbed the side of his forehead. “My guess is he heard those gas rights are bringing in a tidy sum and he might be a tad ornery about it.”

“A tad ornery?” Liz frowned. “He’s being a jerk. I’m also almost certain he’s been throwing stuff out of his plane.”

“Throwing stuff seems a little heavy-handed, but I suppose people have done worse things for less than that.”

“Either way, I want to put a stop to him flying over our house and harassing us.”

“I agree. Now that I know who it is, I’ll address the situation,” Floyd said.

Later that evening, long after the couple turned in for the night, Liz tossed and turned, mulling over parts of her interview, hoping she didn’t look like an idiot in front of the camera. She also wondered what would happen when her husband called Keller out about his harassing actions.

It had been a long haul for Liz Applegate Rasmussen. She could still remember the day she'd arrived back in West Michigan flat broke, unemployed, depressed and discouraged only to discover her family—and friends—were there ready to help her pick up the pieces and start over.

The journey had been painful and embarrassing. It had also taught Liz a valuable lesson and humbled her in a way she'd never been humbled before.

Her pride had been knocked down a notch or two, but it no longer bothered her. In fact, it made her appreciate all she had, which was a lot. Liz enjoyed life's finer things, thanks to a husband who doted on and spoiled her.

She snuggled closer to Floyd and drifted off to sleep. Her last thought was to thank God for her many blessings.

Buzzzzzz.

Liz's eyes flew open. A low groan escaped her lips.

Floyd rolled over and glanced at the clock. "Ten past six. He's getting earlier and earlier."

"Maybe he knows your schedule, that you're up by six-thirty and heading over to the farm by seven. He's trying to be helpful and acting as your alarm clock," Liz said sarcastically.

"I'll track Keller down first thing this morning as soon as I get to the farm." Floyd flung the covers back. He pulled his pants and shirt on and strode out of the bedroom.

Meanwhile, Liz stared at the ceiling, counting the seconds before the plane's next fly over. It buzzed by again, this time a little louder, and she wondered if he was tossing water balloons at them again.

"Rude," she muttered under her breath. "I should find out where you live and show up on your doorstep at five tomorrow morning."

Duchess, who was sleeping in her custom pillow top bed near the window, sleepily climbed to her feet and let out a small yip, her signal she needed to tinkle.

"Let's go." Liz shoved her feet in her slippers and turned the bedside lamp on.

Pop. A loud popping sound echoed. Liz darted to the bedroom window and gazed out. The early morning skies were clear and there was no sign of the plane.

She ran downstairs and onto the back porch, her eyes scanning the open fields surrounding their home and barns.

A shadowy figure crested the hill behind the main barn. It was Floyd. She slipped her shoes on and ran out to meet him. "I heard a loud pop."

"Me too. Sounded like a gunshot," Floyd said. "Or maybe it was Keller's plane backfiring."

Liz rubbed the sides of her arms. "Have you finished feeding the swine?"

"Pepper and Piper?" Floyd chuckled. "Not yet. I was getting ready to head that way when I heard the popping sound. I'll be back inside in a few."

"I'll start a pot of coffee and figure out what we're having for breakfast." Liz followed her pup to the kitchen where she promptly filled Duchess's food and water

dishes before rummaging around in the fridge.

Despite her lack of culinary skills, Liz had become proficient at warming breakfast sandwiches. By the time Floyd arrived, she had finished preparing two and proudly set them on the bar.

“Breakfast two days in a row, sugar lips?” Floyd gave her a quick kiss. “Let me guess, you have your eye on a new Louis Vuitton bag.”

“No, but now that you mention it,” Liz joked.

“You buy whatever tickles your fancy.” Floyd slid onto a barstool. “Those are pretty flowers.” He motioned to the bouquet her friends had brought over the previous day.

“Lucy, Dot, Margaret, and Ruth bought them. They thought the flowers would look nice for the show’s taping.”

“They’re pretty. Makes me think I don’t bring you enough flowers.”

“But you give me everything else.” Liz’s eyes softened as she ran a light hand over his cheek. “And more.”

“I love you Liz.”

“I love you too, Floyd.” She slid his breakfast plate across the counter. “I’m getting better at these breakfast sandwiches. I didn’t even scorch the top of the croissants this time.”

“They look mighty tasty.” Floyd cocked his head. “I don’t hear your plane.”

Liz grew quiet and listened. “You’re right. Maybe he ran out of gas.”

“I’ll track Keller down this morning,” Floyd promised. “He and I are gonna have a friendly little conversation about respecting a person’s privacy and property.”

“And if he blows you off?” she asked.

“Then we’ll follow through with submitting the petition you spent yesterday working on.”

The couple chatted about plans for their upcoming party to celebrate the completion of their new home.

Liz had been working on it for weeks now, planning out every single detail, excited to show off the chateau and to thank Margaret and Lucy for all of their hard work. In fact, she and Floyd planned a small surprise for them, one the couple both agreed was well deserved.

Liz returned to their original topic. “I’m hoping you can talk to Tristan Keller, man to man, and get him to realize what he’s doing is unacceptable.”

“I will. One way or another, we’re gonna get our peaceful oasis back,” Floyd vowed.

A light rap on the back door interrupted their conversation. Liz sprang from her barstool and peeked out the window. It was Echo.

She eased the door open. “Good morning, Echo.”

“Good morning, Liz. I hope I’m not bothering you.”

“Not at all.”

“I was wondering if Teddy could hang out with Duchess for a little while today. He

got scared by some loud noises this morning and I don't want to leave him alone."

"Of course." Liz reached for the pup, who was also Duchess's brother. "We'll give Teddy lots of love and attention."

"Thanks." Echo turned to go and hesitated, looking as if she wanted to say something.

"Is there something else?"

"Yeah. Have you noticed anyone throwing tomatoes at your mailbox or at the house?"

Liz wrinkled her nose. "Tomatoes?"

"There are a bunch of rotting tomatoes on my deck. It sounded like mini bombs going off about an hour ago." Echo said she heard them hit. "The stupid plane was flying over. I heard the tomatoes drop and then a few minutes later a loud boom."

Floyd rose from the bar, a look of concern etched on his face. "Mind if we run over and take a look at your deck?"

"Not at all. It's kind of freaking me out."

Liz set Teddy on the floor next to Duchess and followed her husband and tenant outside. Her heart plummeted when the trio drew closer to Echo's mobile home and she noticed splotches of rotting produce dotting the deck and yard. One had even landed on the hood of Echo's car.

Anger quickly replaced her dismay, and she could feel the tips of her ears burn. "The man threw tomatoes at Echo's house."

“Man?” Echo asked.

“Tristan Keller,” Floyd said. “Liz found out he’s the pilot who has been buzzing around.”

“Dropping water balloons and now rotten tomatoes,” Liz said. “I want to press charges.”

Floyd lifted a hand. “We need proof. We can’t go accusing him of something unless we saw him do it.”

“Did you see the plane?” Liz asked Echo.

“No. Teddy was outdoors taking a bathroom break when it happened. He got so freaked out, he ran away and I had to chase after him. By the time I caught him, I heard the loud pop and then it got quiet.”

“Maybe we got lucky and his plane went down,” Liz joked.

“C’mon, Liz,” Floyd gently chided.

“I don’t want him hurt. I want him out of our hair. Permanently.”

“I’m going to wipe my car off before it strips the paint.” Echo ran back inside to grab a rag while Liz and Floyd returned home.

“This has to stop.” Liz went into a long rant, pointing out his flights were an invasion of privacy, how he was spying on them from the sky and even targeting their property. “We’re sitting ducks.”

“Like I said, I’ll handle it today.” Floyd grabbed his cell phone and keys. He gave her

a quick kiss and left.

Meanwhile, Liz, still fuming over Keller targeting them, returned outside to search for more tomato bombs. Her anger escalated when she found several near the barn and even more only steps away from her Range Rover.

What if one of the pups had been outside when Keller dropped them from his plane? Duchess or Teddy could have been hurt.

She called the dogs back inside, cleaned up the breakfast dishes and promptly logged onto the flight app. As suspected, Tristan Keller's plane was the only one flying over their house early that morning, completing three loops in total before abruptly stopping.

The sound of sirens caught Liz's attention. She darted to the door and watched as an ambulance sped past. Seconds later, the sirens stopped.

Thinking there was an accident nearby, she slipped her shoes on and jogged to the end of the driveway. The ambulance was nowhere in sight.

Liz turned to go when she noticed her neighbor Christi flying down her front steps. She gave Liz a quick wave and ran across the road. "What's going on?" she asked breathlessly. "I saw an ambulance go by a couple of minutes ago."

"I saw it too. I have no idea where it went."

Christi shivered, rubbing the sides of her arms. "Is Floyd home?"

"No. He and Echo left for work."

"Hopefully everyone is okay."

The women chatted for a few more minutes before Liz returned to the house. She ran upstairs to get ready, mentally ticking off her to-do list. After finishing, she gathered up her purse and car keys. Liz crossed the driveway, pausing when she heard a car pulling in. It was a Montbay County sheriff's patrol car.

Liz's scalp started to tingle. Something had happened. Her gut told her it involved the ambulance.

The driver's side door opened. A uniformed officer emerged and made his way over. "Is this the Rasmussen residence?"

"It is. I'm Liz Rasmussen."

"There has been an incident down the road and I was wondering if I could ask you a few questions."

"Incident?" Liz echoed.

"A local pilot's plane crashed in a field near here."

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Liz began to feel lightheaded. “A small plane went down?”

“Someone shot it down.” The officer shifted his feet. “It happened about an hour, an hour and a half ago.”

“Is he...is the pilot...”

“He survived the crash. I’m no medical expert, but I believe he’s going to be all right. He got banged up pretty good.”

“How awful.” Liz placed a light hand on her chest. “I heard the plane early this morning. It must have been around six. In fact, it woke my husband and me up.”

“Did you hear anything else?” the officer prompted.

“I heard a loud popping noise. Looking back, I didn’t notice the plane after I heard the pop.”

The cop lowered his gaze, staring at the splattered tomato near his shoe. Roughly a foot away was another tomato. “I’m curious about these tomatoes I’m seeing on the ground.”

Liz swallowed hard, her mind whirling. The cop knew something about the tomatoes. She could feign ignorance or come clean and tell him what she suspected. “Actually, now that you mention them, my tenant, Echo Quigley, who lives in the trailer over there, said someone dropped a bunch on her porch. Why?”

“Because we found a bushel of rotting tomatoes inside the plane’s cockpit.”

Liz clenched her jaw, biting back a snarky reply. Be cool. You don’t want to sound like a potential suspect. “Perhaps the pilot was in trouble. He lost some of his tomatoes and they landed on my tenant’s property.”

The cop frowned. “Something isn’t adding up here.”

Liz lost her internal battle about keeping quiet and threw caution to the wind. “Perhaps Mr. Pilot was tossing rotten tomatoes at people, property and pets. Someone didn’t appreciate it and they decided to stop him. I don’t know who it was, but it wasn’t me.”

He removed a notepad from his pocket and flipped it open. “Have you been home all morning?”

“I have. My husband left a short time ago, about the same time our tenant, Echo Quigley, left.”

“Do you own guns?”

“My husband does.”

“Mind if I take a look at them?”

Liz hesitated. On the one hand, she had nothing to hide. She and Floyd were not responsible for Keller’s plane going down. On the other hand, she was smart enough to know any misstep or questionable answer could incriminate the couple.

“I would rather have my husband home,” Liz finally said. “Perhaps you can give me time to call him.”

The officer's eyes narrowed. "Your answer is no."

"It's not a definitive no, but more like a not now," she corrected.

The cop asked a few more questions and then told her he planned to return. Liz called Floyd's cell phone as soon as he was gone.

"Remember when we heard a loud popping sound early this morning?"

"Yeah."

"Someone shot Tristan Keller's plane down."

There was a long silence on the other end of the line. So long that Liz thought they'd been disconnected. "Are you still there?"

"I'm here."

"The cop also noticed the tomatoes splattered on our driveway and wanted to know what happened. There were still some in Keller's cockpit when it hit the ground."

"So he was throwing tomatoes at us," Floyd said.

"It appears so. Maybe he ticked off one of the other neighbors and they shot his plane," Liz theorized. Another thought occurred to her. "It is deer hunting season."

"You don't bag a deer by shooting it out of the sky."

"A hunter's firearm could have misfired."

"That's a long shot."

“True.” Liz blew air through thinned lips. “The cop asked if you had guns. I told him you did. When he asked to see them, I explained that I wanted to wait until you were here to show them to him.”

“How is Keller?”

“The officer said he got banged up pretty good, but seemed to think he would be okay. We have nothing to worry about. We were home and in bed when it happened. Well, at least I was,” Liz said.

“We’re not off the hook. Remember when I said I was going to contact Keller?”

“Yeah.”

“I tracked his number down first thing this morning.”

Liz could feel a knot forming in the pit of her stomach. “And...”

“I left a message on his office’s answering machine, telling him I knew he was harassing us and to knock it off or else.”

“Or else what?” Liz asked.

“I didn’t elaborate.”

“He’s going to think you took his plane down and then left a message to cover your tracks.” Liz placed a shaky hand on her forehead. “This is awful.”

“Yep. Obviously, he made someone else angry enough to pull the trigger.”

“Thank God he’s going to be all right.”

“I’m not sure what kind of charges someone could face for shooting down an aircraft, but something tells me the authorities don’t take those things lightly,” Floyd warned.

“Or discharging a firearm into the sky.” Liz briefly closed her eyes. “It is deer hunting season, which means someone’s gun could have accidentally discharged.”

“And took down the most annoying lawnmower in the sky known to mankind?” Floyd asked.

“True.” Liz gazed out the window, toward their neighbor’s house. “Christi was up around the time it happened. I’m sure the authorities are going to talk to her.”

“Maybe she heard or saw something.”

“She always has a pair of bird-watching binoculars hanging around her neck.” Liz could hear voices in the background. “You sound busy.”

“It’s been one of those mornings.” Floyd’s voice grew muffled. “I gotta get back to work.”

“What do you want me to do if the police show up again?”

“Tell the investigating officer to leave his name and number. I’ll call him back to set up a time to talk.”

Liz promised she would before ending their call. She grabbed a plastic grocery bag and a pair of gloves. With Duchess by her side, she trekked through the yard picking up the rotten tomatoes, counting twelve in all.

Mr. Keller had been a busy man before his plane went down. Perhaps he was tossing rotting tomatoes at someone else’s farm, as well. Maybe the man was mentally

unstable, had made some enemies, and those enemies decided to take him out.

Liz grabbed tomato number thirteen and noticed movement next door. It was Christi, standing on her porch. Liz gave her a quick wave and watched as she made her way over.

“What’s in the bag?” Christi asked.

“Rotting tomatoes. The pilot tossed some out of his plane before it was shot down,” Liz said. “It was the same plane that’s been buzzing around our houses for weeks now.”

“I heard.” Christi’s eyes grew round as saucers. “A cop was on my doorstep this morning asking if I knew anything about it. Of course, I told him what has been going on, how the plane has been buzzing by our house at all hours of the day and night.”

“Did he ask to see your guns?”

“He did.” Christi told him she showed him her husband’s guns, kept locked in a gun safe inside the house. “He seemed very curious about you and Floyd.”

“Great,” Liz groaned. “Wait until the police find out Floyd knew the man.”

Christi made a choking sound. “Floyd knew the pilot?”

“He’s a real estate investor who was interested in purchasing our farm. Floyd beat him to it.”

Her neighbor lowered her voice. “Word must have gotten out about your property’s natural gas. I bet he was ticked.”

“Ticked enough to toss tomatoes at us.” Liz shifted the bag to her other arm. “I need to check on Duchess and Teddy.”

Christi trailed behind, throwing out some of their neighbor’s names, trying to guess who might have been behind the shooting. “Honestly, it could have been anyone. I’m sure everyone around here signed the petition yesterday.”

Liz stopped in her tracks, her scalp tingling. “The petition.”

“At the risk of stating the obvious...” Christi pointed to the bag. “You started a petition. The pilot was throwing tomatoes, the same man who wanted to purchase your property. You’ll probably have the investigators knocking on your door again. If I were you, I would be proactive and get my ducks in a row.”

“More than my ducks. The whole farm,” Liz groaned. “I hate to say it, but I think it’s time to get my sister, Gloria, and the Garden Girls involved.”

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“Your sister and her friends are pretty good at solving mysteries.” Christi picked up the pace, falling into step as Liz made a beeline for the house.

“They’re very good. If anyone can figure out who shot Keller’s plane down, it will be Gloria and her friends.”

“It has to be someone who lives nearby.”

“It stands to reason,” Liz agreed. “Which means Gloria and the others will want to use this place as their starting point and work their way out.”

“I’ll try to help in any way I can.” Christi hustled to keep up. “Did you ever check out the flight radar app I told you about yesterday?”

“I did.” Although not specifically invited, Liz wasn’t surprised when her neighbor followed her into the kitchen. “The app is how I found out who has been harassing us.”

“Harassing,” Christi repeated. “You’re right. That’s exactly what he’s been doing. What did you say his name was again?”

“Tristan Keller.” Without thinking, Liz circled around to her laptop and tapped the keys. The flight app screen, the one she’d been studying before walking outside to collect rotting tomatoes, was still up.

Christi made a choking sound. “You were monitoring his flight this morning?”

“I was...” Liz stumbled over her words. Having the flight app open and Keller’s flight pattern on the screen could easily be viewed as her tracking him. Which she had...before she found out someone had taken his plane down. “I heard the plane early this morning and checked to make sure it was Keller’s plane.”

Christi tiptoed closer and leaned in. “You can see where he flew around and around and then...blip. His plane disappeared off the radar. He was right over your property.”

“Right over our properties,” Liz corrected. “It’s possible it was someone other than a neighbor, someone who followed him in their vehicle.”

“I suppose,” Christi agreed. “Only those of us who live out here drive up and down the roads. Does the investigating officer know you were tracking Keller’s plane?”

“No, and unless he specifically asks, I don’t plan on mentioning it.”

“I won’t either. I am so sorry, Liz. It seems like you’ve had nothing but bad luck.”

“A black cloud of bad luck,” Liz sighed. “It all started with the other designer. Not long after, Echo’s past came back to haunt her and now this.”

Christi backed toward the door. “Darren just returned from his business trip. I need to head home and start a load of laundry.”

Liz tapped the top of her laptop. “And you won’t mention this flight app.”

Her neighbor made a zipping motion across her lips. “Not a peep. Your secret is safe with me. I don’t know how much trouble you can get into for shooting a plane down, but I’m guessing it would be quite a bit.”

“Which means figuring out who was behind it and taking the investigator’s focus off Floyd and me is going to be my number one priority.”

As soon as Christi left, Liz promptly called her sister. As luck would have it, her call went directly to voicemail. “Hey, Gloria. It’s Liz. I have a major problem. Remember the plane that kept flying around? Floyd knew the pilot. Someone shot it down. I can almost guarantee when the cops start digging around, he and I will both be suspects.”

Before ending the message, Liz told her she needed help in figuring out who was behind it. Thinking a long, hot shower might calm her nerves, she headed to the main bath. Turning the multiple massagers on, she stepped into her spa-like shower, breathing deeply as steamy jets of hot water cascaded over her body.

She slathered on a generous dollop of her favorite gardenia-scented body wash and mulled over the morning’s events. From what she could piece together, Tristan Keller had taken off from the area airport early that morning and flown directly to their property, where he began tossing rotting tomatoes at them.

After circling around at an even lower altitude, a gunman, hunter or neighbor had shot his plane, knocking it out of the air.

Liz reminded herself it was deer hunting season. Although no experienced hunter would point their gun skyward, let alone shoot at an aircraft—unless it was intentional.

The first step was to find out more about the airport, Keller’s precise location during his morning flight and figure out if anyone else, other than Floyd, Liz and Echo, had been a tomato-tossing target.

She finished showering and returned to the kitchen, where her cell phone sat on the counter. She glanced at the screen and noticed she’d missed her sister’s call. Liz

promptly dialed her number.

Gloria skipped the pleasantries and got right to the point. “I listened to your message. Have the investigators been by yet?”

“A cop showed up, which is how I found out someone shot Tristan Keller’s plane down.” Liz told her the officer asked to see Floyd’s guns. “I told him I wanted Floyd to be present.”

“He’ll be back.”

“He already said as much. Floyd and I will be at the top of the list of suspects,” Liz said. “Which is why we need to figure out who did it before one of us ends up in jail.”

“What does your schedule look like for today?”

“I was going to run some errands, but this takes precedence. Do you think you can round up the others for a meeting to help me figure out my next step?”

“We were already planning to get together for our weekly brunch. It’s my turn to host. Dot’s bringing a breakfast bake. Margaret made a batch of her delicious garlic and herb biscuits. Lucy’s home fries with minced onion and peppers are the best and even Ruth whipped up a cinnamon streusel.”

“Sounds yummy. I’ll invite myself over,” Liz said.

“The more the merrier. It probably wouldn’t be a bad idea for you to leave the house in case the cops show up again.”

With a plan in place, Liz’s mood improved, knowing if anyone could help her with

her current crisis, it was her sister and friends. She hopped into her SUV and made the trip to Belhaven.

Liz cruised down Main Street, noticing Dot's Restaurant, the restaurant Dot and her husband had recently sold, was packed. The post office's parking lot was also full, and she briefly wondered if Ruth missed her old job as postmaster.

So many changes had taken place since Liz had moved back home, including changes to her own life. Floyd had swept her off her feet, treated her like his queen, and given her a life most women could only dream of.

The elegant chateau was everything she could want and more, and Liz was looking forward to the upcoming celebration.

A sick feeling settled in the pit of her stomach. What if the investigators concluded Floyd was the one who pulled the trigger and taken Keller's plane down? What would happen to Rasmussen Farms, to their plans...their future?

Liz tightened her grip on the steering wheel. She had been through too much and come too far to allow that to happen. One way or another, she would figure out who had taken Tristan Keller's plane down if it was the last thing she did.

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“Start from the beginning,” Margaret said. “From the moment you, Gloria, and Lucy drove over to the township office to complain about the annoying plane.”

“The woman suggested I start a petition to present it to the township. She said it was the first step in requesting a noise ordinance be put in place.” Liz told them the trio had made their rounds, gathering signatures.

“My neighbor, Christi, mentioned a flight app to track the plane and get more information about the owner.”

“A man we now know is a real estate investor, Tristan Keller. He tried purchasing Liz and Floyd’s property,” Gloria added.

“After we found out he was the one dropping rotting tomatoes on our property and harassing us, Floyd left a message at his office telling him to stop.”

“Dropping rotting tomatoes?” Ruth interrupted.

“Bunches of them.”

“And maybe even water balloons.” Lucy reminded them about how they had found small bits of rubber near the road and in their driveway.

“Which is what Echo was also finding. Keller was dropping water balloons.”

“This guy sounds like a real nutjob,” Margaret said.

“With more than a few enemies, if I had to guess,” Liz said. “As I mentioned, Floyd left a message for Keller this morning basically telling him we knew he was the one flying around bombing our house with rotten produce and warning him to knock it off.”

“I’m confused.” Dot lifted a hand. “When exactly did the plane get shot down?”

“Early this morning, right after Keller flew over and dropped a bunch of tomatoes. In fact, I pulled it up on my flight app and know exactly when the plane went down,” Liz said.

“So, unbeknownst to you and Floyd, he went to work and left a message for Tristan Keller. By then, his plane was already on the ground.”

“Correct,” Liz confirmed.

“Well.” Ruth sucked in a breath. “It’s not looking good for you guys. Floyd had motive and opportunity.”

“More than enough,” Liz said miserably. “Which is why we need help in figuring out who pulled the trigger. I have no idea what kind of charges someone would face for shooting an aircraft.”

“Let’s find out.” Gloria grabbed her cell phone and began tapping the top. “Hmmm.”

“What?” Liz leaned in.

“Under federal law, shooting down an aircraft, private or otherwise, is a felony. The shooter could be sent to prison. This includes drones.”

“How awful,” Dot gasped. “Liz, you’ve turned white as a ghost.”

“I can’t even think about...” Liz clutched her throat. “I wish I had never contacted the township, never started a petition.”

“You’re not going to prison,” Gloria said.

“I hope not. You know how pale and pasty I look in neon orange.”

“Leave it to Liz.” Lucy laughed. “You have more to worry about than how you look in a prison uniform.”

“You’re right. The food. I’ve heard it’s awful.” Liz grimaced. “Although I could stand to lose a few pounds.”

Gloria rolled her eyes. “You wouldn’t last five minutes behind bars.”

“I already have. Remember the time...”

Her sister cut her off. “We were in the Smoky Mountains and spent a few hours in a jail cell. How could I forget?”

“It was the worst day of my life, a low point I will never forget. I know I wouldn’t survive prison time again,” Liz said dramatically.

“We spent a few hours in jail,” Margaret reminded her. “And you whined about it the entire time.”

“I was traumatized.”

“We’ll start assembling the clues while everything is still fresh in your mind.” Gloria ran to the dining room, grabbed a notepad and pen, and set it on the table. “But first, we eat.”

Liz, although still deeply concerned over the possibility of facing time behind bars, filled her plate with a generous portion of the breakfast bake, crispy slices of bacon, Lucy's loaded home fries and Margaret's biscuits. She left just enough room to add a piece of Ruth's cinnamon streusel.

During the meal, Gloria kept the conversation light, chatting about the upcoming holidays and plans to spend it with family and friends.

"The brunch was delicious." Liz leaned back in her chair and patted her stomach. "This was the best meal I've had in days."

"Poor Floyd," Gloria tsk-tsked. "Maybe you should take cooking lessons."

"And throw good money away on something I know I won't enjoy?" Liz shook her head. "I'm hiring a cook to come in three days a week to prepare meals. I believe the name of the place is MOD—Meals on Demand. They're highly reviewed on the internet."

"Learning to cook isn't hard," Lucy said. "Maybe if you approached it with a positive attitude."

"At my age, I'm not willing to waste time trying," Liz sniffed. "I've tried cooking and cannot, for the life of me, get the hang of it."

"Floyd is a gem," Margaret said. "You better hang right onto him."

"I have every intention of staying wed for the rest of my life, which is why it's of utmost importance that we figure out who the gunman is."

