



Tenant and Trouble (Lack of Luxury Cozy Mystery #2)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Liz Rasmussen is up to her eyeballs in renovations at the dilapidated farmhouse that her new husband Floyd, surprised her with shortly after they eloped. A self-described Park Avenue kinda gal, the farm scene is taking a bit of adjusting for poor Liz, which might just be an understatement.

Echo Quigley, an employee of Rasmussen Farms, and now a tenant of Liz and Floyd's, along with her pup, Teddy, have also begun settling in.

Disturbing incidents start to take place and Liz initially believes her nosy neighbor, Christi Kravitz, is behind them until a stranger shows up on the couple's doorstep, demanding to see Echo. Hours later, the stranger is found badly beaten and in a coma, while Echo swears she has no idea who the stranger is.

Horrified that she's made a huge mistake in allowing Echo to rent out the farm's mobile home, Liz enlists the help of the Garden Girls to get to the bottom of it. Their investigation turns up shocking information about Echo, which explains why she moved to West Michigan with no job and little money in her pocket.

Sleeping with one eye open is Liz's only option as she and the Garden Girls try to unravel Echo's troubling past and figure out if she and Floyd have a tenant in trouble or a tenant who is trouble.

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“Should I stick with the classic luxury look?” Liz lowered the gold faucet in her right hand and lifted the one in her left. “Or go with this one? I absolutely adore the hand-cut French crystal knobs.”

Her sister Gloria gave them a once-over. “What’s the cost difference?”

“Cost doesn’t matter. Beauty, style, and elegance are what I’m after.” Liz turned up her nose. “Floyd told me to pick the one that makes me happy. ”

“It sounds as if you’re going with the French crystal,” Gloria said. “It’s pretty. Will it match the sinks and counters?”

Liz shot Margaret and Lucy, the owners of Hip Chick House Flips , a questioning look. “Have we discussed the master bath sinks and counters?”

“At length.” Lucy tapped her iPad screen and flipped it around so Liz could see. “You chose the mahogany cabinets with cobalt blue double sinks, which is how you found the blue crystal knobs to begin with.”

“Right. Right.” Liz set the gold faucet on the card table and dusted her hands. “I’ve made my decision. One can never go wrong with French crystal.”

“We’ll have even more samples tomorrow,” Lucy promised.

“You need to be here to help.” Liz tapped her sister’s arm. “You have the farmhouse chic down pat and I need your input. ”

A horn honked, and Liz hustled to the door, watching as Dot's Hot Meals on Wheels van pulled into the driveway. Dot, along with friend Eleanor Whittaker, climbed out.

"Lunch has arrived." Liz caught up with them in the driveway. "You're right on time. I'm starving. All this picking out faucets and cabinets has worked up an appetite."

"I'm sure it's hard work." Dot slid the awning up. "I have some bad news. I ran out of time and didn't make the pumpkin cheddar strata or the fig salad. We'll have to settle for chicken with smoked gouda quiche and strawberry walnut vinaigrette salad."

"No worries. I know I was asking for a bit much." Liz's eyes slid along the stainless steel counter. "Were you able to get the cheesecake bites?"

Dot gave a thumbs up. "Yes, and they're delish."

Eleanor grabbed an apron off the hook and slipped it over her head. "We just left a new meal drop spot over on the other side of Green Springs. Delivering food to the homeless is the most satisfying yet humbling experience. I think everyone should volunteer at least once."

The Garden Girls trekked out of the farmhouse and assembled near the open counter while Liz pulled Dot aside. She reached into her front pocket and handed her a check. "Thank you for catering lunch. This is for you and Ray."

Dot glanced at the amount and started shaking her head. "I can't accept this. It's too much." She attempted to return it.

Liz gently pushed her hand away. "You can and you will. Those mineral rights checks keep rolling in. I could wrap a layer of solid gold around the outside of this house and not bat an eye. Please let us help."

Dot stared at the check. “You have no idea how far this will go. Thank you, Liz.” She hugged her friend. “This will easily cover our expenses until the end of the year and now I won’t have to worry about fundraisers. ”

“I’m glad you brought that up. Floyd and I are interested in hosting one here. He knows tons of local business owners who would love to help you.”

“I don’t know how to thank you.” Dot blinked back the sudden tears as she thanked God for answering her prayers. Earlier that morning, she and Ray had gone over their expenses and discovered they were short on funds, forcing them to eliminate two lunch meals per week.

Floyd and Liz’s generous donation meant not only would Dot’s Hot Meals on Wheels not have to cut back, but they could also add the new location, this one filled with people affected by the economic downturn. The new group consisted of locals who were barely scraping by, having to choose between buying groceries or paying the rent. It was an “either-or” situation for many of them.

“You’re helping people, giving them hope and sharing your faith in God,” Liz said. “Floyd and I both agreed to add you to our regular rotation of donations. As long as you operate your food truck, we’ll be here to help.”

“You’re an answer to prayers.” Dot pressed a hand to her chest. “Thank you from the bottom of my heart.”

“Hey!” Gloria wandered over and playfully nudged her sister’s arm. “I thought you were starving.”

“Liz gave us this.” Dot waved the check in the air. “Remember how I said we were falling short on funds? Liz and Floyd just took care of that and then some.”

“And I told Dot that Floyd and I would love to host a fundraiser as soon as we’re able,” Liz added.

“That’s wonderful.” Gloria clapped her hands. “God’s timing is perfect.”

“Yes, it is.” Liz patted her stomach. “The quiche and salad are calling my name. ”

The women filled their plates with food and settled in at the nearby picnic tables, chatting about the chateau’s progress and savoring the picture-perfect summer day.

Gloria went back for seconds and squeezed in next to her sister. “I sent you a link to forward to Echo. It was a job application for the Montbay County Sheriff’s Department. Did you get it?”

“Yeah. I sent it to her. I don’t know if she’s done anything with it yet.” Echo Quigley, Liz and Floyd’s new tenant, who was also a former evidence technician, was interested in a job working for the county and now that she had a permanent address, Liz thought she would help by putting in a good word with Sheriff Joe Nelson.

“She’s dragging her feet?” Gloria sawed off a chunk of quiche and popped it into her mouth.

“Maybe, unless she never got it. I’ll have to check. ”

The other friends who were listening in, threw out theories about why Echo no longer seemed gung ho to apply for a position which suited her perfectly.

Liz savored her last tasty morsel and reached for her napkin. “I suppose it’s none of my business. Maybe she’s changed her mind and would rather continue working at the family farm.”

“We have company.” Dot shaded her eyes and motioned to a work van that was turning into the driveway.

“Is it one of the construction workers?” Liz asked.

“No.” Lucy shook her head. “I don’t have anyone on the calendar for today.”

A man wearing a ball cap, worn jeans and a faded t-shirt emerged.

“I’ll see who it is.” Liz slid off the bench and strode across the driveway, catching up with the man near the front of his van. “Hello. ”

“Hello. Is this the Rasmussen property?”

“It is. We’re not expecting workers until tomorrow.”

“I’m not here to work.” The man shoved his hands in his pockets. “I’m looking for Echo Quigley.”

“Echo isn’t here.” Liz’s scalp started tingling as an internal warning bell sounded. “She doesn’t live here.” Which was technically the truth. Echo lived in the mobile home near the edge of the property.

Liz shifted her gaze, forcing her eyes away from the long scar running from the corner of the man’s mouth to the center of his chin.

“Do you know where I can find her?”

Liz answered his question with one of her own. “Can I give her a message?”

“No. That won’t be necessary.” The man took a step back, his eyes shifting from her

to studying the house...the RV, her friends seated at the picnic table. In other words, he was casing the joint. "Thank you..."

The man was fishing for her name, which made no sense considering the fact he already knew the property owner's last name.

"You're welcome." Liz warily watched as he returned to his van. He backed out of the driveway and slowly drove off.

She released the breath she was holding, wondering why he backed all the way out instead of turning around, and then it hit her. His license plate. The man was making sure she couldn't read his license plate.

"Who was that?" Liz turned to find Margaret standing directly behind her.

"Someone who was looking for Echo." Liz rubbed the sides of her arms.

Gloria joined them. "I take it he wasn't one of the workers. "

"Nope. He was looking for Echo. He was giving me a bad feeling, so I let him think she doesn't live here," Liz said.

"I could tell by the way you were talking something was up. I took a picture of him with my cell phone." Gloria patted her pocket. "I'll forward it to you, just in case."

"That's probably not a bad idea. Thanks."

Lunch ended, and Lucy was the last to leave, only moments before Echo arrived home. Liz had been watching for her and flagged her down in the driveway. "Gloria was here earlier and reminded me she'd sent the application for the evidence technician job opening. I forwarded it to you and wanted to make sure you got it."

“I did. It must’ve slipped my mind. Thanks, Liz.”

“A man showed up here a little while ago looking for you.”

Echo frowned. “Was it someone from the farm? ”

“I don’t think so. I didn’t recognize him and he didn’t give me his name.” Liz started to mention the guy was giving off bad vibes but held back, not wanting to scare the young woman.

Echo cast a wary glance toward the road. “What did he look like?”

Liz described him. “He was driving an old white work van.”

“I have no idea who he was. I...uh...forgot I left something over at the farm.” Echo hurriedly ended the conversation and hopped back into her car, tearing off down the driveway.

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Echo sped off, nearly colliding with Floyd's pickup truck as he was pulling in. He slid out of the driver's seat, scratching his head with a puzzled expression on his face. "Echo was in a hurry."

"To either get away from here or try to find the guy who showed up on our doorstep looking for her."

"Someone came all the way out here looking for Echo? Was it one of the farm's employees?"

"I don't think so. Gloria took a picture of him." Liz pulled up the picture her sister had texted to her and handed her husband the phone.

Floyd studied the photo. "Never seen him before in my life. I'm gonna go get cleaned up." He gave his wife a quick kiss and headed inside the RV to shower. He was gone a long time and Liz finally went inside to check on him. She found him standing near the rear window, the one overlooking the cornfield. "What are you doing?"

"Wondering what happened." Floyd pointed to the window and what appeared to be pry marks. "Did you lock yourself out and try to get in through the window?"

"No. Maybe it was like that when you brought this beauty home," she joked.

Floyd picked at the pry mark with the tip of his fingernail. "The dealer and I conducted a thorough walk-through of the unit. This window wasn't damaged when I took it off the lot."

Liz shifted her gaze to her nosy neighbor's house directly across from them. "Christi spends a lot of time wandering around our property. Maybe she knows something about it." She exited the RV and crossed the road.

The echo of jazz music wafted through her neighbor's open windows. "Dun, dun, dun, dunna. "

Liz rapped loudly on the front door.

The singing grew louder. "...to find the one who meant the most to me. How could you think it was a mystery?" The pitch leveled up an octave, and Liz winced.

She clutched her fists and pounded, this time using both hands. "Is anyone home?"

The singing stopped. Hurried, muffled steps ensued. The door flew open and Christi appeared. "Oh. Hello, Liz."

"Hello, Christi. I'm sorry to bother you. Floyd and I just noticed pry marks on the corner of one of our RV's windows."

Her neighbor's eyes grew round as saucers. "Someone tried breaking into your camper?"

"It appears so, and since you have a bird's-eye view of the house and our RV, I thought perhaps you may have noticed something. "

Christi cast a concerned look over Liz's shoulder. "I haven't, but we can check my cameras."

"If you don't mind."

“We’ll look right now.” Christi motioned Liz inside. “I’m cleaning house. Don’t mind the mess.”

Liz followed her neighbor down the narrow hall, casually gazing to her left into the living room. She slowed, doing a double take when she spotted a trio of telescopes in front of the window, all facing out.

“Those are my telescopes. They’re great for birdwatching.”

“And spying on your neighbor,” Liz whispered under her breath.

“As I mentioned before, my husband Darren travels a lot. You can never be too careful.”

“I suppose that’s true.” Liz continued following the woman down the hall to a room near the back.

“It’s a little cozy in here.” Christi slid a folding chair against the wall and squeezed in behind a desk filled with electrical equipment. A soft hum was accompanied by an array of blinking lights.

Liz said the first thing that popped into her head. “You wouldn’t happen to be related to Ruth Carpenter, would you?”

“Ruth Carpenter?”

“Ruth recently retired from her position as Belhaven’s postmaster. She’s the queen of surveillance.”

“I remember her. She worked at the post office for many years. I don’t recall us ever discussing surveillance stuff.” Christi adjusted the computer monitor and tapped the

keyboard. A grainy image of her front yard appeared.

Liz leaned in. “I bet you don’t miss much between this and your telescopes.”

“My telescopes are for birdwatching.” Christi clicked on the sidebar and switched screens. “Do you have any idea how long the window has been like that? ”

“Nope.”

“Perhaps it was damaged before you brought it home.”

“Floyd and the dealer did a walk-through before he took it off the lot. He said it wasn’t there when he picked it up.”

“I see.” Christi began humming under her breath as she flipped from screen to screen and Liz got the distinct impression the woman had done it many times...on a daily basis even.

She clicked back and forth at lightning speed. Liz started to feel queasy and looked away. Her eyes were drawn to a framed photo of her neighbor. It was a newspaper clipping with a caption beneath it.

Local woman organizes Montbay County neighborhood watch and catches the red kettle bandit on the first day.

The story went on to say Christi had enlisted the help of a small army of volunteers to monitor the Salvation Army’s kettle after a string of thefts .

Christi popped out of her chair. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“I...yes. Are you still in charge of the neighborhood watch?”

“I am.” Christi straightened her shoulders. “We don’t meet often, only once a month. Are you interested in joining?”

“No.” Liz cut her off and promptly apologized. “I’m sorry. I’m busy with the renovations. I don’t think I could fit it into my schedule right now.”

“My cameras didn’t catch anything,” Christi said.

Liz followed her neighbor out of the house and to the front porch. “Thank you. I appreciate you taking the time to check for me.”

She headed home and found Floyd checking the RV’s exterior. “Christi’s twenty cameras didn’t catch anyone.”

“Twenty cameras?” Floyd lifted a brow .

“Twenty might be an exaggeration, but there were at least five for sure.”

“I found some prints.” Floyd showed Liz a set of footprints directly below the damaged window frame.

“Maybe it was someone Lucy and Margaret had come out here to quote one of our projects.”

“I reckon they could’ve been looking for a porta potty. We have one delivering first thing in the morning.”

Liz curled her lip. “You ordered a temporary toilet?”

“We can’t have the workers tinkling in the weeds,” Floyd joked.

Liz's eyes widened in horror. "I never gave it a thought."

"It will be here tomorrow. I figured we could put it over by the corncrib, away from the house and RV. "

"Yes. Yes, that would be an appropriate location."

Floyd pointed out that the tracks stopped near each window. "Someone was looking inside here. Are you still keeping an eye on the place with the hairy scary rabbit you bought from Ruth?"

"It's out of season, so I put it away." Liz had given up on monitoring the app and placed Sunny the Easter bunny in the hall closet. "Ruth's still working on the surveillance wagon I ordered. She's having trouble getting parts."

"It's possible someone's casing the joint, looking to steal building materials. We'll have to keep our eyes and ears open and a handgun nearby." Floyd headed to the barn while Liz returned to the house to jot down additional notes about the home's renovations.

Despite Lucy and Margaret's assurance the project wouldn't drag out, Liz was concerned her dream home wouldn't be ready in time for her to host the Christmas gala she envisioned .

Wintering in an RV wasn't something she was looking forward to. Forced to prioritize, she was pushing to have the master suite completed before the first snowflake hit the ground.

The door slammed, and Floyd appeared. "I'm running over to the farm. Do you need anything?"

“I’m good.”

Floyd promised he wouldn’t be long and Liz headed back to the RV to start dinner. She assembled grilled cheese sandwiches, something she was confident she could handle, and placed them in the heated frying pan.

Duchess, her small pup, circled Liz’s feet and let out a low whine.

“Do you need to go out?” She turned the gas burner on low and followed the pup down the steps.

They meandered to the side yard and inspected the flower bed, which is where they were when Floyd returned.

Beep. Beep. The smoke alarm, coming from the direction of the RV, blared loudly.

“Crud!” Liz flew down the driveway and ran inside. She snatched the frying pan from the burner and ran back out.

Floyd caught up with her. “What is that?”

“What was it,” Liz corrected. “It was dinner. Our grilled cheese sandwiches are burnt toast.”

“They might be salvageable.” Using the tips of his fingers, Floyd plucked the sandwich from the pan and tapped the top. “I think we can scrape this off. What happened?”

“I forgot about them.” Liz glumly eyed the charred sandwiches. “I guess it’s frozen dinners for us again. I’m a terrible cook.”

“At least you tried.” Floyd took a tentative bite. A charred chunk fell to the ground.

Duchess scampered over. She took one whiff, turned her nose up, and trotted off .

“Even Duchess won’t touch it.”

Back inside, Floyd opened the windows to air it out while Liz grabbed the frozen meals from the freezer.

Echo’s car appeared. She tooted the horn, but didn’t slow as she continued driving toward her place.

“How is she doing at the farm?” Liz asked.

“She’s a hard worker. Echo got a tad upset when I told her I couldn’t keep paying her under the table and was planning on putting her on the payroll.”

“Really?”

“I told her it would help build her credit, but she didn’t seem to care.”

“I was hoping she would show more interest in getting her foot in the door at the sheriff’s department. It’s almost as if she doesn’t want a steady job or paycheck. ”

“She might be content working at the farm, but she will have to go on the payroll.”

The couple finished warming their food and settled in to watch television while they ate. Liz flipped through the channels and stopped when she found the local evening news.

A headline flashed across the top of the screen, and a local reporter appeared.

“Montbay County Sheriff’s Department is investigating the vicious attack of a man who was found steps away from the Lake Terrace public boat ramp. We have a reporter on his way to the scene and will update you as soon as we have more information.”

A picture of a van flashed on the screen and Liz nearly hit the floor.

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“What’s wrong, sugar lips?” Floyd waved a hand in front of Liz’s face.

“The van. It belongs to the guy who came by here earlier, looking for Echo.” Liz grabbed her laptop and pulled up the website for the Channel 5 local news. His attack was the headline story, and a disturbing tidbit not included in the television report was revealed. “He has a criminal history.”

“Mercy me.” Floyd joined her. “You don’t think Echo had anything to do with what happened to him, do you?”

“I...don’t know what to think. She said she didn’t know who he was but took off right after I told her about him, claiming she forgot something at the farm.”

Floyd scratched his forehead. “You sure she said she was going to the farm?”

“Positive. Why?”

“I know for a fact she clocked out and never came back because Audrey mentioned her leaving early and not returning.”

Liz cast a wary glance out the window toward their tenant’s mobile home. “Something fishy is going on. Think about it. Echo doesn’t want you to put her on the payroll. She moved to the area with no job and no place to live. What if she ran away from something?”

“Or someone,” Floyd said.

“There’s only one way to find out.” Determined to get to the bottom of who the injured stranger was and why Echo lied about having forgotten something, Liz strode out of the RV and down the driveway.

Floyd caught up with her. “Hang on. We can’t just march over there demanding answers and putting her on the defensive. She could be completely innocent.”

“You saw the news report,” Liz said. “The man was a convicted felon, recently released from prison. He tracked Echo here for a reason.”

“You have a valid concern, but let’s be careful about how we question her.”

“I’ll tone it down.” Liz crossed the wooden deck and gave their tenant’s front door a light rap.

Teddy, Echo’s pup, began barking.

The door opened, and Echo appeared. “Hello, Liz, Floyd.”

“Hello, Echo. We hope we’re not bothering you. Do you have a minute?” Liz asked.

“Sure.” She opened the door wider. “Would you like to come in?”

“Thanks.” Liz, with Floyd close behind, made their way inside. “Have you seen the evening news? ”

“No. I don’t watch a lot of television. There aren’t any decent shows on and the news is depressing. I would much rather read.”

“It certainly can be,” Liz agreed. “Do you remember when I told you a man was here looking for you earlier?”

“Yes. You said he was driving a white work van. Other than my co-workers, I haven’t given anyone my address or told them where I lived. I don’t know who the guy was.”

“The reason I’m bringing it up again is because someone attacked him over by Lake Terrace’s public boat ramp.”

Echo’s jaw dropped. “Somebody beat up the guy who was here looking for me?”

“Yes and, according to the news report, he was recently released from prison.”

The color drained from Echo’s face. “Is he...is he dead? ”

“They didn’t say he was dead, just that he was found badly beaten.” Liz pulled up the picture Gloria had sent her and showed it to Echo. “This is the guy.”

Echo studied it. “I’ve never seen him before in my life. What’s his name?”

“I don’t know. They haven’t released it yet.”

“I can make a quick call to a buddy who works at the television station and find out.” Floyd stepped out onto the deck, cell phone in hand. He returned moments later. “His name is Mick Grotto.”

“Mick Grotto,” Echo repeated. “The name doesn’t ring a bell.”

“You can’t think of anyone, maybe someone from Detroit who had any reason to come looking for you?” Liz asked.

“No. I mean, we handled a lot of criminal cases where I worked, but none in particular comes to mind.” Echo reassured them again, seeming genuinely puzzled

and equally concerned by the news.

Floyd and Liz thanked her, warning her to keep her doors locked and headed home.

Liz waited until they were out of earshot. “Well? What do you think?”

“She looked mighty surprised. I don’t see any reason for her to lie about knowing him.”

“Except for the minor incident when she took off, telling me she forgot something at the farm but never went back there,” Liz reminded him.

“And the fact she doesn’t want to be put on the payroll.” Floyd stifled a yawn. “It’s been one of those days. I wouldn’t mind heading to bed.”

Floyd was already asleep by the time Liz joined him. She tossed and turned as fragments of her conversation with Echo ran through her head.

Their tenant appeared honest and straightforward. There was no reason not to take what she said at face value. But someone, a former convict, had been looking for her and that person had been viciously attacked, but by who and why?

Floyd left early the next morning and Liz headed over to the house. With the main floor demolition complete, it was time for the workers to begin putting the pieces back together.

Lucy and Margaret, who were officially in charge of the chateau / farmhouse renovations, arrived promptly at nine.

The trio toured the lower level, going over the updates one final time. The roar of a loud engine echoed, and Liz stepped over to the window. She watched as a flatbed

truck with John's Johns emblazoned on the driver's side door jostled along the driveway.

"Check it out." Lucy playfully elbowed Margaret. "Liz and Floyd ordered you your own toilet."

"Very funny." Margaret scowled. "I am not using a porta potty. "

"It's for the construction workers," Liz said. "I would never expect you to use a portable toilet."

"Margaret doesn't mind," Lucy laughed. "She's the queen of outhouses."

"Enough." Margaret made a slicing motion across her neck. "You're never going to let me live down our Christmas crisis."

"Never." Lucy grinned. "I'm sorry. I couldn't help but have a little fun."

The truck rolled to a stop. A man hopped out and began lowering the bed, right next to Liz's SUV.

She flew out of the house, waving her arms. "Stop! Don't unload it yet! That's not the spot!"

"Where do you want it?"

"Over here." Liz jogged to the corncrib.

"It looks pretty muddy. I don't wanna get my truck stuck."

"You won't. I promise. "

With a little persuasion, the man reluctantly unloaded the green and white porta potty next to the corncrib. Liz signed off on the delivery and returned inside. “What was so hard about unloading the toilet away from the house?”

She finished going over the planned work with Lucy and Margaret and discovered she’d misplaced her cell phone. Liz tracked it down inside the RV and noticed that she’d missed a call from Gloria.

She promptly called her back. “Sorry I missed your call.”

“I have some errands to run, and figured I would swing by if you’re going to be around.”

“I’m here with Lucy and Margaret. We’re waiting for the workers.”

“Workers meaning you’re one step closer to moving in.”

“I need to be a hundred steps closer. ”

Duchess pawed at Liz’s leg and trotted to the door. She could see her neighbor making her way across the driveway. “Christi’s on her way over. I gotta go.”

“See you soon.”

Liz scooped her pup up and meandered down the driveway. “Good morning.”

“Good morning, Liz. It looks like you’re moving full steam ahead with renovations.”

“As quickly as possible.”

“Are you doing a full renovation or just fixing up here and there?”

“We gutted the place...walls, floors, cabinets, fixtures, you name it.”

“That’s gonna cost a pretty penny,” Christi said. “The reason I’m here is I was wondering if you caught this morning’s local news.”

“No. Why? ”

Christi told her about the man, Mick Grotto, being hospitalized. “I recognized the man’s van.”

Liz’s heart skipped a beat, and she knew exactly where their conversation was headed.

“He was here yesterday.”

“He was,” Liz confirmed.

Her neighbor’s eyes widened. “Did you know him?”

“No.”

“Was he lost and looking for directions?”

“Uh-uh.”

“Floyd knows him.”

“Nope.”

Frustrated, Christi stomped her foot. “You didn’t know him. Floyd didn’t know him. He wasn’t lost.”

“He was looking for Echo.”

“Your new tenant? ”

“Yes.”

