



# Wild Justice (Cowboy Justice Association #17)

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**Category:** Suspense Thriller

**Description:** A Murder. A Small Town. A Sheriff Who Won't Quit.

Lulu Reilly never expected her second day as sheriff of Harper, Montana, to turn into a nightmare. When a body is found by the lake, the weight of solving the town's first murder in over two decades falls squarely on her shoulders. With her father's retirement fresh on her mind and the town watching her every move, Lulu's determination is tested like never before.

But things get even more complicated when Kai Oliver—city reporter turned new owner of the local newspaper—decides his first interview will be with the new sheriff. The chemistry between them is undeniable, but in a town this small, a relationship is the last thing Lulu needs, especially when all eyes are on her.

As the investigation deepens and the tension between them grows, Lulu and Kai must face the chilling reality: the killer is still out there, and they're both in the crosshairs. Can they uncover the truth before it's too late, or will this murder be their last story?

**Total Pages (Source):** 26

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Lulu Reilly had seen her father, Seth, angry many times in her life.

There was that one time when she'd snuck out of the house for a party and hadn't come home until three in the morning. He'd been spitting nails then. There was another time when she was fourteen, and she'd taken the family minivan out for a spin to get her and her friends some fast food in the next town over. She'd thought he was going to pop a blood vessel in his head. His face had been beet red, and her mother Presley had tried to calm him down. She'd done a pretty good job, too, since Lulu was still alive.

There had been a myriad of similar moments, thanks to Lulu's "zest for life" as her mother liked to call it. Now a little older and wiser, Lulu did feel guilty about all the gray hairs she'd given her parents. She truly did. But that didn't mean she was going to back down this time.

Because retired sheriff Seth Reilly was absolutely, positively furious right at this moment. As in, he looked like he might go off like a bottle rocket and fly into the sky. Her father loved her, she was sure of it, but he currently appeared to want to kill her.

She only had herself to blame. She'd deliberately kept this secret from him until today.

"Relax, Seth. It's going to be fine," Ray Ramsey, one of the town council members who had hired her, said. "She's going to do great."

Ray Ramsey was the local real estate guy who had his name and face plastered all over town on park benches, signs, and even mouse pads.

“Ray, you’re a good friend but stay out of this,” her father said, barely glancing at the other man. “This is between Lulu and me.”

“Ray is right,” Ellen Dunphy added. She was also on the town council and had been for years. “It’s done, Seth, and I think Lulu’s going to do great.”

So far no one had mentioned that she’d been the lone applicant. For that, Lulu was grateful. She already had her hands full with her dad.

“Lorelei Catherine Reilly, you cannot be sheriff of Harper. I won’t allow it. I won’t. Period. End of story. The decision has been made.”

Ah, the old decision has been made gambit. Her parents had used it many times in her teens. It had worked about half the time. It wasn’t going to work today, despite her father’s no-nonsense tone.

“You’re wrong,” Lulu said. “And right, too. The decision has been made but by the town council. I’m hired. I’m the new sheriff. Period. End of story. I don’t need your permission, Dad. I’m an adult, and you’re retired now.”

Seth Reilly had taken his sweet time about retiring, too. Presley had started dropping hints which he’d ignored, and she eventually just had to be blunt. She wanted to travel. She wanted to have some fun. They’d worked hard, and now they had a chance to do whatever they wanted to do. And since Seth wanted a happy wife, he’d retired. Eventually.

And honestly? Did he think he could talk Lulu out of it? Didn’t he know her at all?

“You’re not acting like an adult,” her father growled as her mother patted his arm, trying to get him to calm down. “You’re not trained for this. You’ll get yourself killed.”

And the family calls me a drama queen. If I am, I come by it honestly. And it’s not from Mom.

“You weren’t trained either,” she pointed out. “You didn’t go to the academy. You learned on the job.”

She’d practiced this conversation. In the last few weeks, her friend Henry had played the part of her dad, and they’d had a “mock” argument so that she’d be ready for today. Henry, for his part, had done an excellent job of playing the furious father. He was silently cheering her on from the sidelines, which in this case was a couch in her parent’s living room.

“Seth, you’re overreacting,” Ramsey said in a cajoling tone. “What’s wrong with giving her a chance? If it doesn’t work out, we can reassess then.”

Lulu didn’t know whether to thank Ray Ramsey or be a bit hurt. It sounded like he believed in her...kind of.

“Lulu will bring her youth and enthusiasm to the job,” Ellen said. “She loves this town as much as you do, Seth, and they love her, too. With our support, I think she can succeed here. Right, Ray?”

“Absolutely,” Ramsey replied with a definite nod. He looked surer than he had a few minutes ago. “We feel that Harper is going to be in good hands.”

That was more encouraging. Lulu was grateful that the town council had that much belief in her. Unfortunately, they hadn’t put a dent in her father’s negativity. When

Seth Reilly made up his mind, it wasn't easy to change it. It could be done, of course; he wasn't a stubborn jackass, but it was an uphill battle. The one person that seemed to do it effortlessly was her mother.

Her younger brother Chase was also standing by, watching this play out. She had only told him the day before, and he'd simply shook his head and muttered something about fireworks. She shouldn't have favorites, but she did. Chase was her favorite brother. Ben always acted like he had a big stick up his ass whenever he was around which wasn't much these days. He was busy being a grown-up and doing important things - a fact he never let Lulu forget.

After all, everyone knew Lulu Reilly was the fuck up of the family. Until she'd taken this job, she hadn't known what she wanted to do with her life. She'd drifted from place to place and job to job, looking for something that filled her soul. She hadn't found it until now.

"I was in the military," her dad shot back as if no one else had spoken. "I didn't come in green. This isn't a job for amateurs."

"You weren't an MP, Dad. I can do this, but you think I can't do anything."

"That's not true. I just think you shouldn't do this. It's too dangerous."

Now he was grasping at straws.

"Dad, how many times did you come home from work and tell us how bored you were? You've told us - multiple times - that ninety-nine percent of the time you were bored as hell."

"It's the other one percent that can kill you."

“I’m not planning on chasing down serial killers with my buddies like you did,” Lulu replied, keeping her tone even. She wanted to be the reasonable one for a change. “Your deputies are trained. And I’ve trained, too. I know the manuals inside and out. I’ve had firearms training, and self-defense. I want to do this. I can do this. It hurts that you don’t believe in me at all.”

Her mother had always said that Lulu was most like her dad. Seth Reilly had been a wild one in his youth until the day his best friend died while doing a dangerous stunt they’d done a hundred times before. After that, he’d been a changed man. Uptight. Careful. Cautious. From what she’d heard, he’d loosened up a bit after meeting her mother, but he’d never returned to his previous devil-may-care ways.

Consequently, he hadn’t been all that patient with Lulu when she was going through the same phase. He’d come down hard while her mother had been more sedate about things. It wasn’t a surprise that he was having a cow about her new job.

He still thought of her as that wild teenager, but frankly, she hadn’t done anything stupid in a long time.

Okay, define stupid. A person has to take a few chances now and then.

“Seth,” her mother said softly, intervening in the heated conversation. “This is important to Lulu. Of course, I’m worried, too. I would be no matter which of our children took this job. But we have to believe in our daughter. I think she can do amazing things, if she’s given a chance. I know you do, too.”

As always, Presley’s magic worked on her husband. Lulu could visibly see her dad softening, if only just a bit.

“Fine,” he replied, his jaw still tight. “I won’t retire yet. I’ll stay on and train her. When I think she’s ready, I’ll retire then.”

“Dad, you have a flight to go on a two-week cruise,” Chase reminded him. “You’re retired already. It’s done. You got the gold watch and a party.”

“I’ll give it back.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” Lulu sighed. “Is this what you really think of me? That I’m so stupid and helpless that I can’t do this job? Wow, thanks. I now know exactly how little you think of me. Poor, Lulu. She’s such a screwup. Too bad she can’t be more like her brothers or cousins. Hopefully, she can get a crappy job until she can find a man to take care of her.”

Lulu’s mother gave her husband the look. They all knew it well, and she didn’t bring it out very often. But when she did...

Henry and Chase had even grown more attentive once they’d seen it, too. Both of them appeared to be holding their breath as they waited for Seth to respond.

“I believe my baby girl can do anything she wants to do.”

The statement should have made Lulu feel better, but all it did was make her want to cry. He still saw her as a child. Did he see Ben and Chase the same way? She didn’t think so. Was this more father-daughter bullshit?

“Dad, Lulu isn’t a little girl,” Chase said with a shake of his head. “She’s a grown woman, and she’s set herself a challenge here. She knows what she’s doing, and everyone starts without experience. She’ll learn, just like I did when I took over the coffee shop from Mom.”

“They don’t usually get to be sheriff without experience,” Seth pointed out. “They don’t get to be in charge on day one.”

“Well, no one wanted the job,” Chase replied. “Including your own deputies, which is sort of telling. I think Lulu is going to do a good job. I think she’s got this. She cares about this town, and the residents care about her.”

Lulu gave her brother a grateful look. She hadn’t known where he stood on this, but it was good to know he was on her side. He believed in her even if no one else did. Scratch that. Henry believed in her, too. She had the two of them in her corner.

“I agree with Chase,” her mother said. “Lulu loves this town, and I know she believes in keeping the peace here. I think she’s going to do quite well.”

Ray Ramsey and Ellen Dunphy nodded in agreement as well.

Her dad’s attention swung to Henry, still sitting on the sofa.

“Do you want to chime in here, too? Tell me how wrong I am?”

“I think you know my opinion,” Henry said with a mischievous grin. “Lulu is awesome, and she’s going to kick some ass and take some names. Not necessarily in that order though. Seriously, she’s going to do great. And you know why? Because she cares about doing a good job. Not many people do, but she does. That’s why she’s going to succeed.”

Lulu had hit the jackpot when it came to best friends when she’d met Henry. He could be a little strange at times, but he had a heart of gold.

“I guess I’m beat,” her father conceded, throwing up his hands in defeat. “But I want to go on record saying that I don’t think this is a good idea. If you want to be in law enforcement, that’s fine. But you should get more experience before taking on an entire town. But that’s just my two cents.”



“She’s going to be fine, Seth,” Ramsey said. “Don’t worry.”

“I’m going to worry,” her dad growled. “I worry about all of my children.”

With tears shining in her eyes, her mother gave Lulu a big hug before whispering in her ear.

“I love you, and I’m always proud of you. I think you’re going to become a wonderful sheriff. This town is lucky to have you.”

Presley stepped back and beckoned to her husband.

“Seth, isn’t there something you want to say to Lulu?”

The one thing Lulu never questioned in her life was the love of her parents. Since the day she’d been born, she’d been wrapped in the warmth of their love and adoration. It had been their absolute unconditional love that had given her the confidence to take life head on.

Her father was across the room in two long strides, wrapping her up in one of his amazing hugs. Her heart squeezed painfully as she hugged him back, her emotions making it hard not to cry. But sheriffs shouldn’t be crying all over the place. She needed to show them she could keep it all together and be in control.

“I just love you,” her father said. “I don’t want anything to happen to you.”

At first, she didn’t think her dad was going to let go, but then his hold loosened, and he stepped back. His expression was stormy, but he appeared resigned to the situation. Under the circumstances, it was the best outcome she could have hoped for. She’d envisioned scenarios where he tried to ground her or take her phone even though she was a grown adult who paid her own bills.

“We need to finish packing,” her mother said firmly, guiding her husband from the living room. “I need your opinion on a pair of shoes I’m thinking about taking.”

Presley Reilly had never been indecisive about shoes or packing in her life, so it was probably just an attempt to give Lulu some space. Her parents disappeared into the bedroom, leaving Lulu with Chase, Henry, Ray Ramsey, and Ellen Dunphy.

“It will all be fine,” Ellen said. “Right, Ray?”

That’s how Ellen talked most of the time. She’d make a statement and then look to Ray to agree. Luckily, most of the time he did.

“Right. Fine,” Ray echoed. “We’ll let you get to it, Lulu. Let us know if you need anything.”

Ellen and Ray also exited the house after giving their final vote of confidence. At least they believed in her. They’d given her the job, after all. That had to count for something.

And then there was Chase and Henry. They believed in her, too.

“Thanks again, Chase. What you said seemed to make a difference.”

Her brother gave her a crooked smile and laughed.

“Don’t make a liar out of me, sis. If I have to eat crow, I won’t be a happy camper.”

“I won’t let you down,” she promised.

“For what it’s worth, I think you’re going to do fine.”

“What about Ben? Do you think he’d be supportive? Will he think I’m being stupid?”

“Ben thinks everyone is stupid,” Chase reminded her. “Or maybe just most people.”

“He’s not that bad.”

“Okay, he’s not that bad. But he’ll still think that you’ve lost your mind.”

“Do you think I’ve lost my mind?” she asked, holding her breath for the answer.

“I think the jury is still out on your sanity, but all the best people I know are a little crazy. Henry, tell her she’s got this.”

“You’ve got this,” Henry replied. “You’re going to do great. I don’t just say that to anyone. Besides, if anything comes up, Chase and I will be here to help. Right, Chase?”

“We will. But let’s pace ourselves, okay? No murders on day one. Maybe a parking ticket or a small fender-bender.”

The guys were making her laugh even when she didn’t want to. They thought they were so funny.

“How many years has it been since there was a murder in Harper?” she asked with a roll of her eyes. “I think we were kids.”

“Don’t tempt fate,” Henry warned. “Next thing you know, you’ll be saying shit like ‘How could it get any worse?’ or something like that. The universe is listening, you know.”

“If I know my sister, she’ll just tell the universe to kiss her ass,” Chase laughed.

“How about we all go out for dinner tonight as a celebration? My treat.”

“You’re paying? I’m in,” Lulu replied. “Be warned. I’m bringing an appetite.”

“I’m in, too,” Henry said. “One big celebration before Lulu gets down to work.”

If Lulu’s dad had his way, there wouldn’t be anything to celebrate. He’d have her back on a plane to Seattle before nightfall. But she wouldn’t have gone without a fight.

Something deep inside of her was saying that she’d made the right decision. This was what she’d been meant to do.

Helping people. Keeping the peace.

She was going to be the best damn sheriff Harper, Montana had ever seen. Except for Seth Reilly, of course.

Those were some mighty big shoes to fill, but she was going to try.

“Seth, talk to me.”

Seth wasn’t proud of himself at the moment. He’d chided Lulu about not acting like an adult, and what had he done?

Acted like a child, stomping his feet in protest when she wouldn’t do what he wanted. She’d been a grown-up for a few years now, so he didn’t know why he’d expected her to simply fold under his pressure. She never had before, even when he’d been paying her bills. Now that she was independent, she wasn’t going to be any easier to deal with.

“She’s going to get herself killed. Are you truly supportive of this?”

“Let me ask you a question first,” Presley said, her soft gaze on him. She was taking in everything about his reaction - rigid spine, gritted teeth. Nothing ever escaped her notice. “Is your phone in your hand because you’re thinking about calling the town council and getting them to rescind the job offer?”

His phone was in his hand. He’d been thinking about calling one or all of them. He couldn’t deny it. He was livid with every single one of them. They’d told him they’d found a replacement, but they’d conveniently left out who it was. They knew he would have gone through the roof. They’d colluded with his daughter to keep this secret from him. Frankly, he was shocked that they’d pulled it off. This town council seemed to have their shit together more than the others in the past.

“They shouldn’t have kept this from me.”

“True, but you can’t go back in time. They didn’t tell you. You found out today. Now we deal with it.”

“I tried to deal with it,” he said, throwing up his hands again in frustration. “You told me not to. You said to back off.”

“Yes, I did. Why do you think that is?”

His beautiful wife was gazing at him, her arms crossed over her chest. As always, he was blown away by how gorgeous and amazing she was. He’d hit the jackpot the day he’d been assigned to protect her. Here they were, a bit more than thirty years later, and she was sexier than the day they got married. How did she do it? He’d once thought that maybe she’d put him under some sort of spell, but later he’d decided that he was fine with it. As long as he got to be her husband, he was a happy man.

He'd seen that look on her face before, of course. They'd been married a long time and not every day had been sunshine and roses. With three kids and two careers, they'd often butted heads.

Like today. He wanted to put a stop to Lulu's foolishness, and Presley wanted him to roll over and play dead.

"I don't know why."

"Yes, you do."

"Because she's a grown woman, and can make her own decisions?"

"You made that sound like a question. Is she not a grown woman?"

"She is," he growled, not happy in the least that his young daughter wasn't a child anymore. "It was easier when they were little, babe. We kept them safe. That was our job."

"And now our job is to step back, shut up, and just keep loving them."

"I don't like it."

He sounded petulant, and he didn't care. This wasn't a stranger; this was his daughter.

"I don't either, but I believe in Lulu. She wants this, Seth. I can see it in her eyes. She's a passionate person, and I can see that this challenge just lights her up. We haven't seen that in a few years."

"Wanting something doesn't make it a good decision."

“Seth, you were her age when you took this job,” Presley reminded him. “Is it because she’s a woman? I’ve always thought better of you.”

He’d thought better of himself, too. He didn’t have an issue with her being female. His issue was that she was his baby girl.

“If something happened to her, I don’t know how I would go on,” he confessed, his voice tortured. His lungs burned and his heart hurt. He could barely take a breath. “What if something happens to her? How can you be so calm? Why aren’t you terrified?”

Presley wrapped her arms around his middle as she gazed up at him with so much love in her expression, he could barely comprehend it. He only knew that he loved this woman with every fiber of his being. In this life and into the next. There would never be anyone else for him.

She was the one.

“I’m going to tell you a little secret,” she said. “I’ve been terrified since the day I found out I was pregnant. With all of them, not just Lulu. All of the sudden, my very happiness and heart were bound up in another human being. I stayed up and watched them while they slept because I was sure they were only breathing because I willed them to. If I stopped, what would happen? Every single day, I’ve fought the battle of wanting to tuck them under my wing and keep them safe from harm. I never wanted our children to know one day of heartbreak or pain. Doesn’t that sound a bit unhinged? But I also knew that wasn’t our job. We were supposed to raise them not to need us anymore. Good parenting means you make yourself obsolete. It’s a sucky profession, but I wouldn’t trade it for anything. Look what we got...three amazing kids who are going to do wonderful things.”

She was right. He knew she was right. He wasn’t supposed to have any favorites -

and he loved all of his children more than he could have ever imagined - but somehow his little Lulu could wind her way through his heart so easily.

“I thought it would be Ben.”

There. He’d said it. He’d thought it would be Ben that would follow in his footsteps. He still would have worried, but Ben had always seemed so calm, so solid, so...damn dependable.

Presley, however, appeared surprised. Her brows had shot up, and she was almost laughing.

“Ben? How could you ever think that except maybe when he was a kid and played sheriff with his friends? He’s wanted something bigger than this town for a long time. I think we always knew that he’d leave as soon as he finished school. And don’t start with Chase, either. He’s wanted to run the coffee shop since he was a kid and used to help me behind the counter. The customers adored him. Still do. No, if it was going to be anybody, it was going to be Lulu. My god, Seth. Can’t you see it? She’s just like you. According to your parents, she’s exactly like you.”

Her words hit him right upside the head, sending him to a spin. Yes, he’d seen it. He’d tried to ignore it, but how could he? Lulu was so much like him.

I love her so much. I love all of them so much. How did I get so scared about losing it all? Is it because I don’t have forever left? I’m beginning to feel my age? Getting old sucks. But I can’t put my fears on her.

When he was young, he’d felt immortal. Nothing could touch him. He could overcome anything and anyone. He’d thrown his heart and soul into protecting this town, and later even more people, when he’d helped go after two serial killers. He’d been scared during those times, but never for himself.



I know how you feel, Lulu. And I know what you need from me. I understand.

“I’ll make this right,” Seth said. “I’ll talk to her.”

He should have seen this day coming a mile away, but he’d deliberately closed his eyes. Not anymore.

He would make sure Lulu knew how much he believed in her.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:38 pm*

2

The sheriff's station was only a few doors down from the newspaper office where Kai Oliver produced the once-a-week paper that his grandfather had run for over fifty years. Back then, it had been printed every day, of course, when people read newspapers in the morning with their coffee. Kai didn't know how his Grandpa Mitch had found enough news to fill a daily paper, but somehow he had, from all around the area.

Kai, on the other hand, struggled to fill the weekly issue with enough pertinent news to keep people buying it. Which was why he was standing in the middle of the sheriff's station. It was the first day for the new sheriff of Harper, and everyone was talking about it. Once again, the Reilly family was smack-dab in the middle of the gossip mill.

Yesterday, Kai had attended the retirement ceremony for Seth Reilly. The retiring lawman had been given a gold watch, a party, and several send-off speeches praising their longtime sheriff. Considering Seth Reilly had been instrumental in capturing not just one, but two serial killers, he could have left this little backwater town a long time ago for greener and more lucrative pastures. Many of his friends had, but Seth had always said that his roots were here. Now his young daughter was taking over.

Lulu Reilly.

When Kai had visited his granddad in the summers, he had a few memories of Lulu when she was much younger. Even then, she'd been a force of nature, somehow organizing all the neighborhood kids into doing whatever she wanted - hide and seek,

kickball, or hanging out at her mother's coffee shop and eating free cookies.

Kai had seen that Lulu was a born leader who didn't have a fearful bone in her body. She walked through life supremely confident, and damn, if things didn't usually work out for her. Now she was the new head lawperson in Harper, without any experience at all.

Unless he counted her being the daughter of a legend. Did that count? He wasn't sure. Either way, he was here to see if she would agree to talk to him for an article in the paper. Sort of a way to introduce herself to the town, not that she needed any introductions. He was planning a light piece, maybe talking about any plans she had and how much she loved the town. Something feel-good that would have a positive tone.

There were already a few voices that weren't happy about her new job.

It was mostly men, to be honest. Kai had stopped into Leon's for a beer last night, and a few of the regulars were bitching that women shouldn't be cops. That it wasn't natural. That sort of bullshit. They'd made a few jokes of getting her an apron and a rolling pin. Kai was pretty sure that Lulu knew exactly what to do with a rolling pin.

Hit stupid guys upside the head with it.

Kai was trying to keep an open mind about her appointment. It was true she didn't have much or any experience but the job, for the most part, was fairly routine and uneventful. If it hadn't been, he would have had more to put in the newspaper.

If she needed to break up a fight on Saturday night, she had a few burly deputies to help her out. If she needed to look into some cattle rustling, that involved more brains than brawn. Honestly, only time would tell if Lulu had what it took to succeed. He'd heard there hadn't been any other people wanting the job either. The deputies didn't

want the responsibility, and more experienced lawpersons wanted more money. So, they'd hired Lulu.

"Hey, Kai. What's up?" Deputy Steve asked. "What can we do for you?"

"I was hoping to talk to Lulu. Is she here?"

The sheriff's station wasn't large, just a few desks in the main room, the sheriff's personal office, which was more like a closet, a few storage rooms, and an interrogation room in the back with a table and chairs. Upstairs was a small apartment where Lulu's mom had lived when she first moved to Harper. At least that's what Kai had been told. There were a lot of stories from back then, and he'd always wondered if they were all true.

The town grapevine had said that Lulu was now living there with some guy named Henry.

"She ran upstairs for a minute, but she'll be back down. Help yourself to some coffee and relax. I'm sure she'll want to talk to you."

The old story was that Presley put a fancy coffeemaker in the sheriff's station and people began hanging around and visiting. Then she opened a coffee shop a few blocks down, but the coffeemaker at the station had been replaced as the years had passed. Everyone knew they could always get a hot cup of good coffee there, along with help for whatever they needed.

"Don't mind if I do. I left the house with only half a cup under my belt."

"The pot's fresh."

"What do you think of your new boss?" Kai asked as he poured himself a cup. "I'm

sure you're going to miss Seth."

"We will," Steve said, his expression sad. "He's a good man to work for, and we all respect the hell out of him. But it was his time, you know? He deserves to have some fun in his retirement. As for Lulu, she said she's not going to make any big changes for a while. She wants to see how things run, so I'm not too worried. I've known her since we were both kids. She's not a tyrant, and she's always fun. It should be fine. It's not like we're a hotbed of crime here in town."

That had been one of Kai's questions. What changes was she looking to make? He still planned to ask her and get the answer straight from her lips.

"Do all the deputies feel that way?"

Steve chuckled and rubbed his chin at the question.

"If you're looking for dissension in the ranks, I don't know what to tell you. None of us wanted to be sheriff, so we're not mad that she got it. If someone doesn't want her to have the job, they aren't being vocal about it."

Kai hoped it stayed that way. The last thing Lulu needed was a deputy that didn't have her back.

"Were you surprised about her being named sheriff?"

"Hell, yes. But so was her daddy. You should have seen his face."

That might be the story. Right there. How did Seth feel about all of this?

"He didn't know?"

“Apparently not. He was as shocked as we were. They all went to his house this morning, and they must have worked it all out because she came back and got right to work looking through open case files.”

The door to the stairwell that led to the apartment opened, and Lulu entered the main station. She was wearing blue jeans and a beige uniform shirt, just like Seth always had. Except that the former sheriff hadn’t had a fantastic figure and face. Lulu took after her mama in the looks department, and she was every bit of a beauty that could turn heads. Long light brown hair, sky-blue eyes, and legs that were made to wear blue jeans and cowboy boots had made Lulu Reilly the prom queen her senior year.

At over sixty, Presley Reilly was still a stunning woman, too. The whole family had won the gene pool lottery from what Kai could see. Ben and Chase weren’t exactly ugly either, and both had broken a few hearts along the way.

“Hey, Lulu,” Steve called. “Kai was hoping to talk to you. Got a minute?”

“Sure,” she said, her gaze intent as she walked toward him. “My mom told me that you’d taken over your granddad’s newspaper.”

Her tone was neutral, not making his actions sound good or bad. He’d heard plenty from his friends and some of his family about how stupid it was, coming back here to save a tiny local paper that should have been out of business years ago. So far, he hadn’t had any regrets. Yet, anyway.

“About six months ago,” he replied. “I’ll get right to the point. I was hoping to do an article about you coming back to take over for your dad. Why you did it, your plans. How you feel about being back in your hometown after a few years away, that sort of thing. And then maybe a day in the life, as well. Honestly, I’d love to have a regular column about what’s happening from the sheriff’s point of view.”

Her eyes had narrowed as she'd studied him, perhaps to see if he was serious. He was, and he hoped it showed.

"A day in the life might only be a few sentences," Lulu said, a smile finally blooming on her face. "You might want to make it a week in the life, or maybe even a month. So far today, I've ordered coffee, looked through active cases, and I'm currently headed out to talk to a citizen about blocking their neighbor's driveway. Is that what you had in mind?"

"Believe it or not, yes. I think it would be a good human interest story and positive publicity for the sheriff's office."

Kai knew how to persuade people. At one point in his life, he'd been a hell of a lawyer. Too good. But that was his previous life.

"Fine," she said. "I plan on running a transparent office here, just like my dad. So, let's go."

Wait, he wasn't sure he'd heard correctly.

"Go?"

"You're going with me, right? You said you wanted to write a story about my day. Well...this is my day. Are you coming?"

"Yes. Yes, I am."

He didn't have anything else that was pressing to do today. Life was pretty boring in Harper most days.

He followed Lulu out to her official SUV, climbing into the passenger side as she slid

behind the wheel. He had a feeling this had been her dad's truck before because she had to pull her seat up several inches to reach the pedals.

She turned off the main road and appeared to be headed toward the small suburb that had sprung up outside of town about ten years before.

"I remember you."

He was surprised. He was an introvert at heart, and he hadn't spent much time with the town's kids who often ran in packs all day during the summertime. He'd liked to spend most of his time with his grandpa Mitch.

"I spent most of my time at the newspaper office."

"You played softball with us. You were a good hitter."

"I think you're being kind. I wasn't much of an athlete back then."

In college, he'd had a roommate who got him into fitness, but until then he'd barely broke a sweat.

"Do you like running the newspaper?"

"I do," he replied. "Very much."

"I heard you were a lawyer in Los Angeles."

"I was," he confirmed. "Now I'm not."

Her lips curved into a smile at his reply.



“Got it. That’s not a subject you talk about. How about you ask me a few questions for your article, and I’ll answer them while I drive. Sound good?”

It did, so they chatted a bit as she drove. He hadn’t known Lulu all that well when they were kids. They could barely be called acquaintances, to be honest. She’d always been welcoming when he’d played with the other youth in town, but they hadn’t spent any time one on one. He hadn’t been sure what to expect talking to her. She’d always come across as supremely confident, and it was the same today, except...

It was tempered with a maturity and humility that he hadn’t anticipated. Lulu was talking about wanting to do a good job, to be worthy of the title of sheriff. There was a quiet confidence, but it wasn’t a foolhardy one.

Determination. That’s what it was. She was determined to do a good job, and she was going to do whatever it took to make sure it happened.

“Failure isn’t really an option,” she replied, answering another of his questions. “If I fail, then the town suffers. I don’t want that to happen.”

“Plus, who wants to fail? No one.”

Shit, he shouldn’t have said it like that.

“Sorry,” he quickly said. “That was more about me than you.”

“Got some baggage from LA?”

“Kind of.”

“Relax, I didn’t take offense. No, I don’t want to be a failure. I want to succeed. This

job means something to me.”

“Because of your dad?”

“Sure, because of my dad.”

They’d pulled up in front of a two-story home outside of town. The whole neighborhood looked almost the same, with only a few differences between the houses. This one had a Winnie the Pooh flag hanging from the front porch along with some begonias in window boxes.

“Your answer didn’t sound very convincing,” he observed. “Is that what you want me to print?”

“You can print whatever you want, Kai,” Lulu said as she exited the vehicle.

“You don’t care what I print?”

She stopped and turned to look at him. She wasn’t upset or mad. If anything, she looked...amused.

“Is my level of caring going to change what you write?”

“Probably not.”

“Then I’m not going to waste any energy on it then. You seem like a reasonable person. From what I’ve heard you’re well-liked in town and people think you do a good job. Do I need to be worried? Are you planning a hit piece on me?”

“That’s not my sort of journalism.”

“Then we’re fine. Okay, let’s see what the problem here is.”

The problem was two neighbors who had several cars between them, and sometimes one of them would park his car across the bottom of the other person’s driveway. Perry Jenkins and Stan Walters had started out as buddies but recently the relationship had gone downhill. They were now hissing and being nasty whenever they’d see each other.

“It’s illegal,” Lulu told Stan. “You can’t park at the end of his driveway and block it. Even if it wasn’t illegal, it’s rude. C’mon, Stan. You know that. What’s going on here?”

The arguing between the two men had been going on for a good fifteen minutes, and Lulu had let them have their say. Each of them had made their arguments while calling each other a few not-so-nice names as they were doing it.

“He’s got too many cars,” Perry said in a heated tone. “That’s what’s going on here. And now he’s trying to make it my problem. I’ve got problems of my own, Lulu. Your dad knew that. Seth told him to stop, and he hasn’t.”

“You don’t know what problems are,” Stan shot back. “My daughter and that no-good son-in-law live with me now along with the baby, and there’s nothing but crying and yelling all day and all night. I’m about ready to grab my camping gear and go live in the woods to get away from it all.”

Perry and Stan went back and forth for a while more while Lulu mostly listened, only interjecting a few words here and there. Eventually, both of them went quiet. They seemed to have exhausted themselves, complaining about each other and the issues in their lives. Lulu had nodded at the appropriate moments as if she understood.

“Sounds look you guys have your hands full. Things are a bit out of control, and

you're not sure what to do. Amiright?"

Stan shook his head wearily.

"Lulu, you have no idea."

"Damn, Stan. I didn't know it was like that," Perry said, clapping his neighbor on the back. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I dunno. Didn't want anyone to know it was that bad," Stan replied, his head hanging. "I'm at the point I don't know what to do. I'm ready to kick them out, but Willa would kill me."

There was more silence as the men seemed to have come to some sort of crossroads. Eventually, Perry nodded, rubbing his hands together.

"I'll tell you what. You can park your car next to mine in the driveway. That way you can get in and out to go to work easily. In the meantime, I can put a bug in Gail's ear about it. She and Willa talk every day, so maybe she can drop a few hints."

"You'd do that?" Stan said, a smile beginning to bloom on his face. "Damn, Willa just might listen to Gail. She sure as hell isn't listening to me."

"It's her daughter. That's got to be tough," Perry said. "Why don't you come inside, and we'll talk about it?"

"Can I assume that my services are no longer needed here?" Lulu asked.

"Sorry that I called you out here," Perry said. "I guess things got out of hand a bit."

"It's fine. It was nice seeing you both today. Stop by the station and have a cup of

coffee with me next time you're in town. We can catch up. In the meantime, call me if you need me."

"Tell your dad and mom to have a great time on their vacation," Stan said. "Have they left yet?"

"Not yet, and I can just get back in time to see them off before Chase drives them to the airport."

"You better skedaddle then," Perry grinned. "We don't want you to miss that. One more thing before you go," Perry said, his gaze moving to Kai who had been watching all of this unfold. "This isn't going to be in the paper, is it? Because we don't need anyone sticking their nose into this."

"When I write the article about Lulu's first day, I'll just say there was a small disagreement between neighbors, but it was all worked out. How about that?" Kai asked.

The article was about Lulu, after all, not a parking dispute.

"Thanks," Stan said. "We appreciate that."

The men disappeared inside of Perry's house, and Kai and Lulu climbed back into the SUV.

"You did good back there," he said as they drove out of the neighborhood. "You must have some magic secret to calming people down."

"They just wanted to be heard, that's all. They felt like no one was listening to them."

"And you know something about that?"

“I’m the middle child. Plus, I swear my poor mother had to mediate arguments between me and my brothers when we were little. There was always some disagreement going on. Now when we’re mad, we just ignore the person in the family group chat. Kind of passive-aggressive if you ask me.”

“Well, what you did worked. Do you and your brothers get along now?”

“For the most part, we do. We are very different people though.”

“How? Please pardon the nosy question. I’m an only child who always wanted a sibling.”

“Be careful what you ask for. As for how we’re different, I guess Chase is the most laidback of all three of us. Nothing ruffles his feathers, nothing gets him upset. He was a happy baby from what my mom said.”

“And your older brother?”

“What can I say about Ben?” Lulu replied with a sigh. “He was born a grown-up. Or it seemed that way. Always the responsible one, a little adult by the time he went to kindergarten. I once heard my parents debating whether he acted like that as a reaction to me being so wild, or whether I acted wild as a reaction to him being a short adult. I guess you can take your pick. Either way, he makes it a point to disagree with me on just about everything including the color of the sky.”

“With Chase stuck in the middle?”

“Chase makes it a point to never be in the middle. He may be the smartest of us all.”

Lulu had pulled the vehicle up to the front of the sheriff’s station where her parents were standing outside chatting with an older woman who looked familiar, but Kai

couldn't quite place. He was still learning everyone's names.

"Can we call it for today?" Lulu asked when Seth waved at them. "I think my dad wants to talk before they leave for the airport."

Kai had a feeling there was far more to what she was asking, but that wasn't any of his business. He wasn't writing that sort of article.

"Sure, should I come by tomorrow?"

"Anytime. I'll be here."

Kai thanked her for letting him come along before climbing out of the SUV and heading down the street toward the newspaper office. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that Seth was now sitting in the passenger seat that he'd just vacated.

It was the changing of the guard in a way. Seth retiring, and his daughter taking over. How did Seth truly feel about that? Steve had said that her father was shocked. Was he giving Lulu some last-minute advice?

One thing was for sure, this town was never going to be the same. Change was happening whether they liked it or not.

“Did you come here to try again at talking me out of this?”

Lulu kept her gaze straight ahead, not wanting to look at her father's disappointed expression. How many times had she seen it in the past? Too many to count. Her youth had been filled with his frustration at her behavior, and she'd been too young to explain it.

It was only now that she was older that she realized that her “zest for life” wasn't too far from reality. She wanted to experience things - places, people. She wanted to feel the wind on her face, and the sunshine on her skin. She wanted to plunge into life and let it run all over her. Her need to sink ass deep into things wasn't something she consciously sought out. If she'd had her druthers, she would have been boring like Ben. But she was who she was.

Not a daredevil per se, although she'd done some stupid shit in the past. It was the rush of adrenaline when she'd try to do something that others wouldn't do whether it was jumping into the pool when she couldn't yet swim - and she had a little scar on her eyebrow for that one - or going hell-for-leather down the road on a motorcycle screaming at the top of her lungs.

For that one, she'd been grounded for a week. Since she'd only been thirteen, she couldn't say that she was angry at her mom and dad for that punishment.

She wanted to know about everything and everyone, not the most realistic goal a person could have. Becoming an expert in one thing didn't hold any lure for her. She



wanted to read all the books, see all the world, talk to all the people. Honestly, it was exhausting sometimes.

She'd mellowed as she'd grown up, of course. She still had the energy to try everything, but she was realistic enough to know that it simply wasn't possible. Especially when she had rent, food, and electricity to pay for. In other words, life had intervened. Just in the nick of time, some might say.

"No, I didn't," her dad replied. He held something in his hands, but she couldn't see what it was. "Lulu, I know I don't say this nearly enough, but I am so proud of the person that you have become."

He didn't say that often, and she immediately felt a touch of fear in her heart.

"Um, you're not dying or anything are you? Is that why you finally retired?"

Luckily, he laughed and shook his head.

"No, Lulu-bean. I am not dying. What I am is trying to get smarter."

"I'm trying that, too."

"It's hard, isn't it?" he laughed. "Although your mom doesn't seem to have any trouble at all."

"Moms are like that."

It was quiet again for a long moment, but then he pushed what he'd been holding into her hands.

"I want you to have this. I know they probably ordered you one, but it would mean a

lot to me if you wore it.”

Lulu’s eyes filled with hot tears as she saw what he’d given her. In a million years, she’d never expected this.

It was his sheriff’s badge, the gold star still shiny although worn at the edges. He must have cleaned it up.

“They gave this to you in a frame,” she said, her voice choked with emotion as her fingertips ran over the warm metal. “For your retirement. So, you could look at it every day and remember your career.”

Her father Seth Reilly was a legendary lawman. Nothing in the world could take that from him. She’d be lucky to be a fraction of the sheriff he had been.

Tears were sparkling in her dad’s clear blue eyes as well. She reached out instinctively, and he pulled her in for a hug.

“I don’t need something hanging on the wall. I can look at you, Lulu-bean. I love you, and you’re going to make a great sheriff. No one cares more about this town than you do.”

“You do. You care.”

“Yes, I do. And now it’s your turn.”

They were both crying, sitting in the official SUV, like lunatics. Anyone walking by probably thought that they were simply going to miss one another. Silly to cry though, when he and her mom would be back in a few weeks. They wouldn’t be gone forever.

But someday they would. Even Seth Reilly couldn't live hundreds and thousands of years.

She dashed at her wet cheeks with the back of her hand, shaking her head.

"Sheriffs shouldn't cry."

"That's bullshit," Seth replied, his voice rough. "We all cried when we thought Tanner wasn't going to make it last year. It's okay to cry."

Uncle Tanner, now retired from being governor, had scared the shit out of all of them by having a "cardiac event" that had put him in the hospital for a few days. It had hit hard to see Aunt Maddie crying in the hallway outside of his room. He was fine now, but they'd all freaked out. Especially, her dad. He'd always said that Tanner was such a mentor to him. They were as close as brothers. All the men were.

"That's different," Lulu sniffled. "Of course, we'd cry about Uncle Tanner."

There was a soft knock on the window, and Lulu turned around to see Chase grinning at them and making funny faces. He was such a goof sometimes, but it was just the thing to make them both laugh.

"I think your brother wants us to get on the road," her dad said. "We don't want to keep him waiting."

"Right." Lulu's fingers lovingly closed around the badge in her hand. "I'm going to wear it every day. Thank you, Dad."

He didn't have a clue as to how much this meant to her. Not a clue.

"You're welcome, sweetheart. I can't think of better hands for it to be in. You know,

if you ever need any help or advice, I'm there for you. No matter the time of day or night. Your uncles are there for you, too. We wouldn't have been as successful if we'd worked alone. Teamwork made the difference. I highly recommend it."

"Thanks, Dad."

He started to open the door but then hesitated.

"And one more thing. Just some advice from one cop to another. Always trust your gut. It will never steer you wrong."

"Trust my gut. Got it."

With her dad behind her, Lulu believed she could do anything.

The three of them - Lulu, Chase, and her best friend Henry - ended up at the sports bar for dinner. Televisions on every wall, and the best cheeseburger in the county. The place was busy, although not packed. Off in the corner, she saw Kai Oliver eating alone at a table and reading a book.

For a moment, she thought about inviting him to sit with them, and then realized that she barely knew the guy. She had a few hazy memories of him from when they were kids, but she didn't know that much about him other than she liked his grandfather a great deal. She couldn't say that he was someone she wanted to share a meal with. Besides, he seemed content on his own. She did notice, however, that he'd had the good taste to order the cheeseburger with a side of steak fries.

She and Chase both were ordering the cheeseburger, but Henry was trying to cut down his red meat consumption. She didn't know why he was doing that, but then Henry often "tried" things. It was one of the reasons she adored him so much. He didn't think that her penchant for wanting to try new and different things was strange

at all. In fact, he wholeheartedly wanted to support it as long as she wasn't doing anything crazy dangerous.

And even then, he'd go with her so she wouldn't be doing it alone. She'd just hear about it for a while.

I guess we didn't get maimed or dead, Lulu, but we could have.

She considered it a massive win that she hadn't heard that in a long time. Hopefully, she was acquiring a sense of self-preservation.

In other words, she'd realized she wasn't immortal or indestructible. Dying was always a possibility.

"I'm going to have the chicken sandwich," Henry pronounced, closing the menu. "Is it good? Do I need to change my mind?"

"It's good," Chase replied. "And the fries here are tasty, too. You don't want to miss them."

"There goes my girlish figure," Henry chuckled. "I'm going to gain ten pounds while I'm here."

Chase glanced at Lulu, a question in his gaze. He had never truly understood her relationship with Henry.

At first, he'd thought they were dating. Nope.

Is he gay? Nope.

But you aren't a couple? Nope.

Just friends? Yes.

But he's coming to Harper with you? Yes.

Doesn't he have his own life? Yes, but it's complicated.

Besides, Lulu liked having Henry around. He was good company, and he was usually pretty easy to hang out with. He was, however, a complicated person and deeply eccentric. Kidnapped as a child by a family friend, but he'd escaped eventually, he'd never quite recovered his former laidback, free and easy self. He was always well-armed, and often suspicious of new people and places. When he was with Lulu, he could relax a bit if the environment was well-known to her.

Henry trusted her, and he didn't trust many people. His constantly on-edge behavior made him perfect for his occupation - an ethical hacker. He helped companies find the weaknesses in their online presence. He made a boatload of money from it, too, and he could work from any location. Right now, he was planning to work from Harper while she got settled in her job. She wouldn't be shocked if he ended up staying a long time. Being in a small town where he could get to know everyone might make him sleep easier.

"We will have to go running more than a few times a week," Henry said. "Work on our endurance. We should sign up for one of those 10K runs on Thanksgiving."

"This is surprising talk for a guy that said that if we ever caught him running, we should call the police, because a scary clown was probably chasing him with a knife," she reminded him.

Henry had only started running because he hadn't wanted Lulu to be out on the dark streets alone. He'd been almost frantic about it. But she couldn't complain about him. He always put his money where his mouth was, so to speak. He'd ordered a pair of

running shoes online and laced up with her two to three times a week at five in the morning. Bless him, he'd never once bitched about.

He'd lost five pounds, too.

"Let's just say it's not the worst thing that's ever happened to me."

"I don't know whether I'm supposed to laugh at that," Chase admitted. "Is this some sort of gallows humor?"

"Sort of," Henry replied. "I try to see the strangeness in my life and have a laugh with it. My therapist says it's healthy."

"You have a therapist?" Chase asked.

"A couple of them. You don't? You should try it. They have to listen to you because you pay them."

"Henry's just giving you a hard time," Lulu sighed. "He only has one therapist. Henry, play nice with my baby brother. He has a different sense of humor than we do."

"That's because he's normal," Henry said, his expression serious.

Chase was simply one of those people who was happy most of the time. His life - so far anyway - had turned out exactly as he'd wanted it to. He'd known what he wanted, and he'd made it happen. Lulu hoped that it would always be the case.

Their server Lisa came to their table to get their order. She was young and pretty with auburn hair and bright green eyes, and she clearly liked what she was seeing with Henry. She flirted with him quite openly, lingering until another table called her over.

“I think she likes you,” Chase said. “She’s a sweet girl. I went to high school with her. She’s into art and music.”

Henry dragged his gaze from the woman and shook his head.

“She probably just wants a bigger tip. I doubt it has anything to do with me.”

“I tip pretty well, and she’s never acted like that with me,” Chase declared. “Seriously, I think she likes you. I’ve never seen her act like that. You should talk to her. Ask for her number. Unless you have a reason not to...”

Chase was looking at Lulu, and now she wanted to stab her brother with a fork.

“For the millionth time, it’s not like that,” Lulu said. “Henry, tell him.”

“It’s not like that,” Henry repeated with an eye roll for good measure. “I don’t find your sister attractive in the least. As in...not at all. Ick. It would be like french kissing my sister, dude. Do you french kiss your sister?”

“Of course not,” Chase protested. “That would be gross.”

“My point exactly. Trust me, men and women can be just friends. This isn’t some romantic movie where we’re suddenly going to realize that we love each other. I’m not even sure I could ever love someone besides myself, of course. I make it a point to be extremely self-involved. I’d probably be the worst romantic partner in the history of the world.”

The fact was they’d tried to kiss once a long time ago when they’d first met - as an experiment. And it had been like kissing a brother. Awful. Terrible. Awkward as hell. Zero stars. Do not recommend.



“Henry is the brother I always wanted but never had,” Lulu teased.

“I can understand what you’re saying about Ben at least,” Chase said, a muscle ticking in his jaw. He was angry at their older brother. Really mad. His mood had gone from happy to pissed off in seconds. “Where the hell is he anyway? The retirement ceremony was an important moment, and guess who wasn’t there? Ben. He’s never here. When Uncle Tanner was in the hospital, where was Ben? I think he had his assistant send flowers or some lame bullshit like that. And I don’t think he even called Mom and Dad this week. Did I miss that?”

“He did reach out,” Lulu replied softly. “He sent a card to Dad.”

“He signed it, but I’d bet cash money that his assistant picked it out. One of the biggest days in Dad’s life and big brother Ben couldn’t be fucking bothered. What an asshole. A complete and total jerk. And what about today? This was your first day on the job. Have you heard from him? Let me guess...no.”

“I haven’t,” Lulu admitted. “But to be fair, he may not even know. You only found out yesterday.”

“I sent him a text right after you told us,” Chase replied between gritted teeth. “Letting him know and reminding him that he’s missing out on our parents’ retirement. So far? No reply. He left me on read.”

“It sounds like you have issues with your brother,” Henry observed. “You should talk to someone about them.”

“I don’t have issues. My brother is just a selfish dipshit who needs a kick in the ass.”

“That sounds like issues to me.”

Lisa brought out their food and the conversation slowed down as they ate. The cheeseburger was as good as it had been in the past and soon, she had an almost clean plate with only a few fries remaining.

Chase's hand hovered about her plate.

"Do you mind?—"

"Do that and you'll get a fork in the hand," she warned. "I'm eating those fries."

"I'm glad I'm an only child," Henry said. "You both have issues. You can order more fries, you know. I bet the kitchen has a bunch of them. You can order all you want."