With everyone pitching in, the women made quick work of clearing the kitchen table. After finishing, they gathered in the dining room while Gloria settled in behind her

computer, notepad and pen in hand. “First, we look at the clues, at what we have so far.”

She jotted Tristan Keller’s Plane Crash at the top of the blank page and drew a line beneath it. Working her way down, Gloria assembled a list of pertinent information:

Tristan Keller, Real Estate Investor. Pilot. Local.

Flying a plane over Liz and Floyd’s house.

Dropping possible water balloons and rotten tomatoes on the property.

Liz heard a loud pop. Plane was shot down.

Floyd left a message for Keller not long after the plane went down, telling him he knew he was harassing them and that he needed to stop.

Liz leaned in. “We know for a fact the rotten tomatoes belonged to Keller. The officer told me there were still some inside his plane.”

Gloria added the note about the rotten produce found inside the cockpit. “How long would you say he’s been flying over your house?”

“A few weeks. Maybe a month.” Liz tapped her chin thoughtfully. “It makes me wonder why, after all of this time, the guy decided to start harassing us.”

“Are you getting payments for the natural gas?” Dot asked. “Think about it. If this investor guy had an inkling about the gas and it was the reason for him wanting to purchase the property, if you actually started collecting cash, it might have been the trigger.”

“You’re right,” Liz said. “Honestly, I’m not sure about the financial end of it. I’ve been so wrapped up in renovations.”

“It wouldn’t hurt to find out.”

Liz tapped out a text to her husband and received a prompt reply. “I think you might be onto something. Floyd said our first check for the natural gas / mineral rights should be rolling in any day now.”

“Maybe Keller heard about it, got ticked and started harassing you,” Lucy said.

“By spying on us, targeting us with tomatoes and who knows what else,” Liz muttered. “Maybe his aim was off. He hit someone else’s house, and they shot his plane down.”

“It stands to reason if the pilot was harassing you and Floyd, he was harassing other neighbors as well,” Gloria said. “We need to assemble another list of the people who live nearby.”

With Liz’s help, Gloria started a second list of potential suspects. Finally, she finished and set her pen on the desk. “I’m trying to figure out what our next step should be.”

“Where it all began,” Ruth said. “At the airport.”

“I can tell you which airport using the handy dandy flight app.”

The friends gathered around, watching as Liz logged onto the flight tracker and showed them how to use it. She pulled up Keller’s route, displaying the exact time he’d started flying over that morning and where the flight abruptly ended.

“Do you know exactly where the plane went down?” Ruth squinted her eyes and studied the screen.

Liz zoomed in. “It’s hard to tell. It was close to the house. One minute I could hear the plane and the next it was gone.”

“What about the airport?” Lucy asked. “We could do some digging around there.”

“I say we stop by the crash site first and then follow up with a visit to the airport,” Ruth said.

“Sounds like a plan.” Liz logged out of the app and sprang to her feet. “I’m ready to roll.”

Ruth slowly stood. “I need to swing by my house and pick up some equipment.”

Gloria glanced at her watch. “Let’s meet at Liz’s place at noon.”

The friends parted ways, Liz being the last to leave. “Thanks for agreeing to help. This whole thing has me freaked out. I can’t stop thinking about what would have happened if Tristan Keller had been seriously injured, or worse.”

“With the Garden Girls on the case, I have no doubt we’ll figure this out.”

Feeling a sense of relief, Liz drove home to wait for the others to arrive. She swapped out her sneakers for a pair of Floyd’s barn boots and meandered around the property, where she found a few more tomatoes. She even found one in the corner of the pigpen, untouched by the occupants. “Even you guys don’t like these rotten, nasty tomatoes,” Liz sighed.

Gloria wasn’t far behind and caught up with her sister near the fence. “How are

Pepper and Piper these days?”

“Stinky, like they are every other day.” Liz nudged the tomato with the tip of her boot. “And apparently pickier eaters than I thought. Neither of them touched the tomato.”

“I wonder why.” Gloria knelt next to it. “I thought pigs ate almost anything.”

“Me too. Wouldn’t that be something if Keller did something to them?” Liz grabbed a pair of Floyd’s work gloves hanging on the hook and slipped them on.

She returned to her sister’s side, plucked the tomato off the ground and gave it a tentative sniff. “It smells a little chemically.”

Gloria inched closer and hesitantly sniffed it. “You’re right.”

“Jerk. I’m going to be furious if I find out he was trying to poison Duchess, Teddy or our pigs.” Liz made a mental note to mention it to the police. “You’re Farmer Gloria. You should know what a rotting tomato smells like.”

“It’s close to the smell, although I try to pick them before they rot.” Gloria craned her neck, shifting her attention toward the driveway. “Ruth’s spymobile is pulling in. Lucy, Margaret and Dot are right behind her.”

The sisters caught up with the others in the driveway, where they found Ruth already rummaging around in the back of her van. She slipped a set of headphones around her neck and removed a long black wand.

“You bought a new metal detector?” Lucy asked.

“Yep. It’s an early Christmas present to myself. My old one was using too much

juice. This one is much more efficient. It's a hybrid model." Ruth went into a long spiel about how the solar-powered metal detector stayed fully charged for at least an hour before automatically switching over to backup batteries.

"I won't bore you with the specs," she finally said.

The friends let out a collective groan.

"Please." Gloria chuckled.

"Are you saying you want more information? Because this baby is the tool that I think everyone needs."

Margaret made a timeout with her hands. "We get it. You love your new environmentally friendly gadget. What we need now is to have you put it to good use."

"I'll show you the general location where I think the plane went down." With Liz in the lead, the women trekked to the end of the driveway and turned left, passing by Christi and Darren's place before reaching an empty field.

"Hold up." Lucy stopped them. "Check it out."

"Check what out?" Liz squinted her eyes.

"I see a tree stand over there."

Sure enough, perched several feet above the ground, near a row of trees and nestled between two large branches, was a three-sided tree stand.

"Maybe Keller's plane was taken down by accident," Gloria said. "Let's keep going."

Past the row of trees and the tree stand was another clearing where fresh tracks were clearly visible. The tracks continued all the way to a cluster of thick bushes surrounded by tall weeds.

Slowing their pace, the women waded through the weeds. On the other side was another field stretching out for as far as the eye could see.

“We should split up and start searching,” Lucy said.

“For what?” Liz asked.

“Pieces of the plane or signs of dirt being disturbed.”

“Sounds good.” Liz veered to the right. Lucy followed her and kept going while Ruth cut through the center.

Gloria, with Dot by her side, turned to go left, leaving Margaret standing still.

“What’s wrong? Aren’t you going to help search?”

Margaret lifted her quarter-inch black heel. “I was in such a hurry to get over here, I forgot to swap out my shoes.”

“No problem,” Dot said. “You stay here and be our lookout in case someone shows up.”

“Like the cops, who would wonder what we’re doing?”

“You know what to say if they do.” Gloria gave her a thumbs up.

“Yeah. We’re a bunch of women scouting out a new deer blind,” Margaret joked.

“Sounds good to me.” Gloria shifted her gaze, watching as her sister tiptoed along the edge of the field. She spun around, nearly colliding with Dot, who was right behind her. “Sorry, Dot.”

“Hold up. Liz is signaling to us.”

Liz threw her hands in the air, frantically motioning to the others. “I think I found something!”

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Liz hopped the fence and zigzagged over the uneven terrain until she reached the deep indentation.

Gloria, who was closest, caught up with her first. “Good find.”

Lucy, Ruth, and Dot joined them.

“It sure looks like something big hit the ground,” Lucy said.

“You can see where whatever it was got dragged.” Ruth pointed out the marks where something large had been recently removed.

Gloria placed her hands on her hips and shifted her focus skyward. “Based on the path you showed us, Keller’s plane came around from that direction, past your neighbor’s house. It flew over the top of your house, veered to the right, flew past Echo’s mobile home, made another right turn and this is where it ran into trouble and crashed.”

Liz slid her cell phone from her pocket and began snapping pictures. “It hit hard. Keller is lucky he’s alive.”

Ruth adjusted her headphones and turned the metal detector on. Swinging it back and forth, she made her way along the drag lines toward the large indentation.

Liz noticed a pale red pile roughly five feet from where she suspected the plane went down.

“What is it?”

She turned to find Dot peering over her shoulder.

“It looks like more rotting tomatoes, probably the ones the cop said Keller still had inside his cockpit.”

“I wonder where they took the plane,” Dot said.

“Good question.” Liz waved them over. “Check it out.”

“You found the tomatoes,” Gloria said.

Lucy nudged her friend. “Let me check out your nifty new toy.”

“You break it, you buy it.” Ruth handed her the detector and headphones.

“I’ll be careful.” Lucy slipped the headphones on and began waving the wand over the loose soil. “I bet there’s a ton of cool stuff buried in these fields.”

While Lucy tinkered with Ruth’s detector, Gloria and Dot slowly circled around the perimeter of the disturbed soil, searching for clues.

“This could be a waste of time.” Dot rubbed the tip of her nose. “It’s like searching for a needle in a haystack.”

“Or a clue buried beneath piles of dirt,” Gloria said.

“Lucy is having fun.” Dot watched as Lucy bent down, picked something up and slipped it into her pocket. “Let’s all chip in and buy her a metal detector for Christmas.”

“Hey!” Gloria spun around and found Margaret trying to get their attention. “What is Margaret trying to say?”

“I don’t know.” Dot squinted her eyes. “She looks like she’s swatting at flies.”

“No.” Gloria shook her head. “It looks like she’s motioning at us and saying something.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Liz watched a vehicle approach, traveling at a slow speed along the dirt road, heading in their direction. It was a pickup truck with only one occupant. “Someone’s coming!”

“Margaret.” Lucy pivoted. Holding the detector over her head, she raced across the uneven ground.

“Let’s get out of here!” Gloria and Ruth made a mad dash in the opposite direction.

Dot and Liz, either frozen in fear, unaware of the implications of being caught or unconcerned, weren’t moving as fast.

Gloria ran back and dragged her sister across the open field while Ruth whisked Dot through the trees to the other side of the property.

“Like an idiot, I jelled,” Liz said. “By the way, we left tons of tracks in the dirt.”

“To go with the other tons of footprints already there,” her sister pointed out. “Let’s keep moving.”

Liz slowed. “What about Margaret and Lucy?”

“They’ll figure it out,” Ruth said. “It’s probably the owner.”

“The owner?” Liz groaned. “We were trespassing.”

“I’m sure they’ll think of something,” Gloria said.

“If you say so.” Liz cast a hesitant glance in Lucy and Margaret’s direction before reluctantly following the others.

Cutting through the center of the field, they made a diagonal jog and reached the road only mere steps away from Christi’s property.

With a fearful gaze to the right, in the direction they had just left, Liz said a silent prayer their friends would think up something quick and the owner wouldn’t call the cops on them.

Gloria noted the concerned look on her sister’s face. “Don’t worry about Margaret and Lucy. They’ll be fine. We’ve been at this sleuthing gig for years now and found ourselves in more than a few tight situations.”

Dot snorted. “You can say that again.”

“Remember the time the crazy killer was shooting at my van when we were in Nantucket?” Ruth pursed her lips. “As picturesque as that place was, I think Nantucket was a one and done for this chick.”

“Having someone fire shots at your beloved spymobile traumatized you?” Dot teased.

“Sure as sugar. My baby doesn’t like to dodge bullets.”

“Back to Margaret and Lucy.” Liz couldn’t help but feel guilty about abandoning their friends, leaving them behind to fend for themselves. “I hope they figure out a way to talk themselves out of this.”

“I know one thing for certain...Lucy had better not lose my detector,” Ruth said.

“You’re holding the detector. I’ll let you do the talking,” Margaret whispered.

“Thanks.” Lucy sucked in a breath and tightened her grip on the metal detector, mentally berating herself for not tossing it back to her friend before rushing to Margaret’s aid.

As the truck drew closer, she could see the driver, his arm draped over the side of his open window, appearing not at all concerned at the sight of two women.

He shut the engine off, eased the door open, and climbed out. “Afternoon.”

“Good afternoon,” Lucy said.

“Beautiful day.”

“So far.” Margaret attempted a smile.

“Beautiful day for doing something.” The man motioned to the detector.

“Yes. Uh.” Lucy swallowed hard, her mind scrambling. “Our friend lives nearby. She told us about an old ghost town somewhere near here. We figured we would check it out.”

“The old railroad depot?” The man arched a brow. “It’s down by the covered bridge. It ain’t here on my property.”

Lucy mustered up an incredulous look. “This is...your land?”

“Yes, ma’am. I’m Ivan Gregware. This land has been owned by my family since the early eighties.”

Margaret tapped Lucy’s shoulder. “I told you we weren’t even close.” She grabbed her friend’s arm and whisked her toward the road. “Thank you for the tip.”

“You out hunting for treasure in that getup?” The property owner was much more observant than he appeared, noting the fact Margaret was not properly dressed for a tromp through the fields and forests.

“It was a...spur-of-the-moment decision,” Lucy answered honestly. “We got a bee in our bonnet, thought it sounded like fun, and here we are.”

Gregware’s brows knitted. “Where’s your car?”

“Our car is...”

“Way back over there.” Margaret pointed in the general direction of Liz’s place. “We’ve been wandering around for a while now.” She glanced at her watch. “Look at the time? We should get going.”

“Yes.” Lucy forced a laugh. “We got so caught up in finding the place, we lost track of how long we’ve been at this.”

The farmer tucked his hands in the sides of his suspenders. “You ain’t here snooping around because of Tristan Keller, are you?” His jaw tightened. “Did he send you over here?”

“Tristan Keller?” Margaret blinked rapidly. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Lucy tapped her arm. “Oh my gosh. I remember hearing something about a plane going down.”

“See the big crater? His plane fell right on out of the sky.”

Lucy’s eyes grew round as saucers. “How horrible to be flying around, minding your own business, and someone shoots at you. He could have been killed.”

“He wasn’t minding his own business,” Gregware growled. “In fact, he was doing the exact opposite. Tristan Keller is a ruthless money-grubbing, property-grabbing scumbag.”

Margaret, surprised by the anger in the man’s voice, stumbled back. “He was flying around because he was interested in your property?”

“Mine, Floyd Rasmussen’s, the Kravitz’s next door. I heard a rumor that the Rasmussens are sitting on a natural gas goldmine. Stands to reason some might also be on this side of the road.”

Lucy’s mind whirled. Tristan Keller had been harassing others, including this man, possibly even Christi and her husband.

“Tristan Keller is nothing more than a spy in the sky,” Ivan Gregware said.

“Do you have any idea who may have shot at him?” Margaret asked.

The man shrugged. “Could’ve been Floyd. Could’ve been Christi or her husband.”

Lucy didn’t miss the fact the man hadn’t included himself in the list of potential shooters.

Margaret's cell phone pinged. She glanced at the screen. "We...should get going, Mr. Gregware. Thanks again for the tip about where to find the old ghost town."

The women hurried off, heading toward the covered bridge.

"Did you see what I saw?"

"The rifle rack and rifle mounted in his rear window?" Lucy asked. "You couldn't miss it. Something tells me it was loaded and ready to fire."

"Maybe even at a pesky plane flying overhead." Margaret abruptly stopped, wincing in pain.

"What's wrong?"

"I have a rock in my shoe." Balancing with one arm and holding onto Lucy, Margaret removed her shoe and tipped it upside down. "I'm ready to head back to Liz's place."

"Something tells me Mr. Gregware is watching us," Lucy said. "We need to stop by the old bridge."

"You think?" Margaret slipped her shoe back on. "I can't blame him for being suspicious. I mean, we were standing in his field holding a metal detector. By the way, I noticed you slipped something in your pocket right around the time Gregware showed up. Did you find something?"

"It was a shell casing." Lucy patted her pocket. "I found it when I was using Ruth's detector."

"There was a deer stand only a few feet away. I'm sure there are hundreds of shells nearby."

“I suppose. Still, you never know.”

“That was smart thinking how you remembered there’s an old ghost town around here.”

“I find I work well under pressure,” Lucy said. “Who was texting you?”

“Liz. She wants to know if we’re all right. I’ll text her back as soon as we’re out of sight.” Margaret limped along until they finally found a small path leading toward the creek at the far end of Liz and Floyd’s property.

They stopped when they reached a large pile of field stones. Margaret let out a low groan and plopped down on a flat spot. “I’ll text Liz.”

Lucy hummed under her breath, her eyes scanning the banks of the creek. “It’s so peaceful and tranquil back here. Maybe Floyd and Liz should’ve started from scratch and built their dream home alongside the creek.”

“Liz loves her house. There’s no way you’ll get her to move now.”

“True.” Lucy perched next to Margaret. “Are you still texting her?”

“Yeah. I’m asking her to come down here on the four-wheeler and pick us up so we don’t have to walk all the way back to the house. I also told her we have some new information.”

“Yes, we do. We can add Ivan Gregware to the list of potential suspects.”

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“The bottom line is, I would add Ivan Gregware to our list of possible shooters,” Lucy summarized.

“He mentioned Floyd and me specifically?” Liz asked.

“Gregware seems to believe Keller has been flying around because of the natural gas rights he heard were found on your property,” Margaret said. “To be honest, he made a good point.”

“Which is?” Gloria asked.

“If there are valuable resources at your place, it’s possible they don’t stop at the property line. They could extend to Mr. Gregware’s property, maybe even to your neighbor Christi’s place,” Margaret said.

“You’re right,” Liz agreed. “If Keller wanted this property, maybe he’s after theirs too. Although he could go about conducting aerial surveillance in a way that doesn’t annoy everyone around here or harass us by throwing stuff out of his plane.”

“Maybe he should bypass planes and go straight to trespassing, peeking in your windows, digging holes in the yard,” Gloria pointed out. “At least if he’s buzzing around overhead, you know where he is.”

“Point taken. Maybe now that someone took his plane out of commission, he’ll give up and find someone else to harass.”

“Or maybe he’s mentally unstable and is plotting his next move.” Ruth tapped the

side of her forehead. “At the very least, I wouldn’t trust him. Why toss tomatoes out of the plane window?”

“Revenge? To scare Liz and Floyd into selling?” Dot guessed.

Liz squared her shoulders. “I am not moving. He can throw all the rotten tomatoes he wants at us. I put a lot of time and effort into making this my forever home and I plan to take my last breath here.”

“In other words, over your dead body,” Margaret joked. “Let’s hope that’s not the case.”

“It’s getting hot in here.” Ruth fanned her face. “Do you mind turning on the ceiling fan?”

Liz popped out of her chair and ran to the switch. “This isn’t just any old ceiling fan. It’s a fandelier.”

“A fandelier?”

“Part fan. Part chandelier. Check it out.” Liz flipped the switch. Shiny blades fanned out, creating a rainbow of sparkling lights dancing off the crystals dangling from the fan’s base.

Margaret let out a low whistle. “Fancy pants.”

“It’s one of my favorite kitchen accessories.”

“Which makes perfect sense, considering you don’t like to cook.”

Liz ignored Margaret’s playful jab. “Who doesn’t appreciate a little bling in their

kitchen?”

“I have to say, the fandelier is right up your alley,” Gloria teased, rubbing her hands together. “It’s time to get down to business.”

The women discussed their next step...snooping around the airport, to find out if Keller had any enemies, other people who knew his flight route and might be behind the shooting.

“It’s getting late.” Ruth packed up her gear. “Leonard Navoy and I are hosting a YouTube training class this evening. We’re working on signing up new recruits for the NASCA Midwest group.”

“What’s this one about? Assembling an alien test kit for when you capture a flying saucer?” Lucy joked.

Ruth rolled her eyes. “Very funny. We don’t capture aliens. The North American Surveillance and Communications Association is about surveillance and communications. You make us sound like nutjobs.”

Lucy elbowed Gloria. “Remember when Rose came up with the Alien Allure potion? I sure do miss her.”

“Me too. She and Johnnie are living the dream. Rose is concocting all sorts of new stuff for VitaNew,” Dot said. “We should plan another road trip. We could head south, swing by and pick up Rose and take her with us.”

“My cousin, Millie, has been asking when we plan to take our next cruise on board Siren of the Seas,” Gloria said.

“Another cruise sounds fun.” Lucy clapped her hands. “Sun, sand, and the high seas.”

“I’m all in, but first we need to get through my current crisis,” Liz said.

Gloria jangled her keys. “We’ll get cracking on it tomorrow morning. What time do you want to meet?”

“We could have breakfast at Dot’s Restaurant and then head on over to the airport.” Liz promised to have all pertinent information with her for the meeting.

“I’m in,” Margaret said.

“Ditto,” Lucy said.

“What time?” Dot asked.

“Let’s meet at nine.” Gloria tapped her sister’s shoulder. “In the meantime, I would keep quiet about what we know so far.”

Liz made a zipping motion across her mouth. “Mum’s the word.”

After the women left, Liz meandered from room to room. It had been a long haul...three designers, one dead, another a suspect in the first designer’s death until finally—the third time was the charm and Liz found Evie.

She wondered how the segment’s editing was going, which was tentatively scheduled to air in early December. Liz checked on Duchess and Teddy, who were curled up and sound asleep in the kitchen’s doggie bed.

“Hey, lazybones.” She gently nudged Duchess with the tip of her toe. “You can’t sleep the day away. It’s time for a little fresh air.”

Liz let the pups out and caught up with them on Echo’s deck, where she discovered a

wide swath of dried tomatoes splattered from one end to the other. “What a mess.”

Grabbing the garden hose, she turned it on and began spraying it off. With Echo’s broom in hand, she scrubbed the spots while the pups played nearby. She finished her good deed for the day, shut the hose off and draped it across the holder.

Discovering the dogs had wandered off, Liz tracked them down near the back. “There you are.” A ring of bright red caught her eye. On closer inspection, she realized it was a bullseye, set up for target practice.

Liz stared at the target, her mind whirling. Echo owned a handgun, something she fully supported considering what had happened to her when a hired hitman had come after her.

Could it be that Echo had been target practicing, missed her target and inadvertently struck Keller’s plane? She’d mentioned being annoyed by the plane buzzing by at all hours.

Maybe she had fired a warning shot, but instead of warning, she accidentally hit the plane. Liz promptly dismissed the idea. There was no way Echo would shoot the plane down. Still, it was clear her tenant had been firing her weapon.

Making a mental note to mention it to Floyd, Liz called the pups and continued walking until she reached the creek where she’d picked Lucy and Margaret up after their confrontation with the farmer.

Liz had heard her husband mention Ivan Gregware’s name. She’d even seen his truck drive by now and then, but had never met the man. He owned the nearby farm fields but lived elsewhere, which meant he wasn’t a viable suspect unless...he also knew about the flight tracker, knew Keller was doing flybys, drove out to wait for him to show up and then shot at his plane.

An uneasiness settled over her. Although she trusted Echo, a former criminal evidence technician, she didn't know her all that well.

The continuous flights were disrupting everyone's peace. Echo had mentioned Teddy being terrified by the sound of the tomatoes hitting her deck. Had she lost her cool, grabbed her gun, fired a warning shot and hit the plane?

One thing was certain: Liz had grown sick and tired of it to the point she'd actually done something. Which led to another troubling concern...she'd been angry enough to start a petition and gathered as many signatures as she could.

Liz made a mental note to point this out to the investigators—how she wasn't the only one who was angry over the spy plane in the sky.

Back home, she decided to surprise Floyd and prepare a meal guaranteed to knock his socks off...a Mediterranean baked chicken.

Figuring she could handle placing chicken breasts in the bottom of a lightly greased glass baking dish, she followed the directions to a "T," mixing spices and sauces in a medium-size bowl. Next, she poured the contents over the top of the chicken and popped it into her brand spanking new Forno commercial-grade oven.

"This should be tasty." Liz fiddled with the oven timer, struggling to figure out how to set it. She tried Googling it and finally gave up, deciding to use her cell phone instead. "Where is that pre-cooked rice the Missy's Meals in Minutes commercial kept hyping up?"

She stepped into her spacious pantry, nearly the size of the main bedroom of their previous home, and sorted through the contents. Liz silently thanked Evie's assistant for helping her organize the contents.

She finally found the rice and carried the bag into the kitchen. Liz placed it next to a glass mixing bowl and dusted her hands. “Thank you, Gloria and Missy’s Meals in Minutes. Floyd is going to be impressed.”

The door opened, and her husband appeared. “Hey, sugar lips.”

“You’re home early.” Liz greeted him with a kiss.

“Good thing I got here when I did. I had to chase a local news crew away.”

Liz’s heart skipped a beat. “A news crew?”

“They were filming the front of our house.”

“Maybe it was someone from Elegant Estates by Evie. They came back for some additional shots of the outside for the upcoming television segment.”

“I doubt it, unless they work for Channel 5 news.”

“Great,” Liz groaned. “The local stations caught wind of the plane crash and are going to report on it.”

“That would be my guess.” Floyd hung his jacket on the hook by the door. He bent down to greet Duchess and Teddy. “I heard back on Tristan Keller’s condition.”

“Please tell me he’s going to be okay.”

“The wife of one of my employees works in the ER unit at Green Springs Memorial Hospital. From what he heard, Keller has a broken leg, is suffering from a mild concussion, and has some cuts and bruises. He’ll probably be laid up for a few days.”

“Thank God. I hope he learned his lesson and stops spying on us.”

“I’m gonna guess his plane isn’t going anywhere, at least not anytime soon.” Floyd sniffed the air. “Do I smell something cooking?”

“You do,” Liz beamed. “I made dinner.”

He placed a light hand on her forehead. “Are you feeling all right?” he playfully asked.

Liz swatted his hand away. “Very funny. I made Mediterranean baked chicken, also known as dump chicken.”

“The chicken fell on the floor and you dumped it in a pan?”

“No.” Liz grinned. “I placed chicken breasts in a baking dish, mixed up some other ingredients and poured it over the top. I hope you like diced tomatoes, red peppers, olives, feta cheese and garlic. I also added basil and balsamic vinegar.”

“Sounds good to me.” Floyd patted his stomach. “I skipped lunch. You made me such a nice breakfast this morning that I wasn’t hungry.”

Liz tilted her head. “I fed you an already prepared breakfast sandwich.”

“It was made with so much love, it kept me full all day.” Floyd eyed the package of rice. “Chicken and rice, the perfect combination.”

“I hope so. If not, we have the local pizza place on speed dial, and they deliver fast.” Liz returned to their original topic of conversation. “I have some new information on Keller’s plane crash.”

