



The Case of the Vanishing Valuables (Earl Clawson #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Something's not right at the local retirement home, Tranquility Terrace. The residents are losing more than their memories—jewelry, watches, and keepsakes are disappearing too.

Enter Ray Leonard, a detective who could use a break. His secret weapon? Earl—a snarky cat with a nose for trouble.

The suspects? A magician with a shaky hand, a nurse with keys to every room, and a resident who's a little too forgetful. But just when Ray thinks he's solved it, everything falls apart.

Time's running out. The thief is ready to vanish—for good. Can Ray and Earl crack the case before it's too late, or will the secrets of Tranquility Terrace stay buried forever?

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Chapter

One

There were two things you could always count on: humans making messes and me, Earl Clawson, cleaning them up. Not that they realized it, of course. They never did.

Take Ray, for instance. My so-called partner. Right then, he was hunched over his desk, scowling at the crossword puzzle like it owed him money.

“Seven across: ‘Sharp-witted detective,’” he muttered, scratching his head. “Six letters...”

I rolled my eyes from my spot on the windowsill. Come on, Ray, there are a lot of options. Holmes, Poirot...

He muttered under his breath, scribbled something down, then paused to rub his chin like he was deep in thought. “Marple?”

The phone rang, and Ray jumped like someone had slapped him. He fumbled with the receiver before finally picking it up.

“Ray Leonard, private investigator,” he said, putting on his professional voice, which always sounded like he was trying too hard. “Yeah, that’s me.”

I tilted my head, curious. Not much happened in this sleepy town, but occasionally, something interesting popped up.

Ray's expression changed. "Uh-huh... missing valuables? A bunch of 'em, you say?"

I hopped down from the window and sat beside Ray's desk, eyeing the receiver with more interest. Missing valuables? Well, well. This might have been worth staying awake for.

He scratched his head again. "Yeah, I mean, we can definitely help with that. Where'd you say this is?"

His face brightened, and he looked at me, eyebrows raised. "Tranquility Terrace Retirement Home? Yeah, we can be there this afternoon. No problem. What's your name again? Mrs. Hargrove? Right. Got it."

I blinked. Tranquility Terrace? A retirement home? My tail flicked. I had hoped for something with more intrigue—maybe a jewel heist. Instead, we got stolen dentures.

Ray hung up the phone and turned to me, grinning like he had just solved the case of the century.

"Looks like we've got ourselves a job, Earl," he said, stretching out in his chair. "Apparently, someone's been swiping valuables from the residents at Tranquility Terrace. Jewelry, heirlooms, that sort of thing. And get this—they have no idea how the thief's getting into the rooms. Doors locked, windows sealed. No sign of forced entry."

I arched an eyebrow of my own. That did sound interesting. And suspect.

Ray continued, oblivious to my deep thoughts. "Could be an inside job. Or a ghost," he added with a laugh.

Or maybe the residents are just forgetful, and there's nothing going on at all, I

thought as I leapt onto his desk and sat, fixing him with my most unimpressed stare.

He grinned like we were on the same page. “All right, partner. Let’s head out. Tranquility Terrace awaits.”

I resisted the urge to roll my eyes. Sure, Ray. Like you even knew what page we were on.

I hopped down and headed for the door, tail held high. Whether it was at a retirement home or not, I was ready for this case. If someone was pulling a fast one on a bunch of old folks, we were going to find out who—and I was going to leave a hairball in their favorite shoes. Or, at least, I’d do the heavy lifting while Ray fumbled around, pretending he was Sherlock.

Typical.

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Chapter

Two

You know what's even more boring than a retirement home? A retirement home in broad daylight. No creaky floors, no flickering lights. Just the smell of old carpet and faint echoes of soap operas.

Ray pulled into the parking lot, humming along to some tune on the radio like he wasn't about to spend the afternoon investigating missing valuables. Me? I was already three steps ahead, trying to figure out how I'd stay awake through this one.

"Here we are," Ray announced, much too enthusiastically. "Tranquility Terrace. Looks... uh, cozy, right?"

"Cozy" wasn't the word. The place was an old Victorian, with chipped paint and creaky charm. If you squinted, you could almost see the building's former grandeur peeking through the wear. I hopped out of the car, stretched, and took in the scene. Neatly trimmed hedges. Rows of white rocking chairs on the porch. A suspicious lack of life.

Ray grabbed his notebook from the glove box, like that was going to help. "Ready, Earl?"

I gave him a look that said, I've been ready since you woke up this morning, Ray. Try to keep up.

We headed inside, where the smell of stale air and Lysol greeted us. The lobby was quiet, too quiet. A single resident in a wheelchair was dozing by a potted plant, which I was almost certain had seen more action than him.

“Hello?” Ray called out in a voice that bounced off the beige walls. “Mrs. Hargrove?”

“Coming!” a voice chirped from somewhere in the distance, followed by the rapid click-click of heels on linoleum. In swept Mrs. Hargrove, the manager of Tranquility Terrace, looking like she was late for a PTA meeting. Hair perfectly in place, clipboard clutched to her chest, a smile that was one part friendly, two parts “please don’t sue us.”

“You must be Mr. Leonard!” She shook Ray’s hand with the enthusiasm of someone clinging to their last shred of patience. “Thank you so much for coming on such short notice. We’re in quite the pickle here.”

Ray flashed his usual easygoing smile and gestured toward me. “This is Earl,” he said, like it was the most normal thing in the world to bring a cat along on an investigation. Sure, Ray—nothing strange about having a feline sidekick for a job like this, right?

“Great to meet you.” Mrs. Hargrove nodded in my direction.

“Why don’t you tell us a bit about the situation?” Ray said.

Mrs. Hargrove’s smile faltered slightly as she shook Ray’s hand. “I’m just... very worried about this, Mr. Leonard.” She glanced toward the rows of quiet rooms. “Tranquility Terrace is a sanctuary for these people, and if word gets out that valuables are going missing...” Her voice trailed off, and for the first time, I noticed the lines of stress creasing her brow. She wasn’t just afraid for the residents—she was

afraid for the home itself.

“Any sign of break-ins?” Ray flipped open his notebook.

Mrs. Hargrove shook her head. “No, that’s the strange part. The rooms are always locked, and there’s no sign of forced entry. It’s as if the items just vanish.”

“Have you noticed anything unusual?” Ray asked. “Strange visitors, staff behaving oddly, anything like that?”

She glanced around like someone might be listening. “Not exactly... but there’s the cat.”

Cat? Now we were talking.

“The cat?” he repeated.

“Yes, our resident cat, Mortimer,” she said, lowering her voice as if speaking his name would summon him. “He’s, uh, become somewhat of a legend around here.”

Great. A legend. That was all I needed.

Mrs. Hargrove leaned in, looking conspiratorial. “The residents believe he can... predict when someone is about to die.”

I blinked, trying not to roll my eyes. Of course, it had to be something like that. Humans and their superstitions.

Ray’s eyebrows shot up, and he flicked a glance my way, trying not to laugh. But I was already intrigued.

“Whenever Mortimer spends time in someone’s room,” she continued, “well... it’s usually not long before...” She made a vague hand gesture that I guessed meant “curtains.”

Again, I blinked. Are you kidding me?

To his credit, Ray nodded thoughtfully. “So you think Mortimer might have something to do with the thefts?”

“I don’t know,” Mrs. Hargrove admitted, wringing her hands. “Doesn’t seem likely, but I thought I would mention him just in case.” She glanced at me and asked, “Does Earl have the same ability?”

I stared at her. I couldn’t decide whether to be offended or flattered.

Ray cleared his throat, trying to stay professional, though amusement danced in his eyes. “Well, Earl is definitely talented, but, uh, predicting death isn’t really his specialty.”

Yet , I thought dryly. Give me time.

Mrs. Hargrove offered a weak smile. “In any case, we need to get to the bottom of this. The residents are anxious. I’d hate for any more valuables to disappear.”

“Don’t worry.” Ray slid his notebook into his back pocket. “We’ll take it from here.”

I nodded subtly, already sizing up the situation. A retirement home, a bunch of missing valuables, and a cat with a death omen reputation? Something was fishy here—and it wasn’t the bland mush someone was making in the kitchen.

This situation had all the elements of a mystery worth solving. Sure, it might not have

been the glamorous world of high-stakes jewel theft I'd hoped for, but something about a locked-room mystery got my whiskers twitching.

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Chapter

Three

T ranquility Terrace had the kind of atmosphere you'd expect from a creaky old Victorian. Dark wallpaper, oriental rugs, and the scent of something medicinal lingering in the air. The effect made me feel both amused and uneasy, like this was a place where time stood still—pleasant but just a little too calm, like the quiet before a storm.

Mrs. Hargrove led us into the common room, where a few residents were waiting. They made a mismatched group of personalities, all eyeing one another with that mix of suspicion and boredom you only found in places like this.

“Everyone, this is Ray Leonard and his... partner, Earl,” Mrs. Hargrove said, gesturing toward us.

Mrs. Hargrove pointed at an elderly man in a worn cardigan who was sitting by the window. “And this is Ethan Sanders.”

Mr. Sanders barely looked up, giving us a grunt. “Private detectives, eh? We'll see about that.”

Mrs. Hargrove turned toward a white-haired woman whose lips were painted with bright-red lipstick. “And this is Martha Bixby.”

Martha fluffed her hair and smiled. “Lovely to meet you.”

“And beside her, Sally Johnson, Natalie Cartwright, and Josh Jenkins.”

The three seniors nodded.

“And that’s Daisy Landon over there.” Mrs. Hargrove pointed at a small woman who wore a bright-pink shirt and was sitting in one of the chairs.

Daisy leaned in, her smile bright. “Welcome! Hope you can solve this mystery quick. We need some excitement around here.” She gave me a quick scratch behind the ears, and I couldn’t help but purr.

“And over here is Mr. Benedict,” Mrs. Hargrove said, gesturing to the older man in a pinstriped suit who was trying to shuffle a deck of cards. He gave us a dramatic bow.

“Benedict the Magnificent,” he corrected, flashing a smile. “Retired magician. But I still know a few tricks.” He made a card disappear from his hand, then he flicked it back out of nowhere. Honestly, the trick was not very impressive, especially since his hands were shaky and he dropped the card.

A blonde in scrubs bustled in, holding a small paper cup. “Time for your meds, Mr. Benedict.” Her gaze flicked up at Ray, and she frowned.

Mrs. Hargrove introduced Ray and me to Gina, the resident nurse.

“Gina here is the real magician.” Mr. Benedict took the cup and knocked back the pills without even taking a sip of water. “Saved me when I had a heart attack last year.”

Gina blushed, giving him a modest smile. “I was just doing my job.”

“Just doing your job? You’re a regular Florence Nightingale.” Benedict winked.

“Without Gina, I’d be performing card tricks in the afterlife.”

“Same here,” Mr. Billings grumbled from his spot by the window, his thick eyebrows furrowed. “Heart attack nearly did me in too. Gina saved me.”

Sally, sitting nearby, crossed her arms. “She saved me too. Flu so bad I thought Mortimer was waiting to see me off.” She gave Gina a quick nod. “And that chicken soup you made? I swear it pulled me back from the brink.”

Looking a little uncomfortable with the attention, Gina replied with a soft laugh. “I’m just happy to help.”

Ray smiled at her. “Seems like you’ve saved quite a few lives around here.”

Gina shook her head, clearly wanting to move the spotlight elsewhere. “It’s what I do.”

With that, Ray turned his attention back to the group and focused on the real reason we were here. “So, I understand some of you have had things go missing?”

“Gone without a trace,” Mr. Sanders said, his smile fading as he twirled the deck of cards in his hands. “My gold cuff links. One day, they’re on my dresser, the next—they’ve disappeared like one of Benedict’s bad magic tricks.”

“And you’re sure your door was locked?” Ray asked.

Mr. Sanders gave him a look. “Of course. The door was locked, the windows shut tight. It’s like the thief walked through the walls.”

I hopped up onto a chair, my ears twitching.

Ray turned to Martha. “You had something stolen, too, right?”

“Emerald necklace,” she said bluntly. “One of a kind. It was on my nightstand when I went to bed, gone by the time I woke up. I had the flu—bad. So bad that Mortimer was lurking outside my door, waiting for me to kick it.”

Sally shot Mrs. Hargrove a hard look. “If you’d listened to me about security, none of this would’ve happened.”

Mrs. Hargrove stiffened but didn’t argue. “We’re looking into the security options, Sally.”

Sally sniffed. “Too little, too late. I say we call the police.”

That caught my ear. Ray stiffened. I knew the police most likely meant Ray’s ex, Vivian Moretti. She was a detective now with the local police, and Ray still carried a torch for her. He blushed and got all tongue-tied around her.

Viv was cool as a cucumber, though I thought maybe she still liked Ray too. The way her gaze lingered on him just a bit longer than necessary and her tendency to smile whenever he stumbled over his words gave her away. I wasn’t sure what had caused the rift between them, but I was glad it hadn’t carried over to me... Viv still gushed and cooed over me every time I saw her.

“I don’t think we need the police,” Ray stammered.

Sally didn’t look convinced. “No? This is serious.”

“Ray is a serious detective,” Mrs. Hargrove said, her voice firm. “I’m confident he’ll get to the bottom of it.”

I watched her closely. There was something in her tone, a hesitation that made me wonder. Maybe she didn't want the police involved for her own reasons—though I wasn't sure what those were.

With the matter of the police settled, Ray continued asking questions about the thefts.

“Can anyone think of any unusual activity recently?” he asked, jotting down notes. “Visitors who seemed out of place, or maybe noises during the night?”

Martha shook her head. “Nothing, except for the usual creaks and groans of this old place.” She glanced up at the ceiling as if the creaks and groans came from it.

“And what about staff changes?” Ray pressed, glancing at Mrs. Hargrove. “Any new hires recently?”

After hesitating, Mrs. Hargrove replied, “Nope, everyone has been here for quite some time.”

I padded along the edges of the room. A strange draft was blowing, even though all the windows were shut. I tilted my head. The air didn't smell like a fresh breeze—it smelled like dust, old wood, and neglect. My eyes followed the ceiling line. The draft was coming from above. I made a mental note to explore the upper floors later.

“My watch got stolen,” Mr. Billings grumbled, taking a newspaper off the table. “Family heirloom. Gold. Gone without a trace.”

Ray nodded, jotting that down. “So, no signs of forced entry?”