“So your tenant knew him.”

“No, at least she said she didn’t know who he was,” Liz said.

“It doesn’t make sense. Why would a stranger show up on your doorstep looking for your tenant and yet she claims she doesn’t know who he was?”

“That’s an excellent question and one I can’t answer.”

“You’re not having very good luck,” Christi said. “First, Deanna Andretti dies and now this guy.”

“I knew Deanna. I have no idea who this guy is.”

“He had a criminal background. Something about insider trading and blackmailing powerful people.” Christi shuddered. “This concerns me. The criminal element has infiltrated our peaceful little community.”

“One can never be too careful,” Liz said .

“Which is why we installed cameras. I feel somewhat safer knowing I can keep an eye on what’s going on. Hopefully, Mr. Grotto didn’t bring any of his fellow criminals here with him from Detroit.”

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Liz clutched her throat. “Did you say the guy who was attacked was from Detroit?”

“Yeah. He lived somewhere over in the Shoreline Heights area. I’m not familiar with Detroit, so I looked it up. It’s in a rough part of town. He’s in a coma and was transferred from Green Springs Memorial Hospital to somewhere in Grand Rapids.”

Liz struggled to process what Christi was telling her. Echo was from Detroit and so was Mick Grotto. Were they inadvertently harboring a criminal or a former criminal?

She quickly excused herself, telling her neighbor she needed to chat with her contractors. Liz texted Floyd as soon as she was alone .

Did you run a background check on Echo before you hired her?

His reply was quick and concerning. No. Why?

Because Mick Grotto is from the Detroit area , Liz texted back.

Floyd didn’t reply, and Liz could only imagine what was running through his mind. Had the couple unintentionally invited a tenant who was trouble to live on their property?

Liz paced back and forth, her mind whirling.

She had reached a near state of panic by the time Gloria arrived. “The man who was looking for Echo was an ex-convict. He was attacked over by the Lake Terrace public boat ramp. He’s from Detroit and Echo is insisting she has no clue who the guy is.”

“Something isn’t adding up,” Gloria said.

“No, it’s not. ”

Lucy appeared. “Hey, Gloria. You’re out and about early.”

“I had some errands to run.” Gloria motioned to a worker who was tossing chunks of old linoleum into the dumpster. “Out with the old. In with the new.”

“We’re kicking this project into high gear.” Lucy led them around to the side and into the kitchen. “Imagine...forty-two-inch mission white cabinets, custom quartz countertops, a center island with barstool seating for six, cabinet lighting, a white farmhouse sink with gold fixtures.”

“I can’t wait,” Liz said. “Are you sure the main floor will be ready before the snow flies?”

Lucy rolled her eyes. “You ask me that every day and the answer will always be the same...yes. It might not be one hundred percent complete, but you’ll be as snug as a bug in a rug and out of the camper by winter. ”

“I hate to keep harping on it, but the RV is so small. I can’t cook a decent meal in that tiny kitchen.”

“You can’t cook a decent meal in a gourmet kitchen,” Gloria teased.

“That’s why you hire a chef.” Liz pursed her lips. “Anyway, this entire project has me completely discombobulated.”

“I know and I appreciate your patience,” Lucy said.

They circled through the living room, formal dining room, and then the main floor master suite. Liz trusted her friends to keep their word and Lucy seemed confident, but it was such a massive project. She couldn't even begin to contemplate how much time, not to mention amount of money the second floor would require.

After wrapping up the tour, Lucy and Margaret headed out to meet with the project's supervisor while Gloria accompanied her sister to the RV .

She stepped inside and made a gagging sound. "What is that smell?"

"Burnt grilled cheese sandwiches. It smells better than it did last night." Liz's shoulders slumped. "It's been a tough week. What if Echo is lying?"

"It's possible. The guy knew her name, knew how to find her. He's from Detroit, which is where she came from, but why lie?"

"I don't know. She's been making excuses and is against Floyd adding her to the company's permanent payroll. Echo no longer seems interested in applying for a job with the sheriff's department."

"How well do you know her?" Gloria asked.

"About as well as you. And..." Liz's voice trailed off.

"And what?"

"Floyd never ran a background check on her. "

Gloria let out a low whistle. "Not good."

"What do you think the odds are that the cops will show up on my doorstep again?"

“Fair to most likely.”

“Maybe this place is jinxed.” Liz sucked in a breath. “First Deanna Andretti and now this guy.”

“He’s not dead. There’s a chance he’ll recover.”

“Christi told me they transferred him to a larger hospital in Grand Rapids, which means he’s in rough shape.”

Gloria pulled her cell phone from her purse and turned it on.

“What are you doing?”

“Texting Ruth.” Gloria grew quiet as she tapped the screen.

Ping.

“She wants to know if you want her to do a little intel on your tenant. ”

“Yes. Please. I hate to snoop into Echo’s background, but none of this is adding up.”

Ruth, with a little help from some high-tech software given to her by a close colleague who headed NASCA, the North American Surveillance and Communications Association, was a whiz at digging around.

If Echo was hiding something, Ruth and her super snoop sleuthing software would find it. The only problem was, Liz wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

Gloria finished forwarding Echo’s information. “She’ll have something within the hour.” She placed her phone inside her purse and reached for the door handle. “Let’s

take a walk.”

“I hate exercise,” Liz grumbled.

“You do not.” Gloria chuckled. “C’mon. Some fresh air will do you good.”

“I need to swing by Echo’s place and check on Teddy.” Liz grabbed a set of keys on her way out and stopped by the door to swap out her designer shoes for barn boots.

“Those are adorable.”

Liz turned her ankle. “And nearly indestructible, although I think they were designed with a five-year-old in mind.”

“Clucking chickens are perfectly appropriate.” Gloria slipped her arm through Liz’s as the sisters meandered down the long drive. “You mentioned Christi earlier. How is your neighbor?”

“As nosy as she was the day we met her. I stopped by her place yesterday after you and the others left to find out if she noticed anything. You should see her surveillance setup.”

“Noticed anything?” Gloria interrupted.

“There are pry marks on our RV’s window. Floyd swears they weren’t there when he picked it up. He and the dealer went over everything. ”

“It could be he somehow missed it,” Gloria pointed out.

“True. Back to Christi. I went over there to see if she noticed anything, seeing how she’s always watching our place. That’s when I discovered we’re under surveillance

24/7. She has cameras mounted on every corner of her property. At least half of them are aimed at our place.”

“Did they catch anything?”

“Nope. Let’s just say Christi’s AV / surveillance headquarters would give Ruth a run for her money.”

“Maybe we should introduce them so they can start comparing notes,” Gloria joked.

“Christi doesn’t need any encouragement. Don’t get me wrong, property protection is of utmost importance,” Liz said. “I just don’t want cameras aimed at me.”

They reached Echo’s mobile home. Teddy stood watching from the front window, his small tail wagging ninety miles an hour as he excitedly bounced up and down.

Liz slid the key in the lock and cautiously eased the door open. Teddy squeezed past her and trotted across the deck.

“What a sweet little fella.” Gloria scooped him up and held him close. He greeted her with a lick on the chin and wiggled wildly until she set him back down.

Teddy scampered down the steps and promptly watered the nearest bush.

“Has Echo mentioned anyone messing with her place?” Gloria asked.

“No, but it wouldn’t hurt to check.” The sisters, with Teddy leading the way, circled the perimeter.

“Maybe the pry marks are nothing, and I’m just paranoid after Deanna’s death. Let’s head back inside.” Liz called the pup, who promptly headed in the opposite direction

.

Teddy, his ears low, picked up speed and began running toward the barn.

The Shih Tzu's little legs covered some ground, with Liz struggling to catch up to him. "You stinker."

Gloria, anticipating Teddy's next move, attempted to head him off. In the blink of an eye, the pup changed direction and began running toward the open field.

"Teddy!" Liz, terrified the pup would reach the densely wooded area, kicked her boots off and picked up speed. "Come back here!"

The pup reached a thick hedge of brush, forcing him to stop.

Liz snatched him up. "Naughty Teddy," she scolded.

Yip. Teddy squirmed back and forth, but Liz refused to let go. "We never would've found you if you got lost in the woods. "

Gloria caught up with them. "He's...fast," she panted. "Teddy has jet packs built into those little legs. I've never seen a dog move so fast."

"Or be so determined to escape." Liz waited for them to catch their breath before making their way back. "I've learned my lesson. Teddy walks with a leash from now on."

"Unless you want to add dog chasing to your exercise routine," Gloria said.

"Again..."

“I know.” Gloria lifted a hand. “You don’t enjoy exercising. You can move pretty fast for someone who hates it.”

“Only by necessity.” Liz set the pup on the living room floor. “I need to check Teddy’s food and water.” She placed her barn boots on the mat and plodded into the kitchen area where the pup’s food and water dish were located.

Gloria hovered in the doorway, waiting for her sister. A blast of warm air blew in through the screen door, sending a stack of papers on the nearby end table fluttering to the floor. “It’s getting windy outside.”

“I heard we might have some storms rolling through this afternoon.” Liz filled Teddy’s water dish with fresh water. “It’s a good thing we caught Teddy. I could never live with myself knowing he was somewhere out there in a storm.”

“Does Duchess take off like that?” Gloria began gathering up the papers.

“No. She doesn’t care for exercise either and is content to putter around the front and side yards.” Liz filled Teddy’s food dish and set it next to his water. “Thank goodness.”

She gave the pup a pat on the head and joined her sister, noting the odd look on Gloria’s face as she stared at the paper she was holding. “What is it?”

“You’re not going to believe what I just found.”

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Liz tilted her head. “What is it?” she repeated.

“Mick Grotto.”

“What about Mick Grotto?”

Gloria waved the paper she was holding. “His name and a telephone number are on this slip of paper that blew off Echo’s end table.”

Liz’s heart skipped a beat. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.” Gloria handed it to her.

A sick feeling settled in the pit of Liz’s stomach as she stared at the name and number. “She knows him.”

“We can only assume.”

Liz carefully placed the papers back on the table .

Gloria, with cell phone in hand, slipped past her and snapped a picture of it.

“Why are you taking a picture?”

“You never know when we might need it to...” Gloria’s voice trailed off.

“Turn it over to the authorities.” Liz clutched her gut. “I told you she was acting

weird the day he came around. As soon as I mentioned his name, Echo took off out of here, telling me she forgot something at the farm. I found out later from Floyd that she never went back there.”

“Which means she went somewhere around the time of Grotto’s attack.” Gloria tapped her chin. “How long was she gone?”

Liz thought about it. “She left in the afternoon and returned while Floyd and I were making dinner. She was gone for at least a couple of hours.”

“Which would give her plenty of time to meet Grotto in Belhaven, beat him up and come back home. ”

“I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around the thought Echo is involved,” Liz said. “Floyd and I pointblank asked her about him. She claimed she hadn’t heard about his attack and, of course, didn’t know who he was.”

“How did she react when you told her about the attack?”

“She seemed shocked.” Liz blew air through thinned lips. “There’s a connection. Think about it. He’s an ex-con from Detroit. Echo is from Detroit. She doesn’t want to be on the farm’s payroll, doesn’t seem interested in what would be the perfect job for her with the Montbay County Police Department. We’re not getting the entire story.”

“I wonder if Ruth has found anything yet.” Gloria dialed her friend’s number, and she picked up right away.

“Hey, Ruth. I’m still at Liz’s place. We were wondering if you found anything on Echo. ”

“I was getting ready to call you. I’m hitting a brick wall.”

“How?”

“Locating her previous address, former employers, that kind of thing.”

“But you have found her?” Gloria asked.

“Yeah. I have her date of birth. It’s like she was born and then pffft. Nothing, nada, zip.”

“She exists, but has no history.”

“In a nutshell.”

“Maybe we should run over there and try to help,” Liz whispered.

Gloria nodded. “Liz was wondering if maybe the three of us put our heads together, that we can figure out why you’re not finding anything.”

“I’m home,” Ruth said.

“We’re on our way.” Gloria ended the call and waved the phone in the air. “Ruth is waiting for us. What about at the farm? Did Echo fill out a job application?”

Liz snapped her fingers. “I’m sure she did. I’ll swing by there and grab a copy on my way to Ruth’s.”

Gloria left first, promising to meet her there. Meanwhile, Liz climbed into her SUV for the trip to the farm. Floyd’s niece Audrey handled the administrative side of the business and, as luck would have it, was working when Liz arrived.

“Hey, Liz. I haven’t seen you around in a while,” Audrey waved her into the office. “I heard the new place is keeping you busy. Maybe one of these days I’ll stop by to check it out.”

“Don’t bother,” Liz said. “At least not yet. It’s a dump. ”

Audrey chuckled. “It can’t be that bad.”

“Trust me, it is.” Liz switched her cell phone on and pulled up some pictures of the house she’d taken to remind her of the “before.” She handed the phone to Audrey. “Scroll right.”

Audrey’s eyes narrowed. “There’s a thingamabob above the front door. What is it?”

“I’ll show you.” Liz tapped the screen to enlarge the picture and handed it back.

“It’s a…” Audrey made a choking sound.

“Gargoyle, or should I say ‘garboyle,’ as in a garbage gargoyle. I took a hammer to it just in case it had some sort of bad luck associated with it and had it hauled away in the first dumpster load.”

“I have to admit, I probably would have done the same thing. The eyes are creepy.” Audrey shivered. “You don’t think the place was cursed because of it, do you? I mean, with the dead designer lady and all. ”

“Now that you mention it, I can’t rule it out. I almost set our temporary home on fire last night cooking grilled cheese sandwiches.”

“Maybe you should sell the place and find somewhere else to live,” Audrey said.

“As weird as it sounds, the charm house is growing on me.”

“Charm house?”

“Chateau slash farmhouse,” Liz said. “That’s my nickname for it.”

“I like it,” Audrey laughed. “If you’re looking for Floyd, he’s way out back.”

“Actually, I was hoping I could get a copy of Echo Quigley’s job application.”

“Sure.” Audrey unlocked the filing cabinet behind her. She removed a cream-colored file folder and handed it to Liz. “There’s not much in there, other than her application and a picture of Echo’s driver’s license, which has her old Detroit address.”

Liz flipped the folder open and studied the meager contents. “I would like a copy, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure.” Audrey’s brows knitted. “Is there a problem with Echo?”

“No. I just figured it wouldn’t hurt to keep a copy along with her rental agreement.”

“Oh. Sure. Yes, I can understand.” Audrey slid the sheets of paper into the feeder tray and pressed the print button. She finished copying both and handed them to Liz. “Treece and Echo have been hanging out a lot lately.”

Liz remembered how Floyd’s son had offered to help Liz haul some furniture to Echo’s home right after she moved in and had noticed a spark of interest between the two. “You don’t say.”

Audrey shrugged. “Maybe I’m just being nosy and trying to play matchmaker.”

“Or maybe not.” Liz thanked Audrey for the papers, tucked them into the side pocket of her purse, and headed out.

Gloria was already at Ruth’s place when Liz arrived and met her at the door. “Were you able to get your hands on Echo’s job application?”

“I was.” Liz patted her pocket as she followed her through the breezeway and into the kitchen where Ruth stood waiting.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee or iced tea?”

“No. I’m good. Thanks for offering to help get information on Echo.” Liz handed the folded sheets to Ruth. “The fact you’re having trouble finding any information on her is a red flag. ”

“If you ask me, she’s intentionally flying under the radar or someone is helping her fly under the radar,” Ruth said.

“Because...”

“Good question. Let’s see if we can figure out if you have a tenant in trouble or a tenant who is trouble.” Ruth began humming under her breath. She slid her reading glasses down and flipped her laptop open. “Her driver’s license lists an address in Detroit, so that checks out with what she told you.”

“Maybe there’s a glitch in the system and we’ll find everything we ever wanted to know about her,” Liz said.

“We’ll start by using her former address. 11721 Presque Street, Detroit, Michigan. It looks like a duplex or some sort of multi-family property.” Ruth clicked through the links. “There’s something about the place, a news story from last year.”

“Which would have been around the time when Echo still lived there.”

Ruth double-clicked on the link to access the news story.

“What does it say?” Liz squinted her eyes, struggling to read the headline.

Gloria leaned over their shoulders. “No wonder Echo moved.”

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Ruth zoomed in on the news story. “Another Suspected Arson Incident in Detroit.”

Liz slipped her glasses on and read the paragraph below it aloud:

“Detroit’s fire department spokesperson, Wayne Tarzowski, told news reporters his investigation into the south side Detroit fire which displaced two families earlier this week was the result of arson. The tenants, whose names have not yet been released, are the latest victims of an arsonist who has been targeting the area in recent weeks.”

The story stated the fire started late at night and the tenants, all alerted by smoke alarms, safely made it out, but the contents of the burned units couldn’t be salvaged .

Gloria let out a low whistle. “The place is in rough shape.”

Liz studied the black-and-white photo. The structure’s roof was completely gone, and the windows were nothing more than gaping holes where the glass, now blown out, had once been. “The place was a total loss.”

Ruth shot her a look. “Has Echo mentioned a fire?”

“No, but then I’m not sure if she would in the normal course of a conversation. Although, looking back, she made sure the mobile home’s smoke detectors all worked. We put in new batteries and tested both alarms the day she moved in.”

“Is there any sort of description about what type of area Echo lived in?” Gloria asked. “I mean, if she knew Mick Grotto personally, perhaps he lived nearby.”

“I have access to a nifty site that can give us the lowdown.” Ruth pulled up a new screen and entered Echo’s former zip code in the search bar. “This zip code gets a sixty-two percent livability score.”

“Which isn’t good,” Liz said.

“Not really. The crime rate is higher, although the home prices are a lot lower.”

“Because the area is less desirable.”

Ruth scrolled through the screen. Not only were they able to access the livability score and cost of housing, but it also listed crime stats and rental rates. “I’m gonna take a wild guess this might not be the best area, but it might not be the worst one either.”

“Where Echo is living now is a far cry from Detroit and the city,” Gloria said.

“She seems to enjoy country living,” Liz said. “I was wondering if maybe we could find out more about her previous job. ”

Ruth grabbed her job application and pulled up a nationwide employment database.

“How in the world did you find this?” Liz asked.

“You don’t want to know.”

“I’m sure it involves her friend, Leonard,” Gloria said.

“Leonard?”

“Leonard Navoy, tech guru and space explorer.” Ruth grew quiet as she navigated

through several screens. She accessed the county's website and drilled down until she found the evidence technician department. "Crud."

"What?"

"We hit a dead-end. This only lists current employees. I can't access information about former evidence technicians." Ruth snatched her cell phone from the table. "I'll text Leonard to see if he knows a workaround. "

It took a few minutes of back and forth and finally, Ruth set the phone down. "He gave me an idea." She flew through several more screens, flipping back and forth as she consulted one and then entered keystrokes in another.

"I would be so lost," Liz said.

"It's tricky. This site has taken me a while to become proficient at..."

"Snooping," Gloria teased.

Ruth arched a brow, shooting her friend an annoyed look. "Nothing like calling the kettle black."

"You have me there."

"And..." Ruth leaned back in the chair and folded her arms. "We have Echo Olive Quigley's employment records. I'll print a copy." She hit the print key and hustled out of the kitchen, returning moments later clutching a small stack of papers. "She was telling the truth. "

The trio gathered at the table, poring over Echo's employment record. Most of it was a cryptic language. What Liz could glean was that her tenant was telling the truth.

She had lived in Detroit and worked for the county as an evidence technician.

“This is interesting.” Gloria tapped the top of the paper. “Her official title was a D3 evidence technician. I wonder what that means.”

Ruth opened another screen. “D3 is an area of Detroit, the D3 zone.”

They finished going over the employment report, but nothing stood out as a clue.

“So there you have it, gals. Echo was being truthful about her job and where she was from.” Ruth began exiting out of the screens and Liz stopped her. “There’s one more thing, and I hate to keep bothering you, but I was wondering if you could research Mick Grotto. ”

“The guy who showed up on your doorstep looking for Echo, the one she claims she doesn’t know?” Ruth asked.

“And whose name and number we found on a sheet of paper in Echo’s living room,” Gloria said.

Ruth wrinkled her nose. “We’ll be tiptoeing into some murky waters.”

“Which has never stopped us before.”

“True.” As opposed to Echo, Ruth found a great deal of information about the former convict. “He’s from Detroit and was recently released from prison.”

“What sort of crimes has he committed?” Gloria asked.

“He was convicted of Class E felonies,” Ruth said. “Class E includes carjacking, home invasion and carrying a firearm or other dangerous weapon with unlawful

intent. ”

Gloria wandered to the window. “This former convict shows up on Liz’s doorstep, looking for Echo, who had been employed by the state as an evidence technician and then, hours later, is attacked.”

“And Echo went MIA,” Liz reminded them. “She told me she was heading back to the Rasmussen farm, but Floyd said she never made it.”

“That’s all I have,” Ruth said.

“You’ve been a tremendous help.” Liz thanked her.

“You might want to sleep with one eye open until you can connect the dots between Echo and this person,” Gloria warned.

“I was thinking the same thing. Should I tell her we found the piece of paper with this guy’s name on it and see what she has to say?”

Ruth gave a thumbs down. “She’s hiding something. Confronting her will only put her on the defensive. ”

“I’m with Ruth on this one,” Gloria said. “I don’t see how it would help. In fact, it could very well backfire.”

Liz gathered the information on Echo, thanked her sister and Ruth, and headed home. During the drive, she mulled over what they’d found. At least her tenant had been truthful and honest regarding her former occupation and where she’d lived.

She thought about Echo’s former home burning and investigators ruling it arson. She had never mentioned it to Liz, not that it made a difference. It was possible she

believed, as the news story had suggested, the fire was one of several linked to the area.

Still, there was a nagging concern over her tenant's connection to the former convict.

Back home, Liz spread the papers out on the kitchen table. Echo had worked for the county for several years, moving from a lower-paid level one technician to a level two .

She studied the information about Echo's former home, noting a gap between the timeframe of when the place had burned and her arrival in West Michigan. Where had she lived in the interim?

There was no notation in her work records about why Echo had left. She'd told Liz and Floyd she'd loved her job and only quit after deciding to move to West Michigan. Which brought up another point...if she loved working as an evidence technician, why wasn't she pursuing a position with Montbay County?

Knock. Knock. Liz shoved the papers in the drawer and hurried out the door. "Hey, Lucy."

"Hey, Liz. We have a question about the front foyer's medallion."

"The one I tripped and nearly broke my neck on?" Liz joked.

"Yeah. We found someone to refinish it, but it might be a little pricey." Lucy rattled off a number that seemed reasonable to Liz .

"I say go for it. The medallion is the first thing you see when you step inside. We want it to look nice."

“Got it. I’ll put together a change order.” Lucy turned to go. “Before I forget, Echo stopped by earlier. She was looking for you.”

Liz consulted her watch. “She must’ve left work early.”

“She seemed kind of nervous about something and told me she would catch up with you later.”

“Nervous?”

“Yeah. She kept watching the road while we were talking.” Lucy told her Echo said she was heading home, but within minutes, she tore out of the driveway and sped off down the road. “Hopefully, everything is all right.”

“Thanks. I’ll get ahold of her.” After Lucy went back to the house, Liz sent Echo a brief text. “Lucy said you were looking for me. Is everything all right? ”

Liz exited the RV and meandered along the fence line, making her way to the riverbank near the back of the property. She paused near the edge and took a deep breath.

The air was several degrees cooler, and she wondered what it had been like living there at the turn of the century, in a town that no longer existed.

She thought about her own life, how she’d gone from being flat broke to marrying a wealthy farmer and moving into an RV. Never in her wildest dreams would she have dreamed she would be where she was right now...married to a man who loved her, who tolerated her high-maintenance personality and wasn’t the least concerned about her champagne tastes. Floyd was her blessing, her perfect mate. Liz was content...truly content now.

God had given her exactly what she needed and a man she would love for the rest of her life.

She turned toward home and noticed Lucy and Margaret standing in the driveway, chatting with someone in uniform. Liz froze for a fraction of a second and then she took off at a dead run, certain that something terrible had happened.

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Liz raced down the hill, praying Sheriff Joe Nelson wasn't on her doorstep to deliver bad news. "What's going on?"

"I was wondering if you had a minute so I could have a word with you in private."

"Yes, of course." Liz accompanied the sheriff across the yard and to his patrol car.

"I'm sure you've heard about the attack of Mick Grotto, a Detroit area man."

"I have." Liz could tell from the way the sheriff studied her face he was searching for some sort of reaction. "It's frightening to know someone out there is attacking people."

"Mr. Grotto has a criminal past."

"I believe I heard that, as well. "

"Did you know Mr. Grotto?" the sheriff asked.

"No."

"We found your address on a slip of paper inside his van. You didn't know the injured man or have any prior contact with him?" he probed.

Liz dabbed at the beads of sweat forming on her forehead. Officer Nelson knew. He knew Mick Grotto had visited the farm. "I. He was here the other day, looking for my tenant."