“Hopefully about who might have fired the shot.”

Liz filled him in, starting with what she and the others had discovered. “The plane ended up in Ivan Gregware’s field. He wasn’t a fan of Keller’s either.”

“I imagine not.”

“He seems to think Keller was after his property.”

Floyd grew quiet. “It stands to reason if natural gas is over here, they could also find it across the road. Did you talk to him?”

“No. Lucy and Margaret did. We were...” Liz’s voice faded.

“Snooping?”

“Sort of.” She hurried on. “We went over to take a quick look around. While we were there, Gregware showed up. Gloria, Dot, Ruth and I managed to sneak away. Lucy and Margaret got caught red-handed.”

Floyd frowned. “How did they get caught red-handed?”

“With Ruth’s metal detector.”

“You went over there with a metal detector?” Floyd roared. “You’re lucky you didn’t get shot.”

“Looking back, it might not have been the brightest idea.”

“Liz Rasmussen,” he lectured. “You should not be traipsing around private property without the owner’s permission. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you it’s hunting

season. What if a hunter mistook one of you for a deer?"

Liz remembered the deer blind they'd spotted while investigating. "It would have been bad," she said in a small voice.

"Please promise me you won't trespass again."

"I promise. Did you know Echo set up a target practice in her backyard?"

A flicker of surprise flitted across Floyd's face. "Where?"

"It's out back by the trees. You don't think Echo shot him, do you?"

"No, but I suppose I need to chat with her and go over gun safety. We can't have her firing off her handgun without letting us know."

"I agree. On a brighter note, I'm wrapping up the final plans for the party."

"I'm sure you're champing at the bit to show this place off."

"Why not? We put a lot of time and effort into it." Her phone's alarm sounded and Liz carefully removed the dish from the oven. Making use of her spacious center island, she set it off to the side and placed the warmed rice next to it, along with a dish of baked asparagus she'd added at the last minute.

Floyd, his mood greatly improved, filled his plate, complimenting Liz on her culinary creation.

She scooped up a sampling of sauce, added a morsel of chicken and took a big bite. "It's tasty. I love the tart flavors, not to mention this is a healthy meal. Maybe I should start serving more Mediterranean dishes to help me lose a few pounds."

“You don’t need to lose a single pound.” Floyd leaned in for a quick kiss. “You’re perfect the way you are.”

“Thank you, Floyd.” Liz glimpsed movement through the window. It was a car. “Someone is here.”

She ran to the door to see who it was. “Great. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.”

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“Echo’s home from work?” Floyd asked.

“Only if she’s coming home in a police cruiser,” Liz said. “Five bucks says the cops are here to question us about the shooting.”

“They’ve already chatted with you. I guess it’s my turn.” Floyd handed his dinner napkin to his wife and stepped out of the house.

Through the window, Liz watched him greet the officer. There was a lot of hand gesturing, mostly on her husband’s part, and a lot of head nodding on the officer’s part.

The conversation continued until Floyd motioned him toward the house.

Liz hurriedly returned to the counter, pretending to clean up the dinner dishes.

The men joined her in the kitchen.

“Liz, this is Officer Tisdale with the Montbay County sheriff’s department.”

“Hello.” Liz offered a small smile. “I remember Officer Tisdale. He stopped by earlier to ask me about the private plane going down.”

“Tristan Keller,” the officer replied. “If you remember, I told you his plane was shot down and asked about guns you might own.”

“And I told you I would rather have my husband here to show them to you,” Liz said.

“I’m not sure where Floyd keeps all of them.”

“I’m gonna take Officer Tisdale into my office and show him what I have.”

“And I’ll be here continuing to hone my domesticated skills.” Liz waited for them to pass through the kitchen and hurried to the hall. She eased her head around the corner and watched as her husband and the officer disappeared inside his office.

Liz tiptoed down the hall and pressed her ear against the door. She could hear muffled voices—Floyd’s voice and the officer’s voice, and then the cop laughed. She gave her husband a silent thumbs up and returned to the kitchen, which is where the men found her, humming under her breath while she covered the leftovers and placed them in the fridge.

“Done already?” she asked.

“Yep. Officer Tisdale has everything he needs.”

The cop shook Floyd’s hand, an easygoing smile on his face. “Thanks for the hunting tips. With any luck, I’ll get my buck on Saturday morning.”

“Don’t forget to send me a screenshot.” Floyd gave him a friendly pat on the back.

“Let me walk you out to your car.”

Moments later, he returned. “The visit went well.”

“It sounds as if you made a new friend.”

“We share common interests. He likes hunting and fishing. I like hunting and fishing.”

“So, we’re no longer suspects in the shooting?” Liz asked hopefully.

“I wouldn’t go that far. What I will say is he’ll be taking a closer look at some of the other neighbors.” Floyd ran a light hand over the stubble on his chin.

“You look like something is bothering you.”

“Tisdale mentioned the FAA takes these matters seriously. He’s almost certain they’ll send someone here to investigate.”

“Meaning the matter would be turned over to them.” Liz began to feel lightheaded. “Federal prison time.”

“Yep,” Floyd said grimly. “I’m pretty sure the big boys won’t be interested in chatting about hunting and fishing.”

Echo arrived to pick up her pup. Floyd gave his wife a knowing look and told her he was heading to the pigpen to feed Pepper and Piper.

After Echo and Floyd left, Liz turned the kitchen television on and began flipping through the channels, searching for the evening news.

She was still flipping when her cell phone rang. It was Gloria.

“How’s it going?”

“Great. I made dinner, didn’t burn the house down and it actually tasted good.”

“Did you try one of those Missy’s Meals in Minutes’ recipes I sent you?”

“I did. I whipped up a Mediterranean baked chicken dish. It was easy and breezy.

Floyd gave it five stars.”

“Look at you?” her sister teased. “You’ll be making gourmet meals in no time.”

“Remember MOD—Meals on Demand? That’s my future plan.” Liz drifted to the window. “Officer Tisdale came by to talk to Floyd.”

“How did it go?”

“Good. Floyd gave him some tips on deer hunting.”

Her sister chuckled. “No, I mean about being suspects in the shooting.”

“According to Floyd, we’re not off the list. The good news is we’re not the only ones being questioned.” Liz told Gloria about finding a target practice in Echo’s backyard.

“You don’t think Echo shot the plane down, do you?”

“I don’t know. She was freaked out this morning when she dropped Teddy off. Maybe she accidentally shot the plane.”

“How do you accidentally shoot a plane?”

“Firing a warning shot but hitting it instead of missing. All I know is that it’s nice and peaceful tonight. Keller was clearly harassing us, harassing our neighbors. Who knows what someone is capable of when they’re ticked off and tired from being rudely woken up at all hours of the night?”

Gloria’s voice grew muffled. “Sorry. Paul was asking me a question. He’s heading out to make a few repairs to his deer blind.”

“Tis the season. Could be whoever put the deer blind up across the road shot the plane. Think about it...hunters need calm and quiet to lure deer out into the open. Keller kept buzzing around, not only making noise but throwing stuff. Maybe a hunter got fed up.”

“Anything is possible. The reason I’m calling is that I was wondering if you caught the evening news.”

“Not yet.” Liz sucked in a breath. “Floyd said he saw a Channel 5 news van out front earlier. Don’t tell me we’re on the news.”

“You are. Unfortunately, there’s more,” Gloria said. “Something tells me Keller isn’t going away quietly.”

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“Hang on. Let me find the news station.” Liz continued flipping through the channels until she found the Channel 5 news report. “The meteorologist is reporting on the weather. We’re in for a light dusting of snow in the morning, which will be perfect for the hunters. Who needs to worry about snow when my house is on television for all the wrong reasons?”

“Patience,” Gloria said. “They did a teaser clip at the beginning of the show with a promise of a more in-depth story near the end. I see it coming on now.”

“Me too.” Liz turned the volume up.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is Brandi Zondervan. I’m standing in front of the Green Springs Regional Airport where Tristan Keller, a local real estate investor, flew his private plane out of here early this morning, only to have it shot down a short time later. According to what we’ve been told, Mr. Keller was surveying the property when someone fired at least one shot. It hit his plane, causing the crash.”

The scene switched from the airport to an overview of Ivan Gregware’s field. The camera zoomed in on the spot Liz and the others suspected was where the plane had gone down.

“We’ve also learned Mr. Keller survived the crash. Although he sustained injuries, he’s expected to make a full recovery.”

The evening anchor chimed in. “I have to admit, I was stunned when I heard the report, Brandi. Do the authorities believe a hunter’s stray bullet may have been

involved?”

Brandi nodded. “It’s possible, Kevin. They’re not ruling anything out. Mr. Keller has been cooperating with authorities who seem certain they’ll be able to track down the person responsible.”

The anchor began shuffling papers, a grim expression on his face. “Where exactly did the incident occur?”

“This is where it gets interesting.” Brandi tightened her grip on the microphone. “Mr. Keller planned to purchase a vacant farm and property on Cash Creek Road in Green Springs, which is where the incident occurred.”

A clip of Liz and Floyd’s home appeared, obscured in part by the trees lining their driveway. “The property was eventually purchased by Floyd Rasmussen.”

“Floyd Rasmussen,” the station’s anchor repeated. “Wasn’t there another incident involving the Rasmussen family?”

“There was. The matriarch, Doris Rasmussen, was murdered some years back by a member of her own family.”

“It appears the Rasmussens have had some very bad luck,” Zondervan said.

“They most certainly have. One would hope this incident doesn’t directly involve them.”

“Absolutely.” Brandi Zondervan told viewers she chatted briefly with Keller from his hospital bed. “He’s determined to get to the bottom of what happened. I can tell you from my conversation with him, he will do precisely that.”

The segment ended, and the station began reporting on local sports. “Well, I hope Keller is able to figure out who shot his plane down. All I know is it wasn’t Floyd or me.”

“But they put a seed of suspicion in viewers’ minds,” Gloria said.

“Reminding them how Doris Rasmussen was murdered by someone in her own family.”

“The past has a way of coming back to haunt you.”

“And the Rasmussen family in particular,” Liz muttered. “Maybe Keller hired someone to shoot the plane down so he could blame it on Floyd, sue us and try to get the property.”

“I suppose it’s possible. You heard the report. He was injured but should recover.”

“Which seems pretty convenient, if you ask me.” Liz paced. “Think about it. He’s flying over our place at all hours, day after day. Keller is flying low...too low. What if he got some crazy idea to have someone take his plane down and make it look like we did it so he could sue us?”

“You and Floyd have a lot of money,” Gloria said.

“Not to mention the Rasmussen family has a reputation.”

“Stranger things have happened. It looks like we need to add Tristan Keller to the list of suspects.”

“Tristan Keller, Ivan Gregware, my neighbor, Christi.”

“Christi?”

“They have guns. She was as annoyed as we were about Keller’s flyovers. She might not have a strong motive, but she definitely had opportunity,” Liz said. “We also have to consider Echo.”

“Have you noticed if there are tomatoes on top of your roof?”

“That’s a good question. Let me go check.” Liz slipped her shoes and jacket on and circled around to the front of the house. “It’s hard to tell. Will the acid in tomatoes eat away at our shingles?”

She answered her own question. “Keller would have had to bombard our roof with tomatoes to do damage.”

“Which means it would be much easier to target Echo’s place. Maybe Keller thinks you have family living there and decided to go after them.”

“I’m glad he’s going to be okay, but it doesn’t make him any less of a jerk,” Liz fumed. “I guess the report confirms what airport we’ll be dropping by tomorrow morning.”

“Green Springs Regional Airport,” Gloria said. “The sooner, the better. Like I said, Keller could potentially turn into an even bigger pain in the neck.”

“He had better watch it. I’m in no mood for his antics.”

“I don’t blame you. Something tells me Keller has met his match if he tangles with Liz Applegate Rasmussen.”

“You know it.” Liz watched as Floyd crested the hill on his way home from Echo’s

place. “I gotta go. Floyd is on his way back from chatting with Echo.”

“See you at Dot’s at nine.”

Liz ended the call and caught up with her husband near the back porch. “Well? What did Echo say about the target practice?”

“She said the setup has been sitting out there since early fall and she hardly ever uses it,” Floyd said. “I believe her, but...”

“But what?”

“She got defensive, making a big deal about how she should be able to do what she wants on her property.”

“Hmmm. She’s a pretty mellow tenant. Maybe she’s just having a bad day. Nobody wants to get woken up by an annoying plane buzzing over and having the pilot scare your dog while he tosses tomatoes out the window.”

“I wholeheartedly agree.” Floyd flung his arm around his wife’s shoulders. “It’s been a long day. I know one thing for sure.”

“What’s that?”

“Keller won’t be flying over our house tonight or first thing tomorrow morning, which means we might actually get a good night’s sleep.”

Liz was the last to arrive at Dot’s Restaurant, bleary-eyed and in need of another cup of coffee.

Gloria scooted to the side to make room for her sister at the table. “What happened to you? Did you have a late night of partying at the farm?”

“No. Floyd and I overslept. We didn’t have a nuisance plane flying overhead and were able to get a good night’s sleep.” Liz dropped her purse on the floor. “It was wonderful.”

“I bet,” Ruth said. “We were talking about last night’s news report on Keller’s plane crash. The guy isn’t going to leave you alone.”

“If anything, it will give him even more of an excuse to harass us.” Liz tapped Ruth’s arm. “Do you have anything in your surveillance arsenal capable of covering a wide swath of property?”

“Like a panoramic angle?” Ruth asked.

“Precisely, say from the back corner of our house, across the driveway and maybe to the other side of the mailbox?”

“As a matter of fact, I might have the ideal gadget.” Ruth grabbed her cell phone, turned it on, and tapped the screen. “I’m trying to get ahead of the Christmas season, and created the 2.0 version of Cornelius, the nutcracker. You can’t tell from this still photo, but his eyes move. This new version can follow moving objects.”

“How much will this set me back?” Liz waved dismissively. “Never mind. Price isn’t an issue. Do you have one available?”

“I have an extra at home. I’ll have to help you set it up.”

“How soon?”

“It will take a couple of days. I need to make sure it’s ready to roll first.”

“Sweet.” Liz’s eyes lit. “It’s a deal. The sooner, the better.”

The server arrived, dropping off drinks and jotting down orders. During breakfast, Liz and Gloria took turns sharing the recent developments with the others.

Lucy sipped her coffee, eyeing Liz over the rim of her cup. “Do you think Echo would take a shot at Keller’s plane?”

“Being sleep deprived and furious that the man had scared Teddy, not to mention throwing rotting vegetables and making a mess? I wouldn’t rule myself out if I didn’t know I wasn’t behind it.”

“True,” Margaret said. “I wonder about Keller.”

“Wonder about Keller?” Dot repeated.

“If maybe he’s a little.” Margaret twirled her finger next to her forehead. “Cuckoo.”

“Cuckoo enough to take his own plane down?” Gloria asked. “Liz and I were thinking the same.”

Lucy snapped her fingers. “To make it appear Floyd and Liz were behind it so he could go after them.”

“Bingo.”

“Ivan Gregware claims Keller was after his property too. It’s almost as if he’s obsessed with the farms.”

“For good reason.” Gloria rubbed her fingers against her thumb. “Money.”

“We have plenty coming in from the gas...minerals...whatever they are,” Liz said.

“I think it’s going to take all we have to crack the case on this one.” Dot reached for a donut.

“I’m beginning to think the same thing,” Gloria said. “Especially if Keller was the one behind the shooting.”

Ruth’s phone chimed. She looked at the screen and did a double take.

“Who is it?” Gloria leaned in.

“Eleanor. She just drove by Dot’s and noticed our cars parked out front. She said she saw Liz’s place on the news and thinks she might have some information for us.”

“Information?” Liz perked up.

“Eleanor knows a lot of people,” Gloria said. “If she says she has a lead, we need to hear what it is.”

“Is she still dating Milton Tilton?”

“Yeah. She calls him her forever steady,” Margaret said. “Milton wants to get married. Eleanor keeps putting him off.”

“I think Eleanor is reverse aging. Instead of getting older, she keeps getting younger,” Lucy joked. “I wish I had half her energy. I think I see her.”

A flash of neon purple streaked past Dot’s front window. The door flew open and a

vision of purple, lace, and tulle appeared.

Liz's eyes narrowed. "What in the world?"

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Eleanor sashayed into Dot's Restaurant. She gave a quick wave and waltzed over. "Good morning, ladies."

"What kind of outfit is this?" Margaret's eyes traveled from the top of Eleanor's head to the tips of her toes.

"It's a tutu for the salsa class I'm teaching."

"It's a...unique look." Gloria made a twirling motion. "Give us the full preview. I don't believe I've ever met someone who wears a tutu to teach salsa."

"I'm starting a new trend." Eleanor placed her hands on her hips and strutted in a slow circle. "I was having trouble finding a layered red dress that doesn't make me look like a clown."

"And you don't now?" Margaret teased.

"Stop." Gloria slugged her in the arm.

"Ouch. I'm only speaking the truth."

"And the truth hurts." Gloria gave her a stern look before turning to Eleanor. "Margaret didn't mean it."

"It's okay. I'm accustomed to her veiled jabs."

"Have a seat." Lucy pulled out an empty chair.

“Thanks.” Eleanor perched on the edge, making sure her tutu stayed fluffed. “I heard about the plane being shot down yesterday near Liz’s property. What happened?”

Liz filled her in, starting with Keller’s flyovers at all hours and ending with the cops showing up the previous evening to question Floyd. “The bottom line is, even though Officer Tisdale seemed to accept our answers, something tells me we’re still at the tippy top of the list of suspects.”

“Milton knows Tristan Keller, or at least knows of him.”

“What does he know?” Gloria asked.

“He keeps or kept a plane at the Green Springs Regional Airport. He’s an investor and can be abrasive.”

“Abrasive,” Ruth repeated. “As in rude, condescending, opinionated?”

“I would guess all the above.” Eleanor shrugged. “Milt isn’t a fan of his.”

“Neither am I,” Liz muttered. “Not that I wish him any harm, but the guy has been intentionally harassing us and our neighbors.”

“He sounds like a real gem,” Eleanor said. “If you’re looking for more info, Milt seems to think Vlad is your guy.”

“Vlad?” Lucy blinked rapidly. “Who is Vlad?”

“One of the airport’s skydiving instructors.”

Margaret, who had been sipping her coffee, started choking.

Dot pounded her on the back. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” Margaret cleared her throat. “I swallowed wrong.”

Gloria shot her a furtive side glance, monitoring Margaret’s expression while Eleanor continued. “I don’t have much information on him other than Milt also knows who he is and he and Tristan are tight.”

“Friends,” Liz clarified.

Eleanor twined her fingers together. “Like this. If you’re planning on figuring out Tristan’s motive and mindset, you might want to start with this guy.”

The women threw out suggestions about how they could question Vlad without raising suspicions. Everyone except for Margaret, who was unusually quiet.

Gloria tapped the top of her hand. “You’re being way too quiet.”

“I’m listening. I can’t talk and listen at the same time.” Margaret averted her eyes, refusing to meet Gloria’s gaze. “And I don’t have anything to contribute.”

“Hang on.” Gloria snapped her fingers. “Vlad. I’ve heard you mention his name before.”

“You’re right,” Lucy chimed in. “Don knew someone named Vlad. They met at the country club. You said he asked you out after Don died.”

“All right.” Margaret sucked in a breath. “I know Vlad the instructor. His last name is Golubev. Don hooked him up with some investments before he became involved in the Ponzi scheme.”

Ruth slapped her palm on the table. “This is perfect. Margaret is our in.”

“I am not an in. He asked me out. I told him no. End of story.”

“But he was interested.” Gloria pointed to Eleanor. “Can you find out if Vlad is married?”

“Already on it.” Eleanor began tapping the top of her cell phone.

Ping.

“Milt said as far as he knows, Vlad is single. Although he’s not one hundred percent certain.”

“A ring around the finger means little to some men these days,” Ruth pointed out.

A collective groan went up around the table.

“Ruth, always the realist,” Liz said. “We’ll go with the assumption he’s single. Margaret can swing by the airport, accidentally bump into him, start a conversation and maybe glean some clues about his buddy Tristan.”

Eleanor, who was still focused on her phone, shook her head. “Milt said the only way to catch Vlad is by scheduling a class. He’s available by appointment only.”

“What sort of class?” Liz asked.

“A culinary class,” Gloria joked. “He’s a skydiving instructor.”

“Nope.” Margaret began shaking her head. “I want to help Liz and Floyd, but jumping out of a plane is where I draw the line. Lucy’s been skydiving. In fact, she

had plans to work her way up to full certification.”

“I never got around to it. The renovating business takes up too much of my time,” Lucy said. “I haven’t jumped in a while. We can go together.”

Gloria shook her head. “The plan is to be novices. You’re too much of a skydiving expert. We need someone untrained, someone who needs a lot of help, a lot of guidance, like Margaret.”

“Seriously. I’m adventurous, but jumping out of a plane at fifty thousand feet is not my idea of fun.”

“Fifty thousand feet.” Lucy laughed. “It’s barely at twelve thousand feet.”

“Fifty, twelve. It’s a long way up and a hard landing.”

“Newbies dive tandem. The instructor is right there with you every step of the way.”

“C’mon, Margaret,” Ruth said. “Take one for the team.”

Margaret’s eyes traveled around the table and lingered when she noted the hopeful look in Liz’s eyes. She wanted to help her friend. Truly, she did. “I…”

“Thank you, thank you.” Liz sprang from her chair and hugged her friend. “I knew I could count on you. I owe you one.”

“I didn’t say yes.”

“But I can see it in your eyes. You’re the best.” Liz beamed. “I’ll even pay for the skydiving session. All you have to do is make the appointment and show up.”

“And risk life and limb.”

“You’ll be fine,” Lucy said. “The adrenaline rush is like nothing I’ve ever experienced.”

Eleanor waved her phone in the air. “I’m on their website. Do you want me to book a dive? They have one available tomorrow at noon.”

“So soon? I need time to update my will.”

“You’re not dying,” Ruth laughed. “Stop being so dramatic.”

“I think Liz should go with you,” Gloria suggested. “This is for her benefit.”

“I agree. Liz needs some skin in the game,” Margaret said. “It’ll be you and me, Liz.”

“I...I would, but I’m sure we have to show identification.”

“You do,” Lucy confirmed.

“Which means Vlad will recognize my name.”

Dot drummed her fingers on the table. “Liz has a valid point.”

“Lucy is out. Liz is out. Eleanor?” Gloria asked. “Skydiving is on your bucket list.”

“I did one jump, ended up with a dislocated shoulder, and my doctor told me I can’t do it again.”

“Bummer.” Margaret turned to Ruth. “What about you?”

“Tomorrow?” Ruth pressed a finger to her lips. “What time is it?”

“Noon. I found an opening at noon,” Eleanor said.

“It’s possible, depending on what time one of my customers comes by to pick up an order. The next day would work better for me.”

Eleanor shook her head. “From what I’m seeing, Vlad must have gotten a last-minute cancellation, because there’s nothing else available.”

“Sorry, Margaret, Liz. Looks like I’m out.”

“Dot?” Margaret asked.

“No way. Nope. Not gonna happen. I want to help, but it won’t be with me jumping out of a plane.”

“That leaves only one person.” Margaret turned to Gloria. “It looks like you and me.”

“I…” Gloria swallowed hard, visions of her leaping out of the plane and promptly passing out, filling her head. “I have this fear.”

“Fear of what?” Ruth asked.

“Not necessarily of dying but dying by smashing into the ground at a hundred miles an hour.”

“You are all too much.” Lucy grinned. “I thought I had the bravest bunch of friends on the planet.”

“I can see Margaret being afraid, but our fearless leader, Gloria?” Dot teased.

“I’m not fearless and I’m not a leader.”

“Please,” Liz begged. “I would do it for you.”

Gloria wrinkled her nose. “You would face death for me?”

“Pretty please? I’m begging you.”

“I…” Gloria was on the fence. On the one hand, she wanted to help her sister, but jumping out of a plane?

“Federal prison,” Liz reminded her. “You wouldn’t even be able to visit me.”

Ruth began making a squawking sound. “Bwak, bwak, bwak.”

Gloria made a timeout with her hands. “Fine. I’ll do it, but you are going to owe me big time, Liz.”

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“I’m still trying to figure out how Liz talked me into this.” Gloria cast Margaret a side glance. “I was awake half the night with heart palpitations. Every time I thought about jumping out of a plane, the only thing I could visualize was the parachute not opening.”

“What did Paul say when you told him?” Margaret asked.

“He made me promise to text him about half an hour before we go up in the air so he could drive over and watch. He doesn’t think I’m going to do it.”

“Same here. Lucy called early this morning, wondering if I was going to go through with it. I’m almost positive the others plan to be near the airport to watch us fall to the earth.”

“Great,” Gloria groaned. “An audience.”

“So, are we really going to do it?”

“What’s our other option?”

“I have a Plan B,” Margaret said. “We tell everyone Vlad cancelled the class, so we went shopping.”

“Liz will talk us into rescheduling. I’m already having trouble sleeping. I can’t imagine prolonging the agony and anticipation.”

“True.” Margaret fiddled with the edge of her blouse. “I wouldn’t say I’m terrified of

jumping out of a plane. In fact, I watched a few videos on the internet last night to have some idea about what to expect.”

“And?”

“I’m either going to throw up, pass out or go for the gusto.”

“That’s the spirit.” Gloria thought about all the adventures and mysteries she and her friends had been involved in. To put it mildly, the last decade had been one wild ride.

She still remembered the low point in her life when she felt there was nothing left. James, her first husband, had died. Her children were grown and had families of their own while she was at loose ends. Everything changed with the death of Daniel Malone, when she discovered she had a knack for solving mysteries.

Soon, she and her tight-knit group of friends were honing their investigative skills and, over the years, had built up a reputation as senior sleuths. Paul Kennedy, her husband and retired police officer, was the later-in-life love she thought she would never find.

But God had plans Gloria knew nothing about, for a new “career,” deep and lasting friendships and golden years filled with memories to cherish forever. Although skydiving wasn’t one of them. “I’m going to grit my teeth and look at this as not only a daredevil adventure, but a one and done.”

“You said it,” Margaret said. “We also need to remain focused on the reason we’re doing it.”

“To find out all we can about Tristan Keller. While I was awake, I made a mental list of things we need to know.”