She and Chase didn't have a chance to reply. Glen Fellows had ambled up to the table, his usual smug smile in place. Lulu had gone to high school with him, and he'd worn that same expression for four years thinking he was a total badass. Or something like that. His entire friend group had thought they were something special, and for no particular reason, either.

"Heard you're the new sheriff, Lulu," Glen said, leaning down so he was far too close. His breath smelled like beer and garlic. She'd have to keep an eye on him tonight in case he decided to get behind the wheel. "I think we'll miss your daddy around here. Not sure you're going to be up for the job."

"Why?" Chase challenged; his eyes narrowed at the other man. "What stupid shit are you planning to pull?"

"Nothing, nothing," Glen replied, straightening up. "But others might be. Lot of troublemakers in this town."

That hadn't been Lulu's experience. There were always a few, and they often had

followers, but the real troublemakers weren't plentiful.

"Don't be one of them," Chase warned. "Traci probably wouldn't be happy about that."

"Traci doesn't get to tell me what to do," Glen said indignantly. "I'm not pussywhipped."

Glen's phone buzzed in his pocket, and he walked away to answer it.

"In my experience, any man that has to declare he's not pussywhipped usually is," Henry said. "But I could be wrong."

Henry wasn't wrong.

"Ignore Glen," Chase said. "He's an idiot."

"I know that. I went to school with him. He and all his friends are lucky they graduated," Lulu said.

"They graduated because the principal probably didn't want them around anymore," Chase replied.

Lulu finished her fries and pushed her plate away, feeling full and a bit tired. It had been a big day for her, and she needed to get back to the apartment and get to bed. This might be a sleepy little town, but she'd still be on duty.

Henry's attention had been captured by loud voices several tables away. Scowling, he elbowed Lulu and nodded toward the offenders.

"They're getting loud," he said. "And angry."

One of “them” was Glen, of course. How he managed to be in the middle of everything never ceased to amaze her. The other two were Dana Cartwright - who was a few years older than Lulu - and her ex-husband Jay. Dana and Jay had married right after high school, but they’d divorced a few years ago.

Lulu was half out of her chair when another woman who looked familiar came and dragged Jay away, leaving Dana with Glen, but not before berating Dana and shaking a finger at her. The two of them didn’t look fond of one another, but Glen shrugged and walked away, too, after saying something that Lulu couldn’t hear.

Dana, for her part, looked like she was going to cry. Her cheeks were pale, but her eyes were watery and shiny. She watched Glen walk away for a minute, and then turned on her heel and fled out of the restaurant.

“What was all that about?” Lulu wondered out loud. “They all looked like they hated each other. I know that Jay and Dana divorced, but I didn’t realize that it was such a bitter breakup. And what does Glen have to do with it?”

“I don’t know anything for sure,” Chase replied. “There’s a lot of gossip going around. Some of it is that Jay is still in love with Dana, and his new girlfriend Allie is jealous.”

“That’s Allie Baker? I didn’t recognize her. When did she come back to town?”

Allie had left for college about five years before and had pretty much announced she was never coming back. Something must have changed.

“Six months maybe? Maybe nine or ten.” Chase said. “Not exactly sure. And as for what Glen has to do with it, there was also a story going around that Dana cheated on Jay with Glen. I think she had better taste, but you never know.”

“I think I heard Allie telling Dana to stay away,” Lulu said. “It looked messy, to be honest.”

“Anything with Glen involved usually is,” Chase observed. “He’s walking trouble, is what he is.”

“Small towns,” Henry laughed. “Just like Peyton Place .”

Lulu was confused, and Chase had that expression, too.

“What’s Peyton Place ?” she asked.

Henry was always making bizarre references that no one understood until he explained them. Even then, she didn’t get them half the time. He’d spent a great deal of his youth with his grandparents, listening to sixties and seventies music and hearing stories about a time way before the internet.

“It was a soap opera on television in the sixties,” Henry said with a heavy sigh. “My grandmother told me about it.”

“I’ve never heard of it.”

“Me neither,” Chase replied.

“Okay, how about Melrose Place ? Beverly Hills 90210 ?” Henry shook his head at their blank stares. “ Dallas ? Dynasty ? C’mon, now you’re just yanking my chain. General Hospital ? Days of Our Lives ?”

That one she knew. And he knew it. After all, he’d watched it with her many times.

“Got it. Peyton Place is an ancestor of Salem, John, Marlana, Roman, and Bo and

Hope.”

“Exactly.”

“You could have just said that,” she pointed out.

“But then you wouldn’t have learned anything about Peyton Place.”

“To be fair,” Chase said. “We haven’t learned much now. Just that it was a soap opera. Our gran used to watch Guiding Light .”

“Can I just say that I hope my life in Harper is not nearly as exciting as anything on those shows,” Lulu remarked. “Let’s hope for boring and calm.”

Chase lifted his glass with a grin.

“I’ll drink to that.”

“So will I,” Henry said. “Boring and calm. Let’s send that out into the universe.”

Lulu also raised her glass, as well.

Now all they needed was the universe to cooperate.

Since quitting his soul-sucking job as a corporate lawyer, Kai had made a point to be outside every day that he possibly could, and even more importantly, to break a sweat three or four times a week. During his time as an attorney, he'd sat at a desk under fluorescent lights far too many hours of the day until he realized that it was dark when he arrived at the office and when he left. He'd known he needed to make some major changes in his life, but he didn't know where to even start. It had been his grandfather's death that had brought him clarity.

He'd quit and never looked back.

His current life had him drinking far less bad coffee, eating in restaurants much less, and allowing him to care for his body so that he might not drop dead from a heart attack before the age of fifty-five.

His stepfather had made it to sixty-two before being sidelined into partial retirement. The man was still pissed off about it, too. He actively fought against any sort of leisure and thought that Kai was wasting his life. Kai, on the other hand, had decided that he'd rather be like his Grandpa Mitch than his stepfather James. James was a good guy, but Kai wasn't sure he had the best priorities in life.

That's why he was leaving his house at five-thirty in the morning, while the temperature outside could still be described as "fucking cold". He'd bundled up, but not too much, because he would heat up along his route that took him by Harper Lake. He should hit it just about the time of sunrise, and he'd often simply stand there and take it all in, awed by Mother Nature and all her glory.

It was something he'd never had the time to do in Los Angeles - bathe in the morning sunlight as those first few rays peeked over the horizon.

He'd started out slow at first, building speed as he warmed up. He was listening to his favorite playlist as his running shoes pounded the pavement and then gravel as he traveled farther from the house. He'd worked up a good sweat when he made it to the lake. He paused to watch as the sun slowly rose in the clear sky.

It looked like it was going to be a beautiful day. He had plans to talk to Lulu Reilly again, but he was already working on the article in his head. He'd been skeptical, frankly, of her taking over for her father - a nepotism hire at its finest.

After spending some time with her, however, he'd decided to keep his mind more open. She was inexperienced, that was true, but she seemed to have a way with people. The town was always talking about how Presley Reilly was charming and engaging, but Lulu also seemed to have inherited that gene, too.

As long as nothing difficult was thrown at her for a while, she just might be able to pull it off.

Now that the sun was up, he could see out of the corner of his eye two more people also running near the lake. As they grew closer, he recognized Lulu and her friend Henry. They'd had dinner together with Chase Reilly at the sports bar last night.

Kai couldn't help but wonder if Henry was a romantic partner. They didn't appear to be lovey-dovey, but that didn't mean they weren't in private. He didn't get the...vibe. Henry didn't look at Lulu like a man who was in love with her should. She didn't act like she was in love either. Yet, they always seemed to be together, and rumor had it, that Henry was staying in the apartment above the sheriff's station with Lulu. Was it some weird sort of friends with benefits? And why did he even care? He had better things to be thinking about than the love life of Lulu Reilly.



“Sheriff,” Kai said when they stopped to say hello. He took out his earbuds and tucked them in his pocket. “Henry. Beautiful morning, isn’t it?”

“It’s supposed to warm up later today,” Lulu said with a smile. Her hands were on her knees as she caught her breath from the run. “And it is beautiful. I think mornings are my favorite time of day.”

Henry hadn’t said anything at all, wandering toward the banks of the lake, completely ignoring Kai as if he didn’t exist.

“Was it something I said?” Kai joked. “I don’t think your friend likes me very much.”

“Sorry,” Lulu said. “Let me apologize for him. He sometimes just kind of goes off by himself into another world. I swear he has his reasons, and they’re good ones. Once he realizes that he’s being rude, he’ll apologize. Believe me, it’s nothing personal. He’s sometimes just a little...different.”

From what Kai knew about Lulu, she would be the type to have some “different” friends. He’d heard all the stories, of course, everyone had. He wasn’t sure that all of them were true, however. Some sounded too wild and crazy to be real, and some of the others just sounded like a spirited teenage girl testing her boundaries.

In a big way. But with her daddy as a famous lawyer? It made complete and total sense. She’d had some big shoes to rebel against practically from birth. He should understand, too. Hadn’t he rebelled against what his mother and stepfather expected of him? He certainly wasn’t sitting in his plush office right now.

“It’s fine,” Kai replied. “I was just kidding anyway. There’s nothing wrong with being a little different.”

“He’s a lot different.”

“That’s okay, too.”

“What are you doing out here so early? Do you come to watch the sunrise a lot?”  
Lulu asked.

“I run three or four days a week. I always try to time it so I’m here to watch the sunrise over the lake. I know it probably sounds cheesy, but it’s a nice way to start the day.”

“I’m sorry that I missed it. Henry and I run a few times a week as well. It’s good exercise, and I like to be outdoors.”

She and Henry ran together. Once again, Kai wondered what was up with these two, and then once again he reminded himself that he didn’t care. It was simply the reporter in him that made him nosey.

“I was hoping we could talk again today or maybe tomorrow,” Kai suggested. “I have a few more questions to round out the article. Maybe I could follow you out again to a call.”

“Sure, but I can’t promise that anything will be exciting. It might be boring just like yesterday.”

“That’s fine. It’s really you I want to learn more about. I mean, I think the whole town wants to know more about you.”

“I’m guessing the town thinks they know everything there is to know.”

She might be right, but he didn’t get a chance to reply. Henry jogged up to them, his skin a pasty-greenish shade.

“Lulu, you need to see this. You need to call it in.”

“Okay, what do I need to see? What’s going on?”

Lulu’s brow was knitted together in question, and Henry looked like he’d seen a ghost. His fingers scraped through his hair, and he kept shaking his head as if to deny whatever he was trying to say.

“You need to call it in,” Henry repeated, his eyes wide and his tone urgent. “It’s a body, Lulu. There’s a dead body down there. You have to come now.”

A dead body in Harper.

On Lulu’s second day of work.

It looked like the new sheriff wasn’t going to get any grace period whatsoever. If Lulu Reilly had any luck at all, it would be death by natural causes.

Not a murder. Definitely, not a murder.

The dead body belonged to Dana Cartwright.

Lulu’s stomach had clenched menacingly when she’d seen the identity of the victim and the bloody gash on the side of the head. She’d quickly given herself a stern talking to and steeled her spine.

She was ready for this. It had always been a possibility, although she could admit she hadn’t expected it to happen so quickly.

A murder in their little town.

Now wait a minute. You don't know for sure it's a murder.

Yes, I do. No one is going to bash in their own skull and then wander down to the lake to die.

No one was going to say that she hadn't followed strict police protocol. Her first priority was protecting the crime scene. She then called in her deputies along with the county forensics team. What she hadn't counted on was Kai Oliver - the local newspaperman - being onsite for her first serious investigation. He was watching every move she made as if waiting for her to screw up.

She wasn't planning to do that so he could watch all he wanted. What he didn't realize was that he was suspect number one. He'd been standing less than ten yards from Dana when they'd come up on him during their run.

One of her deputies had brought bright yellow crime scene tape with him, and they'd cordoned off the area to keep out looky-loos. In a town this size, everyone and their brother would be out to watch their brand-new female sheriff handle her first murder case. She was sure they couldn't wait to head down to the cafe and compare her to her father.

I'd never come out of that on top.

"Can I call someone for you?" Henry offered as she readied herself to question Kai. "Your brother? Or your...dad?"

"Dad is boarding a cruise ship today," she reminded her friend, giving him the nastiest look she could muster. "We are not calling and getting him to fly back here to handle this. I can do this. I'm a little hurt, Henry, that you'd even suggest it."

Actually, she was a whole lot hurt, but she didn't want to admit it.

“I only suggested it in case you wanted him,” Henry replied swiftly. “I think you’ve got this. I really do. But when it comes down to it, no one would blame you for calling in reinforcements.”

“Yes, they would. They would blame me. They would also lose all respect, if they even had any to begin with. If I call Dad, they’ll all think I can’t do this. As for Chase, he runs the local coffee shop. If he hasn’t heard already, he will. He’s busy, and I’m working so I’ll talk to him later. Now I need to speak with Kai. He was the first person on the scene.”

Her deputies were holding back the onlookers whose numbers were beginning to grow. There had only been a handful about ten minutes ago, but now there were over a dozen.

Lulu could feel the weight of their stare and judgment even from where she was standing several yards away. She walked over to where she’d asked Kai to wait.

“Do you mind if I record this conversation?” she asked, pulling out her phone.

Her dad had always used a little notebook and a pencil, but she might want to listen to this again at a later date.

Kai appeared taken aback by her request which only confirmed her suspicions that he didn’t have a clue that he could be considered a suspect. If she was honest with herself - and she always tried to be - she didn’t think Kai had killed Dana. Not unless she found out that he had some sort of motive that she didn’t know about currently.

But she was going to follow the textbook on this one. No defense attorney was going to get evidence or testimony thrown out because she’d been sloppy. Kai had been on scene, and that meant she needed to get his statement at the very least.

Means, motive, and opportunity. She needed to keep all three in the forefront of her mind.

“Do you mind if I record it as well?” Kai asked. “For the article that I’ll write.”

“Fine, I just have a few questions right now. I may have more later.”

“I have some, too,” he said before she could continue. “For the newspaper.”

She decided to ignore his questions for now. She’d answer what she could, but this was an open investigation. If he thought that she was going to spill her guts, he was mistaken.

“Let’s start at the beginning,” she said. “What time did you leave your house this morning?”

“Around five-thirty. Like I said earlier, I like to be here at the lake to watch the sunrise.”

“How long would you say you were here at the lake this morning?”

“Ten or fifteen minutes before you showed up.”

“Did you see anyone else here?”

“No, just me. I never see anyone else.”

“You saw me,” Lulu reminded him.

“Never before then. That’s why I run early in the morning. The solitude. Can I ask a question now? Am I a suspect? Do you think I killed someone?”

“Kai, you were already here. In a place with a dead body not far away. Don’t you think I’d be a stupid cop not to ask you a few questions?”

She’d decided to challenge him back, get him thinking about what it took to run this investigation. He didn’t seem like a dumb person at all. In the short time they’d spent together, he presented himself as a reasonable and intelligent human being.

Who was standing almost smack-dab in the middle of her crime scene. All by himself.

“I guess you have a point,” he conceded, twisting his lips. “But I didn’t see anyone or anything. It was dark most of the time I was there, and even then, I don’t know if I would have seen the body. From where we were standing, I couldn’t see it. Could you?”

“No, the grass is too tall around there.”

“Then you got lucky that Henry likes to wander off,” Kai observed. “It could have been days...or weeks...”

Lulu had thought about that, too. Was that what the killer had intended? Let the crime scene degrade with a bit of rain and wind before anyone found Dana?

“It was Dana Cartwright, wasn’t it?” Kai asked. “I recognized her. She works behind the bar a few nights a week at Ethan’s place.”

“I cannot comment on the identity of the victim until we have notified the next of kin,” Lulu recited automatically. “And you should know that.”

She’d thrown out that last dig because she didn’t want him to think he could take advantage of her inexperience. Everyone would think the worst of her until she

proved them wrong. It had been happening pretty much her whole life. Even then, some never changed their minds, still thinking she was teenaged Lulu, sneaking out of the house and smoking behind the barn with her friends.

“I do know that,” Kai sighed. “I’m not your enemy, Lulu. I didn’t kill that woman, and I only want to help you.”

“You want to help me? Or you want an exclusive story?”

His face split into a grin, and for a moment she thought he was going to laugh out loud at her.

“What is this? Some seedy crime television show? This is Harper, Montana. There’s only one newspaper for a hundred and fifty miles, Lulu. I automatically have an exclusive. There is no one else.”

Shit, he had a point. She was the law, and he was the news.

“The local television news station might be interested.”

She sounded rather pathetic, like she was grasping at straws.

“I’m sure they will be,” he agreed. “But in the meantime, I’m here. And I’m deeply invested in finding out what happened to that woman. After all, I helped find her. But I didn’t kill her. I barely even knew Dana.”

“Means, motive, and opportunity,” she heard herself mutter under her breath. “Which do you have?”

“I guess I had the opportunity,” he replied. “I was alone here, although we don’t yet know the time of death. I have no motive. Didn’t know her. I didn’t have the means



since I showed up here with nothing but my cell phone. Although I have the physical strength to make that sort of dent in a human skull.”

“You’re not exactly helping yourself,” Lulu said. “I’m not the coroner, but I think it would have taken someone decently healthy to do that. You look like you could swing a bat.”

“Lots of people in town could wield a blunt object. We’re going to need more than that to narrow down a killer.”

“We?”

“Well...you. And me, because newspaper reporters dig into a story.”

“I’m the sheriff in this town. I do the investigating. You report what I find,” she retorted. “ We are not a team. I will cooperate with the press because I want my office to run transparently. But I will not have civilians getting all twisted up into an open case. Seriously, Kai. It could be dangerous.”

“It could be dangerous for you, too.”

“That’s what I signed up for. Now, if you’ll excuse me, it appears that the county forensic team has arrived. Please step aside and let them pass. Don’t ask them any questions, and don’t get in their way. Are we clear?”

“We definitely are.”

He had cleared his throat a few times and was looking at the ground, probably trying to hide his laughter. She was being a hard ass, and he thought it was amusing or cute.

“I promise I’ll give you a more complete statement later today,” she said. “I’m

serious about being transparent.”

“I appreciate that. If you don’t mind, I’d like to hang around and watch.”

“I can’t stop you.” She nodded towards the growing crowd not far away. “We have an audience. And believe me when I say, they are all watching closely.”

Waiting for me to fall flat on my face. As if I’d let that happen.

I’m going to find Dana’s killer, and everyone can go fuck themselves.

I promise, Dana. I’ll find the person who did this to you. I won’t fail.

Lulu's hands were tight on the steering wheel as she drove toward Dana Cartwright's family home. The parents needed to be informed of their daughter's passing, and Lulu was the official who needed to do it.

It was still early, and there was a possibility that Gary and Carole hadn't heard about a dead body near the lake. They wouldn't know that it was their daughter. The deputies had managed to keep the people that had gathered far enough back not to be able to see details. The high grass had helped as well.

She hadn't expected on her second day of work that she'd have to tell a nice, older couple that their daughter had probably been murdered. She wasn't scared about finding the killer. It was this that made her nauseous. She had an image in her head of someone telling her own mom and dad that she'd died. It wasn't a pretty picture.

A car had pulled up behind her, honking, before revving its engine and then pulling alongside.

Ray Ramsey and Ellen Dunphy.

They must have heard the news. Perhaps one of her deputies had called them? They were waving at her to pull over.

What in the hell...?

Lulu pulled her SUV to the side of the road, and Ray parked behind her. She stepped

out of her vehicle, and he did, too, followed by Ellen. The two of them always seemed to be together, with Ellen wanting Ray to validate her almost every sentence. It was a strange working relationship, but it seemed normal to them.

“Lulu, glad we caught you,” Ray said, jogging up to meet her. “We heard about Dana Cartwright. You should have called us right away.”

As far as Lulu knew, that wasn’t part of the protocol. Of course, there hadn’t been any murders in Harper since she was a toddler so she couldn’t be sure.

“You were my next call after I informed the family.”

It wasn’t exactly the truth, but it sounded plausible. They had a reason to be concerned since she was inexperienced. If they were panicking, she couldn’t blame them. But she was determined to do her job.

“Of course,” Ellen exclaimed. “That’s how we found you. We assumed you were headed for the Cartwright place.”

The Cartwrights had a bit of property on the outskirts of town. They raised horses, had a large garden, and Carole liked to sit outside and read when the weather was nice. Gary Cartwright was one of the local large animal veterinarians in the county.

“I am. I’m actually in a hurry as I want to get there before they hear from someone else. Who told you, by the way?”

“I have contacts in the county coroner’s office,” Ray replied. “They called me.”

“We just wanted to talk to you to let you know you have whatever you need resource-wise to solve this horrible murder,” Ellen said, her voice shaky. “Right, Ray?”

“Absolutely,” Ray confirmed. “Whatever you need. It’s been over twenty-five years since the last murder, and we don’t want anyone to think that Harper isn’t a safe little town to raise a family and run a business. Whatever you need.”

“I appreciate that,” Lulu said. “So far, forensics has gathered any evidence, and the county medical examiner will be performing the autopsy. I’m planning to speak with several people who knew Dana as well, piecing her last day together. Confirming alibis.”

“Were there any witnesses?” Ray asked.

“Not that I know of, although one might come forward when they hear the news. Someone might have seen something that they didn’t think was important.”

Her father had always talked about how the smallest details often were the most important.

“Did you call Seth?” Ray asked. “Is he coming back?”

“No,” Lulu said, trying to keep her tone even. “My mom and dad are boarding a cruise ship this morning. I am not planning on calling him.”

“You can just call one of your dad’s friends if you need any advice,” Ellen replied. “Right, Ray?”

“Sure, any one of them can help you.”

“I think I have the situation in hand so far,” Lulu said. “I’m following the textbook down to the letter. I don’t want any questions with the investigation when I hand over any evidence to the prosecuting attorney.”

“Good plan, good plan,” Ray said, nodding in agreement. “Stick to the process. Smart.”

“You’ll keep us informed?” Ellen asked anxiously. “Let us know what’s happening. I think that would be best. Right, Ray?”

“Yes, we should stay in the loop,” Ray replied. “Just a little status report now and then.”

“That’s fine,” Lulu agreed. “Now I need to get to the Cartwrights before they hear about Dana from someone else.”

Lulu didn’t have any intention of discussing an open investigation with the town council. Ellen Dunphy was a huge gossip, and she’d wag her tongue anywhere and anytime. It would be madness to let her know about any possible suspects until Lulu was sure they were either ruled out or in. She didn’t want to ruin any lives because of this.

Ray and Ellen turned back towards town, and Lulu got back on the road. It wasn’t long, and she was pulling into the long driveway of the Cartwright place. Animal lovers, the family owned several dogs and cats who came out to greet Lulu. Tails wagging and tongues lolling, they all received their pets before ambling back to the front door where Carole was standing.

One look at the woman’s frightened expression, and Lulu knew that Carole had already heard about a dead body in town. Carole was pale, her eyes wide, and her breathing ragged. By the time Lulu reached the top front porch step, the older woman was visibly shaking.

“Mrs. Cartwright, I’m Lulu Reilly. The new sheriff in town. I took over from my father yesterday.”

“Yes, I remember you. You went to school with Billie, my younger daughter. I knew your parents, too. I heard you took over.”

Carole’s voice was barely a whisper and a bit choked. Tears were beginning to glisten in her eyes.

“Can we go inside and talk, Mrs. Cartwright?”

Carole sagged against the doorframe, the air seeming to leak from her body.

“Yes, but can you just tell me? I heard about someone finding a body by the lake. Just tell me. I need to know. Just tell me.”

There was a desperate plea in the woman’s tone that Lulu couldn’t ignore. Her heart went out to the woman who was about to get the news that no parent should ever hear.

“We did find a body,” Lulu said, moving closer and placing a hand on Carole’s shoulder. “It was Dana, ma’am. I’m so sorry for your loss. So very sorry.”

The woman seemed to crumple at Lulu’s words, the tears beginning to flow. She helped Carole into the house, leading her to the sofa and helping her sit down when Gary walked in from another room.

“Carole, who were the dogs barking?—”

The dogs were gathered protectively around Carole and Lulu, a few whining that their mistress was distraught. Gary flew across the room and sat on Carole’s other side, gathering her in his arms.

“What’s going on? What’s happened? You’re acting like someone died.”

Shit, this wasn't going well. Or was there ever a good way to do this? It was a question she'd never asked her father or any of his cop friends.

Note to self - ask Dare or Griffin or one of the others.

"It's Dana," Carole's voice cracked with emotion. "She's gone, Gary. She's gone."

Carole broke down into sobs while Gary appeared shocked and disbelieving. He kept shaking his head as Lulu gently explained what had happened this morning. She had to say it several times before the truth began to sink in and reality to take hold.

"We just talked to her," Carole said. "Yesterday morning. She stopped by, and we sat down and had coffee together."

"What did you talk about?" Lulu queried. "Did she seem out of sorts? Angry? Sad? Did she have anything stressful going on?"

"She was tired of her job," Gary growled. "And I don't blame her. She was talking about getting a new one, but she didn't know what she wanted to do. We've been encouraging her to go back to school. Maybe become a dental hygienist or a paralegal. Something with a future. She was never going to get ahead as a waitress at that bar."

"Gary," Carole said with a shake of her head. "It's a good, honest job. There's nothing shameful in work."

"There isn't, but she could have done better."

"We talked about how the hours were getting to her," Carole replied to Lulu. "The late nights and so forth. Dana was a morning person, so it was tough on her. We talked about her sister's upcoming birthday, and how her car was making a strange



noise. That's pretty much it."

"Did she have a boyfriend? Anyone she was seeing?"

"I don't think so," Carole said. "At least, she didn't mention anyone, but then, we're her parents. She might not. Her friends or sisters might know more."

"She had terrible taste in men," Gary said with a roll of his eyes. "Jay was a loser and so were all her other boyfriends. Not a winner in the bunch."

"There was that nice young man from Springwood," Carole interjected. "He was...an attorney, I think. We liked him."

"And that was the kiss of death for the poor guy," Gary griped. "Once we thought he was good for her, she dumped him. She only wanted men who we hated."

A roomful of psychologists would have a field day with that behavior, but Lulu wasn't one of them. Maybe Colt might have something to say, though. He was a professional, after all. Maybe she'd give him a call later to get his thoughts.

"She was just searching for her place in life," Carole said, giving her husband a quelling look. "She was just a late bloomer. She would have figured it all out eventually. I think she was getting close. She had a look in her eye the last few times I saw her. She acted genuinely happy and satisfied."

Happy and satisfied? Had Dana been...in love? Lulu made a mental note to dig into Dana's love life. Sadly, the most dangerous person in a woman's life was her significant other. Unless there was a serial killer in Harper - and the chances were low - strangers didn't usually kill strangers. People killed for love or money or revenge.

Which was it for Dana?

“Can you give me the names of Dana’s friends?” Lulu asked. “I’d like to talk to them, too. It’s sometimes the smallest detail that breaks a case. I want to assure you that finding out who did this is my top priority.”

“We know you’re a good girl,” Carole said. “Your parents are such wonderful people. If your dad were here... Did you call him?”

Lulu had a feeling that she was going to hear that question a great deal over the next few days. Probably until the case was solved.

“He and Mom got on a cruise ship this morning,” Lulu replied, noting the disappointment in Carole’s eyes. “However, I can always call in one of my uncles if I need any help.”

The Cartwrights instantly seemed to perk up at the statement. Their shaky confidence in Lulu’s ability to find a killer restored at the mention of assistance.

“Of course, your father knew many well-qualified lawmen,” Gary said. “They can share their wisdom.”

Was this Gary’s way of saying she wasn’t well-qualified?

Well...I’m not. I’ve never worked a murder case in my life. They should have doubts. They’d be crazy not to. This was their daughter, and I’m a rookie. But I’m going to do it. I will get the job done.

“As I said, this is my number one priority. I will be asking lots of questions around town about Dana and the people around her. I feel like I need to warn you that often families find this disturbing and intrusive. I will try and be discreet, but I need to dig into Dana’s life. Sometimes that can get ugly, especially when it comes to finances and relationships.”

“Our daughter didn’t have any secrets,” Carole assured her. “Her life is - I mean, was - an open book. But we do understand what you mean. We understand that you need to ask personal questions, and we’re fine with that.”

“Do what you need to do to find out who hurt our little girl,” Gary said gruffly. “If you can’t, I’ll find the son of a bitch myself.”

“I beg of you, please do not try and investigate yourselves. There’s a killer out there, and we don’t want any more victims. One is more than enough.”

There were a few more questions, and the parents wrote down the names of the friends...that they knew about. At the age of thirty, Dana might have had secrets from her parents, despite Carole’s insistence that her daughter’s life was an open book.

Lulu’s gut was telling her that someone in Dana’s life had killed her. Just who might it be?

After informing Dana Cartwright’s parents of her passing, Lulu’s next stop was Dana’s home way out in the boonies. The house was at the end of a long driveway off of a side road about ten miles outside of town. It had been Dana’s grandmother’s home until she’d inherited it a few years ago.

Lulu wasn’t the easily creeped out type, but she wasn’t sure she’d want to live out here by herself. There were no streetlights for a good two miles leading up here, and at night this whole area had to bring a new definition to dark. The house had just one porch light, and the detached garage also had a lone single bulb. Surrounded by trees, the home and grounds would have made an excellent setting for a horror movie.

The forensic team was almost done here, and she was anxious to get inside. The crime scene team was looking for trace evidence of a possible murder. Lulu was looking for something far different. She wanted clues into what was happening in

Dana's life - people, places, issues.

Despite what movies, books, and true crime television would have a person believe, stranger murders weren't all that common. In truth, less than ten percent of victims were killed by people they didn't know. Lulu's money was on a romantic partner, friend, neighbor, or family member. Because of that, she needed to know the intimate details of Dana's life.

She took the mother's declaration that Dana's life was an open book with a grain of salt. As much as Lulu loved her parents, she didn't tell them everything about what was going on in her life. And the older she got, the less she told them. Not because she didn't trust them. She did, wholeheartedly. It was simply that she was an adult, and adults didn't go running to mommy and daddy about every little thing.

Especially when it came to her love life. While her parents - especially her mother - were open-minded, she wasn't the type to talk to her mom about a guy she was seeing and yes, sleeping with. Her dad was the type of parent who knew she had sex, but didn't want to know the details. Her mom would have been fine with the details, but Lulu still thought it was a bit weird. She sure as hell didn't want to know about their sex life, although she knew her mom and dad loved and adored one another after many years of marriage.

I don't need all the minute details. I get it. They have sex. But I don't want to dwell on that.

"It's the garage," the lead forensic said to Lulu, pulling her from her thoughts. "That was ground zero. I can show you."

After pulling on her protective gear, Lulu followed the woman into the garage. Dana didn't have much inside of it. Just the usual - her car, a few boxes of Christmas decorations, a large cooler, a few yard tools like a mower and rake, and a shelf with

cans of paint and some random tools.

On the driver's side of the vehicle was a blood pool at least a foot wide, and a few random spatters on the side of the car.

"It looks like she was killed here," the investigator said. "And then probably carried to another vehicle parked in the driveway. There are drops of blood leading out of the garage."

Images of what might have happened flew through Lulu's mind, reversing and going forward several times as she played through multiple scenarios. Had someone come up behind Dana and surprised her? Did Dana have a friendly visitor who had turned not so friendly? Had Dana fought back? Or had she not even seen it coming?

"Then the killer drove her to the lake and dumped her body there," Lulu said, mostly to herself. "Premediated or spur of the moment decision?"

"I know you're not asking me, but it sounds like a spur-of-the-moment decision," the investigator replied. "The victim was found the next day. You'd think whoever did this would want the body to be hidden for a longer period or even forever. But that's just my two cents."

"You make a good point," Lulu conceded. "I'm not married to any particular theory yet. What else have you got from the house?"

"Not much. No broken windows or doors. No signs of any forced entry at all. We didn't find any cell phone at the lake, and we didn't find one here either. There appears to be a spot at the desk for a laptop, but we didn't see one. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. It's clear if you want to go through it."

"I do. Thanks."

“I will say,” the investigator said with a visible shiver. “That this probably looked very different at night. No lights, no cameras. No one anywhere near enough to hear and see. It’s the perfect place to kill someone and get away with it.”

Lulu agreed, which was why she was leaning toward premeditation. But she couldn’t rule out the fact that the killer just got lucky with the location.

Did he or she kill Dana here because it was a remote location?

Or was he or she here with Dana, and the murder just happened here without forethought?

Frankly, the murderer could have dumped Dana’s body somewhere on the property. There were several acres here, most of it wooded.

If I was the killer, I wouldn’t have taken the risk of moving the body and being seen. I would have hidden it close by.

Did that mean that the murderer panicked? So many questions, and she needed to get the answers.

Lulu moved her investigation inside of the home. The crime scene techs had dusted for prints and taken samples for DNA analysis. If Dana had any visitors that night, hopefully, they left a little something of themselves behind.

Tell me about yourself, Dana. Tell me your story. I need to know you.

She started in the kitchen, looking through cabinets and the refrigerator. Like her own home, Dana didn’t look like she cooked much for herself. The freezer had some single entrees and the obligatory pizzas. The refrigerator had a few cartons of yogurt, some apples, and the usual condiments. Stuffed in the back of the lowest shelf was a

twelve-pack of root beer.

There was a box of cereal in the cabinets, along with a half-empty pasta container, an unopened marinara jar, a bag of dark chocolates, and some tea bags. No coffee? There was no coffeemaker on the counters.

Apparently, Dana wasn't a coffee drinker. But she liked a treat of chocolate now and then, something that Lulu totally agreed with. If she did cook, it looked like Dana favored low-effort meals with easy clean-up.

The tiny living room was neat and rather sparse. A couch sat against a wall facing the television. There was an end table with a lamp, remote control, and a paperback book - *Pride and Prejudice* , marked at page sixty-one.

The bedroom, on the other hand, was a different story altogether. Clearly, this was where Dana spent most of her time when at home. The queen-sized bed was covered with a brightly colored quilt and stacked with about a dozen cozy pillows in complementary colors. A fuzzy royal blue throw hung from one post of the headboard. The side tables were stacked with multiple books, candles, pens, and notebooks.

The dresser was strewn with perfume bottles, hair ties, scarves, socks, and a few framed photos of Dana with her friends and family. This room looked lived-in, with Dana's personality coming out more than the kitchen and living room.

The closet and bathroom were more of the same. Like so many people with a busy schedule, Dana seemed to keep her favorite things at close hand. Her makeup was stacked on the bathroom vanity, and her most worn sweaters and jeans were folded in a stack at the bottom of her closet.

Going back to check into the dresser drawers, Lulu found what she'd expected to see.

Clothes, bras, underwear, and socks. Then she pulled open the bottom drawer to find what she'd call the "single woman's stash" or something like that - a vibrator - tucked under a few sweatshirts. Since she was wearing gloves, she reached out to flick the "on" switch, but it didn't hum to life.

Batteries were dead.

I'm not weird. Something doesn't seem right here. It's not logical.

Levering up from her spot on the floor, Lulu checked the two drawers in the side tables. A flashlight, a bottle of lube, a couple of phone chargers, bottles of nail polish, and an emery board.

Am I being picky? Why would she keep her vibrator across the room hidden under clothes? I would keep it next to the bed. Right? There's plenty of room in these drawers, and that's where the lube was located.

Unless...she had someone coming that she didn't want to know that she had sex toys? Her mother? A friend? A...lover? But she left the lube...

And it was a dead vibrator at that. How long have these batteries been dead? Did she not replace them because she didn't have to? Because she had a sexual partner?

Lulu had let her own sex toys languish for months at a time when she was seeing someone. Not that she was out shagging men left and right, but she wasn't a virgin either.

A girl's got needs.

If Dana had been seeing someone, Lulu needed to talk to that person as soon as possible. Was her ex-husband Jay Bradford that person? He was next on the list to get



a visit.

Dana, what secrets have you taken to the grave?

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 1:38 pm*

6

“She’s upstairs,” Deputy Joe said to Kai when he walked into the sheriff’s station. “Technically, she’s off duty for lunch, but I won’t stop you from going up there. Freedom of the press, and all that.”

That wasn’t what “freedom of the press” meant. It didn’t mean that Kai could invade the private home of a person just because he wanted to.

He didn’t, however, pause to discuss the First Amendment to the Constitution with Joe, instead climbing the stairs to the apartment above the station and knocking on the door. He wanted to talk to Lulu, and privately sounded like the way to go, although her friend Henry would probably be there.

The door opened, and Lulu stood on the other side with a frozen pizza in her hand. She didn’t appear surprised or put out that he’d shown up without a call first. He should apologize, of course. His mother would be scandalized at his gauche behavior. She was a stickler for etiquette - murder or not.

“I’m sorry for bothering you. Joe said you were at lunch, but I was hoping to get some quotes from you. I’m going to run a special edition of the newspaper.”

Normally, he barely had enough to fill the weekly edition, and rarely did he have anything that was time-sensitive.

“Extra, extra. Read all about it?”

“Something like that,” he replied.

“You know the local television news will cover this, right? You don’t have to do a special edition. Honestly, that sounds pricey.”

It was expensive. Lulu didn’t know his financial situation, though. Or his maternal grandparents. They’d left him a truckload of money, and he could have fucked around instead of buckling down, going to college and then law school, working in a huge law firm about eighty hours a week.

Right now, he could be at the beach drinking umbrella drinks, driving a flashy convertible, and making passes at twenty-two-year-old cocktail waitresses. He had a buddy from boarding school who was doing exactly that. Nice guy, too.

“That’s under control. I just want to make sure that the paper stays relevant.”

It sounded lame as hell, and she didn’t look fooled. The newspaper was barely relevant, and it wasn’t going to get much better. He was rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic , in a way. He didn’t have any magic pixie dust to sprinkle around, no amazing and stupendous business idea that would change the way the world viewed journalism. He didn’t have the answer that would make that Harper Gazette suddenly fly off the shelves.

By cutting back on printing costs - the lion’s share of his expenses - he was just breaking even. This special printing was going to bust that budget all to hell. He was going to do it anyway. If that made him a terrible businessman, then so be it.

From her dubious expression, she didn’t believe him, but she invited him in anyway.

“I was just about to put this pizza in the oven. Are you hungry?”

“I just realized I haven’t eaten today. So, yes. Thank you.”

“Are you picky about toppings? It’s sausage and cheese.”

“I’m not. I’ll pretty much eat anything except cauliflower, green beans, and strawberries. I’m allergic to strawberries.”

“I’m not fond of them so you’re safe. Want something to drink? I can offer you water, milk, soda, or orange juice.”

“I shouldn’t but I’ll say soda. Thanks.”

His gaze ran over the small apartment. Neat as a pin, but compact. The kitchen and living room were one space. He assumed that there was a bedroom and bathroom down the hall to his right.

Where did Henry sleep? With Lulu?

Stop thinking about who she’s sleeping with. It’s none of your business.

“Where’s Henry?”

Shit, now I can’t keep my mouth shut. This is great.

“He’s at the coffee shop working. He likes to have some noise around him. He says the silence is uncomfortable.” Lulu slid the pizza into the oven before pouring each of them a glass of soda. “And no, he’s not my boyfriend. Everyone asks that, and the answer is no. He’s my best friend, though.”

Kai couldn’t stop his gaze from wandering to that hallway. Lulu noticed.

“He sleeps on the couch. It folds out. This apartment is only temporary anyway. As soon as the house on the ranch is ready, we’ll be moving there. He’ll have his own room and bathroom. Any other questions? I don’t know him in the biblical sense, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“I wasn’t thinking that,” he responded. “At all. You’re just friends. Got it.”

Lulu had a mouth on her, which Kai respected. She didn’t play any games, and he liked that, too. She said what she meant, and she didn’t waste any time beating around the bush. That was something he was trying to get better about. Too often, he found himself talking around a subject rather than just digging in. Not in a rude way, but in a direct one. Lulu seemed like she had that mastered.

“I think you were thinking it, but you didn’t want to ask,” she said, settling down on the couch. “I assume you have more questions for me. You might as well relax and ask them. I’ll answer them if I can.”

“Lulu, are you always like this?” he couldn’t help but ask.

“Could you be more specific?”

“Straight to the point. Blunt. That sort of thing,” he explained.

“Generally, although I can be as wishy-washy as the next person if the situation calls for it. But since I assume this isn’t a social call, I thought we should get right to it. Are you the type that needs a little foreplay?”

“Foreplay?” he asked, laughing at her snark. The more time he spent with Lulu, the more he liked her. “Don’t we all need some of that? Slow down. Take your time. Life is to be savored.”

He was talking about more than sex.

“I’ll file away your advice. We can foreplay away, if you like. So...how’s your day going, Kai? How’s the weather? Do you like your job? What’s your favorite color? What’s your favorite season? Do you like pizza? What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“That’s your idea of foreplay?” he said with a grin. “Throw the kitchen sink at it and hope something sticks? You do need to slow down. You sound like you’re interrogating me.”

“I should finesse you, instead? Okay, I like the shirt you’re wearing, Kai. Is that...boyfriend material?”

She couldn’t even keep a straight face when she said it, just enjoying busting his balls for fun. He wasn’t upset about it. In his humble opinion, the world needed to stop being so uptight and laugh more.

“Why yes, it is,” he said, running a hand down his sleeve. “Thank you for noticing.”

“I’m a cop. I notice all sorts of things.”

“Oh yeah, what else?” he challenged, relaxing and enjoying the banter.

“I think I’m going to save some of that for after lunch. Seriously, what questions do you have? Like I said, I’ll answer any that won’t put the investigation at peril.”

He’d come here for an update on the case, not to share a pizza with her. This wasn’t a social call.

Right?

“I was hoping for an update on the case,” he replied. “What you know, what you don’t know. I was thinking that I would ask for any possible witnesses or people with information in the article that I write. If that’s okay with you?”

“I’m not sure,” she said slowly. “Sometimes pleas to the public can backfire. It can bring out a lot of people that don’t know anything to help, but they desperately want the attention. Next thing I know, my deputies are spending all of their time on the phones taking false tips and then having to wade through them to possibly get one that’s useful. Let me think about that.”

“I didn’t consider that,” he confessed. “If it helps, I could have the calls come to the newspaper office.”

“You have that large of a staff?”

Lulu had to already know the answer - which was a resounding no. Kai had an administrative assistant that worked part-time, and another reporter who also worked mostly part-time or whenever they found a story that was worth printing.

“No, I could put my phone number in the article.”

“Now you’re just being a glutton for punishment,” Lulu laughed. “You do not want to do that. One of my uncles did that, and he’s lived to regret it. No, if we list any number in, it should be to the station. But honestly, I don’t think we need to worry about saying that in the paper. If anyone has any information, they know to call the sheriff’s office.”

“True, I was thinking about someone who might be reluctant. Anyway, the latest?”

He didn’t want to belabor the idea. It had been a passing thought, and he wasn’t married to it. She’d made a good point about wading through all the calls they might

get. He didn't need crazies calling him at all hours of the night.

The timer dinged, and Lulu stood up to retrieve the pizza from the oven. She quickly cut it into slices and filled two plates.

"I don't have a lot of information," she said, handing him a plate before settling onto the floor and using the coffee table for her food and drink. He slid off the couch and did the same so that they were eye to eye. For some reason, he liked to see the expressions flit across her face as she spoke. "Right now, we don't have an official time of death, although the coroner estimates it as between two and four in the morning. Dana's purse was intact, including her identification, but any cash she was carrying was gone plus her credit cards. The initial murder scene was in her garage. That was obvious. That means she was transported to the lake. There was no sign of a struggle. We didn't find a cell phone at the lake or her house. Nor any type of laptop or tablet. I'll need to ask her family and friends whether she had one."

"So, robbery is a possibility?"

"I can't rule it out."

"You don't sound convinced."

"That's because I'm not," she replied. "I don't have strong feelings one way or another. What I do know is that we don't have a rash of robberies in Harper that sometimes turn into murder. In fact, we don't have a robbery problem at all. People generally don't get mugged on the streets of our town. I suppose it could be the start of something, though. Never say never."

"You think someone killed her? On purpose?"

"The most dangerous person for a woman is the man in her life. That's just statistics,"



Lulu said, popping a piece of the crust into her mouth. “I also have doubts as to whether a robber would bother with transporting her body to a second location. They usually want to get in and out as quickly as possible.”

“Unless he or she could be tied back to her home somehow,” he finished the sentence for her. “Then they would want to move her.”

“They’d be taking a chance of being seen. They also couldn’t be a weakling. Dana would have been - pardon my phrasing here - dead weight. She was five-nine and around a hundred and forty pounds. That would be a lot for a woman to handle unless she had help. Not impossible, of course, but awkward if she didn’t know the best way to carry that weight. And I’d assume that they wouldn’t want any attention on them while carrying a body in the middle of the night.”

“You haven’t ruled out a female?”

“I’m keeping an open mind. It’s amazing what a determined human being can achieve.”

“Can we go back to the head wound?” he asked. “Do you have any idea of the weapon?”

“Not at the point, but it looks like something long and thin like a pipe. They’ll need to run tests to be sure, of course.”

“A pipe, or a candlestick,” he offered.

“Colonel Mustard in the dining room with the candlestick,” Lulu groaned. “My family used to play that game all the time. Mom and Dad were big on game night during the winter.”

“You weren’t a Clue fan? What was your favorite? Mine was Risk .”

In that game, he could take all the chances he wanted and the worst that would happen was that he would lose.

“I liked the game of Life ,” she replied. “Would I go to college? Would I get married? Have kids? I liked that I didn’t have to make many decisions. I could just roll the dice and leave it all to chance.”

“You don’t like making decisions? This might not be the job for you.”

“I don’t like making them for myself. I have no problem with other types. It’s like advice. I can’t take my own, but I’m fantastic with other people’s problems. Go ahead. Ask me anything. I’m known among my friends for giving great advice.”

“I don’t need any at the moment, but I’ll let you know.”

Their plates were empty, and Lulu scooped them up as she stood.

“Do you want any more pizza? There’s some left.”

“I’m full but thank you.”

“I’ll just wrap this for Henry. He likes to snack at night.”

Lulu wrapped the rest of the pizza in aluminum foil and placed it in the refrigerator before turning back to him.

“I’m going to see Dana’s ex-husband Jay Bradford. Are you coming with me?”

This woman was a constant surprise.

“You’re okay with that?”

“Not really, but I have a feeling you’d just be right behind me asking them questions. All I ask is that you don’t take over my questioning time, and if they don’t want to talk to you or have you in the room, you let it go.”

“Promise.”

Jay Bradford was the ex-husband. What story did he have to tell?

Jay Bradford worked in a busy body shop painting cars, but he wasn’t there when Lulu and Kai stopped by to see him. The manager had said that Jay had gone home when he’d heard the news about Dana.

“He was upset?” Lulu asked.

“Well...I mean...Dana was his wife once. I assume he cared about her, even if just a little. I mean...I don’t think he wanted her dead or anything,” the manager replied awkwardly. “What I mean to say is that he didn’t want her dead. He’s not that kind of guy.”

“What kind of guy is he?”

“Good worker. Doesn’t complain too much. Gets jobs done. That kind.”

“Did he work here when he was married to Dana?”

“Uh, yes.”

“Did he ever talk about her? His marriage?”

“Never.”

“Were you surprised when they split?”

“No, I mean...yes. What I’m trying to say is that I didn’t have an opinion, but I’m always surprised when a couple gets a divorce. Are we done? Because I need to get back to work. We have a customer...”

“Is it just me or was he trying to cover for Jay?” Kai asked after the manager wandered back into the office area.