“None,” Billings said, crossing his arms. “And I check my door twice before bed. It was locked. I don't trust anyone around here.”

I flicked my tail, thinking the situation over. No forced entry. Valuable items gone without a trace. It didn't take a genius to figure out that someone in this building had sticky fingers.

"And my mother's brooch was stolen just last week," Daisy added.

Ray gave her a sympathetic smile. "That must've been upsetting."

Daisy's eyes flicked toward Gina, softening. "It was. But Gina helped calm me down. She's always been such a help." She paused then added, "We go way back. She's taken care of me here and at Green Pines."

I perked up at that. Green Pines? I made another mental note. That was a small detail, but small details often turned into big clues.

Ray scribbled one last note in his book. "All right. Thank you all for your time. We'll start investigating and let you know as soon as we find anything."

Mrs. Hargrove gave us a tight smile. "Thank you, Mr. Leonard, Earl. I trust you'll get to the bottom of this soon."

"We'll do our best. I'd like to start by inspecting the rooms," Ray said.

She nodded. "They are all on this floor. We try not to put residents in the upstairs rooms, as many of them are unsteady, and we wouldn't want anyone to fall down the stairs."

"Of course not. So where should we start?" Ray glanced up to see if anyone would volunteer.

"You can look at mine." Daisy jumped up from her chair. Pretty spry for an old

human. “It’s the first one right over here.”

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Chapter

Four

Based on the name, Tranquility Terrace was supposed to be peaceful, but Daisy's room was chaos. Post-it notes covered nearly every surface—yellow, pink, blue—like an office supply explosion. They were plastered to the walls, the mirror, the door, and even the lampshade, all with scribbled reminders that seemed to run the gamut from “Feed the fish” (I glanced around; there were no fish) to “Remember to lock door.”

Despite the clutter, the space was charming—a two-room suite with an original fireplace, a private bath, and intricate Victorian woodwork and rugs that added character.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Leonard,” Daisy said, wringing her hands nervously.

Ray gave her a reassuring smile and nodded. “We’ll get to the bottom of this, don’t worry.”

I followed him, stepping carefully around the avalanche of Post-it notes littering the floor. I’d seen cluttered places before, but this? This was next-level chaos. Daisy’s room looked like her brain had exploded and left reminders everywhere.

“So, what exactly went missing?” Ray asked, flipping open his notebook—though judging by the blank pages, I figured he could’ve saved himself the effort.

“My mother’s brooch,” Daisy said, pointing at a glass dish on her dresser. It was, predictably, covered in more Post-it notes. “I always leave it right there.”

Ray peered at the dish, which was filled with loose buttons, bobby pins, and—of course—a Post-it note that read “Brooch goes here.” Nothing about this scene screamed “highly organized,” and yet Daisy seemed genuinely convinced she had it all under control. That made one of us.

“You’re sure the door was locked?” Ray asked.

Daisy’s head bobbed up and down like a dashboard bobblehead. “Oh yes, I always lock it. I even wrote a note.” She gestured to another Post-it on the back of the door, which read “LOCK THE DOOR.”

I hopped onto the dresser and sniffed around. The glass dish smelled like nothing useful, and the Post-it notes spoke more about Daisy’s forgetfulness than her jewelry.

With a wobbly smile, Daisy glanced nervously at me. “I was wondering if Earl might have... um, special abilities like Mortimer. Maybe he could sense things—things normal people wouldn’t notice, like hidden intentions.”

Where was Mortimer, anyway? I had a feeling that cat might know something.

Ray cleared his throat, trying not to laugh. “Earl’s sharp, but he doesn’t predict the future or anything like that.”

“Well, that’s too bad,” Daisy said, glancing at me again. “I was hoping maybe he could sniff out the culprit, literally.”

I rolled my eyes. I was good, but I wasn’t that good.

Ray moved the conversation along. “No sign of forced entry, though?”

Daisy shook her head. “No, nothing. The windows stay locked, and I’m very careful about the door.”

“What about the staff or other residents?” Ray walked over to the door and glanced at the “LOCK THE DOOR” note. “Anyone acting strange?”

She chewed her lip. “No. Well, Rick the handyman seems nervous lately, but he’s very polite. I don’t think he’d do something like this.”

Right, because politeness was the international standard for trustworthiness.

Ray jotted down “handyman” in his notebook like he was connecting dots on a corkboard. “And when did you first notice the brooch was missing?” he asked.

Daisy’s cheeks flushed pink. “I tend to... misplace things sometimes,” she admitted, gesturing to the room full of Post-its. As if that wasn’t obvious. “But I know I left the brooch in the dish before lunch a week ago Tuesday. When I came back from my walk in the garden—it was gone.”

Ray squinted at her. “Are you sure you didn’t move it somewhere else?”

Daisy pulled out a small, dog-eared notebook from her cardigan pocket and flipped through the pages like she had to prove it. “That’s why I write things down,” she said, holding up a page with a note reading “Brooch on dresser.” “I’m very organized.”

“I see.” Ray smiled at Daisy, pocketing his notebook. “Don’t worry, Daisy. We’ll do everything we can to find your brooch.”

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Chapter

Five

Ray and I stepped out of Daisy's room. He glanced down the hallway. This place had more rooms than I'd thought.

"Let's check the rest of these rooms," he said.

I trotted ahead of him, my tail twitching as I scanned the corridor. The faint smell of Lysol clung to everything. It made my whiskers twitch.

We reached the next door, but before Ray could knock, a man emerged from a nearby supply closet, a screwdriver in one hand and a toolbox at his feet. His wiry frame was hunched over, as if he was trying to make himself smaller. The man paused when he saw us and wiped his hands on a rag.

"Uh, can I help you with something?" he asked, eyes darting nervously from Ray to me and back.

Ray replied with his usual friendly smile, the one that always put people at ease. "Yeah, I'm Ray Leonard—private investigator. Just looking into the thefts around here. You the handyman?"

The man blinked then nodded quickly. "Rick. Name's Rick. I do the, uh, maintenance 'round here."

I padded closer, sniffing the air. Nervous sweat. Grease. And something else—a hint of metal from his toolbox. Interesting.

Rick shifted his weight from foot to foot, his hands trembling slightly as he fiddled with the screwdriver, his gaze avoiding Ray's. "Thefts, huh?" Rick's voice sounded a little too high-pitched. "Yeah, I've heard about those. Crazy stuff, right?"

Ray raised an eyebrow. "You wouldn't have happened to see anything unusual, would you? Anyone sneaking around where they shouldn't be?"

Rick swallowed hard and shook his head. "Nope. Haven't seen a thing. Just, uh, doing my rounds. Fixing what needs fixing, you know?" His eyes flicked toward the door behind him. "Locks and stuff."

Ray's brow quirked up. "You work on those too?"

Rick's face twitched, and he released a nervous chuckle. "Oh, sure. Yeah. Old building like this? Locks get sticky sometimes. But they don't make them like they used to. These are solid, though. Rooms are secure, no doubt about it."

As if to prove his point, Rick bent down and fiddled with the lock on the supply closet, twisting the screwdriver a few times. "See? This one sticks a little, but it's just wear and tear."

I crept closer to his toolbox and gave it a careful sniff. Grease. Rust. The usual handyman tools. Nothing that screamed thief.

Ray watched Rick with that easygoing smile, but I could tell he wasn't convinced. "Any of the residents mention problems with their locks lately?" Ray asked, his tone casual.

Rick's fingers twitched on the screwdriver again. "No, no problems. I, uh, fixed the worst of them a while back. Haven't had any complaints." He stood up quickly, wiping his hands again. "Anyway, I've got to get back to work. Busy day, you know?"

Ray nodded, but his eyes lingered on Rick a moment longer. "Sure. Thanks for your time, Rick."

Rick gave a stiff nod, grabbed his toolbox, and hurried down the hall, gripping his toolbox tight in his hand.

I sat back on my haunches, watching him go, my whiskers twitching in thought. He seemed in a rush to be anywhere but here, which made me suspicious.

"Something's off about that guy," Ray muttered under his breath.

Before I could give my silent agreement, a soft clearing of someone's throat broke the quiet. We both turned to see Martha, who had seemingly materialized out of nowhere, leaning against the doorframe of her room. Her sharp eyes flicked down the hallway, settling on Rick's retreating form with a look of thinly veiled contempt. It looked like she'd freshened up her lipstick.

"Careful with that one," she said, her voice low but pointed. "Rick's not all he seems."

Ray blinked, tucking his notebook away. "Oh? You know something about him?"

Martha pursed her lips, clearly enjoying her role as the local oracle of gossip. She stepped close and lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "Heard he's in with a bad crowd—used to run with some folks who weren't exactly model citizens. Had some trouble at his last job too. But Mrs. Hargrove, bless her heart, she's too soft.

Thinks she's got a knack for reading people, so she hires them without checking too deep. Swears she can spot a good apple just by looking at them."

Ray raised an eyebrow. "Trouble at his last job, huh? What kind of trouble?"

Martha gave a sly shrug, glancing briefly in the direction of Mrs. Hargrove's office. "Rumors, mostly. Missing equipment. Maybe worse. But if you ask me, Rick's not the only one Hargrove's got a blind spot for." She shot a pointed look toward the nursing station, where Gina was busy organizing medications. "Though I suppose sometimes, she's right," Martha added dryly, tapping her chin. "That Gina... well, she's a good one."

Ray followed Martha's gaze to Gina, his brow furrowing, but before he could say anything, Martha seized the moment and leaned in closer, lowering her voice even further. "Now, why don't you come inspect my room? Maybe there's a clue in there." She gave a knowing nod as if she were letting Ray in on some great secret.

"All right, lead the way," Ray said.

Martha wasted no time, turning on her heel and gliding down the hallway with Ray and me in tow.

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Six

The rest of the afternoon was spent looking in the rooms of those who had items stolen. Each room seemed to carry its own story—a faint scent of old cologne here, a carefully arranged stack of books there, and the lingering unease of violated privacy. We left Tranquility Terrace with more questions than answers. Ray was lost in his own thoughts, eyes narrowed in concentration as he drove us back to his place. I, on the other hand, had only one thought—food.

The moment we walked through the front door of Ray's small ranch-style house, I made a beeline for the kitchen. The place was a typical bachelor pad—just the basics: a beat-up sofa, a TV that looked like it had survived the nineties, and a kitchen table that wobbled if you so much as looked at it funny.

Ray tossed his notebook onto the counter, oblivious to my attempts to get his attention with increasingly exaggerated head bumps and vocal protests. I sat by my empty food bowl, looking up at him with the kind of deep, soulful gaze that would guilt anyone into action. Well, anyone except Ray when he was deep in thought.

“This place is full of suspects, but I can't figure out who did it,” he muttered, pacing the small kitchen. “It could be pretty much anyone... I guess I should look for a motive. Who needed the money?”

I flicked my tail. Ray. Focus. The bowl's not going to fill itself.

He didn't notice. Instead, he grabbed a leftover sandwich from the fridge, plopped down at the kitchen table, and chewed thoughtfully as he stared at his notebook. I sat in front of him, waiting for him to realize he wasn't the only one in this house who needed to eat.

This is it , I thought, sitting up straighter, staring directly at him. The eyes of desperation. The silent plea. Look at me, Ray. Come on. Just look down and see the face of a starving ? —

Ray sighed, his shoulders slumping as he scratched his head. His brow furrowed in frustration. “No forced entry, no witnesses... How are they getting in?”

I leapt onto the table, plopped down in front of his notebook, and gave him an annoyed meow, staring pointedly at my empty bowl. Finally, Ray blinked at me like he was seeing me for the first time all night.

“Oh. You're hungry, aren't you?”

Brilliant deduction, Sherlock.

He grinned sheepishly and stood up. “Sorry, Earl. I'll get your dinner.”

About time. I hopped off the table and followed him as he opened a can of wet food. The savory aroma filled the kitchen. Right after Ray set the bowl down, I dug in, the case momentarily forgotten. Let Ray chew over his theories for now. I had more important matters to attend to.

While I ate, Ray went back to pacing. “There's something I'm missing. It's right there, but I can't figure it out. Maybe a change of scenery will help clear my head. I know what I need. I need some strong coffee. Let's go to Purr & Pour.”

I paused mid-bite, my ears perking up at the name. Purr & Pour was the local cat cafe. Now, that was a place I could get behind—good coffee for Ray and maybe some extra treats for me. Tonight might not be so bad after all.

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Seven

I loved Purr we had a mystery to solve, and I was already two steps ahead.

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Chapter

Eight

B art had told me about the attic, and I wasn't about to waste time waiting for Ray to piece it together. If something important was hidden up there, I was going to find it—and then nudge Ray into thinking the discovery was his idea, of course. So I slipped out of the house in the middle of the night and headed toward Tranquility Terrace.

I wriggled through the hedge in the back yard, my paws brushing against the damp leaves, and found the spot where the attic window sat high above. It was still open just a crack. Good luck!

With a quick leap onto the low wall and a nimble climb up the ivy-covered trellis, I reached the window. The gap was narrow, but I wiggled my way through and landed silently in the attic. Graceful, as always.

The room was dim, the only light spilling in from the moon through the grimy windowpanes. The air was thick with the smell of dust, old wood, and something stale—like forgotten memories. The floor creaked under my paws, and a cold draft whispered through the rafters.

I took a quick survey of the room. The attic was packed with old trunks, forgotten furniture draped in sheets, and piles of papers scattered across the floor like a failed filing system. Everything was layered in dust—except for one thing.

A map.

It lay out in the open, sitting on top of a dresser near the window, conspicuously free of dust. My whiskers twitched. Someone had used that map recently. I padded over, my curiosity piqued.

Why would anyone hide this up here?

The map was marked with small, precise X s across different rooms at Tranquility Terrace. As I studied it, it didn't take long for me to realize what I was looking at. The rooms that had been hit by the thief were all marked. Whoever had been planning the thefts had stashed this map up here, away from prying eyes.

This changed everything.

I pawed at the map, trying to make sense of the additional marks. If I could get Ray up here, maybe he'd finally stop bumbling around with his crossword puzzles and solve this case. I just had to figure out how to drag him up here without making it too obvious that I'd done all the work.

Just as I was plotting my next move, the fur on the back of my neck bristled. Someone—or something—was watching me. Slowly, I turned.