“Like Keller’s daily routine, if he had any enemies, or if there was any sign of trouble when he left the airport Thursday morning to fly over Liz and Floyd’s place,” Margaret rattled off.

“I hope we’re not wasting our time with this Vlad guy.”

“What if he’s a Russian spy or terrorist?”

“The thought has crossed my mind,” Gloria admitted. “You hear about terrorists enrolling in flight schools while planning attacks.”

“We have a pretty good feel for the bad guys.” Margaret tugged on her seatbelt. “I think you and I will be able to tell pretty quickly if Vlad is on the up and up.”

“We’re here.” Gloria turned into the Green Springs Regional Airport’s parking lot and found a primo spot near the door. “The parking lot is half empty.”

“Maybe Saturdays are their slow days,” Margaret said.

“I would think Saturdays would be super busy.”

“Either way, at least we won’t have to fight crowds.” Gloria lowered the visor and studied her reflection in the mirror.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to remember what I looked like before I embarked on the most terrifying event of my life.”

“Very funny. I thought our pep talk settled your nerves.”

“It reinforced my resolve but did nothing to calm my jitters.” Gloria flipped the visor back up. “I’m as ready as I’m going to be.”

The friends strolled through the sliding doors and stopped at the front desk to check in. The receptionist handed them name badges, a receipt for payment of their class, the one Liz had taken care of after Eleanor found the open spot and then directed them down a long hall.

Reaching Classroom 3, Gloria gave the door a light knock and turned the knob. The room was empty except for a young couple seated near the front.

The man and woman did a double take when they saw Gloria and Margaret enter the room. “Is this Vlad Golubev’s skydiving class?”

“It is. You’re in the right place.” The woman told them he’d stepped out and would be back in a minute. “Are you taking the class?”

“We are,” Margaret replied. “Gloria and I are total newbies.”

“Us too. It’s my boyfriend’s birthday. Skydiving is my present to him.”

“Happy birthday,” Margaret said.

“Thank you.”

The young woman squeezed the man’s hand, gazing lovingly into his eyes. “We’ve been planning this for months now. You said you were newbies so I take it you’ve never done this before.”

“Never. It will be the first and last,” Gloria said.

“I bet it’s one of those bucket list items. You know...something you want to try before you die.” The woman’s eyes grew round as saucers. “I mean...I didn’t mean you dying or us...or anything.”

Her boyfriend chuckled. “You better stop while you’re ahead.”

“Yeah. Anyway, here’s to a great class and some awesome jumps.”

Before either could reply, the side door opened. A bearded man, in his mid-fifties, if Gloria had to guess, stepped inside. “You know how to pick the young ones,” she whispered.

“Stop.” Margaret elbowed her. “He was probably after my money.”

“Good afternoon.” He greeted them, a thick accent lacing his deep voice. He reached for a paper sitting on the desk. “Margaret Hansen and Gloria Kennedy, I presume.”

“Here.” Gloria lifted a hand.

“Perfect. I am Vlad Golubev, your instructor.” Vlad explained they would be splitting up. “Because the planes we’re using can only accommodate the pilot plus four people and all of you are diving tandem, we will be taking two planes.”

“H-how...high do we fly?” Gloria stammered.

“It’s a twelve minute ride to an exit altitude of almost thirteen thousand feet.”

Gloria could feel the blood drain from her face. “Thirteen thousand feet.”

“Correct. We will be up over two miles above earth.”

“Good grief.” Margaret’s hand shook as she reached for the back of the chair. “I’m already feeling dizzy.”

“You will be fine.” Vlad reached for a remote. “But first, we’ll show you how to gear up along with giving each of you some important safety information.”

Gloria slumped in her chair, only half-watching the video, demonstrating how the harness system worked. Thirteen thousand feet. I have lost my mind. Liz should be doing this. Not me. Why did Tristan’s buddy have to be a skydiving instructor? Why couldn’t he have been an English professor or a golfer?

The video ended, and Vlad turned the television off. He handed clipboards to each of them.

“What’s this?” Margaret slipped her reading glasses on.

“A waiver for you to sign.”

“And if we refuse?”

“Then you cannot dive.”

“I’m not signing.” Gloria pursed her lips. “It releases the airport and you from any liability.”

“You dive at your own risk. But you will be fine.” He rattled off the number of times he’d gone skydiving, which was actually pretty impressive. But it only took one incident. One accident and...bye-bye skydiver.

“Just sign.” Margaret scribbled her signature and handed him the clipboard. Vlad reached for it and paused. “Margaret. I thought your name sounded familiar. You

were Don Hansen's wife."

"Yes." She offered him a tight smile. "It's been a while."

"A very long time. It's good to see you again." Vlad's voice softened.

"Same here." Margaret stepped closer to Gloria. "My friend Gloria and I decided to give skydiving a try. It was a kind of last-minute decision."

"Very last minute," Gloria chimed in. "As in yesterday, last minute."

"I had a cancellation. I guess it was meant to be. Do not worry. I will take very good care of you," Vlad promised. "Now that we have the video and waiver out of the way, we will head to the observation deck to wait for the other instructors."

Gloria stood, her legs like rubber. This was it. She was going to jump out of an airplane.

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Vlad held the door and waited for the others to step into the hall.

Gloria's sneakers squeaked on the gleaming tile floor, so shiny that when she looked down, she could see her reflection...the reflection of a terrified woman.

The squeak was speaking to her... mistake...tap...tap...mistake...tap...tap. Even her shoes were telling her to hightail it out of there.

But it was too late. They reached the observation deck, and Gloria's mouth went dry as she watched a group of four casually stroll toward a small plane, geared up and ready to take to the skies.

They looked so happy, so calm, as if they were actually looking forward to hurtling toward the ground and potentially impending doom. What was wrong with them? An even better question was, what was wrong with her?

"I need to use the bathroom."

"Me too." Margaret grasped Gloria's arm. "Where's the nearest restroom?"

Vlad told them how to find it.

The women hurried off, both remaining silent until they were safely inside the empty bathroom.

"We've lost our minds."

“It’s getting real now,” Margaret said.

“Down to the nitty-gritty.” Gloria paced. “Thirteen thousand feet—over two miles up in the air and we’re gonna jump out of a plane, believing our instructor and parachutes will keep us safe.”

“It’s a lot of trust.” Margaret’s cell phone pinged. “Lucy just texted. They’re already at the observation area. They met up with Paul, so you don’t have to bother texting him. Lucy said they have a special surprise.”

“They all chipped in and have an ambulance on standby waiting for us.”

“No. Lucy said we’re going to love it.” Margaret tapped the screen. “She’s asking how we’re holding up.”

“Don’t tell her I’m freaking out.”

“Too late. Lucy said the urge to throw up will go away and your adrenaline will kick in.”

“I’m still waiting.”

“I thought you had to tinkle.”

“Right.” Gloria stepped into a stall. She took care of business and slipped back out where she found Margaret furiously tapping the screen. “Is there a problem?”

“Liz wants to know what we found out.”

“Nothing yet. We’ll have to wait until it’s over to start asking questions,” Gloria said.

“That’s what I told her.” Margaret turned her phone off and shoved it in her pocket. “We should head back. They’re probably wondering what happened to us.”

The women returned to the observation deck, where the young couple was already gearing up and had been joined by additional instructors.

Gloria went through the motions, numbing her mind to what was about to take place.

“I will jump with Margaret. We are more familiar with one another,” Vlad said, a sly smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

“We’re not familiar,” Margaret muttered.

Vlad ignored the comment. “Tom will jump with Gloria.”

“Tom.” Gloria skeptically eyed the man, who extended a hand. “Have you been skydiving long?”

“Last week was my first dive,” he said.

Gloria shook his hand, staring at him in disbelief. “You’re kidding.”

“Yeah.” Tom grinned. “I’m kidding. I’ve been diving for years and have been an instructor since 2010.”

“You scared the you-know-what out of me.” Gloria pressed a hand to her churning stomach, which was threatening a full-on assault.

“Do you have butterflies?” he asked.

“More like somersaults with a couple of front handsprings thrown in for good

measure.”

Tom held out a mint. “This should help. Make sure it’s gone before we jump.”

“Will do. Thank you.” She popped the mint in her mouth. Although the churning was still going strong, she no longer felt the urge to vomit in his face. Which was a good thing. She needed to stay on Tom’s good side. Her life depended on it.

Gloria went into autopilot while Tom helped her gear up. He seemed to know what he was doing, hooking this, strapping that. Still... “How does this work?”

“When it’s our turn, we’ll strap ourselves together and jump.”

“What if a strap breaks?” Gloria nervously tugged on the metal hinge.

“There are many more to keep you secure,” he assured her.

“Our planes are ready.” Vlad led the way out onto the tarmac. The excited couple and their instructors veered off, heading in the opposite direction.

“Have fun!” The young woman gave them a cheery wave.

“Stay alive!” Gloria yelled back.

The pilot greeted them and waited for them to take their seats before taxiing down the runway. Their takeoff was smooth, and Gloria gazed longingly at the ground. There was no going back. This was it. The scariest thing she’d ever done. Ever.

Margaret patted her leg. “It’ll be over before you know it. I thought I saw Ruth’s spymobile parked alongside the road. Did you see it?”

“No. I’m having a little trouble focusing right now.” Gloria finished the mint, her eyes on her watch. Vlad had said it was a twelve-minute flight. They had already reached the eleven-minute mark.

She peered out the window at the farm fields below. “Everything looks so small and far away.”

“Two and a half miles up,” Vlad reminded her. “We’ll be taping the dive if you’re interested in purchasing the video.”

“We are, definitely,” Margaret said. “We can replay it later.”

“How long does it take to reach the ground?” Fear filled Gloria’s eyes. Fear and something else. Determination. She was going to jump and live to tell about it.

“Roughly seven minutes.” Tom went over the nuts and bolts of the jump again while Gloria paid close attention.

“We’ve reached altitude,” the pilot announced.

“Margaret and I will go first.” Vlad placed a light hand under Margaret’s arm and helped her to her feet. “Do you remember what to do?”

“Yes. Push my stomach forward and toward the ground.”

He eased the jump door open and Gloria couldn’t tear her eyes away as she stared at the bright blue skies. Nothing but blue skies.

With Tom’s help, Vlad strapped himself to Margaret and shifted into position, side by side and facing toward the front. She gave Gloria a “V” sign.

“Are you ready?” Vlad asked.

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Let’s go on three. One...two...three.”

“Geronimo!” Margaret yelled, right before stepping out into thin air.

Gloria held her breath, watching through the window as the drogue, the first small chute, opened. Down they went until she could no longer see them.

“We’re in the second drop zone,” the pilot announced. “You ready Tom?”

“Are you ready, Gloria?”

“Yes. I mean. I hope so.” She sucked in a breath and stood on trembling legs, slowly making her way to the still open jump door.

Tom expertly snapped the hooks in place, hooking the back of Gloria’s harness to the front of his.

“We can do the same as Margaret and Vlad and count to three,” he said.

“Sounds good.” Gloria’s heart hammered in her chest. Her palms grew sweaty, and she absentmindedly wiped them on her pants. “Thanks for the mint. I don’t think I’ll throw up on you now.”

“I hope not,” he laughed. “You’re gonna be fine.”

“I’m trusting you with my life.”

“And I will take very good care of you. Do you remember what you need to do at the end?”

“Yes. Stay out of your way.”

“Don’t forget to lift your knees so I can touchdown first.”

“Got it.” Gloria gave him two thumbs up.

“One...two...three.”

She closed her eyes and took a literal leap of faith. While Margaret had shouted Geronimo, the last word out of Gloria’s mouth was the person responsible for her current situation. “Liiiiizzzz!”

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Gloria guzzled the bottled water, thanking God she hadn't passed out, hadn't broken a bone and that she and Tom had reached the ground without incident. Well, without too much of an incident.

She hadn't meant to scream bloody murder, causing Tom's temporary hearing loss and forcing him to swing by the small medical center located inside the airport to have it checked out. Although Gloria apologized profusely, she was certain she wouldn't have to worry about skydiving with Tom again.

Margaret, on the other hand, had embraced her experience and said she would consider going again—not with Vlad, but with Lucy.

"You can have it." Gloria shivered involuntarily, flashing back to the moment she and Tom had jumped, the sensation of being weightless followed by sheer panic at losing control and hurtling toward the earth at breakneck speed.

The parachutes deployed, and the hurtling became more of a gliding—not any less terrifying considering it had taken years off her life, years she wasn't keen on giving up.

"We need to track down Vlad, to glean a few clues from him about his buddy, Tristan," Margaret reminded her.

"I've already thought about it." Gloria finished drying her hands and smoothed her hair in the bathroom mirror. "Let me take the lead."

"Before we track them down, we need to stop by the gift shop."

“Why?” Gloria eyed her friend suspiciously.

“I want to buy the videos.”

“I would rather put what just happened behind me.”

“You’ll thank me later.” Margaret grasped her hand and practically dragged Gloria into the gift shop. The clerk helped them track down the videos and rang up the purchases.

Despite her protests, Margaret insisted on buying both and paid for the purchases.

“You can have them.”

“Like I said, you’ll thank me later. I bet the others would love to see us in action. Maybe we can cast it to the television.”

“Watch me cause Tom’s hearing loss? Hopefully, he doesn’t sue me.”

Margaret laughed out loud. “You were freaked out.”

“You have no idea. Seriously, today’s escapade took years off my life.”

“You’ve been through worse. Let’s go find Vlad.”

It took a few minutes to track the instructor down. They finally found him in the coffee shop seated at a center table along with Tom and what appeared to be several other instructors.

Vlad’s face lit when he noticed the women, and he motioned them over.

“We wanted to thank you for being patient with Margaret and me.” Gloria turned to Tom. “Again, I am so sorry for screaming in your ear.”

“It’s all right.” Tom playfully patted the side of his head. “The doc said the ringing will go away in a couple of hours.”

“You will skydive with us again?” Vlad asked, his question directed at Margaret.

“I’m not sure,” she hedged. “Having my life flash before my eyes is one of those things you don’t want happening too often. You know, like tempting fate.”

“It is perfectly safe.” Vlad rattled off some statistics.

Margaret had given Gloria the perfect opening to start a conversation. “We heard about a recent plane crash.” She pressed a light hand to her chest. “That poor pilot. Someone shot his plane right out of the sky.”

“Who knows if they wouldn’t do the same for skydivers?” Margaret asked.

“The authorities are investigating.” Tom elbowed Vlad. “The pilot...he was a friend of yours.”

“Tristan Keller,” Vlad said. “We’ve been friends for many years.”

“I heard he was going to be all right, but still.” Gloria mustered up a concerned expression. “Do they have any idea who may have pulled the trigger?”

“It was a local farmer,” Vlad said. “A man Tristan knew.”

Margaret blinked rapidly. “And the farmer shot his plane down?”

“It involved some sort of property dispute. I believe Tristan was in the process of purchasing it when the other man swooped in and stole it from him.”

“It must have been a valuable property to be fighting over it,” Gloria said. “Hopefully, the investigators can get to the bottom of what happened.”

“In the meantime.” Margaret made a slicing motion across her neck. “I might consider another skydiving adventure, but until this whole plane-being-shot-down incident gets resolved, I’m not sure I’m willing to take that risk.”

“Tristan, he has a broken leg and some other injuries, but he will be all right. As far as worrying about an active shooter, he believes the authorities plan to make an arrest soon,” Vlad said. “They are waiting for federal agents who will also be involved in the investigation.”

Gloria and Margaret exchanged a quick glance. “They have someone in mind?”

“I—I’m glad to hear it,” Margaret stammered. “It’s scary to think gunmen are out there randomly shooting at innocent people.”

“As I said, I believe Tristan knew the shooter. Hopefully, the person will soon be apprehended.” Vlad changed the subject. “Were you interested in purchasing a video of your skydiving adventure?”

“We already stopped by the gift shop and bought copies.” Margaret patted her purse. “We’re going to watch them later today.”

“I can think of better things to do,” Gloria muttered.

“You will look back on it with fond memories,” Tom promised.

“We’ll see.”

The women made small talk with Vlad, Tom, and the other instructors before leaving.

Gloria waited until they were outside to talk. “It sounds as if the authorities might be after Floyd. What if he was the one who shot Tristan’s plane?” She fumbled inside her pocket for her phone and promptly dialed Liz’s number.

“Hey, Gloria. Where are you?”

“Standing outside the airport. Where are you?”

“Still parked on the side of the road with your surprise and the others. How was the jump?”

“It scared the daylights out of me. I may have caused permanent damage to my instructor’s eardrum. Other than hurtling toward earth at breakneck speed, it was great,” she said sarcastically. “You owe me one. Not a small favor, but something major.”

“I already told you I owed you one. Did you find anything out?”

“Tristan Keller broke his leg, and he has some other injuries, but should recover. Vlad said he told him the police are close to making an arrest. They’re waiting on the FAA to arrive first.”

“Sweet,” Liz whooped. “This is a reason to celebrate.”

“I wouldn’t start breaking out the champagne and party hats,” Gloria warned. “Reading between the lines, they might be coming for Floyd.”

“My Floyd?”

“Yes, your Floyd. Where did you say he was the morning of the shooting?”

“Outside. He was outdoors feeding the pigs.”

“Did he take a gun with him?”

“I don’t know. I mean, he doesn’t normally, but I have to say, we were pretty sleep deprived with Keller waking us up that morning. Throw in the rotten tomatoes being tossed at us and we were both pretty ticked off.”

“Do you think it’s possible Floyd took a shot at him to scare him off?” Gloria asked.

Liz grew quiet. “I’ve never seen him angry enough to shoot at someone. I suppose anything is possible. Now what do we do?”

“Let’s meet up and talk about it while it’s still fresh in our minds.”

“We’re around the corner,” Liz said. “I noticed a small coffee shop about a mile up the road. Let’s meet there. Dot and I have a surprise for you.”

“Does it involve jumping out of planes, hurtling to the earth and shattering an innocent man’s eardrum?” Gloria asked.

“You’re so dramatic,” Liz laughed.

“You weren’t the one who had their life flash before their eyes.”

“It’s a great surprise. You’ll see.”

With a plan in place, Margaret and Gloria hopped in the car and made the short drive to the coffee shop. The friends were already inside when they arrived, all of them beaming. Even Paul.

“What?” Gloria patted her hair. “Why are you looking at me?”

“Looking at us ,” Margaret corrected.

“Stay here. I’ll be right back.” Dot hopped out of her chair and ran toward the bathroom.

Gloria turned to Paul. “What is going on?”

“You’ll find out soon enough,” he said. “I’ve learned one thing today. Your sister is good at keeping secrets.”

“Dot too,” Lucy said. “She was in on it.”

Dot reappeared. She wasn’t alone.

Gloria let out a shriek of excitement and clutched Margaret’s arm. “No way.”

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Gloria sprinted across the coffee shop, meeting Rose halfway. “Rose Morris.” She wrapped her friend in a warm hug, sudden tears burning the back of her eyes. “What are you doing here?”

“Johnnie went on a fishing trip with some friends, so I figured if he can play hooky for a few days, then so can I. I found a last-minute deal on a flight and here I am.”

“Good for you.” Gloria held her at arm’s length, taking note of her sophisticated new shoulder-length hairdo. There was something else. “You lost some weight.”

“More than some. I got rid of the other body that was trapped inside.” Rose twirled in a circle. “And I feel good .”

“You look fabulous.” Gloria felt a tap on her shoulder and turned to find Margaret standing behind her. “It’s my turn.”

“Sorry. I got so excited to see Rose.” Gloria stepped off to the side while Margaret hugged their close friend. “We’ve missed you.”

“And I’ve missed you too.” Rose’s eyes filled with tears. “I didn’t realize just how much until I drove into town, past Dot’s Restaurant, the flea market and post office, all of our old stomping grounds. I even drove by our old house.”

“Where you almost blew your kitchen up?” Lucy chuckled.

Rose pinched her thumb and index finger together. “It was only a small fire.”

“Good times. Those were some good times. Do you need a place to stay?” Gloria asked. “Paul and I have plenty of room.”

Liz spoke up. “Rose is staying with us.”

“And me,” Dot added.

“Liz was the one who contacted me. She invited me to the shindig at her fancy new place. We got to plotting and planning and here I am.”

“Dot wasn’t in on it?” Lucy asked.

“Only at the very last minute,” Rose said. “We wanted everyone to be surprised.”

The friends all started talking at once while Paul stood on the sidelines watching the joyful reunion. Gloria caught his eye and made her way over. “Did you know about Rose’s visit?”

“Nope. As I said, your sister is good at keeping secrets.” Paul gazed down at his wife, a look of pride etched on his face. “You did it. You jumped out of a plane.”

Gloria swiped a hand across her brow. “Barely. There were moments I had second thoughts. Margaret went first.”

Margaret, hearing her name, eased in next to her friend. “Skydiving was a blast. I felt like a bird soaring across the bright blue skies.”

“And I felt like a big boulder being tossed out of a plane,” Gloria joked. “I’ve maimed the instructor for life.”

“Maimed him?” Lucy held up a hand. “In our excitement about Rose’s arrival, we

almost forgot about the skydiving adventure. What happened to your instructor?"

"I screamed bloody murder most of the way down. He ended up having to visit the medical center after we got done because of the ringing in his ears."

"At least you didn't choke him," Dot said.

"We were hooked together with me facing in the opposite direction, which is probably a good thing. I'm sure it's designed that way to keep the instructors safe."

"From what we could see, it looked like nothing but smooth soaring," Ruth said. "Would you do it again?"

"No," Gloria said.

"Yes," Margaret blurted out.

"We have a no and a yes. You mentioned chatting with Vlad after the skydiving ended," Liz reminded them.

Gloria and Margaret took turns filling them in on what Vlad had told them. "The bottom line is, according to Vlad, the authorities are close to making an arrest."

"And you think it's going to be Floyd?" Liz clenched her jaw. "This is awful."

"He didn't say for certain, but Vlad claims Keller knew the shooter, a farmer, unless it was another farmer."

"It could be Ivan Gregware," Margaret said. "He did not like Keller—at all. He keeps a gun in his pickup and is also a farmer. I'm sure he and Tristan Keller knew each other."

“Vlad also mentioned some sort of property dispute,” Gloria reminded her. “Which is what Floyd also said. Keller was after your property.”

“Gregware also doesn’t live there,” Paul said. “He would have had to time it just right to be there when the plane was shot.”

Gloria tapped the top of the table. “Floyd was out feeding the pigs when you heard the gunshot.”

“Correct,” Liz confirmed. “I ran downstairs as soon as I heard it. Floyd was over by the pens. He also heard the popping sound and was trying to figure out what it was.”

“Was he carrying a gun?”

“No.”

“Where does Floyd keep his guns?” Paul asked.

“He has a gun safe downstairs, one in our bedroom and...” Liz’s voice faded. “There is one more spot.”

Paul caught Liz’s eye. “Out in the barn?”

“Yes,” she answered in a quiet voice. “We’ve seen bears wandering around. He uses the gun to scare them off.”

“Maybe bears aren’t the only thing he was scaring off,” Gloria said.

“Floyd did not shoot Tristan Keller’s plane down,” Liz insisted. “He wouldn’t harm a fly, not even nuisance bears.”

“Do you think he might be tempted to shoot toward the plane to scare Keller off?”

“I don’t know. It was bad. The man was driving us crazy, not to mention throwing stuff at us.”

Gloria turned to her husband. “What will happen to Floyd if investigators determine he was the one who shot the plane down?”

“It’s a felony charge. He could go to prison.”

Liz’s lower lip trembled. “Floyd didn’t do it.”

“Then we need to figure out who did,” her sister said. “And we need to move fast.”

“At warp speed,” Paul added. “The FAA won’t mess around.”

“I say we start by checking out Keller’s social media page. Perhaps we’ll be able to glean some clues about him online,” Ruth suggested. “We can go to my place. It’s the closest to where we are now.”

“Social media can be hit or miss but it’s worth a try.”

“I need to head home to grab Mally,” Paul said. “I promised to help Andrea and Brian fix their back fence.”

Mally, Gloria and Paul’s pup, adored the couple’s twins. The feeling was mutual, which meant every time they visited the young family, Mally went with them.

“Give Daisy and Trace a big smooch from Nana and tell them I’ll see them soon.”

“I’ll let Andrea know you’re in the midst of a Liz crisis.”

“Let her know Rose is here and we’ll get together soon to visit. For now...at least for today, we have our hands full.” Gloria shifted her gaze, absentmindedly staring out the window, watching as a small plane flew by. “There is one more thing we need to take a closer look at. Unfortunately, this one might be a little tricky.”

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“It’s obvious Tristan Keller made his rounds.” Margaret zoomed in on the social media site’s photo. “He has a woman on each arm. Something tells me he likes to impress the ladies.”

“How so?” Lucy asked.

“This is the third photo we’ve seen of him at Fairfield Hills Country Club, one of the snootiest clubs in West Michigan. He’s with a different woman in each one.”

“I noticed too,” Gloria said. “He seems to prefer blondes.”

Margaret tapped the screen. “Check out his watch.”

“It’s nice,” Ruth said. “What’s so special about it?”

“It’s a Rolex. Do you see how he’s turned his wrist toward the camera? Obviously, appearances are extremely important to him. His suit also looks expensive. If I had to guess, it’s a Brooks Brothers.”

Dot squinted her eyes. “How can you tell?”

“By the notched lapels and the stitching on the cuffs,” Margaret said. “Don had a few Brooks Brothers’ suits. He only wore them when he was meeting with important clients.”

“So, he likes blondes, exclusive country clubs, and has expensive taste,” Lucy summarized. “It doesn’t help us figure out if he hired someone to shoot his plane or

ticked someone off enough to hunt him down.”

“Hold on.” Gloria stopped Ruth from scrolling. “Go back up.”

She scrolled up.

“There’s a picture of him standing in front of a plane.”

Liz leaned in. “That’s his, all right. Yellow with blue tipped wings.” She read the caption above it. “My new Piper PA, spit polished and ready to go.”

Gloria peered over her sister’s shoulder. “He’s only had this plane for a few months.”

Ruth clicked on the photo to enlarge it. “This was taken at the Green Springs Airport.”

“I recognize the hangar,” Margaret said. “It was near to the one Gloria and I were at earlier today.”

Lucy removed her cell phone from her pocket and snapped a picture. “You were right there. Did you see a plane matching this one?”