“Echo Quigley.”

“Yes. He was giving me a funny vibe. I told him she didn’t live here, which is technically the truth.”

“Did he give you a reason why he was looking for her?”

“He didn’t.”

The sheriff shifted his gaze. “Ms. Quigley lives in the mobile home up there on the hill.”

“She does,” Liz said. “Echo works at Rasmussen Farms for my husband and his family. ”

“Is she home?”

“I...” Liz’s eyes flitted to Margaret and Lucy, who were hovering nearby. “She was here but left. I’m not sure if she was heading back to work or somewhere else.”

The sheriff reached into his pocket, pulled out a card and handed it to Liz. “When she returns, could you please ask her to call me?”

“I will.”

“This is my cell phone number. She can call it anytime.”

“I...” Liz abruptly paused.

“What?”

“I hope you figure out what happened to Mr. Grotto.”

“We will. We’ll track down whoever is behind the vicious attack.” The sheriff climbed into his patrol car and drove off, his words, a promise or a threat, echoing in her ears .

“Hey.”

Liz turned to find Lucy and Margaret standing behind her.

“That looked like a pretty intense conversation,” Margaret said.

“Nelson wants to chat with Echo.” Liz rubbed her brow. “I told him that Mick Grotto had been here looking for her and now he wants to talk to her. I hope I didn’t throw her under the bus.”

“You haven’t done anything wrong.” Lucy touched Liz’s arm. “If Echo is lying to you, hiding something about her past and this man, don’t you want to know?”

Liz thought about the slip of paper Gloria had found inside Echo’s home with Grotto’s name and a phone number scribbled on it. Echo knew the man, or at the very least, knew something about him. Ever since he’d shown up, she’d been acting oddly. What was she hiding? Her gut told her Echo’s past had followed her to West Michigan. “I think she is hiding something.”

“Maybe she was never an evidence technician and is a criminal,” Margaret said.

“Ruth did some digging around. She’s telling the truth.”

“Or maybe she was fired from her job.” Lucy tapped her chin thoughtfully. “Ruth’s handy-dandy super spy software didn’t list a current address for Echo?”

“You know, now that you mention it, I’m not sure.” Liz ran inside the RV and grabbed the information Ruth had given her. She handed it to Lucy.

“I don’t see an address listed.”

“It’s right there...11721 Presque Street, Detroit, Michigan. The place burned,” Liz said. “We found out it caught fire, and the fire was ruled arson. ”

Margaret blinked rapidly. “Someone set Echo’s home on fire?”

“According to the authorities, her place was one of several in a string of arson incidents.”

Lucy’s cell phone rang. “It’s the plumber. He’s asking for a picture of the downstairs bathroom plumbing.”

“It all needs to be replaced,” Liz said. “Tell him we want all new plumbing.”

Lucy gave a thumbs up and headed inside.

Margaret lingered. “You have a big heart, Liz, offering to rent Echo a place she can afford, but you should be careful.”

“I will. I mean I am. Until I can figure out how Echo knows this Mick Grotto, I should probably sleep with one eye open.” Liz watched as Margaret followed Lucy inside the house, her mind whirling.

What if Echo was an ex-con? Horrible thoughts flitted through her head .

Don’t be silly. Echo is not a killer. Yes, maybe she’s hiding something, but everyone has a secret.

Echo was dragging her feet, in no hurry to apply for an evidence technician position. There was no way the young woman preferred doing manual labor at a farm versus returning to a career she clearly enjoyed. Something wasn't adding up.

The RV offered little in the way of protection if someone wanted to break in and get to her and her husband.

Liz fixed a sandwich and caught up with Margaret and Lucy, who were also taking a lunch break, on the back porch.

They chatted about the week's to-do list. Liz still struggled to visualize the end result, even though Lucy and Margaret had created a vision board, showing her exactly what her chateau / farmhouse would look like .

Ting. Ting. Liz was on her way back to the RV when her cell phone chimed. It was Floyd. "Hello, my beautiful bride. Where are you?"

"Home." Liz tapped the speaker button. "Are you still at the farm?"

"I am. I'm getting ready to leave."

"Is Echo there?"

"She left a few minutes ago. Why?"

"Officer Nelson is looking for her. I left her a message, but she hasn't returned my call."

"Maybe she never got it. I'm sure she'll be home soon." Floyd told her he was on his way and asked her to stick around because he had a surprise for her.

“What kind of surprise?” Floyd and surprises were a mixed bag. Her dilapidated chateau home being a case in point.

“A good one.” He hurriedly ended the call, which sent Liz’s anxiety level up a notch. Sudden movement caught her eye. It was Christi on a pedal bike. She gave a friendly wave as she cruised down the road, her binoculars dangling from her neck.

Liz watched in horror as the bike wobbled. Christi struggled to maintain control. The binoculars went flying and whacked her chin.

Christi instinctively released her grip on the handlebars. The bike tipped over, taking her neighbor down with it. Both landed with a thud .

Liz ran to her side and dropped to her knees. “Are you all right?”

Christi let out a low moan as she lifted her head. Small pebbles were embedded in her cheek and in the palms of her hands. “I wish they would pave our road.”

Liz extended a hand and helped Christi to her feet. “Bikes and loose gravel don’t mix. I’m sorry if I distracted you.”

“It’s not your fault.” Her neighbor winced. “I’m a klutz. ”

Liz couldn’t entirely disagree. It did seem that the woman injured herself at the most inopportune moments. “Maybe you should invest in bubble wrap.”

“Or a suit of armor.” Christi grinned, and Liz couldn’t help but smile back. “How does my face look?”

“Not too bad.” Liz eyed the red bumps forming on her face and chin.

Christi ran a light hand over the injured area. “Like road rash?”

“Maybe. I’m sure it will fade fast.” Liz pulled the bike upright, deeming it no worse for the wear. “A helmet with a chin guard might be in order.”

“And knee pads. I better head inside and clean the cuts. Last time I got road rash, it became infected, and I ended up in the ER. You should see my bathroom. It looks like a walk-in clinic.” Christi grabbed the handlebars and limped toward her driveway .

Liz caught up with her. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh at you.”

“You were laughing with me,” Christi said. “I’ll be fine. It’s nothing a tube of antibiotic ointment and a little gauze can’t fix.”

Liz told her to call if she needed anything and returned home. She was halfway up the driveway when she heard tires crunching on gravel.

Echo stopped near the turnoff and rolled the window down. “Hey, Liz. Sorry I didn’t call you back. I was at work and my phone was in the locker.”

“No problem. Is everything all right?”

“Yes. No. I got myself into a pickle,” Echo said. “I invited Treece to dinner. He’s coming over tomorrow night.”

“How fun.” Liz clapped her hands, thrilled at the thought of a budding romance between Echo and Floyd’s son, who was also single. “What are you making? ”

“I don’t have a clue.” Echo bit her lower lip. “I was hoping you could give me a few ideas. I’m not a very good cook.”

Liz remembered the charred grilled cheese sandwiches from her recent cooking endeavor. “Neither am I.”

“Great. Maybe I should order takeout and pretend it’s mine.”

“No.” Liz shifted her feet. “You need to make something special, something that will knock Treece’s socks off.”

Echo began shaking her head. “I’m getting heart palpitations just thinking about it. I could take him out to dinner instead.”

“Don’t do that. I’ll help with the cooking. Seriously.” Liz slipped her cell phone from her pocket and tapped the screen. “What do you like to eat?”

“Greek is my fave, but I’ll eat just about anything. I’m not fussy. ”

“I know Treece likes Greek food. We took him to a fabulous Greek restaurant this spring for his birthday.”

Echo brightened. “Greek sounds good.”

“We need an easy, breezy, impressive Greek recipe.” Liz swiped through the recipe results. “I found one. Chicken souvlaki with tzatziki sauce prepared in less than thirty minutes. The chicken used in the recipe is already roasted. Homemade meets helping hand. ”

“Sold.” Echo smacked her lips. “Mediterranean sampler sauces would go perfectly with the dish.”

Liz continued scrolling the screen. “How does hummus, tzatziki sauce and an Italian herb dipping sauce with pita chips sound?”

“It sounds delish.”

“The decision is all yours. I say we give it a go,” Liz said .

“You’ll help?” Echo pressed a hand to her chest. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll forward the recipes so you can see what we’re signing ourselves up for.”

“I’ll need to plan a trip to Meijer to buy the ingredients,” Echo said. “You wouldn’t happen to want to go with me, would you?”

“Sure. We might want to pick up a little extra in case we mess up.”

“ When we mess up. If it involves me in the kitchen, I can guarantee this won’t go smoothly.” Echo shifted into drive. “I better get going. I’m sure Teddy needs to go out.”

“I let him out earlier.” Liz remembered the sheriff’s visit. “Sheriff Nelson stopped by looking for you.”

Echo’s eyes widened. “Looking for me? Why?”

“Mick Grotto. The police found our address on a slip of paper inside his van.” Liz studied her tenant’s face. “I had to tell him that the man was here looking for you.”

“I...”

Liz held up a hand. “Echo, if you know him, know something, you need to tell the authorities. Someone hurt the man and we don’t know why, or at least I don’t.”

Echo silently nodded. “Thanks, Liz,” she said in a small voice. “I’ll take care of it.”

Liz watched as Echo headed home. She had seen something in her eyes. Was it fear? Was Echo in trouble?

She ran inside to call Gloria and filled her in on what had transpired and about Nelson’s surprise visit. “Echo almost looked afraid. I can’t help but think she’s hiding from someone.”

“Be careful, Liz. Trouble could have followed her here.”

“I hope not. ”

Toot. Toot. Liz ran to the window, watching as Floyd’s truck jostled down the driveway. “Floyd’s home. He has a surprise for me.”

“Oh no,” Gloria laughed.

“Oh yes.”

Floyd sprang from the truck and made a beeline for the back.

“He brought the farm’s trailer home.” Liz craned her neck and watched as he opened the rear cargo doors. He lowered the ramp and stepped aside.

“You have got to be kidding me.”

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“What is it?” Gloria asked. “What’s Floyd’s surprise?”

“I can’t. I’ll have to call you back.” Liz dropped her phone on the counter and hustled outside. “What is this?”

Floyd beamed, watching as a pig squealed loudly. It trotted down the ramp and made a mad dash toward Liz.

She stumbled back. “It’s coming after me.”

“He’s trying to say ‘hello.’ Pepper’s a friendly pig.”

“Pepper?” Liz’s eyes widened in horror. “You named the pig?”

A second pig scurried down the ramp. He made a snorting sound and then a beeline for Pepper, whose snout was now firmly planted on Liz’s bare leg.

“He’s doing something to me with his nose.” Liz clutched her throat and began gagging as Pepper’s wet snout traveled toward her kneecap.

“Pepper is not going to hurt you,” Floyd said.

Liz squeezed her eyes shut, praying the pig would leave her alone.

Squeal. Her eyes flew open.

Both pigs crowded around, sniffing her two-hundred-bucks-a-pop Tony Borbonne

sandals. “They’re trying to eat my shoes. Please make them stop,” she begged.

“C’mon, you rascals.” Floyd made a half-hearted attempt at calling off the swine. “It’s gonna take some time for Liz to warm up to you.”

Liz jerked her foot back, and the pigs advanced. “He’s licking me. ”

Floyd grabbed a small rod hooked to the side of the trailer and began coaxing the pigs away from his wife. “Let’s go check out your new home.”

The pigs obediently followed Floyd across the open field toward the pens he’d been working on for several weeks.

It suddenly dawned on Liz that Floyd’s plan to bring pigs to the farm had been “in the works” for some time. She clenched her fists and marched after him, watching as he led them inside the pen and closed the gate.

He backtracked and joined her. “Aren’t they cute as buttons?”

“Cute as buttons?” Liz swallowed hard, choking back the wave of nausea threatening as she pointed to the slimy imprint on her knee. “I think Pepper was marking his territory.”

Floyd laughed. “You should be flattered. Pigs aren’t always that friendly. ”

“Please tell me this is only temporary and you’re taking them over to the farm.”

“They’re all ours. I figured we would start with two. I think they’ll like living here on our farm.”

“They might, but I won’t.”

Floyd's face fell. "I thought we talked about turning this into a working farm and having our own animals."

"You talked about bringing animals here. I listened."

"I..." For the first time since Floyd's return home, he appeared uncertain. "You really don't want pigs?"

Liz softened her tone. "I would have preferred we discussed this beforehand. They're smelly and disgusting. I can't be responsible for their care."

"That's okay. I'll take care of them." Floyd gave her a peck on the cheek. "I knew you would come around." He began whistling loudly, making his way to the rear of the trailer. He removed several buckets from the back and carried them to the pen.

Liz trailed behind. "Are you sure you can't return them?"

"I could send them to the slaughter, if that's what you want." Floyd cast his wife a side glance.

"I'm not asking you to...kill them. I have my hands full managing the renovations and don't have the time, energy, or inclination to take care of farm animals."

"I already told you I would do it." Floyd balanced the bucket on the fence rail, causing the pigs to snort even louder. "This is going to make a mess."

"You're telling me," Liz muttered.

"No, I mean the slop." He set the bucket back down. "I need my other barn boots in case it splashes on me. I'll be right back."

Liz, curious to find out what pigs ate, inched closer .

The pungent aroma of rotting fruit and vegetables assaulted her nostrils. Liz clamped a hand over her mouth and spun around. She lost her footing and fell on her backside, which is where Floyd found her.

“What are you doing?” He extended a hand.

“I made the mistake of smelling the slop.”

“It stinks to high heaven.”

“Now you tell me.” Liz clutched her gut, watching as her husband dumped the bucket’s contents into the empty trough.

Pepper and Piper grunted loudly, happily slurping up the goodies. Liz swallowed hard and looked away, willing her stomach to stop churning.

“They’re as happy as two pigs in a pocket,” Floyd said. “I think they’re going to settle in nicely. Once they become acclimated, we can talk about fixing the barn and adding cows. ”

“Please, no,” Liz begged him. “The cows should stay over at the other farm. We don’t have the staff to care for farm animals.”

“Don’t worry your pretty little head about the pigs or cows. I have a plan.” Floyd outlined his vision for the future farm, which included not only the pigs and cows but also a flock of chickens.

Liz’s oceanfront dream condo was sounding more appealing by the second and for the hundredth time, she wondered what had ever possessed her to agree to fix the

place up. But she didn't have the heart to complain. After all, farming was in Floyd's blood and it wasn't fair to ask him to give it up.

Rules would have to be in place. Rules about who would care for the stinky, nasty creatures. There was one thing she knew for certain; it would not be her.

Lucy, along with Margaret, emerged from the house and made their way over. "We're wrapping things up for the day. The kitchen counter quartz pieces came in. Before we sign off on them, we want to make sure they're exactly what we ordered. We'll be swinging by the warehouse before we head over in the morning."

Margaret pinched her nose. "What is that smell?"

"What are you talking about?" Liz sniffed.

"It smells like ammonia."

"This?" She stuck her hand in Lucy's face.

Lucy clutched her throat and gagged loudly. "What in the world? Please tell me this isn't one of your expensive French perfumes, because if it is, you got ripped off."

"It's eau de toilette."

"Eau de what?" Margaret asked.

"De toilette as in pig scent." Liz jabbed her finger in the pigpen's direction, where Pepper and Piper were still happily gobbling up their stinky goodies.

Margaret's jaw dropped. "You have pigs! "

Floyd joined them. “Meet Pepper and Piper, the friendliest pigs in West Michigan,” he said proudly.

“I didn’t know you planned to start a livestock farm,” Lucy said.

“Neither did I. I mean, I knew Floyd wanted a farm.” Liz briefly closed her eyes. “Yes, we have pigs.”

“Better you than me.” Margaret patted Liz’s arm and leaned in. “You do smell a little funny. You might want to get cleaned up,” she whispered in her ear.

“I plan to scrub every inch of my body with rubbing alcohol.” Liz accompanied her friends to Lucy’s Jeep. “Echo and I are going shopping tomorrow. She’s making a Greek feast for Treece tomorrow night and I offered to help.”

“You’re helping Echo cook?” Lucy grinned.

“Make sure she has a fire extinguisher handy,” Margaret teased .

Liz playfully punched her in the arm. “You’re hilarious.”

“Did you mention Sheriff Nelson’s visit to her?” Lucy asked.

“Yes, and Echo promised she would take care of it.” Liz thanked them again and joined Floyd, who was still unloading supplies from the trailer. Back and forth they went and the more they unloaded, the more Liz’s concern grew. “Are you sure this is only for two pigs?”

“Yes. Only two. They’re healthy eaters.” Floyd stacked the last bucket on top of the others. “I’m sorry about the misunderstanding and I promise I won’t bring any other animals to the farm without running it by you first.”

“Thank you.” Liz slipped her arm through Floyd’s. “We should take Duchess for a walk.”

“I’ll go get her.” Floyd and Duchess caught up with Liz. They strolled toward Echo’s place and found their tenant and Teddy out on the deck .

Echo stepped over to the railing. “I see you got the pigs home safely.”

“Yeah. They’re happy to be here.”

The trio made small talk, and Echo mentioned dinner the following evening. “Liz has graciously agreed to help me cook for Treece, since my cooking skills are dismal.”

Floyd arched an eyebrow and gazed at his wife. “You’re going to cook?”

“I am.” Liz straightened her shoulders. “We’re making chicken souvlaki with tzatziki sauce, along with a sampler dipping platter.”

“That sounds mighty tasty.”

“Why don’t we double the recipe?” Echo suggested. “You and Floyd can join us for dinner.”

Liz shook her head. “You and Treece should dine alone, although since we’re going to all the trouble, it won’t be any extra work to make enough for Floyd and me. ”

“I’m sure Treece won’t mind if you join us.”

“He might not, but we would.” Liz elbowed her husband. “Isn’t that right?”

“It’s not much of a date if us old folks show up.”

“Maybe next time.” Liz called Duchess, and she and Floyd strolled toward the back of the property. The couple made it to Cash Creek and wandered along the water’s edge. “This is my favorite place.”

“It would make a nice building spot,” Floyd said.

“But not for us,” Liz added.

“Not for us. We’ll have the fanciest chateau in Montbay County before we’re done.” Floyd grasped Liz’s hand. “I’m sorry about springing the pigs on you.”

“It’s...all right. I should’ve known you would eventually want to add farm animals.”

“And I should be more considerate. You’re not a country gal.”

“But I’m trying,” Liz said .

“Yes, you are.” Floyd turned his wife to face him. “I love you, Liz. You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me. I figured I was going to live the rest of my life lonely and alone until you showed up at the farm looking for a job.”

“A job I didn’t want.” Liz chuckled. “God had a hand in us meeting. There’s no way I would’ve been there on my own. Between God and Gloria, we were destined to meet.”

“We were.” Floyd placed a light hand on Liz’s face and tenderly kissed her lips.

Liz could feel her pulse tick up a notch as she leaned in. The kiss deepened, and all thoughts about Pepper and Piper disappeared.

Floyd pulled back, his eyes smoldering. “I guess we should head home and figure out

what we're having for dinner.”

“Dinner?” Liz lowered her lashes. “I was thinking we could head home and spend some quality time alone...right after I shower in sanitizer.”

“Lead the way, my dear. Lead the way.”

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It was early afternoon the following day before Echo caught up with Liz for the trip to the grocery store. “I’m sorry I’m running late.”

“It’s all right. We still have plenty of time to make dinner.” Liz jangled her SUV keys. “Would you like me to drive?”

“This is my project. I don’t mind driving.” Echo hopped back inside her car and waited for Liz to join her. “I put together a shopping list. I think our biggest problem will be tracking down a few of the ingredients.”

“Meijer has a pretty good selection of specialty items. If we can’t find them there, I know a little international food shop in nearby Rockville.”

“Cool. Hopefully, we won’t have to make too many stops.” Echo rambled on about the food and the dishes and it was clear the woman was nervous. “Before I forget, I wanted to let you know that I spoke to Sheriff Nelson and told him I didn’t know Mick Grotto. In fact, after you gave me his name, I jotted it down on a piece of paper and did some research.”

“To see if you could figure out who he was?”

“Yeah.” Echo shot her a quick look. “It’s scary to think an ex-convict was looking for me.”

“He’s from Detroit, which is where you’re from,” Liz pointed out.

“He is. I know it seems like too much of a coincidence, but I swear I’ve never met the

man before.”

Liz’s gut told her Echo was telling the truth. She truly didn’t know the man, and if she really thought about it, Liz probably would’ve done the same if some strange man showed up on her doorstep looking for her and was viciously attacked only hours later. The fact he was a convicted criminal made it that much worse.

So far, everything Echo had told her checked out.

“Thanks again for forwarding the job application.” Echo insisted she was still interested in applying for the job with the county but had been busy, which may have been true as well. Rasmussen Farms was a bustling place. Perhaps she wanted to make sure she was settled in before making a job change.

Another thought occurred to Liz, a reason for her reluctance to switch jobs on a more personal level. “How is Treece doing?”

“Good. He’s been trying to bring the farm’s technology up to date, but his dad and Uncle Dale are set in their ways. They’re old school and not interested in more modern practices.”

“I have to agree the older I get, the less I like change.” Liz adjusted her seatbelt. “You know the saying — ‘if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.’ ”

Echo laughed. “I believe Floyd used that exact phrase earlier today when Treece was pitching a new software program to him.”

They reached the grocery store and, with the list on Echo’s cell phone, the women made their way up and down the aisles, gathering the ingredients.

At the checkout, Liz and Echo split the bill evenly and wheeled the cart back to the

car.

Echo finished unloading and glanced at her watch. “That took us longer than I thought it would. We’re running out of time.”

“The main dish is easy peasy. Between the two of us, we can get the souvlaki and dipping sauces whipped up in no time. What sort of beverage were you planning on serving?”

“Beverage?” Echo wrinkled her nose. “I...forgot.”

“A sparkling red grape juice would be perfect. ”

“I’ll be right back.” Echo sprang from the vehicle and ran inside the store. She was gone for a long time.

Liz pulled her phone from her purse to text her when she caught a glimpse of her jogging back toward the car. She stashed the grocery bag in the trunk and climbed back in. “I found the juice, but now we’re running even more behind.”

“We’ll just have to speed it up a bit.” They would be cutting it close, considering they were two inexperienced cooks trying to muddle their way through preparing a sumptuous Greek feast.

There would be no room for mistakes and starting over. Preparation was going to be a one and done.

Echo sped toward the stoplight as it turned yellow. “We can make it through before it changes.” She stepped on the gas. With tires squealing, the car careened around the corner and onto the main road .

Whirr. Whirr.

Liz glanced in the rearview mirror, her heart plummeting when she spotted a police car with lights flashing right behind them. “I think we need to pull over.”

“Oh, my gosh. I didn’t know there was a cop at the light.” Echo eased onto the side of the road. “This is going to be bad.”

“It will be all right.” Liz could see the officer sitting in his car. Long moments ticked by. Finally, he emerged from the patrol vehicle and approached the driver’s side.

“Good afternoon, ma’am.”

“H-hello,” Echo stammered.

“Do you realize you just ran a red light and were driving recklessly?”

“I didn’t mean to. We are...we’re in kind of a hurry. The light was yellow when I went through, although I may have been going a little too fast. ”

“I’ll need to see your driver’s license, registration and proof of insurance.”

Echo reached across Liz, flipped the glove box open, pulled out a small envelope and handed it to the officer. “Here’s my registration and insurance.”

“I need your license.”

“Of course.” Echo’s hand trembled as she fumbled inside her purse. She pulled out her wallet, removed her driver’s license and handed it to the cop.

Echo watched as the officer walked away. She placed her hands on the steering wheel

and her forehead on top. “This is not good.”

“He might not give you a ticket,” Liz said.

“You don’t understand.”

A sinking feeling settled in the pit of Liz’s stomach. Something told her there was more to it than Echo being pulled over .

Long minutes passed. Finally, there was a light tap on the window and the officer leaned in. “Echo Quigley?”

“Yes?” Echo whispered.

“We have a problem.”

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The officer pinched Echo's license between his index finger and thumb. "Your driver's license expired several months ago."

"It did. I've been meaning to get a new license. I moved from Detroit and haven't had a permanent address until a few weeks ago."

"A few weeks is plenty of time to apply for a current license." He pulled a notepad from his pocket and began writing.

"Are you going to give me a ticket?" Echo asked.

"I'm taking down your information. I'm going to cut you a break and give you a verbal warning."

"Thank you. I...I'll take care of it right away. "

"Driving with an expired license could get you a ninety-day jail sentence and a five hundred dollar citation."

"Five hundred dollars?" Liz pressed a hand to her chest. "That seems a little steep."

The cop shot Liz an annoyed look. "And I could also put Ms. Quigley in jail for ninety days."

"Yes. I mean, I'm sorry for even saying anything. I have to admit, I'm shocked at the fine and jail time."

“Driving with an expired license is a misdemeanor. The State of Michigan takes this matter seriously.”