“Let me ask you a question. You worked with a bunch of guys when you were a lawyer, right? Did you ever work with someone who never mentioned their spouse whether it was good or bad? Is that a thing?”

“Only once, and the guy was a real piece of work. He was secretive about everything. Later, after he quit, we found that he was keeping files on all of us. All the details he could find out, plus - and this was the kicker - he’d keep a running notation of all the things that he hated about us. And he hated all of us. Every single person in the office. He’d remember when someone took the last Mountain Dew from the vending machine. That sort of shit.”

“Did he ever do any work?”

“Not from what we could see. He was too busy documenting the hell out of his co-workers. He was close to getting fired, but he quit first.”

“Dramatically? No, let me guess. He just left one day and never came back.”

“How did you know?”

“Just lucky. If he flew under the radar for a long time, I would assume that he wasn’t looking for attention. But I also think you’re lucky that you’re not the victim of a workplace shooting spree.”

“He didn’t seem violent, just strange. But to get back to the original question, he was the only one. Most people talked about their personal life, especially after a few drinks at happy hour.”

“So, the boss could be trying to cover for Jay?” Lulu mused out loud. “But what is he trying to cover up? Did Jay complain a lot about Dana?”

“He wouldn’t be the first person to bitch about their spouse,” Kai pointed out. “That doesn’t make him a murderer.”

“True, like I said. I’m keeping an open mind. But I’m also keeping my eyes open. If Jay doesn’t have anything to hide, then why is his boss trying to hide something?”

“Spoken like a true cop,” Kai said with a shake of his head. “Everyone isn’t guilty, Lulu. People can have their secrets, and that doesn’t make them a killer.”

“Do you have secrets?”

She didn’t have a clue as to why she’d asked that question. It wasn’t any of her business, and she didn’t want to know. The fact was, she wasn’t sure why she’d even invited him along with her today. She was making his job easy and making hers more difficult. But she’d heard her father always say that the local newspaper was a good friend to have.

He’d never said that during a murder investigation, but then he hadn’t had any locally in her recent memory. Both he and his sheriff friends had shunned the press after capturing Wade Bryson and then Bryson’s son years later. They hadn’t wanted the

publicity. They'd simply wanted to get back to living their lives, especially Uncle Logan. Sadly, that seemed to be a problem that would never go away.

Even now, Brianna, who was one of Lulu's best friends, still suffered nightmares on occasion from being taken hostage by Bryson's son. They'd been roommates, and Lulu had woken to Brianna's screams too many times to count. It wasn't fair that Brianna had to go through that.

"Everybody has secrets," Kai finally replied, a smile playing on his lips. He was wondering what secrets she had. She could see it written all over his face. He shouldn't take up poker. He'd lose his shirt. Of course, an image of Kai without a shirt flashed in her brain. He looked good, too. "And that's not a bad thing."

Must stop picturing newspaper guy without articles of clothing. It's clearly been too long between dates.

Kai Oliver, however, wasn't hard on the eyes. If anything, he was too good-looking with his dark hair and almost silver eyes. He looked like he worked out, too. Weights, maybe, in addition to running?

Stop. Just stop. Don't think about him.

Wait...if I'm thinking about him half-naked, has he thought about me? Do I want him to? I don't know. Get back to the investigation.

They walked back to her SUV, and she saw a man who was wearing the same work overalls getting out of his car parked a few spaces away. He looked a bit familiar, although she couldn't place him. Maybe high school? She waved to him anyway which was the small-town way. He smiled back, approaching her to talk.

"Lulu Reilly, I heard you took over for your old man," he said. "Do you remember

me? Kenny Traeger? We had biology together sophomore year. You tried to set all the animals free by opening the cages.”

Shit, she had done that. She’d hated the idea that the cute bunnies were in small cages along with the ferrets, an iguana, and two rats named Tom and Jerry. The animals hadn’t gotten far, except for Tom and Jerry. Their whereabouts were still unknown. She hoped they’d escaped south of the border and were sipping margaritas somewhere.

Kai’s brows were raised in question as if he wanted to hear more details, but she wasn’t in the mood to rehash any of her childhood antics.

“I do remember you,” she said. “You helped me dissect the frog.”

She just couldn’t do it. Kenny had happily done it for her when the teacher wasn’t looking. That teacher still hated Lulu. She’d seen him in Chase’s coffee shop not long ago and got a nasty look when she’d said hello.

“And what did I get for my trouble?” he said with a laugh. “I asked you out, and you turned me down flat. Said you were dating Todd Litmer.”

“I was dating Todd. I am sorry.”

She didn’t have any memory of Kenny asking her out. None. Zip. If he’d asked her, he’d been vague as all hell.

“It all worked out because I started dating Kate Watson. We’ve got two kids now. So, what are you doing here? Does your car need work?” His eyes widened as she realized the reason on his own. “Oh, right. Jay was married to Dana. You were looking for him. Is he a suspect? Do you know who did this yet?”

“He’s not a suspect,” Lulu rushed to answer. She didn’t need gossip like that making the rounds. “We just needed to talk to him about Dana. If he knew anything about her friends, her daily habits. That sort of thing. It’s more of a fact-finding mission.”

“They haven’t been married for a couple of years, you know,” Kenny said. “But they stayed pretty friendly. Until Jay started dating Allie, of course. She’s a jealous one. Didn’t like Dana one bit. She said she hated her. Poor Jay was caught in the middle. I felt for the guy. You know, for a while there we thought he and Dana might reconcile, but then Allie came along. It was too bad because Dana was a hell of a lot of fun. Just like you, Lulu. Allie seems like she’s got a stick?—”

“Kenny,” a voice hollered, interrupting whatever he was going to say. “It’s time for your shift. Let’s go.”

It was the manager who was yelling from the doorway to the shop. He was scowling at Kenny as if the other man had done something wrong.

Interesting.

“Duty calls,” Kenny replied cheerfully. “It was nice seeing you again, Lulu.”

“Looks like Kenny’s getting an earful,” Kai said as they watched Kenny through the large picture window go into the office with the manager.

“It does. I’ll say it again. What does Jay have to hide?”

“Maybe it’s the manager who has something to hide, not Jay.”

Lulu would keep him on her mental list of people that she’d probably want to talk to again. In the meantime, they needed to find Jay Bradford.



What would he have to say about Dana? Had they been on the road to patching up their marriage?

And what about Allie? Lulu wanted to talk to someone who “hated” Dana.

Enough to kill her?

Kai had been watching Lulu's expression when she'd talked with Kenny at the auto body garage. When the man had mentioned that Lulu was fun, she'd flinched. Just a little. Most people wouldn't have even noticed, but Kai had spent his years as an attorney studying body language.

Studying how people held themselves, where they put their hands, and other behaviors like that had given him an edge when it came to dealing with people. Were they lying? Were they telling the truth? Were they even listening?

She'd had a physical reaction to Kenny's statement. Even Kai, who hadn't grown up in Harper, and had only visited in the summer, knew that Lulu had a bit of a wild reputation. He'd always thought she was spontaneous and a little bit of a daredevil. He also didn't think those were negative traits. Frankly, he wished he had more of that for himself. He was careful and watchful by nature, taking his time to make a decision.

It had made him a good student and attorney, and even a good journalist. But it made him wonder if perhaps he was...boring.

"Remember, if Jay says that you can't be there when I talk to him, you can't stay," Lulu said as they walked up the driveway.

Jay Bradford lived in a small Craftsman-style home in a newer neighborhood on the east side of town. The lots weren't large, but they were all neat as a pin and well cared for. Jay's house was painted a dark green with bright white trim. Two rocking

chairs and a small table sat on the front porch along with several potted plants.

“Got it,” Kai replied. “I won’t go if I’m not wanted. I do appreciate you bringing me along.”

“I’m probably crazy for doing it,” Lulu sighed as she knocked on the front door.

“Maybe you secretly like working with someone,” Kai suggested.

“I don’t think that’s it.”

“Or maybe it’s my charm and sense of humor.”

Luckily - for him - Lulu didn’t get a chance to answer. The door opened, and a resigned Jay Bradford stood on the other side. He had to have been anticipating this visit once he heard about the murder of his ex-wife.

“Hi, Jay. I can see that you heard about Dana. I’m so sorry for your loss. Can I talk with you? I have a few questions.”

Bradford nodded, and then his gaze rested on Kai.

“If you don’t want Kai here, it’s fine,” Lulu assured the man. “Kai’s working on an article for the newspaper about what happened. I thought it might be better if he heard directly from the people I interview. That way there won’t be any misquotes or inconsistencies. But it’s up to you.”

For a moment, Kai thought he was in, but then the man shook his head.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. This has been bad enough without being in the paper, too.”

“No problem,” Kai said. “I’ll wait out here.”

“This won’t take long, Jay,” Lulu assured him. “Just a few questions.”

Bradford opened the door for Lulu, and they disappeared inside, leaving Kai on the front porch. He settled into one of the rockers and pulled out his phone to check for any messages while he waited. He wanted to be inside, but he’d made a promise. Besides, he wasn’t sure that Bradford was going to say anything that would be so momentous that Kai would want to put it into an article.

He hadn’t sat very long when a car pulled up into the driveway, and a woman stepped out carrying her purse and juggling a bag from the local grocer. She didn’t notice Kai sitting on the porch until she was at the top step.

“Who are you?”

Levering from the chair, Kai held out his hand.

“Kai Oliver. You must be Allie. It’s nice to meet you. Can I take that bag for you? It looks heavy.”

She allowed him to accept the bag and place it on the table next to the chair, but she didn’t thank him or greet him. Instead, she looked at him suspiciously, her eyes narrowed as she took him in head to toe and then back up again.

“Why are you here? Where’s Jay? Does he know you’re here? You’re that guy that runs the paper, right? We don’t have any statements to make so you can leave.”

Allie hadn’t noticed Lulu’s official sheriff’s SUV parked in front of the house.

“Jay is inside speaking with the sheriff. And yes, he knows I’m here. And that’s fine

if you don't have a statement. That's not why I'm here."

Kai was far more interested in the investigation than a statement from the ex-husband as to how "devastated" they all were that Dana was gone. As far as Kai was concerned, those bogus statements were nothing more than filler in an article and about as meaningful.

Allie's gaze went straight to the closed door, her face turning pale.

Interesting reaction.

"Jay is talking to the sheriff?"

"Yes, she had a few questions for him, of course."

"Of course," Allie scoffed. "There's no of course. Jay hasn't been married to Dana for two years. He never sees her, and he never talks to her. He doesn't have anything to say."

"He saw her last night at the sports bar," Kai pointed out. "You were there, too."

Allie's head whipped around at his statement. Did she think no one had seen her there? The restaurant had been about three-quarters full. Lots of people had witnessed...whatever it was. He couldn't call it an altercation, but it seemed more than a discussion.

"How do you know that?"

"Because I was there."

"It wasn't a big deal," Allie said defensively. "But other than that, we never see her."

That was the first time in months.”

Kai didn’t want to argue with a woman who was upset. Allie was biting her lip and shaking her head over and over as if trying to negate whatever was happening inside her head.

“The problem is Dana.” Allie dropped her purse next to her grocery bag. “She’s the one that can’t let go of Jay. She’s the one trying to get back together with him. And after what she did, too.”

“What did she do?”

Allie’s eyes widened as she threw up her hands.

“Cheating on Jay, that’s what. She and that Glen Foster. Everyone knows they were having an affair. She skanks around town and then comes crawling back to Jay like he could ever forgive her. She had to be crazy to think that he would.”

“It certainly makes your life easier if she’s gone.”

“Few people are going to mourn Dana,” Allie spat out, her lip curled in derision. “The world is a better place now.”

Kai leveled his gaze at the furious woman standing in front of him. She’d basically just admitted that she was happy as a clam that Dana was gone and no longer some sort of threat to Allie’s relationship with Jay.

Allie seemed to realize it, too, as she quickly began to backpedal.

“I mean...I didn’t want her dead or anything. I’m not that kind of person. I’m not violent in the least. I can’t even kill a fly.”

“But you’re glad she’s gone.”

“Not—not in that way,” Allie replied with a shrug. “I didn’t want her dead, alright? I just wanted her out of our lives. She was nothing but trouble. If she was murdered, it was probably for a good reason.”

Christ, this woman was cold as ice. Someone was dead, and she was busy blaming the victim.

“The sheriff is probably going to ask where you were last night,” he said. “She’s going to ask about an alibi.”

Because it was clear Allie had motive. She had hated Dana Cartwright.

“I don’t need an alibi because I didn’t do anything wrong,” Allie said with a smug smile. “Jay didn’t do anything, either. We were together all last night. He spent the night at my house. So the sheriff can go bother someone else and leave us alone. Jay will set Lulu Reilly right.”

That brought up an excellent question...

Just what was Jay inside telling Lulu right now?

“I loved her. I loved her for a long time.”

Jay Bradford was a man in mourning. He might not have been with Dana Cartwright anymore, but he was sad about her passing. His eyes were red-rimmed, and they had a faraway look in them as if he was remembering images from their past.

“And then you stopped?”

“It’s not that I stopped,” Jay explained. “It was that I had to move on. No matter what we felt for each other, we weren’t good together. We brought out the worst in one another. We couldn’t live together. We were just too different. It was sad, but we needed to stay apart for our own well-being.”

“Did you keep in touch? Talk now and then?”

“Sometimes, although there was nothing formal. If either of us had good news, we might call to let the other know. Dana was very close to my family, and I know they kept in touch, too.”

“What about last night at the sports bar?” Lulu asked. “What was going on there?”

Jay groaned and rubbed the back of his neck. He closed his eyes for a long moment before replying.

“It got all blown out of proportion. My sister got accepted to go back to school, and she told Dana a few days ago. We were both at the restaurant last night, and while Allie was in the ladies’ room, Dana stopped and talked to me about it. Just to say that she was really happy to hear about it. That’s all it was. Allie came back to the table, and she wasn’t happy to see Dana. She said something nasty, and I went after Dana to tell her to ignore Allie. Glen joined in, and told Dana that Allie was being a bitch. That’s all that happened.”

It was “almost” all that happened.

“I saw Allie come and pull you away,” Lulu said. “She said something else to Dana. What did she say? Because Dana looked like she was about to cry.”

“Allie didn’t mean it. She was just caught up in the moment.”



“What didn’t she mean?”

Jay didn’t want to tell her, that was easy to see. It made Lulu want to know even more what Allie had said to Dana last night.

“She didn’t mean it,” Jay repeated. “It all got blown up, and it sounds worse than it actually was.”

He wanted to dance around? This was murder. Lulu didn’t have the patience.

“Glen Foster is my next stop,” she warned him. “He heard what Allie said. He’ll tell me. And then you and I, and probably Allie, will have to have another conversation. We can do that, or you can just tell me. Either way, there were witnesses, Jay. People saw and heard what went on. I’ll find someone who will tell me.”

Jay’s head fell forward, and his fingers scraped through his hair, making it stand on end.

“She said that if Dana didn’t stay away from me, she’d kill her.”

The words were muffled, and Lulu couldn’t see his face, but she could make out the words just fine.

“Allie threatened Dana with bodily harm?”

“No,” Jay said as his head jerked up, his eyes wide with alarm. “No, she was just mad. She’d never hurt Dana. Once I calmed her down, everything was fine.”

“Where were you and Allie last night?”

“After dinner, we went to see a movie in Springwood. After, we went to her house,

and I stayed about an hour. I drove home about ten-thirty or so.”

“Can anyone corroborate that?”

“People saw us at the movie,” Jay replied. “But after that, no. I did call Glen when I got home if that helps.”

“And you stayed home? All night?” Lulu pressed. “No runs to the convenience store? No late-night wandering?”

“No, after talking to Glen, I went to bed. I had to be up early this morning.”

“And Allie? Did you talk to her after you left her house?”

“I sent her a text when I got home. She likes me to do that. And she sent me a ‘good morning’ text this morning about seven which I answered.”

Lulu would check with Jay’s neighbors as to when he came home. They might remember, especially if they were the type in everyone’s business. She’d also check for doorbell video.

For Jay and Allie. Right now, the girlfriend had to be on the top of Lulu’s suspect list. She’d threatened to kill Dana just hours before the actual murder.

Could it be this simple? Ask a few questions and get a suspect. It seemed almost too easy, but then she remembered her dad and uncles talking about how most criminals weren’t brain trusts.

Next stop? Allie.

But Jay wasn’t off the list yet. Despite acting reluctant, he’d thrown his girlfriend

under the bus when questioned. He'd folded pretty darn quickly, too.

Was Jay using his girlfriend to cover for himself? Or was he the innocent boyfriend caught in the middle of his ex-wife and his current partner?

Lulu didn't know what to expect when the girlfriend Allie stepped into the house, but the woman was already mad as hell. She hadn't even asked a question yet. Had Kai said something to her while he was waiting on the porch? Did he routinely piss people off wherever he went?

She'd have to keep an eye on him.

"I can't believe you talked to her," Allie berated Jay, tossing a bag of groceries on the kitchen table along with her purse and keys. "Are you crazy? She wants to put you in prison. That's what cops do. They twist your words all around until you're behind bars."

"I'm not looking to put innocent people behind bars," Lulu said, her tone firm. "What I am interested in is finding the truth."

"The truth?" Allie spat out. "I seriously doubt that."

"Honey, calm down," Jay said, reaching out to pat his girlfriend's shoulder, but she shrugged him off. "Lulu just asked me a few questions about Dana. That's it. She has a few questions for you, too. Just talk to her, and then we can all move on from this."

"Talk to her? I'm not talking to her," Allie replied, her voice going up an octave. "Not without my lawyer there. She wants to put you or me into prison for that slut. Who cares who killed her? I don't, and you shouldn't either."

What a sweetheart. A people-kind of person. What does she do for a living?

Foreclose on homes?

“You’re not helping yourself here,” Lulu said. “I only have a few questions. We don’t need this to become adversarial.”

“I don’t care,” Allie shot back, her face red with anger. “You need to leave him alone. You probably want him for yourself. I’ve heard about you. You’re not any different than Dana?—”

Jay managed to place his hand over his girlfriend’s mouth, effectively shutting down whatever was coming next. But Allie had already made her point and thrown down the gauntlet. This couldn’t be a friendly discussion. She wanted to do battle.

Okay, we can do that.

Jay looked mortified at Allie’s behavior, but Lulu didn’t hold him responsible in the least. This wasn’t his fault. Allie had made her choices, and this was what she wanted. She thought her remark would get under Lulu’s skin. She wanted to inflict a hurt.

In Lulu’s experience, when someone lashed out like that it meant they were hurting deep inside. Whether they hated themselves or whatever their psychological wounds were, they wanted company in their pain, afraid that someone might hurt them even more.

But just because she sympathized with Allie, didn’t mean that the woman was going to find her behavior a winner in this scenario. It only meant that Lulu wasn’t planning to get down to her level and go personal. She was going to be the professional in this situation.

“I’m so sorry, Lulu. Allie tell her you’re sorry. She doesn’t know what she’s saying.

She and I have both been so thrown by what's happened," Jay moaned. "Please don't listen to her. She just needs some quiet time to calm down."

"Absolutely," Lulu finally said after a long silence. She'd weighed her options and decided how to move forward. "I'll see both of you at nine tomorrow morning. Bring your attorneys, if you like. If you don't show up, a deputy will be sent to escort you. Do you have any questions?"

Allie opened her mouth, but Jay elbowed her and shook his head.

"No questions. We'll be there."

From the nasty expression on Allie's face, these two were about to have a big argument as soon as Lulu and Kai stepped out of the house.

But it did beg the question...just why was Allie so determined not to talk to the police? Did she have something to hide?

If she did, Lulu was going to find it.

Allie hadn't closed the front door fully, and Kai had heard it all.

Lulu should have bitch slapped that woman for saying what she did, but she'd remained calm and cool. Kai admired her self-control because he'd almost done it for her, but had held back since he didn't want to go to jail. And he had no doubts that Lulu would love putting him in handcuffs.

Stop with your dirty mind. Don't think about her doing that.

Clearly, he needed to get out more. Go on a date. Have sex. Thinking kinky thoughts about the new sheriff was a terrible idea. He didn't even really know her. Seeing one

another briefly during the summer didn't count toward any sort of friendship.

He hadn't socialized all that much since he'd moved to Harper, to be honest. He'd been busy settling in, decluttering his grandpa's house, making changes at the newspaper to perhaps make it at least break even. He didn't hold out much hope of it being hugely profitable. But he'd kept busy, ignoring any need for human companionship and contact. He'd told himself that it could come later. Later...when he had more time.

Was it later now? Was Lulu sashaying unexpectedly into his life a message from the universe?

We're putting this incredibly gorgeous and sexy woman in your path. What are you going to do about it?

For the moment, he wasn't going to do anything. Impulsively jumping into asking a woman out wasn't part of his personality, no matter how much he might wish it was. He was the cautious type, taking his time and surveying the landscape. He'd weigh his options, not rushing into any decisions.

And the majority of the time, that strategy had worked for him. It helped him at work and in business, not making crazy bonehead decisions on the spur of the moment. His friends and co-workers had called him "savvy and sharp", "intelligent", and "wise." They'd come to him for advice often, acknowledging his expertise. It wasn't a terrible way to live.

But it had also kept him from doing some things that, looking back, he'd wished he had. Opportunities didn't always last forever. They came and went, and if he didn't jump in time? They were gone, most never to return. He didn't like being the guy with regrets of the road not taken.

He'd told a buddy about his dilemma, and his friend had given him a short and succinct answer.

"Dude, your problem is you think too damn much. Relax and enjoy the ride."

Kai's friend wasn't wrong. His brain was difficult to turn off, if not impossible. It made sleep sometimes elusive, too.

Lulu turned out of Jay Bradford's neighborhood and headed toward town.

"You haven't said much."

"I'm wondering how you didn't smack some sense into her," he replied.

"Because I'm not that kind of cop. Or person. Besides, she already seemed over the top upset, and I didn't want to make it worse."

"I feel for Bradford. He's got his hands full with her. She seems...what's the word I'm looking for...paranoid? Yes, paranoid about his fidelity. Whether he's done anything for her to feel that way, I don't know."

"She's seeing boogeymen behind the couch," Lulu agreed with a smile. "I don't want her man, but she wasn't in the mood to hear that. But it makes you wonder what fantasies she's built in her head about Dana."

"She said she hated Dana when she and I were talking," Kai replied. "She didn't bother hiding it either. She told me that Dana had cheated on Jay with Glen Foster."

"There was a rumor around town about that, but I never saw any proof. There are rumors about a lot of things, and most of them don't amount to a pile of spit. Did she say anything else?"

“She said that she had an alibi. She and Jay spent the night at her house.”

“That’s interesting,” Lulu replied with a shake of her head. “Jay has a very different story. He said that he left Allie’s house about ten-thirty. He had to be up early for work.”

“Who do you believe?”

“At this moment? Neither of them. They could both be liars,” Lulu shot back. “I don’t believe an alibi until I can confirm it.”

“You’re a very cynical person, Lulu. Did anyone ever tell you that?”

“Not really. I think I’m just being a realistic investigator. I need evidence to prove someone is a killer - or that they’re not - so I’m looking for more than what someone said when I questioned them. I need facts. Provable facts.”

“Can I ask what else Bradford told you?”

“If I tell you, you can’t print it,” Lulu warned. “Because it’s inflammatory, and right now I don’t know what’s true and what’s not. I don’t want anyone’s life getting ruined because of this investigation.”

“Promise,” Kai said. “I won’t print it.”

“Jay said that Allie threatened Dana’s life. However,” she said with a hard tone. “I don’t know if he was telling the truth. He said she didn’t mean it, and it sounded like she might say stuff like that all the time. He also didn’t stonewall me much, almost immediately throwing his girlfriend to the wolves.”

“Are you the wolf in this scenario?”



“I am. Anyway, that’s why I want to talk to Allie. She needs to speak for herself. When she’s calmer.”

“Can you make her show up tomorrow for questioning?”

“I can make her be there, but I can’t make her answer any questions. She has the right to remain silent, and I respect that.”

Kai had the distinct feeling that Allie wasn’t going to cooperate in any way, shape, or form. But the woman did appear to have a strong motive and opportunity.

Was Dana killed because she was a romantic rival for Bradford’s affections? It was a theory that needed to be investigated.

“We’re here,” Lulu called out as she pushed open the door to Chase’s house. “Can we help?”

She and Henry were having dinner with her brother who had delusions of grandeur in the kitchen. He was pretty darn good, although she loved to give him a hard time about it.

He liked trying out new baking recipes for the coffeeshop, but now and then he liked to experiment with a savory dish. That’s where she and Henry came in. They were the guinea pigs. Luckily, there had only been a few times that Chase had made something inedible. Even he hadn’t been able to choke it down, so they’d all gone out for pizza instead.

“I’m in the kitchen,” Chase yelled. “Come join us.”

“Us?” Henry echoed. “Who else is here? I thought the rest of your family wasn’t coming tonight.”

“That’s what I thought, too.”

Chase now lived in their grandparents’ former home. Grandpa had died about five years ago, and Gran had passed on a few years later. Lulu’s dad and mom had said that it didn’t seem like Gran wanted to go on without her husband of more than sixty years.

There had been some arguments and tears about Chase taking over the home. He'd been adamantly against it, saying that the aunts and uncles should take it, and it would be disrespectful to live there. But Uncle Jason and his wife Aunt Sarah had moved to North Carolina about ten years ago to be closer to their grandkids, and Uncle Sam and Aunt Cindy only spent summers in Montana now. They spent the winters in Arizona, and they didn't want a larger home to maintain anyway. Her parents had their own house that they were extremely happy with, and they didn't want the hassle of moving.

Jason and Sarah had offered their home on the ranch to Lulu anytime she wanted to move back home. She'd taken them up on their offer, and was only waiting for furniture to be delivered so she could move in.

All of the family wanted someone living on the ranch even if they weren't actively working it. Since Lulu and Bennett had been living outside of Montana at the time, that meant Chase. He still hadn't been able to make many changes. Every time he tried, he'd get sentimental and change his mind. The both of them had spent so many wonderful times here with their grandparents.

Of course, now the ranch wasn't all that active. After Gran passed on, the family had leased the grazing rights to others when it had become clear that Sam and Jason were getting too old, and no one's child had stepped up to take over.

Henry placed his hand on Lulu's arm, pausing her progress to the kitchen.

"You don't think it's Bennett, do you? Did he finally show up?"

"I doubt it," Lulu replied. "Chase would have called to let me know."

"Unless it's a surprise."

“It would definitely be a surprise.”

She loved her older brother, but damn, he was no day at the beach. Chase always joked that Ben was born forty years old with a cup of coffee in one hand and a briefcase in the other.

When she walked into the kitchen to join Chase, she almost tripped over her own feet. The unexpected guest wasn't Ben. It was Kai Oliver.

And he looked good, too. He'd taken a shower since she'd last seen him, and his dark hair was slightly damp at the ends where it curled ever-so slightly. He was wearing jeans, but he'd changed his shirt from the light blue button-down from this morning to a red short-sleeved collared shirt. He was freshly shaved, as well, his square jaw free from the short stubble he'd sported only a few hours ago.

He looks better with a five o'clock shadow. No, stop looking at him. Stop thinking about how those whiskers would feel against my skin. Bad Lulu. Must not objectify the newspaper guy.

Was this some weird trick the universe was playing on her? Throwing her and Kai together constantly?

“Kai wanted to talk to me about you for his profile in the paper, so I invited him to dinner. He can ask all the questions he wants, plus he gets to see the Elvis room.”

“The Elvis room?” Kai asked, appearing confused.

He hadn't heard. He wouldn't be kept in the dark for long.

“You don't want to miss the Elvis room,” Henry said with a grin. “I love wandering around in there. I always see something I didn't notice before.”

Lulu's beloved grandparents had been huge fans of The King, collecting memorabilia and filling a room with it. They'd visited Graceland every year, often taking their grandkids including Lulu. She'd grown to cherish that time with her grandparents, and they'd kept it up even when one of her uncles or her dad had to do the driving for the trip.

The room had been the first thing that Chase had said that he would never in a million years touch when he moved in. Like the rest of the grandchildren, he and Lulu would often come across something Elvis-related and add it to the collection.

"You don't want to miss it," Lulu agreed. "It's a unique experience."

"I made pot roast," Chase announced, pulling a pan from the oven. "I've had it simmering all day. Plus, we have garlic mashed potatoes, green beans, gravy, and homemade rolls. Let's get the food on the table and dig in. I'm starved. Kai, once we sit down, you can ask all the questions you want."

Lulu wasn't all that sure she wanted to hear her brother answer questions about her. It felt...strange. She wasn't worried that Chase would say something bad about her. She wouldn't say anything negative about him, either. But she wasn't sure that Kai needed to know much more about her background other than she'd grown up here in Harper.

Frankly, I don't think I'm all that fascinating. What is he going to write about? Adventures in cow tipping?

To her relief, Kai didn't ask overly personal questions during the delicious meal. She could concentrate on enjoying the melt-in-the-mouth roast and fluffy potatoes without worry. He kept most of his queries general in nature such as what it was like growing up in a small town.

He hadn't asked the most obvious two questions yet, and they sort of hung in the air, right over the table where they were eating. Unspoken, but still there, making their presence known.

Did you always want to follow in your father's footsteps?

What was it like growing up with a father who was famous for helping catch not one, but two serial killers?

The latter question was usually the first out of someone's mouth when they realized who her father was. People who had read the articles in magazines or had seen documentaries on television. Everyone had ideas and theories of how they would have solved the cases, and what they would have done.

The former seemed like a simple question, but there was far too much of her personal life wrapped up in it to answer. She wasn't even sure she could put it into words if she tried.

"I've got these," Henry announced as he jumped up, his hands full with dishes. "You're chasing a killer, so you get out of dish duty tonight."

"I'll help," Chase replied with a teasing grin to Lulu. The little shit knew what he was doing. Younger brother stuff, meddling in her life affairs as usual. "Last time you tried to put my cast iron skillet in the dishwasher."

Chase had only been joking, but he didn't have much of a sense of humor about the skillet he'd been seasoning for almost a decade. Lulu made a point to never get within a foot of it. It was practically her brother's baby.

"I don't suppose you'd show me the Elvis room," Kai requested. "I think this is something I need to see."

“You do. Follow me.”

In the beginning, the Elvis room had been in a spare bedroom, but eventually, there was simply too much, and the grandparents had moved everything into the large “rec” room at the back of the house. Previously, that room held a pool table, television, and furniture the kids could beat to death with their friends, and no one would care. That was pared down and moved to the bedroom, and the Elvis memorabilia now had a place of pride and a wide-open space of its own.

“Holy...moley,” Kai breathed in when he crossed the threshold. “This is amazing.”

Lulu loved seeing the face of a person walking into the room for the first time. There was awe, amazement, and yes, a bit of amusement, too.

“Gran and Grandpa were serious collectors,” she explained. “They had Elvis collector contacts all over the world. There’s some really rare stuff in here.”

Kai moved slowly around the room from one display to the other, shaking his head in amazement. The collection was eclectic with record albums, autographed photos, mugs, candles, plates, jewelry, lamps, wall clocks, and that was only the beginning. Lulu’s personal favorite was the black velvet painting of Elvis hanging on the wall.

She wasn’t as huge a fan as her grandparents, but she had an Elvis playlist on her phone. It was especially fun on a road trip with Chase. They’d both sing at the top of their lungs.

“I’d love to write an article about this,” Kai said. “This is fascinating.”

“I’m not sure it would be news,” she replied ruefully. “Everyone within four counties knows that they collected, and they always let people come in that were interested in seeing it.”

Kai's expression turned horrified.

"They could have been robbed. Or worse."

"They believed in trusting people," Lulu said with a shrug. "Besides, Granddad had a shotgun, and even Gran knew how to use it. All my uncles had one, too, along with the ranch hands. A visitor with ill intentions could find themselves surrounded pretty darn quick. And in this county, I doubt they'd get far. My dad was the sheriff, after all. He would have dropped everything and gone after them. They wouldn't make it to Springwood."

"Still, there are valuables here. Isn't your brother afraid he might get robbed?"

Chase never seemed afraid of anything, and he made it a point to not worry about stuff too much.

"You'll have to ask him, but I think the answer would be no. He has a shotgun, too. But he did put in an alarm system when he moved here. He wanted to keep their collection safe."

"That sounds like a smart thing to do."

The conversation waned as Kai explored the record collection, leafing through the albums with a smile on his face.

"I remember this movie," he said with a chuckle, holding up a Blue Hawaii album. "It was on television, and my mom sat down to watch so I did, too. I liked it, although I can't say that I'm an Elvis fan on the level of your grandparents."

Kai placed the album back and moved on to a bookshelf of photos from their trips to Graceland.



“These are your grandparents? They look happy,” he observed. “And you were a pretty cute kid.”

“Oh please, I was in an awkward phase for many of those vacations.”

She’d had a particularly horrid summer when she was thirteen, flat-chested, and wore braces on her teeth.

“Naw, you look like a regular kid. And your grandparents and parents look like they’re having the time of their lives.”

“You’re right, they were. They adored each other. My grandparents were married for more than sixty years, same with my great-grandparents and the great-greats, too. My parents are looking to beat that record if they can. My dad used to say that he came from a long line of love. That’s what I like to describe it as. So much love. That’s why I won’t settle for just anyone or any relationship. I want one like my parents and grandparents. So, I’ll probably be single forever.”

Why on earth had she said that out loud? To him? All she needed was that quote to end up in the local paper. She was talking to him like they were friends, but they barely knew one another.

“I think...that’s wonderful,” Kai replied, his gaze on the photos. “My parents are divorced, but my mom seems very happy with my stepdad. Grandpa Mitch and Grandma Lois seemed happy, too. It was tough seeing him so lonely after she passed on.”

“I remember your grandma. She used to pass out cookies to the neighborhood kids. Her peanut butter blossoms were legendary.”

“They were,” he agreed with a smile. “But my favorite was her oatmeal with

chocolate chips. The absolute best. I'm still trying to find one even half as good."

"I'm sorry about your parents," Lulu said. "I didn't realize they were divorced."

"It's a sad tale of woe," Kai said with a chuckle. "A story of teenage rebellion, not unlike Romeo and Juliet, except that six people didn't die."

"Is it rude of me to say that I now kind of want to hear it?"

"I don't have a problem telling you the story," Kai said. "It's all water under the bridge now."

"Why don't we sit down?" Lulu offered. "I'm all ears."

In addition to being an avid people watcher, she also loved to hear family stories. And there was something about this man in particular that made her want to know more about him.

Don't think about the implications of that.

They settled on a loveseat with several Elvis pillows depicting his 1968 comeback special. His black leather outfit look was one of her favorites.

"My mom was a rebellious teenager. Sneaking out at night, running around with boys, smoking and drinking. That sort of thing. Her parents sent her to boarding school because of that, but according to her, all it did was teach her new ways to torture her parents. During her senior year Spring Break trip with her family and their friends, she met my dad in Palm Beach. He was visiting his aunt and uncle who lived near the beach. They spent an idyllic week together falling in love. By the time the break ended, they were convinced that they were soulmates. They continued to stay in touch by writing letters. They were crazy about one another."

Lulu cleared her throat uncomfortably as he described his mother's youth. It sounded rather familiar, although, she had never fallen in love like that. If anything, she'd found most boys her age boring as hell.

I liked my men older and more problematic.

“Right after her high school graduation ceremony, Mom ran off with my dad and got married. He was from here in Harper, and just as wild and rebellious as she was, from what I'm told. Dad drove his dilapidated Honda Civic all the way to Boston to marry her.”

“Anyway, my mom's parents flipped their lids, of course. They'd hoped that she might straighten up after graduating and maybe get a job. They didn't hold out any hope for college, but they thought she might find work in an office or something like that. By the time, my parents returned from their extended honeymoon backpacking around Europe she was pregnant with me. She hadn't even turned nineteen yet. Dad's parents, Mitch and Lois, were pretty chill about it all. As they said, it had happened so being mad about it wasn't going to do anything. But as you can imagine, my mom's parents were not thrilled. There was estrangement between them for years.”

“Something, something, you're ruining your life. Was that how it went?” Lulu asked.

She'd heard that from her mom and dad a time or two.

Do you want to ruin your life? Because this is how you ruin your life. Don't you care about your future?

If she'd been honest with her parents, and what teenage girl ever was, she would have answered that she didn't care much about her future. It wasn't even on her mind back then. She'd been busy reveling in living in the moment, happy to dig deep into the here and now.

It was only later as she'd grown more mature that she'd thought about tomorrow. But she was also aware that looking too much into the future often kept a person from enjoying the present. She didn't want to go back to who she was, but she didn't want to be that either. There had to be some sort of happy medium, right?

Maybe that was the secret to life - finding that balance.

"Pretty much," Kai agreed. "Both sets of parents tried to convince them to settle down and get jobs now that I was on the way, but my mom and dad had a different idea of how to live life. They took off, and I didn't meet either side of grandparents until I was six. By then, my mother had left my dad and had to come back home. Dad had started drinking way too much, and eventually, she didn't think it was safe for me to be around him. From what she said, it was a humbling experience. She had to admit that her plan for life had basically failed. She was so humiliated. It shaped the way that she parented me. She actively discouraged me from ever taking chances, doing anything outside of convention."

Despite being horrified by some of Lulu's antics, she gave her parents a great deal of credit because they could have done the same. But they hadn't, especially her mother. Presley Reilly had always been Lulu's biggest cheerleader, telling her to keep trying things to figure out what she wanted to do and be.

"Is she still like that?"

"Yes and no," Kai laughed. "Obviously, I'm a grown man so she doesn't say much. She was upset when I quit my law career to come out here and run Grandad's newspaper. She wasn't the biggest fan of my paternal grandparents to begin with. Her parents always called them hippies, and she wasn't close with them, no matter how hard they tried. But she never stopped me from coming here in the summer to visit, though. She wanted us to be close, even after my dad died."

“Hippies?” Lulu giggled. “Mitch and Lois were hippies?”

“As far as my uptight, maternal grandparents were concerned...yes. They were good people, but they saw life one way and only one way.”

“Their way or the highway?”

“That sums it up well,” Kai replied. “They rarely ever spoke about the seven years my mom was traveling around with my dad, and they sure as hell never said my dad’s name. Not once. When he passed away from drinking too much, I heard them arguing with her about going to his funeral. They said she shouldn’t go, and that he didn’t deserve it.”

“She said that she needed to take me so I could say goodbye and get closure. That it would be wrong not to. It was one of the few times she stood up to them. They even sort of picked out her second husband, although they truly do seem in love and happy together. But I always got the feeling that there was a bit of sadness inside of her. I think she missed my dad and their adventures together.”

“But she’d never admit that?”

“Bingo. Not in a million years. I get why she is the way she is. I understand it. And she’s not unhappy. She has a great life.”

“Maybe you should take her ziplining or something,” Lulu suggested. “Or book one of those vacations where you explore uninhabited islands.”

“If she doesn’t have room service, she’s not going. But I wouldn’t mind trying ziplining. Have you ever been?”

“No, but I think it would be fun. There’s just one little problem, though,” Lulu said.

“I’m afraid of heights. Not just a little either. I’m terrified. A friend did it though, and she’s scared, too. She told me she just didn’t look down.”

“Interesting advice. Don’t look down. I’m not afraid of heights.”

“Then you should go,” Lulu urged. “Take a chance.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Kai replied, a wistful tone in his voice. “But when you’ve been raised to never do that... It simply doesn’t come naturally. I find myself looking back at situations wondering what would have happened if I’d followed that little voice in my head.”

“It depends. What does that voice say? Knock over a bank? Or just take the road less traveled?”

“It’s never told me to rob a bank, but it has told me to step forward. Go on that cross-country road trip with my buddies, take that job that sounds interesting but isn’t prestigious, kiss that girl in the moonlight.”

Lulu didn’t want to think about Kai kissing other women under the moon or any other place. The thought of him kissing her had her cheeks growing warm along with a few other places farther south. She shifted on the cushion to hide her reaction and tried to change the subject. Quickly.

“Being spontaneous isn’t everything, I can assure you,” she said. “There are many other wonderful qualities that I’m sure you possess.”

Personally, she’d like to be a tad less impulsive. She was better about it these days, but now and then... Funny how she’d like to be more like Kai, and he wanted to be more like her.

“Well, I am extremely organized,” Kai responded. “That’s always been a plus for school and then my career. I’m also good with people and tough negotiations.”

“I’ll take you with me when I buy my next car,” Lulu said. “Wait, I think I have an idea. How would you like to help me put together my murder board? I could use someone with your organizational skills.”

Once again, she wanted to slap herself on the forehead. Why was she inviting Kai even more into this investigation?

Because you want him here. Admit it.

“I don’t know what that is, but it sounds like something I want to be a part of. Count me in. When? I can free up my schedule tomorrow.”

“Kai, what are you doing tonight?”

If she was going to be spontaneous and stupid, she might as well get it over with quickly.

Lulu was full of surprises, and his enthusiastic acceptance of her invitation had surprised him as well. If he was going to be spontaneous, there was no better time than now to do it. He was glad he'd said yes.

They'd thanked Chase for dinner and headed back to Lulu's apartment over the sheriff's station. Henry had made a lame excuse about going to see a friend, and he'd be back later. Kai had a feeling the guy wanted to give him and Lulu some time alone. He didn't need to, though. It wasn't like that with Lulu.

Admit it. You've thought about kissing her. When you mentioned kissing a girl in the moonlight, you were thinking about her.

The fact was, the more time Kai spent with Lulu, the more he was attracted to her. It wasn't just that she was gorgeous - which she was - it was more. She was more. More funny, more intelligent, more friendly, more kind, more intuitive, more enjoyable.

As a child, he'd only known her one way. She was the slightly out-of-control Lulu Reilly who never backed down from a dare. All grown up, she was still unpredictable, but not in a dangerous sort of way.

He hadn't come back to Harper intending to fall for anyone. He wasn't against the idea, but he had a great deal of work ahead of him to make the newspaper viable. He'd assumed that he'd concentrate on that goal before possibly adding a romantic relationship to his life.



Here I go again. Overthinking situations. Maybe I should sit back and see what happens.

She'd poured each of them a glass of ginger ale, ruefully explaining that she tried not to drink when she was going to be on duty the next day. He'd agreed that was a good plan and that he was fine with a soft drink.

"My dad had this whiteboard in the storage room," Lulu said, propping it on the arms of an overstuffed chair. "I don't know if he forgot about it, or that maybe he just wasn't a visual person. But I am, so I dragged it up here. I just didn't realize that I'd need it so soon. It's magnetic, so I ordered some of these magnets that will hold pictures and things up on the board."

She also had three different colors of markers - green for things that they were sure about, blue for not so sure, and red for not sure at all or known lies.

It looks like Lulu was organized, too.

"I'm going to put Dana's photo right here in the middle," Lulu said, placing the picture in the center of the board. "Now, who do we have as possible suspects? Even if I haven't talked to them yet. I'm going to be busy tomorrow with more interviews."

"Her ex-husband, Jay Bradford," Kai offered. "And let's not forget his girlfriend, Allie. She didn't like Dana and even threatened her life."

"She did," Lulu agreed. "And I'm going to mark their alibis in red because we know one or both of them are lying. I think we also need to add in Glen Foster. Not because I think he's a killer, but because I need to talk to him about what Dana and Jay were discussing the night before she died. At this point, he has information we need."

"There are rumors about Glen and Dana," Kai reminded her. "We need to talk to him

about that, too.”

“And also, the mysterious boyfriend,” Lulu said, placing a paper with a large question mark on the board. “If she was seeing someone, we need to find out who it was and talk to them.”

“What else do we know?” Kai asked. “Can we say that she probably knew her attacker since it happened in her garage, and there is no sign of a struggle?”

“I’m not sure we can say that definitively yet,” Lulu replied. “They could have snuck up behind her. I do think it’s more likely that she knew them, but I’m not ready to hang my hat on that. Not yet.”

“Man or woman?” Kai challenged. “You were leaning toward a man because they would have had to move a dead body. Are you still thinking that way? Because we have a woman on the board lying about her alibi.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Lulu sighed. “I still think it would be difficult for Allie to move Dana’s body to the lake. Not impossible, but damn difficult. Plus, we didn’t find any drag marks in the garage or driveway, only drops. To me, that means Dana was carried.”

“So...a man?”

“Or a man helping a woman,” Lulu replied. “What if Allie killed Dana, realized what she’d done?—”

“And called Jay for help,” Kai jumped in. “I see where you’re going with this. That’s a possibility.”

“There’s a huge problem with my theory though,” Lulu pointed out. “If they were in

it together, you'd think they would have taken five minutes and got their stories straight. They didn't do that."

"They could be terrible criminals," Kai suggested. "Frantic about what Allie had done, still in a state of shock. If it wasn't murder in cold blood, they might not have thought about syncing their alibis. I doubt I'd be an effective killer."

"I think you'd be good at it," Lulu said with a shake of her head. "You're organized, and you think things through. You're detail-oriented. Not that I'm saying you have killer instincts or anything. I don't think you'd kill anyone, but if you decided to, I think you'd probably have an excellent shot at getting away with it."

"I'm going to take that as a compliment because I think you meant it as one," he replied with a laugh. "I'm not a killer, but I could be a good one. That's...kind of nice in a weird way. Sort of like, I'm not a race car driver, but if I put my mind to it, I could be a good one."

"A race car driver?" Lulu said, rolling her eyes. "Now I don't know about that. That might be a stretch."

"Would you be a good killer?"

Why on earth did he ask that? What a stupid question. What was it about this woman that made him forget how to pause his mouth until his brain caught up?

"Is this on the record or off?" she joked.

"Definitely off."

"Then, yes. There's a high probability I'd get away with it. Remember, I've studied murders since I was a kid, and I've made investigating murders my job. I could be

overconfident. But the fact is, with modern forensics and investigation tools, still only about half of murders are solved. The other half go cold. Stranger murders are even harder to solve.”

“Do you think Dana was killed by a stranger?”

“No, I don’t. I think she was killed by someone she knew. Do you think she was killed by a stranger?”

Did he? He wasn’t sure. He’d never investigated a murder before, unless he counted one of the mystery books he liked to read when he had some free time.

“I don’t know,” he replied. “I haven’t ruled it out in my head. I do agree that it’s not the most likely explanation. We would be saying that a stranger was driving around, came upon the long driveway to Dana’s house, decided to turn down it and saw the house, decided to kill the person in the house, and then waited until she came out to the garage and hit her over the head. Then he or she picked her up and transported her to a second location instead of leaving her body at the house and taking that time to get far away from the crime scene. It does seem far-fetched when I say it out loud.”

“If it was some sort of serial killer, he might have picked Dana out as a victim days or even weeks ago. He may have seen her in town, or at the bar she worked at,” Lulu explained. “He may have followed her for a few days to see her routine. He could have seen that she lived in a remote area, and began to plan how he would do it. Imagining it. Fantasizing about it. Then he gets the rush of killing, but the build-up just starts all over again with a fresh victim.”

“Jesus, that sounds horrifying,” Kai groaned. “That’s hunting a human being like an animal.”

“That’s exactly what it is, but I don’t think that’s what happened here,” Lulu replied.

“My gut is telling me that it was someone she knew. Someone she trusted.”

“Maybe we should list out everyone Dana would have trusted,” Kai suggested.

“Or should have trusted,” Lulu replied. “I want to talk to her friends about her relationship with her family. And I want to talk to her family - separately - about her relationship with her friends and co-workers. Tomorrow, I need to go to the bar where she worked. Maybe she was dating one of the customers but keeping it quiet.”