A large gray cat, his fur blending into the shadows, sat perched on an old dresser by the window. His green eyes gleamed in the moonlight, watching me with an unsettling calm, like he'd been waiting for me to notice him.

I sat up straight, flicking my tail in annoyance. "I should've known I wasn't alone."

The cat stretched lazily then settled back down, unbothered. "I'm Mortimer," he said, his voice a low purr. "And you must be Earl."

I narrowed my eyes, taking him in. “Why are you up here?” I asked, keeping my voice casual, though my instincts told me to stay alert. “You know something, don’t you?”

Mortimer blinked slowly, his expression calm and unreadable. “I know plenty of things,” he said. “But what makes you think I’ll share any of them with you?”

Great , I thought, already irritated. Just what I needed—another cat with an attitude.

I glanced back at the map then at Mortimer. “Do you know something about this map? Or the jewelry thefts?”

Mortimer flicked his tail lazily. “Map? No. Thefts? No.”

“Surely, you must know something. You live here.” I wasn’t sure if he was playing dumb or actually dumb.

He shook his head. “I don’t concern myself with the affairs of humans. I just like to spook them. They do tend to run when I show up. They think I’m some kind of bad omen. I go where I please, and they freak out. It’s entertaining, really.”

I growled softly. He wasn’t taking this seriously. “So you’re just a distraction? You don’t know who’s doing the stealing?”

Mortimer’s eyes half closed, and his voice grew more distant. “What the humans do is not my problem.”

Useless. I had expected him to be involved somehow, but he was just wandering around, oblivious to the chaos he caused.

“Are you even paying attention to anything going on at Tranquility?” I pressed, my

patience wearing thin.

He paused as if considering. “I like the garden,” he said after a long moment. “Lots of birds.”

Of course. I released a long, slow sigh. I wasn’t sure if Mortimer was playing me or not. He really did seem disconnected, but I couldn’t be sure.

“Well, if you’re not going to be any help,” I said, turning back to the map, “at least stay out of my way.”

“Gladly,” Mortimer purred, executing a graceful leap down from the dresser. His paws landed silently on the floor, and then, without another word, he padded across the attic and disappeared into the shadows near the far wall.

A soft click echoed through the room. I turned just in time to see a door creak open—one I hadn’t even noticed. It led downstairs.

Mortimer paused in the doorway, looking back at me with a slow, knowing blink. “But if I were you,” he said, his voice smooth as silk, “I wouldn’t wait too long. People start missing things when the moon’s full.”

And then he was gone. The door swung shut behind him with a quiet finality.

I stood there for a moment, my heart racing. Wait a minute... Did he know more than he was letting on? And if what he said about the full moon was right, we didn’t have much time. The next theft could happen tonight.

I glanced back at the map, my pulse quickening.

I needed to get Ray up here. Fast.

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Chapter

Nine

The next morning, Ray sat at the kitchen table, papers and notes scattered in front of him like some kind of detective's disaster zone. His brow was furrowed, his lips pursed, and I could practically hear the gears in his brain grinding away as he muttered to himself.

"Handyman, Rick..." Ray scratched his head, tapping his pen on the table. "He seemed nervous. Maybe he needs money? He's got access to all the rooms."

From my spot on the windowsill, I flicked my tail in irritation. We don't have time for this, Ray. There's something in the attic at Tranquility, I tried to say telepathically, focusing all my mental energy on him. Move it already.

Of course, Ray ignored me, still lost in his jumble of thoughts. "And then there's Mrs. Hargrove..." He scribbled something down and chewed on the end of his pen. "She was really worried about word getting out—bad for business. If people knew valuables were going missing, no one would want to stay there. That place isn't cheap. Maybe she's involved... but would she risk the whole place over some stolen items?"

He sat back, the tapping of his pen now more like a steady drumbeat. "Unless... the money from selling the stolen items is worth more than the risk of bad publicity."

Attic, Ray! Attic! I let out a heavy sigh, eyes narrowing at him. You're running in

circles here. There's no time for this!

Ray shook his head, clearly not hearing me, and flipped through a few more notes. "Then we've got Benedict," he said, frowning. "A magician... aren't they good at picking locks? I need to check into his past, see if there were any thefts at his shows. But he's one of the only residents who hasn't reported anything missing..."

I leapt down from the window and plopped myself right in front of him, locking my eyes with his. Exactly, Ray! If Benedict were the thief, wouldn't he make sure to steal from himself too? Throw everyone off the scent? Think about it!

Ray rubbed his chin, his frown deepening. "Wait... if someone's trying to avoid suspicion, wouldn't they make sure they're a victim too? It'd look less obvious..."

Finally! You're catching on! I emitted an impatient meow, one loud enough to snap him out of his thoughts. He blinked, staring down at me, finally acknowledging my existence.

"You hungry again, Earl?" he asked in a softer tone. "You just had breakfast."

I stared at him, my expression flat. Not hungry. Attic. Tranquility.

Ray scratched his head, still looking at me as if he was trying to piece something together. "Wait a second... the ones who haven't had anything stolen yet..."

Yes! That's it! I paced in front of him, tail swishing.

His eyes lit up, and he snapped his fingers. "I know! We need to get back to Tranquility!"

I purred, hopping onto the counter. Finally.

He jumped up, grabbing his jacket and stuffing his notebook into the pocket. The kitchen looked like a hurricane had blown through, with half-full coffee cups and crumpled notes everywhere, but Ray barely noticed as he bolted for the door.

When we arrived at Tranquility Terrace, it was business as usual. The residents were scattered around the common room, most of them engrossed in their own routines. Ray wasted no time heading straight for Mr. Benedict, who was sitting by the window and holding a bag in front of him. He reached in and pulled out a top hat.

I trotted along beside Ray, but my focus wasn't on the magician. I had bigger things on my mind. The attic, I thought furiously, hoping Ray would pick up on the telepathic waves I was sending his way. Get to the attic. Forget the magician. You're barking up the wrong tree, Ray!

Ray, predictably, was not on the same wavelength. He flashed Benedict a friendly smile. "Morning, Mr. Benedict. Mind if we chat for a minute?"

Benedict gave a showy bow from his seat. He stuck his hand into the top hat and pulled out a long string of scarves. For a minute, I thought he might pull out a rabbit, but he retrieved only scarves. "Detective Leonard! Always a pleasure. What can I do for you today?"

Ray pulled out his notebook and tried to sound casual. "Just a couple of questions. You mentioned before that you haven't had anything stolen, right?"

Benedict nodded, grinning. "That's right. Nothing's gone missing from my room. Maybe I'm just too sharp for the thief to get past. Or perhaps I don't have any valuables that interest them."

Ray jotted something down, nodding thoughtfully. "Interesting. Almost everyone else has had something stolen, but not you. That's curious."

Curious? I thought, pacing beside Ray's feet, my tail twitching with irritation. There's something even more curious in the attic.

Ray, oblivious as ever, was still focused on Benedict. "So, you've never noticed anything unusual? Maybe someone lurking around your room?"

Benedict shuffled his cards again with a flourish. "Not a thing. I keep my eyes peeled, though. Can't let your guard down."

Oh, for the love of catnip. I flicked my tail in frustration. Upstairs, Ray. There's something in the attic! I tried pushing the thought harder, willing Ray to get the hint.

At last, he glanced down at me, frowning. "What's up, Earl?"

Finally! I leapt onto a nearby chair and stared at the ceiling. Upstairs. The attic. Come on, Ray. This is important!

Ray followed my gaze and shook his head. "You're restless today, huh?"

Restless? Restless? I'm trying to solve this case for you! I wanted to throw my paws in the air in defeat.

Benedict was watching me with a knowing smile, like he was in on some joke I wasn't privy to. "Your cat seems quite intent on something. Maybe Earl's on to something you haven't thought of yet."

Ray chuckled, patting my head absentmindedly. "Yeah, maybe."

Yes! Maybe! I darted toward the hallway, hoping Ray would finally catch on and follow me. Upstairs, Ray! The attic!

But no. Instead, he turned back to Benedict. “So, you’re saying the thief hasn’t been able to get into your room. Do you have some kind of special locks or something?”

Ray, please. The attic, the attic, the attic! I groaned inwardly, realizing this was going nowhere.

Then, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Rick, the handyman, crouched down at the far end of the hallway, working on a lock. He kept glancing around, looking as guilty as a kitten caught knocking over a vase. Now, that was suspicious.

My ears perked up. Interesting.

Ray must have caught it, too, because he finally turned away from Benedict and narrowed his eyes. “Wait a second...”

Finally! I darted down the hall toward Rick, leading the way. Come on, Ray. Follow the cat!

Ray followed, his pace quickening. “What’s Rick up to?”

As we got closer, Ray cleared his throat. “Hey, Rick! What’s going on with that door?”

Rick straightened up so fast I thought he might fall over, his face turning pale. “Oh, uh... just fixing this old lock. It’s been acting up.” He shoved his tools into his pocket with a little too much enthusiasm.

Ray pointed at the door. “Where does that go?”

Rick hesitated then sighed. “The attic. No one’s supposed to go up there. It’s mostly just storage, old stuff. Off-limits for safety reasons.”

The attic! My tail flicked triumphantly. I knew it!

Ray's eyes lit up. "The attic, huh? Mind if I take a look?"

Rick shifted uncomfortably, clearly wishing he could be anywhere else. "Well... it's kinda off-limits, like I said. But I guess it wouldn't hurt if you took a quick peek."

Wouldn't hurt? I darted up to the door and sniffed at the base. Ray, this is it! This is what we've been waiting for!

Ray turned to me then back to Rick. "I think we definitely need to check it out. Something's been bugging me about this place, and I've got a feeling the answers are up there."

I purred, eyes locked on the door handle. Attic time, finally!

Rick fumbled with the key, his hands shaking slightly as he unlocked the door. "Just be careful. It's dark and dusty up there."

Ray nodded, giving me a knowing glance. "You ready, Earl? Let's see what's waiting for us in the attic."

I padded forward, feeling the thrill of the hunt as the door creaked open and revealed the stairs leading up into the darkness. This was where we'd find the real answers.

Chapter

Ten

Ray led the way up the creaky wooden stairs, his flashlight beam cutting through the musty air as we ascended into the attic. The door groaned in protest as he pushed it open, and the stale smell of dust and time greeted us.

He swept his flashlight across the room, his brow furrowed in concentration. “This place is a mess,” he muttered. “How are we supposed to find anything in this?—”

His beam of light hit something atop an old, beaten-up bureau, and he froze. On it, laid out in the open, was a map. It looked familiar—too familiar.

Ray stepped closer, his eyes narrowing. “Well, well,” he murmured, leaning over to get a better look. “Looks like someone left us a clue.”

I padded up beside him and glanced at the map. Finally, I thought, feeling a swell of pride. Ray was getting quicker these days. Under my tutelage, of course. Good eye, Ray. You’re almost acting like a real detective now.

As Ray examined it, I could see the gears turning in his head. He didn’t need me to spell it out for him this time—he was actually putting the pieces together.

“This looks like the layout of the rooms downstairs,” he muttered, crouching down to study it more closely. “And these rooms marked with an X are all the rooms that were hit by the thief.”

Ray snapped his notebook shut, determination flashing in his eyes. “We need to get back downstairs. I want to ask a few questions.”

I leapt onto the top of a nearby box, feeling particularly pleased with myself. He’s finally learning. Maybe I won’t have to babysit him forever.

Ray stood up, tucking the map into his notebook and giving the room one last glance before turning toward the stairs. “Come on, Earl. We’ve got some work to do.”

I followed him, my tail held high. At last, we were getting somewhere. With Ray’s newfound sense of direction—and my steady guidance—we were bound to catch the thief soon.

We hurried back downstairs, the map in Ray’s hand. I trotted ahead, making a beeline for Mrs. Hargrove’s office. Ray knocked once before pushing the door open.

Mrs. Hargrove looked up from her paperwork, surprised to see us both. “Mr. Leonard, Earl... what’s this about?”

Ray laid the map on her desk. “We found this in the attic. It’s a map of the first floor, and look—some of the rooms are marked with X s.”

Mrs. Hargrove blinked, leaning forward to examine the map. “I’ve never seen this before. Why would it be in the attic?”

With a frown, Ray glanced at me. I was sitting on the edge of the desk, my tail twitching. “I don’t know yet, but it’s strange, right? It looks like someone’s keeping track of certain rooms. The ones with X s... I think those are the rooms where something’s been stolen.”

Before any more could be said, a high-pitched screech echoed down the hallway. We

all jumped to our feet.

“I think that’s Sally Greenwood,” Mrs. Hargrove whispered, her hand flying to her mouth.

We rushed out into the hall, following the sound of Sally’s panicked cries. The sight that greeted us was Sally, running down the corridor, arms flailing as if a ghost were chasing her.

“I’m not ready to go!” she screamed. “He’s in my room, and I’m not ready to die!”

Mrs. Hargrove hurried to calm her. “Sally, what’s going on? Who’s in your room?”

Sally pointed, eyes wide with terror. “Mortimer! He’s sitting right there by the bed! He’s waiting for me. I’m not ready to go!”

Mrs. Hargrove rushed over, but before she could step inside, Mortimer sauntered out of the room at his usual lazy pace, completely unconcerned by the chaos he left in his wake.

Sally refused to go back inside. “I’m not going in there! I’m not ready!” she insisted, clutching Mrs. Hargrove’s arm for dear life.

Mrs. Hargrove led Sally to a chair. Her face was as white as the lace doilies scattered around the room. Gina appeared beside her and wrapped the blood pressure cuff around Sally’s arm with the calm patience of someone who’d seen this kind of panic before.

“Deep breaths, Sally. It’s all right,” Gina murmured, glancing at the monitor. “Your blood pressure’s going to spike if you keep getting worked up like this. Mortimer’s just a cat, nothing more.”

Wide-eyed, Sally shook her head frantically. “Not just a cat! He was in my room! That means my time’s almost up!” she wailed in a high-pitched rush.

I watched the scene from a few feet away, trying not to roll my own eyes. Oh great, another Mortimer meltdown. I’m sure he’ll be pleased.

Gina patted Sally’s hand. “You’re fine, Sally,” Gina said, her tone still soothing. “You’re not going anywhere. I’ll get you some tea.”

From across the room, Daisy popped up like a jack-in-the-box. “I’ll fetch it! Chamomile, right? Just what the doctor ordered!” she declared in a voice a little too chipper for the moment. She bustled off toward the kitchen like a woman on a mission.