“I understand. Thank you for the warning.”

The officer returned to his patrol car and drove off.

Echo waited until he was gone. “I didn’t know it was such a big deal. ”

“I’m sure now that you do, you’ll get it taken care of right away.” Liz reached for her seatbelt buckle. “Do you want me to drive?”

“No. I’ll be very careful. I guess I had better get that done ASAP.”

“The sooner, the better.”

They reached the farm without further incident, and Liz and Echo carried the bags of groceries inside. While Echo began assembling the pots and pans, Liz ran home to put away the few items she’d picked up and grab some storage containers.

She took Duchess out for a short walk and then finally they made their way back to the mobile home on the hill. Teddy stood waiting by the door, his small tail thumping as his sister trotted in. She gave her brother a nudge with her nose and made a beeline for his food dish.

“I renewed my license online while I was waiting. It was actually very easy.” Echo chuckled as Duchess successfully kept her brother at bay while she feasted on his food. “She has a healthy appetite.”

“She does.” Liz gently guided her pup away from the dish .

Teddy hurriedly took her place and gobbled up what was left.

Liz washed her hands, eyeing the counter filled with food. “There’s a lot more to this than I thought.”

“I like your plan of dividing and conquering. One of us can work on the sauces while the other starts on the chicken souvlaki.” Echo tapped the top of the recipes. “I’ll let you pick.”

Liz studied each sheet. “The main dish looks pretty cut and dried. You start on that and I’ll work on the other.”

While they worked, the women chatted about life on the farm, and Liz mentioned Pepper and Piper. “The pigs are settling in.”

“Floyd has been talking about getting some for a couple of months.” Echo finished prepping the fresh garlic and set it aside. “I don’t see you as a pig kinda person.”

“I’m not.” Liz remembered the stench from the slop pail. “The thought of feeding them makes me nauseous.”

“It takes a special person to farm.” Echo reached for the bottle of olive oil. “You have plenty of room to expand with all the barns and land.”

“Which is Floyd’s plan. If he has his way, we’ll have cows, chickens and maybe even more pigs.”

“While living in the most beautiful home in the area.”

Despite Liz’s fear the meal preparation would be a total disaster, Echo and she whipped up an acceptable authentic Greek meal and an array of Mediterranean

saucers.

Liz's sides were more labor intensive, and it took some time to chop, mash and blend the ingredients for the different sauces.

Echo reached for a clean spoon. "We've earned a chef's sample." She eased a heaping spoonful of chicken into two small bowls and handed one to Liz. "I hope it tastes as good as it looks."

Liz scooped up a small piece of chicken, savoring her bite. "It's missing something."

"The pita," Echo said.

"What about the creamy sauce?"

"Crud. The tzatziki. I'm sure we have enough for the pitas and some extra to use as a side sauce. It's chilling in the fridge." Echo darted to the fridge and removed the cucumber sauce. She added a dollop to her chicken and did the same for Liz.

Liz took another bite. The creamy cucumber with a hint of dill tingled her tastebuds. "Perfect. It's absolutely perfect."

"I hope Treece likes it."

"I'm sure he'll love it."

"The sauces should be ready for sampling, too." Liz gave each of the sauces a thorough stir, sliced off several pita pieces and spread a spoonful of sauce across the top of each before handing one to Echo.

It was getting close to five, and Liz consulted her watch. "We need to wrap this up so

I can get out of your hair and you can get ready.”

“Thanks, Liz. Thanks for everything, for helping me with the cooking, for being the best landlord I could ever ask for.”

“You’re welcome.” Liz scooped a spoonful of hummus into a to-go container. The spoon slipped from her hand and the contents splattered. Her arm bumped the container as it slid across the counter. A fast-moving Liz blocked it with her elbow.

“Nice save,” Echo joked.

“Thanks.” She attempted to swipe the sauce from her elbow and ended up smearing it on the front of her blouse. “I saved the sauce but messed up my blouse. ”

“I have some stain stick in the laundry area.” Echo motioned her into the hallway. She rummaged around inside the cabinet as Liz swiped at the stain. “It can wait until I get home.”

“I found it.” Echo handed the stain stick to her and slammed the cabinet door shut.

A ceiling panel popped out and dangled over the top of the dryer.

“Your ceiling panel came loose.”

“It keeps popping out.” Echo grabbed the stepladder next to the washer, climbed to the top, and popped the panel back in place.

“Do you want me to have Floyd swing by and fix it?” Liz finished dabbing at the spot. “It looks like the runners are crooked. I’m sure it’s an easy fix.”

“It’s fine. It doesn’t bother me at all.” Echo hurriedly placed the stain stick on the

shelf and propelled Liz back into the kitchen. “This place is perfect. I didn’t mean for it to sound like a complaint. ”

“You weren’t complaining. If you change your mind, let me know.”

“I will.”

Liz finished helping clean up and began making her way toward the door. “We made some delicious dishes. I hope Treece and Floyd appreciate all our hard work.”

Echo trailed behind. “It turned out to be a good day, after all. The cop didn’t throw me in jail or fine me for the expired license and our dinner dishes are delish.”

“I’m sure you’ll take care of updating your license soon.” Liz told her she hoped she had a nice, relaxing evening. She coaxed Duchess out onto the deck. During the walk home, she thought about their earlier conversation about Mick Grotto.

Echo had explained her reason for jotting the man’s name on the slip of paper she and Gloria had found, but she’d also written a phone number next to it. How had Echo gotten the man’s phone number?

Would the investigators trace a call to her if they checked Grotto’s phone records?

Back at the RV, Liz placed the food on the table. She turned her laptop on and typed Grotto’s name into the search bar.

His attack was no longer headline news. There was only a small blurb at the bottom of the local newspaper’s page.

It was a repeat of what Liz already knew. The man had been attacked near Lake Terrace’s public boat ramp. The story ended with no mention of the man’s current

condition, which struck her as odd.

Curious to see if there was anything else out there, she dialed Ruth's number.

"Hey, Liz."

"Hey, Ruth. I'm sorry to bother you. "

"No bother. I'm getting ready for a NASCA call via Skype. We're hammering out the details of our annual Chicago meeting. I'm on the planning committee."

"It sounds exciting."

"You should join us sometime. If you like people watching, you can meet some interesting characters."

"I'll keep it in mind," Liz promised. "I was checking online to see if there were any updates on Mick Grotto, the guy who was here looking for Echo the other day and was attacked down by Lake Terrace."

"You know, now that you mention it, I haven't heard anything about him either."

Liz could hear tapping on the other end of the line.

"Strange. Yeah. There's nothing new online. Let me see if I can hack...err...I mean, access the county's database." Ruth grew quiet as the tapping continued. "Uh-oh."

Liz switched the phone to her other ear. "You found something."

"Yep. I'm surprised this hasn't hit the front-page news yet. Are you near your computer?"

“I am.”

More clicking. “I want to forward something to you. What’s your email address?”

Liz rattled it off.

“I just sent it.”

“Hang on.” Liz switched to her email screen. A message from “Spymobile” popped up. “I got it.”

She double-clicked on the link Ruth had sent her. A photo with a caption beneath it popped up. Liz stared at it in disbelief. “No way.”

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“Did you get it?” Ruth asked.

“I did. It’s a sketch from the county sheriff’s department. This looks like Echo.”

“I thought the same.”

Liz slipped her reading glasses on and read the caption. “Sketch of suspect in the vicinity of Lake Terrace around the time of Mick Grotto’s attack on Monday, July fifteenth.” She studied the woman’s thin face, her hair covered by a gray hoodie, but the eyes, the eyes were eerily similar to Echo’s.

She leaned back in her chair. Had Echo lied? Was it possible she not only knew Mick Grotto, but was also behind his attack?

“Are you still there?” Ruth asked .

“I’m here. I’m trying to wrap my head around this. Echo told me she jotted Grotto’s name down on a slip of paper and did some research after finding out he was looking for her. She made it sound legit, although there was one small minor detail she left out.”

“Which was...”

“The phone number that was next to his name. Gloria took a picture of the paper.”

“Gloria has the name and number?”

“Yes.”

“Hold on a sec.” Background music began playing and Liz waited...and waited. Finally, Ruth came back on the line. “Are you still there, Liz?”

“Yeah.”

“I have Gloria on the other line. Can you hear me, Gloria?” Ruth asked.

“I’m here. Why am I on a conference call with my sister? ”

“Because the police are getting ready to release a composite sketch of a person seen in the vicinity of Lake Terrace around the time of Mick Grotto’s attack. I’m sending you a copy.”

Liz knew the exact moment her sister clicked on the image by her sharp intake of breath. “Are you sure?”

“Sure as sugar,” Ruth confirmed. “I hacked, I mean accessed, the county database. They haven’t released it to the public yet.”

“I’m sure Sheriff Nelson will get a copy soon,” Liz said. “Which means he’s going to be on my doorstep again. Maybe I should beat him to it and let him know I think this woman might be Echo.”

“Ack.” Ruth made a buzzing noise. “Negatory. No can do.”

“Why not?”

“Because we’re not supposed to know about this. ”

“True.” Liz wandered to the window, staring toward Echo’s place, a sick feeling settling in the pit of her stomach. “I’m supposed to pretend I don’t know, and just wait for the cops to show up and haul her away?”

“Or sleep with one eye open and a gun by your bedside,” Gloria said. “It still doesn’t prove Echo was behind the attack. She may have known the man, may have even lied about it, but there’s no smoking gun or, in this case, bloody tire iron.”

Liz made a choking sound. “Do you have to be so descriptive? My stomach is already queasy.”

“Sorry,” Gloria apologized. “This means we can place Echo close to Lake Terrace around the time Mick Grotto was attacked. She denies knowing him, even though she had his name and a phone number written on a slip of paper inside her home.”

“Which is why I brought you in on the call,” Ruth said. “Liz told me you took a picture of the slip of paper. I was hoping you still had it. ”

“I do.” Rustling ensued on Gloria’s end. “I have it on my cell phone. Hang tight.” Seconds later, she rattled off a number.

“I’m keying it in,” Ruth said. “Hmmm.”

“Hmmm what?” Liz asked.

“It’s linked to a prepaid cell phone. Those types of phones can be traced, but are a lot more time-consuming. It would be hard for me.”

“Why was Grotto using a prepaid cell phone?”

“That’s a good question. Maybe he was still involved in illegal activities and knew it

would be difficult for law enforcement to pin anything on him if the phone was confiscated.”

“It’s possible he didn’t have a job or credit and his only option was a prepaid cell phone.” Liz glimpsed Treece’s pickup truck pulling into the driveway. He kept going and she could feel an uneasiness settle in. Was Treece dining with a criminal? Was he in danger ?

“Treece is here. Echo invited him over for dinner.”

“I’m sure he’ll be fine,” Gloria said. “Honestly, at this point, our hands are tied. We can’t turn her in because we’re not supposed to know about the sketch. How soon do you think it will be before they release the photo to the public, Ruth?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. Could be five minutes. Could be tomorrow morning. I’m thinking they’ll blast it out to all the local law enforcement first and then release it to the public.”

“I’m going to wait for Floyd to get home and talk to him. We could have a criminal living on our property.”

“You don’t know that for sure. The background check didn’t find anything,” Ruth reminded her. “She was clean. The only other thing I can think of is to get her fingerprint. If we do that, I can run it through another database to see if we get a hit. ”

“You mean your other super-secret backdoor database isn’t foolproof?” Gloria teased.

“It’s about as good as you can get. There’s always an off-chance Echo is in the AFIS database but not linked to the other one,” Ruth said.

“AFIS?” Liz echoed.

“Automated Fingerprint Identification System. Fingerprints from crime scenes are routinely cross-referenced.” Ruth went into a long spiel about the database’s features.

Finally, Liz interrupted. “You’re telling me if I can get my hands on one of Echo’s fingerprints, I can give it to you and you can check it through the AFIS to see if there’s a potential match?”

“Yep.”

“Crud.” Liz sucked in a breath. “I spent the entire afternoon with Echo, cooking food. I could’ve gotten it then. ”

“You’re creative,” Gloria said. “I’m sure you’ll figure out a way to secure a fingerprint.”

“Let’s suppose I’m able to get Echo’s fingerprint. I get it over to you. You run it through your system. How long would it take to find out if there’s a match?”

“The system is amazing,” Ruth said. “It can search up to a million records in about a minute.”

“We’re talking about getting results within hours, not days or weeks,” Gloria said.

“Absolutely. A couple hours, tops. The only problem is, I need to run it through Leonard first. I don’t have that level of NASCA security clearance, at least not yet.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Liz promised. “In the meantime, we’ll have to wait for the police to release the sketch.”

“If they do and Nelson recognizes Echo, you might not have to worry about it. He’ll haul her off to jail. If they determine she’s behind the attack, I’m guessing she won’t be back,” Ruth said.

“I can’t believe it’s her.” Liz studied the sketch still on her computer screen. The similarities were uncanny. It had to be her. “I’ll work on getting the fingerprint.” She thanked her sister and Ruth and ended the call.

Liz drifted to the doorway. Treece’s truck was parked alongside Echo’s compact car. How on earth could she get her hands on Echo’s fingerprint, and was it even worth the effort?

Surely, it was only a matter of time before the cops showed up looking for her. If her tenant was a bad person, she had Liz—and Floyd—fooled. She’d seemed genuinely down on her luck, in need of a helping hand, one that the couple had so generously given her.

Were they in danger? What if Echo was some sort of psycho? Would she come after Liz and Floyd? Try to break into their RV in the middle of the night? She thought about the arson and the fact Echo’s Detroit rental had burned to the ground.

Had Echo been behind the fire? She’d never mentioned it to Liz or anyone else, at least not that she knew of.

Liz climbed onto the bench seat and pressed the smoke detector’s test button. It wailed for several long seconds, refusing to stop. She jabbed the button, pressing hard, but the alarm continued blaring loudly. If anything, it grew even louder.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

Liz clamped her hands over her ears, scrambled off the bench seat, and ran to the

house to track down a screwdriver. She flew out of the house as Lucy's Jeep turned into the driveway.

Her friend sprang from the vehicle and jogged toward her. "Did you set off the smoke alarm again?"

"I was testing it and now it's stuck," Liz said .

"Do you want me to try shutting it off?"

"Please. I'm not having much luck."

Lucy darted inside. She wedged the tip of a flathead screwdriver beneath the edge. She popped the lid off and plucked the battery out.

The blaring stopped.

"Lucy to the rescue." Liz's shoulders slumped. "I couldn't get that thing to shut off."

"The battery probably needs to be replaced. If it's corroding, the alarms are a little more sensitive. Do you have more?" Lucy handed her the old battery.

Liz rummaged around in the junk drawer, removed one from the battery pack, and handed it to her.

Lucy popped it into the slot, replaced the cover, and pressed the test button.

Beep. Beep. Beep. The beeping stopped.

"You're good to go." Lucy stepped down and dusted her hands. "I left a message for you earlier. We need a decision on the half bath sink and toilet so I can get them on

order.”

“Half bath?”

“Yeah. It was at the top of your reno list,” Lucy reminded her.

“You’re right.” Liz placed a light hand on her forehead. “What do you have?”

Lucy trekked back to her Jeep and returned with iPad in hand. Picking out the lower level guest bath was easy. Simple and sleek, yet elegant was the theme, and Liz signed off on both.

“Thanks. I won’t take up any more of your time.” Lucy placed the iPad back in the bag, eyeballing the food on the counter. “That looks tasty.”

“Echo and I spent the afternoon whipping up a Greek feast. Echo invited Treece to dinner, and I helped her cook. ”

“Yummy. Speaking of Echo, have you heard anything else about the guy, Mick Grotto?” Lucy asked.

“It’s a mess.” Liz briefly filled her in. “Echo drove to the store. We were cutting it close and in a hurry. She ran a red light. A cop pulled her over, and I found out that she’s been driving around with an expired license.”

“I’ve done that before.”

“My gut tells me she’s hiding or hiding something. She doesn’t want to apply for a county job, doesn’t want Floyd to put her on the payroll, hasn’t changed her address and now this Mick Grotto, ex-con, shows up and is linked to her.”

“Echo seems like a straight shooter,” Lucy said. “Maybe there’s a reasonable explanation.”

“There’s one more thing. Check this out.” Liz showed her the composite sketch still on her computer screen.

“This looks like Echo. ”

“If it is, someone spotted her not far from where Grotto was attacked. Ruth thinks the local authorities are being notified, and then they’ll release it to the public.”

“And as soon as Sheriff Nelson gets his copy, he’ll be here looking for Echo.”

“Bingo,” Liz said. “Ruth couldn’t find anything on Echo as far as a criminal record. If I can get my hands on her fingerprint, she’ll run it through the AFIS database to see if there’s a match.”

“Automated Fingerprint Identification System. I know all about it,” Lucy said. “It’s crime scene stuff they hang onto to see if, down the road, they pick someone up and can run it through to get a match.”

“Yep. The only problem is, I haven’t come up with a plan on how I’m going to get Echo’s fingerprint,” Liz said.

Lucy tapped her lower lip, her eyes drifting to the mobile home on the hill. “I might have an idea.”

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Lucy reached inside her iPad case. She pulled out a soft cloth and began rubbing the screen. "Echo still has Teddy."

"She does. She loves her little pup. What will happen to him if she ends up in jail?" Liz answered her own question. "It looks as if we'll have both Teddy and Duchess."

"Let's think positive that Echo isn't involved."

"I would love to; however, everything is pointing in her direction. Mick Grotto was here looking for Echo only hours before the attack. Gloria and I found his name on a slip of paper inside her place and now there's the police sketch. Not to mention the fact she told me she was heading back to the farm the day of his attack and I found out later she never showed, which means we can't account for her whereabouts," Liz said.

"I agree. It doesn't look good, but before we vilify, we need to verify."

"Right." Liz blew air through thinned lips. "I shouldn't be jumping to conclusions. What's the plan?"

"We take Duchess for a walk and swing by Echo's place. I'll take it from there."

"Cool. I get to see a Garden Girl in action," Liz teased. "Maybe I'll learn a trick or two."

"You're well on your way to super sleuthing," Lucy said. "Remember how you and Gloria figured out who murdered Deanna Andretti?"

“Under duress and by accident, at least on my part.”

“Doesn’t matter. The outcome was the same.”

Liz plucked her pup from the doggie bed and carried her outside. “Let’s stop by Teddy’s for a minute.” Duchess knew exactly where they were going and trotted up the hill.

Oink. Oink.

“The pigs are out.” Lucy changed direction and strolled toward the pigpen. “They’re lonely.”

“Or hungry.”

“Which one is Pepper?”

“I have no clue.” Liz clamped a hand over her nose. “Good gravy, they smell.”

“They are a little ripe.” Lucy leaned forward. “They look hungry.”

“Floyd will be home soon to feed them.”

“I see a pail of goodies. Do you mind? Pigs have always fascinated me. Gary and I had some years ago. They’re highly intelligent.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“Can you hold this?” Lucy held out the iPad. “Don’t open it or touch the screen. ”

“You sure you want to feed them?” Liz curled her lip.

“I do.” Lucy grabbed a plastic scooper from the side of the pail and scooped up a heaping pile of corn husks, along with large chunks of ripe pumpkin, squash and something Liz couldn’t quite identify.

“Look at the pretty piggies,” Lucy cooed as she sprinkled the food into the trough. “I bet you would love some other piggies to keep you company. Look at how much room you have.”

“Stop.” Liz made a slicing motion across her throat. “Please do not suggest to Floyd that the pigs might be lonely. Two is more than enough for now.”

Lucy filled the scoop again and spread the contents along the trough.

Oink. Oink. The pigs greedily gobbled up the treats while Lucy hung the scooper on the side of the pail. “They seem well-adjusted and happy with their new home. I think you’ll be pleasantly surprised at how social and smart they are.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

The friends continued walking and crested the hill.

Echo’s living room blinds were open, and Liz could see Echo and Treece seated at the small dining room table. A tinge of guilt filled her. How could she possibly suspect such a sweet young woman of such a horrible deed?

Woof. There was no need to knock since Duchess announced their arrival.

Echo appeared moments later. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes bright. “Hello, Lucy, Liz.”

“Is everything all right?” Lucy asked.

“I...” Echo blinked rapidly. “Yes.”

“Liz and I were standing in the driveway, going over the renovations, and I noticed your porch light flashing. ”

“It was?” Echo stuck her head around the corner.

“You have such a cute little doggo.” Lucy thrust her iPad at Echo. “Could you hang onto this for a second?” She didn’t wait for an answer as she passed her iPad to Echo before bending down and greeting the small pup.

Duchess nudged her brother out of the way, eager for attention.

“They are so cute. I would love to get a puppy, and Jasper would be thrilled with a new playmate. Unfortunately, I don’t have time to train one.”

“They need a lot of attention,” Echo said. “How are the renovations going?”

“Great.” Lucy stood. “Liz picked out the main floor’s guest bathroom fixtures. They’re gorgeous. Would you like to see them?”

“Uh...sure,” Echo politely replied.

“They’re on my iPad. All you have to do is press the lower left button,” Lucy said .

Echo did as instructed and Liz’s bathroom choices appeared. “Those are very nice.”

“Modern yet elegant,” Liz said. “We should get out of your hair. I’ll ask Floyd to stop by and check the light.”

“It could be a loose bulb.” Lucy reached inside the light fixture and gave the bulb a

twist. “I think that was it. The bulb was loose.” She reached for the iPad, careful not to touch the screen.

Liz and Lucy gave Treece a quick wave through the doorway, and Liz pulled Echo aside. “How is it going?” she whispered.

“Great,” Echo whispered back. “The food is delicious. Thank you for everything, Liz.”

“You’re welcome.” Liz coaxed Duchess across the deck and waited until they were a safe distance away. “You were very clever. You got the print without her ever suspecting a thing. I never would’ve thought of that. ”

“Practice,” Lucy said. “I’ve had lots of practice. Now, all we need to do is get the print to Ruth.”

Back inside the RV, it took a minute to locate Ruth, who was dining at Dot’s Restaurant.

“Hey, Liz. The cops show up yet?”

“No, but Lucy did, and she helped me get Echo’s print.”

“Sweet.” Ruth whooped. “Where is it?”

“On my iPad, the one I use for business,” Lucy said. “Which means I need to get it to you ASAP or I don’t have a functioning work tool.”

Ruth belched in response. “Excuse me. That one sure came out of nowhere. I’m finishing my dinner. Let me swing by the house and grab my dusting tools. I’ll be there in fifteen.”

Liz eyed the laptop's clock. "Floyd won't be home for another hour. If Lucy will hang around long enough, we'll be here."

"I'm hanging. "

"I'm leaving." Ruth promised she was en route and while they waited, Lucy and Liz huddled around Liz's laptop, searching for updates on Grotto's attack. The sketch still hadn't been released to the public.

"It could be the cops are working on getting a search warrant."

Liz's eyes grew round as saucers. "Do you think they'll search this place?"

"More than likely. If they get a warrant, it will be for here, for Echo's place, anywhere they think would be relevant for collecting potential evidence."

"Great. It's just one more thing for me to worry about," Liz groaned.

"You have nothing to hide, which means you have nothing to worry about."

Ruth arrived as promised, and Liz ushered her inside the RV. "Thanks for getting here so fast."

"No problem." Ruth sniffed the air. "Did you burn something?"

"Dinner. Two days ago," Liz said. "You can still smell it?"

"Ruth has a sensitive sniffer," Lucy said.

"Extra sensitive, but in a good way." Ruth set a bag on the counter.

“I see you brought your bag of tricks,” Lucy joked.

“I always keep it packed and ready to go, especially when we’re in the midst of an investigation,” Ruth said. “Where’s the print?”

“Here.” Lucy gripped the corners of her iPad and placed it in the center of the table.

“Those are nice prints.” Ruth removed the cap on a small plastic bottle and sprinkled white powder evenly over the surface. “There’s a clean one smack dab in the middle.”

“It belongs to Echo,” Lucy confirmed .

Ruth rummaged around inside her bag, removed a roll of clear, wide tape. She tore off a long strip and carefully placed it on top of the print.

She slipped her fingernail under the corner and gently lifted. “Shoot. I forgot to grab one of the microscope slides. They’re in the black plastic case. I only need one.”

“I’ll get it.”

“Be careful not to touch it,” Ruth cautioned. “Grab a tissue from the packet.”

“You have everything.” Liz plucked a tissue from the small packet, opened the black case, and gingerly removed one of the thin glass slides. She placed it on the table next to Ruth. “I feel like I’m in surgery.”

“Sleuthing surgery,” Lucy joked. “I’m sure Echo knows all about this.”

“You don’t...” Liz’s voice trailed off .

“Think she suspects we were after her print?” Lucy shrugged. “It’s highly unlikely, although I suppose anything is possible.”

Ruth carefully placed the piece of tape on top of the slide, eased it into a small pouch, and then slid it into the side pocket of her black bag. “Leonard is in a different time zone. I might be able to get this over to him yet today so he can start working on it.”