“We have too many suspects,” Kai said. “Too many unanswered questions.”

“It’s still early in the investigation,” Lulu reminded him, placing her marker on the end table. “We haven’t talked to everyone of interest yet. Hopefully, by the end of tomorrow, we’ll have a better idea of who is lying to us, and who is telling the truth.”

“What if everyone is lying to us?”

“Then we’re trapped in *Murder on the Orient Express* by Agatha Christie.” Lulu glanced at her watch. “I know I sound a little crazy, but I don’t suppose you’d want to go for a walk? I have too much pent-up energy, and I need to walk around to sort out my thoughts. If you don’t, it’s fine. I’ll just go. But if you do go, I’ll make hot chocolate afterward.”

The temperature had dropped since the sun went down and was now firmly in shiver your ass off territory. The last thing he wanted to do was go outside and freeze to death, even if it was with a woman as beautiful and intriguing as Lulu Reilly.

“Sure, that sounds like fun.”

The words tumbled out of his mouth without warning. He’d wanted to be more impulsive, and now here he was. They could put on his tombstone that he died of

frostbite and spontaneity.

But it meant he had more time with Lulu.

It just might be worth it.

Lulu was in disbelief that Kai had agreed to walk with her in the freezing cold. She could see their breath misting as they trudged along the dark quiet streets of the downtown area. They were both bundled up in their coats, plus Lulu was wearing gloves and a scarf. She didn't mind the cold so much, and it always helped clear her head when too many thoughts were clouding it.

She didn't have a clue as to how she was going to fall asleep tonight. Images floated in and out of her mind as she pictured Dana's last day alive. That was something she still needed to put together - the total timeline of the last twenty-four hours for their victim.

"It's a little chilly out here," Kai said, his hands shoved in his pockets.

He wasn't dressed well for the temperature. The coat didn't look warm enough, and his hands had to be about to drop his fingers.

"You moved here from Los Angeles?"

"I did, why?"

"I'm guessing it doesn't get cold there?"

She heard his chuckle and saw another plume of mist from his breath.

"It does, but not often and not like this. Plus, I only ever visited my grandparents in

the summer. For some reason, I sort of blocked out about how cold it could get here in Montana. This cold is colder, if you know what I mean. I keep reminding myself to get some gloves and a better coat, but I get busy and forget.”

“We can go back inside,” she offered, feeling guilty that he was so cold. “I can think inside.”

“It’s fine,” he assured her. “We’re not walking to Denver. It will be okay.”

She didn’t believe him for a second. He even sounded cold.

Reaching out her hand, she captured his when he momentarily pulled it from his pocket.

“What you need is body heat.”

After the words came out, she realized she’d just said something rather provocative in nature. Yet, her statement was true. The heat of another body would warm him up.

I kind of want that body to be me.

The feeling had been growing all day. Wanting to spend more time with him. Wanting to hear what he had to say about any and all subjects. Wanting to know all the little details about his life.

She recognized the signs. She had all the symptoms.

She was starting to fall for Kai Oliver.

It wasn’t a shock. He was the kind of guy that she found attractive. Quiet, thoughtful, intelligent, with a quirky sense of humor. It didn’t hurt that he was sexy as all hell

either. Those silver-blue eyes ought to be illegal in all fifty states.

Don't get me started on the dimple in his right cheek when he smiles.

She'd never been the shrinking violet type when it came to her love life. She didn't play games or hard to get. She'd simply let the guy know she was interested, putting the ball in their court. If they followed through, it was good. If they weren't interested, that was okay, too. It might smart for a little while, but she was a grown woman. Not every man was going to want to be with her.

Lulu had been so lost in her thoughts that she hadn't realized they'd come to a halt on the sidewalk. Kai had turned toward her, so they were looking into one another's eyes. It was hard to make out his expression in the dim light of the moon, but she could feel the warmth of his gaze and the heat emanating from his body that was now mere inches from her own.

A tension had grown between them, but it wasn't a wall pushing them apart. If anything, it was a force pushing them closer together. She could feel her body swaying towards his, and then their lips brushing together as soft as the flutter of a butterfly's wings.

His arms slid around her, pulling her closer so that she was pressed against the hard muscles of his frame. He kissed her again, deepening more this time until she forgot that they were standing on a public sidewalk in the middle of town where anyone could see them.

Lost in the maelstrom of emotions, Lulu didn't care if anyone saw them. The entire world had ceased to exist, and it was just the two of them alone. His lips, his arms, the fire that had been slowly building between them and would surely explode if they gave it free rein.



Of course, Kai was the first one to come to his senses. He backed away as if shocked by his own behavior, his fingers raking through his hair. He seemed to be trying to say something, but no words came out.

I've rendered him speechless. Is that good or bad?

"I'm sorry," he finally said, his voice raspy in the cold. "I don't know what I was thinking."

Well, shit. She didn't want him to be sorry. She wanted him to want to do it again.

He took a few steps away from her, turning so she was looking at his back. For a moment, she thought he was simply going to walk away without saying anything else. Her entire body was on fire for this guy, and he didn't feel the same way.

Crushing. That's how it felt. If there'd been a convenient hole that opened up in the sidewalk, she would have happily hidden in it.

But then he whirled around and strode back to her, his hands gripping her arms. Not painfully, but solid. She couldn't move away, but dammit, she didn't want to.

"No, that's not true. I'm not fucking sorry. I wanted to kiss you, and I'm not sorry that I did it. I'm only sorry if you think I'm a jerk and want to kick me in the balls for being forward. But for once, I followed my instincts because I desperately wanted to kiss you. I hope that you wanted it, too."

Lulu could feel the smile on her face, her cheeks stiff from the frigid temperatures outside. Yet, she was warm on the inside, her abdomen fizzing with bubbly champagne.

"I don't want to kick you in the balls."

“That’s good.”

He leaned down and brushed his lips across hers again. She could feel the tingle all the way to her toes.

“And I did want you to kiss me.”

“That’s good, too. Very good.”

It was good, except that they hadn’t moved from the spot on the sidewalk. They were still standing like statues in the cold.

“Kai, take me home.” She reached up and traced his jaw with her fingertips. She could see her hand trembling visibly. Could he read on her face how much she wanted him? She could feel his need without him having to say a word. “We have to get warm.”

Or hot. She knew what they could do to chase the cold away.

Spontaneity didn’t have to be a bad thing.

Kai Oliver wasn’t what she’d planned, but there was no way she was walking away from him tonight.

She’d worry about tomorrow in the morning.

They had rushed back to the apartment, pretending to the deputy on duty in the station that the reason they'd hurried back was the dropping temperatures and not their heated desire. Luckily, he'd been too busy bingeing a show on Netflix to notice anything about them. It was turning out to be another boring, quiet night in Harper.

Except for Lulu's bedroom.

Once inside her apartment, she'd thought about stripping Kai's clothes off in the living room but then had a brief moment of sanity. If Henry came home, she didn't want to give him an eyeful of two buck-naked people doing naughty things to one another. He was a cool dude, but given their brother-and-sister relationship, it wouldn't be pleasant for either of them to see the other engaged in sex.

Especially the really dirty kind, which she was hoping to have tonight.

Stumbling into her bedroom, Lulu shrugged her coat off while Kai did the same, tossing them carelessly on the floor. She ought to be freezing from their walk, but instead she was steaming hot, wanting to shed her clothes as quickly as possible to get some relief.

Kai must have felt the same, because his fingers were working at the buttons of his shirt before practically tearing it off in his haste.

"Easy," she said, reaching for the button on his jeans. "I don't want you to rip anything. We'll get there. I promise."

It was a promise she intended to keep.

Clothes were discarded without a second thought, and they fell onto her bed, kissing and exploring one another's bodies. She was fascinated by how his skin felt under her palms, so different from herself, rougher and warmer. She loved how she could hear his swiftly indrawn breath when her fingertips brushed against him, already hard and ready.

His own questing fingers were busy cataloging her sighs and moans when he kissed or caressed an especially sensitive spot. His hands left a trail of fire wherever they went, amping up her own arousal until she thought she might scream from the overwhelming pleasure.

Her abdomen tightened as he pushed her already damp thighs apart and traced a pattern on the quivering flesh with his tongue. He continued his travels lazily, taking his sweet time despite her pleas.

"Now, Kai," she whispered, her voice rough with need. "Now."

Not waiting for him to react or reply, she pushed at his shoulder so that she could roll him onto his back. He didn't protest in the least, a grin spreading on his far too handsome face. He raised his arms and pillowed his hands under his head, making himself quite comfortable.

"Tell me what you need," Kai said. "I'll make sure you get it."

"Too much talk," Lulu said, running her hands up and down his muscled torso before cupping him in her hands, drawing a tortured groan from his lips.

The first time with someone new was always a bit awkward.

Should I move my leg there? Should I play it cool? What if he thinks I'm a freak, and not the good kind?

With Kai, Lulu didn't feel the pressure to be someone she wasn't. She didn't muffle her moans of pleasure, or even worse, pretend that she was feeling something that she wasn't to bolster his ego. He wasn't afraid to change up what he was doing based on her reactions, and she didn't play orgasm games trying to win an Oscar for best actress while performing in a bedroom scene.

When they came together, it was tentative at first. Bracing her hands on his chest, she moved experimentally, watching his reactions when she swayed her hips to the left, then to the right, and back again.

Their breathing grew more ragged as they found the tempo that was going to launch them into the stars. Their groans and moans filled the steamy room, as X-rated shadows mimicked their movements on the wall with the moonlight peeking through the drapes.

The scent of sex hung heavy in the air as they drove closer to the edge of the cliff, just suspended there for what seemed like forever but was probably only seconds. The plunge was imminent, and she held her breath as she waited, the roaring in her ears sounding like a freight train in her tiny apartment. Everything froze for that split second, the world ceasing to exist outside of this room and this bed. She tried to hold on to that delicious feeling of exquisite pleasure just a moment longer, but the inevitable climax was even sweeter.

Clutching Kai's shoulders, she surrendered to her orgasm, riding each wave until she was wrung out from the pleasure. His own orgasm had hit him as well, and they clung together afterward, fidgeting in the sheets until they found the perfect position - Kai's larger frame spooning her, his arms wrapped protectively around her body.

“You pack a punch,” he said softly into her ear, his breath warm on her cheek.

A shiver ran through her, and she chuckled at his praise.

“You, too. We might have to do this again.”

The two of them just might be on to something here. Was this simply a one-night stand? Or the beginning of a...relationship?

Lulu was making coffee in the kitchen the next morning when the door swung open, and Henry walked in. He closed it behind him and gave her a look practically daring her to ask where he’d been all night.

They’d been friends for too long to wait until he’d double-dog dared her.

“I was worried about you.”

“You know I can take care of myself.”

She did know that. Henry was always overprepared for any situation.

“Okay, let’s say that I was wondering where you were,” Lulu replied. “Does that sound better?”

“Yes.” Henry sat down at the tiny kitchen table, playing with the keys in his hand. “I was with Lisa.”

Lisa? From the sports bar?

“You were with Lisa all night? I guess we were right. She does like you.”

Henry wasn't smiling or laughing. He just sat there, staring at his keys and making them jingle every few seconds.

"You know, for a guy who spent the night with a beautiful woman, you don't seem all that happy. Was it weird or something? Is she into something awful?"

Henry rolled his eyes and shook his head.

"No, it was not weird or awful. She's not into anything bizarre. We had a nice night. She's a terrific woman. Nice, funny, intelligent. She's going to school to become an actuarial."

The coffee finished, and Lulu poured two cups, sliding one in front of Henry.

"Have you told your face that you had a nice time and liked her? Because I don't think it knows. You look miserable."

"I'm thinking of backing off."

"Henry," Lulu sighed, knowing exactly where this was going. They'd been down this road before. "If you tell her, she might understand."

Henry didn't have time to respond, however, when Kai strode out of the bedroom while pulling on his shirt. His hair was damp from his shower, and he smelled amazing even from a few feet away. He stopped abruptly when he saw Henry, still dressed in the clothes from last night, sitting at the table.

"Good morning," Kai said, his gaze darting back and forth between Lulu and Henry.

It appeared that he didn't quite know what to say. It had suddenly become rather awkward.

“You were worried about me?” Henry asked, his face lit up with a grin. “Right. I doubt you gave me a second thought. Hey, Kai. Nice to see you. Let’s not let it get weird, okay? No judgments. I just came from a woman’s house, too.”

Kai’s shoulders relaxed, and he pointed to the coffee pot.

“That sounds like a good plan. We’re all adults here. I don’t suppose I could get a cup of that?”

“You can,” Lulu said. “And then you can help me talk Henry out of doing something stupid.”

“What does Henry want to do?”

“I can speak for myself,” Henry said with an exasperated sigh. “I went out with Lisa last night. As you can see, we got along great. One thing led to another. Anyway, I may not be cut out for a relationship with...a human being. I have issues. Lots of them. Did you tell him?”

That question was directed at Lulu who shook her head.

“It’s your story to tell. Not mine.”

“Maybe you and I can go out for a couple of beers, and I’ll tell you the more detailed version,” Henry said to Kai. “But the short version is that I’m pretty fucked up from what happened in my childhood. I was taken hostage by a kidnapper. A family friend, no less. To this day, you might say I haven’t worked through all the issues this episode left me. I like Lisa a lot, and I don’t want her to have to deal with my fucking baggage. She’s too nice a person for that.”

Kai glanced at Lulu, his brow raised, before turning back to Henry.



“I didn’t hear you ask for any advice so I’m just going to shut the fuck up.”

“Henry and I have a pact where we don’t wait to be asked. We just tell each other what we think. It was his idea,” Lulu said, shaking a spoon at her best friend. She loved him like a brother, but sometimes he acted like an idiot. Today was one of those days. “Henry, you are one of the smartest people I know, but you’re making a big mistake. I don’t want you to be alone in life. You deserve to be loved.”

“Are you planning to ditch me?” Henry joked. “Because I have you.”

She didn’t want to say it out loud. She didn’t want to remind him that they were still young, but someday, she might get married and have kids. She’d be busy working and parenting. She’d seen her own mom and dad juggling kids, jobs, family, and friends. It wasn’t easy, and there was always someone who was getting neglected at some point.

From his sad expression, he knew what she hadn’t wanted to say. It was the elephant in the room as they each grew older with more and more responsibilities.

“You’ll always have me, but you need your own person,” Lulu pointed out. “You need a partner in life. Lisa is a lovely person. If you told her, I’m sure she’d understand.”

“I’ll eventually run her off,” Henry said. “She’ll get tired of me being well-armed, or that I scream when I sleep sometimes. When I have a bad day and don’t want to leave the house, she won’t like that. She’ll start to resent me.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Lulu replied. “Maybe she has her own issues that we don’t know about. Hell, maybe she screams in her sleep even louder than you do. You don’t know. And you won’t know unless you give it a chance.”

The frustration in her tone was evident, and she wasn't trying to hide it. She'd seen this happen half a dozen times. The outcome was always the same - Henry was unhappy and moped around for months, and the poor girl involved was confused as hell as to what she did wrong. The last time, Lulu had forced Henry to tell the woman so she wouldn't blame herself.

"What do you think, Kai?" Henry asked. "You might as well dive on in here and give your own opinion."

"I don't think I know you well enough to give any life advice," Kai said with a shake of his head.

"That's why your advice might even be better," Henry argued. "Because you're not biased in any direction. You don't know me well, and it sounds like you don't know Lisa well either since you haven't lived in Harper very long. You're standing outside the situation and looking at it from a stranger's point of view. I'd like to hear what you have to say."

Kai didn't make eye contact with Lulu, instead taking a long drink from his coffee. He settled into a chair at the table while she squirmed, waiting to hear what he was going to say. She'd been pushing Henry to get out there more, and Kai might just tell him that she was crazy and not to listen to a word she had to say.

Fair enough. She was well aware that she might be pushy and wrong. It was simply that she didn't want Henry to live half a life because he thought something was wrong with him. He wasn't broken or defective. He was a good and wonderful human being who deserved to have so much more in his life. He was just afraid of rejection.

Aren't we all? It's a normal human response, especially after what he's been through.

"I think," Kai replied slowly and carefully, his expression sober. "I think that I

understand why you might not want to put yourself out there. You're probably right that many people wouldn't want to deal with whatever baggage that you have. I don't know all the details of your situation, but it sounds like it was traumatic as hell."

Times a hundred and then add ten.

"But sometimes a person needs to step out of their comfort zone and take a chance," Kai went on. "I took a huge chance quitting my job and moving here to take over my grandpa's newspaper. I think that's worked out pretty well. I'm a hell of a lot happier now than I was a year ago. I also recently took a huge chance, and I'm glad that I did."

Kai was looking at Lulu when he said the last part. She could feel the heat in her cheeks, but she smiled back at him. She was glad that they'd both taken that chance. It was good to think ahead, but sometimes a person needed to get some courage and just...jump.

If it didn't work out with Kai, at least she'd tried. She didn't want to be one of those people that had lots of regrets about things they didn't do and chances they didn't take.

"So, you think I should take a chance with Lisa?" Henry asked. "That I'm making this decision from my comfort zone."

"Only you can answer that question," Kai replied. "I'm just giving you my take on it. If you really like this woman, tell her. Tell her that you're imperfect, that you have that baggage you talked about. And then let her make her own decision. Don't make it for her."

"I'll think about it," Henry announced, draining his coffee cup. "You've given me something to think about. I do like Lisa, but I'd never want to be a burden on

anyone.”

“You are not a burden,” Lulu exclaimed. “You have a few issues. We all do.”

“Wait until you find out what they are,” Henry joked to Kai. “She’s a barrel of monkeys to live with, but she hogs the bathroom. And don’t even get me started about her long hair in the shower drain. It clogs it, you know.”

“Okay, that’s enough. Who wants scrambled eggs and toast? I have interviews at nine so let’s get going.”

It was about time to change the subject. She didn’t need Kai wondering about the pipes in her bathroom. She could snake her own drain. She didn’t need a man to do it.

She could handle her own business, and that included finding Dana’s killer. She had another jam-packed day of interviewing people in Dana’s life. The more she knew about the victim, the better chance she had of catching a murderer.

First up, the ex-husband Jay and his girlfriend Allie.

Allie might not have been able to pull this off alone but with Jay’s help?

They were at the top of her list of suspects.

Deputy Steve handed Lulu a folder when she walked into her office, coffee cup in hand. Henry was upstairs getting started on his own job, and Kai had snuck out the back entrance just as the sun was coming up.

In a way, it was silly to worry about being the topic of gossip. The good people of Harper were going to realize she and Kai were a couple eventually. If this relationship had any legs, and Lulu hoped it did, everyone was going to know about it without her having to say a word. It was simply how small towns worked. Everyone from the butcher to the hairdresser to the mailman were going to have an opinion about Lulu and Kai together.

“What’s this?” she asked Steve as he exited her office.

“Medical examiner’s report on Dana.”

Lulu hadn’t expected it until tomorrow, but she was glad to see it today. She’d have time to look it over before Jay and Allie arrived.

Theoretically...

They didn’t have to come here. They could refuse to be interviewed. Right now, she thought the odds were about sixty-forty and not in her favor.

If they didn’t show, she’d take the opportunity to go talk to Glen Foster about that night in the sports bar.

“Did you look at it?”

“Nope, it just arrived a few minutes ago,” Steve said. “Now I’m headed to the coffee shop to pick up some donuts. Do you have a preference?”

Chase always had a box of pastries and donuts for the sheriff’s station ready for pick up every morning. Their mom had started the tradition years ago for their dad, and Chase had taken it up when he took over.

“Cinnamon roll or chocolate frosted donut. Chase knows what I like. I’m not picky.”

They didn’t need to order coffee, too. Lulu’s mom had put a fancy coffee machine in the sheriff’s station practically the first week she’d started working here, and it had been upgraded a few times. It was far superior to the old drip machine Lulu had in the apartment upstairs. She’d finish her first cup of the day and then get a good one from the machine.

Steve closed the door behind him, leaving Lulu alone with the file. She settled at her desk and flipped it open, perusing the report. It mostly confirmed what Lulu had observed at the scene.

Dana had died from blunt force trauma to the head, possibly from a thin pipe. There hadn’t been any alcohol or drugs in her system.

Lulu had to read the next line on the report twice. She read it a third time just to make sure. Now...this was a surprise. She hadn’t expected this at all.

Dana Cartwright had been eight weeks pregnant. Pregnant.

That meant there certainly was a man in her life.

A man that their little town of Harper didn't seem to know about which was strange. She'd already admitted to herself that everyone would find out about her and Kai, probably within days if not a few weeks.

Yet somehow, Dana and her lover had kept their relationship under wraps for at least two months. That was determination in action. With her home being so remote, perhaps it hadn't been all that difficult? Did they never go anywhere? Perhaps they'd driven out of the county to spend time together?

It was more important than ever to find out whom Dana had been seeing. Did he know about the baby? Had he been happy or upset?

An even better question was why they had to keep their relationship so quiet? Had Dana been the side chick? An unexpected pregnancy could have messed up the man's whole life.

A knock on the door interrupted Lulu's reverie, and Steve stuck his head in.

"Your nine o'clock appointments are here. And they brought their lawyers."

"Put Jay Bradford and his attorney in the interview room. Offer Allie and her lawyer coffee and donuts. I'll get to her second."

Was Dana's pregnancy what she'd been discussing with Jay the other night at the sports bar? Had he known about the baby? Was he the father?

There was only one way to know, and that was to ask him. She stood, ready to gather her things for the interview when Steve stuck his head in again, but this time he was wearing a worried frown.

"Sheriff Dare Turner is here to see you. I told him I wasn't sure you had time to talk

to him. He looks like he wants to kill me.”

“That’s Dare’s normal expression. Show him in. It’s all fine. Just offer everyone coffee and pastries, okay? I won’t be long.”

Sheriff Dare Turner was a mountain of a man, tall and broad-shouldered. He was still in excellent shape despite nearing retirement age, and Lulu was sure he could whip up on any criminal who might make the mistake of wandering into Dare’s town. He was known for running a tight ship, and his town adored him.

He was also known for wearing the most sour and grouchy expression on his face. As if he was truly pissed off pretty much twenty-four-seven. He wasn’t, of course, but Lulu and some of the other kids her age had said that his face had probably molded into that shape, and it was painful for him to smile.

She had seen him smile many times over the years, but it was rather a rare occurrence - when his daughters Faith and Cherish graduated high school, things like that. He would have taken a bullet for his wife and daughters without a second thought. He was absolutely crazy about his family, and his wife Rayne swore up and down that he smiled more at home.

But his grouchy demeanor could still shake even an experienced deputy like Steve. It was amusing really, since all Lulu had known from Uncle Dare was his teddy bear side.

“Lulu, looks like you’re getting all settled here,” Dare said when he walked in.

He’d almost smiled, too, which meant he was happy about her taking this job. He’d sent her a lovely text the morning her job had been announced. Several of the uncles and aunts had.



“I am. What brings you to Harper?”

“You.”

Dare Turner was also a man of few words.

“Care to elaborate?”

“I wanted to see how you were settling into the job. If you had any questions, since your dad is on vacation.”

Dare wasn't fooling anyone.

“You're being awfully transparent, Uncle Dare. I have a murder on my hands, and you came to see if I needed any help.”

“Do you?”

“No. Can I ask you a question? Did you call my dad?”

“On a cruise ship?” Dare's lips turned up in a half-smile which was a lot from him.

“No, I didn't call Seth on his retirement cruise with your mom because you have a dead body on your hands. I just came to check on you. See if you wanted a hand or advice, but I can see you're all over this, and that I'm unneeded.”

“Uncle Dare, you are always wanted and needed.”

“You know what I mean. You've got this. I know you do.”

He spoke like a man filled with confidence. In her. It was wonderful and humbling all at the same time.

“I wouldn’t mind some wisdom,” she admitted, sinking back into her chair. “Can I ask you a second question?”

Dare sat in the chair opposite, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

“Shoot. I don’t know if I have any wisdom, but I’m happy to talk it out with you.”

“My victim...I found out this morning from the medical examiner that she was pregnant,” Lulu confessed. “I have a possible suspect waiting in the interview room. He’s her ex-husband. Should I bring it up with him when I question him? I haven’t told the family yet.”

Dare nodded as he seemed to ponder her query. Sighing, he stood and walked over to the window that overlooked a tree that in the summer was lush and green but now looked brown and dull.

“It would be ideal to tell them first, but I’m guessing your suspect isn’t going to sit still while you do that. You need to ask him about it. See his reaction. That’s important. When you’re done, hightail it to her family and let them know. But this is a material part of the case, Lulu. You have to question him about it. If you don’t, you’ll only have to talk to him a second time, and he might not cooperate again. You have to strike while the iron is hot, so to speak, and sometimes that means we piss off some people.”

“I’ve been doing that my entire life,” Lulu laughed shakily. “I should know how by now.”

“Your mom and dad were never so much pissed off as scared to death,” Dare said, giving her one of his patented scowls. “We all were. We had visions of being character witnesses at your parole hearing. But your mom kept saying that you were just going through some growing pains, figuring out your life. She was right, as usual.

Presley is a woman who sees deeply into people. She's smart like that."

"Rayne is amazing, too."

"My wife is the most patient woman on the planet," Dare declared. "Anyone else would have shot me and hid the body. But that's not the discussion for today. I'm going to let you interrogate your suspect before he changes his mind. If you need anything, you know where I am. Anytime, Lulu. Day or night. And come by for Sunday dinner one of these days. You and Chase both. You can bring your roommate, too. What's his name? Harry?"

"Henry," she corrected. "I'd like that."

"And your man, as well. Everyone's welcome."

"What makes you think I have a man?"

Had gossip spread that fast? Dare was in a completely different town, for heaven's sake. Had Kai put it in the newspaper or something?

Extra, extra. Read all about it. I slept with Lulu Reilly last night.

"Because you're happy and glowing," Dare said with a smirk. "And you have an unsolved murder in your town. The only people who would be that happy with an unsolved murder is someone in love. Or falling in love. I remember looking in the mirror when I first fell for your Aunt Rayne. I see that in you this morning. Either way, he's invited, too."

Dare made his way to her office door but then paused and turned back to her.

"Can I give you some advice? I'm not trying to tell you what to do, and feel free to

ignore the fuck out of me because I'm no expert."

"Sure, I wouldn't mind some advice today, especially from you."

"Don't ask him about the pregnancy first thing. Lull him into a sense of security. Ask easy, gimme questions that make him feel safe. Not threatened in any way. Then when he doesn't expect it, mention the pregnancy. That way you get the most authentic reaction from him. Because if he's like normal people, he's going to come in stressed as hell with an attorney. He's going to be defensive from the get-go. Make him feel comfortable. Offer him coffee or a soft drink. Thank him for making time to meet with you. Smile and be friendly."

"In other words, catch him off guard. Nice, Uncle Dare. Have you used this method?"

Because Dare rarely acted all sweet and nice. His usual demeanor was big ole grouch.

"No, but your dad did. I know Tanner, Reed, and Logan did, too. Probably Griffin, as well, because hell, that's who he is. Easygoing until he has to be something else. Anyway, that's just a suggestion. Feel free to ignore it."

Turning on his bootheel, Dare lumbered out of her office, closing the door behind him. She picked up her notebook and pen, ready to go talk to Jay and Allie, but she took a moment to take a deep breath.

She needed to center herself, and she needed to do it right now. There was work to be done, and she was the one that needed to do it. There was no time for flights of fancy and romance. She was the goddamn sheriff in this town. She was the law. She needed to act like it because this badge could be taken from her at any moment.

Her fingers brushed the metal of the badge at her waist briefly, an image in her head of her dad's expression when he'd given it to her. He'd been proud, and she didn't

want to do anything to let him down. Any romantic entanglements were going to have to wait their turn. She had a killer to find.

When Dare had mentioned how happy and glowing she'd looked, heat had flooded her cheeks and her stomach had done a few flip-flops. She'd never quite felt this way before about anyone. She should be thinking about doing her investigation, but here she was wondering if her entire life showed on her face.

She had to be careful. She didn't want people to look at her and know what she was thinking and feeling. Besides, she wasn't in love. That would be crazy. She didn't know Kai that well. Not yet.

But she could be falling in love. She could admit that much.

Of all the spontaneous, impetuous, jump in the lake with all her clothes on thing to do. She had the distinct feeling that it just might be too late to be careful and take it slow.

Kai was still thinking about his night with Lulu when he knocked on Dana's older sister's front door. She lived in a housing development in Springwood, the kind with lots of families and an elementary school nearby.

He'd called Jillian Cartwright Evers the day before to set up an appointment to talk to him for the profile he wanted to do regarding Dana and her family. They'd settled on this morning after she took her two children to school.

"Come in," she said, stepping back so he could pass. "Would you like some coffee?"

"I'm good, thank you."

"We can talk in the kitchen," she said. "You don't mind if I have a cup, do you? I need my caffeine."

"Of course, not. Go right ahead."

They settled at the round kitchen table after Jillian poured herself a cup. She looked like her sister, especially around the nose and chin, but with a different hair color.

"What do you want to know? What kind of article are you planning to write?"

"The plan is a human-interest piece," Kai explained. "I want to make sure that my readers know your sister as a person, not just as a statistic."

“And you’re planning to speak with my parents?”

“I am, but we haven’t been able to work out a time yet. I know that they’re grieving, and I want to respect that. Your grief, as well, Mrs. Evers.”

“Call me Jill. All my friends do.” She leaned forward as if she was going to tell him a secret. “I agreed to speak with you because I wanted to be sure that the true story was told. You’ll just get a bunch of revisionist history if you talk to my mom and dad.”

“Revisionist?” Kai echoed. “In what way?”

“They sort of try to gloss over some of the things my sister has done in the past. She was - to be blunt - self-destructive. She made poor life decisions and then expected everyone to go out of their way to help her fix whatever she’d broken. It was the sad pattern of her life, and a few years ago, I decided that I was done doing that. I’ve taken quite a bit of abuse from my parents for doing this. But I told them that they weren’t helping Dana in the long run. And then this happened. I can’t say that I’m shocked.”

Wow, did this woman even like her sister? Was she victim-blaming? Jillian didn’t appear to be a woman grieving, but to be fair, people grieved in many different ways especially over time. Just because she wasn’t crying and wailing, didn’t mean that Jillian wasn’t devastated in her own way.

Sometimes that was when people were at their most combative, angry at their loved one for leaving. They wanted someone to blame, and since there wasn’t a killer caught yet, it was often easier to blame the dearly departed.

“How about we start at the beginning,” Kai said. “You describe Dana as self-destructive. Can you give me some examples of that behavior?”

“I will because Mom and Dad won’t,” Jillian replied bitterly. “Heaven forbid we say anything negative about Dana. If you talk to them, they’ll say she was perfect but still finding herself. That’s my mom’s favorite description. Dana was finding herself. In reality, Dana had terrible taste in friends and men. They brought her nothing but trouble.”

“Does Jay Bradford fit that description?”

“Jay was the only decent man Dana ever dated, and she couldn’t even hold onto him,” Jillian scoffed. “He’s a good guy who thought he could fix Dana’s issues, but the fact was that no one could. She had to do it on her own, and she was too lazy to do it. Dana was always looking for the shortcut in life. She didn’t want to have to do the real work of making something of herself.”

“Did you ever share that point of view with her?”

“Pretty much every time I saw her,” Jillian replied. “I know that sounds mean, but you see, she only ever reached out to me when she needed something. Whether it was money, a favor, a ride, her tire changed, she didn’t call to hang out and chat. She’d call when she needed me to do something for her. After a while, I got tired of it, and I told her off.”

“What did she say?”

“She’d just laugh and shake her head. She’d tell me that I was too intense and that I took things too seriously. That I needed to lighten up. Then she’d ghost for me months before crawling out of the woodwork again when she needed to borrow gas money. I think she thought getting lectured by me was the cost of whatever she wanted. I doubt she ever listened to a word I said. She certainly never changed, that’s for sure.”



Jillian held up her hands in surrender, her eyes glistening with tears.

“I’m sure that I sound like a total cold-hearted bitch. I can hear myself, and I wouldn’t disagree. But you have to understand that it’s been over a decade of this. Dana was a thirty-year-old woman who acted like she was eighteen. She refused to take on any adult responsibilities. I guess she wanted to be Peter Pan or something. And the rest of us were only around to clean up when she made a mess.”

They were cold, hard words. The sister’s description of Dana wasn’t flattering in the least.

But the real question...was it accurate? It was too early for Kai to know.

“You said that she expected others to fix her bad decisions. Can you expand on that?”

“Do you see my house?” Jillian asked, her gaze roaming the room. “My husband and I worked and saved to pay the downpayment for it. We pay the monthly mortgage, and all the bills associated with being an adult. Now Dana had a far different life. She lived in my late grandmother’s house for free. My parents were supposed to sell the house and split the proceeds between us, but then they backed away from that because poor, poor Dana was renting an apartment she couldn’t afford with a roommate that she didn’t like. So, they let her move in. I’d like to say she at least paid the utilities, but I seriously doubt it. I think they were even paying for Dana’s car insurance. Do you see what I’m talking about?”

He did. If he’d had a sibling like this, he wouldn’t be thrilled either. He’d seen this inequity in some of his friends’ families. One sibling was the responsible one, and they were expected to just suck it up when the screw-up needed help.

And they constantly needed help. It made him glad that he was an only child.

“That must have made you angry. Frustrated.”

Enough to kill?

“Yes, but my husband would always remind me that it was Dana who was really being hurt in those circumstances. My parents were keeping her from growing up and taking responsibility for her own life. In the end, I was stronger for not depending on others for my day-to-day life.”

“Dana did have a job,” Kai observed. “That’s something.”

“She did,” Jillian sighed. “But it was a party job. She wanted to pretend that she was still a party girl in her early twenties, so she got a job at a bar with a bunch of people younger than her. It was pathetic, if you ask me. I don’t think she made all that much either. My parents constantly offered to send Dana back to school for dental hygiene or paralegal. Anything to get her off the gravy train.”

“She didn’t take them up on the offers?”

“Of course, not. Then she’d just be one of a crowd of people who work nine to five. Dana thought she was so different, so edgy. She was simply far too special to do something so ordinary.”

Kai could hear the bitterness ooze from Jillian’s tone. It was clear that there was no love lost between the sisters.

Just where were you, Jillian, the night that your sister died?

Clearing his throat, Kai shifted on the chair. It was time to change the subject a bit - perhaps to something that would help Lulu.

“Was Dana seeing anyone recently?”

“She was always seeing someone,” Jillian replied with a shrug. “But I don’t know who.”

“What about Jay Bradford? Was there any chance of the two of them getting back together?”

“There might have been, but his new girlfriend put an end to that happening. Thank goodness for him, honestly. I think Dana was presenting herself as having grown up, but that was a lie. She was as dysfunctional as ever.”

“Did you ever hear Allie threaten Dana?”

“No, but I wouldn’t blame her if she had. Dana was always calling Jay for some bullshit favor. I doubt she even really wanted him back. She just wanted more of his attention. To her, it was a competition with Allie, and she wanted to win.”

What the hell...throw out a name.

“What about Glen Foster?”

“I heard the rumors, too,” Jillian said. “That she was sleeping with Glen when she and Jay were married. I think that’s the one thing that my sister wouldn’t do. She loved to party and have fun, but she wasn’t a cheater. I will say that much about her. She just wasn’t the type. I wouldn’t put it past her to flirt a bit though. She liked having male attention. But she loved Jay, even if she wasn’t ready for a mature, adult relationship. She loved him. She was truly upset when they divorced.”

“The divorce was Jay’s idea?”

“It was. He needed to be married to a grown-up, and Dana didn’t want to be a grown-up. In the end, he was tired of taking care of her all the time. He was looking for a partner, not a child. He gave her many chances, but I don’t think she took him seriously. I think she thought he’d keep giving her chances like Mom and Dad. Like I said, they weren’t doing her any favors. She had a strange idea of reality.”

This wasn’t what Kai had expected when he’d made the appointment to speak with Jillian. He’d wanted to do a human-interest piece, but he couldn’t very well write an article that the recent murder victim was an immature, selfish asshole via stories from her own sister.

“Jillian,” he said, measuring his words carefully. “I don’t want to upset you, and I very much appreciate your time today. But I have to say that I don’t think I can put a lot of what you’ve told me into the article I’m writing. I will make sure she’s not made out to be a saint. I want to be honest, but not cruel. Is there anything positive that you can tell me about Dana? Anything at all?”

To his surprise, Jillian smiled and chuckled.

“I never thought you’d write any of that,” she replied. “I just wanted to make sure that you knew that Dana wasn’t some golden light in this town. She wasn’t perfect. That’s what my parents will tell you, but it’s not the whole truth. If you’re looking for cute and sunny stories, I do have a few. She wasn’t always a pain in the ass. When we were kids, we actually spent a lot of time together.”

It looked more like Jillian simply needed someone to offload all her emotions to, and not that she hated her sister with a passion. She had to be having conflicting thoughts about the person she loved but didn’t always like very much.

Jillian launched into a few far more positive and funny stories from when they were kids growing up in a small town. These were more likely to get printed, and

hopefully, no one would notice that there weren't many stories from when Dana was older.

Lulu steeled herself before walking into the interview room where Jay Bradford and his attorney were waiting. Her deputies had somehow whisked Allie into a “storage” room that was currently being used as a break area. Since she was out of the way, Lulu could walk around the station without having to deal with Allie until later.

“Good morning,” Lulu greeted them. “Thank you so much for coming in today. I do appreciate it. Your cooperation may help in finding Dana’s killer.”

She was using Dare’s advice, trying to relax them before asking about Dana’s pregnancy.

“I’m not sure I have any more to say,” Jay said. “I told you everything I know.”

“Why are you talking to my client again?” the attorney asked. “He gave you a statement already.”

She recognized the lawyer, but she couldn’t quite place a name with the face. He was the father of someone she’d gone to school with years ago. She searched every corner of her brain for the name of his daughter.

Natalie? Right, Natalie Young. She’d played on the volleyball team. Nice girl. A year younger than Lulu, but well-liked by pretty much everyone. Her dad was Bill Young. At one point, he’d served on the town council. He’d come to a Christmas party her parents had thrown when she was in middle school.

“It’s nice to see you Mr. Young. How is Natalie doing?”

She prayed Natalie wasn’t strung out on drugs or married into the mob.

“She’s doing well, thank you for asking.” Bill smiled at the mention of his daughter’s name, visibly relaxing in his chair. “She went to nursing school in Denver. Lives there now. She’s engaged to be married.”

“That’s wonderful. Congratulations. And obviously, you’re doing well, too. Thank you for coming today.”

“I’m not getting any younger,” Bill sighed. “These Montana winters are getting tougher every year. Maybe I’ll retire down south someday.”

“A little sunshine and golf?”

“That sounds like heaven.”

“So, I just have a few questions, and then you can be on your way,” Lulu said, turning her attention back to Jay. “First, I want to confirm that the night Dana was killed, you went home after dropping Allie off at her apartment. Correct?”

“Yes, I was home before eleven.”

“That’s good. Thank you. I’m trying to put together Dana’s last day, and I was hoping you might be able to help. I need to confirm that the only time you saw Dana that day was at the sports bar. Is that correct?”

“It is,” Jay confirmed. “And I only talked to her for a few minutes. That’s it.”

“You didn’t see her before or after that encounter?”

“No. I didn’t see Dana every day. Hell, I didn’t even talk to her every day. Maybe I talked to her...once a week? Maybe less? Like I said, we were trying to be friends.”

“Did she happen to mention to you what she’d done that day? Anywhere she might have been or anyone she might have talked to? I can’t seem to get any details before the sports bar.”

“She probably spent half the day sleeping,” Jay replied with a shrug. “When she works, she’s up until three or four in the morning. Sometimes later. She often doesn’t go to bed until breakfast time. If I were guessing, she probably slept until mid-afternoon. Puttered around the house and got ready for work. She sometimes stops into the sports bar to grab a quick meal before her shift.”

“That would certainly explain why no one saw her during the day,” Lulu said. “That was her usual routine?”

“As far as I know. I mean, I haven’t lived with her for two years. She could have changed it. I can’t say for sure.”

Bill was checked out looking at his phone, and Jay was relaxed enough to take a bite from his donut.

It might as well be now.

“Jay, when did you find out about Dana being pregnant? Was it that night at the sports bar?”

The poor guy practically choked on his chocolate frosted filled with bavarian cream, and Bill’s phone clattered on the table. The blood had drained from Jay’s face, and his eyes had turned into almost perfect circles. Bill, on the other hand, had turned red in the cheeks as he placed his hand on Jay’s shoulder to make sure he didn’t answer



the question.

“Wait, wait,” Bill said. “I think we need to take a time out here. I’d like to speak to my client privately.”

“Of course, I’ll give you a moment.”

The Harper sheriff’s station didn’t have a fancy interview room like on television. There was no two-way glass, or a speaker that listened in to the room from the outside. She didn’t know what Jay and Bill were talking about, but she could hear their muffled whispers through the door.

“How much longer?” Deputy Steve asked. “They’re getting antsy. And by the way, that woman is kind of scary.”

“I think you can take her,” Lulu joked. “I don’t believe we’ll be much longer. Offer to order anything they want from the coffee shop. My treat.”

“Everyone loves those croissant sandwiches your brother makes.”

Actually, Chase had a helper in the mornings that did those, but this wasn’t the moment to reveal that fact.

“Whatever she wants,” Lulu assured him. “And her lawyer, too. Hell, turn on The Price is Right for them. Make them feel at home.”

Steve disappeared back into the break room, and a moment later, the door to the interview room opened.

“I’ve spoken to my client,” Bill said. “He’s ready to make a statement.”

“Thank you.”

Lulu stepped back into the room, and it appeared that Jay hadn't yet recovered from the shocking news. Some color had returned to his face, but he was still paler than usual.

But being surprised didn't mean that he wasn't a candidate to be the father. It only meant that Dana hadn't told him yet.

At this point in the investigation, she didn't know if there were other potential fathers. Perhaps Glen? Or some other mystery man that Dana had been keeping under wraps? Her gut was telling her that the latter was the more possible alternative, but she couldn't ignore that Jay might have been cheating on Allie with his ex-wife. Sadly, she'd seen more tawdry relationships.

“You wanted to make a statement,” Lulu said, settling back into her chair across from Jay and Bill.

Jay looked at Bill for approval, and the older man nodded briefly.

“It's okay. Just tell the truth,” Bill said.

“I didn't know Dana was pregnant,” Jay said, his words all rushed out and pushed together. “I'm shocked. Really shocked. But then I think that I shouldn't be. She'd made a few changes lately, and it all kind of makes sense now.”

“Changes?”

“She wasn't drinking that night at the sports bar,” Jay clarified. “In fact, she hadn't been drinking for the last few weeks. I even mentioned it once, and she said she was on a new health kick. I thought it was great. I'd always told her that she drank a bit

too much. She didn't have a problem though. She wasn't addicted or anything, but you know, she partied a lot."

"You say that you didn't know. Looking back, did she hint around? Drop any other clues?"

"No, not that I can think of. Dana...pregnant. I mean...are you sure? When we were married, she always said that she didn't want any kids. She said it more than once."

"I am sure," Lulu replied. "Can I assume that if you didn't know, then Allie didn't?"

"I can't imagine how she would," Jay declared. "Dana wasn't going to tell her. Who does know?"

"I don't know. I just learned this detail myself. I'm not sure who knew, and who didn't. If you could guess one person that she might confide in, who might it be? Her parents? Her sisters? A friend?"

"She wouldn't tell her sisters, and I don't think she'd tell her parents first. She might tell her friend where she worked. Her name is Stacy Simpson. Dana and Stacy spent a lot of time together. At least they did when we were married."

"I'll talk to her, thank you," Lulu replied. "I'm also not planning to release this information for a few days. Can I rely on your discretion, Jay? Bill?"

"I won't mention it," Bill replied hastily. "This is confidential attorney-client information, as far as I'm concerned."

"I won't say anything either," Jay replied. "I'm still trying to wrap my head around it."

“That means you can’t tell Allie,” Lulu pointed out. “Are you okay with that?”

“When you release the information, can I deny that I ever knew?” Jay asked. “I can just pretend to be surprised.”

What kind of relationship did Jay and Allie have if he was this freaked out about her finding out that he knew about Dana a day or two before she did? Steve was right. Allie was scary.

“That’s fine with me,” Lulu assured him. “And I won’t hold onto the information for too long. I know how information travels in this town. It won’t stay a secret for long.”

Lulu was going to try and keep the autopsy report under wraps, but eventually, someone was going to push the issue. Autopsies were considered public records, although Lulu could try and keep it private by saying it was part of the investigation. That might work for a while, but probably not forever.

Honestly, she didn’t think that Jay and Bill were going to keep quiet about what they’d learned. Bill was probably going to tell his wife, and Jay was going to tell Allie. She’d be fooling herself to think anything different.

There’s no way he’s not telling her when he leaves here.

It might be just as useful to see who might come out of the woodwork when the news was public.

In the meantime, after she talked to Allie, she needed to talk to Glen Foster. Just how did he fit into this situation?

The bar where Dana had worked didn’t open until three in the afternoon, and Kai wanted to speak with her boss and her best friend and co-worker.

Stacy Simpson was also a cocktail waitress at the bar, and her boyfriend Max Henderson was the main bartender and owner. They lived in a condo not far from the business district. The neighborhood was a little older than all the newer building that was going on outside the city limits but was close enough to the main street that most things were only a short walking distance.

They'd agreed to speak with Kai for the human-interest story he was doing about Dana. They'd only asked that he didn't show up until ten in the morning because they usually slept in after a late night working.

The couple was friendly and inviting when they opened the door, ushering him into the living room and offering him coffee. The house was decorated in bright shades of blue and green, comfortable and cozy. There were even two lazy cats curled up on a braided rug in front of the fireplace that wasn't currently lit.

He wasn't as big a fan of gut feelings as Lulu was, but he instantly had a welcoming vibe inside their home. They appeared to be open to this interview, although sad about Dana's death. The first thing Stacy showed Kai was a picture of all three of them taken two summers ago on the beach. They'd all gone to Florida together for a vacation.

The trio was tanned and happy, smiling for the camera as if they didn't have a worry in the world.

"That's a great picture of the three of you," Kai said. "Did you often take trips together?"

"We couldn't afford it every year, but every two or three," Stacy explained. "We always had so much fun. In the old days, Jay would come too, of course."

"Did you all grow up together?"

“Not at all,” Max chuckled. The man was a giant of a human being, at least six foot six and three hundred pounds. With a shaved head and tattoos, he fit the description of someone that a person wouldn’t want to get on the wrong side of. “I’m seven years older than Dana, and Stacy grew up in Cleveland. She and I met in college, fell in love, and then I convinced her to move back here with me when I took over my old man’s roadhouse.”

“I have no regrets at all,” Stacy said, giving her boyfriend a brilliant smile. “I love this little town.”

While Max was huge, Stacy was tiny. Kai might describe her as almost as a pixie with her petite body and purple-tipped blonde hair. Even her features were elvish with big blue eyes and delicate pointed chin.

They made a striking couple, and they were gazing at each other with genuine love.

“Dana came to me when she turned twenty-one,” Max explained. “She wanted a job, and I needed a waitress. She’s worked for me on and off since then. Mostly on since she and Jay split up. She needed the money, and she did a good job. It was a win-win for both of us.”

“And you all became close friends?”

“We did,” Stacy replied. “Dana was always just the sweetest girl. She’d do anything for you and give you the shirt off her back and her last dollar if she thought you were in need.”