Gloria thought about it. “No. I was too freaked out to notice the other planes. The only thing I was thinking about was making sure I didn’t die.”

Ruth laughed. “You walked away unscathed and with a story to tell.”

“Except for the years it took off my life.”

“I say we drive back to the airport to see if we can track down the plane, look for the bullet hole, and glean any other clues.”

Dot arched a brow. “And how do you propose we do that?”

“Obviously, pilots and passengers are in and out of the airport all day. We could tell them we’re thinking about buying a plane and want to know how much it would cost to rent a space.”

Ruth shoved her chair back. “I’m game. Let’s go see if we can find Keller’s plane.”

“Hang on.” Gloria lifted her hand. “We can’t go blowing in there, looking for the plane, pretending we want to rent a spot.”

“Why not?” Liz asked.

“We need to at least sound like we know what we’re talking about.”

“True.” Ruth slid her chair back in, her fingers flying over the keyboard. “Green Springs airport rents spots. Outdoor parking spots are only eighty bucks a month. What a bargain.”

“Maybe we could all chip in and buy a plane,” Lucy said. “How fun would that be?”

“I don’t want to buy a plane,” Margaret said. “Who will fly it?”

“We can take flying lessons.” Lucy rubbed her palms together. “Click on the link to see how much it costs.”

“Flying lessons?” Gloria playfully placed her hand on Lucy’s forehead. “Are you feeling all right?”

“I’m fine.” She swatted it away. “Seriously, we could fly up to Mackinac Island, over to Chicago. Think of all the places we could go.”

Ruth clicked on the flight school link and whistled loudly. “It’s pricey.”

“Ten thousand dollars,” Lucy gasped. “Forget the plane. It’s too expensive of a hobby for this chick.”

“I don’t think piloting is all it’s cracked up to be,” Dot said.

“We can still go over there to do a little snooping around to see if we can track down Keller’s plane.”

“Margaret and I were there earlier,” Gloria said. “Won’t it look suspicious if someone recognizes us?”

Liz waved dismissively. “Nah. Tell them you had so much fun, you wondered what it would take to actually fly a plane.”

“We can research online all day, but I think the next move is to get a visual of the plane, if possible. I’ll have to stop and get some gas. The spymobile is running on fumes.”

“I’ll drive.” Dot jangled her keys. “You’ve done more than your share of chauffeuring.”

“Fair enough, although I don’t mind.” After Ruth finished packing everything up, the friends piled into Dot’s van for the drive back to the airport.

The woman at the front desk was the same one who had checked Margaret and Gloria in earlier. There was a flicker of surprise on her face when she saw them. “Hello.”

“Hello.” Gloria leaned an elbow on the counter. “My friend and I were in here earlier for a skydiving class. We were so excited we decided to come back and find out how

much you charge to rent a plane and / or rent a spot in the event we purchased a plane.”

The woman grabbed a flyer and slid it across the counter. “Our rental rates are very reasonable. It’s only eighty dollars per month for outside storage for a single-engine plane, which is mostly what we have around here.”

Ruth slipped her reading glasses on. “Do you rent month-to-month or is there some sort of rental agreement?”

The woman went into a long spiel about rates, rules, regulations and then asked if the women would like to tour the facility.

“A tour would be wonderful,” Lucy said. “Can we do it now?”

“Absolutely. I’ll radio one of our in-house sales reps. It should only be a minute.”

The group huddled off to the side while the woman tracked someone down.

“This is going way too smoothly,” Liz said in a low voice.

“Keep your eyes peeled for Keller’s plane,” Gloria whispered.

“There are six of us,” Dot said. “If it’s here, we’ll find it.”

The woman stepped out from behind the desk and hurried over. “Emery will be with you shortly.”

“Wonderful,” Gloria beamed. “Thank you for arranging a tour.”

“You’re welcome. We do daily tours. You would be surprised at how many people

are interested in piloting planes.” She handed each of them a nametag. “You’ll need a tag for the tour. Please write your first name on it so that Emery will know who you are.”

The friends passed around the black marker, jotting their names down.

A man, in his thirties, if Gloria had to guess, with short brown hair and neon blue glasses, approached the counter. He stopped by the front desk before making his way over. “You’re here to tour the facility?”

“We are,” Ruth replied.

“Perfect. I’m Emery and I’ll be your tour guide.” He clasped his hands. “Which one of you owns an aircraft?”

“None of us,” Lucy said.

A flash of confusion crossed Emery’s face. “You’re interested in renting a spot for a plane, yet none of you own one?”

“Yet,” Liz said. “We may be in the market for one.”

“Soon,” Ruth added. “Before we seriously consider such a large investment, we want to know what we might be getting ourselves into.”

“We’re very analytical,” Dot chimed in. “And like to have all the information before pulling the trigger.”

Emery shot the receptionist a side glance. He gave a slight shrug of his shoulders, as if to say he thought he was wasting his time. “We’ll start the tour here in the main building.”

He led them across the lobby and down the hall to the classrooms, an area looking all too familiar to Gloria. “We have several classes in session. Our experienced instructors offer a wide range of training. Who has the pilot’s license?”

“None of us,” Margaret said. “At least not yet.”

Emery blinked rapidly, and Gloria could only imagine what was running through his mind. He thought they were nuts, wasting his time, perhaps even a little of both.

“You’re thinking about buying a plane and none of you can fly it.”

“Yet,” Margaret repeated. “We’re in the exploration phase.”

He wrapped up the inside tour and led them out a rear door. Circling around, they strolled past several small planes, all lined up in a row. “Parking in this area is only eighty dollars per month.”

Liz tiptoed toward one of them and gazed through the window. “This plane is tiny.”

“It’s a two-seater,” Emery said. “Most of the personal aircraft stored here only accommodate a pilot and one passenger.”

“This might not work,” Dot said. “We would need a much larger plane.”

“Larger plane means larger rental space,” Emery said. “Maybe you should postpone your tour until you’ve given the idea more thought.”

“We...uh...would like to continue the tour.” Liz placed her hands on her hips, offering him her prettiest pout. “Please?”

“Fine, but I feel like this might be a premature visit.” Emery reluctantly stepped

inside the hangar and strolled through the center, passing by an array of planes, two-seaters, and even some larger ones. “We don’t have any covered storage available right now. If you were looking for inside storage, you would have to be wait-listed.”

“Do you have onsite mechanics who service the planes?” Lucy asked.

“Absolutely. All of our mechanics are certified professionals.”

“Good, because I would hate to have to worry about my plane crashing,” Gloria said.

Margaret snapped her fingers. “I heard something about a small private plane that went down only a couple of days ago.”

“I remember seeing something on the local news too,” Ruth said. “Maybe we don’t want a plane. It could be dangerous.”

“The pilot flies out of here,” Emery said. “It wasn’t a mechanical issue or pilot error. Someone shot his plane down.”

Liz’s jaw dropped. “Someone randomly shot a plane right out of the sky?”

“It wasn’t random. At least, from what I’m hearing, the pilot knew the shooter.”

“How awful.” Rose’s hand flew to her lips. “I hope he’s okay.”

“He’s going to be fine,” their guide assured them. “I haven’t heard what he plans to do with the plane.”

“Did they bring it here, to the airport?” Liz asked.

“Yeah. It’s out back.” Emery motioned in the general direction, which also appeared

to be in the same vicinity they had just left.

They exited the hangar on the opposite side, passing by several other buildings before circling back around to their starting point.

“Are there any other questions I can answer before concluding your tour?” Emery asked.

“You did a great job of showing us the airport’s highlights,” Liz said. “Thank you for your time.”

“I have a question,” Lucy said. “If we wanted to book a flight, what’s the procedure?”

“You register with the clerk at the front desk, the one you stopped at when you came in.”

While Emery talked, Gloria slipped away, inching toward the area where the smaller planes were stored, searching for a yellow plane with blue tips. She checked to make sure Emery was still facing the other way and darted toward the back, ducking under the wing of a plane and making a beeline for the fence line.

“Hey!” Emery ran after her. “You’re in a restricted area!”

“I’m sorry. I uh...thought I spotted some skydivers coming down over there and wanted to see them.” Gloria glimpsed the yellow plane, her heart skipping a beat before trudging back toward the others.

Dot shaded her eyes. “What is that building over there, on the other side of this chain-link fence?”

“A restaurant. If you want to watch the skydivers, I highly recommend grabbing a

bite to eat on their outdoor patio.”

Gloria perked up. “Right next door?”

“Yes. Their burgers are the best.”

“We’ll definitely check it out,” Lucy said. “Thanks for the tip.”

Emery escorted them to the front entrance. “Good luck. It sounds as if you have more research to do before making a decision.”

Liz thanked him again. “You’ve given us a lot to think about.”

The women crossed the parking lot and returned to Dot’s van.

“I didn’t see the plane.” Liz tapped her sister’s arm. “Were you able to get a visual?”

“I sure did. By the time I found it, Emery noticed me.” Gloria told them it was parked along the fence line.

“The restaurant is right next to the fence,” Lucy said excitedly. “We can get close.”

“So close we could reach out and touch it.” Gloria climbed in and buckled her seatbelt. “It looks like our next step is to swing by the restaurant to check it out.”

“I’m not hungry,” Margaret said.

“You can manage a mozzarella stick or chicken wing,” Dot said. “We’ll order a plate of appetizers to share.”

“This sleuthing is going to make me fat,” Margaret grumbled.

Gloria flung her arm around her friend's shoulders. "Putting on a few pounds should be the least of our worries. We're still alive, and at least we're not in Liz's shoes."

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“I thought you weren’t hungry,” Gloria teased Margaret, playfully pointing at the half-eaten chicken wing she was holding.

“This place has some great wings. I need to bring Stephen here. He loves bar-style food.”

“Speaking of Stephen, how is he? You haven’t mentioned him lately.” Lucy dipped her fry in catsup, eyeing her friend.

Margaret shrugged. “He’s good. He’s busy. I’m busy.”

“Are you two ever going to tie the knot?” Ruth asked.

“Maybe. I dunno. If we do, it will be a spur-of-the-moment kinda thing.”

“Why don’t you two fly to Vegas and let Elvis marry you?” Lucy joked.

“We were thinking more along the lines of a small, intimate affair, maybe even a quick trip to the courthouse.”

Gloria made a choking sound. “Color me shocked. You’re seriously thinking about getting married again?”

“Some days I think it would be nice to have someone to wake up to every morning while there are others that I’m convinced it would be crazy. Why rock the boat if we’re happy with the way things are?” Margaret tapped the top of the table and pointed to Gloria. “What about you? You and Paul have a few years under your belt

now. Would you marry him if you had it to do all over?"

"Absolutely. One hundred percent."

"So would I," Liz chimed in. "Floyd is the best thing that's ever happened to me."

"He spoils you rotten," Margaret said. "I'm not sure your marriage is a fair comparison. It's not like you're in the trenches, struggling through life, trying to make ends meet."

"We have our ups and downs," Liz insisted. "Look at what we're dealing with now? Floyd could be arrested at any moment."

Rose made a clicking sound with her teeth. "I have to admit, I've never met someone who had such a mess of troubles following them around."

"Many of them self-inflicted." Gloria set her napkin on the table. "It's time to take a walk and survey our surroundings."

Lucy slid out of her chair, and Liz stopped her. "I'll go with Gloria. You sit and enjoy the food." She scooted around the table and caught up with her sister near the bar. "Thanks for helping me. I'm sorry about the skydiving scare."

"You're welcome. Looking back, it turned out all right," Gloria said. "Although I was scared out of my mind."

Liz cast a glance over her shoulder. "Do you think Margaret and Stephen will get hitched?"

"Who knows? It took a long time for her to recover from Don's suicide. She took it hard and maybe in some ways she still hasn't completely recovered."

“Because she blames herself?”

“Yeah. I’ve never dealt with a suicide and can only imagine Margaret has second-guessed herself, wondering if she missed some sort of sign, if she could have done things differently and been able to talk Don out of it.”

“I have to say his death changed her,” Liz said. “She’s become a little less judgmental and kinder.”

“Margaret has always seen things in black and white with no gray area. I guess, in a way, something positive came out of it.” Gloria stepped close to the chain-link fence running along the rear of the restaurant.

“I see it. Over there.” Liz nudged her sister toward a trio of planes lined up in a row. “This must be where they store planes needing repairs.”

With Gloria leading the way, they walked single file along a narrow strip of concrete past a plane with a missing propeller. The second plane sported flat tires and a crinkled door. The third plane, yellow and with blue-tipped wings, was the one they were looking for.

“Is this it?” Gloria asked.

“Yep. I would recognize it anywhere. It’s in worse shape than I thought.” Liz inched closer to the fence, studying the crumpled side and missing propeller. “I don’t see a bullet hole.”

“Maybe the bullet entered on the other side.”

Liz knelt on the ground. Tilting her head, she studied the underside of the small plane. “There’s no sign of a hole in the bottom. I think you’re right.”

Gloria approached the gate and lifted the lock. She gave it a firm tug.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to figure out if Lucy can pick the lock.”

“Why do we want her to pick it?”

Gloria stared at her sister. “To open the gate so we can take a closer look at the plane.”

“We would be trespassing. Emery warned us this was a restricted area.”

Gloria let go of the lock and pulled her cell phone from her pocket. “We need Lucy to come back here and check it out.”

“What if we get caught?”

“The airport’s security guards will tell us to leave. By the time they show up, we’ll already have had our chance to check it out.” Gloria slid her phone back inside her pocket. “She’s on her way.”

Lucy appeared moments later. “You found the plane.”

“We found it, but can’t find a bullet hole.” Gloria tapped the top of the padlock. “Which means it has to be on the other side of the plane, the side we can’t see.”

“You want me to spring the lock?”

“Please.”

Humming under her breath, Lucy placed her hands on her knees. “It’s a simple heavy duty long shackle aluminum padlock. Unfortunately, I didn’t bring my lock-picking tools with me.”

“What about improvising?”

“I’ve had some success using large paper clips.”

“How many locks have you picked?” Liz asked. “Ballpark estimate.”

“Maybe a dozen. I’ve actually gotten good at it.”

“She sure has,” Gloria said proudly. “Lucy is our go-to gal for easy access.”

“Do you have a paper clip in your purse?”

Gloria rummaged around in her purse. “Nope.”

“I’ll see if anyone else has one.” Liz hurried off, making a beeline for the table.

Margaret watched as Liz scurried toward them. “What are Lucy and Gloria doing?”

“We found the plane out back. We couldn’t find a bullet hole, which means it has to be on the other side. First, we’ll have to get through the gate that’s padlocked. Lucy needs a paper clip.”

Margaret, Dot and Ruth dug around in their purses, but came up empty-handed. “I have some in the spymobile.”

“Which is at home, parked in your driveway. I’ll check with our server.” Liz caught the woman’s eye and circled the table. “I was wondering if you had a paper clip lying

around I could borrow...err...have.”

“Let me check.” The woman stepped behind the bar and began rummaging through the drawers. “Hey Cal! You got any paper clips back here?”

“Third drawer on the left.”

The server opened the drawer. “Here they are.” She removed a small one and handed it to Liz.

“I...hate to be picky, but do you have anything larger?”

The woman held up a second one that was twice the size. “How about this one?”

“It might do the trick to...clip some thick papers together.” Liz thanked her and could feel the woman’s eyes on her as she casually strolled to the table.

“Did you get a paper clip?” Dot asked.

“Yes. Is the server still watching me?”

“Not anymore,” Ruth reported. “She’s checking on another table now.”

“I’ll be back.” Liz hurriedly dashed behind the bar. She caught Gloria’s eye and ran over. “This is all I could find.”

“I think it will work,” Lucy said. “What took you so long?”

“No one had a paper clip. I finally got one from our server.” Liz lowered her voice. “She was watching me, wondering what I needed it for.”

“I got it.” Lucy slid the lock from the door latch and held it up. “Easy peasy.”

“Let’s get in and get out.” Gloria eased the door open and motioned to Liz. “Keep an eye out and make sure no one comes back here.”

“How am I going to do that?”

“You’re resourceful. I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

“Damsel in distress and faking an injury are the top two,” Lucy said. “We’ll need at least five minutes.”

Liz sucked in a breath and squared her shoulders. “I’ll monitor the situation. You’ll get the time you need even if I have to break a fingernail doing it.”

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Lucy jogged toward the front of the plane, ducking when she noticed someone exiting a hangar and crossing over to an adjacent building. “Get down.”

Gloria scrunched down and hugged her knees, certain that at any moment an airport employee would show up, demanding to know what they were doing.

The seconds ticked by. Nothing happened.

“Let’s keep moving.” Lucy cautiously crept around the other side.

Gloria, a few feet behind her, was the first to spot the plane’s damage. “It’s over here.”

Lucy backtracked and caught up with her friend. “This could’ve been so bad. The bullet hole is only inches away from the wing. Tristan Keller was lucky.”

“Why?”

“Because AVGAS, aviation gasoline, is stored in the wings.”

Gloria’s eyes widened. “Meaning if the wing had been hit, the fuel could have exploded and...”

“Kaboom!” Lucy threw her hands in the air. “Goodbye pilot, plane and anyone on the ground who was in the vicinity.”

Gloria fumbled inside her pocket. She removed her cell phone and began snapping

pictures of the damage.

Lucy grabbed hold of the door handle. “Give me a boost.”

“We told Liz to give us five minutes. There’s no time to search the inside of the plane.”

“I’ll only take a quick peek, to see if the bullet made it inside the aircraft.” Lucy popped onto the tips of her toes. “It’ll only take a sec.”

“Okay, but hurry.” Gloria clasped her hands, palm sides up.

Lucy helped pull herself up, balancing on one foot as she peered inside the open window.

“What do you see?”

“Keller wasn’t too tidy. The passenger seat is full of fast food wrappers.”

“What about clues? Do you see a bullet hole?”

“No.” Lucy sniffed the air. “Gross. The inside smells disgusting.”

“He was tossing rotting tomatoes out of the plane. Maybe there are a few still inside.”

“I can see a bag of something leaking on the floor. Let me snap a couple quick pictures.” Using her free hand, Lucy removed her cell phone from her pocket. “I hope I’m not too heavy.”

“Actually, you’re light as a feather.” Gloria shifted, keeping a solid grip on her friend’s shoe. “I noticed your clothes are baggy.”

“Eleanor.”

“You’re wearing Eleanor’s clothes?”

“No. I’ve been taking her Pilates classes and trying to eat healthier.”

“All of your hard work is paying off,” Gloria said. “Maybe I need to sign up for one of her classes and start monitoring my eating habits. Look at how great Rose looks.”

“She says she feels like a different person. It’s amazing how much you notice when you pay attention to what you put in your mouth. I’m done.” Lucy hopped down, landing lightly on her feet. “Thanks for the lift.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Back to the diet. Do you have any idea how bad fried foods are, especially if they’re fried in certain oils? Soy, corn and canola are the worst. They have linoleic acid which stays in your body for up to seven years and causes inflammation to the brain.”

“I love fried chicken. Why does everything that tastes so good have to be bad for you?”

“You don’t have to give up your favorite foods. Start experimenting with good oils,” Lucy said. “Avocado oil is one of the best.”

“Avocado oil,” Gloria repeated. “I’ll have to try it. Whatever you’re doing, it’s working.”

“Thanks.” Lucy snapped a few more pictures, this time of the plane’s exterior.

“Hey.”

The women turned to find Liz standing near the gate. “How’s it going?”

“Mission accomplished.” Lucy waved her phone in the air. “We took pictures of the damage and interior of Keller’s plane.”

“Sweet. Did you find anything?”

Gloria and Lucy slipped back through the door and replaced the padlock.

“The inside of the plane stinks to high heaven. The guy isn’t very tidy, and he got lucky.”

“How?”

Gloria held her finger and thumb about an inch apart. “The bullet came this close to hitting the wing which holds the plane’s fuel.”

“If it had hit the aviation fuel which, I’m sure I don’t have to tell you, is highly flammable, he could’ve been blown to smithereens and we would be looking at a possible murder charge.” Lucy patted her pocket. “We’ll know more once we have a chance to look at the pictures I took.”

Liz limped ahead of them, cutting through the center of the outdoor seating area.

“What’s wrong with your foot?” Gloria asked.

“Not my foot.” Liz removed her shoe and held it up. “Our eagle eye server was heading in your direction. I distracted her by tripping.”

“Good job.”

“Thanks. Unfortunately, my favorite pair of Jimmy Choo shoes is toast.”

“I’m sure you have dozens of other pairs to take its place.”

“But they were my favorites,” Liz whined.

“Do you want to get Floyd off the investigator’s radar?”

“Of course.”

Gloria made a zipping motion across her lips. “Then put a zip on it.”

They reached the table and found the appetizers were long gone.

“What happened to the food?” Lucy asked.

“Sorry,” Ruth said sheepishly. “We got to talking. Next thing I know, the food is gone. We can order more if you’re hungry.”

“Nah.” Gloria waved dismissively. “I’m ready to get going.”

Lucy consulted her watch. “I installed a large television in my gun safety classroom. I’ll cast the pictures we took of Keller’s plane to the television to see if we can spot anything.”

“Let’s round up our vehicles and all drive over to Lucy’s place,” Dot said.

“Sounds like a plan.” Ruth slurped the rest of her soda and stood.

“Speaking of casting to the screen, I wouldn’t mind watching the skydiving videos. We might have to borrow some of your noise canceling headphones, Lucy, if Gloria

is screaming as loud as she claims she was,” Margaret teased.

“Great.” Gloria rolled her eyes. “I’m never going to live down my plunge from the plane.”

“Not for a very long time,” Ruth said. “At least not until the next wild adventure comes along.”

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“I want to look at the photos one more time.” Ruth studied the side angle of Tristan Keller’s plane, on full display courtesy of Lucy’s projection screen. “I’m no gun expert, but this looks like a pretty big hole.”

“It is. There are several factors coming into play—diameter of the bullet, the velocity, angle at discharge, not to mention range.” Lucy went into a detailed explanation about the various factors until Liz’s head swam. “What does all of this mean?” she finally interrupted.

“In layman’s terms, it means a pretty big gun discharged a large bullet and left a big hole in the plane,” Ruth summarized. “Maybe Keller heard shots being fired. He tried to fly out of a local hunter’s firing range and instead flew right into it.”

Lucy picked up. “He knew his plane got hit. He lost control and ended up in the field.”

“In your professional opinion, what kind of gun was used?” Gloria braced herself for the answer, almost positive she already knew what her friend was going to say.

“If I had to guess, it was a hunting rifle.”

Liz popped out of her chair and started to pace. “A hunting rifle similar to the half dozen or more Floyd owns.”

“And other area farmers, possibly even Ivan Gregware,” Gloria pointed out. “There’s no smoking gun.”

“Just a smoldering one with characteristics similar to the ones my husband owns.” Liz placed her hands on her cheeks. “This is not going to end well. I can feel it in my bones.”

“Gloria is right,” Rose said. “It’s deer hunting season. I bet almost all of your neighbors own rifles.”

“We have our work cut out for us this time,” Dot sighed. “What’s the next step? Interrogate everyone who lives within a twenty-mile radius?”

While the others talked, Lucy grew quiet, studying the plane still projected on the screen.

“What’s on your mind, Lucy?” Liz asked.

“Something about this is rattling around in the back of my brain.”

“A clue?” Gloria asked.

“I think so. Unfortunately, I can’t seem to figure out what it is.” Lucy briefly closed her eyes. “I’ll have to think about it.”

“In the meantime,” Margaret grabbed the remote. “It’s time to kick back and enjoy the Gloria and Margaret Adventure Show.”

“You get it ready to roll and I’ll be right back.” Lucy ran out of the classroom and returned with small bags of freshly popped popcorn. She handed one to each of them. “Feel free to grab a Coke from the fridge.”

The friends settled in and grew quiet while Margaret, with Lucy’s help, began playing her skydiving adventure first.

“Hold up.” Gloria shoved a handful of popcorn into her mouth and sprang from her chair. “Go back about ten seconds.”

“Why?” Dot asked.

“Vlad, the instructor, is checking Margaret out.”

“He is not,” Margaret gasped.

Lucy slid the bar back and replayed the part where Vlad was hooking the front of his skydiving gear to the back of Margaret’s. He gave her a sly side smile. His hand hovered over her bottom for a few seconds, and then he finished attaching the harness.

Ruth laughed out loud. “Good eye, Gloria. Vlad had a hovering hand.”

“Good grief. If I had known what he was doing, I would’ve insisted he unhook us and give me my money back.”

“Vlad had the hots for Margaret,” Rose sang.

“Still has the hots for her,” Dot corrected.

Finally, they reached the part where the couple prepared to jump. Her face lit up, her eyes bright as they leapt from the plane. “Geronimo!”

A second camera picked up, and it almost made Liz dizzy watching them plunge toward earth. The second, larger parachute opened, and the couple floated the rest of the way down.

“Bravo!” Ruth scrambled to her feet and started clapping. “Your jump was picture-

perfect.”

“Thanks. Now it’s Gloria’s turn.” Lucy fiddled with the recording. Seconds later, Gloria and her instructor appeared.

“Look at my face,” Gloria said. “You can see I’m clearly traumatized.”

“You do look a little pale,” Liz agreed.

“My hands are shaking.”

“Poor thing.” Rose gave her a quick hug. “I can only imagine what you were thinking.”

“About how much it was going to hurt if the parachute didn’t open and I hit the ground.” Gloria tapped the screen. “This is the exact moment where I almost backed out.”

The others grew quiet, watching their friend reluctantly approach the jump door, her eyes wide, licking her lips and casting a wistful gaze behind her.

The audio grew muffled for a moment and whatever Tom said to Gloria was garbled.

“I think we missed something good,” Liz said.

Lucy pressed the pause button. “Do you remember what he said?”

“He was reminding me to lift my knees before we touched down. I was probably telling him I would be unconscious by then.”

Dot playfully nudged her arm. “You’re braver than me. I never would have agreed to

it to begin with.”

“Liz owes me one. Big time.”

“And I already have an idea in mind about how to reward you for your bravery,” Liz primly replied.

Lucy hit the play button at the precise moment Tom and Gloria jumped. The scene cut to the aerial view.

“Liiiiizzzz!” Gloria’s shrill screams echoed through the speakers and didn’t stop for several long seconds.

Liz winced and covered her ears. “That is loud.”

Finally, her screaming ended. It was replaced by heavy breathing.