Lucy jangled her keys. “I need to head out. Is it safe for me to use my iPad now?”

“Absolutely.” Ruth snapped the top shut and tucked the bag under her arm. “I’m leaning toward not having the results back tonight. Leonard’s a guest speaker at some alien con out in Vegas and I think he’s doing his main presentation this afternoon.”

“I understand,” Liz said. “I appreciate you coming by here on such short notice and offering to help. ”

“It’s better to find out sooner rather than later if you have a tenant in trouble or a tenant who is trouble.”

“I couldn’t have said it better myself.” Liz followed her friends to their vehicles, thanking them again for the help, and then watched as they drove off.

Her eyes were drawn to the small mobile home up the hill. Was Echo in trouble? Or was she trouble? Hopefully, Liz would have a definitive answer soon.

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As soon as Floyd arrived home, Liz showed him the composite sketch of the woman resembling Echo. “I have to admit, it kinda looks like Echo, but I’m not a hundred percent convinced.”

“Let’s go with the assumption it’s not her. It doesn’t change the fact that Echo knew the guy or knew of him,” Liz insisted.

“You always have to be worrying your pretty little head about something.” Floyd gave her a peck on the cheek. “I’m gonna go feed Pepper and Piper before we eat dinner.”

“You’re in for a treat. We’re having the chicken souvlaki along with a trio of Mediterranean dipping sauces that Echo and I whipped up earlier.”

Floyd playfully sniffed the air. “I don’t smell anything burning. ”

“Very funny.” Liz wagged her finger. “I’ll have you know there wasn’t a smidgen of smoke in the kitchen during the entire meal preparation.”

“I can’t wait to taste it.”

Liz warmed their dinner while Floyd took care of chores. She started setting the table and noticed Treece standing near the end of the driveway, talking to his father.

Floyd motioned toward the house and then to Echo’s place. Both shook their head and then Treece left.

Liz waited for him to return inside. “You didn’t tell Treece what was going on with Echo, did you?”

“No. He was complimenting both of you and told me the food was delicious.” Floyd washed his hands in the sink and reached for the towel. “He likes Echo.”

“I believe the feeling is mutual.” Liz filled their plates and took her place at the table. “I hope she’s not trouble. ”

“We can theorize and hypothesize until we’re blue in the face,” Floyd said. “I think you should give it a rest until we have concrete evidence one way or the other.”

Liz let it go but spent the rest of the evening and part of the long night mulling over the possibility Echo had somehow been involved in the man’s attack.

Floyd was up and out of the RV early the next morning. Liz, who wasn’t far behind, was determined to remove the decades-old varnish from the living room bookcases. Her plan was to give them a fresh coat of stain, one that was lighter and brighter than the depressing shade of black.

Duchess, who had been running from the living room to the front window and then to the back porch door, circled the ladder. “What are you doing, silly girl?”

Woof.

“What is it?” She removed her work gloves and followed Duchess to the kitchen’s back door. As soon as Liz opened it, the pup bolted across the yard and took off at a dead run, heading toward Echo’s place.

A sense of dread filled Liz as soon as she crested the small hill. Echo’s front door was wide open. Teddy was racing back and forth, but Echo was nowhere in sight.

“Echo?” Liz jogged to the front deck. She hovered in the doorway, calling the woman’s name. There was no answer.

Her heart skipped a beat, and her scalp tingled. “Echo? Are you here?”

Still no answer. Liz checked every room, but there was no sign of her young tenant. She ran around the side of the house and found Echo staring at the back, cell phone in hand. “Is everything okay? ”

“No.” Echo’s expression grew grim as she motioned toward the back door’s cracked glass. “It wasn’t like this yesterday.”

On closer inspection, Liz could see the glass was pressing inward. Whoever had busted the window had done it from the outside, and a chill ran down her spine. “Someone tried breaking into your place.”

“Teddy woke me up last night barking. I looked around but didn’t find anything. I never noticed the cracked glass.” Fear filled the young woman’s eyes. “Someone is after me. I knew this was going to happen.”

She began babbling about a case in Detroit involving a high-profile politician. “The lead investigator was onto that senator. He didn’t commit suicide. We had proof. Vanessa, my co-worker, knew it and then she died, too. They were coming after me. I tried to tell my boss, Havane, but he wouldn’t listen. Looking back, he may have been in on it. ”

“Hold on.” Liz did a timeout. “You were working on a case where an investigator was going after a senator?”

“For taking bribes. The case was getting a lot of publicity and then bam!” Echo slammed her palms together. “The investigator committed suicide. I knew him. He

didn't kill himself. He was about to ruin Appolina's career and he took him out."

"What sort of proof did you have the investigator didn't commit suicide?" Liz asked.

"There was DNA under his fingernails. Why would he have DNA tissue under his nails if he overdosed? He didn't kill himself." Echo started rambling again, this time mentioning how her house had caught fire. "Appolina took out the investigator, took out Vanessa and now he's after me. I'm as good as gone."

"Did you know Mick Grotto?"

"No. I swear, I don't know who he is. When you said this shady guy came looking for me, I figured they'd found me even though I thought I did a good job of disappearing. Grotto is an ex-con from Detroit. My guess is Appolina hired him to come after me. Something happened. He was attacked and I'm next."

"Where's the evidence...this DNA evidence?"

"In a safe place," Echo said. "I tried turning it in right after it happened, but now I'm afraid to. It's the only thing keeping me alive."

"You have evidence but no one to present it to." Liz tapped her chin thoughtfully.

"Brian Sellers, a close family friend and former circuit judge, might be able to help."

Echo's eyes lit. Her excitement quickly faded. "Can we trust him?"

"One hundred percent. Let me make a few calls." Liz pressed a hand to her forehead, eyeing the damaged door. "I think you should come to the house until we can figure something out."

Liz kept guard while Echo ran inside to throw some things into an overnight bag. She

placed Teddy and the bag inside her car and drove down the hill to the main house, where Liz caught up with her.

“Hang tight and let me see what I can do.” Liz grabbed her cell phone off the counter and discovered she’d missed several calls. One was from Lucy. Another was from Ruth. The other two were from Gloria.

She called her sister first. Gloria picked up right away. “Have the police showed up looking for Echo?”

“No. She’s here with me.” Liz’s eyes slid to Echo, who was nervously pacing back and forth. “Someone tried to break into her place last night.”

“Seriously?”

“Echo thinks someone is after her because of an investigation she was involved in while working in Detroit. She’s convinced Mick Grotto was sent here to take her out.” Liz filled her in on what Echo had told her, from the senator’s investigation to the lead investigator’s alleged suicide and then her colleague’s untimely death. “Echo has proof the investigator didn’t kill himself, but doesn’t know who to give it to. She’s been in hiding and it appears Appolina and his hitmen have tracked her down.”

“How awful. The poor thing must be scared out of her mind,” Gloria said.

“I was thinking maybe we could ask Brian to help us. He has connections.”

“True. He might be the perfect person to get involved. Have you watched the morning news?”

“No.”

“You should check it out. If someone came looking for Echo, it wasn’t Mick Grotto,” Gloria said. “He died late last night.”

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Liz reached out to steady herself. “Mick Grotto is dead.”

“From his sustained injuries,” Gloria said. “Which means the police will kick their investigation up a notch. My guess is they’ll be on your doorstep within a matter of hours. Where are you?”

“Standing in my future kitchen.”

“And Echo is there with you?”

“She is. I had her pack some things up and now we’re trying to figure out what our next step will be.”

Gloria lowered her voice. “Can Echo hear you talking?”

“Mmm. Hmm. ”

“I see. My number one priority is your safety. I’m starting to suspect we don’t have the entire story. It’s hard to tell if Echo is being completely forthright and honest about this whole story involving a senator and an investigator’s suspicious death.”

“True.” Liz avoided looking at Echo, certain the woman was listening in on her end of the conversation. “Ruth and Lucy also called. Let me get back to you.”

“Please be careful,” Gloria said. “Do you want me to come by? Never mind. I’m on my way. This calls for a Garden Girl’s meeting of the minds.”

A sense of relief washed over Liz. She wanted to go with her gut, to trust Echo, but now a man was dead. What if Echo had busted the window to deflect attention away from herself? What if she somehow already knew Grotto was dead? The police would be hot on her trail. It was possible that her plan was to use the attempted break-in to try to convince them that a “mystery” person was after her.

Liz needed to dig into the Appolina story, to see if what Echo told her added up. But first, she needed to figure out what to do with her tenant, who was anxiously peering out the window. “I think you’re right. I’ll see you in a few.”

As soon as Liz ended the call, Echo stopped pacing. “Grotto is dead. That’s who you were talking about.”

“He is.” Liz shoved her phone in her pocket. “Let’s go over to the camper and have a cup of coffee.”

“I...I need to head to work.” Echo’s lower lip trembled as she scooped her pup up and held him close. “Would you mind if Teddy stayed here with you? I’m afraid to leave him at home.”

“Not at all. ”

“Thanks, Liz, for believing in me and trying to help. If Appolina has someone out there, it’s only a matter of time before they get to me.”

Liz asked the question that had been lingering in the back of her mind from the moment Echo shared the story about Senator Appolina. “If Grotto was sent here to come after you, why was he attacked?”

“Who knows? Maybe he got sloppy, left some sort of trail leading back to Appolina, and he found out. Maybe Grotto made a deal to take me out for a certain amount, and

then once he found me, he upped his fee and wanted more. Appolina knows how to find me now and no longer needed Mick Grotto.”

“If he’s as guilty as you say and going with the theory he is involved in Grotto’s death, we need a safe house for you.”

Echo offered her a grim smile. “I could sleep in the barn. I doubt the hoity-toity politician would dirty the soles of his shoes and come looking for me there. ”

Unless he hired a thug, even worse than the last one. Liz briefly closed her eyes. “We’ll figure something out. Just watch your back and Floyd and I will do the same.”

“I will.” Echo gave her pup a gentle hug as tears welled up in her eyes. It broke Liz’s heart to see her hand shake as she placed her beloved Teddy on the floor. “I wish I had never taken that evidence technician job.”

“But you loved your job,” Liz gently reminded her. “Is that why you’re hesitant to apply for a position with the Montbay County Sheriff’s Department?”

“Yes, and no. I...I thought if I flew under the radar, Appolina wouldn’t find me. He would give up and I would be free.”

“Do you think he set your place on fire?”

Echo nodded. “Without a doubt. He was behind my last house burning to the ground, was the one who sent me anonymous death threats. After the fire, I knew I had to get out. I thought West Michigan would be far enough away. I guess I was wrong.”

Liz accompanied Echo to her car and watched as she climbed in, her shoulders slumped and a look of defeat mingled with fear etched on her face.

Frustrated, Liz clenched her fists. There was nothing she could say, no guarantee she could make that the woman would be safe. It was obvious someone was after her. Whether it was Senator Appolina or someone else. A person or persons were out there and they knew exactly where to find Echo.

A patrol car crested the hill and pulled into Liz's driveway. Another Montbay County Sheriff's vehicle followed close behind. Sheriff Nelson emerged from the first vehicle. With a light hand on his holster, he made his way toward them.

"Liz," Echo whispered .

"It will be all right," Liz said. "We need to find out what they want."

"Morning, Mrs. Rasmussen." The sheriff tipped his hat, his eyes laser-focused on Echo. "Ms. Quigley?"

"Y-yes."

"Could you please step out of your car?"

Echo did as the sheriff instructed. "What is going on?"

"I'm here to question you about the death of Mick Grotto and ask if you'd be willing to accompany me to the police station."

"Question?" Echo's voice was barely above a whisper.

"I would like to go with her," Liz said.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Rasmussen. You can't be with her in the room. There's no sense in you following us down there just to sit in the lobby."

“But...”

“It’s okay. I have nothing to hide.” Echo’s eyes met Liz’s. “Can you stop by the house and grab that insurance policy for me? I’m thinking it will be best if you hang onto it in case I need it sooner rather than later.”

“Insurance policy?”

“You know, the one we were talking about.” Echo stared hard and it dawned on Liz that she was referring to the DNA sample.

“Yes. Yes, I’ll go get it.” A ball of lead settled in the pit of Liz’s stomach as she watched the second officer escort Echo to the back of his patrol car. He placed her inside and drove off. The sheriff slowly followed behind.

Liz’s feet were glued to the driveway, her eyes following the vehicles until they disappeared from sight.

Was Echo guilty? Would they charge her with Mick Grotto’s death? She was still standing there, rooted to the same spot, when her cell phone rang. It was Floyd.

“I don’t mean to bother you, but was wondering if you could run over to Echo’s place and make sure she’s all right. She hasn’t shown up for work yet and isn’t answering my calls.”

“She won’t be coming in today.”

“Is she sick?”

“The police picked her up. She’s on her way to the station for questioning.”

“No kidding. They must’ve figured she was the gal in the sketch.”

“Someone tried to break into her place last night through the back door. They didn’t bust the glass out but came close.”

“Did she call the police?” Floyd asked.

“No. Teddy alerted her to something last night. She got up to check it out but didn’t find the cracked glass until this morning. ”

A car crested the hill. “Gloria is here. I told her what happened, and she offered to come over.”

“Do you want me to come home?”

“There’s nothing you can do. Either Echo is involved or she’s innocent. We need to figure out which it is.” Liz promised to call him as soon as she had an update.

Gloria coasted into the driveway. She sprang from the car and hurried to Liz’s side. “What’s wrong?”

“She’s gone.”

“Who is gone?”

“Echo. Sheriff Nelson and another cop just left. They’re taking her down to the station for questioning.”

Lucy’s Jeep flew down the road. She parked next to Annabelle, Gloria’s car. Margaret and Lucy emerged.

Ruth's spymobile was right behind them, and Dot and Ruth climbed out.

"Did we miss anything?"

"Only if you wanted to be here when Nelson and one of his deputies showed up looking for Echo."

"I knew it was only a matter of time," Ruth said. "Gloria told us Grotto was dead. How did Echo react?"

"Defeated. She's defeated and, if she's telling me the truth, she thinks she's in serious trouble. This goes all the way back to Detroit when she was an evidence technician," Liz said.

"Hang on." Dot tapped the top of the bakery box she was holding. "This calls for coffee and donuts. I have everyone's favorite."

"We can't come up with a plan of action on empty stomachs," Gloria said.

"I'll brew another pot of coffee." Liz counted heads. "I don't think we'll all fit in the camper. "

"I noticed a coffee pot in what was the kitchen," Lucy said. "I'll start a fresh pot. You grab your laptop and we can all catch up with where we're at."

Fifteen minutes later, the Garden Girls had assembled in Liz's future kitchen while Dot handed out baked goods. "Gloria, here's a chocolate éclair. There's an apple turnover for Margaret. Lucy gets the pink frosted raspberry twist. Ruth, here's your favorite glazed donut. I wasn't sure about you, Liz, so you get a frosted chocolate with sprinkles."

Liz thanked Dot for the donut and nibbled the edge. “This is delicious.”

“Fresh from Dot’s Restaurant,” Dot said. “Kip has mastered my secret recipes.”

“Brian is working at the hardware store this morning,” Gloria said. “I warned him we might be stopping by later.”

“Why would this involve Brian?” Margaret asked.

“Senator Appolina,” Liz said .

“Senator Appolina,” Ruth repeated.

“According to Echo, he was being investigated for taking bribes. The lead investigator died while things were heating up. His death was ruled a suicide. Echo and her colleague began investigating his death and found some sort of DNA beneath his fingernails.”

“Ah.” Lucy arched a brow. “I heard about that case. It was suddenly dropped.”

“Or swept under the rug,” Ruth said.

Liz continued. “Thinking there was more to it, Echo and the other technician were trying to turn the potential evidence over when her colleague also died.”

Dot’s hand flew to her lips. “How awful.”

“So now there’s a dead investigator and dead colleague, Vanessa,” Liz said. “Remember when we discovered Echo’s Detroit rental burned to the ground? She’s convinced she was the target. Fearing for her life, she quit her job, packed up and moved here.”

“Which is why she didn’t want Floyd to put her on the payroll, was driving around with an expired license and hasn’t applied for a job with the county,” Gloria said.

“Her plan was to disappear. She hoped Appolina would forget all about her and she could start over,” Liz said. “Grotto is dead and someone tried to break into her home last night. She has the DNA sample, what she called her insurance policy, hidden somewhere. She told me to get it and hang onto it.”

“Then maybe you should.”

“The only problem is, she didn’t tell me where she hid it.” Liz motioned to Ruth. “Were you able to get the results back on Echo’s fingerprint?”

“Not yet. Leonard is still working on it. We should have something this morning.”

Margaret cleared her throat .

“What?” Liz asked.

“She could be lying. What about the police sketch of the woman who was near the boat ramp around the time Grotto was attacked? A lead investigator and colleague are dead, but Echo manages to escape. She’s acting suspicious and went MIA around the time of Grotto’s attack. What if he had some dirt on Echo, bribed her and she went after him?” Margaret polished off the rest of her turnover. “Why would Grotto show up on your doorstep? Wouldn’t he want to catch Echo off guard?”

“All valid points.” Liz lifted the lid on her laptop and typed Senator Appolina’s name into the search bar. Several stories popped up, the most recent from six months ago.

Confirming Echo’s statement, Appolina was being investigated for taking bribes. There were several quotes from the lead investigator, followed by a story about his

sudden death. It was ruled a suicide, just as Echo had said .

“What about Echo’s colleague, Vanessa?”

“She’s mentioned once.” Liz copied the woman’s name and added it to a new search screen. Corroborating Echo’s version, the technician had died nearly six months ago. Cause of death was, once again, suicide.

“Our next step is to track down this DNA evidence,” Ruth said.

“Echo told me she put it in a safe place.”

Gloria downed the last of her coffee. “It has to be somewhere nearby.”

Ruth reached into her purse and pulled out a handful of rubber gloves. “We need to figure out if Echo is telling the truth or if she intentionally damaged her home in an attempt to cover up.”

Margaret clapped her hands. “Let’s roll.”

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Liz, Gloria, Ruth, Margaret, Lucy and Dot fell into step, walking along the driveway toward the mobile home. They veered left, making their way up the incline.

Liz, who was trailing slightly behind, felt a nudge on her ankle. It was a sloppy, wet nudge, followed by a grunt. She pivoted, horrified to discover a pig was hot on her heels. “What in the world?”

Margaret, who was walking on Liz’s right side, scrambled back. “Wild boar!”

“It’s not a wild boar.” Liz attempted to nudge the pesky pig away. “It’s Pepper or maybe Piper. They must’ve somehow escaped from their pen.”

“The gate is open,” Lucy said .

“Great.” Annoyed, Liz marched toward it. “C’mon, little piggy. Let’s go back to our pen,” she coaxed.

The pig moved with surprising speed, easily scampering out of Liz’s reach.

“We’re not playing a game.” Liz’s voice grew firm. “We can’t have you getting lost.”

The pig pawed at the dirt and squealed.

“He thinks you’re playing,” Gloria laughed.

“This is ridiculous.” Liz gritted her teeth and lunged forward.

The pig, anticipating the move, skittered back and grunted loudly.

Liz hit the ground with a thud. “Ooff.”

“You’re doing it all wrong.” Lucy ran to the pig’s enclosure. She filled an empty pail with corn husks and vegetable scraps. “Come here, Pepper, Piper.”

The pig tilted its head, greedily eyeing the goodies Lucy was attempting to entice him with .

“Don’t you want a treat?”

The pig took a tentative step closer, zeroing in on the food. Lucy, anticipating his reaction, took a quick step back and began luring the pig to the open gate.

She strategically placed a trail of enticing snacks, each one a step closer to the pen. With the pig safely inside, joining the other one who hadn’t ventured out, Lucy slammed the gate shut.

She wiggled the latch to test it. “They must have unlatched it with their snouts. You might need to add wire or something to secure it.”

Liz ran inside the barn and dug around until she found a roll of baling twine. She returned to the pen and handed it to Lucy. “Will this work?”

“In a pinch. Floyd will have to come up with a permanent fix.” Lucy wound the twine around several times. “I have to say, you’re some sort of pig magnet, Liz. ”

Gloria leaned in and sniffed Liz’s shoulder. “I think they’re attracted to her expensive perfume.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t your idea to get pigs?” Margaret snickered.

Liz’s eyes narrowed. “This is all on Floyd and another one of his fun surprises.”

“Floyd and his surprises,” Dot laughed. “I have to hand it to him. He likes to keep you on your toes. What’s next? Cows?”

“If he has his way, and probably even a few chickens,” Liz grumbled. “We should change our last name to MacDonald. Liz MacDonald, living her lack of luxury lifestyle in a dilapidated farmhouse. I take that back...in an RV.”

“Not for long,” Lucy said. “The renovations are right on schedule. You’ll have the beautiful luxury home you’ve been dreaming about before you know it. ”

“I hate to complain. Floyd spoils me rotten. I just...I’m not sure this Greenacres life is what I envisioned.”

“Plans change. People change.” Gloria squeezed her arm. “I’m proud of you, Liz. You’re giving it a chance and that’s all that matters.”

The precocious pig stuck his snout through a gap in the fence, searching for more treats. Lucy grabbed another handful. “Pigs are very clean.”

“Is that why they roll around in the mud?” Margaret joked.

“They don’t have sweat glands. Rolling around in mud keeps them cool.” Lucy patted the pig’s head. “They’re also very smart, one of the smartest animals there are.”

“You almost make me like them,” Liz said.

“Let’s buy Lucy some pigs for Christmas,” Gloria teased .

“I’m not setup for farm animals. Besides, I can visit Liz’s pigs whenever I want.” Lucy finished feeding them and wiped her hands on her slacks. “Where were we?”

“Heading over to Echo’s place to snoop,” Gloria said. “Let’s check out the damage to the door first.”

“Follow me.” Liz led the others around to the back of the mobile home and showed them the cracked glass.

“Someone was definitely trying to break in.” Gloria ran a light hand over the jagged edge. “I don’t understand why they didn’t get in. One little nudge and the chunk of glass is going to pop out.”

“Like this?” Liz reached for the broken section and Ruth stopped her. “Try not to contaminate potential evidence.” She handed her a pair of rubber gloves.

“Thanks.” Liz slipped the gloves on, gently pressed against the glass and wiggled it out. She set it on the ground, reached inside, and unlocked the door. “See how easy it would have been?”

“Where’s Echo’s bedroom?” Dot asked.

“Down there.” Liz pointed to the far end. “I’ll show you once we get inside.”

“Before we head in, let’s split up and search the perimeter,” Lucy said.

“Good idea.”

The women spread out in different directions. Lucy stayed closed to the tree line. Gloria headed left. Ruth headed right. Dot stuck with Liz to check for signs of any other exterior damage.

The women finished and returned to their starting point.

“I didn’t find anything,” Gloria said.

“Ditto,” Lucy said.

“Me either,” Ruth reported .

“Be on the lookout for Echo’s insurance policy.” Liz held the door and then followed her friends inside. She gave them a lay of the land while Ruth passed out gloves. Once again, they split up to search.

Liz sifted through the kitchen cabinets, but there was no sign of any sort of DNA evidence or confirmation of Echo’s involvement in Grotto’s death. She wandered into the living room, waiting for the others to join her.

Gloria finished last. “The place is clean. There’s no other damage or anything resembling a possible DNA sample.”

“I wonder what happened to the piece of paper with Grotto’s name and a telephone number on it.” Liz made her way over to the end table and rummaged through the stack of papers. “It’s gone. Echo told me she did some research on him the other day. Maybe she tossed it in the trash.”

“Trash.” Lucy smacked her forehead. “Why didn’t I think of that? ”

“We’re losing our touch,” Ruth said. “Investigating 101. Dig through the trash.”

Liz curled her lip. “Seriously?”

“Trash can sometimes turn into treasure when searching for important clues.” Ruth

strode to the kitchen, removed the trash can from the broom closet, and carried it to the center of the floor.

The others gathered around, watching as she dumped the contents out and began inspecting every single item before placing it back inside the bag. There were leftovers from preparing the Greek feast, a discarded tea bag, scraps of fabric, a moldy shower curtain.

“I see a recycle bin.” Lucy slid the recycle bin across the room and began sifting through it. “Maybe Echo’s safe place isn’t inside her home.”

“It has to be here.” Dot spun in a slow circle.

“Unless she left it at work,” Gloria said .

“No way. Talk about cross-contamination.” Liz shook her head. “That place could contaminate evidence faster than you can say, Pepper and Piper.”

Lucy finished sifting through the recycle bin and Ruth wrapped up her trash search. “When is trash pickup? Maybe any potential evidence is already gone.”

“Nope.” Liz made a thumbs down. “Pickup isn’t until tomorrow. If Echo isn’t behind this, she has to be scared out of her mind. Her colleague died. The lead investigator in the Appolina case died. Mick Grotto came here from Detroit looking for her and now he’s dead.”

“We know he isn’t the one who tried breaking in through the backdoor,” Lucy said.