Stacy sniffled and her eyes filled with tears.

“I never had a sister, but Dana filled that role. I can’t tell you enough about what a beautiful person she was. She was the best friend I’ve ever had, and I’ll miss her

every day for the rest of my life.”

“She was a good person,” Max agreed. “A hard worker and she cared about the customers. Everyone loved her.”

“What about Jay Bradford? Was he still in love with her?”

“Just between the three of us, I think he is still in love with Dana,” Stacy confided. “Was it two weeks ago, Max? Out of the blue, his girlfriend came into the bar and was giving Dana a hard time. Yelling at her to stay away from Jay, and that she wasn’t going to let Dana steal her man or something like that. I doubt the girlfriend would be all upset like that if Jay wasn’t acting like he still had feelings.”

“What did Dana do?”

“She just laughed at the girl and said that she wasn’t going to steal something she gave up willingly. She told the girl that Jay was only a friend. I got the feeling the girl didn’t believe it, but Dana refused to argue with her. She was openly amused by the whole thing. Max offered to escort the girl out, but Dana said that she wasn’t bothered.”

“Eventually, the girl left,” Max said. “Her name is Allie, right? Anyway, when she couldn’t get a rise out of Dana, she stomped out of the place vowing that she’d be back if Dana didn’t stay away from Jay.”

“Did she come back?”

“No, but I was planning to ban her if she did,” Max explained. “I don’t like any trouble in my place, and I didn’t want Dana to have to deal with that. That girl seemed unhinged, to be honest. From where I was standing, it looked like she was trying to goad Dana into taking a swing at her. I guess then she could call the cops

and play the victim. Either way, that's not happening in my bar."

"Jay came in a few days later and apologized for her," Stacy said with a roll of her eyes. "Dana told him to stay away from her as long as he was seeing Allie. She didn't want the hassle. Jay was upset and swore up and down that Allie was just passionate. Frankly, it sounded lame as hell, and Dana told him so. She repeated that he needed to stay away if he was going to date that girl. Max asked him to leave, and he did without any trouble."

"She and Jay weren't getting back together? There was some talk of that," Kai said.

"They sort of tried about a year ago, but it was clear that it wasn't going to work," Max replied. "I think Jay wanted it more than Dana did. She was half-hearted about it, and she didn't seem all that sad when they called it quits a second time. They cared about each other, but they were too different to live together."

"In what way?" Kai asked.

"Dana was an extrovert who liked to be around people," Stacy said. "Jay didn't want to be around people. Ever, if he could help it. Not in the evenings, not on the weekends. Dana once said that she tracked it on a calendar, and Jay didn't talk to anyone but her for forty-two days. Not counting his job, of course. He'd come home and start playing video games. That was his social time, I guess."

"And she wanted to go out?"

"Sometimes, but other times she just wanted to talk to him. Talk about their day, talk about the weather. Anything but sitting next to him on the couch while he played games."

Kai was fascinated by this far different version of Dana Cartwright that he was



hearing. These were the people closest to her, the ones she was with almost every day in a work setting plus a friendship.

“I met with Dana’s older sister Jillian this morning?—”

He was interrupted by both Stacy and Max groaning out loud and shaking their heads.

“Let me guess,” Stacy said. “She complained non-stop about what a terrible sister Dana was, and how she’s the only responsible person in her family. Did I get that right?”

“That woman is a menace,” Max said before Kai could answer. “She’d call Dana just to bitch her out about something and complain that life wasn’t fair. Well, here’s some news for her. Life isn’t fair. I’m not sure where she got the idea that it would be. I bet she’ll dance on Dana’s grave. Now she’ll have all the attention from her parents, especially as the younger sister Billie lives in another state.”

“Is that what she wanted?” Kai queried. “Attention? Did Dana somehow take that away?”

“Dana’s great crime was being born,” Stacy said. “Jillian was loving being an only child. She didn’t want any siblings. She wanted to be the center of attention. So, when Dana committed the sin of being born, Jillian was never going to forgive or forget. She wanted the sole spotlight on her, and she resented the hell out of anyone who took it away. Jillian was even mean to the family dog and cat. She wasn’t any nicer to the youngest sister Billie either.”

“Don’t believe half of what she told you,” Max warned. “Jillian loves to twist the truth and make herself look like a saint while everyone else is an asshole. She’s always the victim.”

Oookaaayyy... Kai was going to have to re-think his entire interview with Dana's sister.

"Jillian said that Dana was living in her grandmother's house," Kai said. "Instead of the house being sold and the proceeds split between them."

Stacy pressed her fingers to her temples and made a frustrated sound.

"Is she going on about that again? That was never the plan. That was something that Jillian made up in her head. Something that I guess she thought was fair to her. The grandmother willed the house to Dana. Only to her. Dana was the only one in the family that ever visited that sweet old woman. She'd help out by going shopping and cleaning. She was always doing something for her Gran. Once a week, all four of us would go out to dinner somewhere. Jillian didn't do shit, and then she was pissed when Dana got the house, the contents, and Gran's bank account. It wasn't much but it was something."

"Jillian was never going to get half the house?"

"Never," Max replied flatly. "It wasn't going to happen. Gran was sharp as a tack until her last breath, and she knew who cared about her and who didn't. Jillian was the latter. I'm guessing she also told you that Dana made bad decisions, and that she was always bailing her out? Not true. The only thing that Dana asked of her sister was a ride to the airport once. Jillian said no, by the way. Dana's parents, on the other hand, they're nice people."

"I didn't want to bother them," Kai admitted. "They just lost a daughter. It felt insensitive to ask to interview them."

"They've taken it hard," Stacy said. "I talked to Carole this morning about the arrangements for the funeral. She wanted me to say a few words, which I told her I

would do. I think you're right to let them have their space during this time."

"I do have another question," Kai said. "If Dana and Jay weren't getting back together, was she seeing anyone that you knew of?"

"She was seeing someone," Stacy said with a smug smile. "But she was keeping it a secret as to who. I think it was like a game to her."

"She didn't tell you who it was?" Kai pressed. "Not even a hint?"

"At first, she didn't tell us anything," Max said. "She'd see him on the nights she wasn't working or hanging out with us. We didn't have a clue for months. When we asked why she was keeping it all hush-hush, she said it was more fun this way."

Maybe Kai was cynical and jaded, but in his life, there had only been a few reasons why someone would keep their partner a secret. Number one - they were ashamed, and two - they were married. Either the person or the secret partner.

Kai was leaning to the latter.

"Do you think she was dating a married man?"

He wasn't much for beating around the bush about topics like this. Stacy and Max could be angry if they wanted to be, but they had to have considered it a possibility at least once.

"It did cross our minds," Stacy said, her cheeks flushed as she fidgeted on her chair. "I asked Dana straight out, and she said that she wouldn't date someone who was happily married."

"But she would someone married unhappily?"

“I asked that, too,” Stacy sighed. “She said that she’d worded her answer badly. That they were keeping it a secret because they didn’t want a lot of attention. They just wanted to enjoy being together without people talking about them, and that eventually they’d go public. They just weren’t in a hurry.”

“She reminded us that people liked to gossip about her love life,” Max said. “About her, and Jay, and others. She said she was tired of a bunch of nosey types talking about her when the skeletons in their own closets were much worse. I couldn’t argue with that. She was right. The busybodies in this town need to mind their own business first.”

“When you say and others , do you mean like Glen Foster?” Kai asked. “There were rumors about them when she was married to Jay.”

“Not only did she not go out with Glen, she didn’t even like him,” Stacy said. “He was Jay’s friend, so she tried to be nice, but frankly he’s kind of a jerk. He also thinks he’s hot stuff, and when she and Jay were having trouble, Glen decided that he was going to be the sympathetic shoulder to cry on before getting her into his bed. There was no way she was going to let that happen. He made her nauseous.”

“Do you know why she and Jay were talking at the sports bar the night before her murder? Glen was there, too.”

Based on their quizzical expressions, Stacy and Max were trying to figure out what that question had to do with the human-interest story that Kai was working on. The last few questions, actually.

If Lulu were here, she’d be asking them instead. Might as well see if I can get it done for her.

Kai was man enough to admit that he cared a great deal about Lulu, and he wanted to

help her solve this murder.

“I don’t know,” Stacy said. “I talked to her that night for a few minutes, but she didn’t mention it. She said she’d picked up some takeout and was headed back to her place for a quiet evening in.”

“She wasn’t seeing her secret man?”

“She didn’t mention him. Is it important? Are you planning to write about her relationship with him? Is that why you’re asking?”

“No,” Kai replied firmly. “I’m not going to write about him. Unless he comes forward, of course. If he did, I’d love to get a quote from him for the article.”

“Maybe he will,” Max said. “You never know.”

Kai asked Stacy and Max for a few fun stories that he could share with readers about Dana, showing the kind of person she was. They eagerly talked about hikes, picnics, movie nights, and Christmas cookie-decorating parties. The three of them appeared to have a genuinely loving friendship.

“Once again, I am sorry for your loss,” Kai said when it was time for him to go. “And I appreciate your time today.”

“You’re not going to write what Jillian told you?” Stacy asked, her tone apprehensive. “Because she’s lying about Dana. She’s always resented her.”

“I’m not going to say anything negative about Dana,” Kai responded. “That’s not the type of article that I’m looking to write. I just want people to get to know Dana Cartwright a bit more than they might have before. I’m not looking to tear down anyone’s reputation. That’s not what I do.”

After speaking with Jillian and now Stacy and Max, Kai was more certain of this than ever. He hadn't quit his soul-sucking job as a lawyer to write sensationalized articles about people who weren't alive to defend themselves.

He said goodbye to the couple and headed out to his vehicle. Before he could leave, Stacy jogged out of the house and waved.

"I told Max that I remembered a story I just had to tell you," she said, shifting on her feet. "But I need to make sure that you're not going to print that Dana was seeing someone. It's important that you don't."

"Because he's married?" Kai guessed.

"Yes," Stacy admitted with a sigh. "He's married, and no, I don't know who he is. Dana said he was unhappy in his marriage and planning to leave his wife."

"Do you think he was going to do that?"

"I don't, and I said the same to her. Now, you're not going to print any of that, right? I need your promise."

"I promise. I'm not planning to write anything negative about Dana."

Stacy thanked him and went back inside while he climbed into the car.

While his interviews had answered many questions, they'd also posed new ones. Did Jillian hate her sister enough to kill her? Was Allie convinced that Dana was after Jay, and would she kill to keep him? And possibly the most important of all, just who was the man that Dana Cartwright was dating?

That's who Kai wanted to talk to.

“ I don’t need an alibi. I’m telling the truth.”

Allie sat across from Lulu, her expression defiant with narrowed and cold eyes. She had the distinct impression that she wasn’t going to get anywhere with this young woman.

I’m wasting my time, but then, it’s my time to waste.

Her attorney, an older man who had introduced himself at the beginning, but hadn’t said much since, simply sat there. Probably billing four hundred bucks an hour.

“Right now, you don’t have an alibi,” Lulu replied, keeping her tone neutral. She wasn’t going to give Allie any reason to get angry or freak out. “Jay says that he dropped you at your home after the movie. According to him, he wasn’t with you all night.”

Allie’s mouth dropped open, and her cheeks turned an angry shade of red. Apparently, she hadn’t thought to synchronize her story with her boyfriend’s. Rookie error? Or she was so innocent, it hadn’t occurred to her?

Why would an innocent woman lie about where she was? It didn’t automatically make her guilty or anything, but it did raise suspicion around her.

“Is he lying?” Lulu pressed. “If I pull traffic cameras, what will I see?”

The problem was that so many people forgot they were being recorded. Even in a small town, there were more and more cameras in homes, stores, and in traffic.

Allie elbowed her attorney, and they quietly conferred for a moment before she answered.

“He dropped me at home,” Allie admitted, but she didn’t look happy about it. “I guess I forgot it was one of the nights that I didn’t spend at his place. That’s where I usually am.”

She forgot . Okay, Lulu wasn’t going to go after that one, although she could. It was a bit farfetched to think that Allie wouldn’t remember where she spent the night a few hours before Dana was killed.

Lulu had to pick her battles, and this one she wasn’t going to win.

“And did you stay there all evening?”

“Yes.”

“Can anyone vouch for that?”

“My roommate, Kathleen Meadows, can. She saw me go to bed.”

“I’ll be checking with your roommate.”

“Fine,” Allie replied dismissively. “I’ll let her know you’ll be in touch.”

That’s the last thing Lulu wanted Allie to do.

“No need. I’ll have one of my deputies call her now and set up an interview time.



Excuse me for a moment.”

Lulu stood up and exited the interview room, beckoning to Deputy Steve who was hovering outside. He couldn't hear what was going on, but he could see through the glass.

“Do you know a Kathleen Meadows?” Lulu asked. “Find her phone number and give her a call. She's Allie's roommate. I need to talk to her to confirm Allie's alibi. As soon as possible, please.”

“Got it. Will do.”

Steve disappeared around the corner, and Lulu rejoined the Allie and her so-far silent attorney in the interview room.

“What were you and Dana Cartwright arguing about at the sports bar the night before she died?”

“I don't remember any argument.”

“I saw you?—”

“May I interject?” the lawyer said with a wan smile. “You can't know for sure that it was an argument if you don't know what was said.”

“Okay, what were you and Dana discussing that night?”

“I don't know. It wasn't important enough to remember.”

“Jay remembers. He says that you threatened Dana's life.”

“I have no memory of that,” Allie said with a nonchalant shrug. “And why would I threaten Dana? She was meaningless in my life.”

“Was she meaningless to Jay?”

“She was a pest in his life that wouldn’t go away. He was frustrated because she wouldn’t give up, and he just wanted to move on.”

“So, you weren’t jealous of Dana?”

“Why would I be? Jay loves me, not her. Are we done now? I didn’t kill Dana, but I can name at least six people who might have.”

“I’d be interested in hearing that list,” Lulu replied. “I didn’t realize that Dana was so hated in the community.”

“Talk to Dana’s sister Jillian,” Allie sneered. “She knows what her sibling is really like. And her parents, too. Or any of her co-workers. They’re always having to pick up her slack because she’s off with some new guy like Glen Foster. Or any of a number of men. She was...popular, I guess you could say. If you’re into that sort of casual relationship.”

Allie had done everything but call Dana a whore. Lulu didn’t believe in slut-shaming.

“I think we’re done here,” the attorney said, levering up from his chair and beginning to pack his briefcase. “If you have any more questions for my client, call my office.”

“Just one more question,” Lulu said, clearing her throat. This could be a huge miscalculation. Was this the right thing to do? She didn’t know, but her gut was screaming at her. This wasn’t planned at all. “When did you find out about Dana’s pregnancy?”

There it was. Right there.

Allie's expression had flickered and glitched for just a split second. She'd covered it up almost instantly, but Lulu had been looking specifically for it.

Allie had known. Somehow. It didn't make a lick of sense as to how she'd known, but she had. Did that mean that Jay was an amazing actor? Had he known and just covered it better?

"I don't know what you're talking about," Allie replied, her expression now bland. "You're not making any sense."

"Never mind," Lulu said, standing up also. "Thank you for stopping in today. If I have any more questions, I'll contact your attorney."

Allie rolled her eyes and quickly exited the interview room with the lawyer right on her heels. When Lulu stepped out into the main area of the sheriff's station, Steve was the first to talk to her.

"I've set up a meeting with the roommate Kathleen Meadows, but you have to go to her work. She has a job during the day."

"Fine, where is that?"

"Dr. Millikin's office. She can see you later today. She's a receptionist there."

"Dr. Millikin? She works there?"

"Yes, why? That's...interesting."

Everyone in town knew Dr. Millikin's practice. It was the only OBGYN practice in

town. Pretty much every woman in Harper - and some from other small neighboring towns - was a patient there because the next nearest baby doctor was in Springwood. Lulu had gone there until she moved to Seattle.

And if Kathleen Meadows worked there, she would have seen Dana Cartwright come in for her prenatal appointment. And if Ms. Meadows had a loose tongue, she might have told her roommate what she'd seen. That explained how Allie might have known about Dana's pregnancy.

A few pieces of the puzzle.

Were they part of the big picture or simply a distraction? Either way, they needed to be put together.

Lulu was backing out of her parking space at the sheriff's station when a car pulled in next to her and honked its horn. Looking over, she could see Ellen Dunphy in the passenger seat and Ray Ramsey behind the wheel. From the way they were waving, she had the feeling they were there to see her.

They both hopped out of their vehicle and motioned for her to roll down her window. There was no way to avoid this conversation unless she wanted to be rude. Technically, she worked for them, although they'd been scarce when her dad was the sheriff. They'd let Seth Reilly run the town, rarely ever questioning him unless it was something about the budget.

"Lulu," Ellen exclaimed. "I'm so glad we caught you."

"I'm heading out to do an interview," Lulu explained. "What can I help you with?"

Hopefully, it wouldn't take long. She was supposed to talk with Glen Foster, and after that, head to speak to Kathleen Meadows.

“We just wanted to see how things were going. Right, Ray?”

“We were,” Ray replied, nodding in agreement. “Any news?”

“I’m running down a few leads, but I don’t know if they’ll amount to anything,” Lulu replied. “We’re researching alibis, and gathering video from traffic cameras where we can to confirm them.”

“You were talking to Jay Bradford and Allie Baker,” Ellen said. “Anything there?”

“I’m still running down their alibis,” Lulu said. “I’m going to meet with Ms. Baker’s roommate in about an hour. We’ve confirmed Bradford’s. He was home all night.”

“Allie doesn’t have an alibi,” Ellen mused. “That’s interesting. Right, Ray?”

“She has one, but I just haven’t confirmed it yet,” Lulu corrected. “I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. It’s just one thing I’m running down today.”

“Of course, of course,” Ray said. “We don’t want to keep you from doing your job. You’re headed to speak to Ms. Baker’s roommate?”

“Yes, she’s at her job right now. But first, I need to talk to Glen Foster.”

“I have to say, Lulu, we’re so pleased with your work so far. You bring such energy to this investigation,” Ray said with a smile. “The energy of youth, I guess. But we’re quite pleased.”

“We are,” Ellen agreed. “Right, Ray? We won’t keep you any longer. We know you need to get back to work. Please let us know if you need anything.”

Lulu promised she would, and waved goodbye to them as she backed out onto the

road. It was nice to be praised, but she could also feel the heavy weight of expectation. They were watching her closely. The whole town was, and she could feel it everywhere she went. They were waiting for her to screw up.

I'm not going to do that.

Glen Foster was a local photographer who usually did family portraits, weddings, anniversaries, and other various occasions. He had a studio just about ten minutes from the sheriff's station and had agreed to speak with Lulu in between clients.

When she walked into the studio, Glen was still busy taking a golden retriever's photo. The adorable dog was wearing a brightly colored birthday hat, and there was a fake birthday cake in front of him and a large bouquet of balloons in the background.

Maybe I need to get a dog. Now that I'm almost settled in.

Her furniture was supposed to arrive tomorrow morning, and she was looking forward to having more space. She adored Henry, and they got along well, but they both needed a bit more privacy than they were getting in the tiny apartment above the station.

Glen finished up with the canine that was named Charlie, before grabbing a bottle of water from the small fridge behind the main desk.

"Do you want one, too?"

"No, I'm good, but thank you."

"We can go into my office, or we can just talk here."

The studio had a waiting area with a couch and a few chairs. Photos that Glen had

taken were all over the walls, and she recognized several people that she knew in them.

“Here is fine,” she assured him. “I just had a few questions for you.”

“Okay, I’ll help you if I can. But why don’t you just go ahead and ask the question.”

“The question?”

“If I had an affair with Dana. I’m not the smartest guy in the world, but I’m not stupid. I live in this town, and I heard the rumors. Everyone thinks that Dana cheated with me, and that’s why she and Jay got a divorce. Except that they’re wrong. Dana and I never had an affair. The fact is, we didn’t like each other very much.”

“You hated her?”

“No, not at all,” Glen laughed. “We didn’t hate each other. We just didn’t like each other. There’s a difference. Dana was okay. It’s just that Jay is my best friend, you know? And when he started dating Dana, they got serious real fast. I told him to slow down, take his time. Have fun while he’s young, but he didn’t listen. Dana found out that I was encouraging him to not get married, to wait a few years. She always resented me for it. I guess she got the idea that I thought she wasn’t good enough for Jay, which wasn’t the case at all. I just wanted him to slow down.”

“So, you were jealous of all the time Jay spent with Dana?”

“I think you expect me to deny it, but yes. I was jealous. Jay and I went from hanging out several times a week, to having a guys’ night every now and then. He’s one of those guys who when he has a girlfriend, all his friends cease to exist. Then when they breakup he expects all of us to be there to hear him whine about how perfect she was and how miserable he is.”

Some of Lulu's friends were the same way. She hadn't liked it much either. She couldn't blame Glen for his stance.

"If you weren't the reason Jay and Dana got a divorce, what was it?"

"It was a lot of things," Glen explained. "They argued a lot about stupid shit. Who left the cereal bowl in the sink, and who dropped their wet towels on the bathroom floor. The answer to both of those, by the way, is Jay. Dana tried to keep a tidy house, but Jay is a slob. I know because we were roommates for about four years. But that's not the big reason they broke up. Dana ended things because Jay was smothering her to death. I think she ran out of sheer self-preservation."

"Can you expand on that? How did he smother her?"

"He wanted to do everything together. He wanted to spend every minute that he wasn't at work with Dana. Now in the beginning of a relationship that seems sweet and romantic. But after a couple of years of it, I think Dana wanted a little freedom. She wanted to see her friends, she wanted to run to the grocery store. Alone. Christ, he didn't even want her to run to the store for bread and milk without him. He wanted them to be joined at the hip. When I questioned him about it, he said that he loved her so much he wanted to spend all his time with her."

That didn't sound healthy. But then Allie had seemed overly jealous as well. Were she and Jay two peas in a pod?

"Let's skip forward in time a bit. What were you all arguing about the night at the sports bar?"

"That was nothing," Glen scoffed. "Jay asked Dana how she was doing since they hadn't talked in a while. It's my opinion that he's never truly gotten over her. Anyway, it was all fine until Allie got in the middle of them spewing her jealous crap."



Dana told her off, and I came over and took Dana's side. Then Dana told me that she wasn't going to like me just because I took her side, which is such a Dana thing to say. That's it. That's all it was."

"Allie was jealous?"

"Allie is always jealous," Glen said with an eye roll. "It's ironic, really. Jay was clingy with Dana, and now Allie is clingy with him. To his credit, he doesn't seem to mind, but I think she's batshit crazy."

"Did you tell Jay that?"

"I did. He didn't care. Allie makes him feel needed, and that's what he wants. It's not going to end well, but what can I do? He won't listen to reason."

"Do you think Jay still loved Dana enough that he wouldn't want anyone else to have her if he couldn't?"

"If you're asking me if Jay could have killed Dana, the answer is no. He wouldn't do it."

"And Allie?"

"Now that's a different story altogether."

"Did Allie threaten Dana that night at the sports bar?"

"Yes, but she's done that before, so I didn't think anything of it. She seems to think that Dana wants Jay back, which is not the reality. But Allie isn't all that concerned with reality," Glen replied. "I think deep down, Allie knew that Jay still had feelings for Dana. If you're asking if Allie is capable of killing Dana, my answer would have

to be yes. I don't like to throw the word around, but she's crazy. One day, she started to scream and pull her hair out because Jay and I were watching a football game on television."

"What did you do?"

"Leave," Glen shot back. "I hit the bricks and didn't look back. I offered to take Jay with me on my way out, but he didn't want to go. He just caved and did whatever she wanted so she'd stop. I don't play that game. I was out of there."

Jay and Allie's relationship, frankly, sounded like a nightmare. An unhealthy, dysfunctional nightmare. They both desperately needed to be needed, and somehow, they'd found each other. Whether that was a recipe for long-term happiness, Lulu didn't know. She could call Colt and ask him. He was the one with all the psychological knowledge.

That reminded her that she needed to call Brianna. They hadn't talked since she started the job, although Brianna had sent a lovely card, congratulating her. It wasn't like them to go too long without talking.

"Listen," Glen went on. "I don't mean to sound like I don't like Allie. I'm sure she has some good qualities. I just haven't seen them. Did she kill Dana? Probably not. But she's not mentally healthy, and I think it's something she could do. She blamed Dana for everything bad in her life. If it rained on her picnic, somehow it was Dana's fault. Know what I mean?"

"I do. Thank you for talking to me today. By the way, where were you after you left the sports bar that night?"

"I've been seeing a woman over in Corville," Glen replied with a smug grin. "She and I closed down a little bar near her house, and then I spent the night there. She can

vouch for me along with about twenty other people at the bar. We were there until about two. I didn't kill Dana. I didn't have any reason to."

Lulu thanked Glen for his time and headed back to her SUV. If anything, this visit had strengthened her suspicions about Allie. She had a strong motive, stronger than anyone else's.

It was time to find out about her alibi. Was she lying - again - or had she been home all night with her roommate?

Next stop Kathleen Meadows.

15

“Want some company?”

Kai was sitting in the coffeeshop, working on his lunch of a sandwich and iced tea. He'd been deep in thought about the investigation, not hearing Henry approach his table.

“Sure, have a seat,” Kai offered.

He liked Henry. The guy seemed to have a genuine and honest vibe, and he cared a great deal about Lulu. If Kai's relationship with her was going to have any sort of future, it would be a good idea to get along with her close friends.

There were things he didn't know about Henry, of course. The man had already hinted about them, but Kai wasn't the type to dig deeply into personal and delicate issues unless he was invited.

“Thanks, I didn't want to walk over there.” Henry nodded toward the corner of the coffeeshop. “Lisa is here, and I don't want to get into it with her.”

Kai glanced in the direction Henry indicated. Lisa was an attractive woman, chatting animatedly with two other female friends. So far, it didn't seem like she'd noticed that Henry was here. Where Kai was seated was blocked by several other tables, but if she looked in their direction...

She'd probably see them.

“Are you going to ask me questions about it?”

Henry appeared amused that Kai hadn't jumped on the subject. Did he get those sorts of questions all the time? That had to get old after a while.

“I wasn't planning to.”

Henry was openly laughing now.

“I admire your cool demeanor. Most people want to ferret out any possible secret that I might have. They simply must have every awful detail, or they won't be able to sleep or eat.”

That sounded like hell.

“What do you do when they're like that?”

“I give them what they think they want.”

“Which is?”

“All the details. Every grisly one. When their face turns green, and they look like they might puke, I know I've done my job well.”

“My mom always said to be careful what you wish for. You might get it.”

“Your mom sounds like a wise woman.”

“She is. Are you close to your parents?”

Kai immediately wished he hadn't asked that question. He'd thought it might be a

safe conversational route, but he'd miscalculated.

"They blame themselves for what happened to me, even though I tell them every time I see them that it wasn't their fault. It was a family friend that they trusted who kidnapped me. It's hard to be truly close with them when they've put up that wall of emotion."

"Damn, I'm truly sorry," Kai apologized. "I didn't mean to bring up a sore subject."

"It's not so much sore as sad. I know they love me more than anything, but since it happened, I think they've kept a certain distance. I think they're afraid to love me too much in case they lose me again."

"I guess they could have gone one of two ways," Henry continued. "Either take a step back or become helicopter parents. Honestly, I think I got the best of the two options."

"I'm sorry that it happened to you."

"I see why Lulu trusts you. She has an instinct about people. She can be around them a short time, talk to them a bit, and she just knows in her gut whether they're good people or bad. I don't know how she does it, but she does. I think she gets it from her mom. Presley is amazing with people. Everyone loves her, just like Lulu. She draws others to her, and they want to be in her orbit. She's like a magnet."

"I hope that Lulu trusts me. I trust her, too."

"She's pretty fucking amazing, isn't she?" Henry said with a wide smile. "She's just a kickass human being. The best. She's like a sister to me, though. I'm not trying to get into her pants or anything like that. We're not that way."

“I appreciate that. And I appreciate the friendship that you and Chase have extended to me.”

“You have to go with the flow with Lulu. Like I said, she attracts people into her life, so you need to get ready for that. There will always be friends around her. And I’ll always be there for her. No matter what. Even if she ends up hating my guts, I’ll be there for her. She deserves the best.”

“It sounds like she has a true friend in you.”

“I hope so.” Henry took a sip of his coffee, his gaze resting on Kai as if sizing him up a bit. “I’ll tell you more about what happened if you want me to.”

“I’m so sorry something like that happened to you,” Kai said earnestly. “How old were you?”

“Eight. My parents let me walk down to a friend’s house. Just four doors down. Not even to the end of the block. I didn’t make it there. A family friend was driving down the street and stopped to talk to me. I walked toward the car, and next thing I knew I was pulled in. It all happened so fast. I was confused at first because they’d always seemed so nice, but then I got scared because they wouldn’t take me home. They kept saying I was home.”

“You don’t have to talk about this,” Kai said. “It’s honestly none of my business. I don’t want you to have nightmares for a week because you told me about it.”

Henry smiled sadly and shook his head.

“I have nightmares all the time. Telling you about it won’t change that.”

“You still don’t have to tell me.”

“How about I just say that I escaped,” Henry finally replied, his gaze looking somewhere over Kai’s shoulder. “But I care too much about Lisa to throw all my emotional shit on her. She doesn’t deserve that in her life.”

“If she cares?—”

“Stop,” Henry interjected. “I know that she cares, she’s told me so. I care, too. But care isn’t enough. Sure, in the beginning it’s great, but eventually the real world starts to intrude, and suddenly you start to resent one another. You wish the other person would change, and we all know where that leads. Love dies, and maybe...if you’re lucky...pity comes after. If it’s not pity, then it’s hatred. I don’t want Lisa to hate me down the road. If that makes me a coward, I can live with that.”

“There is no way after what you’ve been through that anyone could call you a coward,” Kai said. “Clearly, you’ve faced the worst and come out the other side.”

“With some battle scars, and I won’t inflict them on anyone else. I won’t drag them through that nightmare with me over and over. Someday, when she’s happily married to a nice nine-to-five man and has a couple of lovely kids, she might think of me for a moment and thank me. I don’t want to be the selfish asshole here. She and I will both end up disappointed.”

“I think that you’re a better man than I am,” Kai replied honestly. “Not everybody would be so selfless.”

“I am far from selfless. If I was truly a selfless person, I never would have spent time with her at all. I’d be alone all the time. I wouldn’t be friends with Lulu because far too often she has to deal with me reliving it all again. I never wanted that for her, but damn, she’s a stubborn mule. Every time I tried to kick her out of my life, she just kept coming back. That’s how amazing she is. I couldn’t ask for a better sister. Speaking of family, as her honorary brother, I need to tell you that if you hurt her, I



will hunt you down like a dog and rip out your insides while you're still alive and watching me do it."

"Well, that's...vivid. I'm not planning to hurt Lulu. I care about her. I can tell that she's special."

Although hearing Henry talk about her the way he did, only served to remind Kai just how special Lulu truly was. He'd never met anyone quite like her. For a former wild child, she was down to earth, pragmatic...and a freak in the sheets.

How lucky could a guy get?

"I felt it needed to be said. Lulu has always been there for me, and if you mess with her heart and break it, you'll be looking over your shoulder for the rest of your life."

"When I least expect it, expect it?"

"Pretty much."

"I respect that," Kai said.

He admired Henry's loyalty. In Kai's experience, that was hard to find these days.

"Look at all of these people here," Henry said, his gaze roaming the room. "They're all watching and waiting for Lulu to fail. Maybe because they're sexist assholes, or maybe because it will amuse them that she can't do the job. It might make them feel better about their mediocre lives or some shit like that. But they're all watching every move she makes, just waiting for her to fall flat on her face. Well, I'm not going to let that happen. Lulu's been there for me whenever I've needed her, and if she needs me to go with her without backup to catch a crazed killer? I'm in. I'll never let her down. I hope you feel the same way."

Kai wasn't as convinced that the people of Harper wanted Lulu to fail. But he did think that they expected her to. They weren't quite ready to move on from Sheriff Seth Reilly, their famous lawman. They were unsure if Lulu could truly do the job, and yes, they were watching. But were they rooting for her to crash and burn?

"I do feel the same way," Kai replied. "But I don't think everyone wants Lulu to fail. I think there are people that want her to do a good job and find the killer."

"You have a hell of a lot more faith in humanity than I do."

Henry had earned his cynicism in the human race fair and square. Far be it for Kai to lecture him about how people were usually good. That hadn't been the man's experience.

"Can I give you some advice that my grandpa once gave me?"

"Yes, but it's not going to make me change my mind about Lisa. Or about these people wanting Lulu to fail."

"Fair enough. It was pretty simple advice, and perhaps I was just in the perfect frame of mind to hear it that day. He told me that life was short, and there were no guarantees of tomorrow. We have to do whatever we can today. We can't wait to be happy or get to a milestone, and then our life would be good. We had to try and make it that way today, and it requires a bit of optimism to pull it off."

"Sounds like your grandfather was a wise man," Henry replied. "But here's the difference between you and me, Kai. I don't expect happiness or goodness. Ever. I'm sure before everything happened, I was a happy kid, although I don't remember much about my life then. I may have blocked it all out; I just don't know. But today? Today is as good as it's going to get. I'm just trying to survive the daylight hours to get to the nighttime ones. And then, in the nighttime, I'm just trying to survive until the sun

comes up. It's not a bad way to live. I don't long for things I know I won't have. In a way, it makes it a hell of a lot simpler."

To Kai, it all sounded incredibly sad. However, when he looked at Henry, the man didn't appear bothered by it at all. Right now, Henry was even smiling a bit as if enjoying the sunny afternoon. He even waved to a few people as they entered the coffee shop.

But there had to be demons, maybe lots of them, that Henry battled each day and especially at night.

"I'd like to say that if you ever need anything, day or night, you can call me," Kai said. "If the night gets far too long, or anything like that. Hell, I love staying up all night. I know that Lulu would be your first choice, but I'd like to be friends with you, too."

"I'm getting so popular around here," Henry drawled, and then chuckled at his own joke. "It must be my new cologne. Seriously, don't make the offer if you don't want to be called."

"I'm serious."

"Then I'll save your phone number," Henry said. "Prepare to be bothered in the middle of the night with a request to go find the nearest ice cream shop."

"It sounds like fun."

"It won't be, but I admire your optimism."

If Kai was going to have a relationship with Lulu - and that's what he wanted - Henry and her brother Chase were part of the package deal. It would be no hardship at all to

have them in his life.

There was something about Lulu that drew good people towards her, and it was an attribute that he admired.

Hell, who was he kidding? It felt like he was falling in love.

This was going to be a delicate interview. Lulu couldn't just barge in and accuse Kathleen Meadows of telling her roommate that Dana Cartwright was pregnant. But she also couldn't take too long getting to that important question.

On the drive to the doctor's office, Lulu had decided that she'd open with questions about Allie's alibi. She'd see how open Kathleen was to being honest about Allie. If she tried to dance around the questions or outright lie, this interview was going to take much longer than it should.

Kathleen appeared nervous when Lulu walked in and introduced herself. The woman kept clearing her throat and appearing flustered as she asked her co-worker to cover for a few minutes.

"The doctor said we could use her office. She's with patients right now."

The two of them sat on the loveseat against the wall, surrounded by the doctor's diplomas, certificates, and several photos of her family.

"Thank you for meeting with me today. This shouldn't take long."

"It's fine. Fine."

It didn't sound fine. Kathleen's voice was wispy, and Lulu had to concentrate to hear her. The other woman was pale, her hands wringing together in her lap all while chewing on her bottom lip.

Yep, she's nervous as hell. Do you have something to hide, Kathleen?

"I need to ask you about the night before Dana Cartwright's body was found," Lulu began. "Your roommate Allie Baker said that she was home all night after Jay dropped her off at about ten. Can you confirm this? Were you also home?"

"I was home," Kathleen said, nodding in agreement. "All night. I never left."

That was nice, but Lulu wasn't concerned about Kathleen's whereabouts. But it was interesting that she hadn't yet said whether Allie had been home.

"I think I should remind you that lying to an officer of the law is never a good idea," Lulu said. "If you're hiding something material to the investigation, you could be prosecuted for obstructing justice."

"Prosecuted? As in go to jail?"

Kathleen sounded scandalized. Good. If she hadn't been thinking about that, maybe she would now.

"That can happen, although I couldn't say for sure what might happen in this case in particular. I just wanted to make sure that you understood that lying - even by omission - could be costly. I know that we all want to help a good friend, but at some point, they may ask too much of us."

Kathleen rubbed at her temple and gave out a heavy sigh.

"The fact is, Allie isn't even one of my close friends. We ended up as roommates because she was a friend of a friend. We're friendly, but we're not involved in each other's lives. She spends most of her time with her boyfriend, honestly. She's rarely home."

“Jay Bradford?”

“Yes, him.”

“You say she spends most of her time with him. Were you surprised to see her home that night?”

“Kind of. She spends the night at his place most nights. That’s what makes her the perfect roommate. She’s never there.”

“I can understand that.” Lulu took another breath and forged forward. If they weren’t best buds, Kathleen just might tell the truth. “So, I’ll ask again. Was Allie home that night with you?”

Kathleen looked down at her hands and then back up to Lulu.

“Kind of.”

Lulu almost opened her mouth to ask a follow-up question, press her further. But then she remembered something her father had told her about.

Shutting up.

He’d said that most people were uncomfortable with silence. When someone creates a silence that isn’t welcome, people will often rush in to fill the quiet. They’ll start talking, and sometimes, they’ll talk about the very thing they didn’t want to talk about. Just so they didn’t have to hear the quiet.

Lulu waited, giving Kathleen her most patient but expectant look. She didn’t mind the quiet. She could wait all day.

Kathleen, on the other hand, looked fine at first but then as the time stretched on grew visibly agitated. She shifted in her chair, her gaze darting all around the office. She looked like she wanted to jump out of a window and keep running.

“She was in the apartment after Jay dropped her off, but she later left. She didn’t say anything to me before she left, but I went out to the living room and looked out the window. Her car was gone so I assumed she drove somewhere. Maybe over to Jay’s house? I thought perhaps she just wanted her car there for something in the morning.”

There it was. Kathleen hadn’t wanted to be a tattletale. But, once again, Allie was lying about her whereabouts that night.

“Was she gone all night?”

“No, she came back about three or so in the morning. I heard her take a shower and I woke up, so I don’t know exactly how long she’d been home.”

“Did you ask her about it later?”

“No, like I said, she’s not around much. I didn’t think it was a big deal until you asked me about it today.”

“She didn’t ask you to lie about where she was?”

“We didn’t talk about it at all. I’m not in trouble, am I?”

“No, being honest is the way to go. I do have to ask a few more questions. Please be as honest with these as the last.”

“I will.”



Kathleen nodded solemnly, appearing relieved that she wasn't going to jail for her barely-there roommate.

"You're the receptionist here, correct? You see everyone come and go?"

"Yes," Kathleen replied tentatively. "I mean, if I'm on the schedule. I don't work Saturday mornings."

"Did Dana Cartwright come into the office recently? Say, in the last two months?"

"I can't say. Privacy rules."

"Did you tell Allie that Dana had been here?"

The look of guilt swept over Kathleen's face. Her lips were pressed together, and her knuckles were white as she wrung her hands together ruthlessly tight.

"I'm not allowed to talk about the patients. There are privacy laws."

"Did you maybe accidentally let it slip that Dana had been in for an appointment? Was Allie talking about Dana?"

"She complained about Dana all the time," Kathleen whispered. "She said that life would be so much better if Dana wasn't around."

"As in dead?"

"She didn't say dead," Kathleen denied. "Just that it would be better. I took it as she wanted Dana to move out of town."

"Away from Jay?"

“Yes, Allie was very jealous of Dana.”

“Did she and Jay argue about Dana?”

“Sometimes,” Kathleen conceded. “Allie could be...sensitive about things. Sometimes, she would perceive slights that really weren’t there. I tried telling her that Dana wasn’t after Jay, but she didn’t believe me.”

“Kathleen,” Lulu said, keeping her tone patient and even. Friendly. “Did you tell Allie some of Dana’s personal business at the practice? Be honest, please. I’m not looking to get you in trouble, but I need to know the truth.”

“No. No, I wouldn’t do that.”

As Kathleen denied it verbally, her head was nodding in the affirmative. A clear clash of body language. Usually, the body was telling the truth.

“If I subpoena Allie’s phone records between you two, what am I going to find?”

Kathleen, who was already on edge, completely broke down at the question. Her mouth opened in a soft but plaintive wail as the tears began to flow down her cheeks. She was talking and sobbing, and Lulu could only make out about every other word.

It was enough for Lulu to realize that Kathleen had mentioned Dana’s visit to the doctor to Allie.

“Slow down,” Lulu said gently, reaching for the tissue box on the desk and handing it to Kathleen. “Take a few deep breaths, and start from the beginning, okay?”

It took a little while for her to calm down, but eventually the tears slowed, and she was able to continue.

“Allie brought up Dana,” Kathleen explained. “I didn’t bring her up. She was complaining about Dana, as usual. I didn’t even think. I just mentioned that Dana had been in the office. I know that I’m not supposed to say those things, so I immediately shut up. I dropped the subject, and at the time, Allie did, too. But I guess she didn’t. She was bugging me all the time as to why Dana was there. She kept asking if Dana was pregnant or if she was sick. She’d call me during the day, she’d send me texts, she’d bug me when I came home after work.”

“So, you told her?”

“Not really,” Kathleen replied, more tears slipping down her wet cheeks. “Allie did the whole thing where she said what she thought, and if I didn’t correct her then she’d know she was right. I just wanted her to leave me alone, Sheriff. She was making my life miserable, and I just wanted some peace.”

“She guessed that Dana was pregnant, and you didn’t correct her?”

“Yes, but it didn’t work. Allie was even more upset, and she ranted about it for days.”

“Did she argue with Jay about it?”

“No, she said she needed to figure out what to do before she talked to Jay. She said she needed to talk to Dana first. Get her to admit that the baby was Jay’s. She said she wanted to convince Dana that Jay wouldn’t want the baby, and that she should leave town to have it. Then while Dana was gone, she’d marry Jay.”

Allie had it all figured out. Get her rival out of town, marry Jay, and then when Dana returned it would be too late.

Kathleen’s hand latched onto Lulu’s arm, gripping tightly.

“I tried to talk her out of it. I swear I did. I tried to tell her that she needed to stay far away from Dana, but when Allie is like that she doesn’t hear anyone. She only knows what she wants.”

“That night that Allie left the house and didn’t come back for a few hours...You didn’t ask her about that?”

“I was afraid to,” Kathleen admitted. “I didn’t want to know. All I wanted was a roommate to help pay the bills. I didn’t want to get caught up in some romantic melodrama. I just wanted peace and quiet in my life.”

Lulu levered to her feet, tucking the notebook and pencil into her bag.

“I’m going to have this typed up, and you’re going to need to read it over and sign it. Make sure you’ve told me the truth today. Is there anything you’ve said that you want to change in any way?”

“No, I’ve told you the truth. Are you going to tell the doctor what I did?”

“You may want to do that yourself. If it turns out Allie has done something illegal, the whole story is going to come out eventually.”

“I’m going to lose my job,” Kathleen sobbed. “I wish I’d never met Allie.”

“Dana Cartwright would probably say the same thing,” Lulu replied. “Thank you for speaking with me, Kathleen. I’ll be in touch about signing your statement.”

What a massive, tangled web of bullshit. So much drama, lying, and subterfuge.

It was time to take what she had to the district attorney. Did she have enough for a search warrant for Allie’s car and home?

It was time to find out.

“ R elax, I’m going to cook dinner for you,” Kai said. “I’m not a great, but I can rustle up a couple of steaks and throw a few baked potatoes in the oven.”

Kai and Lulu were back at his place after their long day. He’d promised her dinner in exchange for hearing all that she’d learned. He’d also promised to tell her what he’d learned that day as well.

He’d called in a favor from an old college friend who worked at a major news agency on television. He’d asked his friend to check out Allie Baker and Jay Bradford. He was anxious to let Lulu know what had been found.

“Any meal I don’t have to cook is gourmet to me,” Lule replied, stretching out in front of the fireplace. The temperature had dropped quite a bit today. “Can I help?”

“I’ve got this under control,” he assured her. “Steaks are in the fridge marinating and the potatoes are in the oven. Cooking the meat won’t take long. How do you like your steak?”

“Medium. How about you?”

“Medium-rare. I had horrible visions of you saying well done.”

“My dad refused to cook steak above medium-well. Not that we ate steak a lot, mostly he grilled burgers and hot dogs because that’s what we liked most.”

“I could make hot dogs if you’d rather.”

“No, I’m happy to eat the steak, but I admit that I don’t have one of those refined palates. I can be happy with grilled cheese. After living in Los Angeles, you probably like fancy food.”

He wasn’t sure what she classified as “fancy”, but he could admit to liking well-prepared food. He could also admit to enjoying quite a bit of junk food on occasion. It was all about balance, right?

“The problem with fancy food is that they don’t usually give you much of it. Comfort food, on the other hand, usually is served in large portions. I have a big appetite,” he explained. “Ladies first on talking about their day.”

“I talked to Allie Baker, Glen Foster, and Allie’s roommate Kathleen Meadows today, but I’ll just cut to the chase. I handed over the evidence so far regarding Allie to the district attorney, and he’s going to try and get a judge to sign off on a warrant to search her home and vehicle.”

Lulu had been a busy bee today. He was floored that the investigation had made that much progress. But then, he’d had a productive day, too. He’d already started writing the human-interest piece about Dana Cartwright, wanting people to know more about her than she was just a victim of a heinous crime.

“Maybe you should start at the beginning,” he said, settling onto the floor next to her. The heat from the dancing flames felt cozy and almost hypnotic after his long day in and out of the cold. He’d been thinking about just this scenario - curled up with Lulu - since morning. “What did you learn about Allie that makes you think she might be the one?”

“Allie knew that Dana was pregnant,” Lulu said. “Her roommate Kathleen works in

the doctor's office. In a roundabout way, she told Allie. That gives her even more motive. She also blew a huge hole in Allie's alibi. Kathleen heard Allie leave the apartment after Jay dropped her off, and she didn't come back until early in the morning. That means she had opportunity, too. Take that with her threat at the sports bar that night... I'd be remiss if I didn't consider her a major suspect."

"That does sound like motive," Kai agreed. "Does that mean that Jay Bradford knew about the baby?"

"Supposedly not. I have to say that he truly looked shocked when I mentioned it this morning. He could be a great actor. I can't rule that out, but right now, the answer is that he didn't know."

"You'd think Allie would be mad at Jay, not Dana."

"You'd think she wouldn't be mad at anyone because the chances of it being Jay's baby are small. It's a huge leap in logic to go from Dana being pregnant to it being Jay's baby, especially when it sounds like Allie rarely leaves him alone long enough to get another woman pregnant. But Kathleen said that Allie was pretty much obsessed with Dana. She planned to try and convince Dana to leave town to have the baby and then get Jay to marry her while she was gone."

"Allie doesn't sound...stable."

A guy in college that Kai had hung around with had a girlfriend like Allie. Every girl on campus was after her man, and she'd kept him on a short leash. The poor guy couldn't have any fun unless she was there. She'd actually said that out loud, too. Life was too short for that shit.

"Being jealous doesn't mean she has mental health issues, although I've heard more than one person say today that it does. While Jay seems perfectly innocent, I have to



wonder if he has some ownership of this jealousy. We don't truly know if he's stoking this, playing Allie for a fool while he dreams about reconciling with his ex-wife."