The open field appeared. Tom reminded Gloria to lift her legs. The camera bounced around before coming into focus again and everything became crystal clear.

As soon as Tom unhooked them, Gloria dropped to her knees and kissed the ground. “Thank you, God.”

Tom helped her to her feet and gave her a hug. “You did it, Gloria.”

The recording ended, and the friends clapped again, all giving Gloria a hearty whack on the back to congratulate her.

“Never again,” she vowed. “Skydiving was a one and done for this gal.”

“I would try it again,” Margaret said.

“We’ll go together.” Lucy clasped her hands. “Who wants to go with us?”

It was a unanimous “no” except for Ruth, who said she might consider it.

The friends started cleaning up. Everyone except for Lucy, who stared at the blank screen, the same thoughtful expression on her face.

Gloria tapped her on the shoulder. “Have you figured out what’s been bouncing around in your head?”

“Maybe. I’ll need to see the flight log from that morning again.” Lucy waited for Liz to return from the bathroom. “Can you log onto the radar app, the one you were using when Keller’s plane was shot down?”

“Sure. I’ll need to borrow a laptop.”

Working together, Lucy and Liz logged on and tracked down Tristan Keller’s flight. Once again, they cast it on the screen. The women gathered around, quietly watching as his plane appeared.

It circled once, circled again in a wide loop and then... blip ...it disappeared.

“Play it one more time,” Lucy said. “Pause it when you get to the point right before it disappears.”

Liz did as her friend asked, replaying the recording and pausing seconds before the plane dropped off the screen.

“That’s it,” Lucy said excitedly. “Guys, I think I finally found our first big clue.”

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“It’s right here.” Lucy traced the outline of Keller’s flight path the morning of his crash.

“What am I missing?” Liz’s brows furrowed. “I’ve watched this several times. All I see is the plane looping around our farm and then disappearing.”

“Which is exactly what it is. Now we know where the bullet hit.”

“Ah.” Gloria tapped the tip of her chin. “Because the direction the plane was flying and the bullet hole tells us the general vicinity of where the shot came from.”

“Exactly.” Lucy grabbed a large pad of paper, a black marker and drew a big “x.”
“Here’s Liz’s farm. Christi’s farm is directly across the road and the third farm...”

“Is Ivan Gregware’s, although he doesn’t live there,” Liz reminded them.

“Still, Lucy and I noticed a rifle rack in the back window of his truck,” Margaret said.
“Which means he drives around with a gun.”

“So, we have three solid suspects,” Gloria said. “Floyd.”

“Who didn’t shoot the plane down,” Liz interrupted.

“He’s still a suspect.” Gloria pinned her with a stare. “Can I continue?”

“Be my guest.”

“Floyd, Ivan Gregware and Christi’s husband,” Gloria summarized.

“Darren Kravitz.”

“And possibly whoever owns the tree stand we saw in the field,” Ruth added.

“Right, so there might be more suspects. Those are the only ones we know about,” Margaret said.

“Based on the time of day—early morning—I would say whoever took the plane down was familiar with the area.” Lucy tapped the screen. “We now know the shooter was standing at this angle, facing toward Liz and Floyd’s place when they fired the shot.”

“Unless Keller looped back around before he went down,” Ruth said.

Lucy started writing a list:

Large gunshot - hole. More than likely a rifle. Shooter was facing toward Liz and Floyd’s farm. Near daybreak, early a.m.

“We have the time, the weapon, and the location,” Gloria said. “Now all we need is to figure out who pulled the trigger.”

“I think it’s time to have another chat with your neighbor, Christi, considering her farm’s proximity to the location,” Lucy said.

“What do you know about her husband?” Ruth asked.

“I’ve met him and have seen him around a few times, out in the gardens and riding around on his tractor. He travels a lot.”

“Doing what?”

Liz shrugged. “I’m almost positive he sells medical equipment.”

“Was he home at the time of the shooting?”

“I think so. In fact, when I stopped by Christi’s place to ask her to sign the petition, she said he hated the plane flying around too.”

“It looks like we need to move Darren Kravitz to the top of the list,” Gloria said. “You need to find out for sure if he was home.”

“And then what?” Liz placed her hands on her hips. “I ask her if Darren was the one who fired the shot?”

“No, but you can try to gauge his level of anger or irritation at the plane and pilot.”

“I’ll try, although I’m not as good at getting info as you guys are,” Liz warned. “Does this mean you ruled Echo out?”

“Echo, who has a handgun and was practicing with a target out back?” Gloria asked. “We’ll leave her on the list. I’m sure she wasn’t happy having tomatoes tossed at her place.”

“I’ve seen Echo’s gun. If you want my professional opinion, I don’t think her particular handgun was capable of blowing a large hole in the side of Keller’s plane,” Lucy said.

“I want to leave her on the list,” Ruth said. “Suspect the least suspect.”

“I’ll run over to Christi’s as soon as I get home.” Liz motioned to Rose. “You have a

spare key. Let yourself in whenever you want.”

“Thanks. I have a rental car and figured I would spend some time visiting a few of my favorite places.”

Dot flung her arm around Rose’s shoulders. “Not without me. I’m going with you.”

“How about dinner at my place?” Gloria warmed to the idea. “We can invite Andrea, Brian, and the twins over.”

“I’m in.” Ruth gave a thumbs up. “Let’s do an easy meal and order pizza.”

“What about you, Lucy?” Gloria asked.

“If it’s not too much trouble. I would love to spend some time with Rose.”

“Ditto,” Margaret said.

“Liz?” Gloria nudged her sister.

“I’m going to pass, but thanks for the invite.” Liz grimaced. “I’m not in the mood to socialize.”

“Since we’ve taken over your schedule, Rose, why don’t you spend the night with Ray and me?” Dot clapped her hands. “It will be like old times.”

“I’m free as a bird,” Rose said. “The more time I have to spend with my friends, the better.”

“It’s up to you,” Liz said.

“I don’t want to mess up your plans.”

“My main plan is to figure out who shot Keller’s plane.” Liz patted her arm. “Spend time with Gloria and the others. It’s going to go by in the blink of an eye.”

“Thanks for being understanding,” Rose said. “I don’t care what Gloria says about you. You’re the best.”

“I have my moments.” Liz was the first to leave Lucy’s place.

Gloria’s brows knitted as she watched her sister climb into her SUV.

Lucy nudged her. “I can see the wheels spinning. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

“There’s one more person we need to take a closer look at.”

“Floyd,” Ruth guessed.

“Yes, and the sooner the better.”

During the drive home, Liz mulled over what she would say to her neighbor.

She couldn’t come right out and accuse her or her husband of firing at Keller’s plane, but it had to be someone in the vicinity and they made the most sense.

As luck would have it, Christi’s vehicle was in the driveway. Liz grabbed Duchess and headed back out. There was no sign of her neighbor. She could hear voices, or maybe it was the television, blaring loudly. Liz rapped on the door. No one answered,

so she tried again.

Christi peered out. Seconds later, the door opened. “Hey, Liz.”

“Hello, Christi. I hope I’m not bothering you.”

“Not at all. I was throwing some stuff in the crock-pot for dinner tonight.”

“I thought I would stop by to let you know I heard the investigators are close to arresting the person or persons who shot Tristan Keller’s plane down the other morning.”

“Close?” Christi blinked rapidly. “They think they know who it was?”

“That’s what I’m hearing. Have you heard anything?”

“No. I...Darren and I spoke with the police right after it happened. They asked to see Darren’s hunting rifles and handguns. After finishing, they said they would contact us if they needed any additional information.”

“Same here,” Liz said. “Did they want to know where you both were at the time of the shooting?”

“Yes. I told them I was home in bed and Darren was out of town.”

“Out of town? I thought...” Liz tried to remember exactly when Christi had told her Darren was getting back into town and could’ve sworn he was home the morning the shooting occurred. “I thought Darren was home. You mentioned having to do laundry.”

“N-no.” Christi nervously licked her lips and gazed over Liz’s shoulder. “I’m almost

positive I told you Darren got home later that day, not early in the morning.”

Liz didn’t press the issue. Perhaps she had heard wrong. Perhaps Darren had arrived home later, long after the plane went down.

The women made small talk for a few more minutes before Liz left. She gazed around, wondering what Christi kept looking at, and realized it was a small storage shed to the right of their barn. She also noticed Darren’s pickup was gone again.

Back at the house, Liz made a beeline for her security cameras, the ones covering the front of the yard, all the way up to the driveway. The cameras also offered a partial view of the road out front.

Liz fixed a cup of tea and began playing the surveillance videos. Because of their semi-remote location, few vehicles traveled down their road. She glimpsed Floyd strolling toward the pigpens early Thursday morning.

Up next was a blip in the sky. It was Keller’s plane making its first loop around their property. She noticed something falling from it and landing at the end of their driveway.

“Jerk,” she muttered under her breath. “I hope your plane is out of commission for a really long time.”

The next several minutes passed uneventfully and she could feel her mind wandering. Perhaps Christi was telling the truth and Darren hadn’t arrived home until later in the day.

A small movement caught her eye. A set of headlights bounced off their mailbox. Darren Kravitz’s pickup truck appeared. He turned into the driveway and drove out of sight.

Liz noted the timestamp. It was mere minutes before Keller's plane appeared again, this time flying lower and closer to their house. Another tomato bomb was tossed out the window, landing only a few feet away from Liz's luxury SUV.

Keller kept going until he was no longer in sight and Liz knew his plane went down only seconds later. She started to click away when she noticed a flurry of movement. It was Darren, jogging from the shed to the barn. He ran out back toward the open field. Liz waited, but he never returned. "What was he doing?" she whispered under her breath.

She replayed the surveillance footage, clearly showing Darren Kravitz arriving home shortly before Tristan Keller's plane went down. Christi had lied to her.

Liz pulled up the flight radar, reminding herself she had no idea the app even existed until her neighbor had told her about it.

Christi knew about the flight software. Christi and her husband were home at the time of the shooting. Their property was adjacent to Ivan Gregware's property. Darren was running back and forth outside. Was he the shooter? Or had he heard the gunshot and ran over to check it out?

Liz's tea had gone cold. She stuck the mug in the microwave and turned it on, her mind whirling. Was Darren or Christi behind the shooting?

Duchess daintily trotted over to the door and stared up at Liz.

"Good idea, Duchess. Let's go for a walk so I can clear my head." She grabbed a jacket, followed her pup out of the house, and down the two-lane path past Echo's place.

Duchess cast a longing look as they walked past. "Teddy went to work with Echo

today,” Liz said. “We’ll stop by later to say hi.”

With her pup by her side, she meandered all the way to the woods and creek near the back of the property. The authorities had already taken a look at Christi and Darren’s weapons, just as they had Floyd’s.

But what if they hadn’t seen them all? What if Darren shot the plane and then hid the gun in his field, knowing they would eventually search his place? Would the authorities run a check on who owned what weapons, looking for a possible match?

“C’m on, Duchess.” Liz called her pup for a leisurely stroll back toward the house. On the way, she stopped by the pigpen to give Pepper and Piper a snack. Despite insisting Floyd was in charge of caring for their pigs, Liz found herself stopping to check on them and chat at least once a day.

She finished feeding them beets and leftover lettuce before washing her hands in the outdoor sink and meandering toward the house.

They were almost there when she spotted Floyd’s pickup turning into the driveway. He parked next to her SUV and climbed out.

Liz caught up with him. “You’re home early.”

“I’ve been worried about you, considering everything we have going on, and figured I would come home to see how you’re holding up.”

“How sweet.” Liz bounced onto the tips of her toes and kissed his cheek. “Thank you.”

“I also have a surprise.”

“A surprise?”

“Close your eyes.”

Liz closed her eyes. She could hear her husband open the truck door and then slam it shut.

“You can look now.”

Liz opened her eyes and found a beaming Floyd standing directly in front of her.

“What is this?”

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“It’s a nice day, one of the last we’ll have until spring, so I thought we could fire up those fancy new patio heaters we bought and enjoy a light meal in our new gazebo.”

Liz’s heart skipped a beat. “You came home to eat with me?”

“I couldn’t think of a better way to spend my time than with the love of my life.” Floyd lifted the picnic basket. “These past few weeks...few months have been stressful for both of us and I figured it was time to enjoy the fruits of our labor.”

“We have a folding table and chairs around here somewhere.” He held out the basket. “You take this. I’ll grab the table and chairs and meet you at the gazebo.”

“It’s a deal.” Liz reached for the handle, and Floyd playfully pulled the basket back. “No peeking.”

“I promise, I won’t look.” Liz balanced it on her arm and called Duchess, who had wandered off to investigate one of the splatted tomatoes still on the ground. “The thing is nasty. Don’t touch it.”

Duchess promptly did an about-face and trotted after Liz. Not only had Floyd added an airy gazebo but he’d also hired a company to install beautiful brick pavers connecting the structure to their house.

Stepping inside, she set the picnic basket on the built-in wooden bench and waited for Floyd to join her.

Their pup, curious to find out what was in the basket, tentatively sniffed the side.

“I’m sure there’s something in there for you.”

Floyd appeared, struggling to carry a folding table and two chairs. Liz rushed over to help. “This seems like a lot of work.”

“Not if it means I get to spend time with my sugar lips.”

Although Liz had initially been annoyed by the nickname he’d picked out for her, partly because she’d been subjected to her sister’s unmerciful teasing, it was growing on her and she no longer minded his term of endearment.

He unfolded the table’s legs and placed the chairs next to each other. “It’s not fancy. I’m sure you have grander plans for the gazebo than a card table and folding chairs.”

“It’s perfect,” Liz beamed. “I love you, Floyd.”

“I love you too.” He rubbed his palms together. “It’s a touch chilly in here. Let’s fire up our heater.”

The gas heater worked its magic, transforming their cozy dining spot into a warm and inviting oasis, warm enough for Liz to remove her jacket.

“All of this lugging and carrying has worked up my appetite.” Whistling a snappy tune, Floyd opened the picnic basket, removed a crisp white tablecloth, and placed it on top of the card table.

Next, he removed bottles of sparkling water and two place settings, along with neatly folded linen napkins.

“Look at how romantic all of this is?” Liz sighed. “You’re going to spoil me rotten.”

“That’s the plan, to spoil and pamper you for the rest of our lives.”

She watched as he filled an empty cutting board with Italian salami, gouda cheese, sea salt crackers, roasted almonds, dried fruit, olives packed in oil and raspberry cookies. There was even a package of caramel corn.

“This is so pretty.” Liz waited for him to finish removing the last of the tasty treats. “I want to take a picture before we dig in.” She squeezed in next to her husband and snapped a selfie.

“Duchess photobombed us,” Liz laughed. “See her in the corner?”

Floyd patted the pup’s head. “She’s a stinker. I didn’t want to leave her out and brought her some treats.” He removed a bag of doggie treats, her favorites, and fed her one.

Duchess rewarded him by daintily licking his hand, her eyes begging for one more. “Who can resist those puppy dog eyes?” He fed her a second treat before settling in next to Liz.

She filled their glasses with sparkling water and lifted hers. “I propose a toast.”

“A toast.” Floyd lifted his glass.

“To our happily ever after.”

“For many years to come.” He clinked glasses with her and took a sip. “What do you think about Echo and Treece?”

“Do you mean our tenant and your son dating?”

“Yeah. He’s been dropping hints he’s thinking about taking their relationship to the next level.”

Liz lifted a brow. “As in...”

Floyd tapped his ring finger.

“Engaged?” Liz’s eyes lit. “I think it’s wonderful.”

“Now, you can’t tell anyone.”

She made a zipping motion across her lips. “My lips are sealed. They make such a cute couple.”

“And she would make a mighty fine daughter-in-law.”

“This deserves another toast.” Liz lifted her glass again. “To Treece and Echo.”

While they ate, the couple chatted about their upcoming party. Finally, the subject turned to the plane crash, with both of them throwing out theories about who was behind it.

“It’s possible Keller hired someone.”

“But...”

“Hear me out,” Liz said. “He files an insurance claim and collects money from the damaged plane. Secondly, he could try to pin it on us and sue.”

“And three...he could drag our name through the mud,” Floyd said.

“Exactly.” She reached for a cracker. “Ivan Gregware could have done it. Christi could have pulled the trigger, but she doesn’t strike me as someone who would shoot at a plane, although she’s not being completely honest.”

“How so?”

“She told me Darren wasn’t home at the time of the shooting, but he was.” Liz told him she’d seen his truck pulling in around the time Keller’s plane was shot. “I also saw him by his barns around the time of the shooting AND I saw him running out toward the field.”

Floyd made a choking sound. “Where Keller’s plane went down?”

“No. In the other direction,” Liz said. “Which means he was home, AND he was outside.”

“Christi was also the one who told you about the flight app.”

“Yes, she did.” Liz placed a thick slice of salami on top of her cracker and took a big bite. “She knows I contacted the township and started a petition to try to get Keller to stop.”

“Was he tossing tomatoes at their place?”

“I’m not sure. I can’t remember if we talked about it.” Liz made a mental note to check with her. “Obviously, you saw the plane and heard the gun go off. Did you hear or see anything else?”

Floyd popped a dried date in his mouth, chewing thoughtfully. “I’ve been thinking about it. All I can remember is seeing the plane fly over. I went into the barn to get some food for Piper and Pepper. When I came back out, it was gone.”

“But you heard the shot,” Liz said.

“Yeah. I guess I didn’t pay too much attention.” Floyd reminded his wife it was deer hunting season. “It’s not uncommon to hear a gunshot, especially early in the morning.”

“There are plenty of deer stands in the area.” Liz toyed with her food. “Darren could have thought the same, that the shot was from a local hunter.”

Floyd changed the subject. “Were you able to track down the special delivery for Gloria and her friends?”

“They’re on the way.” Liz, with her husband’s input, had picked out a special gift for Gloria, Margaret, Lucy, Ruth, Dot, Andrea, and even Rose, a token of their appreciation for helping clear Echo’s name and Liz’s after the death of a former adversary. “I hope they like them.”

“Like them?” Floyd leaned back. “They’re gonna love them.”

“Their recognition is long overdue, at least in my opinion.”

All too soon, the romantic meal for two ended. Liz reluctantly packed up the leftovers while Floyd carried the table and chairs back to the house.

She turned the heat lamp off and lingered in the doorway, a small smile playing on her lips. It had been a nice surprise, quiet moments spent with her husband, who had swept her off her feet and loved her unconditionally, despite her countless flaws.

Floyd returned and helped carry the basket to the kitchen. “I’m glad I caught you at home. I know how you like to pop in and out.”

“I’m glad I was home too.” Liz grasped his hand, gazing up at him lovingly. “It was the best surprise I’ve had in a very long time.”

The couple strolled down the driveway to his pickup. She waited for Floyd to climb in and blew him a kiss, her heart bursting with love.

Duchess patiently stood by Liz’s side while Floyd backed out of the driveway. She reached down and patted the pup’s head. “I have the best husband in the whole world, Duchess. Let’s grab the mail.”

A gust of strong wind whipped around the corner, and Liz could see winter clouds starting to gather. Their romantic meal ended not a moment too soon.

Turning left, she picked up the pace and hurried to the end of the driveway.

She grabbed the mail and began sifting through it on her way back to the house when the sound of tires crunching on gravel caught her attention. At first, Liz thought Floyd had forgotten something. But it wasn’t her husband. It was a four-door sedan pulling into the driveway.

A tall man, thin and in his fifties, if she had to guess, climbed out. Liz’s scalp tingled when the man greeted her and flashed a gold and black badge.

The “big guns” had arrived.

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“Make sure Liz is gone,” Gloria said.

Lucy ran to the end of the driveway. She jogged back to where her friends stood waiting outside the gun safety training classroom. “She’s outta here. That is one stressed out woman.”

“For good reason.” Gloria blew air through thinned lips. “It’s time to do a little more digging around.”

“Floyd,” Ruth said. “You want to take a closer look at Floyd’s background?”

“Are you sure we haven’t already done this?” Dot asked. “Back when they started dating?”

“You mean a full background check?” Lucy shook her head. “I don’t remember.”

“Neither do I,” Gloria said. “Besides, things change. There could be updates.”

All eyes turned to Ruth.

“What?”

“Do you have access to a super-duper, high-level website to run a check on Floyd?”

“Of course.” Ruth rubbed her thumb and index fingers together. “There’s a fee.”

Gloria wrinkled her nose.

“It won’t cost you an arm and a leg.”

“It’s not the cost. I’m having second thoughts.”

“Why?” Lucy asked. “Because Floyd’s family now?”

“Sort of.”

“Let’s vote,” Dot said. “I say we take a pass and only run a background check as a last resort.”

“I’m with Dot,” Rose said. “These kinda things can come back to bite you.”

“Although I agree to a degree with Dot and Rose, I say we need to eliminate Floyd as a suspect,” Lucy said. “For that reason, my vote is yes.”

“What about you, Ruth?” Gloria asked.

Ruth held up two fingers. “Floyd had motive and opportunity. What kind of sleuthing team would we be if we didn’t take a closer look at every possible suspect?”

Gloria motioned to Margaret. “What about you?”

“I’m all for it. Floyd’s family has a troubled past...not only troubled, but deeply troubled. We need to rule him out.”

“All things considered, I have to agree.” Gloria reached into her purse and grabbed her wallet. “Liz and Floyd are family. It’s my responsibility to pay for the search, even if it ends up backfiring on me.”

“How much do you want to know and how far back do you want to go?” Ruth

cracked her knuckles, rattling off the different levels of background research available.

“Whoa.” Gloria held up a hand. “All I want to do is eliminate Floyd from the list of suspects. I don’t want to know who he dated when he was in high school.”

“Fair enough.” Ruth ran to the spymobile and returned with her backpack in hand. She removed her laptop and settled in at one of Lucy’s classroom desks. “You’re up, Gloria. Have a seat and fill in the blanks.”

Gloria pulled her credit card from her wallet and stared at the screen. An inkling of guilt over spying on her sister’s husband crept in, and she began having second thoughts again.

Lucy placed a light hand on her shoulder. “Are you okay?”

“I feel guilty about spying on Floyd.”

“You don’t have to do the search,” Ruth said. “We can put it off and pursue all other avenues first.”

“Or eliminate him like we would any other potential suspect,” Margaret said.

“Look at it this way. If Floyd is responsible, if he has some sort of deep dark hidden past, wouldn’t you want to know?” Lucy asked.

“True.” Gloria sucked in a breath and filled in the credit card information. After finishing, she slid out of the chair. “It’s all yours.”

The others gathered around, watching as Ruth’s fingers flew over the keys. She pulled up a site and then pulled up a second one. Switching back and forth from one

to the other, Ruth copied and pasted several sections, moving so rapidly Gloria struggled to keep up.

She wasn't the only one. "Good gravy," Rose gasped. "You're moving so fast through those screens you're making me dizzy."

"Obviously, she's done this a time or two," Lucy joked.

"More than a time or two." Ruth grew quiet again, copying and pasting.

"I thought I saw something," Margaret leaned in, her eyes squinting as she struggled to read the sentence.

Ruth swapped screens again.

"Hey! I was trying to read that."

"Let me finish filling in the blanks. I only have one more site to check before wrapping up the search."

Dot pulled Gloria off to the side. "At the risk of stating the obvious, what will you do if Ruth finds something out about Floyd that throws up a bunch of red flags?"

Gloria's eyes filled with doubt. How would she feel if she were in Liz's shoes? Would she want to know if there was something in Paul's past? What if Floyd had done something but also paid his dues?

Everyone made mistakes, including Gloria, who was in no position to point fingers. "It depends on what it might be."

"Here's my advice..." Dot hesitated.

“What?”

“It’s not my place to become involved.”

“Yes, it is. I trust your judgment.” Out of Gloria’s friends, Dot was the most thoughtful, the most compassionate. Her genuine love for others, commitment to helping feed the homeless and those living on the streets was done selflessly, at times to the point of affecting her own health and well-being.

Dot never had an unkind word to say about anyone. She was as close to being faultless as anyone Gloria had ever known. “What do you think?”

“Liz has a computer,” Dot said.

“More than one, I’m sure.”

“She has access to the internet.”

“Of course.”

“And even has one of those fancy phones where she could get on the web almost anywhere in the world.”

“She does. In fact, I think she just upgraded to the latest model,” Gloria said.

“So, if Liz wanted to dig into her husband’s background, she has all the tools available to do so.”

“Correct.”

“Then...” Dot arched a brow.

“You’re saying if Liz wanted to delve into her husband’s past, she could and would.”

“Bingo.”

Gloria pressed a hand to her chest. “You’re right. No matter what we find, short of Floyd being convicted of murder, I’m going to keep it to myself.”

“You and the rest of us.” Dot placed an arm around her shoulders.

“Dot to the rescue.” Gloria gave her a quick hug. “You’re the best, Dot Jenkins.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” Dot laughed. “I want you in my corner any day of the week.”

“Stop with the love fest.” Ruth motioned to them. “I have the information.”

The friends gathered around the computer.

Rose blew air through thinned lips. “There’s a whole book on Floyd.”

“Not a book, but some interesting information,” Ruth said.

“Which is?” Gloria held her breath.

“I have some good news and some bad news.”

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The man flashed the gold and black badge, folded it in half, and stuck it back in his jacket pocket. “Good afternoon. I’m Agent Simpkins. Is this the Floyd and Elizabeth Rasmussen residence?”

“It is,” Liz confirmed. “I’m Liz Rasmussen.”

“I’m here because of an incident where a small private plane was shot down. It occurred Thursday morning.”

“I know all about it. Let me guess...you’re here with good news. You’ve arrested the shooter.”

“No, but we are making some headway in the case. Shooting down an aircraft, private or otherwise, is a federal crime.”

“If you’re insinuating me and my husband are responsible, then you’re mistaken.”

Simpkins flipped through his notepad. “You contacted the township and inquired about filing a petition to restrict air travel in this area.”

“Because the man was harassing us. He was spying on us and...” Liz paused, slowly counting to ten. It would not help her case to tell the agent exactly what she thought. “If you have a moment, I would like to show you something.”

She led him across the driveway, to a small pile of withered tomatoes. “Mr. Keller was not only spying on us and harassing us, but he was also targeting my tenant, my husband, and me, not to mention our neighbors.”

“What are you showing me?”

“I’m sure you already know Tristan Keller was tossing tomatoes from the window of his plane. I found these in the yard, at the end of my driveway, on my tenant’s deck.”