Ray stood nearby, his eyes scanning the room, but I knew his mind was still on the map we’d found in the attic. He had that “I’m-about-to-put-it-all-together” look in his eyes, but it didn’t seem like the pieces were clicking just yet.

Before anyone could settle back into the daily lull, Mr. Benedict took it upon himself to liven up the situation. “I think we need a distraction!” he called out, flashing his deck of cards with a theatrical flourish. “I need a volunteer for a trick.”

Martha didn’t hesitate to jump up from her chair. “I’ll do it!” she said, clearly thrilled to be the center of attention.

Benedict gave a dramatic nod and fanned out the cards in front of her, but his hands were shaking so much the cards swayed like they were about to tumble to the floor. I rolled my eyes as Martha gingerly picked a card, trying to avoid knocking the whole deck out of his hands.

Benedict smiled, a little too proudly for someone who could barely hold a deck of

cards together. “Now, don’t tell me what it is. Just memorize it.”

Martha slid the card back into the deck, grinning, while Benedict fumbled through a series of awkward shuffles. “Shuffling” was a generous term—it looked more like he was trying not to drop everything.

He closed his eyes, waving a hand over the cards like he was channeling some great power. “Now, Martha, concentrate. Focus on your card. Send me your thoughts.”

His hand trembled as he held up a card with a flourish. “Is this your card?”

Martha gasped. “Yes! The queen of hearts!”

Ray blinked, clearly impressed. “How did you know that?”

Benedict winked. “Well, I am a magician.”

The distraction had worked. Sally had calmed down, and the common room felt lighter. Mortimer basked in a puddle of sunlight by the window, clearly pleased with the chaos he’d caused earlier.

Mrs. Hargrove clapped her hands together with a cheery smile. “Now that everything’s settled, dinner is ready. Everyone, please lock your rooms and head to the dining room.”

The residents stirred and got up slowly, and the soft clicks of locks filled the hallway as they proceeded to their rooms. Daisy was already at her door, locking it like she was ahead of the game.

Still in a peppy mood, Mrs. Hargrove bustled over to Ray. “Mr. Leonard, would you care to join us for supper? We’re having meat loaf tonight.”

Ray's face lit up like a kid hearing he was at a restaurant serving ice cream for dessert. "Meat loaf? Oh, absolutely! I'd love to stay."

"Earl," Mrs. Hargrove added sweetly, "you can sit with Mortimer tonight. He'll appreciate the company."

My tail puffed up instantly. Mortimer? Oh, great. Just what I needed—quality time with the feline grim reaper.

Ray, of course, was too busy dreaming about meat loaf to notice my distress. He gave me a quick pat on the head. "Don't worry, buddy. You two can bond."

Bond? With Mortimer? Sure, why not? It wasn't like I had anything important to do—like solve a mystery.

As everyone shuffled toward the dining room, the locks clicked behind them out of habit. Gina was still helping Sally to her feet, speaking softly to her. "Don't worry, Sally. You go ahead to dinner. I'll make sure your medicines are on the bedside table."

Ray raced ahead, following the scent of meat loaf like a bloodhound on a trail.

I let out an exasperated meow, casting a sidelong glance at Mortimer, who was already strutting into the dining hall like he owned the place.

Fantastic. While Ray filled up on meat loaf, I got stuck with the cat of doom. How did my life come to this?

Chapter

Eleven

The dining room buzzed with chatter as the residents of Tranquility Terrace dug into their meat loaf and mashed potatoes. Ray sat at a long table, listening as the residents swapped stories about the recent thefts. I stationed myself by the door, keeping my distance from Mortimer, who had claimed a spot in the corner and was staring out the window.

This is what I get? I thought, casting a disgusted glance at my food dish. Ray's having meat loaf, and I'm stuck with kibble? It's an injustice, really.

Mortimer gave me one of his slow blinks, like he had all the time in the world. I flicked my tail in irritation. He might have been the resident death cat, but that didn't mean I had to like him.

At the head of the table, Mrs. Cartwright was slicing her meat loaf into tiny, precise pieces, like she was performing surgery instead of eating. "It doesn't make sense," she said, shaking her head. "Every one of us locks our doors when we leave our rooms. I lock mine twice—once with the knob and once with the dead bolt!"

Mr. Saunders, who was sitting next to her, jabbed his fork in the air. "Same here! And my watch still went missing!"

Around the table, the other residents nodded, murmuring in agreement. I could practically smell the paranoia in the air. My ears twitched as I tuned into the

conversation.

“Well, if the rooms are locked, how could anyone get in?” Mrs. Simmons asked, furrowing her brow. “It’s not like anyone’s picking the locks. And it can’t be one of us. Could it?”

Ray, halfway through his second helping of meat loaf, leaned forward. “Good question,” he said. “How many of you are one hundred percent sure your room was locked?”

A few hands shot up, some more hesitantly than others.

“Well, what’s the explanation?” Mrs. Cartwright asked, lowering her voice to a dramatic whisper. “A ghost?”

The room grew quiet. A couple of residents chuckled nervously, but Mrs. Cartwright’s face stayed dead serious.

“Now, now,” Mr. Jenkins piped up, wiping his mouth with a napkin. “Ghosts don’t steal jewelry.”

“I’m just saying,” Mrs. Cartwright huffed, her knuckles turning white as she gripped her fork. “It’s spooky how these things keep disappearing without a trace. My brooch vanished right off my dresser, and the door was locked. So unless someone’s sneaking through walls...”

Mr. Benedict, who’d been quietly watching from across the table, chimed in with a mischievous grin. “Maybe it’s Mortimer. A master of mischief. Cats are crafty, you know.”

I shot him a look that could’ve flattened his playing cards. Crafty? Sure. But what

would a cat want with a stolen brooch? Mortimer didn't seem to care that he was the prime suspect of a crime theory. He just blinked again then started grooming himself like he was above all this nonsense.

At the far end of the table, Sally shifted uncomfortably, her eyes darting nervously toward Mortimer. "Mortimer was in my room earlier," she said in a hushed tone. "I didn't notice anything missing, but I didn't have much time to check."

Ray leaned in, wiping his hands on a napkin. "It could be someone with keys," he said, his voice casual but probing. "Who else has access to the rooms?"

The residents exchanged uneasy glances.

"Well, the nurses do, of course," Mrs. Simmons said. She shot a glance toward Gina, who was busy across the room, fussing over one of the other residents. "They need the keys for meds."

"And Mrs. Hargrove," Mr. Jenkins added. "She's got the master key to the whole building."

Ray nodded thoughtfully. "Anyone else?"

"Rick, the handyman," Daisy chimed in, her voice quieter than usual. She shot a nervous glance at Ray as if she'd said too much.

The conversation hit a lull, the air thick with unspoken questions. I flicked my tail, continuing to sense the unease swirling around the room. Ray was putting the pieces together, I could see, but he still hadn't reached the finish line. If only he'd stop staring longingly at his meat loaf and start focusing on the case.

From farther down the table, Mrs. Hargrove ate quietly, observing the conversation

with polite interest but not offering anything. Her eyes flicked to Ray every so often, but she didn't jump in. I could tell she didn't love where the conversation was heading—toward people with keys—but she kept her face neutral. Smart.

Finally, Mr. Saunders broke the silence, his fork clinking against his plate. “So, what now, Detective? You think someone's sneaking around with a master key?”

Ray leaned back in his chair, a small smile on his face. “We're getting there,” he said. “Just piecing things together.”

Finally. I stretched out, my muscles stiff from sitting through all this talk. I glanced at Mortimer, who was now curled up and snoring. At least one of us had our priorities straight.

Chapter

Twelve

Ray and I didn't stick around after dinner. The second the dessert plates were cleared, we bolted from Tranquility Terrace—Ray's stomach full of meat loaf and apple pie and me just ready to be anywhere else. By the time we got back to his house, the cozy warmth of dinner had faded, replaced by the familiar buzz of an unsolved mystery.

He slumped into his creaky chair, the dim light overhead flickering like a bad movie set. The coffee table in front of him was a disaster zone of papers—his scribbled notes from the day, the picture of the map we'd found in the attic, and growing confusion swirling around the room.

I perched on the couch, tail flicking back and forth, watching him with what I was sure was a perfectly balanced mix of amusement and indifference. The place smelled like stale coffee and dust. Let's just say Ray wasn't exactly winning any awards for housekeeping. I'd been telling him that telepathically for weeks, but humans—they never listened.

Ray heaved a heavy sigh, staring at the picture of the map on his phone like the image had personally offended him. "This map... I still don't get it. Why keep track like this?"

I let out a low, unimpressed meow. Come on, Ray. It's not that hard. The thief might be an old person with a failing memory. How many times did I have to spell it out for

him?

He started mumbling to himself, jotting down random notes like that would magically make things clearer. “Maybe it’s... maintenance? Could the rooms be marked because they haven’t been updated or something?”

I flicked an ear. Okay, maybe you’ve got something there. I wasn’t above giving him some credit. But really, Ray, focus. The map’s more than just a checklist. You’re overthinking it. As usual.

Ray scribbled down the idea, but even I could tell from the way his pen hovered over the page that he wasn’t sold on it. “If it was about fixing things, I’d expect a maintenance schedule or at least some kind of checklist. This map feels too... secretive.”

Then why don’t you ask the maintenance guy, genius? I thought, pushing the idea harder into his thick skull. Humans. You really had to spoon-feed them.

He glanced over at me, eyes narrowing like he was finally considering my presence. His gaze shifted back to the map then again to me. “There’s gotta be someone who knows about these rooms. Someone who’s been in and out of them. Maybe done something to them...”

Yes, Ray. YES. Rick, the maintenance guy. Ask him about the map.

Ray paused, his eyes lighting up like he’d just invented fire. “Rick! The maintenance guy. He’d know if anything’s been worked on in those rooms. I need to ask him about this map. Maybe it’s a maintenance thing after all.”

Finally. Took you long enough.

Ray stood up, stretching and rubbing the back of his neck like the act of thinking had exhausted him physically. “All right, tomorrow, we’ll ask Rick. If anyone knows about those rooms, it’s him. And maybe... just maybe, we’ll finally figure out what’s really going on.”

He looked over at me, sitting comfortably on the edge of the coffee table, evidently feeling smug. From the way he said, “Good thinking, partner,” I could tell that he thought this was all his idea.

Sure, Ray. We’re both geniuses , I thought, my tail flicking lazily as I closed my eyes. One of us more than the other.

Chapter

Thirteen

The next morning, Ray and I pulled up to Tranquility Terrace bright and early. The building looked as quiet and unassuming as ever, but I could feel in the air that something was off. Ray sensed it, too—he might’ve been slow on the uptake sometimes, but even he wasn’t totally oblivious.

We walked inside, greeted by the usual hum of resident chatter and the faint drone of a vacuum cleaner somewhere down the hall. Mrs. Hargrove stood by the reception desk, wringing her hands like she was on the verge of losing her mind. She whispered something to Gina, who was nodding sympathetically.

Ray, always polite, also nodded as we approached. “Everything okay this morning?”

Mrs. Hargrove sighed, glancing at Gina. “Not really, Mr. Leonard. Sally—you remember her from last night’s Mortimer scare? Well, something’s gone missing from her room. She’s terribly upset. It was her mother’s bracelet, a family heirloom.”

Ray’s eyebrows shot up, and I could practically see the light bulb flashing above his head. “Another theft? When did she last see it?”

Gina stepped in. “She said she saw it before Mortimer showed up in her room last night. After that, she was too scared to go back in. Slept in one of the lounge chairs. This morning, when she checked her room, the bracelet was gone.”

Ray scratched his chin thoughtfully, glancing down at me. I sat there, tail flicking in annoyance. My eyes narrowed as they locked onto Mortimer, who had just strolled down the hall and stretched out lazily in front of the reception desk.

That smug little furball, I thought, acting like he owns the place. Does he know more than he's letting on? Maybe this whole "death cat" act is just a front, and he's sneaking in for late-night jewelry heists. I mean, it would explain a lot.

But then again, Mortimer couldn't be bothered with actual effort. Grand theft? Nah. He barely had the ambition to chase a sunbeam. Still, I gave him a long, suspicious glare before turning my attention back to Ray.

Ray was still piecing the clues together, slow as usual. "So sometime between last night and this morning, the bracelet disappeared."

Mrs. Hargrove nodded, wringing her hands even tighter. "That's right. Sally didn't check her room after dinner because of Mortimer, and this morning, it was gone."

The gears in Ray's brain were grinding away. He had seen Sally lock her door after dinner—like everyone else had. And yet, her bracelet was still missing. Locked room. No forced entry. Classic. This scenario was shaping up to be one of those "impossible" crimes.

He crossed his arms and scanned the lobby, detective mode activated. I could tell because he had that squinty, deep-in-thought look he always used when he was trying to solve something.

First on his suspect list: Gina. She was still standing beside Mrs. Hargrove, looking calm and composed—maybe a little too composed. Gina was in and out of everyone's rooms, and she had access to the keys. If anyone could slip into a locked room unnoticed, it was her.

Ray narrowed his eyes. I could practically hear his thoughts. But would she take the risks involved in stealing? Gina didn't seem like the type to gamble her job for a few stolen trinkets. She had way too much to lose.

Next, Ray's eyes landed on Mr. Benedict, the magician, who was sitting in the corner of the lobby, fiddling with a magic wand. Maybe he had more than tricks up his sleeve.

Ray's gaze shifted to Mrs. Hargrove. She had the master key to the whole building. Could unlock any door without breaking a sweat. And yet, her calm demeanor in the face of all these thefts was... unsettling. Too calm. She was running the place like clockwork, but was that just a front?

I gave her a half-lidded, suspicious look. She had that hyperorganized, Type-A vibe. Would she really risk losing control by pulling off petty thefts? Probably not. But who knew? Maybe the pressure of running Tranquility Terrace was getting to her.

Ray finally broke the silence. "Sally's bracelet—did anyone see anything unusual last night? After dinner?"

There were shrugs and mumbles all around.

Mr. Saunders piped up from his spot near the window, "We were all at dinner with you, Ray. Then most of us watched a show and went straight to bed after that."

Ray nodded, chewing on the inside of his cheek. They had all been at dinner. All of them. But someone must've slipped away long enough to make their move.