"It could be a little of both. I wanted you to have a chance to talk about your day before I did, but since we've brought up Allie's mental health, I do have something to add to that."

"You didn't dig into her health records, did you?"

"I didn't break any laws," Kai assured her. "I asked a friend who works at a news agency to look into Allie and Jay. Public information only. No hacking. He didn't find anything at first. Bradford has lived a quiet and pretty uneventful life, and Allie seemed the same. It was only when he dug further that he found a record with the campus police at her university. Another student had complained about her harassing him after they went out once. He didn't want to see her again, and she didn't take the news well."

"One complaint isn't exactly a crime spree or murder," Lulu replied. "But it's something to keep in mind."

"It sounds like she's a clinger."

"A clinger?" Lulu repeated.

"The type that goes out on a date or two but gets these grandiose ideas in their head about how they're going to live happily ever after with two kids, a dog, and a picket fence. All after a frozen yogurt, and maybe a kiss goodnight."

"And Jay Bradford just went along with it?"

“If he wanted a girlfriend or just goes with the flow? Yes. For some men or women, they might appreciate all the hard work of a relationship being done for them. Of course, everything has a price.”

“Either way, the DA is going to try and get a search warrant. The case is still open as far as I’m concerned. I don’t want to get tunnel vision. I need to keep an open mind. Jay Bradford’s alibi checks out. Glen Foster’s as well, although he was never a serious suspect in my mind. I just wanted to talk to him about what he heard that night. By the way, he denies ever having an affair with Dana.”

“Do you believe him?”

“I do. He seemed honest and straightforward. I may not like him personally, but he seemed genuine when I spoke with him. What about you? Did you learn anything else?”

“I spoke with Dana’s sister Jillian, and her best friend Stacy. It was like being in the twilight zone. They didn’t even sound like they were describing the same person. Stacy told me specifically that Jillian was full of shit and to not believe a word she said. Frankly, Jillian sounded like she hated Dana in a way. She certainly doesn’t have a lot of respect for her. She didn’t have much of anything positive to say about Dana or her parents. She thinks they coddled Dana while she had to work for everything.”

“Is it true?”

“According to Stacy Simpson, no. Jillian says that their parents gave Dana the house she lived in for free, but they were supposed to sell it and split the money between the daughters. Stacy said that was never the plan. The grandmother willed the house to Dana because she was the only one who spent any time with her. Jillian also said that she was constantly bailing Dana out of her bad decisions, but Stacy denied that, too.

She did say that Dana was dating someone - a married man. She was deeply in love with him, too."

"Let me guess, he was getting a divorce any day now."

"You sound so cynical, sweetheart," Kai joked. "Not very optimistic and open-minded."

"Maybe I am a bit cynical," Lulu conceded. "But I've seen it happen with a few friends. But I'd be glad to be wrong."

"I have a feeling you might be right," Kai replied. "Dana said that the man was going to divorce his wife soon. But soon hadn't come yet."

"He's the person I want to talk to," Lulu said, sounding frustrated. "Whoever this person is, they're still on my suspect list. Dana gets pregnant, and all of a sudden, she ends up dead. Plus, the probable father is married but getting a divorce...eventually. It sounds sketchy as hell to me. That man - and his wife - are suspects in my mind."

"I don't see how we're going to figure out who Dana was seeing unless they walk up to you and introduce themselves."

"If they were going to do that, they probably would have already," Lulu said with a sigh. "There has to be someone who knew who she was seeing."

"Her best friend didn't even know. I think they were keeping things secret. Very secret. Which tells me that the man is very married. Probably kids, too."

"Yes, and he's not going to admit that he was seeing Dana. I already don't like this guy," Lulu admitted. "I think there's a special place in hell for cheaters. If you want to sleep around, then fine. But just end your relationship before doing it."

There was a certain tone in Lulu's voice that said she was speaking from personal experience.

"Did some asshole cheat on you?"

"How did you know he was an asshole?" Lulu laughed. "Oh right, he's a big old cheater. And yes, when I was in high school my boyfriend was cheating with a girl a few towns over. I guess he thought if he didn't see someone in the same school I'd never find out. What a jerk. He tried to play it off as if I was crazy or confused. I was just too dumb to understand, he said."

Kai couldn't even imagine saying that to any woman, let alone Lulu, who was clearly above average in intelligence.

"What did you do? Dump him in front of all your friends?"

"I did, but it's his own fault. When a guy tells me in front of all of our friends that I'm dumb, he gets what he gets. I told him to go fuck himself, and then I kicked him in the balls. Chase always said that I fought dirty."

Kai winced at the mere thought of getting the family jewels racked in such a manner. Not that the jerk didn't deserve it, but...damn. That was harsh.

"He probably didn't like that, Lulu."

"He didn't. He went crying to the school principal who called my parents. Mom and Dad had to come to the school to get me and all that jazz. When my mom heard my side of the story, she told that principal in no uncertain terms that Brian - his name was Brian - was lucky that's all he got. She would have done worse. In the meantime, Brian's parents were threatening to sue or some shit like that while my mom was telling them that they didn't raise Brian right. Everybody was yelling and crying, and

it was just chaos.”

“Were you yelling or crying?”

“Neither. I was just watching it all go down. You’ve never seen my mom in action, but she’s epic. I knew I was in big trouble when we got home, but she was also a mama bear about me getting my heart broken. Anyway, it’s all loud and chaotic. Then my dad walks in.”

From the smile on Lulu’s face, the memory was a good one.

“You’re not going to stop here, are you? I have to hear how this ends,” Kai cajoled. “I’ve met your dad, and I didn’t get the impression he liked chaos.”

“He doesn’t,” Lulu confirmed. “He walked in, and silence fell on the entire room. It was like something out of a movie. Very cool, but kind of a little scary, too, because I didn’t know how he was going to react to all of this. Technically, I’d assaulted a person, and my dad was the sheriff. So...you can imagine how nervous I was when he walked in.”

“And?” Kai prompted.

Just what had Sheriff Seth Reilly done?

“He walked right up to Brian and got nose-to-nose with him. He said, ‘Are you the one that broke my little girl’s heart? That cheated on her?’ I’ll never forget Brian’s face. I think he almost peed himself. He told Brian that now everyone in town would know what kind of person he was. Brian didn’t say a word, just scared as shit of my dad.”

“Then he turned to Brian’s parents and asked what they wanted to do in this situation.

Were they pressing charges? Funny, how five minutes before they wanted to send me to the electric chair, but suddenly they wanted it all behind them. They just wanted to forget the whole unfortunate situation. That's what his mother called it. Anyway, after graduation, Brian went to an out-of-state school and rarely comes back to town. What my dad said was true. Everyone knew what kind of person he was."

"What about you? What did your parents do?"

"That's more complicated," Lulu sighed. "I was always doing crap that I wasn't supposed to be doing. My poor parents were exhausted, of course, because they didn't know what to do with me. Ben hadn't been any trouble, and Chase wasn't really either. While Mom was adamant that Brian had it coming, she also didn't think it was a good idea to encourage me to react that way whenever I got dumped by a boy."

"Wise. You'd get a reputation, too."

"No guy would come near me for months. In the hallways at school, they'd pretend to get scared and cross their legs when I'd walk by. I told my parents it was punishment enough to be treated that way."

"Did they agree?"

"Nope, I was on dish duty after dinner for three months. Oh, and Brian and I had to apologize to one another. Him for being a low-down dirty dog, and me for kicking him in the balls. Frankly, I don't think either one of us meant it, but it made our parents feel better. And in case you're wondering, I don't feel the need to kick anyone in the nuts anymore if they cheat on me."

"What do you do?"

She did carry a gun now, after all.

“They aren’t worth any more of my time. I’m just gone. Out of there. No, we don’t need to discuss it, hash it out, or get closure. It’s just over. Let’s move on.”

“Much more mature. But no closure?”

“Closure is an illusion,” she replied. “If it even exists, it’s something that you find within yourself, not something that you get from another person.”

“You have an interesting take,” Kai said.

“People think that closure will make them magically feel better about something,” Lulu explained. “But does it? Truly? If a woman cheats on you with your best friend, do you really want to sit in a coffee shop while she tells you that he was just so sexy and interesting? She couldn’t help herself. It was nothing personal. Maybe you and I are different, but that wouldn’t make me feel better. If anything, I’d feel worse.”

“You make an impressive argument. You’re right, I wouldn’t want to have that conversation. But let me play devil’s advocate here for a minute. What about if it was one of your best friends? You’re inseparable. You tell each other everything. Then she falls off the face of the earth. She doesn’t return your calls, she’s never home. You see on social media that she’s fine, but she no longer wants anything to do with you. You don’t have a clue what you did to make her act like that. Are you saying you wouldn’t want to know?”

“Is this the lawyer in you?” Lulu joked. “Wanting to win an argument? And I’m not trying to convince you of anything. I’m just saying what I believe. You can believe however you want.”

“You’re avoiding the question.”

“Fine, counselor. Yes, I would want to know why, but it isn’t her responsibility to tell me. She doesn’t have any obligation. And let’s say she did tell me, and I don’t agree with her. I don’t think I’ve done whatever it is she thinks I did. Well, then we’re at a stalemate. No closure there.”

“I like talking with you. You make me think.”

“You make me think, too.”

He couldn’t stop himself from asking the question.

“Is it your dad or mom that gave you this idea about closure?”

Lulu laughed and shook her head.

“You just can’t let it go, can you? I don’t know if they did. They never outwardly said anything, but I think watching my father as a lawman might have contributed to it. Very often, he didn’t get any sort of closure as to why people do what they do. Why did Wade Bryson and his son kill all of those people? Bryson said it was because he had to cleanse the bloodline, but I don’t think my dad or Uncle Logan ever got a definitive answer. A lot of people died that weren’t Brysons, after all.”

“People are still searching for that answer. Books, articles, documentaries.”

“Good luck to them. Wade Bryson isn’t around to answer any questions, and the few times his son has been interviewed he just blames Uncle Logan and all of his friends. As in my dad, who never even met them, let alone did something to compel a human to murder.”

“What was that like? Growing up in the shadow of two serial killers?”



“That’s not how I grew up,” Lulu replied. “My parents tried hard to keep all of that out of our lives as much as possible. There was one trip during summer break with all the aunts and uncles and my cousins. What I didn’t realize right away was that the uncles and my dad were searching for Bryson and protecting us at the same time. They tried playing it off as a madcap summer on the road, but we knew something was up. Eventually, Ben spilled the beans to us kids. He was older and had heard them talking. Then Aunt Kaylee got shot, and things sort of blew up from there. I think people would be shocked at how little the Bryson family played into my life at all. Of course, my cousin Brianna would say something different.”

Kai had followed the case enough to know that Brianna had been taken hostage as bait. The plan was to use her to lure Logan Wright in and then kill him. What Jake Bryson hadn’t realized was that Logan Wright was going to go scorched-hell-on-earth with anyone that harmed a hair on his child’s head.

“It was in your life enough to make you want to be a sheriff just like your dad,” Kai pointed out.

“Not just like my dad,” she said with a shake of her head. “Maybe on my first day I was thinking that, but what I’ve come to realize this week is that I need to be the sheriff I was meant to be. That may not be like my dad. I may be a completely different law enforcement officer. But I need to be a genuine me, not a second-rate Seth Reilly.”

“Lulu, you could never be second-rate,” Kai replied as sincerely as possible.

She needed to know just how amazing she was. Every minute that he spent with her simply made him want to be there even more.

Was this love? He’d thought he’d been in love before, but later realized it was only lust.

He wanted Lulu in a carnal way, but he also wanted to hang out with her. He wanted to debate, and laugh, and even cry with her. He wanted to sit next to her in front of the fire while her heady scent of vanilla mixed with the acrid aroma of wood and smoke. He liked the way the leaping flames highlighted the gold in her hair and made her eyes seem to smolder in the half-light.

Hell, he just liked her. A whole lot, and more than he'd expected to.

If wanting to spend as much time with her as possible - in bed and out - was love, then he was a goner.

"How are you with a screwdriver and a hammer?" she asked him, bringing him out of his reverie.

"Is this some weird sexual kink you're talking about or actual do-it-yourself construction?"

"You are such a smart ass. Seriously, this is about furniture construction. The furniture I ordered about a million years ago is finally being delivered tomorrow morning to the house, and I was wondering if you might help me put some of it together. If you don't want to, it's fine. I can ask Henry and Chase."

She'd mentioned that the apartment over the sheriff's station was only temporary, and eventually, she'd move into where her aunt and uncle used to live on the family ranch.

"I'm happy to help," he replied. "And I do come with experience. Me and my college roommate furnished our place with a hell of a lot of IKEA."

"Then you're hired. They're supposed to show up between eight and ten tomorrow morning. I'll thank you now for being willing to help."

“It will be fun,” Kai said. “We can see how we work together in a stressful situation.”

“Let’s hope it doesn’t become stressful. Are you one of those frustrating people who won’t read the instructions?”

“I guess you’ll find out tomorrow. But what about the search warrant? Don’t you need to be there when they serve it? Assuming the DA gets the judge to sign off.”

“Deputy Steve has experience, but he’ll just be sort of overseeing things. The DA wants the forensic team to do the searches, and I agree with his assessment. Since this is a high-profile murder case, he wants to be sure that any physical evidence is collected by the book. He doesn’t want to give a defense attorney any reason to get something thrown out of court.”

“What if they don’t find anything? Are we back to square one?”

“I don’t think so. Top of my list is to find the married man that Dana was seeing. Someone, somewhere, has to know his identity. I might try checking out some of the restaurants and bars in nearby towns. Maybe they met outside of Harper for anonymity. I can show Dana’s picture and see if anyone recognizes her.”

“Motels, too,” Kai suggested. “They had to meet somewhere private if Dana was pregnant.”

“That ought to be fun. Find every seedy motel in a hundred-mile radius. Should I do a search on the internet for that?”

“They say you can find anything you want on the internet.”

“I guess I’ll find out if that’s true. Now, have the steaks marinated long enough? I’m starving.”

“They have. I’ll get them in the pan. I think we’ve timed the meal just right. The potatoes should be done with the steaks.”

A good meal, a warm fire, and a beautiful woman.

Lulu was a one-of-a-kind woman, and by the way she was currently looking at him, she might feel the same way.

Life in Harper was looking up, and the possibilities seemed endless.

18

Lulu was humming. Humming.

This morning, she'd caught herself humming while in the coffee shop, picking up coffees and pastries for Kai and herself. She'd told herself to stop and had succeeded for a little while.

Then she'd caught herself doing it again on the drive to the house. It wasn't even a tune she recognized. It was simply a happy, light tune for someone also feeling happy and light these days.

I might be in love.

She hadn't said it out loud yet. She'd thought about it a great deal, mulling over what a serious relationship with Kai would look like. They were both too mature to just "date around". At this point in their lives, if they were going to spend their precious little time off with someone, it was going to be a person that they could picture themselves with long-term. Kai was no fuck boy, looking for a quick hit, and Lulu had left the hooking-up culture behind. She might not be looking for forever, but she was looking for a person she could share her life with. Someone who could be a real partner to her.

She'd had her fill of men who couldn't commit, or didn't have a job, or still wanted to pal around every weekend with his "bros" while she sat at home contemplating her position as a doormat in his life.

Of course, there were other men who were threatened if her life wasn't fucked up, too. Her last boyfriend had adored her when she'd still been searching for what she wanted to do, but as soon as she'd started to make moves to improve her life and skills, he'd complain that she wasn't paying enough attention to him.

He'd had the nerve to do this while not even giving her the courtesy of looking in her eyes. He'd been glued to the television where he was playing a video game. With his bros.

Luckily, she'd remembered what her mother had told her when she'd started dating.

"If you're not important to him now during the honeymoon phase of your relationship, it's not going to get any better later."

Presley Reilly had also told her this one, "Don't fall for a man's potential. He may never get off the couch and meet it. Fall for what he is - right now - at this moment. With few exceptions, that's who he will stay."

That day he'd complained to her about not paying him enough attention, she'd taken a deep and long look at her life. It hadn't taken long to realize - maybe a few minutes - that this so-called relationship was for the birds. She'd been so busy trying to convince herself that mature, adult relationships weren't always fun that she'd forgotten that she was supposed to at least be happy to be with him.

After that revelation, she'd promptly risen from the sofa, put on her shoes, and gathered her purse and other belongings before disconnecting his router. She could hear his howl of outrage from the bathroom, where she was grabbing her eyeliner and toothbrush. She then marched out and told him that she wished him good luck in his life because he was clearly going to need it. She'd walked out without a look back.

He'd spent the next few weeks sending her texts telling her that she wasn't ever going

to do better than him. She'd sent back one single reply.

I'll take that chance.

He'd even had the audacity to tell her that she wasn't "fun" anymore like she was in the beginning. It was hard to be the fun one when he relegated her to being the designated adult of the two of them.

Brianna, of course, had told Lulu that she'd never liked the guy in the first place. Brianna had an instinct about people that was foolproof. She could sniff out a lying, cheating asshole a mile away. It was her superpower.

"You should have told me," Lulu had said. "If you had, I wouldn't have stayed with him."

"No, you were in love," Brianna had replied. "You would have made some excuse for him. I knew you'd eventually come to your senses. And if you didn't, I might have had something else up my sleeve."

Brianna never would say what she'd been planning, but Lulu had no doubt it was low-down devious, calculating, and ingenious. Brianna - in a nutshell - was fucking brilliant.

But with this man Kai Oliver, Lulu was so happy she was humming. She'd always sort of made fun of girls who walked around practically floating on air because some guy was so amazing. And now she was doing it, too.

In the middle of a murder investigation no less.

An investigation that just might get a break today. The DA had been able to procure search warrants for Allie's apartment, car, and also her workspace. Maybe...just

maybe the forensic unit would find something that would be helpful. In the meantime, Lulu could only wait for news.

She unlocked the front door of the house and walked in, juggling the two coffees and a box of pastries that Chase had packed especially for her. If she was lucky, there was a gooey cinnamon roll in that box. Or two, if Kai liked them as well. If not, well, she liked him so she might share.

She might even love him, but she wasn't ready to make that declaration. Not yet.

Placing the coffee and pastries on the kitchen counter, she stepped back to happily survey her new home. So much more room than the tiny apartment she was sharing with Henry. The house was a three-bedroom ranch style with a primary bathroom big enough that Lulu could have all of her makeup strewn across the vanity. Her clothes wouldn't even fill half of the closet.

She wasn't sure how long Henry would stay in Harper, but he would have his own side of the house with a separate bedroom and bathroom. He'd even have a real bed if all of the furniture she'd ordered was actually delivered today. She'd had a few delays with the furniture company, and she still didn't quite believe that today was the day.

Lulu hadn't inherited the decorating gene, sadly. Her dad could barely put colors together that didn't clash, and her mother had decorated their home simply, not liking clutter in any form. There had been no Pinterest fireplaces or pantries, no fresh flowers on the kitchen table each week, or handmade potholders for every holiday.

Her mother liked the color red, and her dad the color blue. That meant there were splashes of each throughout the house that was mostly beige as the backdrop. It had worked fine, too.



Brianna and Amanda both had a real eye for color - especially Amanda - and they'd offered to come help her decorate her new place. Amanda had even gone shopping with Lulu for the furniture. She'd wanted something attractive and functional without breaking her bank account.

But even without furniture, Lulu was thrilled. The maple hardwood floors gleamed, and the dark granite countertops were perfect with the farmhouse white kitchen cabinets. The fireplace was the centerpiece of the living room, and Lulu was looking forward to many evenings curled in front of it.

Her aunt and uncle had taken care of the home when they'd lived there, taking pride in their well-kept surroundings.

It had been Lulu's grandparents' greatest wish that all of their children had a house of their own on the ranch. Her parents did, her other aunt and uncle did, and now Chase had taken over their grandparents' house. There was something about having family so close that made it feel truly like she was finally home after a long journey.

She heard a vehicle pull into the driveway and it sounded like the delivery truck. She hurried outside to see the men already opening the back of the truck to unload her furniture. It was finally happening. She would be sleeping in her new house tonight.

There were three men, and they knew what they were doing. Before she knew it, they'd unloaded the furniture in the long driveway and piece by piece were bringing it into the house. She was inside instructing the men where to place her couch and two armchairs when she heard Kai's voice calling from outside.

"Hey," he said, dropping a brief kiss on her lips. "Looks like I'm just in time to put some furniture together."

"There's coffee on the counter and pastries from the coffee shop. Help yourself," she

said.

After all the build-up and months of waiting, the delivery was done in a short amount of time. She was waving goodbye to the men as they drove away before nine in the morning.

“That went more smoothly than I anticipated,” Lulu said when they went back inside. “I was sure something was going to go wrong.”

She’d told him her tale of woe regarding the furniture order. Nothing had prepared her for the runaround she’d received from the company - giving one delivery date and then telling her they’d never given her a date. It had all been stressful and frankly, a pain in the ass.

“It’s finally here so now you can breathe easier. What’s first on the agenda? Putting the beds together?”

Most of the furniture was in one piece, but the beds and the kitchen table had to be assembled. Kai had shown up with a toolbox, ready to work. Bless him, because Henry wasn’t great with tools, but Chase would have done it if she’d asked but it would have been later after work.

“First, we finish our coffee, eat our pastries, and then we put the furniture together.”

“I like that you have your priorities straight. Caffeine, first. Work, second.”

There were cinnamon rolls in the pastry box along with a cruller, two chocolate frosted donuts, and a couple of cranberry scones. They could snack on this all day long. Chase had outdone himself this morning.

They were both sitting on the brand-new barstools at the kitchen island enjoying their

breakfast. Kai's gaze was running over the room and taking in all the details. She couldn't help but wonder what he thought about her mediocre decorating skills. For some reason - that she didn't want to ponder too hard - it was important to her that he was comfortable and at home here.

"You already have the television set up?"

The television was hung over the mantle of the fireplace which was the focal point of the great room. She had her kitchen at one end and the fireplace at the other with the living room furniture in between.

"Henry and Chase did it about a week ago. They wouldn't take no for an answer when they offered. I think they did a pretty decent job. They even set up my streaming channels for me. They would have helped with the furniture, too, I just would have had to wait until tonight."

"No sense in waiting. I'm here," Kai said with a grin. "Wait, does this recliner do what I think it does?"

Ah, the recliner. Butter-soft brown leather that a person could sink into.

It had been a huge splurge on her part. Her mom and dad had one years ago, and she and her brothers had fought over who would get to sit in it. It was supposed to be her dad's Christmas present that year, but everyone, including the dog, wanted to use it.

Eventually, her mother had declared the chair off-limits for any kids unless they were hurt or sick. That had been the best part of having a cold - getting to lie in that damn recliner. It had broken a few years back, and her parents had never replaced it.

But now Lulu had.

“Massage and heat,” Lulu confirmed. “My parents had one just like it. I always said that when I had my own home, I was going to get one. So, I did. It was my splurge. And now I don’t have to share it with my brothers, the dog, or my mom and dad. It’s all mine.”

“You won’t share?” Kai playfully put on a sad face. “How cruel. Can I try it out?”

She wouldn’t mind curling up in it with him.

“You can, but I warn you, you may never want to get out of it and become a productive citizen in society. Its seduction might make you a slave to its three levels of heat and full-body shiatsu massage.”

“Shiatsu? I’m in. It won’t break me. I’m stronger than this chair.”

“I’ve seen lesser men fall but go ahead.”

Kai carefully sat down in the chair and picked up the remote from the side table. He pressed a few buttons and then let out a long sigh, his eyes closing in pure bliss.

Yep, I’ve lost him to a chair.

“Can you imagine sitting in this after a long day of work, especially when it’s cold outside?” he asked, his eyes still closed.

“Yes, that’s why I bought it. How’s the shiatsu going?”

“It’s heaven. Damn, I may have to get one of these.”

“I can tell you where to order it.”

“That sounds great. In the meantime, I might just sit here and wait for it to be delivered.”

“Kai, there’s work to be done,” she reminded him. “And you said that you were stronger than the chair, remember?”

“I was wrong.”

“Kai, I’m the sheriff of this town, and I’m packing heat. Don’t make me use it to get you out of my chair.”

That made him open his eyes, but they were alight with mischief.

“You’d shoot me over a chair?”

“I’m very tempted. And I don’t think there’s a jury in the world that would convict me. Not once they sit in that chair.”

“I do believe you’re right about that.” He levered up with a loud moan. “But I am getting one of those. Shit, I didn’t even know real people actually had them. I thought they were just something you saw at the mall.”

“Real people do,” she confirmed. “Now are we going to get to work? Eventually, I need to check into the office and see what’s going on with that warrant.”

“They’re going this morning?”

“They are. Steve said he’d call if they turned up anything.”

Kai levered up from the chair and then gave it a gentle pat.

“It’s not you. I have to go help build furniture.”

“Are you afraid of hurting the chair’s feelings? I think it will be okay.”

“I just don’t want it to get a complex. It’s nothing personal.”

“You’re beginning to make me think I shouldn’t have let you sit in it.”

Lulu loved how goofy they could be with one another. She adored a man who could make her laugh and didn’t take himself too seriously.

He’s talking to a recliner. He definitely doesn’t take himself too seriously.

“You probably shouldn’t have,” Kai agreed easily. “But that genie is out of the bottle. And I’m going to need the store so I can order one as soon as possible. Now let’s put those beds together. I brought my toolbox.”

Hmmmm...if her bed was as comfortable as the chair would Kai never want to leave it?

The kitchen table was put together first, and it went together quickly and smoothly.

The bed in the spare room had been a bit trickier, but it wasn’t too difficult. Kai hadn’t read the instructions for the table, but he had for the bed. There had to have been a million different parts in that box, and he’d had a terrible feeling that a part might have been left out. Luckily, he’d been wrong, and all the parts and pieces were accounted for. There had been some extra screws, but he wasn’t worried about those.

The king-sized bed in Lulu’s room had been the toughest, and they’d left it for last. She’d picked a modern style with a dark oak padded headboard, and the frame had built-in drawers underneath. But of course, that meant that they had to construct the

drawers which took a good bit of time. By the time they finished, they were tired, giggling, and wanting another pastry from the box in the kitchen.

“We have to put the sheets on,” Lulu instructed after they’d put the mattress in place. “I want to see the bed all made up with the pillows and everything. My friends helped me pick it out. I’m not great with what color goes with what.”

It simply wasn’t fair that Lulu looked completely adorable after their menial labor. Her chocolate brown hair - which had been piled on top of her head this morning - had fallen down around her shoulders, and it was all he could do not to reach out and run his fingers through those silken strands.

Her cheeks were pink with the effort of tossing around a king-sized memory foam mattress after putting together the heavy oak bed frame and headboard. She hadn’t made him do everything because “he was a guy” either. She’d been in there just as much as he’d been, and she had her own toolbox that Chase had given her as a housewarming gift.

“Okay, let’s go then,” he said as she disappeared into her walk-in closet.

She returned, her arms full of linens.

“I already washed them.”

“You’ll get no judgment from me.”

With Lulu on one side of the bed, and Kai on the other, they managed to wrangle the mattress cover, the fitted and flat sheet, a cozy blanket, and then the brightly colored comforter on the bed.

“Okay, now the pillows,” she commanded, pointing to a pile of them on the floor.

There had to be at least a dozen or so, all color-coordinating with the comforter and sheets.

“That’s a lot of pillows,” he observed. “You’re only one person.”

“I’ll only sleep with the bed pillows,” she said with an eye roll. “The other pillows are for decoration.”

“Call me a Neanderthal, but I don’t have any pillows in my house that are for decoration. They’re for use or they’re not there.”

“Are you helping me or not?”

“I am. Just making an observation.”

It only took a few extra moments to arrange them on the bed, although Lulu kept fussing with them as if it mattered where the blue throw pillow was located compared to the green.

It didn’t matter at all. But what do I know? I’m a guy.

Wearing a huge smile, Lulu stepped back to survey her work.

“It’s perfect. I love it.”

It did look nice. Like something out of a magazine. All those pillows were lovely to look at but not terribly practical. Was Lulu going to take them off every night and then put them back in the morning?

But it was almost too perfect.



Lulu wasn't the perfection type either. She didn't care if her lipstick was touched up, or her hair was windswept. She didn't sweat the small stuff. She might nitpick during a murder investigation, but not about whether her sandwich was prepared exactly to specifications.

Kai simply couldn't help himself.

He picked up the green throw pillow and casually tossed it on the floor, watching her reaction closely. Would she explode? Or would she laugh? His bet was on the latter.

She pulled her brows together for a moment as if she was surprised by his action, but then a smile bloomed on her far too beautiful face.

"You threw my pillow on the floor."

"I did."

"You know that's just going to start a fight, right?"

"I'm counting on it, sweetheart."

He couldn't have said who moved first, but later, he would swear it was Lulu. She'd jumped on the bed and grabbed another pillow before swinging in his direction, hitting him on the arm.

The pillow war had officially begun.

He bonked her lightly on the head with a pillow, and she hit him in the stomach. Nobody was going to get hurt, of course, because they were wielding fluffy pillows. At some point, they were chasing each other around the bed, and he reached out to grab her ankle. They both collapsed, breathing hard, on the mattress, giggling like

kids at a sleepover. All they needed were some s'mores and a scary movie.

They lay intertwined, no longer children but fully grown and consumed by mutual desire. He couldn't resist the urge to ravish Lulu, to feel her skin against his without the barrier of clothing.

She responded eagerly, straddling him and indulging in a slow and tantalizing kiss. Their tongues danced together in a game of passion, deepening with each passing moment.

His hands roamed her body, desperate to remove any obstacles between them. With Lulu, he felt completely lost in pleasure, unable to deny his desperate need for her.

The fabric of their clothing vanished in an instant, leaving their bare skin to ignite upon touch. His hands traced the curves of her body, each dip and curve an exciting discovery. Her flesh was like warm silk, inviting him to run his fingers along every inch. With every moan of pleasure that escaped her lips, his own desire intensified tenfold.

He explored her breasts with gentle caresses, teasing the hardened peaks until she cried out and gripped the sheets tightly. His fingertips then ventured lower, tracing the contours of her thighs until he found just the right spot to bring her to ecstasy. She whimpered his name as she surrendered to the waves of pleasure crashing over her.

Gripping her hips, he rolled them over so he hovered above her, allowing him to taste every inch of her neck and shoulders with his lips and tongue. She laughed playfully when he found a sensitive spot, her hands gliding down his spine and sending shivers down his body. Every touch from her was like fire igniting within him, fueling his growing urgency.

Luckily for him, Lulu felt the same.

She raised her hips eagerly, pulling him closer and locking their gazes together. With a slow and deliberate thrust, he entered her completely. They stayed like that for a long moment, basking in the intense connection between them. Eventually, he simply couldn't stay still any longer.

Their movements were more confident this time, fueled by their growing knowledge of each other's desires. As she gyrated her hips with every powerful stroke, he couldn't take his eyes off of Lulu's stunning form. Her skin glistened with sweat and her long hair cascaded around them like a veil.

"Are you ready?" he growled, his voice rough with desire. "Tell me what you need."

Lulu didn't need to say a word as her body spoke volumes. With each thrust, she ground against him urgently, driving both of them towards the pinnacle. He could feel the heat building within him, the building pressure in his lower back.

It was hot and sexy, and it had him on the edge, ready to go over. But he wanted it to be the both of them jumping into the stars.

He fell only seconds after Lulu, giving in to the waves of pleasure that took full control of his body. He wanted to keep his eyes open to watch her orgasm again, but his lids squeezed shut as red-hot flames ran through his veins like lava.

When it was over, they collapsed together laughing and cuddling in the brand-new sheets. They couldn't stay there all day, but for the next few minutes, Kai was going to simply enjoy holding Lulu in his arms.

And he couldn't wait to do it again.

It would have been wonderful to lounge in bed with Kai all day, but that wasn't something that Lulu was going to get to do. They both had jobs, and people depending on them to do it.

After a quick shower, Lulu changed into her uniform and headed directly to the station. She hadn't heard from Deputy Steve yet, but depending on how long the searches took, she should be hearing something very soon.

She'd stopped at the coffeemaker to pour herself a cup before retreating to her office to once again look over the investigation file one more time - just in case there was something she'd missed - when Steve walked into the station.

"You did it," he crowed.

The station was empty except for the receptionist as everyone was out on patrol. Jill, however, wasn't all that interested in police work. She was, as usual, playing a game on her phone and didn't even look up when Steve walked in.

The deputy was smiling, which wasn't all that unusual. Except this time, he was grinning like he'd won the lottery.

"I did what?"

"You cracked the case," Steve said, following her to her tiny office at the back of the station. "The forensic team found what they think is the murder weapon. I have

photos. They've taken it back to the lab to test for Dana's blood. The DA told me to tell you to pick up Allie Baker and arrest her for murder."

"So quick? They don't want to wait for the forensics to come back?"

Steve handed her his phone so she could page through the photos he'd taken. It appeared to be a metal pipe with blood and hair stuck to it, wrapped in a bright two-toned blue checked cloth.

"He's afraid she'll try to run. She doesn't have many ties to the community other than Jay Bradford and her job."

Allie's ties to Bradford seemed pretty strong to Lulu, but she wasn't going to argue with the district attorney. If he thought he had enough to prosecute, then she'd do it. In the end, it wasn't her call.

"Where did they find it?"

"Allie's bedroom closet, hidden at the back behind some dirty laundry and boxes of shoes. I guess she didn't think that anyone would look there."

"I don't want to arrest her in a classroom in front of a bunch of kids," Lulu said, more to herself than Steve. "I'll call the DA and see if the end of the day is good enough."

"You did great, Lulu," Steve said. "You wrapped up this case in good time. The town is going to be thrilled."

"The town is going to be shocked," she replied. "They were waiting for me to fall flat on my face. Then they could all say that I'd just been a nepotism hire, and that they always knew I couldn't do the job."

“Well, fuck ‘em all, right? You showed them, didn’t you?”

“I guess I did.”

Then why didn’t she feel vindicated? Shouldn’t there have been some sort of rush of accomplishment? An achievement unlocked? Why didn’t she feel something more? It was almost...a letdown. Was this how her father felt after a case was solved? The rush of the chase simply leaked away like a hole in a birthday balloon?

After Steve left her office, she called the DA to discuss the timing of the arrest. He agreed that traumatizing a bunch of elementary students wasn’t a great idea, and that she should time the arrest for after school. As long as no one tipped off Allie, it should go smoothly.

They also discussed that Harper didn’t have the resources for a long-term prisoner, should the judge not offer bail. Or if they did, that Allie Baker couldn’t pay it. The DA assured Lulu that they had an agreement with the county lockup to house any prisoners for Harper that exceeded twenty-four hours.

Before hanging up the call, the DA congratulated her on a job well done.

“Your dad would be proud of you,” he said.

After she hung up the phone, she sat at her desk for a long time letting the feelings wash over her. She’d solved a murder, and that was good. She’d proved to the town - and herself - that she could do this job. She should be jumping for joy.

Maybe I’m just not the jumping for joy type? Maybe I’m the all-business kind of person.

It was then that it hit her that she might not be feeling the “completion” love because

it wasn't really done. She still had to arrest Allie Baker, and then the DA would either broker a plea deal or have a trial. If she was found guilty, then there would be sentencing. There was still a great deal that needed to happen. Her part of this wasn't over.

Later today, she was going to arrest Allie Baker for the murder of Dana Cartwright.

Kai wouldn't have been doing his job if he hadn't covered the arrest of Allie Baker. He'd been tipped off by a teacher at the school who called him and said that the sheriff and two deputies had just picked up Allie, put her in handcuffs, and were taking her to the sheriff's station.

For a brief moment, he was a little hurt that Lulu hadn't told him herself, but then he realized that she, of course, couldn't. She was the damn sheriff, after all. She'd probably wanted to keep the arrest as quiet as possible so there wouldn't be a bunch of onlookers.

Instead, he headed for the sheriff's station where the local television news already had a truck and a reporter with a microphone waiting for Lulu to show up. A small crowd had gathered as well, but a deputy was keeping them behind a barricade that had been set up.

Three official vehicles pulled up and parked in front of the station. The television reporter smirked at Kai before rushing up to the lead car where Lulu was climbing out of the driver's side, sticking the microphone in her face.

"Tony and I will give a joint statement in a moment," Lulu said to the reporter, dismissing the smiling woman rather efficiently.

The reporter wasn't put off, however, and they rounded the vehicle to where Tony Witscoff, the district attorney was exiting the car. She tried to ask him a few

questions, but he shook his head, too.

A deputy climbed out of each of the second and third vehicles, before striding up to the back door of the middle car and opening it. Allie Baker, cuffed and angry, emerged from the backseat, her gaze taking in the crowd that had gathered to see her “perp walk” into the station.

Another car pulled in behind the three, and Jay Bradford rushed out, urgently speaking with Lulu who was trying to calm him down. Everyone disappeared into the station, the door closing behind them. Kai didn’t move from his spot since he’d heard Lulu say that a statement would be made in a few minutes. Some of the crowd, however, began to drift away now that there wasn’t anything exciting to see.

“Looks like your girlfriend pulled it off,” the reporter said, a smug smile on her heavily made-up face. “To be honest, I didn’t think she had it in her. Or was this just pure luck? You have to wonder if her father’s entire law enforcement career was just actually luck. Being in the right place with the right people like Logan Wright and Tanner Marks.”

Kai had researched the men that had brought in Wade Bryson and later his son Jake. There hadn’t been one man in that group that was just hanging on. They’d all played their parts. Every one of them. But they didn’t need him to contradict what she’d said. Their legacies were secure.

“It wasn’t luck,” he said. “Lulu’s damn good at her job.”

“Can I quote you on that?”

“You can, but I doubt you will.”

The reporter turned on her high heel and whirled away, but she didn’t go far as the



door of the sheriff's station opened up again. Lulu and Tony Witscoff walked out onto the sidewalk, ready to make their statement. Immediately, the reporter had a microphone in their face, while Kai turned on the recorder in his phone.

He might not be able to do a "live" on television, but he could at least get an article online within the hour.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see another familiar vehicle pull up as close as possible. Ray Ramsey and Ellen Dunphy - both from the town council - had apparently driven over to see the spectacle firsthand.

Tony Witscoff cleared his throat, and everyone's attention turned to him.

"We have prepared a few remarks, and we will take some questions, although we cannot comment on certain aspects of the investigation as it continues to unfold. First up, Sheriff Reilly."

There was applause from the people gathered behind the barricade along with a few "whoops" and a "Hell yeah" from one particular bystander. Lulu might have had her detractors when she became the sheriff, but she'd obviously had some fans, too.

Lulu had a piece of paper she'd made notes on.

"This afternoon, Allison Baker was arrested for the murder of Dana Cartwright. This was after a search of her home, vehicle, and workplace that turned up items of interest in this case. At this time, Ms. Baker and her attorney have declined to give any additional statements to law enforcement. She will be held here at the Harper City jail until she is arraigned in county court tomorrow. Tony?"

Tony Witscoff, the DA, stepped forward.

“When arraigned, the judge will make a determination of whether bail is appropriate, and if it is, what amount. If no bail, Ms. Baker will be held at the county lockup until trial. Any questions?”

The only reporters there were Kai and the woman from the local television station, so this wasn't exactly Meet the Press. The reporter was eager to ask more, so Kai let her go first.

“Is it true you found the murder weapon in Allie Baker's apartment?”

Small towns didn't have many secrets apparently.

“I cannot comment on an ongoing investigation,” Witscoff replied. “Any more questions?”

“Is it true that Allie Baker threatened Dana's life the night before the murder?”

“We do have corroborated evidence that is the case,” Witscoff confirmed.

“I want to ask Sheriff Reilly a question,” the reporter said, pointing her microphone directly under Lulu's nose.

“What will your father think of your success, and did he help you at all with this investigation? Or any of his friends? Did you use any of his law enforcement resources gathered over the years? After all, everyone in this area knows your reputation as a...let's say...troubled youth. And now suddenly, you're the model sheriff. That's quite a transformation, Lulu. Do you have any comment about that?”

What a bitch. Is that the only way you can get viewers? Provocative questions?

Kai wasn't a big fan of using the b-word, but sometimes it just fit a situation so

perfectly. No other word would do. To Lulu's credit, her expression remained bland as if she was asked impolite questions every day of her life. If the woman had been trying to bait Lulu into making some sort of scene, she was going to be disappointed.

"I don't think that's a subject for this moment," Witscoff said hurriedly, waving away the question with his hand. "If you want to interview Sheriff Reilly about her career, you can always put in a request."

"I'll do that," the reporter said, her eyes narrowed nastily and her lips a flat line.

She was trying to stare down Lulu but was getting nowhere. Lulu wasn't giving the reporter any reaction at all.

"Do you have any questions?" Witscoff asked, turning away from the woman and toward Kai.

"Just one. Does this arrest mean that all other suspects have been cleared?"

Kai thought that Lulu might chime in, but she remained silent, not meeting his eyes. She probably didn't want anyone to think she favored him since they were seeing each other.

"As far as we're concerned, we have the right person in custody. Thank you. We'll let you know if we have any more statements," Witscoff replied.

The two of them turned to go back into the sheriff's station, but Ray Ramsey and Ellen Dunphy ran up to them before they could get back inside.

The now-ignored television reporter had stomped back to the news van. Kai had only heard a few choice words from the woman as she chewed out the cameraman for something that probably wasn't his fault. She wasn't a happy camper about not

getting to rile up Lulu.

And you have a nice day.

“You did it,” Ramsey crowed. “We knew you could do it.”

“That’s what I told, Ray. Didn’t I, Ray? I told him you could do it. You’ve closed this investigation incredibly fast. Fantastic,” Dunphy said, nodding her head over and over. “Looks like we have ourselves a first-class sheriff here in Harper. Again.”

“First class,” Ramsey echoed. “The Reilly family must have law enforcement in their blood. Listen, Lulu. There’s probably going to be a lot of press creeping around here once the word gets out that Seth Reilly’s daughter solved a murder case. You might want to take a few days off. Maybe go on a little vacation. Lay low for the weekend.”

“Good idea,” Witscoff agreed. “The national news might pick this up, or at least statewide. I know you don’t like publicity, so it might be good to get away. Take a long weekend. You deserve it.”

“Yes, you deserve it,” Dunphy repeated. “Right, Ray?”

“Absolutely. A reward for a job well done.”

“I’ll think about that,” Lulu said. “I just feel like I haven’t been on the job very long to be taking a few days off.”

“You solved a murder,” Witscoff protested. “That’s huge. A few days away from the prying eyes of the press will be good.”

“Maybe I will. We’ll see.”

“What happens now?” Dunphy asked. “What can we expect?”

“I can answer those questions, Lulu,” Witscoff said. “I know you have a prisoner to process.”

Did Witscoff want some of that sweet praise for himself? Lulu didn’t seem perturbed at all by the older man’s dismissal. She simply nodded and took a step towards the door before hesitating.

“Can we talk for a minute?” she asked Kai.

“Sure.”

They stepped away from the chattering threesome who were talking trial strategy and possible bail numbers.

“I wanted to call you...”

“I know,” Kai said. “I understand why you couldn’t. I get it, Lulu. I do.”

“You’re not mad?”

“I’m as far from mad as I can be.”

“I guess it’s kind of over,” she said, looking over her shoulder where Witscoff was talking to the town council members. “Things should probably go back to normal. Whatever that is.”

“It probably will,” he agreed. “And you’ll figure out what normal is.”

“I will.”

“How about we get together tonight and celebrate? Chase and Henry, too,” he suggested. “Dinner is on me.”

For the first time this afternoon, Lulu smiled. In seconds, she’d gone from serious sheriff to playful girlfriend.

Now that the killer was officially behind bars, perhaps they could take some time and figure out what they were to each other.

Figure out if they were truly falling in love.

Ray Ramsey's idea of getting away for a few days wasn't a terrible one. The sheriff's station was already getting calls from news outlets, all wanting the story about how the daughter of a famous serial killer catcher was now catching killers of her own. Everyone wanted a piece of the story, and Lulu didn't want to be the latest entertainment in the twenty-four-hour news cycle that cable television and social media demanded these days.

Her parents had a cabin that they used now and then to get away from it all. It was shared by several of the "aunts and uncles", and when she reached out no one objected to her using it. They'd all agreed that it was probably a good idea to stay out of the spotlight until the excitement died down. She'd received congratulations on arresting her first murderer, but luckily, no one had decided to compare her to her father.

At least not out loud.

As far as she knew, her mom and dad didn't know yet. They should still be in the middle of the Caribbean basking in the sunshine, drinking tropical cocktails, and playing shuffleboard. They could hear all about it when they returned from vacation.

By then, they might know more about how Allie Baker had managed to pull it off. The woman wasn't talking much at that moment, still protesting that she was innocent. She'd called Lulu a few choice names, too, while being interviewed by the press.

The fact was that Lulu would have held off on arresting Allie if it had all been up to her. But Tony had been adamant that there was plenty of evidence. He assured her that the holes she was worried about were minor. No big deal. Every case had them, and eventually, they would be filled in.

“Open and shut cases are great,” Tony had said. “But you’re not going to get one every time. We have motive, means, and opportunity, Lulu. I’ve seen people convicted with far less. We found the murder weapon in her home. That’s pretty damning, if you ask me. You’ve done your job. Take the ‘W’ and be happy. This time the good guys won.”

Why didn’t it feel like a win? Was Lulu simply incapable of being happy about a human being a killer?

To quiet the voices in her mind, and get away from the nosy press, Lulu was packing her bags early the next morning to spend a weekend at the cabin. She’d invited Kai to go with her, and he’d seemed happy to have a few days to themselves.

Henry, on the other hand, had pretended to pout for a few hours. She had to admit that if she hadn’t been seeing Kai, she would have invited Henry to go with her. Maybe Chase, too.

But she was seeing Kai...

Eventually, Henry had laughed and said that he wasn’t upset at all, just busting her chops a bit. He was looking forward to having a couple of days of quiet to get a big project done for a client. She’d asked him if he was still thinking about leaving town, and he’d said that he would at some point, but that he didn’t have a date in mind. While he liked Harper, he wasn’t inclined to live there full-time. But he’d come and visit often.



Henry was a grown man, but she couldn't help but be worried about him when she wasn't around. He had so many demons in his life, baggage that would have ruined a lesser person. She wanted to be there for him, but she also had to live her own life. Henry would be the first person to tell her, too.

Hell, he had told her. Often. She couldn't plan her life around his issues.

"That's why I have therapists, Lulu. That's not your job."

Too often, Henry's reaction to things was to back away from life. She liked to think that she'd helped him step away from his comfort zone every now and then.

The sound of Kai's tires crunching on the gravel of the driveway brought her back to the present. She was supposed to be having fun this weekend. She wanted to spend some quality time alone with Kai. In bed. Out of bed. She wanted to have a deep conversation with him about life, love, and everything in between. She wanted to hold hands and stare at the lake or the fire in the fireplace for hours. She wanted to laugh and joke and be silly. Mostly, she wanted to get to know him better and figure out if she was truly falling in love.

"Ready to go?" he asked softly when she opened the door.

She'd told him that Henry would still be asleep, so they needed to be quiet.

The sun was only just now peeking over the horizon, and Lulu yawned widely before answering.

"I am. Can we stop at the coffee shop on the way out of town? I need some caffeine."

"Good plan," Kai approved. "I could use some coffee, too."

Lulu was still yawning when they walked into the shop. It wasn't all that busy yet as it was still early, but within a half an hour it was going to be hopping. They gave their order and stepped aside to wait. Chase was behind the counter helping to fill orders and gave them a wave when he saw them.