Simpkins removed a pen from his pocket and began jotting notes. “How long has this been going on?”

“For several weeks, although we only started noticing the tomatoes the last few days.”

“Were you aware Mr. Keller was interested in purchasing your property?”

“I found that out after he started harassing us and spying on us,” Liz said. “My husband and he were both interested in it. We eventually purchased it.”

“Prior to purchasing, were you also aware of the potential natural gas at this location?”

“My husband was aware,” Liz answered truthfully. “I’m not sure how relevant this is to Mr. Keller’s harassment, spying and what happened to his plane.”

“I would consider there to be a small to significant amount of bad blood between your husband and Mr. Keller.”

Liz clenched her jaw, resisting the urge to unload and let this man know what she really thought.

“You have a very nice home.” The agent placed his notepad and pen in his pocket and motioned toward Liz’s SUV. “A nice new luxury vehicle. It’s clear you’ve spent a great deal of money renovating the home. How many square feet is it? Four

thousand and some change?”

“It’s five thousand square feet. Again, I don’t see what my vehicle and home have to do with Mr. Keller,” she gritted out.

“Back to the bad blood. Were you aware Mr. Keller contacted an attorney with plans to challenge the purchase of your property?”

Liz blinked rapidly, her mind whirling. “No. How could he do that?”

“It happens all the time. You would be surprised.” The agent pinned her with a steady stare. “I’ll ask you point-blank, Mrs. Rasmussen, do you have any idea who may have shot Mr. Keller’s plane down?”

Liz enunciated each syllable, her gaze unwavering. This man—federal agent or not—would not intimidate Elizabeth Rasmussen. “It’s deer hunting season, which means on any given day the area fields are filled with gun-toting hunters.”

Simpkins ignored her comment. “Is Mr. Rasmussen around?”

“He’s working.”

“At Rasmussen Farms?” The agent rattled off the farm’s address.

“Correct.”

Another car, similar to the federal agent’s, pulled into the driveway. Four men emerged.

“Who are they?”

“Other agents working the case.” Simpkins removed a folded paper from his front pocket and handed it to her. “I have a warrant to search this property.”

“Search my home?” she gasped. “You can’t come in here and start tearing the place apart.”

He ignored Liz and began directing his men, one to the barn, one to the pigpen, another to Echo’s mobile home and the last one to her house.

“I have a tenant who lives in the mobile home.” Liz could feel panic start to set in. “She has a small dog. Don’t let the dog out!” she yelled at the agent who was heading that way.

“This shouldn’t take long,” Simpkins said. “It would be in your best interest to cooperate.”

“You blindsided me. No warning. No explanation,” Liz fumed. She watched as the fourth agent opened the back door leading into her kitchen. “This is too much.”

She ran after the man and found him searching the kitchen cabinets. “What exactly do you think you’re going to find? I don’t keep rifles in my kitchen drawers.”

“I’m here to search, ma’am, and searching your home and property is what I intend to do.”

“Not without me.” Liz followed him from room to room, practically begging him to be careful. She had spent a small fortune decorating the place, every piece of furniture, every wall hanging had been carefully chosen by her to create their dream home.

They entered the formal living room, and he made a beeline for the fireplace. The

agent shined his flashlight up into the chimney before reaching for the Lalique Bacchantes crystal vase she'd paid a generous five figures for. It was one of her prized possessions.

Liz began to feel lightheaded. "Please be careful. The vase is worth a small fortune."

The agent shot her an annoyed look and picked it up. He inspected the base and placed it back on the mantle. "It's nothing I would choose."

"Then you have no idea about good taste," Liz whispered under her breath, watching as he headed toward their Kawai grand piano, another five figure purchase.

"Let me guess...the piano is worth a small fortune too," he smirked.

"It is."

He ran his fingers over the ivory keys. "It's nice. I would take the piano over the vase any day."

Liz released the breath she was holding when he strolled out of the room.

Although he spent extra time inspecting the gun safe, removing several and taking pictures, he moved at a steady pace and wrapped up his main floor search. The bedrooms were next. Quickly deciding that the less she said to him, the better, she waited for him in the hall.

Floyd! Floyd needed to know what was going on. Liz tapped out a quick text.

She received a prompt reply, and her heart plummeted. Apparently, there were more than a few agents "on the case."

Several agents are here searching the farm.

A movement caught her eye, and she slid her phone back into her pocket. It was the agent. “How do I access your basement?”

“This way.” Liz escorted him to the main level, down the long hall, and to the basement door near the rear entrance. “You won’t find anything down there. We use it for storage.”

She lingered near the bottom step and let him conduct his search on his own, certain there was nothing to find. She wasn’t wrong.

He joined her a short time later. “I noticed double doors outside leading to the basement.”

“The same basement you just searched. You’ve seen it all.”

On the way out, the agent checked the cellar’s double doors and inspected the steps before catching up with Simpkins who stood next to his car.

“I’ve searched the entire house, sir.”

The other agents meandered over, each reporting the same—how they hadn’t found a rifle matching the one used to shoot Keller’s plane.

Simpkins excused himself. He had a brief word with his men and joined Liz. “Thank you for your cooperation, Mrs. Rasmussen.”

“Reluctant cooperation,” Liz muttered. “You need to take a closer look at my neighbors across the road. Both of them were home when Keller’s plane was shot down.”

“We have several persons of interest. Good day.” The agent returned to his car and slowly backed out of the driveway. He and the other vehicles were soon out of sight. She ran into the house, grabbed her cell phone, and dialed Floyd’s number.

“Hey sugar lips.”

“Agent Simpkins and his men finally left. They searched the house, Echo’s home, and all our buildings. Do you still have agents at the farm?”

“They’re wrapping things up now. I figured they would show up sooner or later.”

“Simpkins said Tristan Keller hired an attorney and planned to challenge the purchase agreement for our property.”

“No kidding.”

“Anyway, I thought I should give you a heads-up.”

“Could be their plan is to question all neighbors,” Floyd said.

“I’m sure they will.” Liz reminded him about what she’d discovered. “Like I mentioned earlier, Darren was home at the time of the shooting. Not only was he home, but I could see him running around outside.”

“Maybe Darren shot the plane. We don’t really know him.” Her husband made a valid point. Liz and Floyd knew very little about their neighbor, only that he traveled a great deal and was in medical sales.

“Christi also acted nervous and kept looking at their shed.”

“Like maybe she was hiding something?”

“It’s possible. Or maybe I’m reading too much into it, into all of it.”

“The agents are coming my way.” Floyd sounded distracted, and Liz could hear voices. “Don’t worry your pretty little head. We’ll figure this out.”

A knot formed in the pit of Liz’s stomach, a nervousness that maybe this time her sister wouldn’t be able to help them navigate their way out of the mess. Still, what was her other option? Wait for the agents to show up again, this time with an arrest warrant? “You’re right. We’ll figure it out one way or another. Hopefully, it won’t be from behind bars.”

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Liz called her sister as soon as she ended her conversation with Floyd. Thankfully, Gloria answered right away. “Did you find anything out when you talked to your neighbor?”

“Christi lied. She told me Darren didn’t get home until later in the day on Thursday. I checked the front camera surveillance. He got home shortly before Keller’s plane was shot down.” Liz told her about seeing him running around outside and to his field out back.

Gloria let out a low whistle. “Interesting. Maybe it was him.”

“Or, like Floyd who was also outside, heard the shots and thought they were coming from the back of his property. While I was at Christi’s place, I noticed she kept looking at her shed.” Liz stared out the window, half expecting to see the federal agent’s car pulling back into the driveway. “I was just visited by Simpkins, a federal agent. He and a group of others searched our place, the house, barns, Echo’s home.”

“The top dogs are on the case.”

“They are. I’m not sure if he was blowing smoke, but he told me Keller had hired an attorney and planned to challenge the property purchase.”

“Your property?”

“Correct. Can he do that?”

“I don’t know, but Lucy might considering she’s a licensed real estate agent.”

Gloria's voice faded. "We're right in the middle of something. Let me call you back."

"I'll keep my phone with me." Liz hung up and paced, waiting for Gloria to return her call.

Ting. Liz grabbed the phone off the counter. "What is Lucy's opinion?"

"Under special circumstances, anything is possible, although she said most disputes occur before the closing. I'm not sure how much success Keller will have considering the sale already went through," Gloria said. "It could be he filed a dispute just to aggravate you or make your life miserable."

"Like he has from the moment he started flying over our house and throwing stuff at us? Seriously, I'm beginning to think the man is mentally unstable."

"I would agree."

"Do you think we need to check into Ivan Gregware's and Darren Kravitz's background?"

"You read my mind," Gloria said. "It seems all the clues are leading back to them, Darren in particular."

"Like I said, Christi kept looking at her shed and seemed nervous."

"Ruth is here. I'll hand over the phone, but first, I have a personal question to ask."

"What sort of personal question?"

"Are you and Floyd all right...financially?"

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, you haven’t spent all of his money yet.”

“No. What makes you think I spent all of Floyd’s money?”

Gloria mumbled under her breath.

Liz briefly closed her eyes. “Did you run a background check on Floyd?” The silence on the other end of the line answered her question. “You ran a check on him.”

“We did.” Gloria hurried on. “We had to eliminate him as a suspect. He doesn’t have a criminal record. That’s good news, right?”

“But he had financial difficulties?” Liz asked.

“Yes,” her sister said in a small voice.

“What kind of financial difficulties?”

“He filed for bankruptcy, but it was a while ago, before you were married,” Gloria said. “Probably before the first natural gas / mineral rights money started rolling in.”

“Gloria Kennedy,” Liz scolded. “Shame on you.”

“We wouldn’t be doing our job if we didn’t rule him out.”

“We’ll discuss this later.”

“Or maybe never,” Gloria said. “Let me go grab Ruth.”

Liz was on a brief hold until Ruth came on the line. “We have you on speaker. Gloria gave me the 411 on your neighbors. Let’s start with Ivan Gregware. What do you know about him?”

“Nothing, not even his address.” Liz could hear tapping on the other end.

“I’m getting some basic feedback. Standby.” Ruth grew quiet for several long moments. “As far as I can tell, Gregware is clean. Let’s move onto your neighbor.”

“Darren Kravitz. D-A-R-R-E-N K-R-A-V-I-T-Z.”

“Got it. How about a date of birth?”

“No idea.”

“Address?”

Liz rattled off their address and could hear clicking again on the other end of the line.

“Now we’re cooking. Darren Lee Kravitz is currently employed by West Michigan Premier Medical Supplies in Grand Rapids. Been there for five years. He’s bounced around and had a few jobs.” Ruth began humming under her breath. “He’s a jack of all trades—sales, tool and die, marketing manager.”

“So he has a hard time staying with one job,” Liz said. “I had a hard time keeping a job when I was younger.”

“Because no one wanted to pay you to look pretty,” Gloria joked.

“Very funny.”

“He’s moved around a lot too,” Ruth said. “Fort Bragg, Fort Bliss in Texas. Ah…it’s all making sense.”

“Darren Kravitz was in the military,” Liz guessed.

“Yep. There’s something else in his file. I can’t see it though. This is top secret stuff.”

“What do you mean, there’s something in his file?”

“In his military records,” Ruth elaborated. “They’re sealed. My guess is…”

“Is what?” Liz prompted.

“They’re medical records.”

“Is there any way to find out?”

“Nope. Sorry. I can’t help on this one.”

“Maybe it’s best we leave it alone,” Gloria said. “It would be an invasion of privacy and maybe overstepping the lines.”

“You mean like spying on your brother-in-law?” Liz pointedly asked.

“We’ve already gone over this. We had to rule Floyd out.”

“In summary, Darren has had multiple jobs and was a military guy.”

“Correct. I guess we know what our next step should be,” Gloria said.

“Sneak into my neighbor’s shed.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sure the authorities have already taken a look around,” Liz said.

“Before or after Christi was acting nervous?” Ruth asked. “My guess is they would have searched her place around the same time they did yours.”

“Which means she and her husband could have moved some things around.”

“Good point.”

“If they’re still moving stuff, we need to head over there ASAP, first thing in the morning,” Gloria said.

Liz swallowed hard. “I was afraid you were going to say that.”

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“Why are we sneaking into Christi’s shed again?” Liz whispered.

“Because you told me you thought she was acting weird and kept staring at it,” Gloria whispered back. “Think about it. Christi knew about the flight app. You confirmed her husband returned home the morning of the shooting and could see him running around outside. She’s acting oddly. We either find something or reach the conclusion she’s just being her usual odd self.”

“I got to thinking about it. Maybe Darren was outside, he heard the gunshot and ran out to see what it was. As far as Christi...I think she’s lonely, but what do I know?”

Gloria gave Liz’s outfit the once over. “You need to change before we sneak next door.”

“What’s wrong with blue violet? It gives my gray pants a pop of color.”

“And makes you stand out like a sore thumb. You’ll be spotted a mile away.”

“Fine.” Liz trudged back up the stairs to her bedroom and returned wearing a drab black knitted sweater. “How’s this?”

“Perfect.” Gloria nudged her toward the kitchen door. “Let’s head over.”

“I want to make sure her vehicle is still gone.” Liz, with Gloria close behind, hurried to the front of the house and peered out the window toward the Kravitz’s place. “The coast is clear.”

Trekking down the front steps, the women veered left. They walked all the way past Echo's mobile home before cutting through the woods and crossing over to the other side of the dirt road. Reaching Ivan Gregware's field, the women backtracked and climbed over the fence separating the properties.

"What if the shed is locked?" Liz asked. "Lucy should be with us."

"I tried getting her over here, but she's showing a house," Gloria said. "She won't be available for a couple more hours. I figured by then Christi might already be home. Besides, you mentioned the shed has a window."

"It does."

"I'm good at sneaking in windows."

"But you have trouble with doors?" Liz wrinkled her nose. "What kind of super sleuth are you?"

"One of the best," Gloria shot back. "And don't forget it."

The women approached the shed from the back side and found the door locked.

"Let's check the window." Gloria scooted along the edge and stopped in front of the window. "Great. We're not off to a good start. This is an old transom window."

"Meaning?"

"It's for looks and isn't a functioning window."

"Maybe there's one on the other side." Liz pivoted and began walking toward the corner of the house. A plume of dust filled the air. It was Christi's minivan, speeding

down the road and heading their way.

“Abort mission!” Liz scrambled around the corner. She grabbed Gloria’s arm and dragged her toward the neighbor’s field.

“What are you doing?”

“Christi is home. I knew this was a bad idea.” Liz staggered sideways. “Ouch. I hit a hole.”

“It’s your shoes,” Gloria said. “They were an accident waiting to happen.”

“Stop lecturing. I picked the most sensible pair I could find.” Liz limped at a quick pace, wincing with each step. “We never should have tried sneaking into her shed. I knew it was going to be a disaster.”

“Unfortunately, the issue was poor planning,” Gloria said. “We need our team in place to run a successful operation.”

“Again, you wanted to get in and out before Christi got home.”

“I did, but now I’m thinking we jumped the gun. We’ll need to execute a backup plan.”

“A backup plan?” Liz gingerly climbed over the fence, placing a small amount of weight on her injured ankle. “I’m wounded. Christi is home. She might not leave again—for days. Maybe I was imagining things, and she wasn’t staring at the shed. Maybe she spotted a bird.”

“You’re second-guessing your gut. Always go with your gut. We’ll need to figure out a way to lure her away from the house.” Gloria slowed her pace, waiting for Liz to

catch up. “Do you want me to try carrying you?”

“No, but it is getting more painful to walk.” Liz hobbled across the road.

“I have an idea.” Gloria offered her sister her arm and helped her limp over to a pile of lumber. “Stay here. I’ll be right back.”

Liz winced, gently easing onto the pile of boards. “Hurry back.”

Gloria cut through the tree line and disappeared from sight. Meanwhile, Liz lifted her foot, noticing her ankle was already swelling. She tried rotating it, and a sharp pain shot up her leg.

Rustle. Something began rustling in the nearby bushes. “Gloria?” Visions of a wild animal pouncing filled Liz’s head. “Great. I’m wounded. I can’t run and my sister is MIA.”

Thunk. Thunk. Thunk. A thumping sound echoed off in the distance. Gloria appeared, pushing a wheelbarrow.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m here to give you a ride home.”

“You want me to climb in the wheelbarrow?” Liz asked.

“No. I want to hop in and let you give me a ride back to the house,” Gloria said sarcastically. “Of course, I want you to get in.”

“What’s wrong with driving the car down here?”

“I suppose I could have, but this is much more fun.”

“Fun for who?” Liz grumbled under her breath. Gripping both sides of the frame, she cautiously climbed in. Bits of dirt and debris scraped the bottom of her palms as she slid back. “I can only imagine what sort of disgusting stuff has been inside this thing.”

“Quit whining.” Gloria turned the wheelbarrow around and began wheeling her sister toward the house. “You should probably put some ice on your ankle.”

“It’s already swelling.”

“The shoes...”

Liz lifted a hand. “Will you stop with the shoes? I did my best to dress for the occasion. It didn’t work out. I’m regretting the fact we even made an attempt.”

“We’re going to try again, only next time we’ll be better prepared.”

“Margaret is pulling into the driveway.”

Liz shifted uncomfortably, making sure her bag of ice was still draped over her ankle. “I might need to go to a walk-in clinic.”

“You think your ankle is broken?” Gloria swung the door open and motioned Margaret toward the house.

“No. I’m having chest pains.”

“It’s stress,” Gloria said. “Try to relax.”

“How can I relax? Federal agents are getting ready to arrest Floyd. I have a huge party planned for next Sunday and now I can’t walk.”

“Postpone the party.”

“It’s too late. The invitations already went out. How will I explain to everyone why Floyd isn’t here?”

“Floyd isn’t going to jail.” Gloria’s eyes lit. “Good news. Margaret brought Eleanor with her. Help has arrived.”

“Eleanor? Is she an expert at picking locks, surveillance, or other generally illegal activities?”

Gloria ignored the comment. “And Ruth is right behind her with Dot, Lucy and Rose. We’ve assembled the entire team in record time.”

“I still don’t know how you’re going to pull this off.” Liz rattled off all the reasons she didn’t think they would be able to figure out what was in Christi’s shed. “The woman has a pair of binoculars hanging around her neck 24/7. She doesn’t miss a thing.”

“She doesn’t miss a thing if she’s around,” Gloria corrected. “If we remove her from the area by keeping her occupied, we’ll have nothing to worry about.”

Margaret, followed by Eleanor and the others, traipsed into Liz’s kitchen.

“We got here as fast as we could,” Ruth said. “What happened when you went over there?”

“This.” Liz lifted her leg. “We were running away. I fell into a hole and twisted my ankle. In other words, I pulled a Christi.”

“Pulled a Christi,” Ruth echoed.

“My neighbor has a penchant for getting injured, most of it involving her doing some sort of surveillance on me, which means we need to keep in mind the woman has cameras everywhere.”

“Not to mention she keeps a pair of binoculars with her at almost all times,” Gloria added.

“She’s super snoopy yet also an endearing klutz. It appears some of it has rubbed off on me.”

Dot cast her a sympathetic look. “It happens to the best of us.”

“And I’m having chest pains.” Liz clutched her chest. “Right here.”

Eleanor squeezed past Gloria. “It could be gas. Have you eaten beans recently?”

“I don’t have gas. I felt fine until I tripped. My overall health has spiraled since then.” Liz closed her eyes and leaned her head back. “This whole spy in the sky and his plane being shot down have been nothing but a nightmare.”

“We’ll get to the bottom of it.” Ruth set her backpack on the barstool. “I have everything we need to make sure the coast is clear this time.”

Lucy slid a box across the counter. “Including this.”

Liz’s head snapped up. Her eyes narrowed. “Which is?”

“The high-tech new drone I’ve been talking about. We’re going to lure Christi away from her house. As soon as the coast is clear, I’ll send the drone in to make sure we’re good to go.”

Margaret cleared her throat.

“What?” Ruth asked.

“Don’t you think sending in a drone is overkill?”

“Maybe, but I want to test it out. You never know what they’ll run into. Wild bears, deer, skunks.”

“What was I thinking?” Margaret rolled her eyes and waved dismissively. “Send in the drone.”

“Once Ruth gives us the all-clear signal, Lucy and I will head across the road, figure out a way to get inside the shed and look around.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Liz sighed. “How will we get Christi over here?”

“Not we...you,” Gloria corrected.

“How am I going to get Christi over here?”

“Simple,” Dot said. “Your injury. Call her and ask her for help.”

“With all of you here?” Liz shifted uncomfortably. “I wouldn’t need her.”

“Good point.” Margaret wandered to the window. “We need to make ourselves scarce.”

“What about Ruth’s setup?” Eleanor asked.

“I can be completely mobile in the spymobile,” Ruth boasted. “It’s also used as a command center.”

“I say we move our vehicles to the bottom of the hill,” Gloria said. “Actually, the location would work out even better for Lucy and me.”

Liz flung her hand across her forehead. “This is totally stressing me out.”

Dot tapped Eleanor’s arm. “Is there anything you can do to help her?”

“Maybe.” Eleanor leaned in, studying Liz’s pasty complexion. “Would you be open to trying some of my relaxation techniques?”

“Does it involve body contortions?”

“No. It involves stretches and focusing your energies away from the stress.”

Liz eased to an upright position, her head still spinning. “I’ll give it a try. As long as I don’t have to put weight on my ankle.”

“I’ll need some yoga mats.”

“Got ‘em. They’re in the back of the spymobile,” Ruth said.

Lucy arched a brow. “Why do you keep yoga mats in your van? Never mind. I’m sure I don’t want to know.”

“For overnight stakeouts. They work out great for sleeping in the back of the van.”

“About Liz,” Gloria reminded them.

“I’ll have her fixed up in no time,” Eleanor promised.

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“Our first step is to set the stage for relaxation.” Eleanor hummed under her breath while unrolling an array of neon colored yoga mats.

Liz watched her space them evenly along the wall. “How many people are going to be relaxing?”

“I have one for each of us.” Eleanor counted heads.

“I’m in pretty good shape.” Ruth rolled her neck. “I find surveillance and sleuthing to be relaxing.”

“Not me,” Dot said. “My stomach is always in knots.”

Liz gave her a thumbs up. “We’re kindred spirits, Dot. I’m a nervous wreck.”

“I can always use some stress relief,” Gloria said. “Besides, Lucy swears by some of your new classes and I’ve been meaning to give at least one of them a try.”

“It certainly won’t hurt.” Eleanor stepped over the mats. “We need to set the mood with music. I find classical works best.”

“I have an Alexa over by my desk.” Liz turned it on and asked her to play classical music.

“Perfect. It’s precisely what I was looking for. Let’s get to it.” Eleanor settled onto the mat so that she was facing the others. “This is all about relaxation, relieving stress and focusing on tranquil, peaceful thoughts.”

Liz eased onto an empty mat, carefully placing her bag of ice on her ankle. “Even if this doesn’t work, thank you for trying, Eleanor.”

“You’re welcome.” Eleanor tapped the side of her forehead. “I believe most of what ails humans is linked to the brain. I have several techniques. The PMR method might work best for today’s session.”

“PMR,” Ruth echoed. “Progressive muscle relaxation.”

“Correct. An American physician introduced it back in the thirties. The idea is to alternate between relaxation and tension in each of the major muscle groups. I even had one of my attendees fall asleep during the class.”

“I could use a nap.” Lucy stifled a yawn. “I have a bad habit of falling asleep in front of the television. When I finally decide it’s time to get ready for bed, I’m wide awake.”

“Same here,” Margaret said. “I’ve been catching up on old episodes of the Love Boat.”

“I remember watching that show.” Dot stretched her legs. “I was in love with Doc.”

“I had a crush on Gopher,” Gloria said. “He was a real ladies’ man.”

“What about the captain?” Lucy asked. “I mean, who doesn’t love a ship’s captain?”

“Speaking of ship’s captain, I chatted with my cousin Millie the other day. She loves her job as cruise director.”

“Millie is living the dream,” Rose said. “Handsome husband, a dream job, cruising all over the world visiting exotic locations.”

“And not shoveling snow,” Ruth added. “A cruise sounds good right about now.”

Eleanor clapped her hands. “We’re getting sidetracked, however, you can hold that thought. If cruising sounds relaxing, focus your thoughts on ocean breezes and golden sandy beaches.” She began by having the women work their biceps and triceps.

Sure enough, Liz could feel herself relax, and the pain in her ankle lessened. The soothing music, focusing on her breathing, envisioning lounging on a beach, soaking up the sun, and listening to the waves roll onshore, was working its magic.

Maybe what she needed was a vacation. Working on the home’s renovations was a major undertaking, with workers showing up at all hours. It had been a long haul, yet worth every moment of organized chaos.

But it was over now and time to enjoy their many blessings. What better way to do it than to set sail on the open ocean?

Before she knew it, the class ended, and Liz’s body felt like warm pudding. “Your session was wonderful. Thank you. I feel so much more relaxed.”

Eleanor beamed. “I’m happy I could help.”

Liz slowly stood and put a small amount of pressure on her foot. Although it still hurt, her ankle was no longer throbbing. “My ankle feels better.”

“It’s amazing what the mind and body can do when you focus your energy in a positive direction.”

The women rolled the mats up and set them on the back porch.

Liz slowly made her way to the desk and pulled out her checkbook. “How much do

you charge for one of these classes?”

“Forty dollars per person, but they’re an hour and a half long,” Eleanor said. “You got the condensed version.”

“So, a class of this length would be...”

“Maybe twenty-five bucks.”

“Sounds like a bargain.” Liz calculated the number of attendees and multiplied it by twenty-five. She finished writing the check and held it out. “This is for you.”

“I don’t want to take your money.” Eleanor shook her head. “I did it to help a friend.”

“And I appreciate it more than you know. However, you should be paid for your services. In fact, it’s probably not enough considering you gave us a private session.”

Eleanor hesitated.

“Go on,” Gloria said. “Take the check. Liz can afford it. You helped her. This is her way of saying thanks.”

“Liz is loaded,” Lucy chimed in. “I’m sure the check won’t bounce.”

“Very funny.” Liz grinned. “Please...take the check.”

Eleanor took it from her. “I’m glad I could help.”

“I’m glad you could too.”

While the women talked, Ruth settled in at the bar. “Everything is ready to roll. When

do you want to get this mission underway?"