His eyes flicked back to Gina. She had gone to put Sally's meds in her room, hadn't she? Ray, focus! Could she have swiped the bracelet then?

I telepathed, narrowing my eyes at him. Remember the map? We came to talk to Rick about the checked-off rooms. And don't forget... Rick has a master key.

Ray blinked as if waking up from a mental fog. I could practically hear the gears turning in his head, slowly grinding into place. That's right, Ray. The map. Get back on track!

His expression changed, his eyes sharpening as realization set in. "Where's Rick?"

Mrs. Hargrove blinked in surprise. "Rick? Oh, he's down in the basement, working on the boiler this morning. Why?"

Ray didn't answer right away. He glanced down at me, and I was already on my feet, tail flicking. I'd been waiting for this realization. About time too.

Then he gave a quick nod. "I need to talk to him."

Mrs. Hargrove looked confused. "Rick? Do you think he?—?"

Ray held up a hand. "I'm not sure yet. But I need to talk to him. Mind if I head down to the basement?"

Mrs. Hargrove hesitated but then nodded. "Of course. It's just through that door and down the stairs."

Ray thanked her and made for the door, with me trotting alongside him.

He opened the door, and we headed down the narrow staircase. The air grew cooler as we descended, the dim light from the bulbs overhead casting long shadows on the cement walls.

Chapter

Fourteen

The basement of Tranquility Terrace was about as inviting as I'd expected: dark, dank, and reeking of mildew and oil. The cold, heavy air pressed down on us like a wet blanket. Overhead, a single bare bulb flickered, casting long, dancing shadows along the cracked cement walls. The hum of the boiler filled the air, and the occasional drip of water resounded somewhere deeper in the building.

I flicked my tail in agitation as we descended the narrow stairs. This place smelled like wet socks and bad decisions. I hated it already.

Ray, on the other hand, seemed undeterred. He walked carefully down the stairs, his flashlight catching glimpses of old pipes and dusty, forgotten storage boxes. Rick, the handyman, was crouched by the boiler at the far end of the room, his back to us. He was muttering to himself, occasionally grunting as he turned a large wrench over the rusted valves.

Rick was bent over, tending to something in the old heating system. Ray stepped closer, but before he could say a thing, Rick whirled around, eyes wide and wild, the wrench raised high above his head as if he were ready to swing.

Ray threw his hands up, backing up a step. "Whoa there! Take it easy, Rick. It's me, Ray Leonard."

Rick's knuckles were still white around the handle of the wrench, but recognition

slowly dawned on him. His eyes narrowed, though with less suspicion than before. “Ray? What are you doing down here?”

I watched carefully from my spot by Ray’s feet, keeping an eye on Rick. He still didn’t look thrilled to see us, but at least we were past the whole “possible-head-bashing” phase.

Ray dropped his hands and offered a small grin, trying to lighten the tension. “Just wanted to ask you a few things. No need for the heavy artillery.”

Rick grunted, setting the wrench down with a clang against the boiler. “Yeah, well, you startled me. What’s this about, anyway? More questions about the thefts?”

Ray nodded, pulling out his phone. “Yeah, but this time, I need to ask you about something specific. I found this in the attic yesterday.” He swiped through his phone and held up a picture of the map we’d discovered, the one with the marked-off rooms.

Rick squinted at the screen then raised an eyebrow. “A map? What about it?”

“Was this yours? Were you using it for something?” Ray asked, his voice casual but probing. “Rooms marked off—it made me think maybe it’s related to repairs or updates?”

Rick shook his head. “Never seen that before.”

Ray blinked, clearly surprised by the answer. “You sure? You’re the one in and out of the rooms, fixing things. I thought it might’ve been a system you were using to keep track.”

Rick crossed his arms and leaned back against the boiler. “Why do you keep asking? Oh, you think it has something to do with the thefts. You think I’m involved.”

Ray didn't blink. "I didn't say that."

Rick bristled, tension rolling off him in waves. "Look, I'm a hardworking guy. I fix things. I don't need to steal from a bunch of old folks just to make a living. You want to accuse someone? You go ahead and accuse one of these other weirdos around here."

Ray cocked an eyebrow. "You know something I don't?"

With a snort, Rick shook his head. "I know enough to keep my nose clean. But if you want to know who's been acting suspicious, you ought to be looking at Benedict."

Ray's eyes narrowed slightly. "The magician?"

His expression dark, Rick crossed his arms tighter and leaned against the boiler. "I've seen him sneaking around, using the secret door."

Ray blinked. "Secret door?"

Rick sighed, clearly irritated by having to offer an explanation. "Yeah, it's an old servants' door. Back from when this place was some fancy mansion. It goes from the pantry in the dining room to the hallway where all the rooms are. It's easy to miss if you don't know it's there."

Ray fell quiet for a moment, processing this new piece of information. A secret door? One that could let someone slip in and out of rooms without being noticed?

"You're saying Benedict uses that door?"

Rick nodded. "I've seen him slip in and out during dinner, usually when everyone's distracted by the food. Wouldn't surprise me if he was sneaking into rooms while

people were eating. Don't magicians know how to pick locks?"

"Why didn't you mention this earlier?" Ray asked in a careful voice.

Rick shrugged, pushing himself off the boiler. "Not my business, is it? Besides, I figured someone else would notice. Ain't my job to babysit these people, just to keep the place from falling apart."

Ray nodded slowly, glancing down at me. I sat at attention, my sharp eyes gleaming with suspicion. A secret door, huh? And the magician had been sneaking around? This idea was sounding a lot more plausible than I'd have liked. The guy did know how to make things disappear. But did he make Sally's bracelet disappear last night? I tried to remember if Benedict was in the dining room the whole time we were eating, and I couldn't. I hadn't noticed him leave, but magicians could be sneaky.

Ray turned back to Rick. "You sure Benedict's the only one using that door?"

Rick shrugged again. "Far as I know. Could be someone else knows about it, but I've only seen him use it. The door's been there for decades, so who knows?"

Ray nodded, thinking. "Thanks for the info."

Grunting, Rick picked up his wrench again. "Yeah, yeah. Just leave me out of this. I've got enough work to do around here without getting mixed up in some thief hunt."

Chapter

Fifteen

I padded up the stairs from the basement behind Ray, my paws silently judging every creak and groan of the old wood. Ray, meanwhile, was muttering to himself—something about Rick, sticky locks, and maps.

We finally reemerged in the common room, where the usual suspects were scattered about. The air felt... different. Tense. Too quiet. And then I saw why.

Viv.

Standing at the front desk, talking with Mrs. Hargrove, looking every bit the sharp-witted detective she was. Auburn hair in that messy bun, detective's badge hanging off her jacket, and—oh boy—that look in her eyes. This was bad. The moment her hazel eyes landed on us, I knew Ray was done for.

And, naturally, her eyes lit up—not at Ray, mind you, but at me.

“Earl! You’re looking great,” she practically squealed, and before I could even prepare myself, she bent down and scratched me behind the ears.

Well, well, well. Looks like somebody still knows who the real brains of this operation is.

Ray, poor guy, was standing there like someone had knocked the wind out of him. I

leaned into the petting a bit, not because I needed it, but because why not? If he was going to let this whole situation get awkward, I might as well enjoy it.

“Yeah, hey, Viv,” Ray muttered, clearly trying to regain some shred of control in a conversation that didn’t even include him.

“Ray,” Viv said, standing up and finally acknowledging his existence—barely. She crossed her arms, that no-nonsense expression taking over as she switched back into professional mode. “Sally called the police. She’s not happy with how things are being handled here. So here I am.”

Ray’s face tightened, and I could practically feel the annoyance radiating off him. He hated when people went over his head, and having Viv swoop in? Well, that was like throwing salt on an open wound.

“I’ve got this under control,” he said, trying to sound confident. Too bad I could hear the strain in his voice, and from the look on Viv’s face, so could she.

Mrs. Hargrove, bless her, stepped in, wringing her hands even harder. “Ray, I just don’t know... Things keep going missing, and the residents are getting worried. Sally’s right—maybe we need more... help.”

“I’m making progress. I just talked to Rick, and I’m piecing it together.”

Viv raised an eyebrow, and I could already tell she wasn’t buying that. “You keep saying you’ve got it under control, Ray, but how many more things need to go missing before you actually solve this?”

Ouch. Direct hit.

“Viv, I’m close. There’s no need to bring in backup,” Ray insisted, trying to cling to

some dignity.

Viv sighed, glancing at her notepad. She had already started writing something down, probably a list of all the ways Ray was fumbling this case. “I’m not here to step on your toes, but I need to take some basic info back. This has been going on for weeks, and we need to wrap it up before it gets any worse.”

I flicked my tail, observing how Ray stiffened at the word “worse.” It didn’t take a genius to see how much this conversation was bugging him. Humans and their egos. So fragile.

“Fine, but you’re wasting your time. I have it already solved... pretty much,” Ray said.

Before the situation could get even messier, Viv’s phone buzzed. She checked it and sighed, her face shifting from irritation to focus in an instant.

“I’ve got another call. Something urgent.” She slid the notepad back into her pocket, giving Ray a look that wasn’t exactly sympathetic. “I’ll be back.”

Viv turned to leave but not before throwing one last smile my way. “See you later, Earl. Keep an eye on him for me.”

I gave her a slow blink, which I knew she’d take as a “sure thing.” After all, somebody had to keep Ray from losing it completely.

Mrs. Hargrove watched Viv go then turned to Ray with that hopeful, worried look humans always got when they were placing all their bets on him.

“Mr. Leonard... are you really close to solving this?”

Ray squared his shoulders, though I could tell he was barely holding it together. “Yep,” he said, a little too quickly. “I’ve just got to check one thing out, and I’m pretty sure I’ll have our culprit.”

Uh-huh. Sure you do.

As Ray headed for the dining room, I followed, my paws padding along quietly beside him. He didn’t say anything, but I could hear his thoughts racing, feel the tension in his every step. Viv was in now, which meant the clock was ticking. If he didn’t figure the solution out soon, she was going to come back and take the whole case from him.

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Chapter

Sixteen

The dining room at Tranquility Terrace was quiet. We proceeded to the pantry and got to work looking for the secret door.

Ray stood in the pantry, running his hands along the wooden panels, trying to feel for anything unusual. “There’s gotta be something,” he muttered, pressing here and there with growing frustration.

I sniffed the air and scratched lightly at the baseboards, my sharp eyes scanning the walls. Secret door, secret door... how hard can it be?

Ray pressed another section of the paneling, waiting for a panel to slide open. Nothing happened. The wall stayed stubbornly in place, as solid and unyielding as ever. He stepped back, scratching the back of his neck.

“Maybe it’s hidden better than I thought,” he mumbled.

I released an exasperated meow.

Ray crouched down, squinted at the bottom of the wall, and tapped along the seams. “There’s gotta be some kind of trigger here,” he muttered.

I wandered over and sniffed the base of the wall, but nothing stood out except the faint smell of dust and age. This is getting old, Ray. Maybe we should come back

with a hammer. At least then, we'd be making progress.

Ray sighed, standing up and dusting his hands off. "Nothing. I don't get it. Rick said there was a door. I guess we should ask him exactly where it is."

Oh great, back to the basement. Can't wait.

Clearly frustrated, Ray ran a hand through his hair. "Maybe he's messing with us... Maybe there's no secret door, and this is just some old pantry after all."

Just as I was thinking he might be right and we should call it quits, a soft, unmistakable click came from behind us. We both froze, ears and eyes darting toward the sound. Slowly, Ray turned to face the pantry wall.

And there it was. As if by magic, the panel he'd been pressing and prodding at slid open with a soft creak.

Ray's eyes widened. "What the?—?"

Mortimer strolled through the opening, as calm and composed as ever, his sleek gray fur catching the sliver of sunlight from the dining room. He blinked lazily at us, looking completely unbothered.

My tail puffed up in disbelief. You've got to be kidding me. Mortimer knew about the door?

Mortimer plopped down and started licking his paw with all the grace and smugness of a cat who knew far more than he let on. Ray, still standing near the now-open door, stared at him in shock.

"Mortimer? Where did you—how did you...?"

I marched over to Mortimer, my fur bristling with irritation. All right, Mortimer. How did you open that door? I demanded, telepathically, of course.

Mortimer looked up from his grooming session, giving me a slow blink of amusement. “Oh, that?” he said lazily, flicking his tail. “I figured it out years ago. The trick’s right here.” He raised a paw and gestured toward a small, nearly invisible panel near the floor, just low enough for a cat to push against. “You give it a nudge, and the door opens. Not exactly complicated.”

Ray crouched down beside the open panel and inspected the spot Mortimer had pointed to. The tiny panel Mortimer had triggered was barely noticeable, especially to human eyes. Ray shook his head, muttering to himself. “So that’s it... interesting.”

Mortimer gave one last languid stretch, stood up, and padded lazily back toward the hidden passage. “Well, I’ll leave you two to your little investigation. I’ve got places to be.”

Ray watched him go then stood and brushed the dust off his hands. “Come on, Earl. We’re getting closer. Let’s see where this door leads next.”

He nudged the panel farther open, revealing a narrow, dimly lit corridor. The air inside was cool and stale, and I could hear the faint hum of the kitchen appliances on the other side of the wall. Ray’s flashlight swept across the space, casting long shadows as we both stepped inside. The door creaked shut behind us.

The passageway was narrow, barely wide enough for Ray to move through without bumping his elbows on the walls. On one side was a door to the kitchen. A few steps down on the other side was another door. When Ray opened it, we found ourselves in the main hallway, where the residents’ rooms were.

“Interesting. This could be how the thief moves about.” Ray turned and pondered the

door. “And Mrs. Hargrove must know about this passage. Rick knows about it. And Rick said Benedict knew. I wonder if anyone else knows.”

Chapter

Seventeen

“ W e need to have a little talk with Benedict,” Ray muttered, setting off down the hallway with purpose.

I padded along beside him, flicking my tail in agreement.

We hadn’t made it more than halfway down the hall when Mrs. Hargrove appeared from nowhere, practically skidding to a stop in front of us. She looked like she’d been running a marathon, her face tight with worry.

“Oh, Mr. Leonard, I’m glad I found you!” she exclaimed, her voice trembling slightly.

Ray stopped in his tracks, eyebrows rising. “What’s going on, Mrs. Hargrove?”

“There’s been another incident,” she added, wringing her hands.

Ray’s posture stiffened. “Another theft?”