“Unless it was Echo. What if...” Ruth pressed the tips of her fingers together. “Let’s pretend Senator Appolina was guilty of taking bribes. A lead investigator found evidence of it. Appolina pa nicked. He killed him or had him murdered and somehow

managed to make it look like a suicide.”

Gloria picked up. “Echo and the D3 evidence team were brought in to determine if it was a suicide and found DNA beneath his fingernails. Echo and her colleague contacted Appolina to strike a deal. They would confirm the investigator’s suicide and destroy the evidence in exchange for...”

“Money,” Margaret said.

“It’s possible,” Liz admitted. “Echo told me her boss didn’t believe her and she fled Detroit fearing for her life.”

“Two of the three people who could assist in the conviction or exoneration of Appolina are dead,” Ruth said. “Echo is either running for her life or behind it all.”

“If we could only get our hands on that DNA sample.” Dot placed her hands on her hips. “We looked everywhere. ”

Gloria tapped Liz’s shoulder. “You don’t have any idea where Echo may have hidden it? Think hard. Did she say or do anything that might be a clue?”

Liz struggled to remember, replaying her conversation with Echo that morning before the authorities showed up and then the day before, when they were preparing the Greek feast. “I was here with her for a few hours yesterday afternoon when we were whipping up the meal for Treece. She seemed relaxed, happy. We finished just in time. I packed up some food to bring home because it was getting late.”

She continued. “There was a minor incident. It happened right before I left. I got some stains on my shirt and Echo loaned me her stain stick.” Liz’s scalp started to tingle. “I think I might know where Echo hid it.”

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The Garden Girls gathered around Liz, watching as she placed Echo's small ladder beneath the ceiling panel, the one that had popped out the previous day when Echo loaned her the stain stick.

She climbed to the top and gently pressed on the panel, causing balls of dust and debris to fall.

Liz sneezed loudly and coughed. "Gross. Decades of dust are probably up there."

"You think Echo hid the evidence in her ceiling?" Lucy wrinkled her nose.

"The panel came loose yesterday. I told her Floyd could come over and adjust the runners, and she kept insisting it was fine. I can't imagine it popping out on its own, which means someone must've been up here messing around with it." Liz bounced onto the tips of her toes, struggling to slide the panel to the side. "This isn't working."

"Let me try. I don't mind a little dirt and grit." Ruth swapped places with her.

"You're only a smidgen taller than me."

"True. The problem is, you're going about it all wrong." Ruth reached the ladder's top rung and crawled on top of the dryer.

Pop.

Liz cringed. "Don't break her dryer."

“It’ll be fine,” Ruth said. “Mine pops all the time when I climb on it.”

“Why are you climbing on your dryer?” Gloria waved dismissively. “Never mind. I’m sure I don’t want to know.”

Pop. It popped again as Ruth shifted to her knees. She reached above her head and carefully slid the ceiling panel to the side. Shifting her weight, she cautiously stuck her head inside the opening.

Gloria inched closer. “Do you see anything?”

“Yeah. Echo might want to set a few traps.” Ruth dangled a dead mouse pinched between her thumb and index finger.

“Gross.” Liz stumbled back, colliding with Lucy, who was standing right behind her.

“Ouch.”

“Sorry. That is disgusting,” Liz gasped.

“Country living at its finest,” Ruth quipped. “Do you want me to put it back where I found it?”

“Of course not.” Liz grabbed the garbage can and carried it back to the laundry area. “Please...dispose of it.” She turned her head as Ruth released her grip on the decomposing rodent, letting it fall squarely into the receptacle. “Are there anymore up there? ”

“Not that I can see, but...” Ruth let out a small whoop. She reached above her head again and this time when she pulled her hand back out, she was holding a vial with big black DPD letters on the side of it. “Jackpot.”

The others stood quietly, watching as Ruth slid the ceiling panel back in place. She scooched off the dryer and landed lightly on her feet. “I hope Brian can help us.”

“I’ll give him a buzz.” Gloria scrolled through her contact list until she found the number for Belhaven’s hardware store, Nails and Knobs.

“Nails and Knobs. Brian speaking.”

“Hey, Brian. It’s Gloria. I have you on speaker. I’m here with Dot, Margaret, Lucy, Liz and Ruth. We need a favor. Is it all right if we swing by?”

“Sure. I’ll be here all morning.”

“Sweet. We’re on our way.” Gloria ended the call and waved her phone in the air.

“Let’s go. ”

“We should take one vehicle.” Ruth jangled her keys. “My vote is for the spymobile.”

The friends piled into Ruth’s van for the short drive to downtown Belhaven. Nails and Knobs was busy, forcing the friends to hang out until the coast was clear.

Brian’s eyes twinkled with mischief as the women approached the rear counter. “The Garden Girls in full force. I’m in trouble now,” he teased.

“Not you, but possibly Echo Quigley, Liz’s new tenant,” Gloria said. “Does the name Senator Appolina ring a bell?”

“Charles Appolina,” Brian said. “He was being investigated for taking bribes. If I recall correctly, the lead investigator committed suicide, and the case was closed.”

“Echo worked in Detroit as an evidence technician and was involved in the case. She

and her colleague, who also mysteriously died, believed someone murdered the guy who was in charge of the investigation.”

Brian’s expression sobered. “No kidding. Appolina took the investigator and an evidence technician out?”

“That’s what we’re trying to figure out,” Liz said. “Mick Grotto, an ex-convict from Detroit, came by the farm a few days ago looking for Echo. He was attacked and has since died of his injuries.”

“I heard,” Brian said.

“An eyewitness helped create a composite sketch of a person seen in the area where Grotto was attacked, and that person looks a lot like Echo.”

Brian let out a low whistle. “Wow. The ex-con is dead. Someone claims Echo was in the vicinity of where he was attacked and you’re wondering how she’s involved.”

“Correct.” Ruth removed the vial from her purse and placed it on the counter. “Echo told Liz she had evidence, DNA evidence found beneath the lead investigator’s fingernails and we think this may be it.”

“She kept potential evidence?” Brian asked.

“Echo said her boss didn’t believe her, that Appolina was behind the death of the investigator and her colleague. She fled Detroit and came here.”

“Do you think she’s telling the truth?”

“We’re not sure,” Ruth said. “Sheriff Nelson picked her up earlier for questioning. If she is, and the DNA of the investigator’s killer is in this vial, then this could clear her

name.”

“She gave it to you before she was picked up?” Brian asked.

Liz and Gloria exchanged a quick glance.

“You didn’t...” Brian briefly closed his eyes. “Please tell me you didn’t break into her home to get your hands on this.”

“We didn’t break into her home to get it,” Margaret said .

“I had a key. She told me to go get her insurance policy, which is this vial, so it’s all above board,” Liz insisted. “Although I’m not sure she would’ve been keen on having all of us search her place.”

“Someone cracked the glass in her back window last night and could be after her,” Liz said. “Do you think you’ll be able to help us?”

Brian wrapped a paper towel around the container and slid it off to the side. “I have a friend in forensics. I’ll get this over to him and ask him to put a rush on it. Who should I call when I have the results?”

“Me,” Liz said. “This is all on me. If Appolina’s DNA is found in this sample, will they reopen the case?”

“They’ll reopen the case, examine the evidence, possibly even hire a new investigator.”

The women thanked him. They exited the hardware store and gathered on the sidewalk out front. While the others discussed the sample, Ruth stepped off to the side, cell phone in hand.

She joined them a few minutes later. “Leonard has the results from Echo’s fingerprint sample.”

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Ruth motioned for her friends to join her back inside the spymobile. “Leonard ran Echo’s fingerprints through the central database. There was no match.”

“No match?” Liz echoed.

“He wasn’t able to find her in the database,” Ruth confirmed.

“It still doesn’t explain her having Grotto’s name and number on the slip of paper,” Liz said. “I hate to say it, but my gut tells me Echo knows more than she’s letting on. Why she kept the DNA sample is beyond me.”

“Unless she and Grotto teamed up to bribe Appolina. She met with Grotto, something happened, she attacked him and then he died,” Lucy said .

“At a public boat ramp?” Dot frowned. “I don’t know how big this Grotto guy was, but Echo is as skinny as a rail. I doubt she could overpower a man, a rough and tumble convict at that.”

“She could have been in hiding and sneaked up on him from behind,” Ruth pointed out.

“We’ve done as much as we can,” Gloria said. “We’ll have to wait for Brian to get the results back and see what the authorities come up with as far as Echo is concerned. Maybe we won’t have to do anything. Maybe she is guilty and the authorities can link her to Grotto’s attack.”

During the ride back to the farm, Liz mulled over all they had learned. Obviously,

Echo was involved with Mick Grotto. Had the two been working together to put the squeeze on the senator?

Liz still wasn't convinced. Most of the information Echo had given her added up.

Job as an evidence technician in Detroit? Check .

Death of the lead investigator in the Appolina case? Check.

Echo's colleague's untimely death, also linked to the investigation? Check.

Two confirmed suicides were definitely questionable, not to mention the fact Echo's Detroit rental burned to the ground, and she barely escaped. On the other hand, she may have been involved with some bad people and it came back to bite her.

Liz was on the fence about believing the DNA was linked to Appolina. It still didn't clear Echo, at least as far as she was concerned. She could have been involved in some shady dealings as well.

Who had been behind the break-in at Echo's place? Why hadn't they finished what they started? Unless Echo was the one who had done it in an attempt to deflect and make it appear someone was after her .

One thing was certain. It wasn't Grotto. He was dead.

"I think she's behind it," Margaret said. "She had Grotto's name with a telephone number next to it. If you ask me, it's a cut and dried case."

"Except for the fact she has...had a DNA sample," Liz reminded them. "We'll know more once we find out who it belongs to. That will be the link to who is behind the suspicious deaths."

Gloria tugged at her seatbelt. “The backdoor attempted break-in. I keep going back to it. If it wasn’t Echo and someone was trying to get to her, why didn’t they finish the job?”

“I’m with Gloria,” Lucy said. “If they were that close to Echo, why didn’t they take her out?”

“She told me Teddy alerted her to something. Echo owns a handgun. Maybe she went to investigate, gun in hand. The person trying to break in saw it and took off. ”

Ruth pulled onto Cash Creek Road, swerving toward the edge to miss the chatter bumps. “Floyd needs to call this in and have the road commission come and grade your road.”

“It’s always been like this.” Liz gritted her teeth as the spymobile jostled along the gravel road. “I would love to see it paved, but I’m sure it’s low on the priority list, since there are only a few houses out here.”

“Speaking of houses, how is it going with your neighbor, Christi?” Dot asked. “Is she still sneaking around your property?”

“Not lately. At least I haven’t caught her. Oddly enough, she’s kinda growing on me,” Liz said. “She doesn’t bother me nearly as much as she did when we first bought the place. I think she’s bored and lonely.”

“And you and Floyd provide plenty of entertainment,” Gloria joked .

“She fell off her bike the other day and got banged up pretty good. I should probably check on her.”

Back at the farm, the women exited Ruth’s van and assembled in the driveway.

“I need to get Dot’s Hot Meals on Wheels on the road.” Dot consulted her watch. “Thanks to Liz and Floyd’s generous donation, we’ve added a new stop, at least for the rest of this year, which means I should get a move on.”

“Do you need an extra hand today?” Gloria asked.

“Thanks for the offer but I’m all set. Ray and I are running the route.”

Ruth shaded her eyes. “How is Ray feeling these days?”

Dot had recently confided in her friends that her husband had been suffering episodes of forgetfulness and memory fog. Concerned he was showing signs of the onset of dementia, he’d undergone a thorough physical exam and his doctor discovered an underactive thyroid.

“His medication is working wonders. He hasn’t gotten lost, forgotten what he was doing or where he was going for several weeks now,” Dot said. “Thank you for your prayers. I was so worried.”

“I hate to hear those stories where people work hard their entire lives, only to retire and have health issues or worse, they die before they’re able to enjoy their golden years,” Gloria said.

“Which is why we should make the most of our time together and do the things we want,” Lucy said.

“Eat that chocolate cake,” Ruth said.

“Take that dream vacation,” Margaret chimed in.

“Work on that bucket list,” Dot said.

“Buy that designer handbag,” Liz quipped.

A collective groan went up .

“Leave it to Liz to point out the materialistic bucket list.” Gloria patted her sister’s shoulder. “At least you’re consistent.”

“There’s nothing wrong with enjoying the finer things in life,” Liz insisted. “I think Floyd and I balance it nicely with our donations and trying to help others.”

“Well said.” Dot nodded. “You be you, Liz. We wouldn’t want you any other way.”

“Here, here.” Gloria dug inside her purse and pulled out her car keys. “I should probably get going too.”

Ruth slid back behind the wheel and rolled the window down while Dot hopped in the passenger seat. “You’ll let us know when Brian has the DNA results?”

“I will. Hopefully, he’ll give them to someone who is above board and not involved in Appolina’s illegal activities,” Liz said.

“If I trusted anyone, it would be Brian,” Dot said .

Gloria eased in next to her sister, watching as Lucy and Margaret, followed by Ruth and Dot, drove off.

A movement across the road caught Liz’s eye. It was Christi, returning home. She exited her vehicle, grabbed a set of crutches, and hobbled toward the door.

“Christi is on crutches,” Gloria said.

“She was limping after her fall. She must’ve hurt herself worse than she thought.” Liz, with Gloria by her side, crossed the driveway and caught up with her neighbor as she was unlocking the door.

“Hey, Liz. Hello, Liz’s sister.”

“Gloria,” Gloria said.

“What happened?”

“I sprained my ankle when I fell off the bike.” Using her free hand, Christi swung the door open. “I saw the police at your house early this morning. Is everything all right?”

“They took Echo in for questioning.”

“Oh.” Christi blinked rapidly. “They found out she had something to do with that Grotto guy’s death?”

“Possibly,” Liz said. “I hope they clear Echo but also figure out who was behind it.”

“Absolutely. You never know about people these days. She has visitors coming and going at all hours over there,” Christi said. “You can’t be too careful. That’s why I keep my surveillance cameras rolling all the time.”

“Hold up.” Liz lifted a hand. “What do you mean, Echo has people coming and going at all hours?”

“Just last night, my camera caught someone parked on the side of the road near your property. I was going to mention it to you, but then I don’t want to be that nosy neighbor. I’ve been trying hard to mind my own business.”

“Someone tried to break into Echo’s home last night. They almost busted out the glass in the back door,” Liz said. “We think Teddy, her pup, scared off whoever it was.”

“Do you mind if we take a look at the recording?” Gloria asked.

“Of course not. You might want to invest in some surveillance equipment, Liz. It seems like you need it more than me,” Christi said.

“You’re one hundred percent correct,” Liz said. “In fact, I’m moving it to the top of my to-do list.”

Christi dropped her purse and keys on the chair and led them through the house to her surveillance room in the back.

Gloria spun in a slow circle, taking in all the blinking lights and AV equipment. “You could give Ruth Carpenter a run for her money.”

“I told her the same thing,” Liz said. “NASCA might be right up Christi’s alley.”

“The North American Surveillance and Communications Association? ”

“Ruth is a member and moving up the ranks,” Gloria said.

Christi’s eyes lit. “Really? I was thinking about applying online. Has she learned any interesting things, stuff like tips on security and surveillance?”

“You have no idea,” Gloria chuckled.

“That does it. I’m signing up.” Christi hopped behind the desk and let out a low groan as she eased into the chair. “This sprain is cramping my style.”

“We won’t stay long,” Liz promised. “We’ll take a quick peek at what your camera caught and be on our way.”

“I have this nifty new app which detects movement.” Christi tapped the sidebar and opened a new screen. With a few clicks, she stopped on a frame.

Although the image was grainy, Liz could see a vehicle slowly drive past. Brake lights appeared and then the lights disappeared .

“This is where someone gets out.” Christi paused the recording. She reached for her mouse and enlarged the frame. “Right there. Keep watching. They walk behind the vehicle and then you can see them take off toward her place. I figured maybe she invited a friend to come over and didn’t want them pulling into the driveway or being seen.”

“Echo can invite whoever she wants over,” Liz said. “This didn’t strike you as odd?”

Christi pursed her lips and gave a small shake of her head.

“Because Liz and Floyd have had several odd things happen since moving in,” Gloria guessed.

“Well, I mean. Yes. There have been a bunch of workers coming and going. Cars, trucks. The police have been over to your place multiple times. I just...it didn’t strike me as all that unusual.”

“Twice. The police have been by twice.”

“This time,” Gloria reminded her sister. “Don’t forget about Deanna Andretti. ”

“Okay, maybe more than most people, but not more than half a dozen times.”

“You asked, and I’m explaining why it didn’t strike me as odd.”

Liz had to concede Christi made a valid point. “Is there any way to get a license number?”

“I can see.” Christi tapped the keys and zoomed in. The picture became even fuzzier.

“Crud. Well, that didn’t work.”

“At least Echo was telling the truth,” Gloria said. “Someone did try to break in.”

“So...let’s say I want to invest in a similar surveillance setup,” Liz said. “I like the feature and how it picks up movement.”

“It saves so much time.” Christi rolled her eyes. “You have no idea how many hours I’ve wasted going over recordings before I splurged and bought the upgraded app. ”

She showed them how the app worked when a vehicle drove by.

“Hang on.” Gloria stopped her. “When was this recorded?”

Christi consulted the timestamp. “A couple of hours ago.”

“This looks like the same vehicle you recorded in the middle of the night. Whoever tried to break into Echo’s place is still hanging around.”

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Christi pulled up the image of the vehicle parked alongside the road from the previous night and placed it next to the one taken only hours earlier. “You’re right. It appears to be the same vehicle.”

Liz studied the four-door sedan with tinted windows. “I’m almost certain the vehicle has a Michigan license plate, but again, we’re not able to read the numbers.”

“You know what? I’ve seen this car driving up and down the road the past few days.” Christi clicked through several days’ worth of recordings and, sure enough, the same vehicle with tinted windows kept appearing. “We don’t get a ton of traffic on this road, just locals, farmers and such. That’s a pretty fancy vehicle to be driving up and down a bumpy dirt road. ”

Christi replayed the video and Liz watched as the person exited the vehicle and disappeared into the dark night. They returned, moving at a quick pace. They sat inside with the engine running for several long seconds before driving off.

“Did you catch that?” Gloria asked.

“Catch what?”

“It looks like they threw something out the window before they left.”

Christi slid the bar back to the precise spot where the person exited the car. Several long moments ticked by before they returned.

“Right there,” Gloria said.

Christi hit the SLO-MO button. The driver climbed inside. The vehicle's taillights lit. Seconds later, they tossed something out the window as they drove off.

"We need to figure out what it was," Gloria said .

Christi struggled to her feet. "I'll show you where the camera is. You can check the angle and go from there."

It was a slow trek to the front porch and the camera which was pointed at her driveway, giving an unobstructed view of the barn. It also offered a bird's-eye view of the road and Floyd and Liz's property.

Liz wasn't able to see Echo's mobile home. The wooded area lining the road served as a buffer, giving her privacy. It also gave anyone who wanted to sneak up on her ample opportunity to access the property via the woods. "Let's go check it out."

"This is exciting." Christi hobbled to the edge of the porch. "I would love to tag along and try to help, but I don't want to slow you down."

"You wouldn't be slowing us down," Liz said. "Although I can't guarantee the terrain is conducive to crutches. "

The trio crossed the road. They conducted a thorough sweep of the area, starting near the corner of the driveway and working their way beyond the point where the vehicle had been parked. Unfortunately, a thick layer of leaves and debris made it impossible to find anything.

"We're never going to find anything in here." Liz kicked at a pile of dead leaves with the tip of her shoe. "This is like searching for a needle in a haystack."

"It's time to call in the professional who has the tools we need," Gloria joked.

“Professional?”

“Ruth has a modified metal detector. Whatever they tossed out caught the light, which means there’s a chance it’s metal and she might be able to find it.” Gloria dialed her friend’s number. “I know you just left, but we might need some help. I’m here with Liz and her neighbor, and am putting you on speaker. ”

“Brian already got an answer on the DNA sample,” were the first words out of Ruth’s mouth.

Christi sucked in a breath. “DNA sample?”

“No. Christi’s camera caught someone parked on the road adjacent to Echo’s place last night, backing up her claim someone tried breaking in. It was a four-door sedan. Before they left, they tossed something out the driver’s side window.”

Gloria picked up. “We searched the area and couldn’t find anything.”

“So you were wondering if I had time to bring my metal detector over and help with the search,” Ruth said.

“It would be nice, but I hate to keep bothering you,” Liz said.

“You’re not bothering me. I dig this stuff. Are you ready for me now?”

“We’re here,” Gloria said .

“I’m on my way.” A giddy Ruth promised they wouldn’t have to wait for very long.

Christi winced as she shifted her weight.

“We need to get you off your feet.” Liz ran back to the house, grabbed a folding chair and placed it at the end of the driveway.

“Thanks.” Christi settled in, a pained expression on her face. “I did a number on my ankle. What was Ruth saying about DNA results?”

“It’s nothing.” Liz waved dismissively.

“My doctor wanted me to do one of those DNA tests, to see if I had any genetic disorders. I’m kind of on the fence about it.” Christi went into a long spiel about the pros and cons of DNA testing and, much to Liz’s relief, forgot all about her question.

Ruth arrived and parked the spymobile near the end of the driveway. She circled around to the side door and grabbed her metal detector before joining them. “You weren’t kidding when you said you were waiting for me. ”

Christi grabbed her crutches and struggled to her feet. “Ruth Carpenter. I’m sure you don’t remember me. I used to stop by the post office to mail products from my home business when you still worked there.”

“You’re the bird feeder lady.”

“I am. Business has been a little slow lately. Orders for my custom bird feeders will pick up again when we get into the colder weather and people start thinking about feeding their feathered friends.”

“I wouldn’t mind seeing what you have,” Liz said. “I could use a bird feeder out back.”

“I’ll show you my current inventory later.” Christi pointed to Ruth’s metal detector. “Your friends have been bragging about how you’re a super sleuth and telling me

about all the surveillance equipment you have in your home.”

“And in the spymobile.” Ruth patted the side of her van .

“Spymobile?” Christi echoed.

“That’s what we nicknamed my van. It’s tricked out with surveillance equipment.”

“State-of-the-art equipment,” Gloria added. “Not to mention it’s bulletproof.”

“Bulletproof?”

“With D65,” Ruth proudly boasted. “We’ve only had to put it to the test once or twice.”

“Like the time that guy shot at us in Nantucket,” Gloria said.

Christi’s jaw dropped. “Someone shot at you?”

“Lucy. A killer shot at Lucy.”

“That...that sounds exciting.”

“Not to mention a little dangerous, but that’s never stopped the Garden Girls from investigating.”

“Do you mind showing me around your van?”

“Not at all.” Ruth handed the metal detector and headphones to Gloria. “I’m thinking about upgrading my antenna. The one that’s on here got caught on a tree branch. It’s bent and I’ve been getting a lot of white noise.”

“Antennas are tricky.” Christi hobbled after Ruth. She hovered near the sliding door, watching while she showed off her equipment.

Liz pulled Gloria aside. “I think Ruth has met her match.”

“Like two peas in a pod,” Gloria chuckled. “They cut those two from the same mold.”

Ruth finished showing Christi the inside and then they circled the van with their friend pointing out the various exterior features.

“How much did all of this cost, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I think I’m up to about seventy-five grand, including the cost of the spymobile. ”

“It’s an investment in security,” Christi said. “Thank you for showing me. You have an impressive setup.”

“You’re welcome.” Ruth reached for the metal detector and Christi eyed it with interest.

“Have you also upgraded your metal detector?”

“I’ve done some minor adjustments. I tweaked the sensitivity setting and started using headphones. My hearing isn’t what it used to be.”

Gloria rubbed her hands together. “Let’s put it to use. According to Christi’s surveillance video, the sedan parked right about there.”

Ruth shifted her gaze to the end of the road. “It’s pretty isolated out here. It would be easy to sneak around after dark without being noticed.”

“Which is the reason we installed cameras. Darren, my husband, travels for business. Before Floyd and Liz moved in, there was no one around.” Christi returned to the folding chair while Liz, Gloria and Ruth began making their way through the thick brush.

“It’s going to be tricky finding anything,” Ruth warned. “This is some thick brush and we have no idea what we’re looking for.”

The trio moved at a slow pace, scouring the area. They reached the end of the tree line and then turned back around for another sweep.

“I’m not getting a single hit,” Ruth said. “Are you sure this is the spot?”

“Positive.” Liz studied Christi’s house. “For all we know, it could’ve been a piece of paper that blew away.”

A plume of dust near the end of the road grew thicker. A car crested the hill. It was the Montbay County Sheriff’s patrol car. As it drew closer, Liz could see the sheriff behind the wheel. He pulled off to the side, exited the vehicle, and opened the rear door.

A pale Echo emerged .

She caught Liz’s eye as they made their way over.