"Hi, Lulu. Kai."

Lulu knew the voice well. It was Lisa. Henry's ex-girlfriend? Had they ever really been boyfriend and girlfriend? It was strange to put names on relationships after a certain age. She wasn't sure she wanted to call Kai her "boyfriend" because he wasn't a boy. They were grownups. Was there some other name? Perhaps significant other ? Partner ?

"Hi, Lisa. You're up early this morning," Lulu replied.

"I'm heading to visit my grandparents for a few days. They have a few things around the house they need help with. I'm glad to see you today. I was planning to leave this with Chase, but I can give it to you."

Lisa held up a light blue wool cardigan.

"A sweater?"

"It's Henry's," Lisa explained. "He left it at my place, and I've been wanting to return it. It looks expensive. I'm sure he'll want it back."

Now Lulu recognized it. She'd helped Henry pick it out a few years ago. He had to be missing it because it was one of his favorites. Henry loved his clothes, and he liked to be dressed well.

"Henry is being an idiot," Lulu heard herself saying before she could stop the words.

Oh well, they're out there now.

"Maybe," Lisa conceded, her expression sad. "Maybe he's right that I couldn't handle it. I was willing to try, but he said it wouldn't work. He knows himself so I think I need to believe him."

"He doesn't know you," Lulu replied. "And sometimes he doesn't know himself. He's a lot. I can admit that. He has issues, but he's working on them."

Yes, Henry was working on them but... It didn't mean that he was ready to be in a relationship. The sad reality was that it might never mean that he could do that.

"I do miss him," Lisa said, her eyes bright with unshed tears. "Is it stupid to say that I love him? It is, isn't it? I mean, I barely know him really. But I do."

"It's not stupid. Henry is a lovable person. When you meet the right person, you just know."

"I think so, too," Lisa said. "My parents said they knew the moment they met. But that's just luck. I don't know."

"Listen, don't give up on Henry," Lulu urged. "I'll work on him."

"No," Lisa said, shaking her head. "He's made up his mind. I have to respect that. I'd want him to do the same for me. I'll just remember him as the funny guy I spent some time with. Always good memories."

Lulu didn't get a chance to reply. Lisa pressed the sweater into her hands and then quickly left the coffee shop.

"Lulu, it's time to get on the road," Kai said gently. "Our coffee is ready."

They walked back out to the car and back on the road. Lulu didn't say much as they drove, her mind busy with a swirl of thoughts. She was supposed to be unplugging from the regular life but failing miserably.

"You look like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders," Kai said after a while. "I think you need this getaway."

"I was thinking about Henry," she replied. "He's talking about leaving Harper. And also, about Chase and Ben, too."

"Whoa, slow down. It's not even eight in the morning. You're thinking about all of that?"

"Yes, the 'fixer' in me wants to make everything better in their lives, and it's frustrating when I can't."

"Let's hold off on Henry for a minute, because I know that he's a big subject all on his own. But what about Chase and Ben? Is there something wrong?"

"No...well...maybe. I don't know," Lulu admitted. "It's just weird between them. Chase is always on about Ben, and I admit that he has a point. Ben hasn't exactly been all that present lately, but I know that he feels a great deal of pressure about his job. He works obscene hours, and he never complains. He just says that it's part of the job, but eventually, I would imagine he'd get burnt out, you know? Anyway, I guess Chase is mad at Ben because he wasn't here for Dad's retirement. Or his birthday a few months ago. Or Mom's birthday before that."

"It sounds like Ben hasn't been here for much," Kai observed. "That happens as people grow up and move away. Their life is somewhere else. Home isn't home anymore, and Harper is just a place to visit once in a while. Are you angry with Ben?"

“No, I get it. Especially when my life was sort of up in the air. I didn’t want to come back and bump into someone I knew and have them ask me about my life. I didn’t have any answers then. But Ben does have the answers. He’s so incredibly successful. He and his friends started their own business, and they make tons of money. He’s got it all figured out.”

“Maybe he doesn’t think he does.”

“Trust me,” Lulu laughed. “He does. He’s pretty smug about it, too. Not in a mean way, but he thinks he’s got the world by the tail.”

“Does he?”

“Money, friends, beautiful girlfriends. It certainly looks like he does. When he talks about it, it sounds like he does. He’s always apologetic about not getting back home. He sends flowers, and candy, and muffins and stuff. Chase is mad that he never sends himself.”

“This is between Chase and Ben,” Kai said. “If I were you, and I’m not, I wouldn’t get involved. Maybe they just need to take a swing at each other and get it all out of their systems.”

“What is it with men punching each other and then having a beer? It makes no sense.”

“I didn’t say it did, but sometimes it works.”

“It sounds stupid,” Lulu argued. “And frankly, I’m not sure Ben even realizes that Chase is pissed off.”

“Are you mad at him, too? Has he ever acknowledged your new job?”

“No,” Lulu admitted. “No, he hasn’t.”

And that wasn’t like Ben. He could be an asshole, no doubt there, but he usually wasn’t a huge one.

“Have you reached out to him?”

“Yes, and he texted back. He just hasn’t mentioned the job, that’s all. It isn’t a big deal. He...probably forgot. He’s a busy man.”

“And Chase is pissed off that Ben forgets things?”

“Yes,” Lulu sighed. “Chase never forgets anything. Ever. Even silly small stuff like your favorite ice cream flavor. Ben used to get so frustrated with Chase when we were growing up.”

“It sounds like two brothers who love each other and their families but have very different ways of showing it. They’re living their lives based on their own belief systems, and they haven’t yet come to terms with the fact that they’re not the same just because they grew up in the same house with the same parents.”

“For an only child, you’re laying down some wisdom this morning,” Lulu said. “Where did you learn all this psychological sibling stuff?”

Kai popped a bite of his coffee cake into his mouth before answering.

“I went to boarding school with a set of twins. I roomed with one of them, because heaven forbid, they roomed together. They fought like cats and dogs. Apparently, at one point they were close. And I mean really, really close. They finished each other’s sentences close. They wore the same clothes, ate the same food, played the same sports, got crushes on the same girls.”

“That doesn’t sound healthy in the least,” Lulu observed. “That sounds like creepy enmeshment.”

“I can’t say whether it was or not, but eventually one day one of them decided to do something different. He didn’t want to wear the blue shirt. He wanted to wear the green one. It set off the other one and it was a world war after that. That’s why I was rooming with the rebel twin. The other one just couldn’t let it go until one day one of the teachers sort of blew up at him. The kid was complaining about his brother again and this teacher just sort of couldn’t take it anymore. He asked the twin, ‘Has it ever occurred to you that your brother is not you?’”

“This was news?”

“Apparently. The other twin just sort of stood there with his mouth hanging open. I don’t think he had thought that his brother was a separate person. They were twins, in his eyes, and that meant conformity in all things. I’ve always wondered if it was something the parents had encouraged, or if he was like that on his own.”

“Did the twins reconcile? I’m a sucker for a happy ending.”

“Sadly, no. The one twin was simply too angry about it all. They barely spoke all four years of high school. I don’t know what happened after graduation though. They might have reconciled then.”

“That’s sad. I hope Ben and Chase don’t end up like that. It would be terrible.”

Frankly, she couldn’t see her mother allowing games like that to go on. She’d make them sit down and hash it all out before she’d let them hate one another.

“I’m not saying Chase and Ben are that far gone,” Kai explained with a shake of his head. “I’m sure that Chase knows that his older brother is a separate human being.

But it might be hard for him to see his older brother off in the big city, doing big city things.”

“Chase has always been happy being in Harper.”

Kai smiled at Lulu’s adamant tone.

“You seem pretty damn sure about how your two brothers think and feel. Maybe they’re saying one thing but feeling something else. Maybe Ben misses home, and Chase is wondering if he made the right decision to stay. You took your time working out what and who you wanted to be. Ben and Chase might envy that.”

Lulu had never thought that her brothers envied anything about her life. They’d always told her that she needed to calm down, think things through, and not be so impulsive. Could it be that they had been the impulsive ones? They’d chosen their futures early, and maybe...just maybe...were thinking about what might have been?

Nah, there was no way. Ben had always been sure he wanted to be in business in a city that didn’t roll up its streets before nine. Chase had loved working with their mom at the coffee shop, and he’d been stoked to take over when she retired. It was too hard to believe that they were regretting their life choices.

Lulu had always been the one who questioned her life, not her brothers. She’d been the one floundering to find a purpose that had meaning. This was just a silly disagreement between her brothers, and it honestly needed to stop. If Chase needed to yell at Ben, then she’d arrange it so they could eventually move past it.

She might not be able to fix the world, but this was one thing she was sure she could pull off. The Reilly family couldn’t go on being fractured and at each other’s throats. Ben and Chase could work out their shit and then leave it behind.



It would be job number one when she got back to Harper.

The sun was shining, the temperature perfect - not too chilly, but not too warm. Rain had been predicted for the weekend, but somehow a few clouds had passed over them without even a small shower.

Kai and Lulu had arrived at the cabin, thrown their bags inside, and then headed straight outside again to go for a long walk beside the lake. For a grown man, he'd enjoyed simply holding her hand far too much. There was something about being with Lulu out here in nature that felt comfortable and right.

Eventually, they'd climbed into the rowboat and lazily drifted across the smooth surface of the lake. Lulu was reclined against him, her fingers trailing in the chilly water. They didn't speak much unless it was to point out the shape of a cloud that looked like a bunny or a watering can.

"I'm thinking about getting a dog."

Her announcement was out of the blue, but from her tone she'd been thinking about the subject for a long time. Longer than they'd been in the rowboat, anyway.

"What kind of dog?" he asked.

"I don't know. The kind that wouldn't mind being outside and getting muddy every now and then, but would be fine inside the house, too, and wouldn't destroy my furniture."

“You don’t have any particular breed in mind?”

“No, I think I’d go to a shelter or rescue and adopt.”

“That sounds like a nice thing to do. I like dogs.”

It was a funny conversation, and it was clear that Lulu was tiptoeing around whether he would be someone who would like to have a dog around.

Because she wanted him around, too.

“You do?”

“I do,” he confirmed. “When I was a kid, we always had dogs. I missed them when I was at school. When I was home, they slept in my bed. It drove my mom crazy. She said that dogs don’t belong in people’s beds, but I think that they do.”

“Me, too.” There was a long pause before she continued. “Did you like going to boarding school?”

That was an interesting question. Depending on the day and his mood, he might answer it differently.

“Sometimes,” he finally replied. “I liked my friends, and we had a great deal of fun. But I missed having my own room and my dog. I missed my grandpa that I would visit in the summer. If I ever have a kid, I don’t think I’ll send them to boarding school. I got a great education, but I’m not sure it was worth it...the things I missed.”

“I think my parents would have loved to send me to boarding school during my teen years, but we couldn’t afford something like that.”

“There were a fair number of kids that were there because their parents couldn’t deal with them,” Kai conceded. “It always seemed like a copout to me, though. Like they didn’t want the hassle, so they sent them away for four years except for summer and holidays.”

“I don’t know about that,” Lulu said. “If they were anything like me, they probably drove their parents to almost lose their minds.”

This was becoming some sort of broken record. Lulu was constantly down on herself for her wild-child past.

“Can I ask you a question? Just how bad could you have been? No one died. You didn’t die. From what you’ve said there were no drugs involved. You didn’t torture small animals. You were a teenager who wanted to test your boundaries, and you were far more enthusiastic about it than most other kids. That’s not a sin, Lulu. Give yourself a break. You’re not doing five to ten at the state pen.”

Kai was pretty sure he fucked up their wonderful afternoon, because Lulu didn’t reply at all. She simply stared up at the sky until it was time to go back to the cabin.

He’d hurt her somehow, and now he felt like shit. He’d been trying to make her feel better about herself, but he sucked at it. It was just that she was so hard on herself, even now that she wasn’t giving anyone any trouble.

Did her parents or siblings constantly bring it up? Was she stuck in some sort of “family slot” where they wouldn’t let her escape her troublesome past behaviors? She was going to have to hear about them for the rest of her life?

If so? That was bullshit. He’d bet his trust fund that the rest of her family wasn’t any more perfect.

Calm down. You don't know that's what's going on here.

Kai didn't know, but he had a few suspicions. When they arrived back at the cabin, he stepped away for a few minutes to shoot Henry a text asking about his theory. He was sure Henry would tell him the truth - no sugarcoating.

Here I am trying to fix things for Lulu. She can do that for herself, of course.

Kai wanted her to realize how amazing she was. Every day he marveled at this woman, and yet she didn't seem to know that while no one was perfect...in his eyes, she was damn close.

Fuck that. You want her to know that you love her. Go ahead and admit it.

It was becoming harder and harder to ignore the elephant in the room. Kai had fallen hard for Lulu, and it didn't look like there was an escape hatch. He was in. All in. Damn, if it didn't feel better than anything. Just walking around with her and floating on a stupid lake with her had made him a happy man.

Everything in the world was better now that Lulu was in his life.

"Should we grill the chicken for dinner?" Lulu asked when he came out of the bedroom.

She was bustling around in the kitchen, pulling the items they'd purchased at a nearby store out of the refrigerator and placing them on the counter.

"That sounds good."

She wasn't looking him in the eye. She was pretending to be busy, and it was all his fault.

Some people would ignore the rising tension between them until it would eventually fade after some time.

Kai wasn't one of those people.

He was the type that liked to air out any grievances, bring it all to light, so they could move on from whatever it was. He believed Lulu was like that as well. He was going to find out shortly.

"I'm sorry about earlier," he said. "It's none of my fucking business. I just wanted you to know how amazing you are. You are, Lulu. You don't have to keep paying for your sins when you were younger."

She froze, and he watched her take a shuddering breath before finally looking up at him.

"I'm sorry, too. It's just?—"

She broke off, shaking her head as if what she had to say wasn't worth saying. He was sure that it was.

"It's just?" he prompted. "What's on your mind, babe? I'm here. I'm listening. I care."

Apparently, that was the wrong thing to say, because Lulu burst into tears, her shoulders shaking with sobs. Kai immediately went to her side, and she let him pull her into his arms, rocking her back and forth while they stood in the middle of the tiny kitchen. Eventually, the tears subsided, and Lulu sniffled a bit as she took a step back but not out of his embrace.

"I think I might be going crazy," Lulu finally said. "I don't know which way is up

these days. I'm so confused. And you shouldn't have to deal with any of this. You're too patient by far. I wouldn't blame you if you took off and ran down the mountain back to town."

That was the last thing on his mind.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said firmly. "Why don't we go sit down on the couch, and you can tell me what's going on. I know you're upset about Chase and Ben. And Henry. Is there something else?"

The cabin wasn't large, so it was only a few steps to the living room that was cozy and warm. Kai was planning to light a fire once the sun was down and the temperature dropped. He had visions of them curling up on the overstuffed sofa, sipping wine, and staring at the flickering flames.

"I'm not upset about Chase and Ben anymore. You made a lot of sense about this being between them. I don't want to be someone who is constantly trying to fix people. Except..."

Her voice trailed off, but Kai knew where this was going.

"You want to fix Henry."

"Yes," she sighed. "Sometimes I can see that he's in so much pain, and there isn't anything that I can do for him. It hurts me, too."

"Lulu, you do so much for him," Kai replied. "You're his friend. You're there for him. You care about him. Believe me, that's more than most people can hope for."

"He's hurting himself."

As far as Kai could see, Henry wasn't the self-destructive type. He wasn't racing motorcycles on narrow mountain roads or jumping out of airplanes without a parachute.

"Henry strikes me as a very self-aware person," Kai replied. "He knows what his actions are doing. He's actively working on himself. But that's work he has to do. You can't do it for him."

"It's frustrating," she said, her lashes still wet with tears. "I don't like that I can't make it all better for him."

"I don't like that I can't make you feel better about this either. Now we're both trying to fix people. We have so much in common."

That got a watery smile from her, and an elbow in his ribs.

"It's not just Henry."

"I figured it was more than that. We can talk about it, if you want to. I don't want to push."

"You do want to push," she retorted.

"Okay, I do want to push you to talk about it. I think it will make you feel better. But I'm not going to do that. We'll talk about it on your timetable, if at all."

"Then how about we make dinner? I'm starving," she declared, wiping her wet cheek with the back of her hand. "How are you on the grill?"

"I've got mad skills," he boasted proudly. "I'm pretty handy when it comes to cutting up veggies, too."



“I may have to keep you around for dinner prep,” she teased. “My knife skills are abysmal.”

He’d have to take it slow with Lulu. First, she’d let him chop up a few onions, and then maybe she’d trust him with whatever was bothering her so much.

One step at a time.

Lulu and Kai had demolished every bite of dinner and were both in the mood for dessert. When they’d picked up groceries on the way out here, they hadn’t wanted to make anything fussy, so they’d chosen vanilla ice cream, some chocolate sauce, and a can of whipped cream for make-your-own sundaes. She’d also thought about fun sprinkles but eventually had decided to keep things simple.

Lulu rinsed out the dishes while Kai ran a sink full of hot, soapy water for them to soak while they ate their dessert. Since it was only the two of them, and they’d cooked on the grill outside, there weren’t too many of them. They’d be able to quickly get these out of the way before bed.

“Two scoops? Or three?” Kai asked, retrieving two bowls from a cabinet. “And I assume you want both chocolate and whipped cream?”

“Of course, I want both. I’d bathe in chocolate and whipped cream if I could.”

Waggling his eyebrows like a villain in a silent movie, Kai grabbed for the whipped cream can.

“I’m willing if you are.”

“I wouldn’t say no, but we’d make a mess. And I’m not in the mood to clean it up.”

Lulu scooped out the ice cream into the bowls and topped them with the chocolate before adding a flourish of whipped cream. Kai poured a few drops of the chocolate sauce on his finger and then gave it a taste.

“Nice, not too sweet.” He poured out some more, but this time he pressed his finger against her lips. The flavor of dark chocolate burst on her tongue, sweet and bitter at the same time.

If he was going to do something that provocative, he wasn’t going to be disappointed.

Lulu sucked his finger into her mouth and laved it with her tongue, but watching his expression the entire time. His eyes had darkened with need, and desire was stamped on his features.

I think these sundaes might melt by the time we get to them.

Kai must have been of the same mind, because he was tugging at the hem of her t-shirt while she worked on the button and fly of his jeans.

As they shed their clothes, the air in the room crackled with heated anticipation. Lulu grabbed the whipped cream can from Kai's hand and playfully sprayed a dollop on his chest, making him shiver at the cool sensation. She leaned in, her lips and tongue following the trail of sweet cream, leaving a tantalizing path of kisses along his skin. His groan of pleasure was almost her undoing, letting her know that he was enjoying their little game.

Leaning back against the cool granite counter, she silently challenged him to return the favor, presenting her naked body as his canvas. It was strange not to feel even one iota of self-consciousness, but the way Kai was looking at her left no doubt that he was liking what he was seeing.

With a mischievous glint in his eyes, he retaliated by drizzling chocolate sauce on her collarbone, then across her neck, and down between her breasts, watching it drip down slowly. Lulu let out a soft gasp at the contrast of temperatures against her skin, sending a shiver down her spine.

His far-too-clever tongue lapped at the chocolate, sending arrows of pleasure ricocheting through her body and all the way to her curled toes.

As Kai continued to lick chocolate from Lulu's body, he traced intricate patterns on her skin, leaving behind a trail of heated and quivering flesh. The sweet aroma was intoxicating, and Lulu couldn't help but arch her back, offering him more of her naked form to explore.

His eyes locked onto hers, a fire burning deep within them, as if daring her to let go of her inhibitions completely. With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and surrendered herself to the moment, feeling his warm breath on her skin as he continued his slow, deliberate journey.

Lulu's mind spun with sensations; the smooth texture of the granite beneath her back, the coolness of the room against her skin, and most prominently, the way Kai's tongue felt against her body - firm yet gentle, insistent.

When his tongue finally touched her clit, she almost screamed his name loud enough to be heard back in Harper. Her whole body shook with the intensity of her orgasm, her world tilting on its axis. She could only surrender to it, letting it run wild inside of her, twisting her to its will until eventually it ebbed away, leaving her breathless but still ravenous. She needed him inside of her now.

Their gazes locked, his pupils blown wide with desire. He gently moved closer, his hands guiding her legs over his shoulders as he positioned himself at her entrance. The bar of arousal that had taken up residence in her abdomen coiled even more

tightly in anticipation.

His cock pressed forward, stretching her walls to accommodate him and rubbing all the sensitive spots inside of her as he pushed into the hilt.

Their bodies, slick with sweat and desire, melded together perfectly as he began to move. His hips rocked in a slow, deliberate rhythm that sent shockwaves of pleasure coursing all the way to her fingertips. The kitchen counter, once a mundane backdrop of their ordinary lives, now served as a stage for their most intimate desires.

Wrapping her legs around his lean waist, Lulu pulled him deeper into her, urging him to go faster. Fuck her harder. Her need for him was overwhelming in a way she'd never experienced before.

Her nails dug into his back as her breath hitched with each thrust. The scent of passion filled the air, mingling with the aroma of chocolate still lingering on their damp flesh.

Their skin slid against each other, creating a symphony of wet sounds that echoed throughout the small kitchen. This was no dainty coming together - clean, neat, and tidy. It was raw and animalistic, a little dirty like real life. They pawed at each other like there was no tomorrow.

Life was uncertain, right? Perhaps they had this moment and this moment only.

Lulu wanted to scream at the top of her lungs to fuck her harder, faster. She wanted to feel him more deeply than she'd ever felt anyone ever before. All she could, however, was chant his name over and over again as she moved closer to her orgasm.

She was so close it was infuriating. She could almost reach out and physically touch her climax, just shimmering right before her eyes.

He leaned down, his lips brushing against her ear as he whispered,

"Come for me," he whispered, his lips brushing against her ear. "Let go."

Lulu's body arched beneath him as she felt the waves of pleasure building up inside her, far more powerful than ever before.

"I need you."

Kai wasted no time. He increased his pace, thrusting deeper and faster into her now. The kitchen counter creaked under their weight, but they paid it no mind. All that mattered was the feeling of his hard body against hers, the way their sweat mingled, and their hearts pounded in unison.

Her orgasm hit her only moments before his own. She clung to him like a life preserver in a storm, the waves coming from all directions and threatening to pull her under with their force. Her vision spun and white lights sparkled in front of her eyes, the pleasure so intense it was almost painful. Yet, she never wanted it to end.

It did, of course, leaving them wrung out, breathless, and giggling at the mess they'd made of the kitchen. The ice cream had melted, whether from the heat of their coupling or the ambient temperature in the room, she couldn't have said. They were both sticky from sweat, chocolate, and more.

"I love you," Kai said, pressing soft kisses to her shoulder. "I know I should probably play it cool and pretend, but it's not who I am. I just love you. Is that okay? You don't have to say it back or anything."

If there was ever a perfect moment, it was now with this man. Her heart had sped up even faster at his bold statement, but she was glad that he'd thrown caution to the wind. It wasn't his usual behavior. He'd told her that himself. But if he could be

brave and impetuous, then she could, too.

“I love you,” she said, her voice a mere whisper. “I’m willing to take a chance on us if you are.”

Their kiss sealed the deal. They were a couple. A team. Fools in love.

“I think we need a shower,” Kai chuckled, pressing a chaste kiss to her forehead. “And then we need to clean the kitchen.”

“I would step down from the counter, but I’m pretty sure my legs would give out,” Lulu confessed. “And yes, a scrub down is in order.”

Lulu had given in to spontaneity once again, but she didn’t have the heart to be sorry about it. Not when it was this pleasurable. Besides, no one had been hurt.

No one but she and Kai needed to know.

And she’d never look at a kitchen counter the same again.

The drive back to Harper had Lulu's mind going a mile a minute. She wanted to talk to Kai about what had been weighing on her mind. Was it too soon after they'd said their I love yous ? Was there a polite standard waiting period after vowing love before burdening your partner with your doubts?

If there was, she was about to make Emily Post extremely upset.

"I'm ready to talk about it," Lulu said before she could lose her nerve. She truly wanted to hear what Kai had to say about this. "I'm not so sure that Allie Baker is guilty. I have some doubts."

If Kai was shocked, he didn't act like it. He nodded in acknowledgment of her words before replying.

"I know that you thought the DA was jumping into arresting her a bit too quick. What are you thinking about this?"

He hadn't told her she was crazy or not thinking things through. He hadn't told her to take the win and move on.

"I know in a big way it makes sense," she explained. "Allie had a motive, she had an opportunity, and the murder weapon was found in her apartment."

"It does seem like a slam dunk," Kai said. "But clearly you're not sure."

“Are you sure? And tell me the truth. If you’re sure, and I’m just making my life difficult, I need to know.”

“Like bet-my-life sure? No. I don’t think I could be that sure unless the person confessed. I understand why Tony wanted you to arrest Allie, but I’m open to hearing about your doubts.”

Be careful what you ask for, Kai.

“Okay, how on earth did she carry Dana’s body to the lake? And why did she do it in the first place? If I killed someone, the last thing I would be thinking was that I needed to transport a body somewhere, leaving possible forensic evidence in my car as well as the clothes I was wearing and the crime scene. Why spread your evidence to a third place?”

“Maybe she wanted to hide the body,” Kai suggested. “Hope it wouldn’t be found.”

“She didn’t hide it very well. Henry found it first thing in the morning,” Lulu pointed out.

“True,” he conceded. “As for the evidence transfer...well...there’s no such thing as the perfect crime. It’s the mistakes that allow law enforcement to catch the bad guys, right? Maybe she’s not very smart. Or she was panicked. She might not have gone there with the intention of inflicting bodily harm.”

“I agree with that,” Lulu replied. “They argued. It got heated. Next thing you know someone got clobbered with a pipe. But that begs the question, if it was an accident or Allie was defending herself - although we don’t have any evidence of that - why didn’t she call the police? Tell her story. Instead, she drags a dead body out to the lake to dump it, bringing all the forensic evidence with her. Make it make sense.”



“You’re being too logical,” Kai said. “If this was a crime of passion, born out of a disagreement, I’m guessing emotions were already running high. Allie wouldn’t have been thinking like a cold-blooded killer. She’d be panicking and doing all the wrong things. And let’s face it, some people don’t trust cops.”

Kai made sense. If Allie was an emotional mess after killing someone, she wouldn’t be checking the “killer handbook” for tips on how to get away with it.

“Let’s take the evidence one by one,” Kai suggested as they drove toward Harper. “First, she had motive. You have to admit that Allie is strangely bonded to Jay. Other people have noted her creepy possessive nature.”

“Second,” Kai went on. “She had ample opportunity. She went out for the night, supposedly driving, and no one can corroborate her story. She had plenty of time to kill Dana, transport her body, and then get back home.”

“If I was a killer, I’d make sure someone - anyone - saw me somewhere close to that time, even if I had to dance on top of the bar at the local honkytonk to do it,” Lulu observed. “I’d make sure the whole damn town saw me while I ran through the streets singing classic rock that my mom and dad used to play during my childhood.”

“Doobie Brothers? Foreigner?”

“Eagles. Bob Segar. Journey and Kansas, too.”

“They have good taste. Okay, the third and probably the most important piece of evidence. The confirmed murder weapon was found in Allie’s apartment. That’s pretty damning, Lulu.”

That was the big one. If Allie wasn’t the murderer, then how did she have the pipe?

“It is damning. I can’t argue that. Unless someone is trying to frame her?”

“Whoa, there,” Kai replied, shaking his head. “This is coming out of left field. Do you have any evidence that she’s being framed?”

“No, I don’t,” Lulu admitted. “Not a speck of evidence points to that. None except her absolute denial that she did it.”

“You believe her.”

He didn’t phrase it as a question.

“I don’t know, but my gut is screaming about this. If she did it, I just don’t think she did it alone. And let’s not forget Dana was seeing someone. A married man. Where in the hell is he? We still don’t know who he is, and he had a motive to kill her. A big one. She was pregnant and going to upset the apple cart of his comfortable family life. That’s just as big or bigger than Allie’s motive.”

“I agree, but we have no idea who he is or how to find him. One thing’s for sure, he’s not stepping up to tell us his identity. He wants to remain anonymous.”

“That’s exactly why I can’t let this go,” Lulu said, pouncing on that statement. “I get it. He’s married. But if he loved Dana, you’d think he might come forward to give us some details about her friends and life. I wasn’t going to run to his wife and tell on him.”

“He didn’t know that,” Kai pointed out. “And I think you’re giving a marital cheater way too much credit when it comes to bravery. If he’s chicken shit enough to cheat on his spouse instead of just manning up and telling her that he doesn’t want to be married anymore, he’s not going to have any sort of spine when his sidepiece gets killed. He wouldn’t want any of that suspicion aimed at him.”

“Even if he loved her?”

“Even if he loved her,” Kai confirmed. “He might have been sitting back waiting to see what happened in the investigation. If no one was arrested, and he thought he had important information, maybe then he’d come forward. But I doubt it. He might write a letter to the cops, or something bullshit like that. But I don’t see him stepping forward at all. You have much more faith in humanity than I have.”

“What can I say? I want to believe.”

“I admire your optimism regarding our fellow man. I wish I shared it. So, if you were to continue looking into Allie where would you start? You can’t change her motive. It is what it is. What about the pipe found in her closet? That’s something that could be manipulated by another person. Who else had access to Allie’s apartment?”

This was where Lulu’s mind had been going since Allie’s arrest.

Others couldn’t change Allie’s behavior regarding Jay Bradford. They also couldn’t change the fact that Allie had been out driving that night - unless they’d lured her into doing it, but Allie hadn’t said that it had been anyone else’s idea.

It was only the murder weapon that could be played with in some way.

“Exactly,” Lulu agreed. “Why on earth would Allie store a murder weapon in her closet? I know, I know. Stop thinking with logic. But come on...even a panicking killer would think to toss the pipe in the lake, never to be found hopefully. Getting rid of the pipe in the lake is the only reasonable explanation for moving Dana’s body there, although they could have thrown the pipe in the lake and left Dana in her garage. Once again, their logic escapes me. Would you store a murder weapon in your closet?”

“I’ll admit that it seems like a dumb move,” Kai replied. “Allie knew she was a suspect. Even after being questioned, she didn’t think to move it or get rid of it in some way.”

“Maybe she thought the police were watching her.”

“Whose side are you on?” Kai joked.

“Just playing devil’s advocate with my own theories. I don’t want you to humor me. Tell me if I’ve wandered into stupid territory.”

“A life in prison is on the line,” Kai said. “I don’t think you can be too careful. So, who did have access to Allie’s apartment?”

“Her roommate, but she didn’t have a motive,” Lulu replied.

“That we know of.”

“True, but I’m going on what we know. Jay probably had access, I’m guessing. Even if he didn’t have a key, he’s probably been there. No one would think it strange for him to be visiting her. He could have snuck off to the bathroom and hid the pipe in the closet. I’m just not sure how strong a motive he had. If what Dana’s friend says is true, he still had feelings for her.”

“I think we have to take that with a grain of salt,” Kai said. “We don’t know for sure that he did. But what about a maintenance person or Allie’s landlord? Wouldn’t they have access?”

“They would, but they don’t have a motive. Unless they were working with someone who did.”

“You’ve always thought that this might be a two-person job. Maybe our killer has an accomplice. Someone who helped him or her carry Dana’s body that night. Someone willing to help cover their crimes. But if we’re open to that theory, we have to be open to another. The accomplice might be Allie’s, and she was double-crossed. She thought she had an ally, but instead, they helped point the finger at her to the police.”

“With friends like that, who needs enemies?”

“There’s no honor among thieves,” Kai quoted. “That may have been the plan all along.”

“You’re giving someone a lot of credit here, when you warned me that criminals don’t always use logic.”

“You’re right,” Kai agreed. “But someone might have spent some time thinking this through, not under any pressure at all. Right now, we have four possible people who could have been Allie’s accomplice - her roommate Kathleen, her boyfriend Jay Bradford, a maintenance man, and a possible landlord, although that could be one and the same as the maintenance person. Who else might have access to Allie’s apartment?”

“Pest control?” Lulu suggested. “And any of Kathleen or Allie’s friends, too. It might be a long list. Maybe even neighbors.”

“Sounds like they need to be checked out one by one,” Kai replied.

The district attorney might be satisfied they had the right person, but Lulu still had some doubt. When they returned to town, she was going to dig a little bit into the unanswered questions.

Just to be sure.

“L oosen up, Lulu. Have some fun.”

Lulu shouldn't have come here tonight. She and Kai had been convinced by Chase and Henry to come out for a quick drink now that they had returned to town. They'd hit the barbecue joint for dinner, and then headed to one of the local watering holes. One of Chase's friends from his high school years had a band, and they were playing tonight.

The band was pretty good, too, playing covers of famous rock songs. They were good musicians, and the lead singer had a good voice. People were dancing and even singing along to a few songs, and Chase had chided her for not letting loose a bit.

“You should be celebrating,” he said. “I've seen you dance on top of a bar in your favorite cowboy boots on a far less happy occasion than finding a killer. What's going on?”

Lulu didn't regret her wild and woolly ways - much - but she liked to think that perhaps she'd matured a bit over time. Dancing on top of a bar was fun, but it didn't seem like something that a sheriff should do.

Now, in the privacy of her own home? That was a different story. She was still the lead singer of her own girl band, singing into her hairbrush while jumping around her room and on top of her bed, giving the concert of a lifetime to her devoted - but imaginary - fans. Brianna and Amanda had often joined in, their voices harmonizing pretty damn well for amateurs. In another life, they might have been pop stars.

In a completely different parallel dimension, where people with mediocre talent could become rich and famous.

“I am celebrating,” Lulu replied. “I’m just relaxing a bit.”

“I thought that’s what you did over the weekend,” Henry said as the band wrapped up their song to take a break.

“I did, and now I’m still doing it.”

Kai gave her a sideways glance but didn’t say anything. They’d “relaxed” in just about every room of the cabin, including the shower.

A shadow fell across the table and Lulu looked up to see Glen Foster standing there, a grin on his lips.

“Looks like you did it, Lu,” he said loudly enough for a few heads to whip around at the sound of his voice. “I have to admit that I was skeptical. Hell, we were all skeptical. Didn’t think a woman could take over your dad’s job, but I was wrong. You did pretty good. A lot of people are eating crow now.”

She could feel those eyes on her. Again. They were staring, watching her reaction closely. They hadn’t believed in her before, and to be honest, she doubted they truly believed in her now that she’d caught a killer. She had a distinct memory of her dad telling her that some people would never be convinced of anything, even when it was right before their eyes.

And some of those people lived right here in Harper.

There were always going to be people watching her, waiting for her to fail. They’d revel in her humiliation because for a few minutes, hours, days, or maybe even

weeks, it made them forget how miserable they were in their own lives.

If she worried about them all the time, she'd never get anything done, and she'd be as unhappy and nasty as they were.

I don't want to be like that. I won't tie myself up in knots for their approval.

Lulu would never get it anyway. The only way to win was not to play. It was freeing to finally get that through her head. She'd always known it, but she hadn't truly believed it. She'd kept thinking that she could change their minds.

I can't, and I'm not going to waste my time trying. They don't get to control me that way.

Glen was waiting for her response to his kind of compliment. She wasn't sure what to say. If anyone was eating crow for dinner tonight that was their business. It had never been a contest. She hadn't won a trophy or a blue ribbon.

Someone yelled Glen's name from across the room, and he gave Lulu a wave before heading in the direction. She didn't need to reply at all.

"Is it just me or do you not seem as happy as everyone else that you solved a murder?" Henry asked softly.

"I'm having my doubts about Allie's guilt," Lulu admitted. "Kai and I were talking about on the drive home. We're going to look into a few things now that we're back."

"What few things?"

"Like who might have been able to plant the weapon in Allie's apartment," Lulu explained. "Her landlord, a maintenance person, or maybe her roommate or a friend."



“With friends like that, who needs enemies?” Henry said. “You know, I can check out a couple of those items for you. I have a few computer skills I can use.”

“Nothing illegal,” she replied in a warning tone. “I mean it, Henry. Don’t hack the Pentagon or anything. You could do some serious time for that.”

“I’m an ethical hacker,” Henry emphasized, giving her an eye roll. “And I’m paid quite handsomely for it, so I’m not going to mess up that sweet gig. Don’t worry. Legal all the way. I’m too pretty for prison.”

“I can’t disagree with that.”

Later when the band came back from break, Kai asked her to dance when they played a slow song. She happily melted into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder. The tension she’d been carrying all day seemed to dissolve as she closed her eyes and concentrated on him, blocking the rest of the chaotic world.

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?” she asked with a small sigh as they barely moved to the slow ballad.

“That’s a loaded question,” Kai chuckled. “Can you be more specific?”

“About the investigation.”

“I think you should listen to your instincts. Anything else?”

“No, just that. I don’t think I’m as crazy-wild as I used to be.”

“I’ve heard some stories,” he admitted, his lips close to her ear. His breath tickled her cheek. “Since you and I started seeing each other, a few people have stopped me on the street to tell me a story about your wild youth.”

Oh, my stars. That cannot be good. There were some doozies.

“I’m more mature now.”

“You are, but don’t lose that zest for life, Lulu. Never lose that. I admire that about you. It’s special...and rare these days.”

“You wouldn’t care if I hopped up on the bar and danced? You wouldn’t be embarrassed?”

His arms tightened around her as his hand slid over her shoulders and his lips brushed her temple.

“Nope, I’d cheer and remind myself that I am one lucky son of a bitch. You be you, Lulu Reilly. You let me be myself, too. I’ve never felt so relaxed around anyone in my life. You just accept me for who I am. You’re not trying to twist me into someone you think I need to be. I want to be that place for you.”

While Kai’s parents sounded like mostly wonderful people, Lulu had a feeling that they’d spent a good deal of time trying to make Kai into something he simply didn’t want to be. Like a cutthroat corporate lawyer attending fancy cocktail parties and dating supermodels.

“How about you take me home, and I’ll show you just how much I love you,” she suggested as the music stopped. “And how I don’t want you to change.”

“Woman, you are brilliant.”

She’d take that compliment and cherish it. She wasn’t brilliant, of course, but every now and then she had a good idea.

Getting naked with this hunk of man who was currently looking at her like she hung the moon?

A very smart choice indeed.

She'd leave all her cares and worries for tomorrow. Tonight, she'd concentrate on the man she'd fallen in love with.

It was almost dinnertime the next day, and Kai was putting the finishing touches on an article for the online newspaper about a microbrewery-slash-restaurant opening one town over. He'd interviewed the owner in the morning, and he wanted to get it loaded to the website before he met Lulu for dinner.

Lulu.

He hadn't planned to fall in love, but here he was, happy as hell. He walked around with a smile on his face pretty much twenty-four-seven, he was so in love with this woman. This amazing, wonderful, full of vinegar and spunk woman. She could dance on bars, jump from airplanes, race her car down deserted roads, and generally make some noise, and he was fine with all of it. He hoped he got through to her last night that she didn't have to change to be loved.

He loved her. All of her. The good, the bad, the goofy, the crazy, the devoted best friend, and the dedicated sheriff, too.

The door to the newspaper office swung open, and Henry strolled in looking quite satisfied with himself if his smug smile was any indication.

"I have some information for her that she wanted," Henry said. "But she's working, so I thought I'd give it to you."

“We’re supposed to meet for dinner in about an hour. Have you called or sent a text?”

“I did send a couple of texts, but she hasn’t replied yet, so I’m guessing she’s busy. To be honest, I was getting antsy to tell her, which is why I’m here,” Henry admitted.

“She’s probably out handling a call,” Kai replied. “May I ask what you found?”

“It was simple really,” Henry said. “All I had to do was look up the property tax records for the county, and I found it. Ray Ramsey is Allie’s landlord.”

“The town councilman?”

“That’s him. Lulu said you two were looking into people that had access to Allie’s apartment and could have planted the pipe that killed Dana Cartwright.”

“We are, and that’s interesting. I’d planned to look at the property records myself today, but I got bogged down with work.”

“I had some free time, so it was no big deal.”

“I do appreciate it. It’s not all that surprising, though. Ramsey is a real estate agent, and he’s involved with several properties in the area. I just didn’t realize he owned that particular building.”

“What happens now? Do you go talk to Ray Ramsey?” Henry asked. “He probably knows who all have keys to the building, including any maintenance people.”

Kai wanted to speak with Ramsey, but ideally, Lulu should be there as well.

“After we talk to Ramsey, you can go to dinner with us.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Henry replied. “Can I vote for pizza? Is there a vote being taken?”

“Pizza is fine with me. We’ll see what Lulu wants.”

The buzzing of Henry’s phone interrupted their dinner planning.

“It’s Lulu,” he said. “I’ll put her on speaker. Hey, Lu. It’s me and Kai here.”

“I got your message,” Lulu said. “I had to make a trip to the Perry ranch today. They’re having problems with ATV riders on their land. What’s up? What did you find?”

“Henry found it,” Kai clarified. “He was just telling me about it.”

“I found out the person who owns Allie’s building,” Henry explained. “It’s Ray Ramsey. From what I can see, he owns several houses and a few apartment buildings in town. He would know everyone who has keys to the building.”

“That’s great,” Lulu said. “I can ask him for the names so we can check them out. I’m headed back to town now, and I’m planning to stop at the ranch on the way to change clothes. I feel grubby after my shift. I can try and stop by his office afterward and ask him.”

“Are you sure? We can do it,” Kai offered. “It sounds like you’ve had a busy day, and we only need to get a list of names from him.”

“I’m not going to argue with you. I’m exhausted and just want a shower. The sports bar is just two doors down from his office, though. How about we meet there for dinner?”

Kai gave Henry a questioning look as to whether the sports bar was okay. He'd been the one wanting pizza, after all.

Plus, Lisa worked there. Had she and Henry worked things out?

"A cheeseburger might hit the spot," Henry said with a nod. "We can do pizza tomorrow night."

"We wanted pizza?" Lulu asked. "Oh wait. Lisa. We can go somewhere else, Henry."

"Lisa isn't working tonight," Henry replied with a shake of his head. "It's fine. Even if she was working tonight, we're both in a small town. We're going to see one another now and then. We can have pizza another night. Kai?"

"I'm starving and not picky," Kai declared. "We'll see you soon then."

Hopefully, this meeting would help move the investigation forward. Was Allie Baker innocent, guilty, or one-half of a criminal pair?

It was time to find out for sure.

All Kai wanted was to have some dinner and then curl up next to Lulu for the rest of the night. It had been a long day, and he was ready to relax a bit.

But that relaxation would have to wait a bit. He needed to stop by Ray Ramsey's real estate office and see if he could give him a list of who might have a key to Allie Baker's apartment.

That shouldn't take long, right? How many people could it be? Two or three?

"There's something about this guy that gives me the creeps," Henry remarked as they

approached the building. “I don’t know what it is or why. He just does. Maybe it’s just me.”

“No, I get what you’re saying,” Kai admitted. “I think it’s because we know that Ramsey wants something from us. He wants us to buy or sell a house. I think he sees relationships mostly transactional in nature.”

“That’s a sad way to live.”

Kai couldn’t argue the sentiment. It was a sad way to live. He’d seen it in others, and it never led anywhere good in the long run.

He parked on the street in front of the building and walked into the deserted reception area. It was already after six, and the employees might have already left for the day. There was a hallway behind the reception desk, and at the far end, it looked like an office door was open and the light was on.

The front door had been unlocked, and he had seen Ray Ramsey’s sedan parked behind the small brick building.

“Ray?” he called out. “Are you here? It’s Kai Oliver and Henry Austin.”

Ray Ramsey stuck his head out of the office door, a big smile on his face.

“Come on in. This is a surprise. To what do I owe the pleasure? Let me guess. Your city friend is thinking about buying a house here in town. Good choice. Real estate is an excellent investment.”

Henry was not planning a real estate purchase. According to Lulu, she wasn’t even sure he was going to stick around Harper. He’d already been here longer than his original plan. He’d just come to help get her settled in her new job, but then...murder

happened.

Kai gave Henry a questioning glance and received a shake of the head in return.

No, he's not buying a house.

He walked down the hall and into Ray's office where the man was beginning to pack up papers into his briefcase.

"Have a calendar," Ray offered, holding out one of those calendars with a magnet. He even had his smiling face and phone number on it, too. It was the same one that Ramsey had given Lulu for her new home. She'd put it on her refrigerator. "So, is your friend looking for a house? I can think of a few good candidates in the county. One is completely move-in ready. The other might need some TLC. Tell me, are you handy with a hammer and nails?"

"Not in the least," Henry replied. "I consider myself mechanically declined, if you know what I mean."

Ramsey laughed at the joke a little too hard.

"He's not actually looking for a house," Kai explained. "We're here on another matter. I was here to see if I could get a list of people that would have a key to Allie Baker's apartment."

Frowning, Ray shook his head.

"I don't quite understand. Why do you need a list like that? What's going on?"

"I'm just doing a little more investigation. It's for an article I'm writing."



Kai didn't want to go into great detail. That hinky feeling that Henry had spoken about was back and more intrusive than ever.

"More investigation? Why? Tony didn't mention that he needed the police to do any more investigating."

"This isn't about anything the police are doing. This is for me. It's just a few routine questions. It's not a big deal."

He didn't want to drag Lulu into this discussion. Ramsey had already tried to insert himself more than was needed. That was behavior that Kai didn't want to encourage.

"It's a big deal to me," Ramsey objected. "The town council needs to know what the press is doing here in Harper."

No, you don't need to know.

"I'm sure the town council doesn't want to get into a First Amendment showdown over something so trivial," Kai replied.

From the sour expression on Ramsey's face, Kai had scored a direct hit.

"What do you want the information for?" Ramsey pressed. "I don't see why you need it."

"It's for an article about the evidence against Allie," Kai said.

"It's an open and shut case," Ramsey argued. "Everyone knows she did it. Does Lulu think Allie is innocent?"

"Any competent defense attorney is going to ask for the information," Henry said.

“They’ll want to establish reasonable doubt that someone else might have planted the weapon. You’re going to have to produce the list sooner or later.”

Ramsey stared at both of them for a long moment and then crossed his arms over his chest. Kai knew from the body language alone that they were wasting their time.

“I think I’ll wait until later then,” Ramsey said. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“That’s it,” Kai said. “Have a nice evening.”

He and Henry turned to leave, but Ramsey had one more question.

“Wait...does Lulu know you’re here asking for this?”

Kai didn’t answer for a moment. Lulu didn’t need this guy on her ass.

“No, she doesn’t. This is all about a feature for the newspaper. But as Henry pointed out, eventually someone else is going to ask you for the information.”

Kai and Henry exited the building silently, not speaking until they were in front of the sports bar.

“That was weird,” Henry said. “Or am I imagining it again? Because sometimes I don’t see things the way others do. That was weird, right?”

“It was weird,” Kai agreed. “He seemed hostile to anyone looking into Allie’s possible defense. The attorney will have to subpoena the information from Ramsey. The guy’s not going to give it up willingly.”

“The question is why,” Henry said. “Why is he hesitating? If Allie is guilty, he has no

reason not to give the names.”

“Unless he doesn’t think Allie is guilty, and he’s protecting someone,” Kai observed.

“Why would he protect someone if he thinks Allie is guilty? Open and shut is how he described it,” Henry said. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It doesn’t,” Kai replied. “We need to talk to Lulu about it. I also think that I’m going to call up my investigative journalist friend and see if he can help me do some digging into Ray Ramsey. He might be up to something that he’s trying to keep quiet.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, but he doesn’t like people looking into his real estate affairs. That’s where I’ll start. Maybe he’s doing something illegal. Or maybe he’s squeaky clean. If he is, I’ll be the first to apologize and buy him a beer. Either way, it wouldn’t hurt to look into his business dealings a bit.”