"The sooner the better," Liz said. "I still need to come up with a plan about how I'm going to get Christi to come over here."

Gloria pointed at her sister's ankle. "You need help."

"True. I could ask for her help." Liz limped toward the window. "Is she still home?"

"Her minivan has been parked in the same spot since she almost caught us trying to sneak into her shed earlier," Gloria said.

"She's in for the long haul," Liz sighed. "I'll call her as soon as everyone is in position."

Ruth shut her laptop and slid it into her backpack. "It'll take ten minutes for us to skedaddle. It'll be another ten for me to get everything set up and the drone ready for takeoff."

"What if she spots the drone?" Liz asked.

"Hopefully, she doesn't grab a gun and shoot it down," Ruth joked. "I paid a pretty penny for that thing and I didn't buy the extended warranty."

"I'm not sure someone shooting it down would be covered under warranty," Lucy said.

"True." Ruth lifted her backpack and slid it on her shoulders. "If the drone gets damaged, I'm sure Liz will reimburse me."

"How much was it?"

“Two and some change.”

“Two hundred dollars?”

“Thousand.”

Liz made a choking sound. “You paid two thousand dollars for it?”

“Yeah, and so far I haven’t regretted my investment.” Ruth tightened the backpack’s shoulder straps. “You won’t have to worry about it getting damaged if you keep Christi inside your house and away from hers.”

Margaret reached for her car keys. “How long will Liz need to keep her here?”

“I would say half an hour,” Gloria said. “If Lucy doesn’t have too much difficulty getting us inside the storage shed.”

“Do you remember what kind of lock it had?” Lucy asked.

Gloria and Liz exchanged a glance.

“I think it was a combination lock,” Liz said. “Although I can’t be certain.”

“It was,” Gloria confirmed. “I remember thinking there was no way I would be able to figure out the combination.”

Dot tapped Lucy’s arm. “Is it doable?”

“It is, but I’ll need a strong magnet, about five inches in diameter.”

“I might have one.” Ruth told them to hang on. She hurried out of the house and

returned, waving a magnet in the air. “Will this work?”

Lucy turned it over in her hand. “Yes. I believe this will do the trick.”

“Let’s stay in communication, everyone except for Liz,” Ruth said.

“I’ll need some sort of confirmation when the coast is clear,” Liz said.

“Keep your phone handy.” Gloria patted her pocket. “I’ll send you a text when Lucy and I have cleared the area.”

“Okay.” Liz sucked in a breath. “Let me know when you’re ready for me to lure her over here.”

The women traipsed out of the house. Liz stood in the doorway, her anxiety ramping back up as the others climbed into their vehicles and drove off. What could possibly go wrong?

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“We’re ready to roll,” Ruth reported. “Get her out of the house and we’ll take it from there.”

“You said you’ll need about half an hour,” Liz said.

“Give or take a few minutes. Thirty should cover it, unless Lucy and Gloria run into trouble.”

“Thirty minutes. I’m sure I can keep her here for at least half an hour.”

“Good luck.”

“Thanks. I’m going to need it. I’ll send a group text when she’s on my doorstep.” As soon as Liz ended her call with Ruth, she dialed Christi’s number. The call went to voicemail. “Crud.”

Instead of leaving a message, she tried again. “Please answer. Please pick up,” Liz begged.

Ting...ting.

Liz was getting ready to hang up when Christi, her voice thick with sleep, answered. “Hello?”

“Hey, Christi.” Liz’s voice came out an octave too high, a sure sign she was nervous. She took a deep breath and forced a more even tone. “I hope I’m not bothering you.”

“I was taking a nap.”

“A nap? I’m so sorry,” Liz apologized. Not knowing what else to say, she said the only thing that popped into her head. “I’ll let you go.”

“It’s all right. I’m awake now.” Christi yawned loudly. “What’s up?”

“I-uh, had a small accident and was wondering if you could help me.” Liz briefly filled her in on twisting her ankle, leaving out the part about it happening on her neighbor’s property.

“In other words, you pulled a Christi,” the woman joked.

“Klutzy me. You wouldn’t happen to have an ACE bandage lying around, would you?”

“You’re asking someone who gets a black eye from falling on a pair of binoculars. What size do you need?”

“What sizes do you have?”

“Two by five, three by five and four by five. Pretty much every size available,” Christi said.

“I’m not sure. Maybe I should see them first.”

“Do you need me to bring them over?”

“If you don’t mind. I’m having a little trouble walking.”

“No problem. I’ll be over in less than five.”

Feeling a twinge of guilt over tricking her neighbor, Liz thanked her profusely, even offering to buy the wraps.

“Based on my propensity for injury, I need to hang onto them. I’ll loan them to you instead.”

“Fair enough. If I don’t answer the door, let yourself in.”

Christi promised she would, and Liz hobbled to the bar, strategically choosing a barstool that would give her an unobstructed view of the door. While she waited, she sent a group text updating the others.

Ruth replied with a yellow emoji sporting black sunglasses and a sly smile. Gloria gave her an okay sign and Lucy, being the funny girl, sent her an emoji of a man wearing a striped prison suit, a grim expression on his face as he gripped a pair of metal bars.

Very funny , Liz texted back. However, I’m not the one doing the breaking and entering.

Gloria and I are pros. We won’t be breaking, only entering.

I see her coming up the driveway. Stand by.

Liz watched her neighbor climb the porch steps, juggling a plastic grocery bag, a clear container and a Thermos. “Come in!” she hollered loudly.

The back door opened, and Christi stepped inside. “I grabbed some other stuff while I was at it.”

“Thank you.” Liz slid off the barstool and then remembered the group text. “Give me

a sec.”

Coast is clear. She hit send and set the phone on the counter before making her way across the kitchen.

Christi’s brows knitted. “You must have done a number on your ankle.”

“You have no idea.” Liz held onto the edge of the counter and carefully lifted her pant leg, revealing her swollen ankle.

“Ouch.”

“Ouch is right. I’ve been icing it, but was thinking it might help to wrap my ankle as well.”

“You called the right person.” Christi waved the bag in the air. “I’m an expert at wrapping. We’ll have you fixed up in no time.”

“Thank you for coming over here on such short notice,” Liz said. “I guess I need to buy more appropriate footwear to wear around the farm.”

“Rubber barn boots are my go to,” Christi said. “As far as treating your injury, I follow the RICE method for sprains.”

“Rice?”

“Rest, ice, compression and elevation.” Christi lifted the lid on the clear container and removed a green bag with a nasty smell.

“Gross.” Liz began gagging. “What in the world?”

“I know it smells bad.”

“Like a combination of garlic and varnish.”

“An herbal doctor, a friend of mine, swears by this stuff. To be honest, it helped immensely with inflammation in my elbow.” Christi placed the stinky green bag under the kitchen faucet, ran water over the top and carried it across the room to where Liz stood watching. “Have a seat at the bar.”

“Is the green bag dangerous?” Liz eyed the bag suspiciously. “The liquid won’t soak into my skin and poison me, will it?”

Her neighbor laughed. “I’ve used this a few times and can honestly say I had no adverse side effects other than bad breath. For some reason, it travels right up to the throat and sinuses.”

“Gross.”

“You’re so funny, Liz. Are you sure you’re cut out for farm life?”

“No. I’m not sure. In fact, there are days when I question my sanity and judgment, among other things.”

Christi directed her back to the bar area. She patiently waited while Liz moaned and groaned until finally settling into a semi-comfortable position, resting on the barstool’s back with her legs spread out across the others.

“Just try to relax.” Christi gingerly placed the bag on Liz’s ankle. “You only have to use this one time.”

“Thank goodness. The smell is triggering my gag reflexes. Am I allowed to rinse it

off?”

“You can, but you should wait at least a couple of hours, so the herbs have a chance to soak into your skin.”

“And make me stink,” Liz grumbled.

Christi lifted the bag. “You don’t have to use this. I’m only trying to help.”

“You’re right, and I am sorry for my whining. Unfortunately, I’m a big baby when it comes to being injured and uncomfortable. Actually, I’m not much fun to be around when I’m hangry, tired or overwhelmed, either.”

“In other words, Floyd has his hands full.”

“In more ways than one.” Liz motioned to her. “Please. I need help. Put the stinky stuff back on my ankle. I promise I won’t say a word.”

Christi eased the bag onto Liz’s ankle. “How is your party planning going?”

“Great. I can’t wait to have everyone over.” Liz brightened at the thought of her upcoming shindig, which was being catered by one of the most prestigious catering companies in the area. She’d also hired an event planner who was coordinating the rental of tents, chairs, purchasing decorations, even hiring a popular local band.

Her party was shaping up to be Montbay County’s event of the year, perhaps even the decade. Liz’s name would be associated with the upper echelon of West Michigan, hopefully securing invitations to equally impressive parties, many of which she planned to attend.

As far as Floyd was concerned, his whole take on the party and potentially new sets

of friends? Not so much of a fan. In fact, he couldn't care less about hosting events.

"Will Darren be coming with you to the party?"

"Yes." Christi dabbed at Liz's ankle. "He'll be gone until next weekend. After that, he'll be home until after Thanksgiving."

"I bet it's hard spending so much time alone."

Her neighbor shrugged. "I keep myself busy with birdwatching. I like to make my rounds hunting for treasures at the thrift stores. How does your ankle feel?"

Liz wiggled her toes. "Better. Wow. This stuff might actually be working."

Christi set the green concoction aside and removed several boxes of ACE bandages from the grocery bag.

"Maybe you should add holistic healing to your repertoire," Liz joked. "You could start a YouTube Channel and call it Christi's Holistic Country Care."

"I have considered creating my own site, but it would take time." Christi lined up the boxes of bandages. "I was thinking we could start with a medium-sized bandage."

"Let's give it a shot, and thanks again. You're a lifesaver."

"You're welcome. I'm happy I can help."

A fresh wave of guilt washed over Liz. Not only had she disturbed her neighbor, but she'd also borrowed her medical supplies and had her waiting on her hand and foot, literally. Meanwhile, her sister and friends were breaking into the woman's shed, searching for clues to figure out if Christi or her husband were responsible for

shooting down Keller's plane.

She silently reminded herself they needed to figure out who was behind it. If not, Floyd could very well be on the hook. Still, she felt as if she was betraying a friend...a friend who had been kind enough to help her.

"Would you like me to wrap your ankle?"

"Seriously. You don't have to. Just tell me what to do."

"Start wrapping about six inches from your foot, keeping steady pressure as you wind it around."

With Christi's direction, Liz expertly wrapped her ankle. After finishing, she swung her leg over the side of the chair and put weight on it. "It's still stinging, but not nearly as bad as before." She impulsively hugged her. "I owe you one. More than one."

"You're welcome." Christi began packing up the unused boxes of bandages. "Just remember what I said...RICE...rest, ice, compression and elevation."

"Got it." Liz limped over to the fridge. "Can I get you a cup of tea, maybe a sparkling soda?"

"Thanks. I brought my own special blend for you to try. It helps with inflammation." Christi removed two plastic cups from the bag. She set them on the counter and poured liquid from the Thermos before handing one to Liz. "Bottoms up."

Liz lifted the glass. She took a big swig and began choking. "What is this?" she wheezed.

“Baking soda and warm water to help speed up the healing process.” Christi took a sip. “It’s an acquired taste.”

Liz’s eyes watered. “Acquired taste?”

“You don’t have to drink it.” Christi blew air through thinned lips, clearly aggravated by Liz’s lack of appreciation.

“I’m sorry. I was—I wasn’t expecting to swallow baking soda.”

“I should have warned you.” Christi wrapped the green bag of stinky stuff in plastic. “I’ll get out of your hair so you can rest.”

“Hang on.” Liz set the cup on the counter. “Don’t go yet. I…have something to show you.”

“You do?”

“It’s for the party. I need a second opinion.” Liz hopped over to the desk area and eased into the chair. “I ordered several bouquets of flowers for the party and am trying to figure out if they’re too large. Let me pull them up.”

She took her time fumbling through the screen, praying Gloria and Lucy were almost done. “I know they’re here somewhere.”

“Maybe you can email me a picture.”

“I…I’m almost there.” Liz found the photos. She double-clicked on the link and up popped the exquisite bouquets, which were costing her an arm and a leg.

Christi let out a low whistle. “They’re gorgeous.” She leaned in, a small gasp

escaping her lips. “If you don’t mind me asking, how much do these cost?”

Liz rattled off the price.

“I could buy a week’s worth of groceries with what you spent.”

“They are pricey,” Liz agreed. “I’m spending more than I planned on them, but you know what they say about first impressions. Those arrangements will be the first thing guests see when they step through the front door.”

“They’re beautiful. I hope they don’t disappoint you.” Christi made a move to head out, and there was no way to stall.

Ting.

Liz nearly collapsed in relief at her cell phone’s tinging. “I need to find out who that is.”

“I’ll grab your phone for you.”

She began to feel dizzy as Christi darted across the kitchen and grabbed Liz’s phone. “Th-thanks.” She tapped the screen and almost wept with joy at the one word text. “Done.”

“Thank you, God.”

“Good news?” Christi asked.

“Yes. Very good news.”

“Let me know if you need anything else. I’m only a phone call away.” Christi waved

goodbye and stepped out of the house.

Liz placed her head on the kitchen counter and took a deep breath. “This spying and sleuthing isn’t for the faint of heart.”

Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 11:29 am

Gloria scooched in next to Ruth, who was studying the small monitor mounted on the spymobile's wall. "How's it going?"

"The drone is ready for takeoff. I'm waiting for Liz to give us the signal the coast is clear and Christi is away from her property."

"Christi and her husband have several surveillance cameras," Gloria said. "Which means we'll have to follow the same path that Liz and I took when we were over there earlier."

"How do you know they don't have cameras mounted on the shed?" Margaret asked.

"I didn't notice any, but unless Christi is monitoring them, there's a good chance she won't go back and check the footage."

"Unless she has a reason to," Rose said.

"It will be an easy in and out," Lucy said.

Ting. Gloria's cell phone chimed. She snatched it from her pocket. "Christi is at Liz's. It's time to roll."

"Wheels up." Ruth tapped the keyboard, and the treetops appeared on the monitor. Smooth as butter, the drone flew higher and higher, gliding over the dirt road. Ivan Gregware's property appeared, followed by the rut where the plane went down, the fence line and finally the Kravitz's shed.

With a steady hand, Ruth guided the drone along the perimeter of their property. “I only see Christi’s minivan. Her husband’s truck isn’t there.”

“Let’s go.” Gloria slid the spymobile’s side door open and hopped out. Lucy was close behind, keeping pace with her friend. Sticking together, the women ducked down as they jogged along the edge of the property. With a furtive glance in both directions, they crossed the road and entered Ivan Gregware’s field.

Turning right, the women reached the fence, easily climbing up and over, lightly landing on Christi’s property.

“This way.” Gloria stayed low, moving at a quick clip over the uneven ground. “Be careful. Liz tripped somewhere in this area.”

“I can see how. The field is full of ruts,” Lucy said. “I wouldn’t want to try this at night.”

“We would break our necks.” Up ahead, Gloria could see the shed. They cautiously approached from the back, stopping when they reached the door.

Lucy removed the magnet from her pocket and lifted the combination lock.

Snap. The magnet latched onto the back side, and Lucy slowly began turning the dial. First to the right and then to the left. Finally, she turned it back to the right.

Pop. The locking mechanism released and Lucy slid it out. “Works like a charm.”

“I’m curious...how does it work?”

“The magnet senses when the number is reached. You can’t hear it, but you can feel it.”

“I have an old combination lock at home. Maybe you can help me get it unlocked.” Gloria braced herself and eased the shed door open.

The upper transom window offered a faint light filtering through the grimy pane. An array of gardening tools hung from hooks on the walls. A heavy duty bench vise was mounted to the end of the workbench.

“Check this out.” Lucy tapped the top. “I haven’t seen a bench vise like this in years, only in scary movies.”

“Me either. I wonder what type of shop stuff Darren likes to do.”

Lucy tilted her head, noting the handsaw, rake, and shovel tucked away in the corner. “It looks like your everyday run-of-the-mill gardening shed.”

“Let’s get to work.” Gloria rubbed her palms together. “The clock is ticking. I’ll check the workbench drawers starting at this end.”

Splitting up, the women began systematically searching the nooks and crannies until they had checked every square inch.

“There’s nothing.” Lucy studied the ceiling. “There aren’t even any shells or casings lying around.”

“Maybe Liz’s overactive imagination thought Christi was acting suspicious.” Gloria tapped her lower lip. “Or maybe there was a rifle in here and Christi or her husband moved it.”

“Could be.” Lucy spun in a slow circle.

Gloria joined her, eyes aimed toward the ceiling. “What do you see?”

“Some old boards stacked along the rafters. We didn’t check up there.”

Gloria grabbed the ladder propped up next to the door and placed it near the center of the shed.

“I’ll check it out.” Lucy scrambled to the tippy top, her head barely above the rafter.
“Will you look at that?”

“You found a rifle.”

“Yep. Without a speck of dust on it, which means it hasn’t been up here long. Liz was onto something. Darren or Christi must’ve moved it here from somewhere else.”
Lucy held out her hand. “Give me your cell phone.”

“Why?”

“So I can see if there’s a match to the hole in the side of Keller’s plane.”

Gloria promptly handed it to her.

“Hmm.”

“Well? What’s your expert opinion?”

“The hole in Keller’s plane could have been caused by this rifle.”

“I was starting to believe Tristan Keller hired someone to take his plane down,” Liz said. “Boy, was I way off.”

Gloria curled her lip. “I smell something.”

“Like what?” Liz asked.

Her sister leaned in and sniffed. “Your breath. It smells like...”

“Varnish?”

“Yes. Or maybe varnish mingled with garlic,” Gloria said.

“It’s some concoction Christi brought over to put on my ankle.” Liz lifted her leg. “It actually helped. The stinky stuff and the compression wrap combined. She’s an expert at wrapping sprains.”

“The combination reminds me of Rose,” Ruth joked.

“I got me a few that smell,” Rose said. “Though not quite this bad.”

“Yeah, some are even worse,” Gloria teased. “You sure are living the life, Rose Morris. I smile every time I’m in the store and see your beautiful face on those bottles of energy drinks.”

“Which, by the way, it still works like a charm,” Eleanor said. “You are what I would call Belhaven’s small town superstar.”

Lucy tapped the top of her cell phone. “Back to our current situation. I snapped a picture of the weapon I believe could have been used to take Tristan Keller’s plane down.”

“Which is great news,” Dot said.

“The downside is we trespassed to find it,” Gloria reminded them.

“I’ve given it some thought,” Ruth said. “The FAA has an anonymous hotline for open cases. We call the hotline, give them the specifics and let them handle it from there.”

Liz pressed a hand to her chest. “I like the idea. If it ends up being a dead end, Christi won’t know we were involved. We’re good neighbors and I want to keep it that way.”

Ruth slipped her reading glasses on. “I have the number. Liz, it’s up to you to make the call.”

“There is something else.” Lucy hesitated.

“What is it?” Gloria asked.

“One small possible clue I found. I forgot all about it until this morning when I was washing a load of laundry. I think we need to turn it over to the federal agents.” She told the others what it was.

“You’re right,” Margaret said. “I forgot about it too. It could be nothing. There’s only one way to find out.”

“I’ll give Agent Simpkins a call. Maybe he can swing by and pick it up. In the meantime, I’m ready to make the call to the hotline.” Liz reached for the phone. “We either send the agents in the right direction or risk Floyd going to prison. Give me the number.”

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“Now’s our chance to sneak away for a quick chat.” Liz grabbed the end of her glittery gown and held it up, guiding her sister and friends away from the party and into the office at the end of the hall. “I thought you might like to know I have an update on the federal investigation.”

“Darren was picked up and is in jail,” Gloria guessed.

“There’s a twist. Remember when we found out he was in the military and some of his records were sealed?” Liz didn’t wait for a reply. “Ruth was onto something. After a heart-to-heart talk with Christi, she confided that those sealed records were medical records. It turns out he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder linked to his time in the Middle East while in the military.”

Dot’s hand flew to her mouth. “Darren heard Keller’s plane. He saw the tomatoes hitting their property and had a flashback.”

Ruth picked up. “He thought they were being attacked and shot at the plane.”

“It all makes perfect sense, doesn’t it?” Liz asked.

“Another case solved.” Gloria dusted her hands.

“Not quite.” Liz pointed to Lucy.

“What does this have to do with Lucy?”

“The shell casing. The one Lucy found in the field and gave to me to turn over to

Agent Simpkins. It was from a gun belonging to Ivan Gregware, and a perfect match to the bullet that struck Keller's plane. Darren wasn't behind the shooting."

"But..." Dot blinked rapidly. "All the clues pointed to Darren. How Christi lied and told you he wasn't home when the plane went down, yet you saw on the surveillance he was home and in his yard at the time of the shooting."

"Looking back, I think Christi wasn't sure if her husband was behind it and was covering for him," Liz said. "When the FAA showed Gregware they had a perfect match for the shell casing Lucy found in his field, he confessed. My thought is that morning we ran into him, he'd gone back to try to find it."

"But by then, it was in Lucy's pocket," Margaret said.

Ruth let out a low whistle. "Wow. Timing is everything. Half an hour later and Ivan Gregware might have found the casing."

"And Darren would be in jail for a crime he didn't commit," Dot said. "What about the tomatoes? You said they smelled funny."

"They were tested and investigators couldn't find anything in them," Liz said.

"I hope Keller's not off the hook," Ruth said.

"No, he's not. In fact, he's facing charges of aggravated stalking with the plane as a weapon. Floyd seems to think he's going to be forking over some big bucks for a fine and will be required to do community service."

"Community service like picking up trash?" Gloria joked.

"How appropriate. He was out trashing people's property and now he's going to have to pick it up," Margaret said. "I hope they throw the book at him."

Liz snapped her fingers. “There’s one more thing. They’re pulling his pilot’s license. He’s no longer allowed to fly.”

“Yay!” Dot clapped her hands. “It looks as if the Garden Girls have one more mystery for the books.”

“Our home is once again quiet and peaceful,” Liz said. “Thank you for everything, for getting the ball rolling by skydiving with Vlad, for Ruth bringing her high-tech drone over to monitor Christi’s place while Lucy and Gloria sneaked into her shed, even though the gun you found wasn’t the one that fired the shot.”

“Not to mention Ruth’s metal detector,” Lucy reminded them.

“And you finding the shell casing. It was a team effort.” Gloria lifted her hand. “High five. The Garden Girls get their guy.”

The women slapped palms.

“I’m only sorry I wasn’t a part of this one.” Andrea rubbed the sides of her arms. “Those twins keep me hopping. There are days I don’t know if I’m coming or going.”

“Enjoy every second.” Gloria patted her arm. “They’ll be grown up in the blink of an eye and you’ll wonder where those years went.”

“Absolutely,” Lucy agreed. “Daisy Marie and Trace will be starting school soon and then the time will really fly by.”

“Brian and I are making memories,” Andrea said. “But maybe next time, I can help in some other way.”

“You know it.” Gloria glanced at her watch. “I’m sure Paul is wondering where we sneaked off to. We should get back to the party.”

“Not yet.” Liz limped behind the desk and removed a large gift bag. She set the bag on the desk and pulled out a small stack of envelopes, handing one to each of the women. “This is a token of our appreciation for helping us.”

“What is it?” Rose asked.

“You’ll have to open it to find out.”

Gloria flipped the flap and removed a Majestic Cruise Lines gift card. “A gift card?”

“For a cruise on board Millie’s ship. I think it would be fun to hit the high seas. What better way to celebrate than on a vacation?”

“What about spouses and significant others?” Ruth asked. “I’ll be cruising solo.”

“Floyd and I talked about it. He thinks we should book another one sometime down the road. This one would be just us women.”

“Count me in,” Dot said. “It’s going to take some planning.”

“The gift card doesn’t expire, so we have plenty of time to figure out when,” Liz said. “There is something else...something equally important. After all these years, I figured each of you deserved some official recognition.”

“Recognition?” Gloria echoed.

“There’s no denying you gals know your stuff. I can’t think of a single crime you’ve come across you haven’t been able to solve,” Liz said. “Which makes you not only senior sleuths but also catapults you to the top of your field.”

“Well.” Lucy's eyes twinkled mischievously. “We are pretty awesome, if I do say so myself.”

“Which is why I have these.” Liz reached into the bag and removed a shiny black box with a bright red ribbon tied around the outside. “There’s one for each of you. Don’t open them until everyone has theirs.”

She handed one to Gloria, Dot, Lucy, Margaret, Ruth, Rose and Andrea. “It’s a small token of Floyd’s and my appreciation.”

“You didn’t have to give me one,” Andrea said.

“You deserve it as much as the others,” Liz said. “You’ve been up to your eyeballs in more than your share of mysteries, thanks to my sister.”

“She’s right. You’ve been in the trenches with the rest of us.” Gloria playfully shook the box. “What is it? A Cartier bracelet?”

“No. Nothing that fancy. I can’t picture Lucy or Ruth wearing an expensive piece of jewelry.”

“I would much rather add accessories to the spymobile. It would be money better spent.”

“This isn’t for the spymobile, but it will look impressive sitting on your desk.” Beaming, Liz tucked her hands behind her back. “Go ahead and open them.”

Gloria untied the ribbon and removed the box’s lid. Inside was a pink-handled spyglass, sitting at an angle and resting on a black granite base. She squinted her eyes, struggling to read the inscription etched on it:

The GOATS Award. Greatest of all Time Sleuth. Presented to Gloria Kennedy for her outstanding senior sleuthing skills, keeping Montbay County and the Town of Belhaven safe.

“Goats,” Lucy laughed.

“You know the saying. Greatest of all time,” Liz said. “You are all GOATS.”

“I love it.” Dot carefully removed her spyglass and held it up to the light. “It’s perfect. Finally, after all these years, we’ve been recognized for our contribution in keeping the streets safe.”

“You know it.” Lucy held hers up.

Liz waved her cell phone in the air. “Gather around by the bookcase. I want to take a group photo so I can run off copies and frame one for each of you.”

The Garden Girls gathered in front of Liz’s bookcase, all beaming and holding up their special award, smiles on their faces as they drew close to one another.

Gloria could feel tears burn the back of her eyes...surrounded by the best friends she could have ever asked for. The Garden Girls in their Golden Years living their best lives. Who could ask for more?

The end.