“Ms. Quigley has cooperated. Our investigation will continue into Mr. Grotto’s death. I’ve advised her to remain in the area in case we need to chat again.” Nelson pointed at the metal detector. “I almost hate to ask, but what are you up to?”

“Someone tried breaking into Echo’s place last night,” Liz said. “Our neighbor’s camera picked up a vehicle in the vicinity. They tossed something out the window

and we're trying to find it."

"Echo mentioned the attempted break-in. Do you mind showing the recordings to me?"

"Not at all." Christi slid out of the chair and escorted the sheriff to her property.

Liz waited until they were out of earshot. "How did it go?"

"They think I killed Grotto because someone saw a person who looked like me in the vicinity of the boat ramp around the time of his attack." Echo rubbed her forehead. "It's only a matter of time before they try to pin this on me."

"Not yet," Gloria said. "Someone who drives a dark sedan with Michigan plates was trying to get to you."

"We found your insurance plan and turned it over to Brian Sellers, a former circuit court judge. He's having the DNA tested," Liz said. "If they can tie it back to Appolina, there's a good chance they'll reopen the case involving the investigator's death."

"If they believe me," Echo said in a small voice. "It's my word against a powerful state senator. Who do you think they're going to believe?"

"Evidence is evidence. I'm guessing it would be inadmissible, but it could get the ball rolling again," Gloria said. "Although I'm not sure how the officials will react when they find out you've been hanging onto it."

"Because no one believed me," Echo insisted. "Not my boss, no one. "

The sheriff and Christi returned a short time later. "Mrs. Kravitz has forwarded a

copy of the recording to me. I'll have our forensics team try to enhance it and get a plate number."

"I have some experience in enhancements," Echo said. "They can be tricky."

"There's a fifty-fifty chance. They might not be able to get the entire plate number, but maybe enough to point us in the right direction." Nelson nodded toward the woods. "While I'm here, I would like to check out the damaged door."

Echo led the sheriff away, up the hill and out of sight.

"The poor woman," Christi tsk-tsked. "It's a good thing whoever it was got scared off. Imagine what might have happened."

"We need to figure out who it was. The sooner, the better."

Sheriff Nelson and Echo returned. "I told Echo I'll file a report on the attempted break-in. If it's related to Mick Grotto's death, we need to get to the bottom of it."

Nelson returned to his patrol vehicle. He sat inside for several long moments with the engine running before doing a U-turn and driving off.

"Well?" Ruth waved the detector in the air after he was gone. "We're waiting for Brian to get back with us, for the sheriff to see if he can get a hit on the license plate. It looks like we're at a standstill until we have more information."

While Ruth talked, Christi used the tip of her crutch and began swiping at the brush. Back and forth. Back and forth. She abruptly stopped. "Hey! I think I found something!"

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Using the rubber end of her crutch, Christi pointed at something on the side of the dirt road. "It's right there."

Ruth bent down and grabbed the silver foil packet with Kip's Bar and Grill emblazoned on the front.

"It's an empty packet of matches," Gloria said.

"It hasn't been here for too long." Ruth flipped it over. "It still has a little foil left on the outside."

"I wonder if there's anything else." Gloria focused her attention on the ground nearby. "I see part of a cigar."

"Don't touch it." Ruth pulled a tissue from her pocket, picked it up, and inspected the torn label. "Mo something, cigar. "

"This could be potential evidence."

"Or not. It's falling apart." Ruth tipped the cigar over and bits of tobacco fell out.

Gloria made her way toward the tree line separating the mobile home and the road. "I would imagine at night and after dark, you could tell if Echo's lights were on."

"There's one way to find out." Liz jogged down the driveway. She ran inside the RV, grabbed a flashlight and then made a beeline for Echo's place. She reached the back door, turned the flashlight on and aimed the high beam toward the road. "Can you see

my light?” she hollered.

Gloria’s muffled reply echoed back.

Liz pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed her sister’s number. “I’m standing near Echo’s back door shining my flashlight toward the road. Can you see anything? ”

“No.” Liz could tell Gloria was on the move. “Try again. Even though it’s daylight, we should be able to see something between the trees.”

Liz made a slow sweep with the flashlight, back and forth. “I’m running it along the tree line.”

“Yes. Yes. I can see light.”

“Cool.” Liz shut the flashlight off and jogged back to where they stood waiting. “Putting together a timeline, I believe whoever parked here was watching Echo’s place. They waited for her to go to bed and then sneaked through the woods.”

“And they used matches from Kip’s Bar and Grill to light a cigar, a brand that has the letters m and o in it,” Gloria said.

Kip’s, a downtown Belhaven business, was the town’s only bar and after-hours hangout. It offered a limited selection of food—packaged pizzas, burgers, and fries, and not much else. Gloria had been inside the bar a few times, mostly to nose around when she was investigating .

He was also the owner of Dot’s Restaurant. He purchased it from Dot and Ray the previous fall, seamlessly picking up where the couple left off. The recent purchase meant Kip owned nearly as much Belhaven commercial property as Brian and

Andrea Sellers. Between the three of them, they owned half the downtown.

Gloria flipped the matchbook over. “Kip knows everyone in town.”

“Which means if a stranger stopped by and started asking a bunch of questions, Kip would know it,” Ruth said. “I’m feeling the need for a burger and fries.”

“You read my mind,” Gloria said.

“What about me?” Echo asked. “Do you think it would be worth it for me to go with you?”

“Yes,” Gloria and Ruth said in unison.

“If Kip, or one of his employees, remembers someone stopping by there, they might mention something that hits your radar,” Ruth said .

“At the risk of inserting myself into an investigation uninvited, can I tag along?” Christi asked.

“I don’t see why not.” Gloria shrugged. “If not for you, we wouldn’t be visiting Kip’s in the first place.”

The women climbed into the spymobile. During the ride, they threw out ideas about who was hanging around. All clues pointed back to whoever had taken Mick Grotto out.

“We still don’t know if Senator Appolina is even involved.” Gloria motioned to Echo. “Is there anyone else you can think of, anyone from your past who may have come looking for you?”

“Appolina is the only one who comes to mind,” Echo said. “He was in big trouble. The lead investigator was on the news almost every night, insisting he had evidence that was going to take down a powerful political figure.”

“How many people knew you had the lead investigator’s DNA sample?” Ruth asked. “I mean, if no one knew about it, how could someone be after it?”

Echo began chewing her lower lip. “Maybe Vanessa told someone, and it got back to Appolina. She and I worked together on most cases. It stands to reason if someone took her out, they’re also after me.”

While Echo talked, Liz turned her cell phone on and pulled up a search site. There was story after story about Appolina’s potential involvement in a lucrative union bribe as well as several questionable business practices. “This senator was playing with some other high-profile people.”

“Yes, he was,” Echo said. “Maybe it isn’t Appolina who is after me. Maybe it’s someone even more desperate to make sure the state doesn’t reopen the lead investigator’s case.”

Liz tapped on the most recent story about the senator. “It looks like the DA’s office is already looking at reopening the senator’s case.”

Ruth blew air through thinned lips. “I’m sure he’s not happy about that.”

“Which might be the catalyst for him to want to tie up any loose ends if he’s involved in criminal activity,” Ruth said.

They reached downtown Belhaven. Ruth found an empty spot directly in front of Kip’s Bar and Grill. Nearby, Dot’s was bustling, and almost all the tables were full. “Dot’s is still doing a brisk business.”

“Chicken and dumplings sounds good right about now, but I suppose one of Kip’s burgers and fries will hit the spot.” Ruth patted her stomach.

Liz and the others stepped inside the bar where they were greeted by the strong smell of stale cigarettes and spilled beer mixed in with the tantalizing aroma of burgers grilling. She lingered in the doorway, giving her eyes a moment to adjust to the dim light .

There were only a handful of patrons inside, and almost all were seated at the bar.

“Hello.” A young woman with jet-black hair, the ends a deep shade of purple, and tattoos running up her right arm greeted them.

“Hello,” Gloria replied. “We were wondering if Kip was around.”

“He’s next door at Dot’s. He spends most of his time over there now.”

“Do you sell cigars?”

“Yeah.” The woman motioned to the glass case behind her. “What kind would you like?”

“Do you have one that starts with an m and an o?” Ruth asked.

“We do. It’s the Montabello. They’re a buck ninety each or you can buy a box of nine for seventeen dollars.”

“Can I see one?” Gloria asked .

“Sure.” The woman grabbed a cigar from the case and set it on the bar. “It’s not a bad cigar. It’s better than Old Toes, which is our bestseller.”

“Old Toes?” Liz laughed.

“It smells like the name. Are you looking for recommendations or to buy one?”

“No, but I appreciate the offer. I’ve never been much of a cigar smoker,” Gloria joked.

“I figured as much.” The woman stuck the cigar back inside the case. “Can I get you something?”

“We’re heading to the restaurant for a bite to eat,” Gloria said. “I have another slightly strange request. Can I see a pack of your matches?”

“Sure.” The woman reached beneath the bar and pulled out a pack of silver foil matches. “Pretty fancy, huh?”

“It’s an unusual foil cover and certainly catches the eye.”

“Kip is into what he calls buyer motivation by recognition. He read somewhere people associate the color silver with wealth. All I know is people dig them and we give away a lot more than we used to.”

Liz studied the cover and nearly fell on the floor at what the woman said next.

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The gal behind the bar placed her hands on her hips. “We got these in last Thursday and have already gone through a box.”

Liz made a choking sound. “You just got these in? I’m sorry. I didn’t catch your name.”

“I’m Pam. These new matchbooks came in less than a week ago. We’re selling twice as many cigars and packs of cigarettes.” The bartender tapped the side of her forehead. “Like I said, Kip is into this buyer motivation thing and I have to admit, it sure looks like he’s onto something.”

Ruth leaned an elbow on the bar, casually looking around. “Someone has been hanging around our friend’s place late at night. They left part of a Montabello cigar and one of your empty matchbooks along the side of the road. We’re trying to figure out who it was.”

“We don’t sell a lot of that brand. Like I said, the Old Toes brand is our bestseller.”

“Have you sold any of the Montabello cigars since the new matchbooks became available?” Gloria asked.

Pam thought about it. “No. Not that I can recall, but it doesn’t mean we didn’t. I’m the full-time day shifter here at the bar. We sell a lot more cigars and cigarettes to the late night and weekend crowds.” She told them most of the locals preferred the stinky brand. “Carrie, our other bartender, might have. She’ll be here in about half an hour.”

Liz thanked the woman. The group made their way to the small eating area at the

back of the bar.

“Well?” Liz asked as soon as they were seated. “Echo’s stalker appears to have spent some time in here, bought a cigar and took a book of matches before staking her place out last night. ”

“Now, all we need is to identify the person.” Ruth fiddled with her phone. “I found a photo of Appolina. Our next step is to ask both bartenders if they’ve ever seen this guy.”

A server appeared. She took their orders, and while they waited, Pam stopped by their table. “I was thinking about the cigar thing. I sold one the night before last. The dude made a big deal about the cost and how much cheaper he could get it over in Detroit. Yada, yada.”

Liz, who had taken a sip of her Diet Coke, started choking. “Did you say he mentioned being from Detroit?”

“Sure did. He was a short guy, kinda pudgy around the middle. His gray hair was a little thin on the top.”

Ruth held up her cell phone and the photo of Senator Appolina. “Was this the guy? ”

Pam’s eyes squinted as she studied the picture. “It’s possible. He had a nasal voice, like he had allergies or something.”

A customer called her over, and she excused herself.

“It could have been Appolina,” Christi said.

Echo shivered involuntarily. “Maybe he sent another henchman. I mean would he

actually drive all the way to the other side of the state to track me down?”

“A possible scenario is he hired Grotto. Something went wrong. He took Grotto out and decided to handle the matter—meaning you—himself,” Gloria theorized.

The burgers and fries arrived, and Liz wolfed hers down, realizing the only thing she’d eaten was the donut Dot had brought to the house. A lot had happened in a short amount of time. Echo’s attempted break-in, learning about Mick Grotto’s death, Sheriff Nelson hauling Echo off to the station for questioning, finding the possible DNA sample and turning it in, finding the matchbook and part of a cigar.

“I’m stuffed.” Liz patted her stomach. “Investigating and hunting for clues is hard work.”

“The food was delish.” Christi peeled a sliver of cheese off her plate and licked her finger. “I can’t remember the last time I went out to eat. Darren and I hardly ever go anywhere. He travels a lot and by the time he gets home, all he wants to do is stay there. It gets boring and lonely.”

“You should hang out with Liz more,” Ruth teased. “She’ll keep you from being bored.”

“Bored?” Liz muttered. “I haven’t had a moment’s peace since...”

“You married Floyd. You know you love every minute of the chaos.” Gloria wagged her finger at her sister.

“It’s true. My life is a lot more exciting now. ”

“You make a cute couple,” Christi said.

“Thanks and thank you for letting us take a look at your cameras. I think we’re closer to figuring this one out,” Liz said. “It’s only a matter of time.”

The server arrived with the check, and Liz was quick to grab it off the table. “My treat. Now that I think about it, one of the last times I ate out was when Echo and I had dinner at Green Springs Café.”

“Back in the good old days, when I wasn’t being investigated and someone wasn’t trying to take me out,” Echo said.

Liz patted her hand. “Don’t worry. The Garden Girls are on the case. They’ll get to the bottom of it.” Out of the corner of her eye, she watched a woman enter through the backdoor. She made her way behind the counter and to the other end of the bar, where Pam was waiting on customers.

The women huddled close together, casually glancing in their direction .

Echo grabbed the end of her straw and jabbed at the ice in her glass. “The bartenders are talking about us.”

“What can you tell us about them?” Echo had admitted to Liz not long after they met that she was a people-watcher. She loved studying them and trying to figure out what made them tick.

“Pam is married. Her husband’s name, or maybe her son’s name, is Evan. She digs motorcycles and her dye job is called lavender tips,” Echo said.

Christi lifted a brow. “That’s impressive. How do you know all of that?”

“Her tats...tattoos. She’s wearing a wedding band unless that’s for show, to keep the bar creepers from hitting on her,” Echo said. “I haven’t had enough time to gather

intel on the other chick, the one I'm assuming is Carrie. Here she comes now..."

The woman tied an apron on as she waltzed across the floor. She stopped when she reached their table. "Hello," she sing-songed. "I'm Carrie, one of Kip's other bartenders. Pam was telling me you're looking for someone who may have been in here buying a Montabello."

"We are. It would have been recently and around the same time Kip switched over to those fancy foil matchbooks." Ruth showed her the photo of Appolina still on her phone. "Does this man look familiar?"

Carrie shook her head. "No. I've sold a few of that brand cigar, but only to locals. She also said one of you was possibly being stalked."

"Me." Echo lifted a hand. "At least it's looking that way."

"I've had a stalker or two in my day, mostly older men who come in here thinking they can slip me a twenty and I'll be their date for the night, if you know what I mean."

Liz pressed a hand to her chest. "How awful. They want you to..."

"Hook up with them for a few extra bucks." The woman chattered on about some of the customers until Pam flagged her down. "I gotta get to work. Good luck finding the person."

After paying the bill, Liz and the others headed back to the van for the short drive to the farm.

Christi was the first to leave, claiming her ankle was throbbing. "Thanks for including me today. I'll keep a close eye on the cameras and let you know if I see

anything else.”

Ruth was next. She told them to let her know when Brian got the DNA test results back, and they promised that they would.

Liz, along with Gloria and Echo, let the pups out and then headed to the mobile home to take a closer look at the back door.

Liz snapped a picture and forwarded it to Floyd. She followed up with a phone call, asking him to bring a piece of plywood home so they could cover the door until they were able to have the glass replaced.

“How is Echo?”

“She’s glad the sheriff didn’t arrest her. We think we might be onto something, but don’t have anything definite yet.”

“I’m sure between the police and Gloria, you’ll figure out who it is.”

“Hopefully before they get to Echo.” Liz ended the call and joined her tenant and sister, who were hanging out in the living room. “Floyd is bringing some plywood home to cover the window. What’s next?”

“We wait for the DNA results from Brian,” Gloria said. “We wait to see if Sheriff Nelson is able to get a license plate number.”

“Until then, I’m a sitting duck.” Echo cast an anxious glance toward the driveway. “Whoever it is knows where to find me. This waiting is making me a nervous wreck.”

“You could head over to the farm,” Liz suggested. “It will keep you busy and take

your mind off all of this.”

“That’s a great idea.” Echo changed into work clothes and headed out. She promised to text Liz as soon as she got to the farm and Liz gave Floyd a heads-up that Echo was on her way to work.

Back at the RV, Gloria waited until her sister finished sending Floyd’s text. “Echo might not be completely innocent. If Appolina took the investigator and Echo’s colleague out, how did she escape?”

“With potential DNA to boot,” Liz said. “I wonder how much longer it will take for Brian to get back to us.”

“Let me give him a call.” Gloria left a message, asking Brian if he’d gotten an update.

Minutes later, her cell phone rang. “He’s calling. Hey, Brian.”

“Hey, Gloria. I was just getting ready to give you a call. The DNA test results are in.”

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“Hang on, Brian. Let me put you on speaker.” Gloria tapped the speaker button. “The DNA test results came back. What did they find?”

“They’re inconclusive.”

Liz blinked rapidly. “Inconclusive.”

“The sample you gave me did not produce enough information to link it to a specific person.”

“Bummer,” Gloria said. “We’re back to square one, unless Sheriff Nelson can get a read on the license plate of the vehicle that’s been hanging around Echo’s place. Either way, it’s not a smoking gun.”

“No smoking gun means no arrest,” Liz said.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t able to get you what you needed,” Brian apologized .

“Thank you for trying.” Gloria ended the call and tucked the phone in the side pocket of her purse. “Maybe the DNA was a hoax to begin with.”

“Which means Floyd and I will need to sleep with one eye open,” Liz said.

Gloria left not long after and Liz returned to the house, where she restlessly rambled from room to room. According to Lucy and Margaret, an army of workers would arrive first thing the following morning to begin working on the kitchen, the main floor powder room, as well as the living room.

She hoped Lucy was right and things would move fast. Living in the cramped RV was getting old. Their bed was too small, and the bathroom wasn't much larger than a postage stamp. Despite the challenging conditions, at least they had a roof over their heads, and in the end, her dream home would be worth the wait and all the headaches.

Liz returned to the RV. She flopped down on the sofa and turned the television on. Her eyelids drooped, and she leaned her head back to rest for a minute.

Duchess, along with Teddy, jumped up on the sofa and began tromping across her legs.

Liz bolted upright and stared at the clock. She'd napped for over an hour. It was time to figure out what to make for dinner.

While she worked, she mulled over Echo's predicament. If she was telling the truth, the poor girl had to be scared out of her mind and exhausted after living in hiding for months on end.

Her colleague was dead, and now she was being stalked. Not only stalked, but targeted.

Floyd arrived while she was carrying the plate of chicken she'd cooked on the outdoor gas grill back inside. Echo pulled in behind him.

She left the car running and made a beeline for the RV. "Thanks for taking care of Teddy. We'll check in with you later. "

Floyd watched her climb back in and drive off. "Echo's mighty nervous about what's happening."

"Who can blame her?" Liz filled him in on the cigar, the matchbook, and their trip to

Kip's Bar and Grill. "A man came in and bought that brand of cigar. He told one of the bartenders he was from Detroit. We showed both bartenders a picture of Appolina, but neither one of them recognized him."

"And the DNA samples you gave Brian?"

Liz made a thumbs down. "Inconclusive. All we have left is Christi's surveillance recording of the vehicle. Sheriff Nelson is working on seeing if they can get a read on the vehicle's license plate."

"I have a sheet of plywood already cut. I would like to put it up before it gets dark." Floyd cast a hesitant look toward Echo's mobile home. "What are we gonna do about Echo and her staying at her place tonight?"

"The only available spot we have is the sofa. "

"And you're not sure we'll be safe if we ask her to spend the night here," Floyd guessed.

Liz nodded. "What should we do?"

"Let me think about it." Floyd grabbed his box of tools and trudged off. Liz finished cooking dinner and glimpsed her husband stopping to feed Pepper and Piper.

When he finished, he placed his tools in his truck and caught up with her inside the RV. "We're gonna need to replace the whole door. I screwed the plywood in tight. It's not going anywhere, but it ain't pretty."

"I bet not." Liz fixed their dinner plates and set them on the table. "Have you given any thought to what we should do about Echo?"

“Echo and Teddy left a few minutes ago. She told me she’s gonna spend the night at a friend’s house.”

“We’re hitting some dead ends. Obviously, someone was trying to break in last night. All we know for certain is a sedan was out there and whoever was in the vehicle left part of a cigar and empty matchbook behind.” Liz changed the subject. “With everything going on, I forgot to ask Echo how dinner with Treece went.”

“He isn’t saying much, but I have noticed the two of them eating lunch together, and Treece spends more time in the milking parlor when Echo’s there.”

“They make a cute couple.” Liz picked at her baked potato. “I hope she’s not involved in Grotto’s death.”

“Me too. I would start questioning my judgment.”

After dinner, Floyd and Liz meandered around the property, with her husband sharing his vision for a working farm. It was clear he planned to add more farm animals, and Liz needed to prepare herself for what was to come.

She stifled a yawn. “I’m sorry. It’s been a long day. ”

“And tomorrow will be just as busy.”

“Yes, it will.” The workers Margaret and Lucy had lined up would start putting the pieces back together. It was both exciting and terrifying. She’d never designed a home before. What if she hated it? What if she spent all this money on something she didn’t love?

Liz pushed the nagging thoughts aside. Of course, she would love her home. It would be everything she dreamed of. She’d seen the computer-generated finished product

and it would be perfect.

The couple made their way back to the RV and turned in early that evening. Liz flipped and flopped, hearing every creak and bump, every snap and pop.

Duchess was restless too, and Liz could hear her small nails clicking on the linoleum floor as she made her rounds, from the window to the sofa to the dinette .

Floyd crawled out of bed before sunup and started a pot of coffee.

A bleary-eyed Liz wasn't far behind.

"You look like I feel."

"It was a rough night." Liz leaned her hip against the counter. "I heard every single creak and groan. I had no idea an RV could make that much noise."

Duchess pawed at Liz's foot, and she picked her up. "Duchess was restless too. Maybe we'll get some sort of resolution about Echo's situation today."

"Echo." Floyd finished filling a coffee cup and handed it to his wife. "I forgot until just now. Someone called the farm asking to speak with her yesterday. It was right before we were getting ready to leave."

Liz perked up. "Who was it?"

"I can't remember the name. Audrey took the message." Floyd told her he would track it down as soon as he got to the farm. He ate a quick breakfast and then stopped by the pigpen to feed Pepper and Piper before heading to work.

Liz showered, and then she and Duchess meandered to the front yard. She grabbed

the garden hose and began watering the flowers.

Chirp. Chirp. Liz set the hose down and pulled her phone from her pocket. It was Floyd. “I found the message from the man who called here yesterday looking for Echo.”

“A man?” Liz asked.

“His name was Mark Havane.”

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“Mark Havane,” Liz repeated. “Why does that name sound familiar?”

“I don’t know. That’s what Audrey wrote down.”

“Has Echo shown up for work yet?”

“Nope. She should be here any minute. I’ll give her the message as soon as I see her.”
Floyd ended the call, promising to let her know what it was all about, if Echo told him.

She didn’t have long to wait. Floyd called back while she was rolling up the hose.

“Mark Havane is Echo’s old boss.”

“That’s why his name sounded familiar. She mentioned him, how he didn’t believe her that someone took the lead investigator out. I wonder why he’s calling her at the farm,” Liz said .

“He must not have her cell phone number.”

“How did she react?”

“At first she seemed surprised, but then not so much. She took his number and thanked me.”

“Interesting. She wasn’t necessarily surprised or alarmed by the fact her former boss had tracked her down.”

“Nope.”

Liz thanked Floyd for letting her know, and then promptly dialed Gloria’s number.

“It might not be odd,” Gloria said after Liz filled her in. “Although you would think if they had kept in touch, he would’ve had her cell phone number.”

“Floyd said Echo didn’t seem concerned about it. Maybe I’m making a mountain out of a molehill. I wonder if Sheriff Nelson has had any luck getting a license plate number.”

A loud rumbling filled the air and Liz watched as a big box truck and two large work vans pulled into the driveway. Lucy’s Jeep was close behind. “It looks like the work crew is here to get started on my kitchen.”

“Woo-hoo. Lucky you!” Gloria whooped. “I’ll let you go.”

Liz quickly ended the call and hurried around the side of the house.

A whirlwind of activity ensued as the workers unloaded cabinets, boxes of flooring and a pallet of light fixtures. The materials were transferred onto carts and taken inside.

The sound of hammers and saws was music to her ears and, although she was determined to stay out of the way, Liz stopped by for a sneak peek while the workers took their lunch break.

“Well?” Lucy removed her safety glasses and joined Liz in the doorway. “It’s starting to take shape now.”