Ray Ramsey might simply be a garden-variety strange guy who just didn’t know how to act with people and was generally socially awkward.

But Kai was with Henry on this one. He didn’t trust the man.

Lulu was sweaty, grimy, and all she wanted was a shower and fresh clothes. When she stopped by the house, she stripped off and hopped under the steamy spray, washing the day away.

She would have luxuriated in it much longer, but she had to be mindful of Kai and Henry. She didn't want to keep them waiting. Plus, she was starving. Because she'd been so busy, she hadn't eaten much during the day.

Wrapping a robe around her, she padded into the kitchen in bare feet to grab a glass of water. From the front windows, she could see a familiar sedan pulling up in front of her house.

Ray Ramsey. What on earth was he doing here? She didn't have any memories of members of the town council stopping by the house when she'd been a child.

There wasn't time to duck behind the couch and pretend she wasn't home, however. Ramsey had bounded up her front steps and looked through her living room window. He could see that she was there, albeit in her bathrobe. She wasn't going to be able to get out of speaking with him. But she'd keep it brief.

"Hi," she said when she opened the door. "This isn't a good time right now. I need to finish getting ready. I have people waiting for me."

"I'll only be a few minutes," Ray said. "We need to discuss the investigation."

He didn't specify what investigation he was talking about, but she assumed it was Dana Cartwright since nothing else of note was going on in Harper.

"This isn't the best time," she repeated. "We can talk tomorrow at the station. Whatever time you like."

"We need to talk now. Your boyfriend stopped by my office to ask for the names of the people who had access to Allie Baker's apartment. He says he's writing an article, and he's just looking into questions a defense attorney might ask."

Kai was a smart man, and he hadn't thrown her bodily under the bus, either. She made a note to thank him later.

"I don't control the content of Kai's newspaper," Lulu replied. "That's his business. He can ask, and you are free to answer as you wish. But why is it a big deal? Is it some sort of secret?"

"He's wasting his time," Ray said, his voice louder than before. "The case is closed. Done. Allie Baker did it, and she's going to go to prison."

"She hasn't even had a trial yet," Lulu pointed out. "We don't know how that will go. There are some unanswered questions, and those could sway a jury on reasonable doubt."

Her calm tone didn't seem to help the situation in the least. If anything, Ramsey appeared more agitated than before. His usually smiling face was now contorted in an angry frown, his forehead wrinkled into a scowl.

"You have to stop your boyfriend now. I won't allow it."

Lulu had been working on acting more adult and mature for years. She'd left her wild

child days long behind her. She was a professional working an important job. She didn't take double-dog dares or impulsively drive her mother's minivan to Canada on a whim for poutine. Without telling her parents.

Okay, that was a teenage escapade that I shouldn't have done. But it was delicious.

She did, however, still have one flaw. She didn't like other people telling her what to do. Especially, when they assumed they had the right to do it. It was a Reilly family trait. They had issues with authority. Her dad had managed fine in the Army, but he'd been happier as his own boss. Her mom and brothers were the same.

"I am the sheriff, and I don't think what he's doing is wrong," she said, her teeth gritted with every word. "It's a harmless request. If you don't want to answer, then don't."

There was a whole lot she hadn't said.

Ray wasn't reacting well to her response. His hands were furled into fists, and his face red as he berated her under his breath. She could only catch about every third word, but it was something about not respecting his authority and thinking she could make her own decisions. She was just a dumb girl who had delusions of her own grandeur.

Or something in that vein, but with more cuss words.

He used his larger frame to push past her despite her protests, planting himself in the middle of the living room. In her current state of dress, she couldn't manhandle him and yeet him out of the front door.

"We're going to talk about this, and I'm not going to leave until we do," he said, crossing his arms over his chest.

She'd been firm. Patient. She'd even muffled her instinct to be sarcastic. But Ray Ramsey was the pushy type. Maybe that was how he bought and sold real estate. She didn't know, and frankly, she didn't care. Her patience with this man-child was at an end. He needed to leave, preferably in the next thirty seconds.

"Ray," she said sharply, getting his attention. Her patience was at an end, and her anger was beginning to boil. "You need to leave my home right now. You were not invited in and are presently trespassing. We are not going to discuss this. We can talk about it tomorrow. I've had a long day at work, and I am in no mood for this. Please leave."

"Or what?"

His soft-spoken question belied the anger she could see in his eyes. He was furious with her.

Good. She wasn't so damn happy either. She hadn't had "Ray Ramsey being an asshole" on her bingo card for the day, but here they were.

"Staying here when I'm asking you to leave is a good way to end up in jail."

"You work for the town council."

"I work for the citizens of Harper. You only represent them, and that doesn't give you the right to break any laws. I'll arrest you. If the town council wants to scream about it, they can."

Chuckling, Ramsey shook his head and took a few steps closer so she could more clearly see his angry but amused expression.

"Lulu, the only reason you even got this job was because I pressed for them to hire

you. If it weren't for me, you never would be sheriff. You should be grateful to me."

Her heart bumped slightly at his words. Was it true? She didn't have a clue, and at this moment, she didn't care. It didn't matter how it happened.

I'm the damn sheriff now. How I got here is irrelevant. And I'm doing a good job.

"It doesn't matter how. What's important is that I am the sheriff, and I will arrest you."

The happy, genial real estate agent was completely gone. Ray Ramsey had turned into a ravenous predator, his eyes gleaming with want as his gaze roamed her from head to toe. She wanted to vomit just watching him.

"In your bathrobe?" he scoffed. "You're not so scary out of uniform, Lulu. I think we'll have that talk right now. If you want to keep your job, that is. Are you going to call your boyfriend and tell him to back off or not?"

She didn't bother asking if he was threatening her because he clearly was.

Sadly, he had a point. She was standing barefoot, wearing a robe and not a uniform. She wasn't exactly intimidating people left and right in her pink terrycloth robe with a kitten on it. She was, however, pissed off. If he thought he could shake her up with his behavior, he was barking up the wrong tree.

Her gaze landed on the calendar he'd given her when she'd moved into the house. It was on the refrigerator, just in her line of sight and right behind his head. The picture showed a happy, smiling man, telling potential clients without a word that they could trust him with the largest purchase or sale of their lives.

"You haven't answered me," Ray said, his tone sharp. "What's your problem?"



No, she hadn't replied to his barely veiled threat. He was not happy at the moment, angry and frustrated that he couldn't browbeat her into doing what he wanted. He'd threatened her job, and she hadn't folded either.

Her gaze was still on the calendar, trying to figure out why in the hell she couldn't stop looking at it. What was it? She should have been figuring out how to throw Ray Ramsey out of her house, but instead, she was mesmerized by an advertising photo.

It was such a shitty, smug grin in the picture, too. Like Ramsey knew the secrets of the universe, and he'd tell you about them if you'd just hire him to help buy or sell your home. And you could trust him because he was wearing a blue suit with a fun, brightly colored handkerchief in the pocket.

His clothes said that he was a good businessman, but he didn't take himself too seriously. He was fun and professional, all at the same time. He'd be awesome to work with because he wasn't a stick in the mud, but he knew his way around a sales contract, too.

That stupid handkerchief...

Lulu kept staring at it, not able to pull her gaze from it. Something in the back of her mind was bugging her, not letting it go but not revealing as to why. It was just a handkerchief. Ugly and loud. The blue-on-blue checked pattern looked like it belonged with a picnic basket, not with a professional business suit.

Blue-on-blue.

Yes. Right. That was it. She'd seen that pattern before. It had been wrapped around the pipe the forensic team had found in Allie Baker's apartment.

If it was the same - and how many people wore pocket squares in Harper that looked

like that - there was only one way it could have got there.

Ray Ramsey had wrapped his handkerchief around the murder weapon when he hid it in Allie's closet. He would have had a key to her apartment because he owned the building . He was also married with kids, and he would have had a hell of a lot to lose if he'd been seeing Dana on the sly and she got pregnant. And he was strong enough to have moved the body from the house to the lake.

It all made sense now.

His preoccupation with the investigation, wanting to know how it was going all the time. He'd never cared about any of that before. Sure, it could be because she wasn't her father, or it could be because he wanted to make sure that no one pointed to him. Guilty parties often inserted themselves into a law enforcement investigation. Sometimes to try and control, and sometimes because they simply got off on it.

If Ray and Dana had been lovers and the baby was his, then he had motive. He wouldn't want anyone, including his wife and family, to figure out he wasn't the pillar of the community that he pretended to be.

Whether he had means and opportunity, as well, she couldn't say. But then he hadn't been a suspect until this moment.

Did you kill her? Did you? Did you murder Dana in cold blood?

Lulu quickly schooled her features, hoping her thoughts weren't written on her too-expressive face. She'd always admired those poker-faced people in her life, but she wasn't one of them. She'd never get rich in Vegas, but she just might be able to pretend that she didn't think the man standing only a few feet from her was a killer.

Her phone on the counter rang, but she ignored it. She didn't want to turn her back on

Ramsey.

“Maybe we could talk about this over a beer?” Lulu offered. “I’m supposed to meet Kai at the sports bar in town. How about you come with me, and we can chat about this? You can talk to him yourself, and we can figure something out.”

Friendly. Open. Pals. Keep it light.

She wasn’t afraid of Ray Ramsey, but she probably should be. He wasn’t a small man, and he might not make it easy if it came down to it. He could fight or run.

She’d studied self-defense, but he had a good six inches and about fifty pounds on her. Her class instructor had told her that with a strength deficit like that, she should think about outrunning them if possible. She wasn’t exactly in the perfect outfit for that.

Lulu couldn’t yet say for sure he was a murderer, but he needed to be questioned and investigated. She had the law on her side and pretty much nothing else. The odds were not in her favor. If she had to fight him to get him out of her house, things might not go well. It would be better to finesse him out of the door.

Later, she could officially bring him in for questioning.

Lulu had been trying to keep her face bland and her tone normal and even. She didn’t want Ramsey to pick up on any weird vibes that might be out there between them.

She must not have done so well, however, because his gaze was sharp and skeptical when he heard her request.

“You want me to have a drink with you?”

“Sure, why not? You can talk to Henry about maybe buying a house.”

“According to your friend, he doesn’t want a house.”

“I’m supposed to meet them in a few minutes,” she reminded him. “Let’s go join them. Otherwise, they’ll worry and come looking for me.”

“I think you’re lying,” he replied softly. “I don’t think anyone is waiting for you.”

The Ray Ramsey standing in front of her bore no resemblance to the smooth-talking realtor this town knew well. Any scrap of charm and friendliness was gone, leaving him cold and remote. There was a darkness in his eyes that she’d never seen before, but she’d heard it described. Brianna had talked about Jake Bryson’s dark, empty eyes when he’d been about to kill her. She’d said there was nothing behind those eyes except evil.

Now Lulu knew what she’d been talking about.

This man. This man right here...he could kill someone. He’d gone from becoming a suspect to being a murderer within minutes of her arrival here.

Her gut was screaming at her. Screaming that this man was Dana’s killer.

Her dad had told her to trust her gut. Her brain was saying that she didn’t have enough evidence yet. That she didn’t know for sure that Ray Ramsey was Dana’s killer.

But she did. She knew. She didn’t know how she knew, but something deep inside of her was yelling in her ear that Ramsey was the guy. She could see it in his eyes, his demeanor, his entire body language. She’d been sure of many things in her life, and she was sure of this, too.

No doubts.

Lulu didn't have time to ponder her discovery, however. Like a predator stalking its prey, Ray was watching her closely, clearly studying every facial expression or slight body movement. She could physically feel the deadly tension that had built around the two of them. Her heart raced, beating against her ribs like a drum in a marching band. Blood roared in her ears as she faced Ramsey down, determined not to cower or appear weak in any way.

People like him only understand power.

Should she initiate a confrontation? Grab the nearest heavy object and swing it at him? Should she continue to try and talk him out of her house? Pretend that everything was normal?

The thing was...she was pretty damn sure that the talking portion of the evening was over. Ramsey was staring at her with those empty eyes, his expression icy cold and calculating. She might not have any choices if he suspected that she'd figured it out.

"I need to call Kai and let him know that I'm running late," she finally said, breaking the long silence. She moved toward the kitchen counter where she'd left her phone. "I'll tell him that you're going to join us."

She wasn't, however, reaching for her cell. Instead, she planned to grab the heavy glass bowl that was meant to hold fresh fruit, but she hadn't had a chance to go to the grocery store and fill it yet.

Just as her fingers touched the cool glass edge, Ray's hand clamped down painfully on her wrist. She'd made a rookie mistake...she'd turned away from him, if only for a moment.

“Dana never saw it coming,” Lulu heard Ray say into her ear. He was far too close, and she could smell his sweat mixing with some revolting cologne. It turned her stomach and made her physically ill. “But you will. This time, I want to watch your face.”

It all happened fast. She tried to push away from him and run, knowing that she was at a disadvantage in a fight, but he blocked her in with his larger frame. His hands had wound around her neck, and he was bearing down with all his strength, bending her back over the granite countertop. His face contorted, his teeth bared like an animal.

The world was beginning to get dark as black spots appeared in front of her eyes as she struggled for oxygen. She clawed frantically at his fingers, but they were clamped tightly. In the distance, she could hear ringing, but she wasn't sure if it was her phone or her ears playing tricks on her.

The world had gone fuzzy, and her life began to play in her head, shaky images of her childhood almost in fast forward. Her parents were there, and Bennett and Chase, too. Their family and friends. At one point, her dad was teaching her to fish, and Ben was being a pest. The usual sibling stuff. She'd hauled off and kicked him in the shin to make him stop his teasing. He'd howled in protest but then laughed and said that she fought dirty. He'd been strangely proud of her that day.

I fight dirty.

The room was already spinning, and her vision was narrowing dangerously. She didn't have any time or oxygen to make any sort of plan. She simply trusted her gut to tell her what to do.

Lulu reared back her leg, and then with the scraps of energy that she had left, she drove her knee directly into his groin, his most vulnerable spot. She heard his howl of

pain, and then his grip around her neck immediately loosened.

Ramsey cursed and stumbled back, falling into a heap on the floor. His face was twisted and ugly in anger, his cheeks bright red as four-lettered word after four-lettered word spilled from his lips.

She fell to her knees, gulping in air as quickly as she could to her starved lungs. At some point, tears had leaked down her cheeks, and she could taste the tang of salt on her tongue.

The entire episode from his grabbing her until now could have taken five minutes or five seconds. Lulu had no idea. Time had ceased to have any meaning. She only heard the one word that was screaming inside of her head, over and over.

Run.

Kai and Henry had ordered their first beer, and were waiting for Lulu when Chase ran into the sports bar and straight to their table, out of breath and his face red.

“Where’s Lulu?”

“At the ranch,” Kai replied, puzzled by Chase’s demeanor. The man was normally as calm and laid back as hell. “Why? What’s going on?”

“Allie Baker just got out on bail, apparently,” Chase explained. “One of my regular customers stopped by and told me that Allie’s been down at the hair salon raising hell. She says she’s going to get revenge on Lulu for arresting her. They said she seemed serious about it, and then she marched out still furious, vowing to make Lulu pay for what she did. I tried to call Lulu, but she’s not answering. I came here to warn her.”

“She might still be at the ranch,” Henry said, checking his watch. “Or on her way. Let me check the app and see where she is.”

“The app?” Kai echoed. “What app?”

Henry rolled his eyes at the question, even as he pulled his phone from his pocket.

“How quickly you forget that I’m a victim of a kidnapping in my youth. That makes me overly paranoid and suspicious of pretty much everyone and everything. Because of my rampant paranoia, I convinced Lulu to put one of those apps on her phone that



tells me where she is all the time. She has my information, too. She said that if it made me feel more secure, she was fine with it. Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the time, I don't check it because I don't need to."

Kai wasn't a huge fan of the modern methods of what he considered technological stalking, but in this case, he'd make an exception.

"She's still at the ranch," Henry said, turning his phone screen so that Kai and Chase could see it. "I'll try calling her. Maybe she was in the shower earlier."

Henry tried, but once again, no answer. Kai also tried, but Lulu didn't pick up either.

It didn't make sense. He'd seen Lulu climb out of the shower to answer her phone. If she thought the call was from the sheriff's station or one of her friends or family, she wanted to take the call. She always said that she knew that if they called it was important, otherwise they'd simply send a text to be answered whenever.

"That's weird," Henry stated. "Normally, Lulu would answer right away."

"Maybe Allie is already there," Chase suggested.

"I don't like this," Henry declared. "This isn't like Lulu."

"Let's not jump to any conclusions," Chase replied. "There's probably a perfectly reasonable explanation for why she's not answering."

Henry held up his phone again.

"She's still at the ranch. Or at least her cell is. Even Lulu wouldn't take a shower this long. Why isn't she answering us? I don't like this at all. We need to drive to the ranch right now."

Kai was more than certain that Lulu could handle Allie Baker with one hand tied behind her back. But...he couldn't deny that he had a hinky feeling as well. It was simply unusual behavior for Lulu. As the sheriff of a small town with mostly part-time staff, she had her phone on her pretty much twenty-four-seven. She'd even carried it around when they were on their long weekend, although she'd never received a call. Only a few texts with questions that could be answered when she had a few minutes.

It felt a bit silly to go running to the ranch because she wasn't answering her phone. People were allowed to ignore calls whenever they wanted to. It didn't mean that she was in mortal danger. Maybe she was just getting dressed, and she was going to call them later.

The question warred in Kai's brain, but it was no contest when he looked at Henry. The other man's hands were balled into tight fists, the knuckles white. The situation was affecting him, whether he wanted to admit it or not.

Kai didn't want to see Henry upset. If it helped in the least bit, it wasn't a big deal to head towards the ranch. They might even meet Lulu driving toward them on the way. She'd be slightly amused at their behavior, but she'd easily understand. She, more than anyone, was aware of how Henry could react to certain situations.

"Sure, let's go. Just in case Lulu needs our help."

"I didn't want to be an alarmist, but I'm glad we're heading to the ranch," Chase admitted when they were in the car a few minutes later. "Anything can happen there. Lulu might have got some crazy idea in her head and ended up injured."

The image of Lulu lying on the ground, possibly in a pool of blood, had Kai pressing the accelerator even harder. He hoped that when they arrived, they'd feel like idiots for worrying when she was fine.

“Hey, Henry,” Kai said as they raced down the deserted road. “Try calling her again. See if she picks up.”

Henry pulled out his cell phone and tried again before shaking his head.

No answer.

Something wasn't right.

While Ramsey was still writhing on the floor, Lulu crawled toward the door on her hands and knees, her throat burning and her breathing ragged. Chase wouldn't be home yet, but if she could make it all the way to the barn, a few of the ranch workers might be there still.

Ramsey began to struggle to his feet, although still extremely unsteady. She had to get on the move, and she needed to do it now. She wasn't going to get in another lucky shot. He'd be more wary a second time.

Her muscles screamed in protest when she forced herself to stand. It felt like every bone and muscle hurt, but she couldn't lament any physical injuries. She could moan and groan later, nurse herself back to health.

When she was safe.

Because Ramsey, who was now screaming nasty names at her, was pissed off - absolutely fucking furious. If he caught up to her, he was going to want to inflict equal damage and pain, if not more. If she hadn't fought back, she had no doubt she'd be dead.

She could hear her phone ringing again, sitting on the kitchen counter, but grabbing it wasn't in the cards. She'd have to move back into the house to do that instead of

taking the few steps out of the front door.

Lulu's bare feet had run across the concrete of her front porch and then down to the gravel and dirt of her driveway, cutting the tender flesh of her soles. Ignoring the pain, she'd turned to head toward her aunt and uncle's house when she heard the sound of Ramsey's footsteps behind her and the sound of an engine not far in the distance.

A vehicle was barreling up her driveway, a cloud of billowing dirt and dust behind it. In that split second, she changed her mind completely, spinning so that she was now running up the driveway toward it instead of away.

Ramsey was directly on her heels, a mere few feet behind her - perhaps closer. If he could reach out and grab her the belt of her robe...he'd have her.

Her heart pounding wildly, Lulu let out a grunt as she pushed herself to move faster and get closer to the SUV that she could now see clearly. It was Kai's vehicle.

She didn't know why he was here instead of the sports bar in town waiting for her, but she was damn glad that he was.

Stumbling, she fell onto the gravel driveway, the rocks digging into her knees, feet, and palms. A hand grabbed the hem of her robe, yanking her backward, but Kai had already jumped out of the car, along with Chase and Henry, and was running straight toward her. Ramsey wasn't going to win. Not this time.

When she was safe and sound, she was going to take great pleasure in arresting him for the cold-blooded murder of Dana Cartwright. And the attempted murder of the town sheriff. Assaulting a police officer was a serious offense. Even if he somehow managed to slip out of the murder charges, he wasn't going to skate on attacking her.

Kai knocked Ramsey away from her before pulling her into his arms, wrapping them tightly around her. Henry and Chase, in the meantime, had corralled Ramsey a few feet away.

“Are you okay? Did he hurt you? When we were driving up, we saw him chasing you.”

Kai’s expression was anxious, his brows pinched together in concern. She reached up and smoothed his forehead with her fingertips. The love and concern on his face made her own heart squeeze painfully in her chest.

I love this man.

“I’m okay. He was chasing me. He killed Dana, and he was going to kill me.”

Her hand dropped to her sore neck where Ramsey’s hands had been only moments before. When Kai saw the red marks she was sure were livid on the skin, he snarled in anger and fury.

“Don’t,” she said when she could see that he was about to stomp over and punch Ramsey. “He’s not worth it. Please stay with me.”

His expression softened, and he pulled her closer into his arms, warm and protective. She could happily stay here and never move from this place.

“I ought to beat him to within an inch of his life,” Kai muttered. “He tried to?—”

“It’s okay,” she whispered, placing her scratched palms on his chest. His heartbeat was fast but steady. “You got here in time. I’m alive.”

“We thought we were saving you from Allie,” Henry said. “But when we got here,

Ramsey was chasing you. We're kind of confused. If you could fill us in that would be great."

"I'm dirty, sweaty, out of breath, and cut on my hands and feet, but you want an explanation?" Lulu shakily laughed. "Of course, you do."

Henry's expression turned from curious to horrified in a split second.

"Oh my god," Henry groaned. "I'm so sorry."

Kai placed a hand under her legs and lifted her up, carrying up onto the porch and placing her into one of the chairs.

"You shouldn't be standing on your feet," Kai said. "Chase is calling out Deputy Steve and some other backups. Should I tell him to add an ambulance?"

Oh, my heavens, no.

"I am not going to be shoved into the back of an ambulance for a few cuts. We can drive to the hospital at the regular speed limit. No flashing lights or sirens. I'll be fine. And by the way, Henry, the reason I was running from Ramsey is because he killed Dana. I'm pretty sure I was next on the list."

"Ramsey?" Chase asked, his eyes wide. "Shit, we had no idea."

"You thought Allie was coming for me? Why?"

"Because she said she was, sweetheart," Kai replied, pressing his lips to her cheek. He was looking at her like she was the most precious thing in the world. She could get used to this. "I'm just glad we listened to our gut that something wasn't right. You weren't answering your phone."

He'd listened to his gut? She had, too. Looks like that had worked out just fine. Her dad knew his stuff, but then he always had.

"So, you were the ones calling me over and over? I was a little busy realizing that Ray Ramsey was a killer."

Sirens were in the distance but growing louder with every passing moment.

"Stay down," Kai commanded when Ramsey had begun to try and stumble to his feet. "Deputy Steve is going to arrest you, so you won't get far anyway."

"No, he's not," Lulu said. In any other scenario, she'd want to stay and be coddled by Kai, but not at this moment. "As the sheriff of Harper, I'm going to arrest him. And I'll take great pleasure in doing it, too."

"I don't doubt that you will."

"You think I'm crazy, don't you? It's just something that I want to do myself," she explained. "I want to give Dana justice. She deserves it."

"Sweetheart, I sort of like your kind of crazy," Kai said, kneeling so he could cup her face with his hands. She could already feel the prick of tears in the back of her eyes. His expression was filled with so much love and adoration. She didn't have a clue what she'd done to deserve this or find this man, but she was just damn happy. "You can keep the peace in town and spend your evenings watching television or reading. Exciting or calm. I'm there with you. All the way. I love you, no matter what you do. And if anything ever happened to you?—"

Quickly, she placed her finger over his lips, shaking her head.

"I'm okay, and I'm going to be okay. You came to my rescue."

“I don’t think you needed me. I think you would have been okay.”

“Either way, you came for me.”

Henry and Chase, who had been watching each, cleared their throats loudly.

“Uh, we came to your rescue, too,” Henry said awkwardly. “And Lulu, you need to tell Kai you love him this very minute. He said it to you, so you need to say it to him.”

Henry might think that he didn’t need love in his life, but this just proved that he was more than worthy. Somewhere out in the world was a woman who was going to be perfect for him.

“Kai Oliver, I love you,” Lulu said loudly as her deputies arrived, their tires blowing up more dust and dirt and their sirens almost drowning out her romantic proclamation. “More than I ever could imagine. I promise you now, I’m going to tell you every day. So, get ready. Now let me do my civic duty and arrest Ramsey.”

Her parents hadn’t even been gone two weeks. When they returned from their vacation, they were going to be surprised. She’d solved a murder.

And fallen in love. Deeply and madly. The forever kind.

Life was full of surprises. Sometimes, really good ones.

“I heard you’re the person taking care of my little girl.”

Retired sheriff and legendary lawman Seth Reilly didn’t necessarily make that statement sound like a good thing. But it hadn’t sounded terrible either. Mostly neutral.



Kai was being evaluated and sized up, which was easy to see. Fathers weren't always happy about the man that was doing "it" with their daughters. And this father was more intimidating than most... Seth Reilly probably knew a hundred ways to kill a man, hide the body, and then go to brunch with his family without ever being suspected of foul play.

Kai and Lulu hadn't waved their relationship in any faces with a bunch of PDA. They truly hadn't. But Kai's things were in the bathroom and bedroom. It didn't take a genius to figure out he'd been staying there while taking care of Lulu.

"I am, sir. But I think she's feeling much better today since you and your wife are here."

"Call me Seth," Reilly said, clearing his throat. "Once we heard what happened, we came as soon as we could get a flight. She does look good. You must be doing a pretty good job. She's not the easiest patient."

Lulu was giving Kai a smug smile from her perch on the sofa. She'd warned him that her dad would be a hardass at first, but he wouldn't stay that way.

"If I love you, he's going to love you," Lulu had said. "You have to look for the little signs, but they'll be there."

Kai had been invited to call the man by his first name. Surely that was one of those little signs Lulu talked about?

"He's doing a wonderful job," Presley Reilly declared, patting Lulu's leg. They were sitting together on the couch, talking about the cruise that had been cut short because of Lulu's adventure. "Lulu looks very healthy. And happy."

The last was said as sort of a challenge to her husband. Kai could already tell that

Presley Reilly was an amazing woman who knew how to handle her spouse. They were also totally in love with one another. The adoration between them was clear and strong. They'd been through so much in their marriage, and it looked like it had only brought them closer.

Kai wanted that with Lulu. Yes, it was fast. Maybe he was as spontaneous as she was. They both were all in on this relationship, and he could already picture them making a home and building a life and family together.

"What are your plans now?" Presley asked. "You're still going to be the sheriff, right? You're not going to let that asshole make you feel like you don't deserve this job?"

Ray Ramsey had admitted when questioned that he'd pushed to hire Lulu for one reason - he thought she'd make an awful sheriff and could easily be controlled.

Obviously, he hadn't known her all that well despite her growing up in town.

When he'd hired her, he hadn't been planning to kill Dana Cartwright. He'd simply wanted to pull the strings of the head law person in Harper. He said it made him feel like a big shot. Later, when Dana told him she was pregnant and planned to keep the child, he'd decided to use Lulu to his advantage. He'd kill Dana, and Lulu would never solve the murder because he assumed she was incompetent.

He'd gone to Dana's house that night, and they'd argued in the garage. He'd tried one more time to get her to terminate the pregnancy, but she wouldn't do it. She'd turned her back to go in the house, and he'd grabbed the nearest thing he could lay his hands on, which turned out to be a pipe. He'd hit her on the back of the head and then decided to move the body to the lake area, hoping it wouldn't be discovered for a while so that forensics wouldn't be that helpful. It was Ramsey's bad luck that Kai liked to jog in that area.

When it appeared that Lulu was actually capable at her job and making progress, Ramsey decided to throw Allie Baker under the bus since she was already under suspicion due to her unusual behavior. As her landlord, he had no trouble sneaking into her apartment when no one was home and planting the murder weapon.

He thought he was home-free until Kai asked about who had access to Allie's apartment. He panicked, went to see Lulu, and realized that from the way she was acting, she suspected him. Even if she didn't, he needed to stop her from continuing the investigation. He didn't have an answer when the district attorney offered up the theory that Kai wouldn't have let it go if anything had happened to Lulu.

That's the truth. I wouldn't have rested until I found out who killed her.

It just proved the theory that criminals often didn't think things all the way through to their logical conclusion.

"I'm not quitting," Lulu declared. "I'm the sheriff of this town, and I've arrested my first murderer. They'll have to fire me if they don't want me."

"I don't think anyone will be doing that," Chase said. He and Henry had been pretty quiet during the reunion with the parents, letting Lulu soak up all their worry. "You're a hero, and heaven help any town council member who tries to get rid of you. Ellen Dunphy is going around town telling everyone she always knew you'd be amazing as sheriff. Everyone is saying the same thing. They all knew you were going to kick butt and take names."

"Liars," Henry hissed, his expression stormy. "They didn't believe in you."

"We believed, and now they do," Chase replied. "Everyone learns at their own pace. Some just take longer."

“You know, Dad, you were right,” Lulu said. “Kai and I trusted our gut. And it all worked out.”

“When your father gets it right, he really gets it right,” Presley said. “But ultimately, it was you who made it happen. You’re a good sheriff, and this town is lucky to have you.”

Lulu was looking at her dad now, wanting and needing that validation. Seth Reilly didn’t disappoint. No two people on earth could look prouder of their child than Seth and Presley Reilly did at this moment.

Chase and Henry were grinning like idiots, seriously proud, too.

“You are an excellent sheriff, baby girl,” Seth said. Kai thought it sounded like the older man was slightly choked up when she spoke. “I’ve put this town in good hands. They are fortunate to have you.”

“Who wants pizza?” Presley asked, a big smile of happiness on her face. “Our treat.”

“I’m not turning that down,” Chase stated. “But be warned that Henry and I are starving.”

“We wouldn’t expect anything else, son,” Seth laughed.

“Let me comb my hair and put on some shoes,” Lulu said, standing up.

Kai immediately went to her side, ready to carry her if she needed it. The soles of her feet had been cut in a few places, and she’d stayed off of them in the last couple of days, but she was bound and determined to go back to work tomorrow. Kai was wasting his breath trying to talk her out of it. She was still in some pain, but she didn’t want to admit it.

It turned out Seth Reilly had the same idea, however, and they both almost crashed into one another to lift Lulu from her spot on the couch. Presley appeared amused, Lulu's father less so.

"I guess you have this handled," he said, straightening up. "If you don't feel like getting out of the house, sweetheart, we can order in."

"Are you kidding? I'm dying to get out of this house. I'm about to go stir-crazy. Just give me a few minutes."

She leaned on Kai's shoulder as they walked into the bedroom so she could get ready to leave. When she closed the door behind them, she stopped and wrapped her arms around his middle.

"I think my dad likes you."

"I'm not so sure about that. He wanted to help you. Maybe I should have let him."

"He's just having a little trouble realizing that I'm all grown up. He doesn't have to worry about me anymore."

Kai wasn't an expert on parent and child dynamics, but one thing was for sure...

"He's always going to worry about you, Lulu. Not because you're wild or impetuous or spontaneous. But because he loves you and doesn't want anything to happen to you. We'll feel that way about our kids, too, someday."

"You always know the right thing to say."

"I don't, but it's sweet that you think I do. Now, what can I do to help you get ready? I'm at your service."

Sliding her hands up his chest, she wound them around his neck, her fingers making lazy circles on the back of his neck. Her eyes were soft with all the love that he was feeling, too. He hadn't planned to fall like this, but how great was it that he had.

She amazed him. Lulu Reilly was one of a kind.

"Kiss me," she commanded. "Then we'll go eat pizza."

Who was he to argue? Kai would kiss this woman any time of the day or night.

Hopefully, for a lifetime.

26

New York City

The best part of a business trip was when it was over, and Bennett Reilly stepped through his front door. He'd been gone three days in Toronto, and he was happy to be sleeping in his own bed tonight.

All he wanted to do was order in a pizza, take a long hot shower, and get some rest. He'd been functioning on about four hours a night, and he was looking forward to some solid sack time.

The lights were on in his apartment, so he assumed that his girlfriend, Sophie, was there to greet him. She didn't live with him, but since she had three roommates, she spent several days a week at his place. He didn't mind it at all. She didn't make a lot of noise when he was working, and she was good company.

Frowning, he looked down at the floor in his entryway. There was a box sitting there filled with what looked like some of Sophie's things.

"You're home a little early."

"We had a good tailwind, I guess," Ben replied, motioning to the box. "What's this?"

Sophie wasn't smiling, which was strange. She was usually happy when he returned from a business trip. Sometimes, she'd even have a surprise dinner made for him. In fact, she wasn't dressed in her usual pajama pants and t-shirt for lounging around the

apartment. She was in blue jeans, a gold sweater, and brown boots.

“Are you going somewhere?” he asked before she could answer his first question.

“Shit, did I forget that we had plans tonight?”

“No, but it wouldn’t be a surprise if you did,” Sophie said, reaching for her coat from the rack by the door. “As for what the box is, those are all of my things. At least, I think it is. If you find anything else, can you please set it aside, and I’ll send Julie over for it?”

“Why are you taking all of your things? What’s going on here?”

Ben didn’t quite understand. It had been a long three days, and he was exhausted. He didn’t have time for one of Sophie’s games tonight.

“I’m breaking up with you,” Sophie said. “I would have thought it would be fairly obvious, but you’re probably thinking about business, right?”

“That business pays for a luxury apartment on the Upper East Side. Something that you seem to like.”

Ben couldn’t keep the bitterness out of his tone. He’d stepped back into his home, and now Sophie was kicking him in the gut.

“Ben,” Sophie said with a shake of her head. “It was never the apartment, or the fancy car, or the expensive trips. It was you. I wanted to be with you. But now I’m just tired, and I can’t do this anymore.”

“I am with you,” he replied, his tone laced with frustration. “We’re together. Why would we break up? Everything has been great. We rarely argue or even disagree. We have fun.”



His arguments sounded lame to his own ears. He wasn't the type to beg a woman to be with him, but this was a surprise. He hadn't seen this coming at all.

"Are we together? Really?" Sophie asked, her brows raised. "Everything has been great...for you. Not for me. The reason we never argue, Ben, is because you never listen to me. You don't think about what I want or need. It's all you, and you just steamroll over everyone else so that you get what you want. Which is usually just to work. I can compete with other sexy women, but I can't compete with a sexy job. And frankly, I don't want to. I want to be with someone who cares enough about me to listen now and then."

"I care about you. I listen."

Her words had hit him hard, though. He was a workaholic. He was aware of that, but he'd thought he was doing a good job of balancing it with life.

"You listen? Okay, let's test that," Sophie said, her lips pressed together in a thin line.

"What state was I born in, Ben? We've been together for over a year. You should know that. If you can answer that question correctly, I'll unpack my things. So go ahead. Where was I born? I know I've mentioned it more than once."

For sure, it was the Midwest. He remembered they talked about how he'd gone to school there, and she'd been brought up not far away. He just couldn't remember exactly which one. Illinois, Indiana, maybe Ohio, or Iowa. He'd once seen her wear a college t-shirt, but shit, he couldn't remember which it was.

"Ohio. You were born in Ohio."

She took a deep breath and shook her head.

"Michigan, Ben. I went to Michigan State, too. My college roommate came and

visited last month, remember? She told stories about our time there. But you weren't listening."

"I'll listen— Shit, you aren't perfect either. There were plenty of times I could have been mad, but I let it slide."

"Just stop," Sophie laughed. "I know I'm not perfect. And you and I both know that you're not in love with me, and you're not going to do any changing for a woman you don't love. Maybe you will someday, for someone, but not for me. I've faced the reality, and you need to, also. This isn't some great romantic love affair. It wasn't even that great of a relationship. And now it's over. Goodbye, Bennett Reilly. I hope you have a great life. I truly do. You deserve it, and so do I."

Sophie did deserve better. Whether he did was up for debate. He hadn't meant to be an asshole, but clearly, she thought he was. It didn't matter that he thought he'd done his best.

"You deserve it," he agreed. "I'm sorry that this didn't work out."

Arguing back and forth about who was at fault here wasn't productive. He wasn't going to change her mind at this point. She'd already checked out of the relationship. She'd packed her things and had been ready to walk out. Wait...?

"Were you just going to leave? Leave me a note or something like that?"

"You really don't have a high opinion of me, do you? No, I was going to tell you face to face. You just arrived earlier than I thought you would." Sophie reached down and picked up the box. "Like I said, if there's anything I forgot, just text me. Julie will come get it. I meant what I said, Ben. I hope you have a great life."

"You, too. And I am sorry."

“Ben, you don’t even know what you’re apologizing for.”

He didn’t bother to reply. There was nothing left to say. He opened the door for her and was shocked to see his business partner Martin standing on the other side.

“I was about to knock,” Martin said, glancing to where Sophie was standing with her moving box. “Is this a bad time? I can come back.”

Martin only lived a few blocks away and often stopped by for a beer and to talk business and sports. The doorman knew him well and wouldn’t have thought anything about letting him upstairs.

“Actually, it’s the perfect time,” Sophie said, exiting the apartment. “It’s nice to see you, Martin.”

“It’s nice to see you, too.”

“I think I interrupted something,” Martin said.

“Yes, you did, and thank you. It was becoming awkward.” Ben stepped back to let his friend in. “Come on in. How about a drink? I could use one.”

Martin glanced down to where Ben had left his suitcase.

“I wasn’t sure you would be home yet, but I saw your lights on.”

“The flight was on time.”

Ben poured two whiskeys and handed one to Martin.

“How about we drink to new beginnings?” Ben joked. “Even if we didn’t see them coming.”

“I take it you and Sophie have hit a bump in the road,” Martin remarked. “But I’m glad that you want to embrace new beginnings tonight. The fact is, I wanted to talk to you before you went into the office tomorrow. A few things have happened while you’ve been gone.”

Martin Thorogood was one of the three partners at Bennett’s firm. There was Ben himself, who handled the business side of things, Martin, who was the money man and had invested a great deal into the firm, and then Scott, who was the technological brains.

Scott was a software genius, but half the time, he walked around barefoot because he didn’t know where he’d left his shoes. He was the stereotypical absent-minded professor. They had all three met in that roundabout way that happened when a person was young. Someone was a friend of someone else who was a friend with another mutual, and they all ended up at the same gathering over and over until they became friends, too.

Scott had known that he’d never get anywhere in business without some help. That’s where Ben came in. They’d also needed capital to start the company, and Martin was looking to invest in a startup with the millions he’d inherited. It had all worked out - after some blood, sweat, and tears - and now they were sitting pretty on the twentieth floor of a fancy high-rise office building in Manhattan.

It was a far cry from Harper, Montana.

While Ben loved his family and the town, he’d always wanted to spread his wings. He’d wanted to take on the world and accomplish great things. And he hadn’t wanted to do it in the shadow of his famous father.

Ben didn’t bother to sip at the whiskey, instead shooting it down in one go and then feeling the heat all the way to his belly.

“Should I pour another one?” he asked, but Martin shook his head.

“I need you to stay at least sober while I talk to you. What you do after I leave is your business. Listen, Scott came back from vacation the day you left. He’s made some changes in his life, and it’s going to affect us all.”

Scott was always making changes. First, there was the vegan era, then the mysticism era, or was it astrology? Ben couldn’t keep up as Scott was always searching for the answers to the big questions of life and the meaning behind it.

Maybe I should do that more often? But that really isn’t me.

“He’s joined some sort of group, and he’s decided he doesn’t believe in capitalism.”

Ben had to play Martin’s words over and over in his head to be able to decipher them. He wasn’t making any sense.

“He doesn’t believe in capitalism? How does that even work? It exists. He can’t say he doesn’t believe in something that exists. I could understand ghosts or something like that. There are questions there, but not with capitalism.”

“Okay,” Martin sighed. “Let me rephrase it. Scott has renounced capitalism. He doesn’t believe in making money from other people. He doesn’t want us to sell the software anymore. He wants to give it away for free.”

“For free?” Ben echoed, not quite believing what he was hearing. “Are you kidding? Is this some kind of a prank?”

“I wish it was, my friend. Scott isn’t kidding. He’s already sold all of his property, and he’s moving out of state. He didn’t tell me where, but he’s not kidding, and he is serious. He didn’t tell me until he’d made all the moves. He said he didn’t want me to try and talk him out of it.”

“Did you try? Because this is crazy and probably just a phase. In a few weeks?—”

“It won’t matter because he’s already given or sold his possessions and donated the money. It’s a done deal, Ben. I told Scott that I couldn’t give away our product, and although I couldn’t speak for you, I didn’t think you’d want to do that either. He said he understood, and he signed the company over to the two of us. Free and clear. Scott holds no interest in the company anymore. He even handed me his key to the office.”

Ben fell back into the cushions of his couch, reeling from the news. First, Sophie, and now Scott. Was the world going insane?

“I get it,” Ben said. “First thing tomorrow, we need to start looking for someone to replace Scott. We’ll put the feelers out. It may take some time but?—”

“Ben,” Martin interrupted. “You and I both know that there is no replacement for Scott. He, and only he, knows the technology. He invented it.”

“That doesn’t mean that someone couldn’t figure it out,” Ben argued. “We have to try.”

“Scott Harrington is a genius,” Martin replied softly. “A certified genius who was able to invent data analysis technology that others can only dream about. It would take a team of dozens of people years to reverse engineer what Scott created. Frankly, I don’t think we have the time. If we can’t support our product, how can we, in good conscience, keep selling it? No, we need to close down. It’s the only option.”

Close down?

“I can’t believe or accept that it’s our only option.”

Ben was in a daze that this was really happening. Maybe he’d wake up in the morning, and it would all be a weird dream because he’d eaten too much spicy food.

Martin sat down next to Ben, his expression grim.

“Let me put it another way. I’m ready to move on, Ben. I don’t want to struggle for years or longer trying to replace someone that I’m not sure can even be replaced. I invested in this company because it sounded profitable and fun. That’s changed. I want to take the profits and invest in something else. Something I enjoy. Frankly, I don’t want to do any hard work. With the money we have on hand, we can give the employees generous severance and still have some money left to tide us over for a long while. If invested smartly, maybe a lifetime.”

“You mean me, right? You’re not worried about money.”

Martin bowed his head and nodded.

“You’re right. I was talking about you. You’re a known entity in this town, and you’ll bounce back with no problems. You have a great reputation. I predict companies will be falling all over themselves to recruit you once the word gets out that we’re closing down.”

Ben didn’t want to work for someone else. That’s why he’d jumped on this startup idea with Scott and Martin.

“What about our lease, our office equipment, our contracts with vendors?”

“I’ve been working on that while you were gone,” Martin said, levering up from the couch. “I actually had to do some real work, and I must say it only strengthened my decision never to do that again. I’m a trust fund baby, Ben, and I like it that way.”

“I can’t believe this is happening.”

“I’ve negotiated a reasonable buyout with the landlord, and they’re taking over our office furniture and equipment as part of the deal. I also negotiated with our vendors.

Once we notify our customers, we should be completely shut down within thirty days.”

Thirty days? Then everything they’d worked for would just be gone. Poof. Like it had never happened. But it had.

“I’m not ready for this.”

He hadn’t realized that he’d spoken out loud until Martin gave him a sad smile.

“I know, and that’s why I had to come by tonight to tell you. I didn’t want you to have to pretend in the office in front of the staff. This gives you tonight to mull this over. I think when you do, you’ll come to the same conclusion that I did. Without Scott, we’d struggle to do anything. He was the lynchpin to all of this. His leaving would set us back years.”

It was hilarious that Martin thought that one night was going to make Ben okay with all of this.

“Ben, no one could have worked harder or been more dedicated than you were. This isn’t your failure. It’s just life. Scott has the right to go do and be something else. We can’t stop him, and we need to face the reality of our situation. Sooner rather than later when we’ve run through millions of dollars and months and months of time with nothing to show for it.”

But...it felt like a failure. Martin could say all he wanted, but it didn’t stop it from feeling like this was a gigantic failure.

I should have foreseen something like this. Scott was always squirrely. I should have seen this coming and had talent recruited to take over someday. Pushed Scott to share his knowledge. Then this wouldn’t have happened. It’s my fault. I was the one running the business.



“Jesus, don’t ever take up poker,” Martin sighed. “I can see the wheels turning in your head. You’re finding a way to fucking blame yourself.”

“I should have?—”

“Fuck it,” Martin yelled, his face turning red. “Dammit, Ben. Stop making everything fucking about you. This isn’t about you. Scott was always a one-man show, and frankly, this day was inevitable. At some point, we were going to get big enough that we’d need to bring in more staff. Scott would have had to let other people in on what he’d invented and built. He was never going to do that. And now, shit, he wants to just give it away because he knows no one on this fucking planet understands it. He might not care about making money anymore, but he still cares about his goddamn ego. No matter what cult or group or shit he’s joined, Scott Harrington is a fucking egomaniac. He knows he’s fucked us, and he doesn’t care. Hear me, Ben. Scott doesn’t care about you, me, or any one of those employees. He doesn’t care about anyone but himself. He hasn’t changed. He’s the same fucking prick he always was, but now he’s a broke prick. People aren’t going to put up with his bullshit so willingly now.”

The truth hurt. Martin wasn’t pulling any punches tonight, and Ben felt every one of them like a blow to the body taking his breath away.

Ben thought about offering to talk to Scott, but Martin was right. The man was a prick and an asshole. He didn’t care about anyone but himself, and he wasn’t going to listen. Once Scott made up his mind, only he could change it at some undetermined time in the future.

“Take the day off tomorrow,” Martin suggested. “Have a long weekend. We can tell the staff on Monday that we’re shutting down.”

“No, I’ll be there in the morning.”

He didn't want to draw this out. Better to pull off the band-aid quick. Less pain that way, right?

Martin left the apartment, softly closing the door behind him. Ben still hadn't moved from his spot on the sofa, his emotions swirling around him to the point that he was almost physically ill. He thought about pouring another whiskey, but he didn't think he could hold it down.

Glancing at the clock, he realized that he hadn't even been home an hour yet.

One simple, single, fucking hour had changed his life completely.

He'd been happy, in a relationship, and a partner in a growing business. He didn't have any of that now.

Less than sixty minutes later.

Does that make me a loser?

Now what? What was next?

Bennett Reilly didn't have a clue, but he was sure that sitting in his expensive apartment feeling sorry for himself wasn't going to give him the answer. He'd give himself tonight to feel like shit, and tomorrow he'd come out ready to go to war.

He just didn't have a clue who he was fighting. Maybe himself?

Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed Lulu's adventures in Wild Justice. Join Bennett Reilly for his story in Cherished Justice . Coming soon.

Thank you again for reading.