Mrs. Hargrove nodded. “Yes, I’m afraid so. Mr. Benedict reported that his cuff links are missing. They’re very valuable. He’s quite upset.”

I could see in the way Ray’s eyes darted around that his mind was already working overtime, piecing things together.

“When did he notice they were gone?” he asked.

“Just a few minutes ago.”

Ray’s brow furrowed, his thoughts already churning. “Has anyone else reported anything missing?”

Mrs. Hargrove shook her head. “No. But... we’re worried this could escalate. The residents are getting anxious.”

He nodded. “I understand. I’ll look into it. Thanks for letting me know. Where is Benedict?”

She pointed down the hall. “He’s in his room. Number ten.”

Ray and I approached Mr. Benedict’s room with a renewed sense of purpose. The magician’s suite was tucked away in one of the quieter corners of Tranquility Terrace, and as we reached the door, Ray knocked gently. The door creaked open, revealing the dark, moody interior—like a stage set for one of Mr. Benedict’s performances rather than a typical retirement-home room.

My eyes widened slightly as I padded inside. The decor screamed Victorian drama, full of deep reds, heavy drapes, and enough mystery to choke on. Dark wood furniture, velvet cushions, and brass fittings were scattered around the room.

Magic props—silk scarves, decks of cards, and top hats—were perched in odd places, as if the magician had used them in the middle of a trick before abandoning them. A vintage trunk in the corner was partially open, revealing even more tools of the magician’s trade. The faint smell of incense hung in the air, thickening the theatrical atmosphere.

“Mr. Leonard,” Benedict greeted from his chair by the window, his voice as smooth and rehearsed as always. He waved Ray in with a dramatic flourish. “I trust you’ve heard about my missing cuff links.”

Ray nodded but stayed on his feet. “Mrs. Hargrove mentioned it. You said they were valuable?”

Benedict let out a long, exaggerated sigh, running a hand over his perfectly groomed mustache. “Very valuable. Magician-society cuff links—not just any pair. These were passed down to me by my mentor when I joined the order. They’re nearly impossible to find outside the circle. If someone has those in their possession, it would be... obvious.”

Ray crossed his arms, studying Benedict. “And you’re sure they were stolen and not just misplaced?”

Benedict’s eyes flashed with indignation. “Of course.”

“But why not mention it sooner? It’s after noon now, and if you noticed them this morning...”

“I didn’t notice them this morning. I noticed them just a few minutes ago. You see, I keep them tucked away in a box in my underwear drawer. Never think to look there, actually. But when Sally mentioned another theft, I got to thinking I should double-check.”

“So they could have been stolen at any time?”

Mr. Benedict frowned. “I suppose so. Let me think. I remember looking at them last Monday. That’s the last time I can be sure they were here.”

Ray was silent for a few beats. He kept his eyes on the magician, clearly weighing every word. Everything about Benedict was so composed, so perfectly in control. It was like he was putting on a show even now. Then again, maybe he was.

Benedict broke the silence first. “So, Mr. Leonard,” he said, his voice cool and casual, “are you any closer to solving this little mystery of ours? Because from where I’m standing, the thief doesn’t seem particularly discouraged by your investigation.”

Ray stiffened. His voice was calm, but I could hear the edge in it. “I’m very close, Mr. Benedict. It won’t be long before I name the culprit.”

Benedict gave a slow nod, his lips curling into a practiced smile. “Good. I’d hate for this to go on much longer. You’ll keep me informed, I trust?”

Ray replied with a curt nod of his own. “Of course.”

As we stepped out into the hallway, the door clicked softly behind us. Ray muttered under his breath, “Something’s not right with that guy. Too calm, too controlled.”

I trotted beside him, my own thoughts swirling. Well, that was interesting. Was Benedict hiding something? And if so, what did it have to do with the map?

Chapter

Eighteen

We got back to the office in the afternoon, and as soon as Ray tossed his jacket onto the chair, I could tell we were in for one of those long “thinking sessions.” You know, the kind where Ray talked out loud to himself while pretending he was coming up with all the brilliant ideas. In reality, it was usually me nudging him in the right direction, but hey, I didn’t mind. Kept things interesting.

Ray flopped into his chair behind the desk, boots propped up like he was about to take a nap. His laptop balanced on his lap, the machine humming as he scrolled through whatever articles or online forums he always seemed to dig up when he was “researching.”

“Seems kind of weird that the thief stole twice in the last two days,” he muttered. “Maybe Benedict’s was about misdirection. He is a magician, after all.”

That was exactly what I was wondering, but this time, I hadn’t had to telepath it to Ray. I hopped up onto the desk and settled into my usual spot beside the ever-growing pile of papers, files, and coffee mugs. I flicked my tail lazily, watching him work, or whatever it was he called that.

“Let’s see if Benedict’s got any skeletons in his closet,” Ray said, his voice low, more to himself than to me. I wasn’t sure how much good internet digging would do on a guy like Benedict. Anything on him might be pre-internet.

I watched Ray type, and a few searches popped up on his laptop screen. He scrolled through some articles about magician acts and society performances, nothing that looked suspicious. No thefts, no shady dealings, just a guy who liked top hats and making doves disappear.

Ray squinted at the screen. “Nothing on Benedict,” he said, sounding irritated. “No criminal record, no news articles. He was doing magic shows up until fairly recently, but it looks like he’s clean.”

Clean’s relative, Ray. I stretched out my paws, settling into a comfortable position. The guy makes a living pulling tricks and hiding things in plain sight. If he’s guilty, it won’t be in some public record.

Ray rubbed his chin, deep in thought. “But he’s too smooth. Too confident. And those missing cuff links...”

He trailed off, lost in his own thoughts. I let out a low, thoughtful meow, hoping to steer him in the right direction. Think, Ray. What does a magician like Benedict do for fun? He’s not some parlor-trick amateur—he’s the real deal. Look up the acts he does.

Ray blinked, his gaze sharpening as if the idea had just popped into his head. “Maybe I should check what kind of magic tricks he’s known for.”

Yes. Now you’re thinking. I flicked my tail approvingly, satisfied that my telepathic nudge had worked. Magicians like Benedict don’t just pull rabbits out of hats. There’s more to him.

Ray typed quickly, searching for any performances linked to Benedict. A few videos popped up—old clips of the magician performing at various clubs and events. Some consisted of standard magic fare—sleight of hand, card tricks, the usual. But as Ray

scrolled further, a particular performance caught his eye.

“This one,” Ray muttered, leaning closer. “The escape act.”

I tilted my head, watching the screen as Ray clicked on the link. The video showed Benedict performing one of those dramatic water tank escapes, the kind where the magician was locked in chains and submerged in a tank, only to emerge a minute later, free and dry. Benedict was younger in the video, but his confidence was unmistakable. He thrived on the tension, on making the impossible seem effortless.

“He was chained up and locked in,” Ray murmured. “And we all know magicians pick the locks to get out of the chains.”

My whiskers twitched. Exactly. Magicians like Benedict have to know how to pick locks, Ray. It’s part of the act. If he can get out of a locked tank, he could easily pick the locks in those residents’ rooms.

Ray sat back, staring at the screen, deep in thought. “If Benedict has lock-picking skills, that would explain how he could get into the rooms, even if they were locked. No need for a key.”

I let out a satisfied purr.

“But that’s a pretty standard magician trick, not really convincing evidence that he’s the thief.” Ray started typing again, searching for more instances of stolen items or thefts connected to magicians. But as he scrolled through article after article, nothing concrete popped up. No mentions of items reported missing after Benedict’s shows.

Ray sighed, leaning back in his chair. “There’s nothing on him, Earl. No history of thefts.”

But just as I was about to settle back into a comfortable nap, something on Ray's screen caught my attention. I raised my head, my ears twitching.

Ray frowned as he stared at the screen again. "Here's something on missing items, though."

I jumped up and padded over to the screen to get a closer look. Ray clicked on the article, his brow furrowed in confusion. The headline read: "Thefts at Green Pines Retirement Facility—Residents Report Missing Items."

Ray sat up straighter, reading the article out loud. "This is from last year. A series of small thefts were reported at Green Pines, a retirement home similar to Tranquility Terrace. The items stolen included jewelry, family heirlooms, and other valuables. The thief was never caught."

His eyes widened. "Wait a minute..."

I could practically hear the gears turning in his head. You're onto something, Ray. Green Pines... why does that sound familiar?

Ray paused, the memory clicking into place for him. "Daisy mentioned she used to live at Green Pines," he said, his voice laced with suspicion. "She told us that back at the beginning of the case. She was a resident there."

Now you're thinking. But was she the only one?

Ray's fingers flew over the keyboard, searching for records of who had been at Green Pines during the thefts. But nothing came up—no resident list, no mention that Benedict was there. Still, the connection between the two facilities nagged at both of us.

Ray's eyes darted back to the screen. "What if Benedict was at Green Pines too? Daisy might not have been the only one who moved from place to place. Maybe it's common."

He scribbled a note on a scrap of paper. "We need to find out if anyone else—especially Benedict—was there during the time of the thefts."

I flicked my tail. Finally. It's all starting to come together.

Ray glanced down at me, a grin spreading across his face. "You know, Earl, I think we're getting close. Real close."

Chapter

Nineteen

We were back at Tranquility Terrace the next morning. Ray sat across from Mrs. Hargrove, leaning forward like he was about to break the biggest case of his career. Mrs. Hargrove, on the other hand, was perched on the edge of her seat, looking more nervous than I'd ever seen her. She was wringing her hands together, her eyes wide behind those oversized glasses.

"I think I know who's behind the thefts," Ray said, his voice low, dramatic.

Mrs. Hargrove's eyes widened even further. "You do?" she gasped. "Oh my, Mr. Leonard! Who is it?"

Ray sat back, looking confident, like he had all the answers in the world. "It's Benedict."

"Benedict?" Mrs. Hargrove almost squeaked. "The magician? But why?"

Ray cleared his throat. "Think about it. He's a magician—he knows how to make things disappear. And we know he's got lock-picking skills. I found out last night that he used to do an escape act. You know, the kind where they're chained up and locked in a box, and they get out by picking the locks."

Mrs. Hargrove was still staring at Ray, her mouth hanging open in shock. "Oh dear... I never would've suspected Benedict. He's always been such a gentleman."

Ray nodded like he had it all figured out. “That’s how these things usually go. It’s always the person you least expect.”

Mrs. Hargrove stood up from her desk, looking ready to faint at any moment. “We should talk to him right away. If he’s really the one behind the thefts...”

Again, Ray nodded, standing up too. “Don’t worry. I’ll handle it.”

We left her office and made our way to the common room, where I could already hear the faint murmur of residents chatting and clinking teacups. Sure enough, Benedict was there, sitting in one of the armchairs by the window. He was chatting with Mr. Billings and Martha, who were laughing about something I didn’t care to investigate.

Ray walked in with all the swagger of a detective in a crime novel, and I followed close behind, already sensing this situation was about to get interesting.

“Benedict,” Ray said, striding up to him with purpose. “We need to talk.”

Benedict, always the showman, looked up from his conversation, raising an eyebrow. “Mr. Leonard! What a surprise. What can I do for you?”

Ray stood tall, arms crossed. “It’s about the thefts.”

Benedict’s expression faltered slightly, but he kept his cool, smiling politely. “Did you figure out who the thief is?”

Ray smirked. “We’re close to solving the case. Very close.”

I hopped up onto a nearby table, watching the exchange with interest. Oh boy. Here we go.

Benedict looked genuinely confused, his eyebrows drawing together. “Really? Well, I’m sure we’re all eager to hear the resolution.”

Ray didn’t waste a second. “Benedict, where were you the night Sally’s bracelet went missing?”

Benedict blinked then chuckled lightly. “I was... at dinner. With everyone else. You were there, too, if I recall correctly.”

Ray wasn’t backing down. “Right. But you also know about the secret door in the dining room, don’t you?”

Benedict’s smile wavered. “Secret door? Oh, you mean the old servants’ passage? Yes, I use it sometimes during my shows. Adds a bit of flair, you see.”

Ray’s eyes narrowed. “Flair? Or access to the residents’ rooms?”

Benedict’s smile finally disappeared, replaced by another look of genuine confusion. “I beg your pardon? Are you suggesting I’ve been sneaking into people’s rooms?”

“Yes,” Ray said, crossing his arms triumphantly. “I think you’ve been using your magician skills to break into the rooms and steal from the residents. You know lock-picking, don’t you, Benedict? You use it in your escape acts.”

Benedict looked increasingly flustered. “Well, yes, I know how to pick locks. It’s part of my act. But I certainly haven’t?—”

Something in Benedict’s open bag of tricks had caught my eye—a small set of tools that looked suspiciously like... lock picks.

Ray , I nudged telepathically, trying to get his attention. Look in his bag.

Ray was too caught up in his interrogation, so I tried again, louder this time. RAY!
Look in the bag!

Suddenly, Ray's eyes flicked toward Martha, who was knitting a sweater, needles clacking together and a bag filled with yarn on the floor next to her. His face lit up like a detective who had just found the smoking gun.

No. No, not that one. The magician's bag!

But Ray was already proceeding toward Martha. He crouched down and peeked inside the knitting bag, where a tangle of yarn and knitting needles sat harmlessly.

Martha's needles stopped, and she watched Ray, her brow creasing in confusion. "Mr. Leonard? What on earth are you doing?"

Not that bag! I telepathed as hard as I could.

Ray straightened up quickly, laughing awkwardly. "Uh, just... admiring your knitting. Very impressive."

Benedict's bag, I meowed and flicked my tail toward it for emphasis.

Ray, still oblivious, glanced around again and spotted the trash bin by the door. "Maybe...?" he muttered to himself as he walked over and peeked inside.

Everyone watched in disbelief as Ray rummaged through the trash bag. He pulled out an old magazine and a crumpled tissue before shaking his head.

Oh, this is painful. You're really doing this. Stop looking for clues in the garbage, Ray. It's not there. Move your eyes three feet to the left!

I hopped up on the nearby chair, trying to get Ray to refocus. I shot another telepathic push. The bag, Ray. Benedict's bag!

Ray looked at me, and his gaze drifted toward a random tote bag on the floor next to one of the residents. "Hmm..."

Not the tote bag! For the love of catnip, it's the magician's bag! **THE MAGICIAN'S BAG!**

Finally—finally—Ray's eyes flicked back to Benedict's prop bag. He knelt and peeked inside. His brows shot up when he caught sight of the lock-picking tools nestled among the scarves and fake coins.