“I can’t wait.” Liz clapped her hands and spun in a slow circle. “It’s going to be

beautiful. ”

“You’ll have the classiest kitchen in Montbay County,” Lucy joked. “You’ll be able to host parties to your heart’s content.”

“And you and Margaret will be the VIPs for our first one.”

The hours flew by as workers continued buzzing in and out of the house. Quitting time came, and the workers piled into their vehicles and drove off.

Liz waited until they were gone to slip back inside. The smell of fresh sawdust filled the air. She made her way around the massive center island and paused in front of what would be her farmhouse sink overlooking the side yard.

She stared dreamily at the open pastures and green acres for as far as the eye could see. Liz was still standing there, envisioning her dream home, when Floyd arrived.

“It’s looking good, sugar lips.”

“The transformation is going to be incredible. ”

“Are you happy?” Floyd slipped his arms around her.

“Thrilled.” Liz bounced on the tips of her toes and kissed his cheek. “I love what I see so far.”

“And I love you.”

“How is Echo?”

“She’s fine. I think she’s leaning toward coming home tonight. I stopped by her place

before I came here. It doesn't look like anyone was over there messing around last night."

"That's a relief." Liz pressed a hand to her chest.

"She was gonna give that old boss of hers a call. She's thinking he might be willing to put in a good word for her if she applies for a job over at the county."

"Oh, good. I mean, bad for the farm, but good for her," Liz said. "It would be a shame for her to waste her skills and knowledge. "

"I agree." Floyd patted his stomach. "I'm hungry, and you've been doing a lot of cooking. What do you say we order pizza?"

"I say that sounds great." Liz reached for her phone. "We'll have it delivered hot and fresh in under thirty minutes."

A movement caught her eye. "Echo's home."

Their tenant parked behind Floyd's truck, and Liz met her near the back door. "The workers got a lot done today."

"I heard. I thought I would stop by to check it out."

"We still have a long way to go, but at least we're making progress," Liz said.

"It's gonna be beautiful." Echo finished touring the lower level. She turned to go, and Liz stopped her. "We're ordering pizza. Why don't you join us for dinner?"

"I don't want to impose. "

“It’s not an imposition. We’ll have plenty.”

“Thanks. I need to run home and get cleaned up.”

The food arrived not long after Echo returned. The trio sat on the front porch, enjoying the warm summer evening and discussing the renovations.

Echo confirmed no one had bothered her place. “I talked to my old boss, Havane, earlier. He promised to give me a glowing recommendation. I think I’m ready to apply for a county job.”

“Good for you,” Liz beamed.

“We’ll miss you,” Floyd said. “You’re a hard worker, but you need to follow your heart and do what makes you happy.”

Liz dipped her crust in the pizza sauce. “Was there a reason for his call?”

“You know, now that you mention it, I’m not sure. He said he tracked me down through another former co-worker and was surprised to find out I had moved to West Michigan.”

“Is he still a supervisor at the place where you used to work?” Liz asked.

“Yeah. He said they’re super busy. He’s in charge of hosting the inner-city fundraiser again.” Echo explained it was an annual event that raised money for area youth programs. “It was great fun. We did crazy things to raise money. My favorite was the wheelbarrow obstacle course.”

“I’m sure Montbay County plans similar events,” Liz said.

Echo wiped her hands on her napkin and grabbed her cell phone. “I have pictures.” She tapped the screen and handed Liz her phone. “That’s me and my co-worker Vanessa, the one who died. She’s in the wheelbarrow. Mark is on the right. You might get to meet him. He said he would be in the area tomorrow. If he had time, he was going to give me a call. ”

Liz studied the short man with the pudgy middle. His hair was gray and thinning on top.

“Mark doesn’t look like he would be able to move very fast, but he can,” Echo said.

Liz started to hand the phone back when something prompted her to take a closer look. She tapped the screen to enlarge the picture.

“What is it?” Echo asked.

Liz pressed a hand to her forehead, struggling to remember what the bartender had said about the man who was in Kip’s buying a Montabello cigar. “Do you remember the description Pam, the bartender at Kip’s, gave us of the cigar-smoking stranger?”

Echo’s eyes widened. “She said he was short, kinda roundish and balding, with gray hair. You don’t think...”

“We need to run this over to the bar to see if your old boss is the guy who was in there.” Liz sprang from her chair, and Floyd stopped her .

“Hold on. I’m going with you this time. Before we leave, we need to find out if she’s working.”

“You’re right. She told us she was the day shift bartender. I’m hoping she’s still there.” Liz made a quick call to the bar. “She’s there, but will be clocking out soon.

We need to get a move on.”

The trio piled into Floyd’s pickup truck and took the back roads to Belhaven. Downtown was packed, and the only empty spot was in the post office’s parking lot across the street.

With Floyd leading the way, they made a beeline for the bar.

Pam was in the corner ringing up purchases. Liz caught her attention and made her way over. “Pam.”

“Yes.”

“I was in here the other day with my friends, asking you about a man who purchased a Montabello cigar. ”

“I remember.”

“We showed you a picture, but you weren’t sure if that was the guy.”

Pam tucked the order pad into her work apron and nodded. “Yeah. He wasn’t a regular and hasn’t been back since, at least as far as I know.”

Echo stepped forward. “Actually, I think the person who came in was my former boss. I have a picture of him and was wondering if you could identify him for us.”

Pam shrugged. “I’ll try.”

Echo pulled up the photo and showed it to the woman.

“It’s kinda dark.”

Echo tapped the screen. “Does that help?”

“Yeah.”

Liz’s heart hammered in her chest as the bartender studied the photo .

“This is the guy.” She handed the phone back. “I’m almost a hundred percent certain because I remember the mole above his eye.”

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“You’re sure?” Echo asked.

“Yes. He had a raspy voice.” The bartender lowered her voice and croaked. “He sounded like this.”

Echo’s face turned ghostly white. “He was here.”

“A couple days ago.”

“Do you remember anything else?” Liz asked.

“Nope. That was it. Raspy voice. Montabello cigar. Light beer.”

Floyd thanked Pam and the three of them headed out.

“Now what?” Liz asked. “We can confirm Echo’s former boss has been here for a couple of days. More than likely, Christi’s camera caught him near Echo’s place the night someone busted out her window.”

Ping. Echo jumped at the sound of her cell phone pinging. Her hand trembled as she turned it over. “It’s him,” she whispered. “He’s calling.”

“We need time to think,” Floyd said. “Let it go to voice mail.”

Echo dismissed the call. “He knows where I work and where I live. He knows I have the DNA sample, or at least had it.”

“Something tells me he’s here looking for it,” Liz said. “We need to come up with a plan to nail him. The Appolina case is back in the spotlight, which means if your former boss was in on it with the senator, they’re getting desperate, desperate to make sure there are no loose ends.”

“And I’m a loose end.”

“We could contact Sheriff Nelson, but we have no proof, other than Pam the bartender confirming Havane was here at the bar. ”

Echo began shaking her head. “I know how this works. It would be my word against his. It happened before. I put my trust in him. It backfired. I almost died when the place I was renting burned to the ground. I’m sorry, but I can’t trust the Montbay County Sheriff’s Department not to go right to Havane and tell him what’s going on.”

Liz blew air through thinned lips. “We need proof. Solid proof Havane was, or is, involved with Senator Appolina, and then we can turn it over to the local authorities.”

“Gloria always comes up with good ideas,” Floyd said.

“Let me see if we can get everyone together, Ruth, Lucy, Dot, Gloria and Margaret.”

Echo rubbed the sides of her arms. “We can’t do it in public. If Havane is following me, he could also be watching me, watching us, right now. ”

Liz motioned them to Floyd’s pickup truck. She waited until they were inside to dial her sister’s number.

“Hey, Liz.”

“We need help. Echo’s former boss, Mark Havane, is the one who’s been hanging

around. We're almost a hundred percent certain he was over at Echo's place. He's still in the area and there's a good chance he wants to meet with her."

"Oh no."

"The Appolina case is heating back up. If Echo's boss was involved, he's desperate to get his hands on the potential evidence."

"Has he threatened her?" Gloria asked.

"No," Echo said. "Looking back, I never should have told him I had it. I didn't know he was behind all of this or that he'd come after me."

Gloria grew quiet, so quiet Liz thought their call had been disconnected .

"Are you still there?"

"I'm thinking. Paul and I finished eating dinner. Where are you?"

"Parked in front of Kip's place," Liz said.

"You're right around the corner. Come on over. I'll see if the others can meet us here and maybe we can put some sort of plan together."

"The sooner, the better. If Havane is in on it, he's only in town for a short amount of time before he heads back to Detroit. My guess is he's going to make a move."

"Let me make some calls. I'll see you soon."

Gloria and Paul's farm was only a few miles out of town. They arrived to find the porch light on and the back door ajar with the couple waiting inside.

“Lucy, Margaret, and Ruth are on their way. Dot can’t make it. She and Ray are cleaning up from the evening food truck run. ”

Liz greeted Paul, who was seated at the table. “We’re sorry to barge in on you on such short notice.”

“Don’t give it a thought. It’s a common occurrence around here,” Paul joked.

Ruth arrived next, followed by Lucy and then Margaret.

Paul, along with Floyd, stood off to the side while the women gathered at the table.

Taking turns, Liz and Echo filled them in on the recent developments.

“To sum it up, we believe Mark Havane, Echo’s former boss who heads the county’s forensics team, was working with Senator Appolina, taking bribes and turning a blind eye to criminal activity,” Liz said. “The lead investigator died. Echo and her colleague questioned his death.”

Echo picked up. “Which is when we tried to turn the sample over to Havane. He wouldn’t listen to me. Maybe he didn’t believe I had anything worthwhile, which could be the case since the DNA sample came back as inconclusive.”

“But he, meaning Havane, doesn’t know that for sure,” Lucy said.

“If the authorities reopen the case, he could be trying to get his hands on it in the off-chance you had something,” Ruth said.

“Correct,” Echo confirmed. “He called me out of the blue, claiming he was in the area and wanted to meet.”

“Have you agreed to meet with him?” Margaret asked.

“No. He called me again a short time ago and left a message.”

“You haven’t listened to it?” Gloria asked.

“Not yet.” Echo tapped in her four-digit code, turned the phone on speaker and played the message .

“Hello, Echo. Havane here. I’m in the area and was wondering if we could meet first thing in the morning. I was thinking about our last conversation and how the senator’s case was drawing attention again. If you still have state’s evidence in your possession, you could be in very big trouble. Please call me back at your earliest convenience.” Havane rattled off a number, and the message ended.

“He wants to get his hands on that DNA sample,” Gloria said.

“I don’t have it. Mr. Sellers does,” Echo said. “He’s going to kill me, isn’t he?”

Paul spoke. “We won’t let that happen. If your former boss is involved and drove all the way across the state to get his hands on the sample, believing it to be potential evidence, he could become even more desperate.”

“So we give him a DNA sample,” Lucy said.

“How?” Margaret asked .

“I have a bunch of old DPD bottles,” Echo said. “They’re in a box in my hall closet.”

“That’s it.” Ruth gave a double thumbs up. “We create a new DNA sample and give it to Havane.”

“Let’s call Brian,” Paul suggested. “The original DNA sample could be inconclusive for several reasons.”

Gloria tracked Brian down at home, who confirmed the DNA results were inconclusive.

“But it could still be viable DNA.”

“Correct,” Brian said. “I’m no forensics expert, but that was what I was told.”

Echo waited until the call ended. “What he said is true. Inconclusive could be for any number of reasons. So I should call Havane back and set up a meeting?”

“My vote is yes,” Liz said. “Meet him at Dot’s Restaurant for breakfast, lunch, whatever. We collect his saliva and Voila! We have our own sample and can send it in to see if it matches the one you and your colleague collected.”

“Liz might be onto something.” Gloria tilted her head. “We need to make sure we get a clean sample. I’m sure Kip will let one of us fill in as a server.”

“I’ll do it,” Lucy volunteered. “I’ll be the server. It will be fun.”

“And I’ll hook Echo up with a recording device,” Ruth said.

“Gloria and I will be there too,” Paul said. “Only steps away in case things go sideways.”

“I can’t keep running and looking over my shoulder. It’s them or me and it’s not going to be me,” Echo vowed. “At the very least, I’ll go down fighting and prove not only did Vanessa not commit suicide, but neither did that investigator.”

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Liz stepped off to the side while Ruth attached the listening device to the back of Echo's blouse. "Are you sure she needs this? I mean, all we're doing is getting DNA."

"He might say something to incriminate himself. Besides, I hardly ever get to use this old school stuff anymore. I want to make sure it still works."

"Hopefully, he won't see it." Echo nervously clutched her throat. "Are Gloria and Paul here?"

"I'll check." Liz darted out of the restroom and into the restaurant's dining room. She returned moments later. "They're here. You and Havane will be seated at the table next to them. Paul is a retired cop. He'll be close by if anything happens."

"Right. Right." Echo's hand trembled as she tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "The plan is for us to order something to eat or drink. Lucy will be our server, and she's going to make sure she gets some good samples."

"I'm glad we brought Sheriff Nelson in on this. He has a couple off-duty officers near the front to make sure things don't go sideways for Echo. He was even able to convince the county's forensics team to clear a spot on their work schedule. They agreed to test the samples as soon as they're dropped off at the lab," Ruth said. "They have the original DNA sample you gave to Brian. If there's a match between Havane's sample and the original you found beneath the investigator's fingernails, they should know pretty darn quick."

"And if there is a match, they bust my old boss and, hopefully, Senator Appolina,"

Echo said.

Ruth adjusted the device's settings and placed a light hand on Echo's back. "We want to make sure you're seated next to Paul and Gloria. We need to get you over to the table before Havane arrives. "

Liz casually strolled out of the women's restroom and turned right, making her way to the hostess stand in the back where Floyd, Margaret and Dot had gathered. She glimpsed Sheriff Nelson hanging out in the kitchen, chatting with Kip.

Through the lattice, she could see Echo take a seat at the table adjacent to Paul and Gloria. Long moments ticked by. Five...ten...eleven. A man matching the photo Echo had shown her finally entered Dot's Restaurant.

He paused in the doorway until catching Echo's eye and making his way to the table.

Lucy emerged from the kitchen and slipped one of the server aprons over her head. "Are we ready to roll?"

"Havane just got here," Liz whispered. "You look great."

"I haven't had a uniform on in decades. I hope I don't spill anything. "

"All we need is a sample," Floyd said in a low voice.

"It should be a piece of cake." Lucy checked to make sure she had an order pad and pen. She set two glasses of ice water on her tray and carried them to the table. She returned moments later and placed the handwritten order on the ticket holder. "Order up."

Lucy gave the wheel a spin and hurried over. "Two meatloaf lunch specials, a basket

of homemade bread and two Cokes ought to give us what we need.”

Liz hung back, watching as Echo and her former boss chatted. Although she wasn’t able to see Echo’s expression since her back was to her, she could read Mark Havane’s body language. He appeared relaxed and smiling while at other times he clasped his hands and leaned forward, a clear sign he was trying to get a message across.

Echo slid her chair back and said something to him before hurrying to the women’s restroom .

Liz caught up with her there. “How is it going?”

“He wants the sample. I haven’t given it to him yet.”

“What about touching stuff? Has he used the silverware?”

“No, but he will. He can’t eat meatloaf with his hands,” Echo joked.

“At least you still have a sense of humor.” Liz patted her shoulder. “You’re doing great. Try to get him to eat and drink as much as you can. Lucy will get the goods. Sheriff Nelson is waiting in the back. We’re almost across the finish line, Echo. You can do it.”

“As soon as we eat, I’ll hand over the faux sample. He’ll leave and it will be over.” Echo took care of business and joined Liz, who was waiting by the sink. “Do you think once he has what he believes to be the evidence, he’ll come after me?”

Liz had spent half the night wondering the same thing. Would Mark Havane try to take Echo out? If he was involved with Senator Appolina, they had already killed the investigator, Echo’s colleague, and possibly even Mick Grotto. They were in deep, so

deep they would need to get rid of Echo as soon as they had what they wanted.

Echo didn't wait for an answer. "He will. I can see it in his eyes. You know how I like to read people? Mark's eyes are dark pools of evil. If we don't nail him, I'm a goner."

"You know him better than I do, Echo."

She squared her shoulders and stared at her reflection in the mirror. "Let's do this."

Long minutes turned into half an hour and then another forty-five minutes as Liz and Floyd slipped into the back and began pacing.

Sheriff Nelson consulted his watch. "It won't be long now. My guys seated near the front texted that Havane is getting ready to leave."

"Here comes Lucy."

Lucy carried an empty tray of dishes into the kitchen, a triumphant gleam in her eye. "Havane left. Mark Havane used everything on this side of the tray."

"Way to go, Carlson." The sheriff slipped on a pair of gloves before placing each of the utensils...a fork, a straw and a glass, into individual zippered bags. "The team is on standby, waiting for this. We should have the results within hours, before Havane has a chance to leave town."

Kip wandered over. "Well?"

"We believe we have what we need," Lucy said.

Nelson lifted the bag. "Thank you for your help, Kip."

“Always happy to assist the local authorities.” Kip gave Nelson a mock salute and turned to Lucy. “Good job, Lucy. I’m short-staffed these days. You wouldn’t happen to want a part-time, pick-your-own-hours job, would you? ”

Lucy shook her head. “I’m flattered you would consider hiring me. Unfortunately, the Garden Girls and my Lucky Strike gun training classes, not to mention Liz and Floyd’s huge renovation project, keep me busy.”

“If you change your mind...”

“You’ll be the first to know.”

Echo appeared in the doorway. “We got some good samples. Lucy and I made sure of it.”

“It helps when one of us is an expert evidence technician,” Lucy said. “You did great. I never would’ve suspected a thing.”

“I was nervous the entire time. My adrenaline was pumping. At one point, I thought I was going to throw up.”

“The important thing is you pulled it off.” Liz lifted a hand. “High five for a job well done.”

Echo smacked her hand. “It helped having Paul and Gloria right there. ”

Ruth stormed into the back, her earpiece still connected. “I got it all on tape. He was pressuring Echo to hand over the goods.”

“But I held out, waiting until the very end to give him what he wanted,” Echo said. “I needed to make sure his DNA was on as much stuff as possible.”

“An evidence technician getting the evidence,” Liz said. “You put all of those years of experience to good use.”

“To take down a man I considered a mentor and a friend,” Echo said.

“Now, all we have to do is wait,” Lucy said. “I predict we’ll all be able to sleep better tonight.”

“Amen to that,” Liz said. “Chasing down bad guys is wearing me out.”

Sheriff Nelson texted Paul before the group left the restaurant. “The samples are at the local lab. The team has already started working on it. Given the gravity of the case, it’s getting top priority. We’ll know if there’s a match between Havane’s samples and Echo’s originals within the hour.”

The group caravanned to Paul and Gloria’s house to wait for the news. She fixed a pot of coffee and then they gathered out on the porch.

Mally, Gloria’s springer spaniel, made her rounds, greeting the guests and begging for back scratches.

A restless Echo wandered toward the garden.

Liz started to follow, and Floyd stopped her. “She needs a minute alone. This has been a heavy burden for Echo, the death of her friend and colleague, being stalked, harassed and threatened. It’s gonna be a bit of a shock if she finds out it was her boss, a man she looked up to and trusted.”

Liz cast her tenant a concerned look. She was so thin and had always struck Liz as being haunted by something or someone. Little did she know until recently who and what that had been .

Mally trotted to Echo's side. She gave the pup a pat on the head and began meandering around the barns and gardens.

An hour passed, and Liz kept checking her watch. "I thought Sheriff Nelson promised us it wouldn't be long."

Paul's cell phone rang. "There he is now."

"Echo!" Liz frantically motioned for her to join them.

Echo ran back to the porch.

"Sheriff Nelson is on the phone."

Paul tapped the screen. "Hello, Joe. Let me put you on speaker. I have a whole group on standby, waiting to hear the results."

Liz held her breath as she waited. Dear God, please help Echo put an end to this nightmare.

"It's a match," Nelson said. "The DNA on Mark Havane's dishes and straw from Dot's Restaurant match the DNA sample Echo obtained from the lead investigator at the time of his alleged suicide. We're already en route to pick Havane up."

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Liz slid the safety glasses on top of her head, watching as her sister doubled over, her shoulders shaking with laughter.

“What’s so funny?” Liz frowned.

“Your raccoon eyes,” Gloria gasped, clutching her gut.

“Seriously?” Liz plucked her compact from her front pocket and flipped it open, her eyes widening in horror at the sight of the perfectly round indentations circling her eyes. “I thought the safety glasses felt a little snug.”

She snapped the compact shut and found her sister, cell phone in hand and aimed at her. “What are you doing?”

“Taking a picture. This is great. ”

“It’s awful.” Liz snatched the cell phone from her hand and promptly deleted the photo. “You’re supposed to be helping.”

“I am.” Gloria made a wide sweep with her hand, motioning toward what was left of the upper hall. “You now have a clean slate.”

“It’s a start. Deconstruct to reconstruct,” Liz quipped. “Remind me to have the workers order a new back door for Echo. The plywood is a hideous eyesore, and I don’t want her having any reminders of what nearly happened to her.”

“Do you think this is the end?” Gloria asked.

“I hope so. Mark Havane is on paid leave. Both he and Senator Appolina are being investigated. They would be crazy to come after Echo now. Unless there’s someone else in on it, I think we can all stop looking over our shoulders.” Liz shifted her feet. “I wish Echo had confided in us from the beginning that someone was after her. ”

“Being stalked is serious business. She figured if she disappeared without a trace and there was no paper trail for anyone to find her, she could start over and leave Detroit behind.”

The women made their way downstairs.

“Echo didn’t count on Appolina and her former boss working together,” Liz said. “The two were taking bribes from the unions, turning a blind eye to certain questionable business practices. The case got a lot of publicity, dragging the evidence technicians, including Echo, who insisted the lead investigator didn’t commit suicide, into it.”

Liz continued. “She was scared out of her mind and knew for certain something was going on when her co-worker was also found dead. I hate to say it, but nosy neighbor Christi’s cameras were instrumental in getting a partial copy of Havane’s license tag that night he tried to break into Echo’s place.”

“It took some guts for her to meet him at Dot’s Restaurant,” Gloria said .

“Appolina’s little black book was his undoing. He, in his own handwriting, had made an appointment for Havane to meet with the lead investigator the day of his death.”

Gloria rubbed the bottom of her chin. “Remind me again how Mick Grotto ties into all of this.”

“Havane hired Grotto to track Echo down, get his hands on the DNA sample and take her out,” Liz said. “Instead, he tracked Echo down and then contacted Havane,

threatening to tell Echo why he was there and who had hired him unless he and Appolina paid him more money.”

“This could have ended badly for Echo.” Gloria folded her arms. “As far as the sketch, the authorities found out the woman seen in the vicinity of Grotto’s attack had similar features, but it wasn’t her.”

Liz nodded. “God put her in the perfect spot to get the help she needed. ”

“On the Garden Girls’ radar.” Gloria dusted her hands. “Has Echo heard back about the county technician job?”

“She told me earlier she was going to call and check.” Liz lifted her gaze, staring out the kitchen’s screen door. “There she is now.”

The sisters watched as Echo’s compact car circled the driveway. Duchess let out an excited yip, her small legs moving ninety miles an hour as she scampered down the steps.

Echo hopped out and scooped the pup up, a bright smile lighting her face as she hurried toward the house. “Guess what?”

“You got the job,” Liz said.

“Yep. I’ve already told Floyd he’ll need to find someone to replace me.”

“That’s wonderful.” Liz gave her young tenant a hug, thanking God for answering their prayers. Not only was Echo found innocent of killing Mick Grotto, but God was helping her get her life back on track. “This calls for a celebration. What’s your favorite dish?”

“Lasagna.”

“I think I can whip up an acceptable homemade lasagna in the RV’s kitchen.”

“No,” Gloria and Echo said in unison.

“I appreciate the offer,” Echo added. “But I would hate for you to set your RV on fire again.”

Liz waved dismissively. “It wasn’t on fire, just a little smoke-filled.”

“We’ll be heading out for our weekly Garden Girls get-together at Dot’s Restaurant.” Gloria consulted her watch. “Why don’t you join us and we can celebrate in style?”

“I would like that.” Echo set Duchess on the ground. “I need to head home and shower first.”

“You have time.” Liz told her they weren’t planning to meet for another hour and watched as an excited Echo hopped back into her car. “That is one happy young lady with the weight of the world no longer sitting squarely on her shoulders.”

Gloria gave her sister a pat on the back. “I have to say your style of sleuthing is impressive. It never crossed my mind to pull a few strings and ask Brian for help.”

Liz playfully elbowed her sister. “What? Do you mean I did something the infamous Gloria ‘Garden Girl’ Kennedy hadn’t thought of? Imagine that.”

“There’s hope for you yet, Liz.” Gloria grinned. “There’s hope for you yet.”

The end.