I let out a satisfied purr. There you go, Sherlock. Now, we're getting somewhere.

"Aha!" Ray exclaimed, bending down and digging into the bag. He pulled out the small set of lock-picking tools with a flourish and held them up for everyone to see. "These! This is how you've been getting into the locked rooms!"

The entire room fell quiet. All eyes were on Benedict, whose face had gone pale. For a moment, Ray looked ready to declare the case closed.

But then, Benedict sighed, shaking his head slowly. "Mr. Leonard, those are part of my act. I haven't used them in years."

Ray blinked, thrown off balance. "So, you're expecting us to believe that you didn't sneak out the secret door, pick the lock to Sally's room, steal her bracelet, and then, the next day, pretend you had something stolen to throw me off track?"

Benedict raised his hands slightly. They were trembling. "I have tremors, Mr. Leonard. I've had them for a while now. That's why I stopped performing certain

tricks, like the lock-picking escape. I can't pick locks anymore. That requires a steady hand."

Ray's triumphant expression deflated faster than a punctured balloon. He stood there, holding the lock-picking tools awkwardly, as realization dawned on him.

"Oh," Ray mumbled, his face turning a little red. "Well... I didn't know about that."

The room remained silent for a beat before Benedict, ever the gentleman, gave a slight smile. "No harm done, Mr. Leonard. But I assure you, I'm not your thief."

Ray muttered something under his breath as he slipped the lock-picking tools back into Benedict's bag. I sat on the table, flicking my tail with amusement.

Ray straightened up, clearing his throat. "Right. Sorry about the confusion, Benedict."

Benedict smiled warmly, his usual calm demeanor returning. "No worries, Mr. Leonard. I appreciate your thoroughness."

As we walked out of the common room, Ray gave me a sheepish look. "Well, that didn't go quite as planned."

I flicked my tail, letting out a soft meow. Don't worry, Ray. You'll get 'em next time. Probably.

Chapter

Twenty

After the whole debacle with Benedict, Ray and I retreated to the little garden area behind Tranquility Terrace. Ray, shoulders slumped, sat on one of the wooden benches, clutching his notepad in one hand while he rubbed the back of his neck with the other.

I jumped up onto the bench beside him, giving him my best “don’t beat yourself up” look, but he wasn’t paying much attention. He was too busy muttering to himself about how he could have gotten the whole thing so wrong.

“Benedict,” Ray mumbled. “I can’t believe I thought it was him. Lockpicks in the bag, the secret door—it all lined up. But no, of course it couldn’t be that easy.”

I flicked my tail, letting him vent. Don’t feel so bad. Even I thought it was him. But hey, you’ll figure it out. We’ve been in worse scrapes.

Before Ray could spiral further into self-pity, Rick strolled over from one of the garden paths, a tuna sandwich in hand and a tool belt slung low on his waist. He was humming to himself, clearly on a lunch break. As soon as he saw Ray, though, he raised an eyebrow.

“Ray, buddy,” Rick said, sitting down on the bench next to him. “You look like someone kicked your dog... or your cat, in this case.”

Ray sighed, flipping through his notepad without really reading it. “Just made a fool of myself back there, Rick. Accused Benedict of being the thief.”

Rick chuckled and took a bite of his sandwich. “Yeah, I heard. You really thought Benedict was sneaking around with those shaky hands of his?”

Ray groaned. “Not my finest moment.”

Rick shrugged. He pulled out a little piece of tuna from his sandwich and held it down toward the ground. Mortimer, who had been lounging nearby in his usual “too cool for school” fashion, lazily rolled over and padded up to Rick’s feet, accepting the tuna morsel like the royal sovereign he believed himself to be.

I narrowed my eyes at Mortimer. Oh, so that’s how it is? You get to eat lunch, and I’m stuck here with nothing ? The smell of the tuna drifted up, and my stomach growled. Rick’s sandwich smelled like heaven.

Rick gave Mortimer another piece of tuna, not even looking at him as the cat munched away.

I edged closer to Rick, eyeing the sandwich. Maybe if I sit right here, looking pitiful enough, he’ll drop me a piece. I’m much more deserving than Mortimer.

Rick glanced over at me, catching the look. “Oh, Earl wants in on this, too, huh?”

I purred softly, You bet I do. Just drop the tuna, Rick. Let’s not make a big deal of it.

Rick gave me a tiny piece. It was delicious.

Ray, oblivious to the tuna negotiations happening beside him, leaned back on the bench, tapping the notepad with his pen. “You know what’s been bugging me?”

Rick wiped his hands on a napkin. “What’s that?”

Ray flipped to a page in his notebook, showing the rough drawing of the map he’d found in the attic. “This. The map. At first, I thought it was some kind of maintenance plan—maybe rooms that needed fixing up.”

Rick squinted at the drawing then shook his head. “Like I told you, I’ve never seen it.”

Ray frowned. “So, I wonder what it could be for. It was recent, up in the attic with no dust, and the rooms marked were rooms that were stolen from. You haven’t seen anyone with anything like that, have you?”

Rick leaned back and tossed another piece of tuna to Mortimer, who was now practically sitting on the man’s shoes, waiting patiently. “Hmmm... well, it does sort of remind me of that paper that Gina uses to keep track of when patients get their meds.”

But Ray’s eyes narrowed, the wheels turning in his head. “Right. She’d have to keep track of that. And a person that is used to keeping track might also keep track of other things.”

Rick raised an eyebrow. “Sure, that makes sense.”

Ray sat up straighter. “Exactly. And no one would think twice about seeing her go in and out of residents’ rooms.”

Looking a little surprised, Rick nodded slowly. “Yeah... Gina’s in and out of those rooms more than anyone. Always checking on people, especially the ones who are, y’know, not doing so great.”

Ray stared at the map, realization dawning on his face. “If Gina made this map, she could’ve been keeping track of which rooms she’s hit already. She’s careful. Systematic.”

I sat up a little straighter. Good job, Ray! Let’s get her!

An energized Ray jumped up from the bench. “Rick, thanks. I think you just helped me crack this thing.”

Rick chuckled, standing up and brushing off his hands. “Hey, don’t mention it. Just glad I wasn’t on the suspect list.”

Ray grinned. “Don’t worry. I know who I need to talk to next.”

I followed close behind as Ray walked back inside, my mind already racing ahead to the confrontation with Gina. We had her now—at least, I was pretty sure we did.

Chapter

Twenty-One

We headed back inside Tranquility Terrace. Ray was looking more energized, his eyes sharp with determination, and I could tell he was ready to confront Gina. I followed close behind, my mind already racing through the possibilities. The culprit had to be Gina—everything pointed at her now.

Just as we stepped into the hallway near the common room, we almost bumped into Daisy, who was standing there, wringing her hands like she'd been waiting for someone. As soon as she saw us, her eyes widened, and she rushed up to Ray.

“Oh, Mr. Leonard! Ray!” Daisy stammered in a slightly too-eager voice, her words spilling out in a nervous rush. “Have you... have you figured anything out? Are you close to... catching the thief?”

Ray raised an eyebrow. “I think I’ve got a pretty good idea of who’s behind all this,” he said, his voice calm but clipped.

Daisy’s eyes darted around, and she bit her lip. “Oh... that’s... that’s good. Really good. I just hope... I hope it all gets resolved soon.”

Before Ray could say more, Mrs. Hargrove appeared from around the corner, her face tight with worry. She marched straight up to us, and even I could sense the frustration radiating off her in waves.

“Mr. Leonard,” she said in a hushed but firm voice, “may I speak with you privately for a moment?”

Ray glanced at Daisy then nodded. “Of course.”

I followed as Mrs. Hargrove led us down the hall to her office. As soon as the door closed behind us, Mrs. Hargrove turned to face Ray and crossed her arms over her chest.

“Ray,” she started, her voice low but full of tension, “I understand you’re trying to help, but this... this can’t go on like this. Accusing people left and right, making everyone nervous—it’s creating chaos. The residents are all on edge.”

Ray frowned, looking slightly defensive. “I wasn’t accusing people left and right?—”

“Benedict,” she interrupted, raising an eyebrow.

Ray cleared his throat. “Okay, maybe I jumped the gun with Benedict, but I was trying to flush out the real thief! Get them rattled, make them slip up.”

I hopped onto the chair near the door, flicking my tail lazily as I watched the scene unfold. Sure, Ray. That’s exactly what you were doing.

Mrs. Hargrove didn’t seem convinced. “Rattled, yes. Everyone’s rattled. No one feels safe. The common room is practically empty, and the ones who are there look like they’re waiting for something bad to happen. Gina isn’t even tending to the residents like she usually does.”

Ray blinked at that. I noticed his eyes dart toward the door, a hint of concern crossing his face. Gina, usually the picture of calm professionalism, was conspicuously absent from her usual duties. If she were innocent, she’d be checking on the residents, not

hiding. Maybe she sensed we were closing in on her.

Mrs. Hargrove sighed, clearly frustrated. “Ray, I can’t let you keep making accusations without proof. This isn’t some detective novel. People are nervous, upset... and frankly, I’m starting to think it’s time to call the police. We can’t keep this going.”

At the mention of the police, Ray straightened up, shaking his head a little too quickly. “No, no, there’s no need for that.”

I could practically feel the anxiety rising in him. He definitely didn’t want the police, especially Viv, walking in here to see that he hadn’t solved the case. That would be a disaster for his pride.

“I’ve got this under control,” Ray insisted, though I could see his confidence wobbling just a little. “We’re closer than you think. I know who it is.”

Mrs. Hargrove raised an eyebrow, looking skeptical. “You do? Then who is it?”

I let out a soft meow, nudging Ray with my gaze. Gina. Come on, Ray. Say it.

Ray’s jaw tightened, but then he squared his shoulders. “It’s Gina. She’s the one behind the thefts.”

Mrs. Hargrove blinked in surprise. “Gina? But... Ray, are you sure?”

“I’m sure.” Ray sounded more confident now. “She’s been using her access to the residents’ rooms—no one would question a nurse going in and out. She has keys, right?”

Mrs. Hargrove nodded but still didn’t look convinced. “I... I just can’t believe it.”

“She worked at Green Pines, and there were thefts reported there,” Ray added. “And the night Sally’s bracelet went missing, Gina said she would put Sally’s meds in her room while we were at dinner. Maybe she put the meds in and left with the bracelet while no one was watching.”

Again, I flicked my tail. Ray was right. I actually hadn’t remembered that little detail. He was getting better. My chest warmed with pride.

Mrs. Hargrove frowned. “I guess that does sound suspicious.”

Ray gave a reassuring smile, though I could tell he was still nervous about how this conversation would play out. “Trust me. We need to confront her, but we need to be smart about it. No public accusations this time.”

Mrs. Hargrove frowned, clearly unsure. “You’re sure? You don’t want another Benedict situation, Ray. The residents are on edge, and if you accuse someone publicly again, it could really upset them.”

Ray nodded, his expression serious. “I understand. I’ll keep it private this time. Bring Gina here. Once we get a confession, then we can call the police to make the arrest.”

Mrs. Hargrove bit her lip, still uncertain. After a long pause, though, she nodded slowly. “All right. I’ll bring Gina in. But, Ray, this is your last chance. If this goes wrong again...”

“It won’t,” Ray said quickly, his confidence growing again. “This time, we’ve got her.”

Chapter

Twenty-Two

Mrs. Hargrove's office was thick with tension. Gina sat across from Ray, her posture calm but her eyes sharp, watching him as he laid out his case. Mrs. Hargrove stood near the window, arms crossed once more, visibly worried but clearly hoping Ray knew what he was doing.

Mortimer lounged on a velvet cushion in the corner. He was half asleep, barely flicking an ear at the discussion, clearly not interested in the drama unfolding around him. I cast him a sidelong glance. Typical. While the rest of us were working, Mortimer was too busy taking his third nap of the morning to care.

I settled on a chair by the window, my ears twitching as I caught sight of Daisy through the window. She was lingering outside, just beyond the garden, acting... strange. She kept glancing around nervously, fidgeting, and then I noticed she had a suitcase. A pretty big one too.

That's odd, I thought, my eyes narrowing as I watched her. What's she up to?

Ray, oblivious to what was happening outside, leaned forward toward Gina. His voice firm, he said, "Gina, you've been working here for months. You have keys to the residents' rooms. It wouldn't be hard for someone with that kind of access to slip in and out unnoticed."

I flicked my tail in mild annoyance. Ray, forget the keys. Look at Daisy!

But Ray was laser focused on Gina. “You’re always in and out of the residents’ rooms. You know their routines. And today, I noticed you’re wearing an antique ring—just like some of the jewelry that’s gone missing.”

Gina glanced down at the ring on her finger and raised an eyebrow. “This? It’s a family heirloom. I’ve had it for years. Ask anyone.”

While Ray and Gina’s conversation went back and forth, I kept my eyes on Daisy. She was moving faster now, sneaking toward one of the old sheds on the property. The suitcase dragged behind her, and she kept glancing around like she didn’t want to be seen.

Why does she need a suitcase? And why the shed? Daisy’s forgetful, sure, but she’s never been this odd before.

I glanced at Ray, trying to nudge him telepathically. Ray, stop looking at Gina for two seconds and pay attention to what’s going on outside!

But Ray was still pressing his case. “And then there’s the map we found in the attic. The rooms are marked, Gina. You’re organized—you keep records, spreadsheets. It wouldn’t be hard for someone like you to use a map to keep track of which rooms you’ve been in.”

Gina blinked at the map he slid toward her and frowned. “I’ve never seen this before.”

Meanwhile, outside, Daisy had reached the shed. She glanced around one last time before disappearing inside with the suitcase. How odd.

Ray was still on his Gina spiel, not even noticing my frantic attempts to get his attention. “And you were at Green Pines, Gina. There was a rash of thefts there too.”

Gina released a small sigh, her patience clearly wearing thin. “Yes, I worked at Green Pines, but there were a lot of staff there. I’m not the only one with access to the rooms here.”

Ray scribbled something down in his notebook while I continued to watch Daisy’s odd behavior.

Gina sat back in her chair and crossed her arms. “I would never steal from my patients, and I certainly wouldn’t need a map to keep track.”

Ray’s expression tightened. His mental wheels were turning, and I could see he was starting to doubt his own theory.

He glanced at me then shifted his gaze toward the window. His eyes landed on Daisy—just as she was slipping back out from the shed, her movements hurried, her suitcase no longer in sight.

Ray froze.

“Wait a second,” he muttered under his breath, his eyes narrowing. “Daisy.”

Mrs. Hargrove looked over, puzzled. “What? Daisy? What about her?”

Ray didn’t answer right away. He stared at the shed then back at me. I could see the pieces falling into place in his mind. His gaze flicked back to Gina, and then a light seemed to switch on.

“Daisy was at Green Pines too,” Ray said slowly, his voice gaining momentum as the realization hit him.

Mrs. Hargrove’s eyes widened. “What are you saying?”

Ray stood, his posture firming up with renewed confidence. “It’s Daisy. She’s been using the map to keep track of who she’s stolen from so she doesn’t accidentally hit the same room twice. That’s why she needed it—because she’s forgetful. Have you seen all the reminder notes in her room?”

Pleased that Ray had figured it out, I flicked my tail again.

Mrs. Hargrove’s mouth dropped open. “Daisy? But... I can’t believe it.”

Ray nodded. “And the night Sally had her bracelet stolen... Remember how Daisy rushed off to get her tea? The whole time, Sally’s room was unlocked and open because she’d run out after seeing Mortimer.”

Gina’s brows shot up. “And we were all busy tending to Sally, so no one would have noticed if Daisy slipped into Sally’s room on the way.”

I shot one last look at Mortimer, who was still lounging in the corner, completely unbothered by the entire ordeal. His tail flicked lazily, too, as if to say, Finally. Took you long enough.

Ray moved toward the door, his face set with determination. “Let’s go catch a thief.”

Chapter

Twenty-Three

Ray burst out of the doors of Tranquility Terrace, charging toward the small shed in the far corner of the lawn. I sprinted ahead of him, my tail high, already knowing this was it—the big moment. Daisy had just emerged from the shed, her face flushed and a bit too casual, like she hadn't just snuck off with a suitcase full of stolen goods.

She blinked in surprise when she saw Ray storming toward her, and I could practically hear her scrambling to think of an excuse. Behind us, a small crowd of residents had gathered on the lawn, all of them watching the unfolding drama with wide-eyed interest.

“Oh!” Daisy said, her voice shaky as she glanced around nervously. “Mr. Leonard! I was just... just doing some gardening.”

Ray slowed to a stop in front of her, his eyes sharp and focused. “Gardening?” He glanced down at her empty hands. “Where’s your gardening tools?”

Daisy hesitated for a second too long, her eyes darting toward the shed behind her. She forced a smile. “Oh, well... I was just putting them away. You know, tidying up.”

I padded up next to Ray and sat down with a flick of my tail.

Ray didn't miss a beat. He took a step forward. “Then you won't mind if I take a look

inside the shed, right? Just to make sure everything's in order," he said, his voice steady but firm.

Daisy's eyes widened, and she quickly stepped in front of the shed door, blocking his path. "Oh! No, no, no need for that. It's just a mess in there. You know, old gardening stuff. Nothing interesting."

Ray crossed his arms, his expression hardening. "Move aside, Daisy."

She swallowed hard, glancing over Ray's shoulder at the growing crowd of residents who had gathered on the lawn. Benedict, leaning on his cane, had a glint in his eye and was already whispering to Mr. Billings, who looked a bit too excited for someone watching a confrontation.

"I'll bet you five bucks Daisy can get away," Benedict muttered to Billings.

Billings snorted. "Are you kidding? Ray's got this. Ten bucks says she trips on her way out."

Behind Billings and Benedict, Martha was clapping her hands in delight. "Go on, Ray! Don't let her fool you!"

Someone else called out, "Fake left, Daisy! You got this!"

Ray glanced back at the residents briefly, his face flashing with disbelief at the bizarre cheering section. I just sighed. You've got your work cut out for you, Ray. Focus.

Daisy, now visibly sweating, released a nervous laugh. "Oh, come on, Ray. There's nothing to see in there! Just old tools. Trust me."

Ray took another step forward, and she instinctively put her hands out to block him. “Daisy, move,” he said, his voice steely. “Now.”

She hesitated then squared her shoulders, looking desperate. “No.”

That was all I needed. I dashed around her ankles and wound myself in and out, weaving through her legs with my tail brushing against her knees. I felt her wobble, her feet tangling with my fur.

“Whoa!” Daisy yelped, flailing as she lost her balance.

Perfect, I thought as I made one last tight loop around her legs. In a dramatic tumble, Daisy fell backward, landing with an undignified thud on the grass. The crowd of residents erupted into cheers.

Benedict cackled, waving his cane. “And down she goes! I knew it!”

Martha clapped enthusiastically. “Rush her, Ray!”

Not wasting a second, Ray stepped around Daisy and threw open the shed door. Inside, tucked neatly in the corner, sat the suitcase she’d been dragging. He grabbed it and yanked it out into the sunlight. The residents fell silent as they watched him unzip it with a swift, determined motion.

Ray opened the suitcase, and there, nestled in the folds of Daisy’s belongings, was a pile of jewelry, watches, and small valuables. The sunlight gleamed off the gold and silver, casting sparkles across the lawn.

The crowd surged forward, gasps of recognition filling the air.

“Hey! That’s my pocket watch!” Mr. Billings exclaimed, stepping forward.

Martha pushed her way to the front and reached into the suitcase. “My necklace! Oh, thank heavens! I thought I’d lost it forever!”

A chorus of voices rose as the other residents began to identify their stolen items. Ray stood tall, folding his arms as he looked down at Daisy, who was still sprawled on the ground, her face pale and eyes wide with panic.

“It’s over, Daisy,” Ray said, his voice calm but final. “You’ve been caught.”

Daisy opened her mouth to protest, but no words came out. She looked around at the residents, who were all glaring at her now, their joy at recovering their stolen goods quickly giving way to anger.

I sat down beside Ray, giving Daisy my best “you’re done” look. Next time, maybe don’t leave the suitcase full of loot in the shed, Daisy.

Just then, Mrs. Hargrove appeared, rushing across the lawn toward Ray. “Oh my goodness! You found everything!”

Ray nodded, his expression grim. “It’s all here. Daisy’s been stealing from the residents this whole time.”

Mrs. Hargrove’s face turned ashen as she stared down at Daisy, who was still struggling to get to her feet. “Daisy... how could you?”

Daisy muttered something under her breath, but no one seemed to be listening anymore. Mrs. Hargrove pulled out her phone. Her fingers trembled slightly as she dialed. “I’m calling the police. This needs to be handled properly.”

The residents continued to murmur and reclaim their stolen treasures as I watched from the sidelines, my tail flicking with satisfaction. Mortimer, who had wandered

over at some point, sat down next to me, his eyes half closed as he thumped his tail against the ground.

Well , Mortimer , I thought, glancing at him, looks like the case is closed.

Mortimer let out a low, lazy purr, barely lifting his head, as if he'd known all along who the culprit was.

Chapter

Twenty-Four

The moment Mrs. Hargrove disconnected the call with the police, the crowd of residents that had gathered around the shed buzzed with excitement. Daisy, still sitting on the grass, looked defeated, wringing her hands nervously in her lap. Ray stood tall, arms folded, looking rather proud of himself, and I couldn't blame him. He'd cracked the case!

We waited for only a few minutes before the distant wail of police sirens broke the chatter. The residents looked around, whispering to one another as the sound grew closer, and then, sure enough, a police car pulled up onto the lawn, crunching the gravel under its tires.

Ray didn't seem nervous—at least, not until the police cruiser's door swung open and Viv stepped out, looking all business in her crisp uniform and sunglasses. Ray's confident posture wavered just a little, and I could practically feel him trying to stand a little taller.

Here we go, I thought, eyeing him with mild amusement. Ray might have had the situation under control, but when it came to Viv, things always got interesting.

Viv strode toward us, the picture of cool, calm professionalism. She took off her sunglasses when she reached the crowd, and her eyes landed on Ray. For a moment, her expression was unreadable, but then her gaze flicked to Daisy, who continued to sit on the grass.

Mrs. Hargrove, clearly relieved the police had arrived, rushed over to Viv. In a voice bubbling with gratitude, Mrs. Hargrove cried, “Oh, Officer Moretti, thank goodness you’re here! You won’t believe it—Ray figured it all out! He caught Daisy red-handed! All the stolen jewelry and valuables were hidden in the shed!”

Ray straightened his back again, looking pretty pleased with himself as Mrs. Hargrove kept gushing. “We didn’t know what to do! It’s been going on for months, and Ray—well, he solved the whole thing! He’s just been fantastic!”

I flicked my tail, glancing up at Ray. He had that look— that look—on his face. The googly-eyed expression he got over Viv, like some kind of lovesick puppy. Honestly, I’d never understand humans and their silly emotional entanglements.

Ray shot a glance at me, trying to play it cool, but I could see it in his eyes—he was hoping Viv would be impressed.

Viv finally turned to Ray, and for a second, her cool demeanor softened. There was a flicker of something in her eyes—something warmer than I’d seen in a while. “Good job, Ray,” she said, her voice quiet but genuine. “Looks like you really pulled this one off.”

Ray’s chest puffed up a little, and he cleared his throat. “Yeah, well, just doing what I do. It wasn’t easy, but we got there in the end.”

Oh brother , I thought, rolling my eyes. Here we go. It was all part of that human love thing that made no sense to me. I didn’t know why Ray cared so much about what Viv thought, but humans got all tangled up in these things. It was a mystery even I couldn’t solve.

Viv’s eyes lingered on Ray for a beat longer, and I could practically hear his thoughts spinning. But then, her professional demeanor returned, and she turned to Daisy, her

voice hardening once more. “Daisy Barker, you’re under arrest for theft.”

Daisy let out a soft whimper as Viv pulled out a pair of handcuffs and moved toward her. “I didn’t mean to! It just... happened!” Daisy babbled, still sitting on the grass. “I didn’t think anyone would notice!”

Viv gave her a sharp look. “Tell it to the judge.”

Without another word, Viv helped Daisy to her feet and snapped the handcuffs on her wrists. Daisy stood there, looking forlorn as Viv led her toward the police cruiser. The residents murmured among themselves, some looking shocked, others just relieved the ordeal was finally over.

Ray watched Viv walk away with Daisy in tow, his eyes following her until the cruiser door closed with a soft click. I could tell he was still basking in the afterglow of Viv’s praise, probably imagining all kinds of dramatic things—like how she might come to respect him even more after today.

Viv turned to Ray one last time as she climbed into the driver’s seat. She gave him a small nod, her voice just loud enough to hear. “Good job, Ray.”

Ray smiled, and I could swear he looked like he was about to float off the ground. “Thanks, Viv,” he said, his voice soft.

The engine roared to life, and just like that, the police cruiser pulled away, taking Daisy off to her new home in the local jail.

The crowd of residents slowly began to disperse, most of them heading back inside to admire their returned possessions and swap stories about the capture. Benedict muttered something about “next time, they should make it a chase,” and I caught him and Martha exchanging a few bucks from their earlier bet.

I glanced up at Ray, who was still standing there, staring off into the distance where Viv's car had disappeared. I flicked my tail against his leg, trying to snap him out of whatever daydream he was having.

Come on, Ray, I thought, nudging him telepathically. You caught the thief. You saved the day. No need to keep floating on cloud nine just because Viv gave you a pat on the back.

Ray finally snapped out of it, shaking his head like he was coming back to reality. He glanced down at me, a sheepish grin tugging at his lips. "What, Earl? Can't a guy enjoy a little victory?"

I let out a soft purr, circling around his legs. Sure, Ray. But next time, maybe don't get too distracted. We've got cases to solve.

Chapter

Twenty-Five

That night, we celebrated. Ray cooked himself a juicy steak, and I dined on real salmon, fresh from the store.

“Ah, Earl,” Ray said between bites, glancing at me like we were sharing a moment of victory. “We did it. We cracked the case. Got Daisy caught red-handed. And now...” He held up the check from Mrs. Hargrove and waved it in the air like it was a trophy. “We got paid.”

I flicked my tail lazily, glancing up from my salmon. We did it? I thought it was mostly me.

Ray grinned, clearly enjoying his steak and his moment of triumph. “You know, I gotta say,” he mused, leaning back in his chair, “I was pretty clever, huh? The way I figured out it was Daisy. Just pieced it all together, like a master detective.”

Again, I flicked my tail. Sure, sure, you were clever.

Ray kept going, clearly lost in his own world of self-congratulation. “And did you see how Viv looked at me?” he said, his voice dropping to that dreamy tone that made me want to cough up a hairball. “She was impressed. You could tell.”

I licked the last bit of salmon from my plate and stared at him, unblinking.

Ray leaned forward and lowered his voice like he was about to share some deep revelation. “She didn’t say it outright, but I think... I think she was happy to see me.”

I let out a low meow—a telepathic nudge that translated loosely to “Are you serious right now?”

Ray tapped his chin, nodding to himself. “Yeah. Yeah, I thought so too.”

I blinked. That’s not what I meant.

He got that far-off look in his eyes, the one he always got when he started daydreaming about his ex, Viv. “You think maybe she’s ready to forgive me? Maybe she’s thinking about, you know, giving it another shot?”

Nope. Don’t think so.

Ray leaned back in his chair, chewing on his lip like he was contemplating something big. “You’re right, Earl. Maybe I should call her.”

I stood up, my fur bristling slightly. No! Didn’t you hear me?

Ray reached for his phone, completely ignoring my telepathic protests. Then he paused. “You know what? I think I’ll give it some time. Play it cool. Don’t want to rush anything.”

I sat down again, sighing with relief.

Before Ray could go off on another tangent about his brilliant deductions and his romantic delusions, his phone rang, cutting through the quiet hum of the kitchen.

Ray’s eyes lit up as he grabbed his phone off the table. “Maybe this is another case!” he said, sounding excited. “We’re on a roll, Earl. This could be the next big one!”

I flicked my tail and gave him a long, unimpressed look. Here we go again.

Ray answered the phone, his face continuing to brighten as he spoke to whoever was on the other end.

I stretched out lazily, purring softly as I settled back into my spot. This wasn't over. Not by a long shot.

As Ray leaned into the call, already planning the next adventure, I closed my eyes, satisfied with my role in today's victory. After all, who needed human praise when there was fresh salmon?